Lesbian Elders Oral Herstory
of
J. Robin Whitley

An Interview
Conducted by
Baylee Woodley
6/10/2022

Collection: The Lesbian Elders Oral Herstory Project

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LEOHP Interview
Interviewee: J. Robin Whitley
Interviewer: Baylee Woodley
Date: 06/10/2022

Baylee Woodley 00:03
Hello and thank you for joining us. Today is June 10th, 2022, and we are recording an oral herstory with me, Baylee Woodley, talking to Robin Whitley about her life history. This is a Lesbian Elders Oral Herstory Project interview, a project with the Lesbian Herstory Archives. I'm recording from the Lekwungen territory in Victoria, British Columbia, and Robin is recording from Boone, North Carolina. So Robin, I wonder if we could start by you telling me about growing up in Big Lick, Oakboro, North Carolina in the sixties.

Robin Whitley 00:42
Well, I can sure try. I was actually born in Charlotte. But the town [note: I grew up in] is actually Oakboro. Big Lick was a community of Oakboro, though of course, before the railroad came into Oakboro, the town was Big Lick. Needless to say, it's a little country town in North Carolina in the middle of nowhere. But in the middle of nowhere put us four hours from the beach and four hours from the mountains so that made it kind of nice. Oh, now I'm kind of nervous now. But I knew at an early age that I was a lesbian. And well, I didn't know the word was lesbian, I just thought everybody was like me. I thought everybody liked girls. And then I found out by watching— it was a Bill Bixby movie, and it was— I can't remember the name right now but he came out to his kid [note: as a homosexual], and I turned to my mom and I said, "That's what we are right?" And she said, "No! We're heterosexuals." And that's when I knew I was different. So then I looked at the 1969 World Book to look up what the word "heterosexual" meant and to find that I was not one. So that's when I knew I was different. I was in elementary school. That would probably be 1969 or 1970. I was raised in a religious community and I was a religious kid anyway. I'm not quite sure what I'm supposed to tell you now. It was a cotton mill town.

Baylee Woodley 02:47
No, that's perfect. I think we know my next question was— I wanted to ask you about being a Lutheran Pastor because that was a huge part of your life. I wondered if you could tell me a bit more. What that was like sort of growing up and coming out and then getting into that role?

Robin Whitley 03:03
Oh, sure [crosstalk]— I got nervous and then I forgot everything.

Baylee Woodley 03:08
I understand.

Robin Whitley 03:11
So I was religious all my life and I went into my undergraduate in church music. I went to a small school in North Carolina that was a United Methodist school, [note: Pfeiffer College], and got a Church Music degree. And that's where I got into the Lutheran Church. After many years of working as a church musician, I decided to go to seminary to become a pastor. Except that I told God, I said, "God, you know, you don't want me to go to seminary, or because they don't want me to go to— what are you gonna do about them [note: meaning anti-LGBTQ church members]?" And it was like, I had this argument with God. And needless to say I didn't win. But I went to seminary and I said, "I'll go, God, but you have to make sure that the church has changed by the time I get out of seminary." Well, I was changed instead, which was pretty cool because graduate school changes you regardless of your degree. But I did get ordained as a Lutheran Pastor and I worked at Advent Lutheran in Charlotte, North Carolina. I was their first associate. It was a wonderful church and it was one of the progressive churches in Charlotte, but not progressive enough for me to be an out pastor. Because at the time the Lutheran church was not ordaining or condoning practicing homosexuals, you know? Like we need practice. But did I tell you the story about the dog house?

Baylee Woodley 04:59
No.

