LGBTQ Oral History Project

Introduction to LGBTQ Studies (Spring 2018)

Northern Kentucky University

L: Ok if you can start with your name, age and hometown

B: Bonnie Meyer we're still talking about the age, I’m forty-two and I'm from Covington Kentucky

L: How do you self-identify in terms sexual orientation and gender identity

B: Depending on the audience and that is I think due to the field of work that I'm in. I identify as queer and some spaces when people don't understand what queer means I'll say bisexual.

L: When did you realize you were LGBTQ

B: I think I've always known or I think a lot of us know who we are from an early age, so I grew up in a very small rural town in northwest Ohio and being an eighty's kid there was not really any talk about LGBTQ anything. By not really, I mean there was no talk about LGBTQ anything. What we heard back in the eighty's and when I was growing up was all about gay men and it was around the HIV and the AIDS crisis and all of that under the Reagan administration so very few positive representations of gay or lesbian people through my childhood. But I know from a very early age that I knew that I was attracted to both men and women and that was just the language that had, or I knew that there was an attraction there, but I did not know what that meant. I knew that it was not OK where I was from certainly and I think for a long time I figured that there was something wrong with me until I realized of course that there are lots of gay and lesbian folks in the world and it was it was OK but that was a that was a really long time coming and I ended up coming out pretty late in life, comparatively speaking especially for somebody who does this kind of work pretty late in life. And I think that that's because of where I grew up the education, the conversations, the community and just lack of visibility of the LGBTQ community when I was growing up.

L: What about specifically your parents did they have anything to say about LGBTQ people

B: Oh, they have a whole lot of thoughts about LGBTQ people. I do not know my biological father I've never met him or perhaps when I was an infant, but I've never had any interaction with my biological father. My mother married when I was five. First five years of my life my mother and my grandmother raised me. I feel certain that my grandmother would have been supportive. My mother, I don't believe really has all that many issues with gay or lesbian folks but is certainly not in a position to express that. I think is my take. The man that she married who raised me is certainly I would say, wildly homophobic and I have had absolutely no contact with him for over ten years. I have zero intention to ever speak to him again and my mother officially
disassociated from me via a Facebook post about three years ago so. I think I fall into the group of people who, you know, the biological family is not always your family. The family is in this community and it’s the folks that that you choose, the folks that you meet along the way and I have so many wonderful friends and in-laws and two really great kids who are supportive and that's what matters.

L: So, did you come out and how did that look

B: I came out like a lot of people come out and that is being dragged directly out kicking and screaming. I knew that I was not straight. When I had the language to put behind it I think I was probably in my early twenty's. I was definitely at this point, already a mom, and I identified at that point really as nothing and I just knew that I was not straight. So, I started to figure out the number of sexual orientations that are out there when I started my undergraduate work at Miami University as a twenty-two-year-old with an eighteen-month-old daughter, who had been married at this point for a couple years to a man, who I met in high school and I started dating when I was fifteen. My very first class was a women and gender studies class and that professor was a lesbian and talked about it. This was in the mid ninety's which was pretty bold especially in an institution like Miami to be just out there and confident and bold in her identity and I learned a lot from her, about the world and really at that point started to piece together what my identity could have been. I didn't really, fully come into that for quite a bit longer for probably about another ten years or so before I had all of the language and all of the confidence behind that identity. But what ended up happening was I was a high school English teacher in my old hometown in Northwest Ohio, in the country, and I was sort of outed. More so around accusations and ridiculousness by my ex-husband after we divorced. He has since admitted that he said and did absolutely everything to get revenge on me for ending the marriage. So, after everything that I went through there, which, it was pretty terrible being outed as a high school teacher in a conservative community where they believed that I was the first gay person that they had ever interacted with ever. I certainly was pretty full of rage and frustration and it was really after I started my doctoral work at Miami University again and had really wonderful mentors and friends and support, that it all sort of pieced together for me and I was able to move forward and live what is an authentic life for me.

L: How did LGBTQ representation look when you were growing up?

