

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

Michael Johnson
Oral History

Interviewed by
Tami Albin

January 4, 2009

<http://kuscholarworks.ku.edu/dspace/handle/1808/6796>

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Tami Albin (albin@ku.edu or tami.albin@gmail.com)
Director of *Under the Rainbow: Oral Histories of GLBTIQ People in Kansas*
Anschutz Library
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University of Kansas
Lawrence, KS 66045

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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 Michael Johnson.

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Please note: this transcript is not time stamped. It will be at a later date.

Michael Johnson: Narrator

Tami Albin: Interviewer

TAMI ALBIN: Okay. So we're rolling with both. So today is January 4, 2009. Happy New Year.

MICHAEL JOHNSON: Happy New Year.

ALBIN: I'm here with Michael Johnson. Thank you so much.

JOHNSON: Thank you so much.

ALBIN: I appreciate it. We will start off the interview the way that I start all of them off which is, Tell me where you were born and when?

JOHNSON: I was born in Des Moines, Iowa in 1986, the August of. And yeah. We were only there for—we were only in Des Moines for about two months after I was born and then we moved to Colorado because my father had a job there. So I grew up—I started growing up in Colorado. I was there until probably my second grade in elementary school. And then my parents got a divorce and we moved—or we moved back to my mother's hometown which is McLouth, Kansas. And then they got a divorce and I grew up there rest of my life.

ALBIN: So what was it like growing up in McLouth?

JOHNSON: It was weird. I mean, it was good. It was—it's like one of those double hit things, like it's weird and it's good at the same time because my mother's family still resides all around the McLouth area, like some up near Leavenworth and some closer to Oskaloosa but mainly in the McLouth area. So it's kind of like you always had someone watching out for you but at the same time you always had someone watching you just in general too. So like it was pressure but it was kind of a relief, too, to know

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that there were people that kind of had your back a little bit. So that was cool. I'd have to say—the strangest thing for me coming to McLouth from Littleton, where I lived in Colorado, was the size of the school. Because I remembered quite vividly going from second grade having my classroom be in a trailer out in a parking lot somewhere because there were so many students in this school that they had to bring in like modular homes, and then moving to McLouth and we were like kindergarten through twelfth grade in one building, and we were sharing a cafeteria. And I mean my class had like forty-five students in it at the maximum. So I just remember going, Wow at the sheer level of people in my grade and stuff like that.

ALBIN: And do you have any siblings?

JOHNSON: I have one younger sister. She's eighteen now, nineteen, eighteen, yeah.

ALBIN: So you started grade two at this school and you stayed in this school right through to grade 12?

JOHNSON: Yeah, in McLouth.

ALBIN: What was that like?

JOHNSON: It's—I mean it's the same thing. It's just strange because you grow up around these people and they don't change in your mind. Like, you've got this set image of who these people are and who your friends are and who your friends aren't from second grade on. But then all of a sudden it's like you hit middle school and high school and it's like whoa, stuff's changing, things are weird but we're still all the same people. It's really strange to have that experience and then go meet people who would never even dream of what that experience is. Because my best friends in Emporia where I go to school now are all like, Yeah I graduated with like five hundred people in my class and blah, blah, blah. And I'm like, I could probably still name everybody I graduated with. It's just—it's kind of a weird thing to have that connection with people.

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ALBIN: So during this time you're friends with all these people who aren't changing, but at what point did you realize that you were attracted to people of the same sex?

JOHNSON: I think that—it's like one of those things to where you always kind of know what it is but you never really have a name to put to it. I think that the first time I realized I had a crush on another boy was when I was in the fifth grade in McLouth Elementary School. I think that's also the first time that I kind of had a name to put with it. Because it was around the time that the first Ellen DeGeneres sitcom was on TV still. And it might have even been a rerun. It might have been in syndication. But it was all the scandal about her coming out as a lesbian on TV. And I still didn't quite have a grasp on what being gay was. And I remember sitting and watching TV with my family. We were all over at one of my aunt's house or something one evening. We were sitting watching TV and the *Ellen* show as on. They stop and they watch it for about fifteen minutes. Then they start this conversation about how, Well she should be taken off TV because nobody wants to watch that and blah, blah, blah, blah, and her political views and her choices should be left off the show and it was entertaining until then. And I'm like, Oh so that's what it is. And that's why people get angry about it. It's just like one of those connecting things. And then it connects puts in your head that that's the bad thing to do and bad thing to be and all that. So yeah, I would say about fifth grade I finally had a name to put with what I was feeling and who I was.