Robin Whitley 05:00
I'm gonna tell you this story anyway, because this is part of the whole challenge. In every church, and I'd worked in churches long enough, even by then, I knew that in every church there's some troublemaker that's gonna cause you trouble. And I was a pastor in this church and my girlfriend at the time was coming to the church because she liked it too. And well, one day troublemaker came up to me at church and said, "Robin, are you gonna be at home after church today?" And I said, "Yeah," I said, she said, "Well, I'm gonna call you this afternoon." I said, "Well, okay, just give me a call." Well, when I got home, my girlfriend told me, "Oh Robin, Loretta—" I said the name. So God, can we take out that name [laughs]— well, they won't know who it is anyway, she's long ago died. Now I'm embarrassed. But she said, "She came up to me and said something to me at church— "Are you still living with Pastor Robin?"" And I said, "Oh my gosh, she is going to call me and she's going to ask me, "Are you living in sin?" And going to make me come out to the Bishop, which would have caused me to lose my job. I was worrying for four hours, praying— that's how long it took before she called me. Praying and pacing and saying, "Oh my gosh, what am I gonna do? Am I gonna come out?" Because I still have to pay off my master's degree and I still haven't done this and I wanted to be a pastor longer than however many months that was— six months [laughs]. Anyway, she called up and she said, "Robin, you want a dog house?" So all that time wasted. All that time, I'm wasting my creativity on just trying to stay in the closet. And I think that was kind of a turning point, believe it or not, but then I got sick.

While I was trying to get well, I decided during my prayer life, that it felt like God was telling me it was time for me to come out to my Bishop. So I did. And when I came out, the Bishop— in fairness to the Bishop at the time— he didn't remove me right away, which is what most of the Bishops would have done. He did give me you know, a couple of months before he made the decision and allowed me to preach in some other places and he did, at one point say, "Robin," he said, "there's some churches that are wanting you to be their Pastor" because I had been supply preaching. And he said, "And so we're going to have to ask for your resignation. I should have asked for it by now but you can't preach in these churches." And so they asked for my resignation, and if I didn't resign, they were going to charge me with sexual misconduct.

Baylee Woodley 08:27
Wow.

Robin Whitley 08:27
So what I told them, when I did send in my resignation, I— you know what, I actually have found that in my own packing, I meant to save it for this interview but I forgot— but I told the Bishop, I said, "If you don't want gays and lesbians becoming pastors, then you need to tell the Holy Spirit to leave them alone." Because I never, the irony of it all was I never wanted to be a Pastor anyway, I wanted to be a musician. I was just trying to be where I felt God called me to be. And oddly enough, I was kind of decent at being a Pastor, I was a church professional. So that was very devastating for me. And for a long time, I was lost as a result. Lost emotionally because I got into a big depression.

Baylee Woodley 09:36
How would you describe your relationship to religion now? Have you come back to it? Have you found a place?

Robin Whitley 09:44
I've always been religious, I remained religious. And while I was going through the hurt part, I explored other religions— and I'm tilting my screen back because I wanted— I was glad that we have all those [correction: flags] there. That's my partner's. But I'd explored all those religions anyway [laughs]. Buddhism is the one that resonates with me most. Although I also really resonate with Judaism. And so, what I realized is I really resonate with all of them because I don't believe that any one of them holds the one truth. And of course in the South— I need to be clear— in the South, I would be attacked for that statement. Because this is, especially here, even in these mountains, we, I mean even this house, it's surrounded by five Baptist Churches. So we're in the Southern Baptist [note: region]— I mean, and we got some Holiness churches over here, and some Jehovah's Witnesses over here. So you know, we've got some of the more conservative religions around us. And we're not in a super rural area, we're just on the edge of Boone. So the further out it gets, more conservative and more dogmatic. But none, very few of

the churches in this area would agree with what I just said, how's that? Some of their church members might agree with it but not the Churches.

Baylee Woodley 11:32
Yeah, perfect. Yeah. And that actually— I was wondering if you could elaborate on, you know, you came out, and you decided to stay in North Carolina. You and your partner have made a home there. I was wondering if you could speak a little bit to what that looked like and what it was that drew you to stay in that place after everything?

Robin Whitley 11:52
Well, I keep— you know, that's odd that you say that because my partner and I, we've only been together for a year now. She's from Ohio and I'm, of course, from North Carolina. I'm one of the few people in Boone that is from North Carolina but I just always loved the warmth of [note: Southern people]. I love the country. I'm just a rural person. I mean, there's rural areas everywhere. But there's just something about North Carolina I love. And back especially during the past political years that you referenced before we started the interview, I was like, "Why in the world did I stay in the South? I should have moved to New York like all my other lesbian and gay friends [laughs]." But I was just more of a country girl person. I'd rather be out in the woods walking and hiking. I know they have hiking in New York, but I didn't ever see that right in New York City, where you can be really out. And in most of the places where I really felt the safest as a lesbian, there weren't a lot of places to hide because they were all cities. So I've stayed here mostly because of my love of nature, truthfully. And though the South has a hard history from slavery and civil rights and all that— we have a hard history. There's also a beautiful history of kindness, and lovingness, lovingkindness, and good people. There are good people here. Not everybody carries shotguns, and that kind of thing.

