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Interview #3 Abstract and Transcript, 2001

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Interview #3

Phone Conversation Part I

#3: ... Yeah, yeah I'm actually part of the drag community here

CNK: Cool.

#3: Or at least a retired part of the drag community.

CNK: Retired?

#3: Yeah, semi-retirement anyway.

CNK: Are you from WV yourself?

#3: Yes I am. Yes I am. I am originally from a little town called And I've lived here all but 2 years of my life. I lived 2 years in [a large city], and decided that I needed my mountains and came back. And I've been here since.

CNK: Wow.

#3: So I'm sort of just hanging out. And at this point I'm not sure I'm going to go into a Ph.D. program, but I'm not sure where or when, etc., etc. I just need a break.

CNK: Would you be willing to talk some while we are on the phone about your background, your people and where you were raised and how you came to be who you are?

#3: Oh yeah. No problem. That wouldn't--. That would not be a problem at all.

Basically my entire family is from West Virginia. And one side of the family is from the coal fields down around ... County, ... County, ... etc. And they have--. They have the

whole coal miner union mine wars background. That's one half of the family. The other half is originally from right here around And--. Let's see. I would probably label my family as working class. Maybe some members are middle to upper class, are middle, upper middle class, but pretty much middle class to working class folks. Baptist religious background. Strong Baptist, especially with my grandparents. With my parents it was not a regularly practiced thing, but it was sort of evident in house rules and just the belief system in general. And pretty much conservative when it comes to politics. I hate to say this but and sometimes very bigoted. And I often question how I emerged out of that but I know it was because of my grandmother who I have a very close relationship with. And I spent a lot of time with her as a kid and so. I basically was quiet always known I'm gay, had a horrible relationship with my father before I came out. Didn't improve things when I came out.

CNK: It improved things?

#3: No it did not. No no no. We're just sort of now to the point to where we can have somewhat of a relaxed conversations, and I'm still constantly on the defensive. And I've been out since 1987, 1988. So this has not been a short process. Some people in my family just sort of had an initial reaction and then it was like "ah well," and it's never been discussed since. Other people--. You know, my grandmother she has a religious concern but pretty much we agreed to disagree and it's not usually brought up and now--. She's become so familiar with sort of my family of choice that when I talk to her she usually asks about people that I know. Friends of mine. So it's gotten much better.

CNK: Can you talk more about her growing up as an important person in your life?

#3: Yeah. She grew up very poor. Text book Appalachian you know I mean just textbook Appalachian. Very poor. Log cabin kind of thing. She was raised--. She was raised by her mother because her father was killed at when she was very young. He was-- . There was some sort of accident and he died. She's always been very quiet and the peacemaker. And she was always--. She's the one that taught me compassion because I can always remember her being very compassionate. And she truly did--. I remember watching her--. She tried to truly practice her religious faith and she was just always sort of my companion and we were very close because my mother and father worked when I was born. So I stayed a lot with her, and she baby-sat and she spoiled me rotten.

CNK: This is great.

#3: She didn't--. She taught by example. She didn't really do the big lecture thing except the one time I can remember getting one spanking from her which was just horrible I still cringe because I don't know what possessed me but she had bought one of those stupid little pools for kids and it just seemed the thing to do while she was bent over filling that thing up to push her right in there. I don't remember how old I was. I must have been 6 or 7 years old, and I got a spanking over that. That's the only time I ever got in trouble. She was not happy about that. I don't know what possessed me to do that to this day but it just--. It did seem the thing to do. It was just prime. I think probably that was the drag gene coming out at that point.

CNK: The drag gene?

#3: Yeah just cantankerous, spontaneous kind of thing. I have to say probably the independent fierce part of my personality sort of probably comes from my mother because

I also spent a lot of time with my mom. She was sort of the number two person and so they tempered each other. My grandmother is very--. She'll let people run over her and luckily I got a little of her compassion, but I also got a little of my mother's spitfire temper too. My mother taught me--. My mother, nobody else taught me to be completely independent. And that little did I know that down the road when I came out and everybody pretty much sort of backed off that I would need it. So does that sort of answer your question?

CNK: Yeah it does. What did it feel like to know what you knew about yourself to feel what you felt whether you felt different of whatever and to live where you lived?