ALBIN: Right, right. And so how did that impact the rest of your attending school?

JOHNSON: I mean, it kind of sucked. (laugh) It kind of sucked a lot. Because, I mean in my small town—McLouth's only like 860 people, so I really didn't have any positive queer influences in my life. Like I knew there was a lesbian in town who everyone was kind of cool with but she just kind of kept to herself and it was all very Midwest proper, Hey neighbor, how you doing? And then they'd go along their merry way and stuff. But the only time you hear about gay people was that they're bad people or that they're not right in the head but we should still love them anyways or whatever, which is pity which sucks, right? Yeah. So it really kind of was a burden on me I guess. Because like I'd always been—I'd always been a kid who sat and thought about stuff. I was—I never really had time for my peers. Like I always felt like I wanted to be with the adults, I wanted to make the adults laugh, I wanted to make the adults talk with me and stuff like

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that. So I mean I would just sit there and I would dwell on it and think on it and come up with ways on how I could talk to adults about something like this or how I could just have an open conversation with someone about it. I mean even like the seventh, eighth grade I was thinking about this stuff because I just—I did, I loved to talk and find out people's stories and all that. But I didn't—I mean I didn't feel safe there because faggot was the number one thing you called someone if you really wanted to just get them real quick or that's so gay or whatever like that. So to put a name with it and then be afraid to even say that name was just kind of burdensome. Burdensome? Burdeny. Yeah. So yeah. So I went from kind of being an outgoing kind of happy kid to being really kind of quiet and self—and turned in on myself. At the beginning I don't think it was because I was like depressed or anything, but I think it was because I was just really trying to figure stuff out. And then I think that led to depression because I was just really feeling alone and not with another group because even in a small town you have groups of people who are always together, together, together and I didn't really feel that connection with anybody else.

ALBIN: And did anybody notice that you had kind of turned inward?

JOHNSON: Yeah. I mean, my mom—my father wasn't really in my life that much after probably about the sixth grade on. And even I think he noticed when I would go out and have parental visit with the father or whatever. But my mom and my dad both kind of noticed that I was kind of quiet and not really being as outgoing as I used to be or whatever. I don't think they ever thought it was to the level to where it was as in like depression or just sheer loneliness or whatever, but I think they noticed that I wasn't really too happy with stuff in general, yeah.

ALBIN: And so how did you work through that?

JOHNSON: It was (laugh) tough. I went through really dark phases. It's—it's kind of like you start turning to outlets that I wouldn't say aren't healthy but aren't probably the right choices at that time to make. I mean, by the time I was in eighth grade, ninth grade, you know, I was a hormonal teenage boy and of course any hormonal teenage boy is going to go online and find whatever he can right? So I went online and I tried to find like support groups or whatever like that and then it just turned into, Well there's

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porn online too. (laugh) So it's like—it's like you just kind of turn to whatever. And as a hormonal teenage boy I turned more to the naughty side of the Internet instead of what could have probably really helped me. And then of course I had guilt about that because I knew I shouldn't have been doing that or whatever, as my mother would probably say. So yeah, it was kind—I just—I got really depressed and I didn't have anybody to turn to so I was just—I was like either on the Internet chatting with whoever or I was trying to figure out ways of getting out of McLouth to find—but I didn't have a car or anything, it was just—it was just a really weird and strange combobulated time. I want to see that transcription combobulated. But yeah, it was not good. I was—I was—by the end of my freshman year of high school I think I was very depressed and was very—I think I had like dark suicidal thoughts almost and just the thought of, Well this sucks. I just don't want to go. Life passed by, I quit. And then someone—I can't remember who it was but someone was talking about some online journal thing that you could have. It was like—oh what was it called? Xanga, Xanga. Did you ever—have you ever heard of Xanga?

ALBIN: Uh-huh.

