

INTERVIEW WITH BESS, 3

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B: . . . I look at some of the young ones from the COOLs, when they found; after retreat they found out a number of things about me cause I got, at the party, somebody's birthday party they invited me to. They were asking me how I happened to do the things I had done. And I was telling them about Rita. And they just cracked up. And I was saying, you know, you all are so lucky. You don't have to go through all that sort of thing. But there were a few who weren't quite happy with themselves and then so I would tell them, you know, you don't have to listen to all this advice that other people are giving you, if it doesn't fit your pattern of life, as long as you're not trying to take some woman away from another woman, being ugly. Or you're not talking about them to make things unpleasant for them. And you're not reporting them on their jobs. Then you can go and enjoy a normal life with your lover. And be happy. I says, you don't have to be mean. So I'm the advisor. So that makes it, they listen to me, cause I said, "My gray hair demands respect. Listen to me, cause I've been through it." And every once in a while somebody asks, Why isn't Rita with you. I said, she doesn't like being a lesbian. That's it. She doesn't like being one. I do. I like what I am. I think I've always liked me. There might have been one period in there when I didn't know which way I was going. Not male or female, but what direction I was going to take. But I just had a, I guess I can thank my mother for that. I just had a rather healthy outlook on life. She did too, so maybe that's where I got it from. Things are never so bad that you can't do something about it, she used to say. You can always do something. It may not be exactly what you want, but you can do something. And I told my boys that, so they pretty much, especially the one here, they pretty much have done the same thing. Ruben is the one I had to work on, the one I adopted, my gay son. He didn't like himself. Cause his father gave him such a hard way to go. Even up until almost before he died. When I made him go back to Maryland and make some peace with his father. You're not a man! You know, that kind of stuff. But he did go back and he did tell his father how he felt all those years growing up and his father belittled him on everything. And he loved his father and wanted him to accept him for what he was. He got that out of his system. When he came back, and his father died not too long afterwards, at least he had peace with himself. He had said what he had to say. But now he's almost, he's like Rita in some things. When Jim puts his arm around him, Ruben just dies. Don't do that, don't do that. And Jim and I just talk about him. We laugh at him. Jim says, come on Bess. And Jim and I will act, do a fool thing you know. He'll say, watch me. And he'll go over and do something, kiss Ruben. Like that. I just crack up. But we're working on him. He's in an industry where there's so many gay men. And I say, Ruben, what makes you think the people where you work don't know you're gay? The industry is loaded with it. Hollywood. Where he works. But he's funny. When

he came here he didn't want to meet anybody. Just wanted to talk. But we're still working on him. And when we get on the phone, he gets on the extension, and Jim and I talk real dirty. He says, Ruben's just passing out. I say, I know he is. Ruben says, ohhh! And hang up. So he's another one who doesn't want to accept his - he accepts it in a funny kind of way. He knows what he is. He is never going to get married and he's not going to have any children. He likes children. Works beautifully with them. Excellent teacher. And he can't - you know, a woman doesn't interest him in the least bit, at all. Has never interested him. I don't even think he's ever had a girlfriend, not even when he was younger. He just didn't bother. I said, well boy you've known all your life. You should have accepted that fact now. And because Jim has been married - that's another thing - and his 3 children, and he just wrote and said his son graduated from San Diego State, no Long Beach, with honors in a class of 4,000. He had a 4.0 average. He's real tickled about that, and his daughter got married before I left. And he has one more son. But he does his job as a family man. His family, they live in, are from Michigan. They all know he's gay. When his brothers came to live on the beach, they all met Ruben. He says Ruben tries to act like they're not lovers and he says he just puts his arm around him, and Ruben dies. In front of Jim's brothers. Cause they know their brother. I said, that's too much pain, to deny what you are.