B: Thinking about my childhood the only thing I remember is HIV and AIDS and all of the conversations around that and all of the fear around HIV and AIDS. Just ridiculous stories and fears. There were some television shows where they really mocked the LGBTQ community there was a lot of that I saw in the eighty's especially now thinking back on the representations of usually gay men in movies but also transgender people and how they were just mocked in movies throughout the eighty's and in the ninety's. And then also all of the really scary, terrible stories that spearheaded some of the organizations that we see today and some of the momentum
and I think that initially really pushed us into this next phase I think of LGBTQ work which were the murder of Matthew Shepard, who was my age, Brandon Teena, who was my age and so as a person who was starting to figure out or realize or recognize that maybe there was this part of me that was that was more than Heterosexual. But seeing what happened when people were in very rural spaces and I related to those stories in those spaces because my hometown was so teeny tiny, and it was kind of scary around these sorts of issues back then so no positive representations at all from my childhood.

L: How do you think the representation has changed since you were younger

B: I know it's changed I mean we see so much out there now about the LGBTQA community. Through social media, through legislation, we certainly have a really long way to go but we weren't even talking on a large scale about LGBTQ rights thirty years ago like we are now. We have a lot of ground that we still need to make up and I mean. It's still legal to fire a person or deny them housing or kick them out of a place because of their sexual orientation or their gender identity in most states including the one that we live in still in 2018 and so we have seen some policy changes. Obviously, same sex marriages the Supreme Court handed that down a couple years ago. But we still see pretty serious discrimination against trans folks through legislation and through. We're talking about it now though and people are involved, and people are out in ways that they've not been out before. We were walking through Covington about two weeks ago on a Sunday morning and there was a same sex wedding happening in Goebel park and we loved it you just don't see things like that. We were and Covington on Saturday and saw a same sex couple walking down main street holding hands. I mean these sorts of things didn't happen twenty, thirty years ago and I do think if it's because of media. That’s positive and negative sometimes all press can be a good press. So, you see shows like Modern Family which can be problematic but still there are representations of LGBTQ folks. On television and movies on social media so it's just it's a completely different world than it used to be.

L: How did coming out effect your social relationships were there negatives and positives

B: I say I've lived two lives. I have this life and I have my previous life I call it. Which is I'd say about the first thirty years or so and now this is the second part of my life and with the exception of just a couple people from the first thirty years of my life I'm in no contact with anybody at all from that part of my life and that is due to the discrimination and the hate that I faced through that community. Through people's inability to be open minded and because we have come too far and we're too strong to put up with toxic relationships in our lives so. From the first part of my life my kids are really kind of it in terms of the relationships that I still have and now in this part, post K-12 teaching to be married to my wife and to being engaged in the community which is really important to me and to her and to us and our friends and our family and our careers they could not be more different. But without a doubt the reason why the people who are no longer in my life it's completely due to my sexual orientation.

L: So, let's talk about your wife where did you two meet
B: We met six and a half years ago. In Covington and we met as she was organizing a community event to speak back to a hate crime that happened in Covington and I was sympathetic to all of this having gone through some of the things that I went through. And so I had created this Facebook page, Queers for Solidarity around pulling L.G.B.T folks together who were interested in doing work beyond pride festivals so I was just thinking about it was at this time the unions were under attack in Ohio and I have always been a worker's rights person and public education person and I did not understand why we were not having more conversations around social issues as queer issues. I was frustrated with the ways in which of course as you know this was seven years ago people were latching to one issue and not thinking about how all of these issues impact all of us. So, she had posted in this Facebook page about a Covington’s night out was the event and organizing or jumping on the organizing team and my best friend Jose and I constantly were going back and forth from Oxford to Covington. Oxford's a pretty small place and there was a really awesome queer scene in Covington, so we would we would trek down there quite a bit. So, I said to him “we should go down and join this meeting” and he said “OKIE DOKIE” So we showed up thirty minutes late and walked in to this place that is now Braxton brewing company but at the time it was the Artisan Center and she was facilitating a meeting with. I don't know probably around ten people or so around the table who I didn't realize at the time were all people who are friends of hers I know all of these people and have known all of them closely now for almost seven years and everybody in the room saw what was happening pretty quickly. So, my head typically does not turn to other people. I need to get to know you I need to be attracted to your brain and your ideology and your commitment to society and she was smart, and she was commanding a room with people of all different ages and backgrounds and people clearly respected what she had to say and that was kind of it for Katie and me. So, we met on that day and we were exclusively a couple in just a couple weeks and we were married within a year. It'll be six years of marriage and seven years together this fall.