#3: It was an interesting situation because I was always precocious as a kid. I can remember--. And my mother--. My whole family has always been readers. We all read. And so I sort of had this sense. I didn't know what the hell to call it, but I can remember having crushes on little boys in 3rd grade, 4th grade, and until I found out there was something wrong with it I didn't think anything about it. But when I started putting two and two together and figuring out that words like faggot and queer referred to me. Then I felt very very isolated and at one point I can remember thinking to myself, "I must be the only person in the world like this." But I flip back to what my mother had taught me, the stubbornness also came from my grandmother and my mother, and I was just stubborn as a little boy growing up through middle school and high school. And I really didn't sort of completely come out to myself until I was in college. I had had some sexual activity late in high school but dear lord the price was horrible guilt. So all of that--. I tried to--. I went through this whole process of you know getting religion in my life so I could get

right with God and get this all taken care of. And that lasted about a year. It was at that point that it all broke loose and when I came out I am here to tell you, I came out! Within one week I was out going to the gay bars, and at the end of that week I had booked my first drag show. So I never do things small. Well of course it's that drag gene again it has to be dramatic. But, but at home the number one memory I have is I can remember a conversation in my mom and dad's living room and I can't remember who all was there. I know my dad was and some other men type folk. And somehow the subject of homosexuality came up and I can remember--. I think it was an uncle of mine saying something along the lines of, "They should all be rounded up put on an island and shot." I can remember thinking to myself, "You're talking about me." And so. I've thought a lot about that as I've grown older. Thinking to myself, "Kids are hearing this kind of garbage from people who are supposed to be their protectors and the people who love them," and they hear this kind of crap. And pretty much that is one of the reasons that I sort of dedicated my whole life to activism in one way or another. And I have all kinds of trouble. I'll probably have trouble with my family over [this current] situation . . . because I've been in the newspaper, and they always call and there is always an argument and I always end up telling them, "Live your life. I live mine." We still go through this because I--. Well my father even told me once to have my name changed. And at first I was really pissed off and I was going to, but then I thought, "Wait one minute honey. You gave it to me. It's mine to do with as I see fit. If you didn't want any connection to you, you shouldn't have given me your name." And so it's that stubbornness coming out I think.

CNK: I love it.

#3: But that sort of sums it up. I mean now I've sort of settled into--. I think I've hit middle age, or at least I'm starting to. I'm becoming more of a homebody. I don't get out and visit nearly as much, and I'm sort of just entering into what looks like it's going to be somewhat of a long term relationship. Finished up my master's degree. Going to go on and get my Ph.D. Do the--. I'd like to do some writing and teaching. And just sort of go off and have my little life. Sometimes like with this situation the goddess doesn't--.

CNK: Things(...) up again?

#3: Oh yeah. Of course, just when you start to get complacent and lazy. That's when change needs to take place in your life because otherwise you become stagnant.

CNK: Amen.

#3: So.

CNK: Speaking of middle age, what's your date of birth?

#3: ... 1967. A [Astrological sign] through and through.

CNK: So, are there things about your experience that you think would be different--?

What's the Appalachian component of realizing that you're gay and dealing with that? Is it distinct?

#3: The number one thing--. And a fellow by the name of Jeff Mann--. I don't know if you know him or not. He's an English/Lit person over at Virginia Tech. Has written about this. The number one difference is there is such a connection to the land and the people, yet you want to get away so you can live to be who you are, where you can--.

Where you don't constantly either have to be in the closet or on your guard. And that's

not to say--. I'm not trying to stereotype or generalize and so OK if go to New York City I never have to be on my guard. That's not what I'm saying, but I'm saying if I go to New York City or I go to Philly or I go to DC, there's a lot of people that don't care.

CNK: That what?

#3: That don't care one way or the other. You just sort of blend in. And I think there is a conflict that develops: Do I stay? Do I go? I know that's exactly what's going on with me right now, because I would like to go and get my Ph.D. at a particular university out in California in . . . , but that is just way too far from my family. Family of choice and family of origin. And it's too far from my mountains. So I think that is a part of what makes it somewhat different. But. And I would have to say also--. Which is not really different I guess from rural--. Rural areas period have a problem where there is a lack of support. However the Internet has done a whole lot for that because kids can log on and go to P-FLAG or go to youth organizations and things like that and they can find out--. Unlike when I was growing up I didn't know that there were other homosexuals and when I did find they were always sort of alluded to in secrecy and in whispers and as the town pervert.