Baylee Woodley 14:19
Yeah, I love that. Have you found— what does queer community look like in North Carolina? Are you able to connect with other people? And I'm using the word queer, but I think actually when we spoke last time, you said that that was not a term in the South that you like to use.

Robin Whitley 14:38
It doesn't bother me. A lot of people don't like it though. And it wasn't [note: acceptable] when I was growing up. That was one of the things that was different from when I was growing up. Queer wasn't something you really claimed, you know, because it was used as a really derogatory term around here. But it's interesting that you asked that because when I first— in my college, it was a Methodist school, so of course there were religious groups in it. But there was a community, like we all knew that all the people, the lesbians stayed in certain dorm. And so when I got brave enough to come out, I had a friend that lived in that dorm. So we talked and I found other lesbian friends and other dorms. We were in hiding though, the closeted ones were in

the other dorms. So we didn't really have much of a community and the only way, the first time— when I was in college in the eighties, the only community you had really was when a bunch of queer people decided, let's go dancing. I remember the first time we went dancing. My friend invited me to go dancing and I was the most religious of the whole group. I was excited but scared to death, because I thought, I'm gonna get in there and I'm gonna feel so out of place and I'm gonna want to go home and they're gonna want to stay there. So just get ready for this, Robin. I got there and I'm like, "Ahhhh! I'm not the only one!" So it was just so awesome to not be the [note: only one]— I felt free. I didn't drink at the time so I was really a weirdo. I liked to dance, but I didn't drink [laughs]— so I was, I was a weird one. But I had a blast dancing and that was the only real queer community in the eighties. Even after I graduated from college, if you wanted queer community, you pretty much had to find a bar. That made it hard for people like me who were not drinkers. And with me being in a church, especially being an employee of a church, it was tricky sometimes to be seen at bars. Because did I mention I live in the South, and it's conservative? And even the Lutheran church was more conservative because they have all that conservative influence around them.

But as time went along, I made my friends through, made connections, you know, how we network. Well, I don't know though. You know, if you've lived in the city, maybe people don't know in the country, you find somebody that's like you and you come out to each other. And then somehow another, you start introducing yourself to each other's friends and then you build a network. And that's how we did it. That's the only way, that was the only community we had. Somewhere in, right after I graduated college, I found out about the MCC church in Charlotte, which is Metropolitan Community Church, it's a gay and lesbian church that's founded by Troy Perry. It's more fundamental, based in a more fundamental denomination than I grew up with. Now the dogs are going to play, you can see them down. They've decided that they're going to [laughs]— play and have fun while we're talking. But I made some friends through that MCC, and one of the friends I made lived out near where I lived. And so we were lifelong friends. She died a couple years ago but it was more like that that we made friends in the rural areas and you didn't lose touch with those friends because we called each other. Or back in the day, we wrote letters. Yes, I am old enough to remember when that's all we had.

But then when I lived in Charlotte is when I began to find larger communities and I [note: finally] got to go to a gay bookstore. You know what I'm saying, something where you realize there were more, even more people, and more types of us [laughs]— [dog barking]— Luna! That's her play bark so I don't really fuss at her. So Sylva was the small country town I lived down in [note: Western Carolina before moving to Boone]. It's still in western North Carolina but it's closer to Cherokee. And it's rural— it's a small town, however it had a better gay community than Boone does, oddly enough. And I say that because Appalachian State is a much bigger university. Stop it! Nobody wants to play! She wants to play and nobody's playing with her. Stop, Luna. No, nobody wants to play. Poor dog [barking]— now I'm forgetting what's— oh,

Sylva. But it's a— Boone is much bigger than the colleges down near Western Carolina, down near where Sylval is. But for some reason or another they have a better out gayness down there. Because I was running into gay and lesbian people all the time. Trans people were very open. They had a good trans community and support community down there. They've already gotten a [note: community center]— it's called Cornbread and Roses. It's a farmhouse that's turned into a Gay and Lesbian Center. We don't have that here. And a gay member has gotten on to our town council because he's wanting to see some more gay and lesbian things happen here. So we're trying to make some things happen here. But there's not community like there was in Sylva, or like in a Charlotte where you've got more of a core community, or several core communities. We do have some churches here that are wonderful little communities of gays and lesbians. So I, and I'm still learning about the other communities, because I've only lived in Boone since June and lived close to Boone for the past four or five years.