L: All right so describe your first kiss how did that look

B: She was she was pretty slick. I thought I would be the person that initiated the first kiss. It was really funny because we had hung out just really just a handful of times. I said that our first date was when we went to a pride night at Kings Island and she didn't realize it was a date she thought we were just hanging out with friends until I think at the end of the night she realized maybe it was a date and she asked me to go out the following weekend and then we texted back and forth a little bit over the course of the weekend. I taught on Monday afternoons and then there was a place in Oxford that we liked to go for five dollar martini Mondays and so I was texting back and forth with her about martini Monday and she just out of nowhere she was coaching soccer as I was getting ready to go in and teach my class she said that her soccer practice was cancelled and so she thought maybe she would come up and join us for martini Monday which I thought was awesome and also I was not prepared. I was not expecting it, so she did come up and join us for martini Monday. I found out later that it was not soccer practice it was a soccer game and it was not canceled she just skipped it and went to Oxford the hang out
with me for a martini Monday which was good. Later that night she ended up coming over and I was just sort of propped up on the end of my couch and I was jabbering away, and she just walked over and kissed me, and it was pretty slick, and I was impressed and then my heart was gone. So, it was it was a good one.

L: Do you think it was love at first sight?

B: I think it was love at first sight. We just had this conversation recently it was love almost at first sight there was an immediate attraction between the two of us. I mean even in that meeting at the Artisan center people started, just sort of jumping in and telling stories about Katie and somebody had a photo of her at this fairy festival where she was dressed completely ridiculous as a fairy and they were showing me this photo and she was really embarrassed and wanted everybody to stop but everybody To this day, including my friend Jose they just they saw that this was a match and I have never been instantly attracted to a person in my life ever except for her so it was good. Then later that night after we met I went back to Oxford and as I was walking into my house, pretty late after we got back she sent me a text and said, “You're unreasonably beautiful” and so it was done from there.

L: How do you think this relationship has differed from other relationships?

B: I think you know when it's meant to be all relationships are difficult and they take commitment and some selflessness and patience which I'm not always the best at and the ability to be open minded and to support each other and to be willing to kind of go with the flow in the direction that life takes you. I think I never in a million years would have seen where my life would have led me now living in Covington. We just bought our first house together. In the Austinburg neighborhood of Covington. It's just incredible to think about what you're able to do when you're when your partnership is as a team as well and so she is my best friend, she's the love of my life, she frustrates me more than any other person on the face of the earth I think that that's the way that it is supposed to go. She's my biggest cheerleader she believes me, and she supports me, and she believes in me when I don't believe in myself and that is not easy to come by and certainly I feel the same way.

L: What is your favorite memory of when you first started dating

B: We went to a whole lot of costume parties when we first started dating it was fun we started dating in the beginning of September, so we had all the Halloween stuff and we've always enjoyed that. So, we owned a bar right after we started dating and we constantly would have different costume parties, and this was fun. So, it was it was a lot of fun to imagine the costumes with her, so we went as good and evil for our very first costume. Our very first official date, this was after she came up to my house, was a Pirate Party and so our first date in Covington was we were dressed as pirates and that's awesome, so we've just had a lot of fun with that over the years. Traveling, we went away, by away I mean Lexington, I mean I never spent any time in Lexington as a person from northwest Ohio who lived in Oxford Ohio for the entirety of my life.
up to that point but a month into our relationship we were in Lexington for a weekend and since then work or just individual and collective passions have bounced us all over the place so it's often the case that we're not at home or out about doing things and that's the way it's been since the very beginning and that's the way I'm sure it will continue to be. And it's lovely and we've got a lot of places a lot of fun. I'm waiting for our Travel Channel or H.D. T.V. show or something. It is going to happen, happy hour around the world I know it's going to happen, all the queer happy hour spots.

L: So are you involved in any LGBTQ organizations.

