

Under the Rainbow: Oral Histories of Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual,
Transgender, Intersex and Queer People in Kansas

Bill Smith
Oral History

Interviewed by
Tami Albin

March 23, 2008

<http://kuscholarworks.ku.edu/dspace/handle/1808/5556>

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Format

Interviews recorded on miniDV using a Canon HV-20 and an Olympus D-40.

Transcript

Transcribed by Transcriptions by Nina. Time-stamped and reviewed for accuracy by Rachel Gadd-Nelson. Lightly edited and reviewed by Tami Albin. Transcript has been reviewed and approved by Bill Smith.

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Bill Smith: Narrator

Tami Albin: Interviewer

00:00:00

TAMI ALBIN: Okay so let's get that going, get that going. Okay so today is March 23, 2008 and I'm here with Bill Smith. How are you?

00:00:10

BILL SMITH: I'm fine, how are you?

00:00:11

ALBIN: I'm doing all right.

00:00:12

SMITH: Good.

00:00:13

ALBIN: Okay so I will start off this interview as I've been starting off all my oral histories. Tell me where you were born and when?

00:00:17

SMITH: Okay. I was born September 10, 1970 in New London, Connecticut and family moved around a bit. When I was four we moved to Colorado. We lived there for about five years I guess, somewhere around there, moved back to Connecticut then most of my—all my growing up took place in Connecticut after that point so—

00:00:41

ALBIN: So what was your childhood like?

00:00:42

SMITH: Um, what I remember? (laughs) It was good. It was a good childhood. Nothing really negative stands out really. My parents were divorced in '77 I believe it was. And so we—it was about—a little bit after that time that we moved back to Connecticut, my mother and my sister and I. And then my dad was back in Connecticut also. But—and that's probably the most traumatic event in my childhood

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that I remember is that divorce. I remember not really liking my mom for too much after that for a while and finally got over that and actually now have a really—actually all during growing up I had a really good relationship with my mother so—but we—I'm trying to think—that was—that—yeah, that was probably the most traumatic event in my life other—well I take that back. I lost a grandfather also. My—when we lived in Colorado my grandmother and my grandfather had driven out to Colorado to see us and my grandfather died of a massive heart attack that day that they got there so it was kind of a—that was pretty traumatic too. So I really didn't—I didn't get to know my grandfather all that well but my grandmother's still alive and—this is my mom's side, and so we're going out this year to see—celebrate her eightieth birthday in June so that's pretty exciting. But childhood other than that was really good.

We—like I say we pretty much lived in Connecticut during my growing up years other than that time in Colorado. My sister have a two-year—my sister's two years younger than I am. When we got back to Connecticut we were put into Catholic school so we went (laughs)—went through Catholic school through eighth grade, both of us did. And that was an interesting experience. So we were in Catholic school, I was a altar boy for those eight years also, and now neither one of us are practicing any type of religion other than like spirituality or some type of personal. So we kind of had too much church at that time. (laughs) We did—we did live in—my mom remarried in '81 and my stepdad then got a job—temporary position in California for a year so we lived in LA area for about a year. And during that year time I went to a public junior high school, so I had a little bit of exposure to public school system. But then we moved back to Connecticut and went right back to Catholic school, St. Mary Star of the Sea Church. (laughs) Yes it was great. And I finished out there and then I went on to public high school. Well it wasn't public high school. It was a—I went to a state regional school. I always caught—not caught, I always—when I would talk about it because it's kind of funny because I went to a vocational school. And a lot of times people will hear about going to vocational school they think of someone who is like in a juvenile delinquent system, but it was actually a school that you had to apply to attend to. So it was kind of a prestigious school to get in—not prestigious but you had to really show that you would be applying yourself at the school. So it wasn't like a delinquent school. (laughs) So I went to high school there and graduated from high school in '89. And after high

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school—two weeks after high school graduation I went off to basic training in the army so that was—

00:04:23

ALBIN: So why did you join the army?

00:04:25

SMITH: I joined the army I think for many reasons. One it was part of kind of family history. My mom's father was—my grandfather was career coast guard, retired from the coast guard. My uncle, my mother's brother, was in the army. Actually he was a recruiter (laughs) so that had something to do with it too but he—and I had some uncles and stuff that were in the army. And so that— there was some of that family history piece of it. Also it was a lot of—for me it was just a—I really had a fascination about military history, the World Wars, Vietnam. Those were just really—I really liked reading about the history of those conflicts. And I had a sense of like, Well this is something that I need to do also for myself, kind of a challenge to me to do stuff that not everyone else can do or chooses to do because it was—you volunteer to do it. And it was also pride in country too. It was just I really felt like that was what I needed to do to give back to my country I guess. So—

00:05:44

ALBIN: So what was basic training like? Where were you?

00:05:48

SMITH: I went to basic training at Fort Dix, New Jersey . We were one of the last basic training units that went in there because then they transferred the camp to a different type of post. But I was in Fort Dix, New Jersey and went through June through August of '89. And basic training to me—looking back on it now in retrospect it was like a lot of fun. But I remember being there going, What the hell am I doing here (laughs) and why am I rolling around in the grass? But looking back, I mean it was a good time. It was hard; it was really a challenge to me to adjust in the lifestyle really. I mean because you're really—you're taking this 18-year-old kid and you're thrusting him into this like very regimented, very disciplined atmosphere, and that was a hard transition. But everyone who was in basic training was going through the same thing so it was a cool—we had a good, I guess, unit. We were really—kind of

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bonded pretty quickly. But it was fun looking back. Then there's a lot of times I think, I wish I could do it again (laughs) just for the fun of it. But you—I mean, you do things that—like I said like normal—normal—ordinary people wouldn't normally do. You're up at 5:30 running around for physical training, you're—one day you might be just doing drill and ceremony—learning different marches and turns and stylistic-type things for drill and ceremony, another day you may be up on the rifle range just firing away with an M16 or trying different weapons, and then one day you're throwing grenades. I mean it's just—or another day you're just running through an obstacle course. I mean it was just such a diverse—things that you were doing during that eight weeks of time. And all the time you're transitioning from a civilian to a soldier really.