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. . . but I like the ladies. I like to look at them. I'd like to hold a few of them. I'd like to do a lot of things to a few of them. But I can reminisce and figure out, what I have done, and I can fantasize on what I could do. I was talking to [S] about that and just the two of us, close in age. We just cracked up laughing. You know. I said, yeah, but you still in it. She says, we're going to have to find somebody for you. I don't know whether I want anybody now or not. I don't know whether I want to put the energy into it. Cause to me any relationship you got to put a lot into it. Maybe I'm lazy. I don't know. I think I haven't met the right person. I like youth, but I think I'm too old. I don't think I have the energy to keep up with a young woman. Cause there are so many things they are doing now. They want to go rafting. Years ago, I would have gone. They want to go hiking. I don't feel up to, that I can do that sort of thing. And I wouldn't like to get connected with somebody who wants to do that sort of thing and be a hindrance. So I'll be a good friend. Go with your friend and come back and tell me about it. Or I'll go in the car and sit on the bank and watch you. But if I'm a lover with somebody I'd like to participate. Not sit and watch. Now, ask me something else.

K: OK.

B: Stop me from talking.

K: Seems like from early on you had some sense of who you were. Do you remember when it first really became conscious? When you realized that you were gay?

B: I guess when I was in college. In high school I just knew I liked my girlfriends. And I especially liked one. But I didn't think anything about that being different. Because there was always somebody you liked being with more than the other girls. You'd enjoy their company more. Cause I liked Ina, and I liked Eleanor, better than the other two girls. But I didn't think anything unusual about that. When I got to college and got tagged, I began to think about it. And I reviewed my high school days and I knew I had a crush on my - but a lot of girls had a crush on the gym teacher, you see, and the English teacher. Cause they were so fabulous. So I never thought anything about it. But when I went there and reviewed how I had acted, and then I liked this French teacher, and she wouldn't let me come over. Then I went to the library, and I worked in the library, so I looked it up to find out what the heck was going on. And I said, oh, that's what it is. And then I started asking the librarian, who was a Miss, a number of questions. She says, Bess, what are you looking up? I said I'm looking up this lesbian business. I said, you know they tell me I like Vanya, that I'm her lover; and she didn't flinch. A little white lady, about this big. So she said, what do you want to know? I said, I want to know all about it. So she said, well, Bess, and she told me where to go look. What books to get, to read, and that's when I got the Well of Loneliness because she recommended it. And I read that. And so I talked about it with her. And I guess out of my conversation with her and looking it up, I decided that was what I, no wonder I didn't want to bother with these boys. But I never did doubt that there was anything wrong with it. I guess because the people I spoke with never said, Oh, but you shouldn't do that. You should - she never said anything. And Miss Horton and Miss Nighten would just say, You need to get married. But now that I remember, they never did say you need to get married to a man. Now that I think about it. That's right.

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K: Do you think they might have been saying something else?

B: They might have been, but I was too dense to know it. You know, I didn't know enough about it to even realize it.

K: Did they consider themselves married?

B: Yes. That's why she adopted Miss Horton, to make sure if anything happened to her, and it did, because when she did die, in a letter mother wrote, there was a fight but she had made this adoption and she had this will and everything. So the family

couldn't move in and take it. Cause they had a very beautiful home, and I guess they'd been together a long time, and acquired quite a bit. Cause I learned really how to pour tea at her house. They had a gorgeous tea set. She'd had me and my brothers would drop the things, drop the cups, and but I learned a number of skills there with her, with Miss Horton. Miss Nighten wasn't around too much. She worked crazy hours as a nurse, so I didn't see her too often.

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K: So maybe they were telling you something different than what you thought.

B: Yeah, maybe so. I hadn't even thought about it. They just said, You should get married. They never said get married to a man. But this, what was that lady's name in the library? She'd been there 90,000 years. But I got books and read and then I knew, you know, well that's why I have feelings like that. I knew I had gotten on that little girl when I was 10. I told you about her. And boy I felt bad. But then, at that time, I figured it was because I was with brothers all the time and so I was always playing the male role. Cause my brothers were bad. And they were always jumping on little girls. Cause I'd tell on them. They'd get under the house and get some little girls and I'd tell them if they didn't pay me I'd go and tell mother. And they paid me. So but I never connected that incident with my feelings, other than I can remember liking what I was doing until her sister walked in and swatted us. Then I was so scared. I guess those feelings vanished, cause she gave us both a good whipping. And then made me come home. And then wouldn't let me be able to come visit again. But it was in college that I realized, this is the way I am. So and I didn't see anything, there was nothing repulsive about it. That was just the way I felt. Then I understood why I was, why Miss - name was on the tip of my tongue, that French lady - wouldn't let me come over to her room. Cause the women teachers all lived in the house together and they each had rooms. And she never let me come. And boy she was hard on me. Oh, she was hard on me in class.