JOHNSON: It's such a middle school, stupid, like emo kid thing to do now. But back in the day I was like, Xanga. And I would just like write whatever online and blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, and it was kind of like a release, like so at least it wasn't all in my head all the time, but it was still just a release. It was kind of freeing to be able to just jump online and type and not many kids from my school knew my little name or whatever that I had on there and all that stuff. So I got on there and made friends on there and stuff like that.

ALBIN: And so were you having conversations with people online?

JOHNSON: Like randomly I would, but they weren't like ever really heavy conversations. They're just like, Hey how you doing? Good. Me too. You know, just like random, daily, run-of-the-mill stuff because I think I was just too scared to like breach it. Like we—everybody knew that we were talking because we had this connecting, I might be gay, are you gay too thing. But it was like whoever I was talking to or whoever it was that was like e-mailing or commenting on my little blog or whatever,

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that person and I were too afraid to even talk about it or like say it. So yeah. But then at the end of my—well beginning of my sophomore year of high school I found a friend in my high school who had gone to this camp called—at that point it was called Camp Anytown, and it was a Youth Leadership and Diversity experience. And I was like, Okay, whatever, get me out of McLouth for a week, right. So I go and it's all about—it turned out to be all about Kansas teens coming together to fight racism and bigotry and sexism in their communities. And they put kids in these situations to where they'll have to sit down and think about what happened that is wrong with this situation. Like we have a day where people are given a disability and told to go to lunch and basically see how people interact with that and what we could do to change that and how people interact. And I was like, Okay this is cool, this is cool, this is cool. And I'm going Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday. And Wednesday evening they announce the next speaker for the day. And they're like, Well our next speaker is going to be a PFLAG [Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays] panel. And I was like, PFLAG, random internet source. And I was really excited. And I heard these men up there talking about their lives in the Midwest, Kansas Midwest, growing up as gay boys. And I was like, That's me, Hi, (unintelligible). Yeah, and so it was really kind of reassuring to know that there was somebody else out there who had lived through it and is now I mean much older than me but still had lived. It's nice to know that.

ALBIN: So did you talk to—did you go up and talk to them afterwards?

JOHNSON: I did. I went up and talked to them. But I was still kind of like, Hey that's—I really appreciate you guys. It's an awesome thing, it's an awesome thing. Yeah, I went up and talked to them and it was really cool. It was just a reassuring thing to me. And I actually came out to my friend afterwards, the friend that had sent me to the camp. I came out to her afterwards and she was really supportive and all that. Hey kitty. (laugh) So yeah. I did that and I came back to my high school and somebody found out about my Xanga site. So I'm like, Well now I've just got to roll with it, right?

ALBIN: Right.

JOHNSON: And then a friend of mine, his stepmother had found my Xanga site as well. Along with that she had found, on his computer, links to porn site—like gay porn

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sites, right, but for some reason he had put my name on it. And I'd never been to this guy's house, I'd never like—I mean, I hung out with him. He was one of my friends in high school or middle school, and—but I'd never been over to his house, never been on his computer. And she called my mom up and was like, Hey what's up with this? My mom had no idea what was going on.

ALBIN: Wow.

JOHNSON: So we kind of had it out and that was how I came out to my mom and it (laugh) was—it was interesting to see my—I mean, I was dealing with my own stuff too, but looking back on it now it's interesting to see how my mom dealt with it. Because we just kind of like walked on eggshells around each other but still made each other know that we still love each other. (laugh) Hey how you doing? Good. Love you too, so yeah.

ALBIN: So the friend that you came out to, how did they react?

JOHNSON: They—I mean, they reacted like, Well yeah duh, obviously you know. It's like, for all of our trying to cover things up and to hide things I think that sometimes that even forces them out a little bit more, because you try to kind of bottle something up so tight that it starts seeping out the cracks. And I think all my life—all everybody's life I think there are clues. I guarantee my dad probably thought he was living with a French foreign exchange student for a while or something, (laugh) just like, I don't know who you are and how you got here. But yeah, she was very supportive and very cool. And actually that was the time when I found out who my real friends were too, because people are always bashing on the little almost gay kid and then when he comes out it's like, whispers behind the back, whispers behind the back, people are still going to bash on you. But it's the people who are going to come out and like warn you, Okay this is what's going on. I'm here for you. If you need me to stand over you, blah, blah, blah. But yeah, that's when you find out who your real friends are I think.

ALBIN: And so how old were you at that point?