It was—and they teach you a lot of things. They teach you a lot about the army history and what the soldiers created and what it means to be a soldier and about integrity and about selfless duty and about courage and things like that. So it really—for me it really helped me to become more of the person that I am today because before going in I was very introverted kind of person, very—I mean I had a group of friends but I wasn't really an outgoing person. And so—but after going through that I really kind of—I found my voice, so to speak, and was able to just kind of break out of that shell. Because you're kind of forced to do that and that was good for me, I needed that. Like I said, I wanted the challenge to challenge myself to do things that I had never done before and I did. So—so it was a good experience for me. And after that I went—graduating in August of '89 I went to Fort Huachuca, Arizona. My job in the army was as a military intelligence analyst and so that's where the school is, it's in Fort Huachuca, Arizona. And I was there from August until January of 1990. And that again was more advanced training in my specific job duties so I learned all about intelligence analysis and things like that.

00:09:23

ALBIN: What is that?

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SMITH: Basically is you're taking raw information and you're taking from that information everything that can be strategic or combat that would be worth intelligence for the commander. So you may get like—and this—I'm sure this has all changed since then but then we were studying the Soviet doctrine because that was still the threat at the time. So we were studying their doctrine, how they would place troops on the field

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and how they would work, learned all about their equipment, how—what their capabilities were, ranges, what they did, things like that. But you also look at—you're doing a lot of map reading so we look at maps, we look at the terrain features. And part of our job is to identify where the friendly units could maneuver. So say you have—the enemy has set up a defensive position at some location. You're looking at the train to figure out, Okay well here's a mountain range here but there's a valley here. How could we get through there without being detected? And you also do a lot of—you're identifying where those defensive locations are too so those become targets for artillery air, whatever, air strikes or whatever. So it's kind of the work we did. But also we do a lot of the personal security like helping people get security clearances, helping—keeping information secure, things like that, so a lot of the personal—what's the word I'm looking for? I can't think of the word. I can't think of the word.

00:11:13

ALBIN: Okay. (laughs)

00:11:14

SMITH: Just like security for buildings or structure type things. So that was it. And that was a long training about from August to January, however months that is. But also during that time you're doing more of the physical training. You're doing like the field training stuff and everything like that. And then after I finished—graduated from there, I was stationed at Fort Riley, Kansas so that's how I became—or how I came to be in Kansas, it was through the army at Fort Riley. And I was stationed there from 1990 to 1992. And '92 is when I got out of the army—active army in June of '92 and went back into the reserves in October of '92. And I was in the reserves until 1997. So—

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ALBIN: So at what point in your life did you kind of come to the conclusion that you were gay?

00:12:08

SMITH: Actually—I mean that's a really good question because it's something that I—even as a kid I knew. It was just an internal feeling that I had growing up. I knew that—I always hate to use the word I felt different but I don't know what other word to use to describe that feeling. But I knew there was something unique about me (laughs)

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growing up, even at like age of five. I remember being in kindergarten just thinking—not—it's not a sexual feeling but it's more of an emotional connection or a—you feel like you can bond with someone, so it was more of that type of feeling. And so I never really—I didn't know that it was not the norm but it wasn't something that I felt like I could share with other people either. So it was kind of a weird feeling at the time.

And I just—it just kind of evolved as I was growing up. I mean I just continued to feel—have those feelings. And then as you get through adolescence and those feelings become more—they manifest more in other ways and there is a—you feel a physical connection to someone or an attractedness to someone. And that always was there too as I was hitting puberty and all that—all those racing hormones. But I never actually—I never had—I never engaged in any sexual activity until I was twenty-one. So it was well after—I mean it wasn't because the desire wasn't there. It was just like, it wasn't an important part of what I was—who I was at the time. So—but I always had those feelings. And of course you have your fantasies and things like that. Back then it was, Oh John Stamos (makes noise) (laughs) Or—so I was like wow—or Ricky Schroder. It was like, oh golly. So those—when I was watching TV or something those—my sister was talking about Rick Schroder too. I was like, I want to say, “I like Ricky Schroder too.” But it's like for some reason I knew that I couldn't say that and I never did. And all through high school it was kind of the same thing. It was kind of interesting. In high school—I was kind of a nerd in high school, the geeky guy. I was a hall monitor. (laughs) I wouldn't normally admit that but—

00:14:37

ALBIN: I've never met a hall monitor.

00:14:39

SMITH: Well, I have a certificate at home if you wanted proof. (laughs) But I was just like even as a freshman I don't know, like people would—people are cruel, kids are cruel, and so I was called a lot of names in school. And I don't know if it's because—I don't know why. I just think they needed someone to pick on and I was the one—I was little short kind of runty, kind of nerdy kid and I was—partly because I was quiet too. I wasn't really outgoing. And so I mean they were calling me like fag and all that, even in freshman of high school. And I would just like to kind of go back now and like someday say, “You know what, you were right. Thank you. I'm glad you could point that out at”

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such a young age.” But I never—it never really—I mean it upset me but I never really got—I never let it bring me down.

I mean I—and actually through high school as like kind of a way of like just my own like little revenge things I became really involved in like student government and so I was like the secretary like my sophomore year and then I was president my junior year and I was—I started the school newspaper and did that for a while and worked on yearbook committee and of course the hall monitor. So I kind of did things that I—to position myself to be able to have some control of the student body. (laughs) And then my ultimate revenge though was (laughs)—my ultimate revenge was I was senior—on senior yearbook staff and we—I was in charge of like doing the layout for the yearbook. So the front page of the yearbook is a full-page picture of me. (laughs) I'm like, these people are going to remember me for the rest of their lives whether they want to or not. (laughs) So I got my little revenge in. But overall my high school experience was not bad. And actually one of my best friends from high school, he and I are still like best friends. Actually I just talked with him yesterday so we're—and his kids call me Uncle Bill or—and so it's kind of—we're really a close—our friendship has really stayed strong over the years. So he lives out in New York but—so it was a good experience. I forgot what your original question was. (laughs)

00:16:54

ALBIN: Oh well when did you—the question was when did, did you realize?

00:16:57

SMITH: Oh when did I realize? Okay yeah. So I realized when I was very young. And like I said it just kind of over time evolved and manifested into different feelings and emotional connections and things like that.

00:17:11

ALBIN: So how did that impact life in the military?