Baylee Woodley 22:43
Yeah, I want to— talking about sort of different identities coming together and things— we had a great conversation last time about, sort of how living in North Carolina shaped your explorations of butchness and gender fluidity and I wondered if you'd be willing to just elaborate on that a little bit in the interview.

Robin Whitley 23:01
Oh, sure. How it shaped my identity as what?

Baylee Woodley 23:06
Just you were sort of— we were talking about how you were exploring these two different identities and how it was a bit linked for you to survival there and to encountering sort of new terms.

Robin Whitley 23:18
Oh yes.

Baylee Woodley 23:20
I'd love to capture that a bit.

Robin Whitley 23:22
Yeah. Well especially when I was trying to not [note: come out], trying to stay in the closet, I knew that I was more of a Butch person. And of course, when I was a kid, they called me a tomboy and then when you get to a certain age, they say "You gotta quit being this way." So I had to start dressing, and wearing earrings and makeup and I always felt like a clown in it. But I thought if this is what I have to do to pass, to get by and be safe— and I mean, I did try dating some guys and that was about it. But anyway. Yeah, they're just not my thing. But I still had to

kind of hide and so I had to dress the part. How's that? I had to look as straight as possible. And I even, as a little girl I even practiced— I was trying to practice walking so I didn't walk so butchy and one of the reasons that mom said she wanted me and my sister to take dance is because I was too much of a tomboy. And of course, I ended up loving dance, loving ballet, oddly enough, but I didn't like wearing a tutu.

But anyway, there's this femme idea in the south of what a woman is. A woman should be a femme, period. Femme or the Southern Belle, whatever you want to say. That really pretty, fancy person that I was not. And what I did find was a way to— I tried to be really kind. I wasn't prissy but I did try to find a way to dress the part, dress nicely, and you know wear dresses and skirts when I had to. And it always felt like I was wearing a costume and I couldn't wait to get home to get into my jeans and tennis shoes, and T-shirts. And so as I got older and got braver at coming out, I was able to play a little bit more with coming into my butchness, though in college it was really hard because I knew I was more butch than people wanted me to be. And I say that because I think one of the things I mentioned to you is that back then when I was trying to find a girlfriend, you know, I didn't know how to find a girlfriend because I was religious and you couldn't find one at church— well, other than my first girlfriend. But now [unclear]s— but the only way is to read some want ads, what they had was *QNotes* in Charlotte, it was a newspaper that's called *QNotes*. I think they still have *QNotes*. And in it, it always had "this kind of woman wants this, but no butches." No butches. Everything always said "no butches" and it was because all of us that lived in the South were trying to keep our jobs, or stay in school, or have a place to live with our parents. Because if they, if parents— especially the religious parents— had the least idea that you might be headed that way, you could be kicked out of house. You would lose your job.

There was a thing going on when I was in Charlotte. This man was trying to keep this couple out of their apartment because they lived together and they were a straight couple, but he had an antiquated law. He chose an antiquated law that was about, it was an unmarried couple couldn't live there. And it was one that was, he was trying to use against gays and lesbians as well. So you know, we just had to be so careful because it was about housing. It was about your school. It was about church jobs. It was about everything in the South. So you had to pass and, and just like the guys had to pass for men. You know, I think that would be interesting here. I should have asked my gay guy friend because he's not a lumberjack type of guy. So it'd be interesting in knowing his take on how he had to dress. But the advantage that the gay man had is that they dress up like men, and they go to work and they get by and "oh, look how handsome he is," you know. But anyway, I digress.