CNK: So there were some as you were growing up that you are aware of?

#3: In later years when I was in high school. That was when my father and mother would actually somewhat talk about things like that in front of me. But for the bulk of my childhood I didn't even know that there were other people like me. I was so naive I didn't know the Village People were gay! I didn't even know what--. I didn't know what Greenwich Village was.

CNK: Right.

#3: I had no idea that they were gay. I don't think my parents did either actually if you want to know the truth. God this is dating me. They had the eight track. But that's solid sums up my-- Did I answer your question?

CNK: Well yeah. So, you kind of agree with this with Jeff Mann who talks about this relevance the connection to land and people and the--?

#3: Absolutely. Absolutely and I don't necessarily even know if you talk to every gay male, every lesbian, every bisexual male or every transgendered person in Appalachia. I don't know that they can even vocalize that. But I think when you really start poking and prodding and get right down to it you can find that there is this really strong connection. And there is a conflict at some point that that person fights or continues to fight, whether to leave or whether to stay. And then there is the whole concept of being quote unquote out in this area-- I mean I'm about as out as you can get. I have bumper stickers on my car the whole nine yards. And tend not to, knock on wood, to have problems. But I also wouldn't want to move with my partner to certain parts of... County either, which is the neighboring county, because we'd probably be burned out.

CNK: Burned out?

#3: Yeah. They'd probably burn the damn house down and run us out. So it's an odd place. I think yeah everybody would share that conflict, whether or not they could vocalize it or consciously recognize it or not.

CNK: Tell me more about that conflict, I mean why don't you go where there are lots of gay people and you can be anonymous or be in the company of a new family of choice?

#3: Because one of the characteristics of being Appalachian is the high value that we place on our family, whether it is family of choice or family of origin. The people who have been with me through my whole coming out process, they are my family. And they can't be replaced. Does that make sense? It's very--. I hate to use the stereotype but it's very clannish. When I packed up and went to [a large city] I felt like I was a fish out of water. The culture was completely different. The food was different. How we even viewed spirituality was somewhat different. There seems to be at least in this area there is a generalized reciprocity thing that goes on where you know I'll help you out, because one day I might need your help kind of thing and I did not see that when I was living in [a large city]. And then there comes the whole question of land. This land cannot be mimicked anywhere else. Now maybe in Ireland or Scotland but I haven't been there yet so I can't make that determination.

CNK: Right.

#3: Nothing can--. These mountains cannot be mimicked or copied anywhere else in this country. And I mean I've been out west and I've been in lord I've been in the Midwest where it is so flat I couldn't stand that. Even in Florida. I like my mountains. I feel safe. I feel connected. And literally when I cross the border, whether I'm crossing the border into Morgantown coming out of Maryland and you know I still have ... hours to get ... home. Once I cross the border into West Virginia I'm home. If I'm in San Francisco and I run into someone from West Virginia, there is an immediate dialogue that can begin, because it's kind of like we are related in some strange way. Does that make sense?

CNK: It's what in some strange way?

#3: It's like we're related.

CNK: Related?

#3: Yeah or we're neighbors. So that's kind of my take on that.

CNK: Oh boy. You speak so well about all this.

#3: (begins to speak)

CNK: Oh go on.

#3: No, please. I was going to tell you I think I need to call you back. I've gotten like six phone calls.

CNK: Oh you have?

#3: Yeah, so can I give you a ring right back?

CNK: That would be great.

#3: OK, what's your number? ...

CNK: Maybe we will hone in on this paper a little bit.

#3: OK.

CNK: Thanks.

#3: Uh huh. Bye bye.

CNK: Bye.

Phone Conversation Part II

#3: Absolutely, no problem. Actually I sort of came in this morning and tried to get grounded.

CNK: Oh.

#3: Try to get some things done so.

CNK: Your story is just so beautiful and so well told.

#3: Wow!

CNK: I'm honored that you would express all of that on the phone without having met. Just very appreciative.

#3: Hey I figure--. Thank you first of all. And I figure that one of the most important things we can do is tell our stories because that makes us human in the eyes of people rather than some abstract nebulous clump called homosexuals. And so that's sort of my goal. I want to really personalize some of this stuff. But anyway.

CNK: No that's great. That's just what I want to hear about. That's what I want to do is collect people's stories and keep talking about that on the value of that.