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SMITH: It really didn't, because like I said, I really didn't become sexually active until I was twenty-one and that was about the time I was—well it was about a year before I got out of the active duty army, so it really didn't have an impact on me. And I came out

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when I was in the military, I was still active duty. I came out in '91 and it was early '91. Because I was kind of seeing someone, it was first relationship type thing and it was—it was not a very good relationship. And so I was kind of put in a position where I had to. Because I had to tell my mom so I had to call my mom from Kansas to Connecticut and say, Mom this is what's going on and this is why. And so I—that's not the ideal way to come out to your parent, but she was like, Okay. And we—after that we had a few conversations on the phone about it and she, I think, went through the typical parental grief about, Oh my God what did I do wrong? I'm like, You didn't do anything wrong. This is just who I am. It's nothing that you've done. But she had to go through that process. So there were a lot of tears, lot of crying. But—and I think that was in October that I had called and told her that.

And then her and my sister drove out in December for Christmas to spend it with me in Manhattan, Kansas. And I told my sister right around Christmastime. And my sister had a similar reaction where she was like, crying and oh. But then she said, Well why didn't you tell me before because we could have been going out all the time looking for guys. (laughs) So that's what did that night. We—(laughs) so I mean we—and she's been—my family's been really great about it. Initially there's that—always that transition but I've never had a negative experience coming out to anybody, which I know is probably not the norm for a lot of people but I guess I was just lucky to have a parent and my sister who really understood. And I think a lot of that has to do with the way my mother brought us up too—to be open, to not—not just—not about sexuality but just open about everything and keeping—and my stepdad, I have to give him a little bit of credit on that too even though he hasn't been in the picture for a long time but he really kind of like opened our eyes to a lot of the world kind of—like about history, about music, about just all different types of cultural type things. And my mom was really good about that too in many ways and exposing us to different faith groups and things like that. So we were really brought up to—kind of like as a hippies generation, (laughs) with that just being open and accepting of people and not because they're different, because of their unique qualities and just for who they are. I mean that's kind of how we were raised. And so I think that had a lot to do with it too. But it didn't stop my mom from going through that grief process because it was still like, Okay, I was hoping for grandchildren. (laughs) Like, Well you can still have them. I got a sister. She's going to

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have kids. (laughs) You've got a cat. So that was an interesting process. But today I mean it's not an issue really that I know of.

00:20:47

ALBIN: What about your biological father?

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SMITH: My dad—I didn't tell him for—actually I didn't—actually I never came out to him, he came out to me is what I usually joke around by saying. And that wasn't until probably let's see, 2005 maybe. And I think that he's always kind of had an inclination because I've never had a girlfriend, never—and the couple people that I have had a relationship with or lived with were guys so (laughs) I think he might have had a clue. But we never talked about it. It was just a non-issue, non-topic of conversation whenever I would visit with my dad. And he and my stepmom live out in Idaho. But he came out in, I think it was 2005, summer of 2005. And I had no sooner picked him up at the airport—we were in my truck coming back to Lawrence as he said, Oh you don't have to worry about it. Your stepmom and I know and we're okay with it. I'm like, What are you okay with? What are you talking about? He said, Oh, we know about your lifestyle. (laughs) I was like, Oh great.

So—and it was kind of funny because I had built up the—I guess the courage to talk to my dad about it when he was visiting at that time and he took that away from me. (laughs) So I kind of feel cheated out of that but at the same time I felt relieved too because it was like, okay great, this is perfect. And then I couldn't have asked for an easier out I guess (laughs) than that. And so—and yeah it's really been a non-issue with them either so it's been really good. And I haven't really talked to anyone else in my family. I've like—but I think they all basically know. I mean it's—I don't keep it a secret anymore when I—in e-mails or pictures of—it's kind of obvious that if I have my arm around somebody and there's (unintelligible) pictures of me with the same person that's it's probably just more than just a friend. (laughs) And I don't really feel like I have to say anything to any other member of my family.

My mom and my dad and my sister are the most important—and my stepmom—are the most important people that I felt the need to explain that to them. And I think it was more of a selfish thing for me to be able to—maybe selfish isn't the right word but I

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wanted to have that—I don't want to use the word control either. It was just something I felt the need that I had to share with them. Any other member of my family I really don't feel like I have—it shouldn't be an issue for them. If they don't agree with it, that's fine. (laughs) So—and I've had it really kind of easy too because I don't live around my family at all. So I'm it that's here in the Midwest and all my family's either in Connecticut or I have my sister and brother-in-law in Seattle and my dad and stepmom in Idaho so—so I think—but I don't think it would be a problem for any of them either.

00:23:52

ALBIN: So you finished your two-year stay in the military—

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SMITH: Three.

00:23:58

ALBIN: Three. Okay so then what year is that?

00:24:00

SMITH: '92, June of '92.

00:24:03

ALBIN: So after June of '92 what did you do? You're out at this point?

00:24:07

SMITH: Uh-huh.

00:24:08

ALBIN: What'd you do?

00:24:09

SMITH: I should say that—and I want to go back because I think it's an important piece of my military part of this. I was in Desert Storm—Desert Shield, Desert Storm. And I think that's an important piece to mention, not only just because of the historical factor but the fact that as a gay soldier I was in a combat situation and I don't think I compromised the integrity of my unit in any way. And we were living in close proximity

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to each other—sharing tents and sharing shower spaces and everything. So I think that that's an important piece to add, and it was intimate proximity to people.

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ALBIN: And did they know you were gay?

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SMITH: Not at that—no. And I really—and I wasn't out at that time either. I wasn't even really—I mean I knew but I wasn't even out to myself really, but I knew that I was gay and I had—but I wasn't even sexually active at that time either so—but yeah so I think that's an important piece to mention. And it was an interesting experience and one that I'm glad I was able to do but at the same time I'm glad I did it then and not now because I think the situation—this is going off on another political aspect, but the situation there is just totally different now. I think that—anyway, I just—I'm glad I was able to do it then. And I—it's interesting because I—during this current conflict there I feel conflicted myself in many ways because I feel like we shouldn't have had to go back the first—the second time if we had just finished everything off the first time which we didn't do. So I feel kind of conflicted where I really want to be back there and doing my part again but at the same time I know that I've already done my part. So it's really kind of an interesting position to be in but—

00:25:58

ALBIN: Were there other people when you were in the army—when you were active in the army that you knew were gay or that were out?