K: Sounds like the librarian was very helpful.

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B: The librarian was really nice. I worked there two years, I was at St. Augustin's in the library. She talked to me a lot. In fact I had some privileges as a freshman that the other girls didn't have because I was working in the library and she'd keep me there and we'd talk while I was stacking books up and putting them away and that sort of thing. Like I said, I just guess I must have met the right people for me at the right time. Cause I seemed to -it's just talking with you that I'm remembering things that different

people said through my life were really helpful. I guess they reinforced all the things my mother had been saying. Wouldn't she love to hear me say that? Cause I never gave her much credit . . . and she goes, cause I always says she was always on my case. But I guess I was really lucky because - the name keeps - we talked. And because I remember when I got ready to go up to the freshman dance, and I said, well I can't go by myself. And she was the one who made arrangements for Willhemina's brother to take me . . . she and Willhemina, cause Willhemina was a senior and she worked in the library. And they made arrangements for me, for her brother, who was in my class, to take me to the dance. And since I liked to dance, I wasn't about not to go to that dance.

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K: It was very bold of you to tell her what you were looking up.

B: I don't think I ever hesitated too much about saying or asking. I think that's from my mother. If you want to know something, she said, look it up or ask. I think that had just become a habit. I don't think it dawned on me that I would be reprimanded for asking about it. And the librarian had no business reprimanding; she had to give you the information. That's what probably I thought too. And it just happened that she did. So I looked it up. She gave me that book. And when I found it later on the shelf, I bought it. In the bookstore.

K: What word did you look up?

B: I looked up "lesbian."

K: Lesbian.

B: I looked up queer, that's when I first found out about dykes, I looked that up. It wasn't in the book. She told me.

K: What did she tell you about dykes?

B: She told me that was a term that was used for very masculine women, leather type, well see I didn't know about leather type things then. What do you mean, leather type? And she described it. So she was very informative. Maybe she was. I just never thought about that librarian. But she'd been there since the school had opened. The school was opened in 1800.

K: She knew an awful lot.

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B: Yeah, she knew an awful lot. But she was a world of information. Kids would come in and ask her about getting a book,

and she told them just where to go to find anything they wanted to know about anything. She really knew her work. And now as I remember now, she was a Miss Whatever-Her-Name-Was. But I learned a lot in there. She was orderly. See I admire that in anybody. Everything in its place. I like that. And that's why I worked in the library, cause everything had a place to be. Well, everything in my mother's house had a place to be. Even me. So that was natural . . . [talks to the pet].

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But that was my real first indication. So when I went back to Houston, that's when I recognized Mr. Green, ah Mr. Whidlow - that was his name - for what he was. See by that time when I got back in '38, they were using some words, so of course, my brother said, "He's a sissy." So I knew what he was talking about.

K: And when you went back did you also recognize your hairdresser and her friend?

B: Yes. Yeah. And the, I went to get my hair done and she said, ". . . meet a boy?" I says, I'm not interested in the boys. She just raised an eyebrow, didn't say anything. But they didn't invite me to their house anymore. Never went back. And it wasn't until I was in Chicago that I knew my mother was friendlier with them than, maybe she was all the time but I had no way of knowing, because of her letters. And when she went back after she had sold the family home, she stayed with them. And I didn't think strange about that, cause I knew she'd moved and they had a big house. But my mother might have known a whole lot more than I ever gave her credit for. I guess she did. Because when she'd write, she said when Miss Horton came out to California and Miss Ina, they stayed at her house. But that was nothing unusual. Almost everybody who came from Houston my mother knew. So see I never thought anything about that.

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K: Your Mom never remarried did she?