I wanted to dress like the men, you know, so [laughs]— and at one point, I thought I might be trans because I wanted to be a man so much. I wanted to dress like that. I wanted to live with a woman. I wanted to be able to get married one day. And as time went on and I finally did get

some counseling, and I came out to some counselors, then I began to work. One of the counselors I first had said, "You know, Robin, I can teach you how to live in the closet. I can help you live with yourself in the closet and put this aside, or I can teach you how to live with it." And I said "I want to be myself, you know, I want to be myself." And so that started that journey and that was still in the eighties. And it's the best journey I ever went on is the one to claim myself. So as I learned to claim myself, I tried to find ways that I could still look like a woman, but kind of be butch still [laughs]— do you know what I'm saying? So it meant I ended up dressing like a soft butch. I remember one time my niece— and she was young enough that she, knew that I was different but she couldn't quite pin it. You know and she's— "Robin, why do you dress the way you do?" And I knew I had to own all women's clothes. And I said, "What do you mean?" And she looked at me and she's like, "Oh, never mind." Because she looked at what I had only she realized I had on everything that was women's clothing and it was like, hm, that's not it. What was it? And you bet it was because it was the choices that I made. She did not like the choices I made for her Barbie either, by the way, just so you know. I have to tell you this. I'm not a doll person. So it was very hard to play with dolls with my niece. I didn't play with dolls when I was little. I would start putting Ken's clothes on the Barbie and she got so mad at me [laughs]— she'd say "Robin you want to go color?" and I'd say yes.

Baylee Woodley 31:42
That's amazing.

Robin Whitley 31:42
So don't make a butch play Barbies [laughs].

Baylee Woodley 31:45
I'm glad you told her that, you know Barbie dolls, or Ken dolls, can go on the Barbies. I think that's an important life lesson.

Robin Whitley 31:52
You know what's funny, though, she was only three at the time I was doing this. But after a time she did this, she was only three and one day she picked up the two different Barbies and she had the two Barbies kiss each other. She looked at me like this [note: carefully watching for my reaction]. I didn't say a word.

Baylee Woodley 32:15
You're so clever.

Robin Whitley 32:19
You know, my sister would have said, "No, no, no," but I'm like "I'm not sayin' nothing. that's the way it's to be [laughs]— Barbie can kiss whoever she wants to can't she? [Laughs]—

Baylee Woodley 32:31
She can.

Robin Whitley 32:34
And Ken can kiss whoever he wants to.

Baylee Woodley 32:38
Amazing. I may have done that with my Barbies once or twice. Speaking of Barbies, I wondered how you met your first girlfriend in church. How did that come about, that you came up to each other?

Robin Whitley 32:53
We became friends because we were both religious and we both wanted to be missionaries. We were in school together in high school. And our high school— I guess nobody from high school will be hearing this [laughs]. I was trying to think how to protect her privacy, but so we started praying together because I wanted to be a missionary to India and she wanted to be a missionary to Africa. And we started praying together, and one prayer led to another prayer, led to a kiss and well, you had your first girlfriend going on there. It was one of the best religious experiences I ever had [laughs]—

Baylee Woodley 33:00
I like that so much.

Robin Whitley 33:23
And you know, if some conservative person heard this conversation, they would just be saying I'm blaspheming but I tell you what, it was very holy for me [laughs]— And very, wow. You know, I mean because I'm 61 years old and still I think that first kiss and that first time, you're like ooh. Although and my ex, no not ex, my current partner— my ex knew too, but my current partner knows this— and I love her. I love her to pieces. But you know, your first love is always your first love.

Baylee Woodley 34:30
How did you meet your current partner?

Robin Whitley 34:34
We were both interested in writing. We both like to write poetry. And when I moved first moved up to Boone and after my divorce, I was looking for a writer's group and a friend of mine said, "Well, you might try this person." Well, it wasn't a friend, it was a newsletter thing. I said "What?" She said, "Check with this person." So we became friends and we've been friends for a

couple of years. And as we became friends, and I decided I was over my ex and maybe I wanted to date again, I thought she's pretty cute. And Birdie thought she was wonderful. That's always a plus when your dog says, "I like this one." I just kept thinking about her and she just kept being a good person. Not only in my eyes, but whenever I would hear other people that knew Heather, and they say, "Oh she's great, isn't she?" And I'm like, oh so she's the same everywhere she goes, she's a great person. I have to introduce you to Birdie, I think I showed you to Birdie.