00:26:06

SMITH: Not until I came out” actually. It's like when I came out—when we got back and I was like, oh I've done everything I can—and I met someone and I started kind of dating someone and that's when I came out to some of my friends that I had in the army. And then I was like introduced to this whole other world in the (laughs) army where there was this whole sub-gay culture” that existed. And it was really an eye-opening experience for me. And I just—it was interesting because you don't—people that you would think would be just the straightest people you would ever meet because they're army tankers or—they were gay also and I was like, Wow that's pretty cool. (laughs) So—so there—it was this whole like subculture within the ranks. (laughs)

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00:26:59

ALBIN: Interesting.

00:27:00

SMITH: Yeah.

00:27:01

ALBIN: So then what did you do after that once you finished?

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SMITH: After I was—I got out of the army in June of '92 and I stayed around Topeka for a couple of months. I was actually in a different relationship. And in August of '92 I moved back to Connecticut and the person I was dating at the time like in October moved back—moved to Connecticut with me and we lived there for about a year. I had always wanted to come back to Kansas. My goal is—I really wanted to go to school at K-State (laughs) because it was the campus I kind of grew up around—not grew up around but campus I was around a lot being at Fort Riley in Manhattan and so I really liked the campus, I liked the community, and I really wanted to go back there. So we stayed in Connecticut for about a year and then moved back to Topeka. I was in Topeka for a year to get my residency here and then I went—started at K-State in '94 and got there and realized that it wasn't the school I really liked, it was Aggieville I really liked and so (laughs) I majored in Aggieville 101 for the first two years and then I ended up transferring to Washburn. And then I finished—went to Washburn until 2000. I graduated with my undergrad in social work. And that's when I started—after graduation is when I started working at KU and I started working at KU in June of 2000 and was there until December '06, so just about seven—well six-and-a-half years I was at KU.

00:28:37

ALBIN: So what was life like living in Kansas being a gay man?

00:28:41

SMITH: Life being gay in Kansas. It was—it was good actually that I—I mean I came in—I guess when I came out I mean there was a lot of—I was around a lot of people

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who had been out for a while. Like I said, I was still in the army so I was kind of living this dual—and I lived off post which kind of helped too so I could have my own life after work and I could go home. I lived in—we lived in Manhattan—I lived in Manhattan. So I had all these gay friends in Manhattan. And so we would do the—we would just hang out. We would go to—Topeka was the place to go then. There was a bar in Topeka. What was it called? Buddy's. It was kind of funny because it was right across the street from the Capitol Building on Jackson I think it is. You could walk out of the door and there's the Capitol. Then there was like this Saint Something Church (laughs) right across the street. So it was just a great location. But I mean it was interesting. I mean, I met some really great people, had some really great experiences as far as like being exposed to the gay culture and what that was all about because it was still new to me. I didn't really experience the gay lifestyle or the gay culture in Connecticut when I lived back there for the year, partly because I was working a lot and I really didn't know anybody.

It's funny, you go home expecting things to be the same as they were when you left but when you get there they're not the same at all, because the people that you knew are gone and second what you really want is to like hang out with those same people (laughs), some of them anyway. And then there wasn't a lot of family time being there. So I really didn't experience it in Connecticut at all. But then I moved back to Kansas in '93, June of—August '93. And I was still dating the same person that had moved to Connecticut with me, Matt. And it was kind of interesting because (laughs) Matt moved back to Topeka about a month before I did to find a new place to live and find a job and the same time found a new boyfriend and (laughs) really didn't tell me until I got back to Topeka that that's what had happened. And so when I got back it was kind of—to Topeka—it was kind of like, Oh and by the way and—but we had to live together for like six months and that was a very rough time for me, those— And actually the first year back in Topeka was a rough time so when I got to Manhattan I was just ready to get out of Topeka. But it was really—I kind of was—I kind of got really depressed but I still was able to get—connect with people, probably not healthy connections as far as like social networking but it was what I needed at the time.

And so it was really—the experience I had in Topeka during that year back was really just going to the bars (laughs) and so that was interesting. But then I moved to

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Manhattan and it was like—it was great because I got away from the negative stuff that was happening in Topeka and I met a whole new group of people and I got connected with the community. I lived there for, let's see, from '94 to I think it was '96 so just a couple of years. But in that time I was able to connect with some good people that were involved in the community in Manhattan with the Flint Hills Alliance, as I was mentioning earlier. I don't think it would be bad for me to mention her name but Deb Taylor, she was really an activist during that time in Manhattan with the Flint Hills Alliance. She got me involved with that and actually talked me into being president of the organization for a year and that was quite an experience. But it was a great time in Manhattan for me. Even though I was not really focusing on my studying, I needed that experience also of being a part of the community. And so it was nice just to be in a small town where people—you walk down the street and people would say, "Hey Bill, how are you?" Or any time you would go anywhere people knew who you were and would ask you questions or talk with you. And I think that also helped me kind of break out of my shell too because it was kind of a good experience for me. But I met some really great people also.

And it was—the place to go then in Manhattan was a place called Club Berlin. It was a little bar in Aggieville like at the end of this—I can't remember the cross street. But going there—and it was a place where you could go and it was just a comfortable atmosphere. It was a mixed bar. It really wasn't just a gay bar but it was a mixed bar. And that was a good experience. It seems like a lot of the gay culture revolves around bars. (laughs) And I think that's because it's a place where you can go to be yourself and it's a safe place and you don't necessarily have to drink, although there's a lot of that going on. But it's just—I think it's just where you are able to connect with people in a safe place. And so that's kind of what you did. There are coffee shops you do the same thing. And so that was a good experience. It was good to get involved in the Flint Hills Alliance because that gave me a way to become educated about the gay history in Kansas and—

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ALBIN: What did the organization do?

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SMITH: We were really—we did social functionings and then to bring people together we did like potlucks and different things, but we did educational type programming too. We did work on some activist stuff. We weren't really out there marching or anything but we worked on like getting people involved civically in the community and statewide. And I mean it had a pretty good membership. I can't remember numbers off the top of my head but we had a pretty good membership that I recall. And it was just—it was really just a place for people to come together. And we—we met in a church. I can't remember where the church was. Oh I can't remember the name. It's been so long ago, I'm getting old. But that was—it was really interesting just to—and just to talk with people who had been around for a while, had seen where things were in the past, where you are now, where there's a lot of—well then in '94 or '95, somewhere around there like with the changes that happened in Lawrence and wanting the same things to happen in Manhattan as far as like sexual orientation, the nondiscrimination thing.