B: No. We wanted her to. One man we liked and she said - my brothers and I finally asked her - we asked him to marry her. And he said, I'd like to but your mother won't marry me. We finally asked her why and she said she just didn't, he was a strong man she said, and she didn't know whether she could live with a strong man, who would tell her what to do with her children. And she knew she would have a battle. So she didn't want to marry anybody. She was a courted lady, however, she had gobs of boyfriends until she met Mr. Wesley. And then she just went out with him. But he was the editor of the colored paper there, and a lawyer. And they went together for years and he really wanted to marry her, but he said,

she says she's not going to marry me. So a couple of months after she said definitely NO, after three of us went to him and asked him why don't you marry our mother? And he explained it to us. See those are the kind of children we were in those days. In those days that was unusual. We went to his office. Got an appointment. And went and said, you know, we like you. My brothers like you. And you're the, why, Mr. Wesley, why don't you marry mother? . . . he told us. That was unusual. And then we went back and asked her. Why won't you marry him? She says, to my brothers, I don't want any man telling me what to do with my sons. And so we told her, we like him, we wouldn't mind having him for a stepfather. She said, No. So finally, I said to her, cause she talked to me more about her mother, you just don't want anybody telling you anything to do, do you? She said, yes, that's right. Cause her mother let her do almost everything she wanted to do. So that was the reason she never married. She dated. Boy, did she date. So that was, she was a firm believer in her authority. She didn't want it usurped. He said that she was the only women that he had ever had discussions and arguments with that he could not get her off the track. Get her off for a little while, but she'd say, But we were discussing such-and-such and such-and-such a thing. Never could. So she was before her time really. Really and truly. And I'm fortunate. She had to be before her time. That we got the advantage of a lot of things that some of the other girls in our group and fellas too, they just never had the advantages of thinking.

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My mother, . . . to do things, you had to think things out and give an explanation if you did it without talking about. He says, Why? And then after a while he had to give some more whys. So I think that was good for us. For me anyway. And my brother said the same thing, so she . . . and she, I don't see how she could go to Miss Nighten and Miss Horton's house all those years, and write me the kind of letter about the adoption. Without knowing why. It just doesn't, they don't go together with the way she got information. So she had to know. I think I said, told Rita, there ain't no way she doesn't know what's going on here. Rita says, I don't think so either. She and Rita got to be . . . in fact, I used to tell her, "You're really glad I have Rita aren't you? Yeah, she says, I can talk with that gal. They talked business. My mother was very much into making money. And she and Rita could talk money. I mean, all day and all night. I could care less. Making money? Make it and spend it and enjoy it. But they would talk property. And they believed in property. Owning property. Do if I can, if I don't it doesn't bother me if I live in an apartment. That property was too much trouble. After we sold that house I said, no, never again. I got tired of cutting grass and fixing screens and water pipes and oh heck, all that stuff. Rita loved doing that. We spent more hours painting, resodding, laying cement, laying block. Oh! I'd rather be out and be doing something. But she liked that.

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K: Tell me one other thing. It seems like you went against the grain in so many different ways. Were you a tomboy?

B: Yes. I was a tomboy. If my brothers could do something, I had to do better, cause I was the oldest. I couldn't let them outshine me. Break my neck a few times, but I would try. They jumped off the top of the garage. I was going to jump too. Until I got a little you know, up in my older teens, later teens and I stopped doing that. I figured it wasn't necessary. But at school I was always - I was in the gym class. And like I said, I was skinny, I was light, so I was always on top of pyramids and tumbling and that sort of thing. And if I could have I would have put on a pair of my brothers' pants. But it just wasn't allowed. Because I always felt more comfortable in - when at camp when they wore shorts, I was always in shorts. But then in those days the women wore big bloomers you know, so I stayed in the big bloomers.

K: In the bloomers.

B: Mmm-hmm. Yeah, I was a tomboy. Mother used to say, you need some feminine graces. I said, oh shucks. And she'd fix these dresses, she'd make these dresses for me with these ruffles and I would just about die, until I had managed to tear off a few ruffles, you know, chasing around. And she finally says it wasn't worth it, so she stopped making those kind of dresses for me. You know, they were ruffled all the way down, and a big bow ribbon in your hair, and my ribbon was streaming all out. Cause I'd yank it you know, I couldn't stand all that stuff. And she'd put curls, and I'd grab them all up and tie them up, this hair up. But I attributed that to the fact that I was the eldest of three and the two younger ones were boys, and my mother made me responsible for the boys. If they didn't do their homework or their housework, I had to do it. So I was on them. So I had to keep up with them. So we only had one bicycle. In those days everybody in the family didn't have a bike. Had one bicycle. And if they tried standing up on the seats, I had to stand on the seats too. Go down the streets, and no hands, you know, just standing on the seats. And if they skated I had to skate too. Cause we only had one of everything. Mother couldn't afford to buy everybody one. So we all had to use it. So I guess, now in high school I was called a tomboy. But it didn't bother me. I had a reason. Keep my brothers from running over me. Cause we'd fight and my mother would get all over us. And sometimes one brother and I were against the other brother. Two brothers were against me. But when it came to chores, I was responsible. If they didn't do theirs, then I got the spanking.