Baylee Woodley 35:45
Hello!

Robin Whitley 35:48
Yes— [crosstalk]— she was trying to get in on the video. Anyway, oh you heard that little squish, it was because she brought her toy to me to play because she wanted to be part of it. She just wants you to know that she likes lesbians, that she's not interested in anybody [laughs]— anybody that gets fresh with her she doesn't, she is not interested anymore [laughs].

Baylee Woodley 36:03
Welcome to the interview [laughs]— that is valid [laughs].

Robin Whitley 36:22
She was fixed very early [laughs]— she's an asexual dog [laughs].

Baylee Woodley 36:29
Yes, your sexuality is valid sweet puppy [laughter]. Well, now that the puppy has officially joined the interview. That's perfect you met through a writing group because I did want to make sure that we got to your writing, and your art, and your music, because you have sort of had that training with the church, but then you really carried it on. It's been a love throughout your life and I wonder if you could tell me a little bit more about what you do? And also if you had some poetry to share, if you wanted to do that.

Robin Whitley 37:02
Sure. Well I've done, I've actually done poetry all my life too. But you know, at the time, I wanted to be a famous musician. And then I realized, oh, you have to give up a lot of stuff I didn't want to give up to go on the road. Like my grandma, I didn't want to give up my Grandma Whitley. So I thought well, I can just be a local musician. And that's what I've done all my life is be a local musician, do church music and things like that. But like I play with different people. My friend and I down in Sylva would play Celtic. I've sang gigs, mostly folk songs, jazz, you know, that kind of thing around town. I've always written poetry and I was going to share a poem from my first book, "In a Southern Closet." It was originally— excuse me— [drinking] published by Regal Crest Books, which they put out some really good books. But then I wanted

to do a— I haven't done it yet, I wanted to do an audio version of it and I needed to get my rights back. So now it's under my, I'm calling it "Napping Dog Press" for now. But anyway. The one I want to read is called “Southern Closet:”

"Hooowee! Sure is hot in here.
Humid hot air stifles me
like the sweaty Baptist preacher,
preaching hellfire and brimstone in my face.
The preacher is mean with bad breath.

I am in a Southern closet,
surrounded by clothes of religion,
the smell of mothballs, unbearable incense.
The closet heat closes on my face like a plastic bag.
I tried to find a place for me, a place to breathe.
I see the bible belt on the wall and remember
the times I've been whipped to bleeding with that belt.

I'm being punished even now.
Having to stay in the closet.
Not a good girl.
Lesbian.
Homo.
Don't dare be lesbian and live in the south.
Don't dare be gay and want religion.
Don't dare be homosexual and desire God.
It's unnatural.

Pregnant and barefoot
is what a woman is
supposed to be in the South.
Not lesbian.
Shotguns and tobacco
is the makeup for a real man
looking for life in the South.
Don't be gay.
The only way you're to flip your hand
is to give passers by the bird.
Tell them to go to hell.
Well, we're there.

All the gays and lesbians that is,
suffocating in a Southern Closet is
as close to hell as you're gonna get."

Baylee Woodley 40:27
Thank you.

Robin Whitley 40:28
Yeah, I stumbled over my own poem but some of the imagery I used in that was based upon the old closet at one of my grandparents house that we liked to play in, except in the summertime, because it was too hot and it was suffocating. And grandma had mothballs up there to keep the moths off. And so, but it did make me think of what it was like to try and live in the closets.

Baylee Woodley 40:57
Yeah, that speaks so much to that context in the South, but I think something that people feel all over the world, that sort of suffocation. So beautiful because you've dared to do all of the things that the poem says you shouldn't dare to do.