So that was really a cool time to be there I think for me. And it helped to kind of get me more involved, not only with just the gay aspects of activism and politics but just got me thinking more civically also as far as like the political system and being informed and voting and—not really kind of—I wasn't really—I was all about the military part of it but all the civic stuff about it's like, okay politics, eh. So—but now it's like that's really kind of helped me even today because I make it a point to become informed about things before I make decisions on things, in all aspects of what I do so it was good

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ALBIN: So you were still involved in the reserves at this point?

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SMITH: Yeah—

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ALBIN: And you were out openly and in the reserves?

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SMITH: Yeah—

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ALBIN: So did that have any kind of impact on—

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SMITH: Not really. I—the good thing was that when I was in the reserves and living—my reserve unit was actually in Kansas City. So everything that I did locally at home there was no risk for me to be—unless someone's following me around and that wasn't happening. So no. But even when my—I had a unit in Manhattan the last year that I was in nineties—was I living in Topeka? I'm trying to remember where I was living. I think I was still living in Manhattan. My unit was in Manhattan. And even then it really didn't—I was at the point where I really didn't care. They find out, they find out, what are they going to do, kick me out? Okay.

00:37:15

But it came to pass that I was—decided I wanted to go back active duty in the reserves and I wanted to do that as a reserve recruiter. I also talked about going into warrant officer training school and that—but I really wanted to do the reserve recruiting. And during that process I made the realization that Don't Ask, Don't Tell policy just doesn't work for me and how is it going to work for anybody else? And so I couldn't with a clear conscience go through with that. And instead of following through with my application for (laughs)—to become a recruiter I consulted with the Servicemembers Legal Defense Network which is a watchdog organization for the Don't Ask, Don't Tell policy. I consulted with them and drafted a letter to my commander stating this is why I can't follow through with this application and this is why. I basically came out to my commander in this letter, and that's an automatic discharge, just for even saying that you're gay. So that started the whole chain of events of being discharged from the reserves.

That was not a—it was not a bad experience. I mean, I didn't have any negative experience from my chain of command at the reserve unit. Again, I don't know if I'm just lucky that I never experience [telephone ringing] bad things when it comes to coming out or what but—in fact a couple of times they had asked me to, Well just take back the letter and we'll just go on with what you were doing, we won't worry about it. It's like, well what does that say about integrity? (laughs) Not a lot and you taught me a lot about integrity, you taught me a lot about courage and a lot about selfless service and

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that's what I'm doing. I can't, with a clear mind, not do that. And so I followed through and so I was discharged in December, '97. Both times I was discharged with an honorable discharge so I maintained all my VA benefits and everything so I didn't lose anything and still had the GI Bill at the time. So that was an interesting experience.

On some level—sometimes it was like, Why the hell did you do that? Why did you—because that—you can't go back now. And even if I wanted to go—and there's times where I would like to go back and make it the career choice for the rest of my working days. But other times I'm at that same point where I'm like, Well you did it for—it was your way of saying, this—I'm taking a stand on this issue and this is how I'm doing that and I'm willing to sacrifice that career for what I believe in. And so it was really—it was really a hard decision to make for me because I really have a—even today I still have a strong desire to—for pride—or not desire but I have a strong pride in our country. And I may not agree with everything that we do right now and there's a lot I don't agree with but I think we—as citizens we have that obligation in some ways to give back. And so that's—I think that's part of the conflict I have. Like I was saying earlier with the current situation and everything feeling a little conflicted. So I think that has a lot to do with it also, but—and there's a big part of me that misses the army. I miss that structure, I miss the discipline, I miss the regimented lifestyle. I mean I just—I miss that. And yeah. (laughs)

00:41:06

ALBIN: So by doing this action of writing the letter and coming out, what's the response been from other people that you've done this?

00:41:19

SMITH: Um I've gotten a lot of support, a lot of—a lot of times when I see articles that are about—like there was a whole—I forget what the situation was but it was— Anyway, I posted on a listserv that I'm on—I'm on military.com, which is my way of staying connected. But I'm on this bulletin board. And I posted something on there about the bulletin board about what I—about coming out in the military and everything. And like I got—someone wrote back something about, it's called Don't Ask, Don't Tell for a reason. Why did you tell? I'm like, Well there's a principle behind it. Yes I knew going into the army—because when I went into the army it wasn't Don't Ask, Don't Tell. It was if you were gay you can't be in at all. And they actually asked you, Are you

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homosexual? I mean there was a question on the application and of course I lied but—then at the time it was like I wasn't sexually active, I just had feelings and so it wasn't a lie. It was a stupid question anyway. (laughs) But—I totally forgot where I was going with that.

00:42:29

ALBIN: Okay. (laughs)

00:42:33

SMITH: That happens a lot with me. I get going and then I'm like, Where the hell am I going?

00:42:38

ALBIN: The reaction from people.

00:42:39

SMITH: The reaction from people, yeah. They asked me, Why did you—why would you tell? I was like, Well I told because it's a stupid pol—it's a stupid law, and in order for it to be changed people have to start speaking out about it. And if it's just one voice that starts—I mean not that I'm the only one talking about it but you need multiple people saying, This is wrong, this is not a legitimate—there's no legitimate reason why a gay person cannot serve in the military at all. I mean, all the arguments about it'll be a distraction to the unit cohesion. Not really. When you're in the heat of battle I'm not thinking of a piece of ass, I'm thinking of saving my ass. So I don't really care. (laughs) But—and then the—so those arguments just don't—they don't—there's no validity to them. And so you've got to talk—speak out about it. And a lot of it just comes—I mean there's more problems with your married soldiers' infidelity than there is with gay soldiers like trying to convert people, (laughs) because I don't know of a lot of gay people who try to convert people. (laughs) And so—and infidelity in the military is just—it's just—especially during times of war but—it's just crazy. So there's no legitimate reason why a person should not be allowed to serve. And I don't even like to use the word allowed because it should be—it's a voluntary thing. If I'm choosing to do it, it's because I want to do it. I don't need your permission to do it. And so I think that that law is just completely flawed and it needs to go away. It just needs to go away completely.