B: I am actually. So, on campus I’m the founding director of the office of LGBTQ programs and services here at Northern Kentucky University. Prior to this, after returning, after everything that happened through my divorce and because of my ex-husband and everything in northwest Ohio that lead me directly into this work I was really furious with how being a person who taught juniors and seniors in the community that I grew up, first of all why people would even believe the things that he said was ridiculous and secondly that people would believe that I was the first gay person they've ever met in their life is ridiculous. Third the immediate response to even the possibility that I would be a lesbian teaching juniors and seniors. I was just frustrated with the entire process and full of rage and it was through my relationships and my mentors at Miami University, my doctoral program that helped me focus that rage in really productive ways and learning and that's when I really started reading and learning about job protections and what policies we have in place at the federal level, like none really, these days and at the state level and it was through all of that knowledge and so many conversations with public teachers from our region who experienced very similar things to what I had experienced who were no longer in the classroom or those who left because it was too much or those who managed to survive and went on to a different positions somewhere. All of that work led me really into the passion of thinking about the experiences of LGBTQ educators and public schools and how teaching and working in places that do not have job protections can be damaging to the health and it's just pretty terrible but that led me into an interest to get involved with bigger organizations, so I was on the board of equality Ohio for a bit. Equality Ohio is the state-wide advocacy organization for LGBT folks and issues. Then I moved to Kentucky after I met Katie where I then was working and living exclusively in Kentucky, so at that point was no longer involved with Equality Ohio but I got involved with the Northern Kentucky pride festival immediately we have a cochaired that festival for the last six years, doing it again this summer. But also beyond Northern Kentucky pride, I'm on the LGBTQ LULAC Cincinnati board and just do a lot of work in the community aside from NKY pride or Northern Kentucky fairness working with state wide organizations like the fairness campaign to think about how we can spread fairness across Northern Kentucky and for us that means fairness ordinances seeing additional cities in northern Kentucky adopt fairness ordinances, providing of spaces for LGBTQ people to express discrimination that they are facing in their communities so the importance of local human rights commissions and hearing those complaints and helping to provide a sounding board for people
who feel like they're discriminated against in the community has been really the bulk of my work for the last several years. Then just I think through the work through the office as well as the community work just being willing to be a resource, so I do a lot of trainings for social workers and school counselors and police officers and community members and government officials in LGBTQ competency.

L: How long have you been involved here on campus in the office

B: This is the fifth year for the office. I am the founding director of the office, so we'll be here for five years officially the second week of class in August and we will have a birthday party to celebrate the offices five years.

L: Talk about some of the stuff you do here on campus

B: So, we’re the programs and services office and I think that that's a really good way to think about it. So, when we talk about programs as an office located within the division of student affairs our primary focus is always students so some of the programming are things like LGBTQ History Month in October there are various days of recognition and celebration for identities within October so organizing visibility and events around those days in that month particularly National Coming Out Day. We move into November and transgender day of remembrance. We have trans day of visibility coming up in just a couple weeks. We do pride week in the spring. We've done events for World AIDS Day And then also supporting other events that are happening on campus so there's the programming aspect. But there's also the services aspect so some of the services we've offered have included Mentor programs for LGBTQQA students, Confidential coming out groups, and lots of trainings. We train the orientation leaders RA's and Presidential Ambassadors. We train our police force here on campus, our police officers were the first in a Kentucky public university to be LGBTQ confidence trained. But also, on top of that it's thinking about institutional change and commitment because we can offer all of the programs and all of the services but if we're not thinking about how the institution is supporting LGBTQ students through nondiscrimination policies, through applications, through name change procedures and how we allow students, particularly transgender students, but all students who need to change their name to do so in an easy fashion. That results in them not being outed to their friends, to their peers, to their professor, their classmates, to the other residents in their residence hall and thinking about how we can better that application process and then you know thinking about health benefits and how we have trans inclusive health benefits on campus. That's one of the things I think that I'm most proud of but we don't talk about it very often and so the systematic change is the change that we don't necessarily see or feel or there's not a giant celebration about it but it certainly changes the way that an institution operates and supports their LGBTQ students and we've seen a lot of that over the course of the last five years and that's definitely because we're supported. You can't have all of these changes without support and I believe that our students, our faculty and our staff who identify within the community are supported on our campus. I've certainly felt supported in the five years that I've been in this role.
L: So, do you feel comfortable here on campus as an LGBTQ person