#3: Well basically, people either have--. Their understanding of homosexuality is either based on stereotypes or it's loosely based on you know they just think of this blob this abstract blob. And that's really the case for minorities in general I think to some degree or another. And I truly believe that when people sit down and they hear somebody tell their story or they hear a personal story it puts a face and a name and experiences and feelings in blood in flesh in bone, and pulls that out of that abstract blob of quote unquote homosexuality. And suddenly they are a person first and foremost. And I've found that that is probably one of the best ways to educate people is to share your story. Statistics don't get it. You can give all of the statistics you know and crunch all the numbers in the world and it still does not have the impact in this particular kind of situation that hearing somebody's story has. I hope that makes sense?

CNK: Ummhmm

#3: I feel like I'm rambling on.

CNK: No you're not.

#3: And in particular in this area where storytelling is still important that I think think that also ties into it to so I think there is some ethnic--. My Appalachian ethnicity is sort of rising to the surface because I like nothing better than telling a good story.

CNK: So storytelling is still important here?

#3: Oh, absolutely! Absolutely! I noticed that even in my family of choice we still tell stories and even at home when I go home for Thanksgiving or Christmas or whatever holiday that happens to be. Sometime we will get into a storytelling kind of situation where somebody will relate what my grandfather did one time. blah blah blah. or whatever. So yeah storytelling is still very important I think.

CNK: Is that unique to this region?

#3: I'm not sure. I know--. I don't think it is unique to this region. I wouldn't say that but I think it is an important part of our ethnicity in this region. Does that make sense?

CNK: Uhhhuh

#3: Because I can't I really can't speak to that because I don't know. I don't know that much about let's say Italian ethnicity or Irish ethnicity. I would be interested in finding--. I do know that there are some very strong connections between our origins in this area come out of Scotland and Ireland. So there is a very strong Celtic tie. And you can sit back and sort of watch people in this area and you can still see glimmers of that. For example, fixing--. It's sort of a tradition to fix cabbage on New Years in this area and put

some sort of silver coin in it to bring good luck and money in the new year. And the foods themselves, cabbage and potatoes and things that are still very popular here trace their origins pretty far back to Celtic origins.

CNK: So that's a Celtic tradition?

#3: I think so yeah. From all I've been able to figure out and all I've been able to learn about it. But--.

CNK: So if you were trying to do one semesters worth of useful productive work related to gathering stories around alternative sexuality where would you go with that?

#3: That's a tough one. I've always found--. I've always sort of believed that it's a hard thing to do in a semester. And when you say where would I go.

CNK: So would you carve out a plan of action? An appropriate sort of framework.

#3: Well you've got through me. OK, you've got your first contact, and I can put you in contact with other people. Are you just talking about this particular area, the Huntington area or are you talking about West Virginia?

CNK: West Virginia

#3: OK.

CNK: People who have been born--. I'm thinking of at least the basic restriction, people who were born and raised in West Virginia and I'm uncertain of whether to restrict it to people who continue to live here or not.

#3: I can put you in contact with people, and I mean you can do--. Depending on how quick you can get things transcribed and get your interviews done, I can put you in

contact with people at the state coalition. West Virginia Gay and--. Lesbian and Gay--. Gay and Lesbian Coalition I'm not sure I can't remember the name of it.

CNK: Cool

#3: Who probably--. There are several people who would probably be willing to work with you.

CNK: Great

#3: I think I would--. I think depending on--. Do you want to build on--. You want to build on this research right? Even after you leave--. After you leave the fellowship?

CNK: If I can find funding. I would like to yeah.

#3: I would--.

CNK: But I wanted to look for them like it will be--. Just a square of work that they can see the beginning and a clear conclusion to it. I think they will want that don't you?

#3: Oh yeah. Yeah. They will look for that. In the past somebody--. There was one person who did--. Worked with just a few oral histories that were done by female workers at Owens Illinois.

CNK: Yeah

#3: So you could. You could potentially collect set a specific number of oral histories. Cause it sounds like that is sort of the ethnographic or ethnographic kind of approach. That's what it sounds like. That's the approach that you take. You could set a certain number of interviews.

CNK: Yeah I'm thinking maybe like 10 or 12. Something--. Does that sound about right for a semester?

#3: Yeah it depends. Are you going to be the one to have to transcribe it?