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ALBIN: Do you think it will ever go away?

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SMITH: I think so. I think—it's—and it's not going to happen any—maybe in the next five, ten years, maybe. But I think it's—I think there's enough momentum now for people to change it. And I think a lot of the studies that have been done with polls and surveys of American people they're like—I forget what the last one I read was like 70 percent of the American people think that it should go away. Basically I think that the momentum is there. There's—oh what's his name? There's a bill, and I can't remember—HB something or other. I can't remember which one it is, but it's the Military Readiness Act which eliminates the Don't Ask, Don't Tell piece of it. I wish I could remember the number. (laughs) But yeah so there's—and that—I forget how many people bipartisanly have signed on to it in support of it. It's quite a broad spectrum. I think it's about 125 or something. So—I think it'll—I think in time it'll go away. It's going to have to because they're—I mean, they're running out of people to recruit and enlist. I mean, they're offering outrageous bonuses for people just to get them in and their base—I mean if they were to get rid of that I think there would be a lot of people (laughs) that would volunteer. I would go back if I had the opportunity to, so they need to change it before I turn forty-two. (laughs)

00:45:53

ALBIN: Is that like the cutoff?

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SMITH: That's my cutoff, yeah.

00:45:55

ALBIN: Oh your cutoff? (laughs)

00:45:56

SMITH: Yeah my cutoff. It's my age—I forget how it goes—your age minus the years of service that your—or plus years of service or something (unintelligible). So my cutoff is forty-two (laughs), so a few years to go.

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00:46:09

ALBIN: So I'm going to change the tape.

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SMITH: Okay.

[Section Edited]

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ALBIN: Yeah I've heard that people are being very out right now while being in Afghanistan and in Iraq and nobody's doing anything about it because they need bodies—

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SMITH: They need bodies, that's it.

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ALBIN: So they're not making any kind of—

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SMITH: Right—

00:46:31

ALBIN: —changes or doing anything. And I actually met a woman who was in the army in around '91 and she said like her whole group, like the majority of them, were queer.

00:46:43

SMITH: Oh yeah.

00:46:44

ALBIN: It was just—she said it was just not an issue. This was when I was at this panel that Steve Estes was at. And she said it just wasn't a big deal.

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SMITH: Yeah it's not. I mean it really—I think for the most part it—I think you have pockets where you have that—where it could be problematic but for the most part I think people—I think with this generation that we have growing up now too I mean they're—they're so—I mean they're—these kids are coming out when they're twelve and eleven and stuff. I'm like, How do you even know at eleven years old? (laughs) Good Lord.

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ALBIN: Yeah it's really—

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SMITH: It's a different time.

[Section removed]

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ALBIN: Okay so what happened—what was life like in Lawrence when you were here?

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SMITH: Life in Lawrence was great. I mean I wasn't—I think my time in Manhattan and—and I lived in Topeka again after because I transferred from K-State to Washburn and was—lived in Topeka from '97 to 2000 or so, and I was involved some with some of the peace and justice organization. But I think by the time that I got to Lawrence I was kind of burned out a little bit on the activism part of things so I really didn't get involved in any of the organizations in Lawrence. I think I went to a couple of meetings. I don't even know what the name of the organization is in town anymore.

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ALBIN: Was it a social one?

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SMITH: Well there's a social one and then there was—

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ALBIN: There's NetworQ.

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00:48:34

SMITH: NetworQ. I was involved in—I went to a couple of NetworQ meetings. And Deb Taylor is a part of that who is one of the founders of the Flint Hills Alliance back in Manhattan. And she got me back—we reconnected and she got me back involved in that. But I just—I had had enough at that time. I was like really tired (laughs) of trying to be the voice for things. And so I really—I got more involved in Lawrence more socially just with networks of friends. And I really didn't get too involved with—I think by this time in my life I was like, Okay yeah I'm gay. (laughs) Okay, it's not—I don't have to like proclaim it anymore, it's pretty much who I am. And so it really—I just—I don't—I really didn't get involved in the gay—I mean I did—I don't want to say I abandoned it but I just didn't get really involved in it. I went to, oh what is it called? The bar in town where you can be gay on certain nights. (laughs) One night a week they had gay—

00:49:33

ALBIN: Oh Liquid?

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SMITH: Liquid, yeah. I would go to Liquid a couple times. For a while I actually went there a lot but I—

00:49:41

ALBIN: (laughs) You could be gay?

00:49:42

SMITH: Yeah. (laughs) You could be gay on Wednesday night at Liquid or whatever night it was.

00:49:45

ALBIN: Yeah, now it's the Granada.

00:49:46

SMITH: Now it's the Granada, okay. So I did that. But I got involved with the Queers and Allies on campus actually a couple of years before I left so I wasn't in it from the beginning. But I started talking with our speaker's bureau to classes and I always go to

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Brown Bag Drag because that's always the funnest event of the year on campus. But it was—I mean, it was a good life in Lawrence for me. I really—I miss living here. (laughs) I lived in Lawrence for seven years. And yeah it was just a good time.

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ALBIN: What about working? Like what was your job specifically at KU?

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SMITH: At KU I worked in Student Health Services in the Wellness Resource Center. And my job title was public health educator. So I did programming on specific health topics. My focus area was on sexual health and alcohol and other drugs. And so I did a lot of programming, campus-wide programming on those events like Alcohol Awareness Day or Sexual Responsibility Week so we would do different things. But I did a lot of classroom presentations; I did a lot of presentations in the fraternities and sororities, also in the residence halls. I was CPR instructor on campus, I taught CPR classes for the rec center. I instructed a freshman orientation seminar and for a couple of years I did that. And part of that class I would bring in Queers and Allies panel. And I always used that panel as an opportunity for me to come out to the class. So I would always sit on the panel myself. And so the students were really—I think that really intrigued them. At first they were like, Why is he sitting up there? And then at the end of the class they're like, Oh okay. Then they had all kinds of questions. It would generate a lot of discussion in subsequent classes. And then I also taught a class for the community health department through the—it was a required course for the community health majors and I can't remember what it was called. It was like—I can't remember. But it was basically about how to develop health education programs. So my experience working at KU was just great. I loved it, loved it. And it was a great environment to work in and great people, colleagues that were there and met some great people. Just the opportunities that were available at KU to see different speakers that was just great, I loved it

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ALBIN: With your students—because it was this first year of class and as we know the students that come into—because this is something I'm interested in. The students that come into KU from all over the place, majority 21,000 of them at KU, are from all over Kansas. What was it like coming out to these seventeen-year-old kids who may be from

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cities, they may be from towns; they may be from really rural locations? Like how did they react?