B: I do feel comfortable here. It's easy for me to feel comfortable here though because they hired me to sit in this seat to do this role, so I can be out as loud as I want to be. That is part of my job but it's not this way for everybody I mean I work within the Center for student inclusiveness. We’re allies up here I work within the division of student affairs and this entire student engagement area we’re just full of allies in this building and on this floor. It's not that way I don't think for every single person I know that the coming out process, particularly in the workplace, is difficult and you never know what people are going to think or how they're going to react and that's just part of who we are, always in the process of constantly coming out and thinking about how we come out and thinking about how people will look at us differently after we come out so but I'm in a very unique role where my role is to be out and I am thrilled about this role I think because of everything that I went through that landed me in this position and thinking about the discrimination and the hate and the death threats and the property damage and the stalking and all of the things that happened after I was outed and to now I feel I have an obligation to be strong in this work and to be visible in this work and that's why my work is not only on campus but in the community as well. There's an obligation that I feel to be out and to just continue moving forward in doing positive work and being who I am. That said I'm also a White, cis-gender woman so there's a lot of privilege that comes with being a White, cis-gender, able bodied, educated woman. Folks who are not would perhaps not find it as easy. There's a lot of privilege there and we don't talk about that enough.

L: Do you have any advice for people who want to be activists

B: Advice for people who want to be activists. Find your people and then find your cause and be true to yourself. Self-care is huge I didn't understand self-care or the importance of self-care until I stopped running and then ended up with a whole bunch of medical issues so I understand that I process my stress and my anxiety through running and through yoga and by spending time out in my yard with my wife and my dogs and the sunshine and so finding that time to disconnect and I think we can all be pretty lousy about that especially under the current situation. I don't know how anybody can just sit back and not be angry about the direction that our country is taking at the moment, but you can't do everything so finding your focus and finding your cause and throwing yourself into the work that you're passionate about but always having your people.

L: Is there anyone you have looked up to or the role model

B: I have always looked up to my grandmother she was the strongest woman I've ever known she was a force, her name was Betty Brown and she helped my mother raised me the first five years of my life and it is because of her that I am who I am today. I experienced a lot of emotional and verbal abuse as a child and so experiencing that is something throughout your entire childhood that you don't shake off. For the rest of my life I feel like I'm always going to have this little voice in the back of my head telling me that I'm not smart enough and I'm not good enough and I'm never going to be able to accomplish all of my dreams and my grandmother is the other voice
in my head that blows all of that off and says that I can accomplish anything if I just set my mind to it and I put the work into it. She was such a trailblazer in the seventy's she was involved in the union, United Steelworkers she bicycled all across Ohio. She was just an incredibly strong woman who was super active in her community and just loved me and so. She's been gone for thirteen years this April, but I still hear her, and I still feel her and she's the driving force behind where I ended up today.

L: How do you think being an activist shapes you as a person.

B: I feel a really strong commitment to my community and I feel that when a person has experienced like I have experienced some pretty terrible things and I am better now than I was before. Not saying that I'm glad that experienced all of those things but I've learned a lot by it and I've had the right people in place throughout my life. Even when I felt like I had nobody there was always somebody there. I have I have a couple of really great aunts who have just sort of instinctively know when I need them to pop back in with some sort of encouraging word or something to support me and they were pretty important as I was healing from everything but also along the way the friends and family that I’ve had. I am stronger and feistier and better equipped to stand on my own two feet and to fight now. I also have a lot of privilege in order to do so through my position here in the community, but it doesn't matter I don't think it matters where we would live. You can't go through that sort of thing, end up on the other side of it and then just sit back in your armchair and do nothing. You have to continue to work to change the culture of the community that you live in and for me that work is around fairness and legislative protections and support from our elected officials and schools. So, I will not sit still. I just think that we have such a commitment to be engaged in what's happening in our community and to call our elected officials, to be active, to join boards and volunteer and just do the work to make this world a better place and I think that it’s sort of intertwined with my identity at this point. You just have to do your part.

L: We need more people like you

B: We need more people who are willing to volunteer

L: Well thank you very much, it’s been a pleasure to talk to you.