K: That was pretty serious.

B: Yeah. And they'd laugh. And I'd have to kill them, you know, later when she wasn't around. And that's why they don't call me by my name now. It was always, my mother would say, go to your sister. So I guess from the time they were little. So they call me sister. Never call me by name. My mother called me by my name, but my brothers don't. I only have one now. I was talking with him the other day. He's in Houston, getting ready for this family reunion. And he still, I'm still the big sister. Cause he calls. And he's the one with the six wives, but he still calls to talk about things. What do you think, sister? It's nice. And this younger brother and I have never discussed my sexuality. Now the other brother who died, who lived in Los Angeles, he and his wife and I talked. When they came to Chicago, and came over, they didn't stay because Jackie would not stay in anybody's house. She goes to a hotel, cause she loves room service. So we got her a place, the hotel that was near, cause we were in this University of Chicago area, so they have hotels around. So we just got one a block from us. And they'd just sleep there at night, but then they'd get up in the morning and have breakfast there and then walk over to our apartment. And then Rita and I would do things with them. There was no way that they did not know . . . what was going on just by the way Rita and I addressed each other, the way she was fixing dinner, and that sort of thing, how we talked. When we came out, when I came out to California, after I left - when I called my brother from New York and said I'm coming out to visit for a week, Rita says I need to get away, I'll be out there, I'll call back and let you know when my flight's in. I said in the meantime, look for some places. I might take a look at some apartments. I didn't say one bedroom, two bedroom, anything. When I got there, went in the guest room Jackie had, I'll never forget, had this 2-lb. box of See's Candy, which I dearly love, chews and nuts.

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K: Chews and nuts is my favorite too.

B: That's what I like. And they were working. And I had no car there, of course, because they both took their cars. But they didn't do anything, say anything too much to me for the first two days. They just left me alone. Because I was really in a bad way. And then by the 3rd day Irwin said, well, sister do you want to go take a look at some apartments? He says, I've got some all - he's very methodical - all lined up. So we went out that evening. They were all 1-bedroom. I didn't say anything. Finally, I saw one and I said, well what about a 2-bedroom. And Jackie and Irwin looked at each other and said, do you really want a 2-bedroom? And I said, no, I guess not. So then we went to find this and I said I'll take this one. And I made a deposit on this one I liked. When I got ready to go I said, well I'll go back and if I don't come back then you go back and get my deposit. Jackie said, you'll be back. They knew Rita too. And on the way to the airport I talked about some

of the things that Rita and I were - Tiki, got your nerve! - about some of our problems and she wanting to continue teaching and I didn't want to teach, I was sick of teaching. And she still wanted to be in education. They didn't say too much, except Jackie said, well I think you should do what's going to make you happy. So I said, OK. So then when I got back, I told Rita I was going to move, then I called them and said, I'm coming back. When I got back out there, after I got all settled, my brother had a party for me. And in the midst of the party I was in the kitchen with Jackie and she said, Bess your brother and I know that you are gay. We've known it for a long time. We discussed it so you don't have to be hesitant about talking about your and Rita's relationship. And I said, OK. And that was it. And they, after I was there, we was talking, and they said they had known for a long time. Irwin said he had known when he married Jackie; he says, I've got a sister and I think she's gay, so don't be surprised. And so they were married 25 years, so they had known almost all that time. So it was very easy.

K: Yeah, that was nice.