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SMITH: For most of them it was like—some it wasn't an issue. It was like, Oh I have a cousin or I have an aunt or I have a uncle. So they had already been exposed. For some it was like they didn't think they knew any gay people but yet I had been teaching them for half a semester so it's like, okay so how did—we would have discussions about that, How does that change our dynamic because now you know me as an out gay person but first I was your instructor? So how does knowing that change the dynamic? And a lot of them were like, It really doesn't change it. It's just like you're—so I don't think that—like I said earlier, I don't think this generation has as much of an issue with sexual orientation as we want to think that they do. (laughs) I think—I think some of—not necessarily those in the gay community but those outside of the gay community are really concerned that we can't expose our kids to these things because then they'll become one. (laughs)

So I think our—these students are a lot more savvy than we give them credit for. Some of them may not be as academically savvy (laughs) but culturally they're pretty savvy. A couple did have an issue. They're like, Well my religion says—so it's always the religious issue that they have a problem with. And I'm like, Well that's something that you—I would never try to discredit their—where they were on that. I was like, That's something that you need to kind of—I would throw it back on them and say—not throw it back but give it back to them and say, Well that's something that you kind of need to work on and see how you can reconcile that. Because I would always also bring it to the point where, you're coming into a whole new community here and it's mostly from kids that were from small towns. You're going to be exposed not only to gay people but lesbians, bisexuals, transgender people, people from different countries and different skin color, different everything. Everyone in that—so try and bring back the uniqueness of humanity (laughs) in some ways. And whether that had an impact on them or not, I don't know but I'd like to think that it did. (laughs) So I never—there was never an argument in the class. I think it might be the way that I present things too because I—don't like to—what's the word I'm looking for? I don't like to like become argumentative with people. It's like, they have their beliefs, I got to let them have those but I want to

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learn about that. And so I think by allowing them the opportunity to really talk to me instead of me trying to persuade them that kind of helped in those situations. It's like, You tell me what your experience is and we'll just leave it at that. But it did generate some interesting conversations in class, so—I think it's good.

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ALBIN: So you left KU in December of 2006?

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SMITH: Yes, December of 2006.

00:56:06

ALBIN: And where did you end up?

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SMITH: I end—took a position at University of Missouri in Kansas City, Go Roos (laughs) but I'm still a Jayhawk through and through. And I'm in a similar role there, however, I was hired to start their or to develop their health promotion program at UMKC, and so that's what I've been doing for the past year or so. And it's a great school. I really like it. I like the opportunity that I have there. And it's a really different environment than KU. It's a smaller school about half the size and it's mainly a urban commuter school so it's different. I'm having to relearn how to connect with students because they're—they connect differently with people, interact differently. But it's been a good experience. And I've become involved with the LBGT office and I'm on the LBGT advisory board for the campus, and so we're working on making sure that we're getting everyone's needs met in some way or another. UMKC is in the top one hundred of the *Advocate's* schools, of gay-friendly schools. So that's a honor that we really want to maintain and so we're trying to figure out how we can keep up that rating. And UMKC was actually the first school—they actually went to the Supreme Court in the seventies arguing for the right for the students to organize as a LBGT group student organization. And so they had the, I guess, landmark Supreme Court decision that allowed that to happen on our campuses. So UMKC has a piece of that history in student organization history, so that's kind of interesting, kind of cool.

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00:58:08

ALBIN: So what is life like living in Kansas City?

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SMITH: Life in Kansas City is amazing. (laughs) I love Kansas City. I think as I was living in Kansas I was slowly making that eastward migration to Kansas City, it just took me like ten, twenty, eighteen years to get there. But I really like Kansas City. Kansas City has a great atmosphere. It's a very gay-friendly city. There is—

00:58:36

ALBIN: Now is this Kansas City, Kansas or Kansas City, Missouri?

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SMITH: Kansas City, Missouri, yeah, on the Missouri side. I'm on the Missouri side. But I'm getting involved in some (unintelligible) PROMO [Promoting Rights of Missourians] which is—I don't even know how to describe them—they're the statewide organization for—for—can't think of the word—(laughs) pro-gay legislation type stuff, nondiscrimination stuff. I'm also involved with the—it's a Midwest—Midwest Coalition for Responsible Sex Education, which is really looking at sex education in the high schools. So I'm getting involved—so I'm getting involved with the community. I'm also a community representative for the Kansas City HIV Programming Council. So we kind of have—we kind of decide how the grant money is spent among the different service organizations in town, both on the Kansas and Missouri side. And so that's a three-year appointment from the mayor's office so I'm on that. And so I've gotten really involved and I've tried to really connect with the city on that level. And then also with this social network level I have a group of my lesbian friends, as I call them, and we call ourselves the Coffee Mafia in Kansas City. So we get together every Saturday morning for coffee and just general BS'ing and kvetching about something. (laughs) So we do that every Saturday and we host at different people's houses and so that's—that's always fun. Last night we had a game night and (unintelligible) people for games. And we do different things together but I—that's the Lesbian Mafia and I'm the token gay man. (laughs) Actually we've introduced another token gay man so we've got two in there now. (laughs) But it's a great—it's all inclusive because we have a couple straight couples in it too so it's a lot of fun. It's a good group and so I've really connected with

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that. And then I—just being involved in the community and on-campus stuff and just in my—just doing my own stuff. So I love it.

01:00:46

ALBIN: I've interviewed a few people who have talked about the AIDS epidemic and when it hit and I've interviewed some people who are HIV positive. And one person I interviewed was really concerned about this younger generation not—because they are a generation away from when the epidemic hit and he's really worried that history is kind of doomed to repeat itself because people—he feels that a lot of people are not practicing safe sex again.

01:01:16

SMITH: Yes—

01:01:17

ALBIN: Have you seen that happening?