Robin Whitley 41:12
That's right. And you know, that's one of the other reasons I wanted to be a part of this project is because I'm like God love you, we just got to encourage young people to come out earlier and earlier. I wish I had come out earlier. Because technically, I wasn't totally out until I came out as a Pastor in 1997. So that was 30 years ago. So you know about half of my life, I lived in a closet. And I didn't know what happiness was until I started living outside of the closet. Because I could breathe then, you know. And one of the things I told my mom— and my mom and my sister are very religious— and they told me, "We knew you were but you didn't have to tell us." And I'm like, "What?" And one of the things I've said all along is that a religious person who comes out to religious parents, even though the issue is about the gay person, by coming out to your parents or your family, they love you and you're requiring them to make a faith decision at that moment. One that they may not be ready to make. Because well I know this person, I love this person, how can this person be gay? Does that make sense?

Baylee Woodley 42:43
Yeah.

Robin Whitley 42:44
And then it becomes personal for them too.

Baylee Woodley 42:48
Yeah.

Robin Whitley 42:50
That doesn't mean that at this age, 61, that I want my Mama telling me I'm goin' to hell, you know, that gets old by now. Anyway, but I told her when I came out, she said, "Why did you have to come out?" And I said, "Mama," I said, "It was not good for my mental health." And it wasn't. The longer I've been out, I'm like I will fight to the end so no young person ever has to be in the closet again if I can help make that happen. I'm gonna make that happen. And I'm glad that young people like you are being out, loud, and proud. I wish I had been out, loud, and proud, younger in life.

Baylee Woodley 43:42
I love that when we were chatting before, and you said— we were still talking about the politics in the States right now— and you were like, "We are not, we cannot go back in the closet."

Robin Whitley 43:50
Mhm.

Baylee Woodley 43:50
I think that it has more— you know I thought about it a lot since we met. But just also like hearing that poem. Like the umph of that statement is so important. Especially in the face of legislation rolling back.

Robin Whitley 44:03
Oh, yes. And uh—

Baylee Woodley 44:05
If you, sorry— I was just going to say, was this the book that was published the year that same-sex marriage was legalized in North Carolina? [Crosstalk]—

Robin Whitley 44:14
No, that was my other. That was my poetry book, that was my second book that came out that same year. And that was really exciting. Because I was at a poetry reading when the news came down that gay marriage was— I was at the poetry reading for that book, when the [note: news came in]— “North Carolina is going to let people get married!" And that was so exciting because I just never thought that would happen in my lifetime. I never thought it would even be talked about in my lifetime, much less happen. And even though my marriage, you know, I think I mentioned this to you too. Now we have the right to marriage, we also have the right to get divorced [laughs]. That's the only bad thing about the right to marry. But although it was heartbreaking that my marriage didn't last— I wanted it to, but my partner then didn't. I wouldn't change it for anything in the world. Because it also helped me even understand what other

divorced people go through, that though you want to be empathetic and understand, you can't really until you've gone through it yourself and how awful it is. Because there's something about that ritual that you really do feel like it's going to last forever. And then it doesn't, and you have to deal with that. So I don't regret that one bit. Now this one came out— golly, when did this one come out? In 2011, this one came out in 2011. And it's a memoir. And then separate, the one that came out when you were talking, is a poetry book. Do you mind if I read one more poem?

Baylee Woodley 46:20
Please do.

Robin Whitley 46:22
The one is called "If I Could." And it kind of goes along with what was in that other one that said—

"If I could, I would do anything in the world
without fear of failing God,
without fear of failing you.
I would write symphonies
that speak of your heart,
tell stories that remind you of God,
paint pictures that tell you the goodness of life, and people.
Sing songs that embrace you in love.
You know, I can do anything in the world and not fail God,
and not fail you, by being true to me,
the gift I was created to be."

And you know, that's what I was trying to say to you a while ago. If I can help young people, or anybody, old people, I don't care if you're coming out to yourself. If we can help each other be true to who we were created to be, this world would be so much of a better place.

Baylee Woodley 47:30
Yes, I agree.

Robin Whitley 47:31
I sounded like a Preacher then, didn't mean to! [Laughter]—

Baylee Woodley 47:35
We need more of that kind of preaching in the world, I feel. Then just the one other thing I wanted to make sure that we ask is if you came to the Lesbian Herstory Archive a bit because of

your poetry, right? And it was sort of— was it a process of finding like a way to capture these histories and help people come out?