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B: Because he'd call and said, hey sister, I'm going to have a party. Got a couple of girls over here for you. Come on over and take a look at them. And I'd go. Of course I wasn't interested. They tried to get me interested, cause they'd been out there almost 50 years, so they knew a lot of people. I just never found anybody that, I was really too devastated. It took me a couple years to get myself together. Cause after all, 30 years is a long time. And I had to recondition myself to even look. And also, to explain to myself what went wrong. Was I wrong? Or were we both wrong? Or was there no wrong? It was just, personalities finally just didn't mesh. Course there were a lot of occasions where I let my will be bent to please her, cause I wanted to make her happy. I did a lot of things that under other conditions I would have said, I'm not going to do that, No! But Rita had such a traumatic childhood. And I had a good one. I just felt like I wanted to share whatever it was that I had that was fun. But she didn't want it, it wasn't enough for her. But like I said, that was one nice thing, I did not have that problem with my family, my brothers anyway. Now I don't know what Harold knows. Harold is the one who says, I don't want to put my head on the pillow, or Earl and I've forgotten which one. Harold is so busy chasing women and marrying them, I don't think he's had time to think about what kind of life I had. He knew I was living with a woman. Well I really don't think it even dawned on him what the relationship was. I don't think he cares. When mother died and I went out to California, he did say, where's Rita? I said, she wouldn't come. Because we'd been together so long everywhere we'd gone together. He never tried to introduce me to fellas, and he knew a host of them, hundreds of them, all the time that I would go out to visit in California. He

never did that. So I guess he knew. And if Irwin had known all those years, and I didn't even know he knew, I'm sure they had talked about it. But my boys knew. I didn't tell them.

K: Well, I should let you go so you have time to get dressed.

B: What time is it?

K: It's getting late. It's a quarter after.

B: 11 o'clock.

K: I have a consent form which if you feel comfortable signing, this would give me permission to be able to use these tapes.

B: I don't care.

K: OK. You can also decide whether you want me to use your full name, or just your first name, or a nickname, or if you want me to change any information.

B: Not at this stage. You can use my full name, honey, doesn't matter. That's you. Oh this is me, address.

K: Right. I can actually fill in the address, if you just sign it, cause I know your address. You just sign that.

B: I just use Bess now instead of my full name, cause I can't stand that name. So I cut it off, took that Bessie out, I told you why.

K: Yessir - ree.

B: That's OK, they do that all the time and when anybody comes up to the car and I'm driving, they'll say, may I help you sir. I just crack up. I say, yes you may. And they say, I'm sorry. And I say that's all right.

K: OK, great. Thank you. And I really enjoyed talking with you. [tape off and on again]

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K: . . . more information . . .

B: It's on . . . While we are like we are, then we have nothing to do with it, it's not a pretense, then I think the general public will begin to understand and accept. Acceptance is what we really would like to have. I personally don't care whether they accept me or not, cause I'm like I am, and I'm going to be like I am. But there are so many of us who want acceptance. And at the thing the

other night I heard so many of the fellows getting up and saying, I can't come out to my family. And some of the girls says, are you going to be to the parade? Oh, no, my family doesn't know I'm out. And they're young. And that's tragic. So if these type of things that you're doing will help the other generation or other people, from the same generation, understand our problems, cause every group has their own problems - I think it'll be so much better and we won't have politicians getting up talking about the crazy things they talk about if somebody is different than them. And some of them have skeletons in their closet that they don't want out. I found that true when you got in the race business. A lot of the bigots have coloreds in their family that they don't want known, so they are the ones who are diehards on keeping the races separated, cause they don't want that information out. Plus being from the South, you knew of so many families where the very light-skinned had crossed over, intermarried. And so many white families have no idea that they've got colored grandparents way back there. Same thing I figure with lesbians and gay guys. There's so many of them, we've had them years and years and years and years, and no one has ever known. Never suspected. And they like these people in their families, but by today's standards if they knew they were gay, they wouldn't want to have anything to do with them. So reports like you're doing give some background of how people started out, and why. And how they, if they accept themselves, how they feel about themselves. I feel good about myself. I like me. I've always liked me. I don't know - that's not egotistical, I just have never had any reason not to like me. [phone rings and she answers it . . .] Well, are you going to come back and see me again?

K: I would love to.

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B: Fine, after Galah.

K: You're going to be way too busy before Galah.

B: Yeah, all next week I'll be doing that. Yeah, that will be fine. Then I know you have some more questions. I just talk, talk, talk, talk, talk.

K: Now I told you about Lavender University didn't I?

[tape off] 544 **END OF SIDE 3** **END OF INTERVIEW**