CNK: Do you know anything about that? Whether they help you out with that?

#3: I know that there is a graduate--. There are--. There is either one or two graduate assistants up there.

CNK: Yeah well there is all of these fellowships so I have to assume I would transcribe them so I'd probably say ten.

#3: I think you probably might have to end up transcribing some of them yourself. So I would be careful. It depends on how long the interviews--. You know what kind of in-depth interviews you want to do.

CNK: My standard interview is 90 minutes. I have a feeling it will be roughly that.

#3: I would say 8 to 10. And that in and of itself just the collecting of the stories and the analysis for--. Or coding for common threads I think would be of interest to several people on that committee especially if you--. If you decide to go and look at that conflict issue that we were talking about.

CNK: Which conflict issue?

#3: The conflict as to whether to stay or to leave. That ties it into the general Appalachian issue and so that might be an inroad for you.

CNK: That's a really good idea. And I think I could look at people who left you know within that scope who made that decision.

#3: Oh easily and I can give you Jeff Manns phone number. As a matter of fact what city do you live in?

CNK: Elkins

#3: Elkins ahhh.

CNK: So it was just over at Tech interviewing Nikki Giovanni but we could go back and see him.

#3: Jeff Mann is going to be here on campus on Marshall's campus.

CNK: Really?

#3: Yeah during the CSEGA conference.

CNK: On really? Well we are going to be presenting and singing at it.

#3: OK cool. He is going to chair one of the sessions I know.

CNK: Great!

#3: So you can get in touch with him. And he is a wonderful guy and some of the stuff he has written is wonderful. A lot of the stuff is not published. He quoted something that was written by a friend of his he's a poet. So most of his stuff is in you know the form of poetry.

CNK: Cool

#3: But there is one particular poem that he writes about himself being in DC on a rooftop and being so disconnected and feeling so low and down and he missed his mountains.

CNK: Wow! Where is he from?

#3: He is--. He's from West Virginia. Hell actually he's from Hinton.

CNK: Wow!

#3: And his father just had about three months ago or so--. Do you get the Charleston Daily Mail?

CNK: No. Wish we did.

#3: His father just wrote a letter--. His father is a previous legislator at the state level and he just wrote a letter which if you could get a copy of it it would be wonderful. I don't know if I still have a copy or not. So he is West Virginia, born and bred and although he does not live in West Virginia, he lives in Virginia, still within the Appalachian region. And he lived in DC for five years I think. So I would I can defiantly put you in contact with him. I've got his e-mail address I can e-mail it to you.

CNK: Great. Was this a gay related letter that his father had written?

#3: Oh absolutely. It was in support of his gay son because someone had written a really nasty letter it was an anti-gay letter I can't remember which part it was about.

CNK: Wow!

#3: He published this in the Charleston Daily Mail I'm pretty sure. I can look and see if I've got that.

CNK: That would be great.

#3: The letter would be interesting to read especially coming from a previously state legislator. But it was a beautiful letter about his son.

CNK: Wow!

#3: So.

CNK: Yeah I'd love to see that.

#3: I was trying to think I may have it in a folder because I tried to collect all that stuff when I was actually working on my thesis.

CNK: Uhhuh

#3: And so I will dig through that tonight. I have a big ole note on my planner..

CNK: OK

#3: To dig up some of this stuff for you and I'll send you the e-mail tonight.

CNK: Thank you.

#3: I actually have to run now because I have somebody waitin here in the office.

CNK: OK

#3: But if you need to if you need to call me...

CNK: OK

#3: Just give me a ring. I'm in the office usually what from like 9:30 until noon and then from noon shoot from one until two.

CNK: OK

#3: Then usually by five o'clock or so I'm home because I have to get home and watch Designing Women.

CNK: OK

#3: So usually I'm home after five, six o'clock.

CNK: So 9:30 noon and then 1:00-2:00.

#3: Umm hmm. I'm in the office here, and then by 5:00, 6:00 o'clock I'm at home.

CNK: Is it ok to call you there?

#3: Oh Lord, yeah.

CNK: What's the number?

#3:

CNK: ... ?

#3: Uhh huh.

CNK: Well thank you!

#3: You're very welcome! And it was really nice to get the chance to talk with you.

CNK: You too.

#3: And I will be in touch ok?

CNK: Great thank you. Bye.

#3: Bye.