Robin Whitley 47:56
Yeah, actually, it's because it was after my divorce, and my family started being kind of weird again. I'm like, if something happened to me, my books, and my journals would be lost. I needed to find somewhere that these things might matter, my art and my poetry. I'm like, where would these things matter? So I started looking, and that's how I ran across Herstory and I've been following them for five or six years, maybe even longer. But no, I think it was— I found them after the divorce, because I got worried that all these pieces, that are pieces of my heart, you know, they lost. And I think it's important that we find a way to keep the stories alive. And you know, even by talking to you that day, I was telling Heather, my partner, I said, "You know, we got to do this here in North Carolina. We need to record these stories here. Because there's more stories." Not everybody knows about Herstory, though I can tell them. But not everybody's going to go there. You know what I'm saying because they want to, they want to know, a Southerner. Southerners can be a bit quirky about going outside of their own little place. But I really, I just wanted a Southern story to be remembered, too, when this started happening. I was excited. I'm like, oh a Southern lesbian can be part of this.

Baylee Woodley 49:42
Yes, no, completely. And I've also talked to my friends more since we chatted the first time because I think as someone who's lived in cities for quite a long time, it is like an incredible point of view to speak to someone living in the South. I think there are so many ideas about the South and what it's like to be part of the LGBTQ community there but individual stories don't often get heard. So it was really incredible to meet and hear that.

Robin Whitley 50:08
Aww.

Baylee Woodley 50:09
Oh and I wanted to just— is there anything else that you wanted to make sure that was included in your oral history?

Robin Whitley 50:15
I do actually, because one of the things I started to— I had had a bad place in my hair. I started to wear a hat— but then I thought, well, that won't look good in the house. But it had Cherokee on it. We are the mountains here, we're Cherokee territory. I'm not saying this, I mean, I don't know that any Cherokee will ever know, but there are wonderful Cherokee people in these mountains. And it was— sadly, most of them live down in just the south part of the mountains now because the Trail of Tears removed so many of them. There is a Qualla boundary down there. So when

Andrew Jackson started the Trail of Tears— are you familiar with what I'm talking about? They moved as many Indians as possible. And the Qualla boundary is some land one of the men that was a— he was part White and part Cherokee— helped buy up the land. So some of the people could stay there in that boundary because it was bought by that man. But so many of them were made to go out west. And it's just really sad because these are beautiful mountains. Well, I sent you a picture so you can see what it was. And like today, Heather and I, we went kayaking down the New River, which is actually one of the world's oldest rivers, which I didn't know until today. The only river older than the New River is the Nile.

Baylee Woodley 52:22
That's amazing. Thank you for doing that, the territory acknowledgement as well, because I wanted to mention at the beginning that I was on the Lekwungen Territory but I wasn't sure where you were. Maybe I should have looked it up. So I appreciate you doing that as well.

Robin Whitley 52:34
What territory are you on?

Baylee Woodley 52:36
Lekwungen Territory. It's also known as Songhees and Esquimalt.

Robin Whitley 52:42
Oh, and see I don't know if it's because you're saying it so fast and I'm a Southerner, or I don't understand the language. You're saying— Lekwungen? Lekwungen. I have not heard of that Tribe so I'm glad you said it.

Baylee Woodley 52:57
The history of BC is really interesting. It's all unceded territory really here. But we have an amazing community of Indigenous activists and artists.

Robin Whitley 53:06
Oh, that's wonderful. We have some wonderful artists down in the Sylva area too because Sylva was like neighbors, in the neighborhood of Cherokee. Of course, from here you don't see as much, because we're in the height of the tree [note: season]. But okay, thank you for saying that. That's cool.

Baylee Woodley 53:27
Thank you.

Robin Whitley 53:27
Yeah.

Baylee Woodley 53:30
Was there anything else you wanted to make sure it was included before we—

Robin Whitley 53:35
No I was, like I said, I was trying to be brave enough to sing a song, but I can't think of one right now so [laughs]— Fair enough, I got shy.

Baylee Woodley 53:44
We'll look up your music.

Robin Whitley 53:46
Okay. Thank you so much for interviewing me, Baylee.

Baylee Woodley 53:51
Thank you so so much for being interviewed for the project. It was so amazing to meet you. Then I'll just pause the recording here. So yeah, thank you all so much.