01:01:18

SMITH: I see it and I have the same fear. And this is—because I—partly why I got involved with that Coalition for Responsible Sex Education and why I'm involved with the HIV-AIDS Planning Council is because I really—I'm very scared for this generation. We have seen an increase in HIV-positive youth eighteen to twenty-four so that's on the increase. Another risk group is women, particularly African American women at a high risk. And so I think we're—and the circumstances for those two groups are very different. One is—for the African American women it's mainly through partner transmission, from partners who are either MSM, who have male sex with men on the down low or who are intravenous drug users or both, and so they're—and they're passing it on to their female partners. For the youth I think it's just a lack of not using safer sex practices. I think it has—I think this abstinence-only generation that we're in teaching in schools is failing our students on many levels. We're not providing them with the correct information and we're not providing them the tools for when they do become sexually active how to protect themselves and how to use the tools that they have available.

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And like you said this generation has never—did not grow up, did not experience the onset of the epidemic in the early eighties where it was in the news every day. You heard about someone dying every day. You knew—you would know people who died mysteriously, you didn't know why, and you make those connections later on. But this generation has not experienced that. We also as this—our generation who kind of was in the beginning, we were exposed to all that prevention education. We were exposed to the ACT UP groups doing their—their activism. So we were—and we were there. We saw these things happening. I really—I'm scared because this—particularly in the last eight years (laughs) we've had—what is the word I'm looking for—the abstinence-only education. So this—I call it the prevention—the age of prevention complacency. We're don't—we're not doing prevention education like we should be doing it in the schools. We can't go into a high school and talk about condom use or how to put on a condom or even give condoms out in school. How is that helping our students? We know, okay teens are getting pregnant because they're having sex. I don't know if that's a surprise to anybody but maybe if we were providing—[telephone] or not providing but making condoms available to them, we might see a decrease in that teen pregnancy even more. Sorry. It's my text messaging. I thought I turned it off. Sorry. So I really think that we've really become complacent when it comes to HIV prevention—not those who are doing the work but it's just as a society, as a culture. I think this generation sees that there's medication to control the virus. Okay so I could take a pill, I'll be fine. But what they don't realize is that those pills are highly toxic and the side effects of those pills are—can be really—do you want to—? You might lose your bowels at any moment. Is that how you want to go through the rest of your life? And you have to take those pills every day. You have to take those pills for the rest of your life. And you have—you can't stop because if you stop that pill's not going to work for you anymore and you—and there's only so many out there. (laughs) So I think that that has a lot to do with it. And I am scared. I think that we are going to see an increase of this generation becoming HIV positive.

There was an interesting study that was done. And I always cite this study but I cannot remember where I read it and what journal it was in, but it was a journal—it was a study that talked to the generation that grew up during that time. And these are educated professionals and they're seeing an increase in this cluster that they're just giving up safer sex practices. They're like—they're tired of it. And so there's been an increase in

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this population of professionals who grew up—educated people who grew up in that early eighties and nineties.

01:06:10

ALBIN: So what age range would they be now?

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SMITH: They'll probably be in our age range.

01:06:13

ALBIN: Right, maybe a little bit older.

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SMITH: Maybe a little bit—yeah. And so there's been kind of a increase in that population also. I wish I could remember the study.

01:06:23

ALBIN: Do you know anything about the history? I've had some people tell me that in Kansas a bunch of people at one point just up and left Kansas, went to the big cities and then when some of these folks became HIV positive they came back—

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SMITH: They come back (unintelligible)—

01:06:38

ALBIN: —and there was like an influx. Does that happen in a lot of locations, people come home?

01:06:40

SMITH: That does happen. I think because you come home, yeah. Yeah that does happen a lot. Just—Kansas was actually really progressive in the early eighties. They passed one of the first comprehensive sex education laws, the board of education did. And so they were like one of the—like in the forefront of doing this comprehensive sex education and the whole what's-the-matter-with-Kansas syndrome it kind of went backwards and—so the history of our board of education here the last couple of years, I mean you can't even talk about evolution for God's sake. But it's just interesting how

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progressive Kansas was and how proactive the board of education was at that time to do all that prevention, education and comprehensive sexual health education. And now it's just like, You have to—you can—you're so restricted to do what you can do. Kansas had an interesting history when it comes to that too. It used to be such an open—the free state—and now it's such a conservative state.

01:07:47

ALBIN: Do you see the future of Kansas changing at all? I mean do you—

01:07:51

SMITH: I'm always optimistic. Change is always good. Change is always going to come, so hopefully it's good change. I mean I think we've been fortunate to have—I say we, I feel like I still live in Kansas but—it's a huge part of my life. Very fortunate to have a Democratic governor for the last two terms. I don't know if that's a tradition that will hold in the next election but I think it's a good thing. Whether—I think—Kansas is so unique though because it has really three major metropolitan type areas—well Wichita the largest city and then you have the whole Lawrence and Kansas City, Kansas, Johnson County area and then that little bubble like around Manhattan (unintelligible) kind of around that area. That's where I see a lot of the progressive thinking and happening and the—whether you can change the rural parts of the state, I don't know. I think—I don't know. I'm optimistic that Kansas will always be the beacon of light it started out to be and so I think it—I think there's always hope. There's always hope in Kansas.

01:09:10

ALBIN: So do you see yourself spending the rest of your life in Kansas City? I mean, you can go anywhere?

01:09:16

SMITH: I could. I actually—I really would like to retire back to Lawrence when I do get to that point in my life, retiring, assuming that Lawrence doesn't change. I mean I'm sure it will change but I can see myself retiring in this area. I really like this part of the country. I have no desire to live back in Connecticut and, yeah. I've been here since 1990 so I have eighteen—almost—well eighteen years—seventeen years because I

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lived in Connecticut for a year. So I've been here for seventeen years and I like it.
Yeah.

01:09:59

ALBIN: So is there anything that I haven't covered that you want to talk about?

01:10:05

SMITH: I don't think so.

01:10:06

ALBIN: Okay.

01:10:07

SMITH: Yeah.

01:10:07

ALBIN: If so we can always have another chat.

01:10:10

SMITH: I don't—I can't think of anything else really. (laughs)

01:10:13

ALBIN: Okay. Well great. Thank you very much.

01:10:15

SMITH: You're welcome.

01:10:17

ALBIN: Excellent. That was wonderful.

[end]

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