JOHNSON: I was sixteen, yeah.

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ALBIN: And so how long did it take to kind of reconcile stuff with your mom?

JOHNSON: You know, that's a really good question. (laugh) And I think it's just something that kind of happened naturally. I mean, like there was probably a week or two that we just kind of really didn't talk to each other that much about whatever and then you can feel comfortable to kind of broach the subject because it's something new that you're both dealing with and you need to figure it out and plan it out. And I mean, I think that we were kind of afraid to fight with each other about it, but I think in fighting with each other we were just kind of trying to figure each other out. And there were, there were definitely bumps along the road where we just didn't understand each other and we tried to and tried to and tried to and we just ended up, I mean either screaming at each other for a little while or talking to each other in just crappy ways but still ways where you're trying to figure each other out but still knowing that we loved each other. And eventually it just kind of came to this middle ground where we're like, Okay we're still discovering, still discovering how this fits into life in general. And yeah. It just happened, it melded.

ALBIN: And what about your dad?

JOHNSON: My dad—I came out to my dad the winter after that, so I was probably like seventeen. Maybe I was eighteen. And we—it was probably my last major visit with him. And we were in Colby, Kansas. He was dropping my sister and I off to meet my mom. And he told me to wait in the car for a second and my sister to go and blah, blah, blah. And we sat there and we talked about it, because I told him I had to tell him something, blah, blah, blah. We sat there and talked about it. And I felt like I was going to throw up the entire time because it's your dad right? And basically he told me that he thought I needed some spiritual guidance and possibly to talk to a therapist. And that was when I was like, You know what, okay see you later. You have a good rest of your life. Oh my God. I was so shaken though. Like (laugh) I walked away so cool but I know I stepped out of that car and I was like, Uh can't move. Feel like throwing up. It's just like it was—it was kind of—it was kind of like a car wreck that just happens and everybody's okay but you're still shaken anyways. Yeah.

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ALBIN: So was your—the fact that he mentioned spiritual guidance, was your family religious at all?

JOHNSON: We were—I'd like to describe us as pseudo-religious. We were Methodist. We loved God and we knew that God loved us. And I think that—I think that sometimes my father tried to be more religious than he actually was, like when it benefited him. But we did. We did church on Sunday, we did Christmas Eve, Easter, all that stuff, but we weren't ever like major Bible-thumping Christian people. So it did, it always kind of played a role, but it wasn't like the most important role in our life.

ALBIN: Did your mother mention religion at all?

JOHNSON: She didn't. She's become more active in the church lately actually, but at the time that didn't even escape her lips.

ALBIN: And you had mentioned that that was like the last time that you—like the last big visit you had with your dad?

JOHNSON: Yeah. Like I've seen my dad off and on since then, but there'll be times where there'll be six months to a year where I don't talk to him and there'll be—and that's not—I don't think that's just the gay thing. I think it's that my dad and I are very different people and that sometimes when very different people come together it doesn't really work out that well. And it's like you know that you love him. Because I do, I love my dad. I don't want to be around him, but I love him. And I know he hopefully feels the same way around me. I think it's just very different people with very different ideas about everything.

ALBIN: Right. Right. And then what about your sister, because she had to have heard you arguing with your mom.

JOHNSON: Oh yeah. My sister was pissed off that I didn't tell her first. I mean—I mean she was—and I didn't want it to be funny at the time but it was so funny and ridiculous to me at the time because she was so angry that I had told one of my friends first instead of telling her. It's like she felt like I had walked up to a complete stranger

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and told a complete stranger before I told her. I'm like, You know, this is kind of my best friend who hangs out with me and blah, blah. And she's like, I don't care. You should have told—and she was in tears and bawling. And I'm like, I don't know how to react to this. And it's—I mean, and that's another interesting dilemma because like any time you have siblings you're going to have—especially with just two siblings you're going to have, Well this sibling did this, this, this and this. Now I'm expected to do this too because as the older sibling people are always comparing her to me and it's true, and I hate that it's true but it is true. But I never felt like I brought up comparisons. I always thought that [she] just did her own thing and that she took her way, I took my way, not better, not worse, it's whatever.¹ But I think sometimes she feels, or felt anyways, that there was a lot of comparing going on between the two of us and that she was just so angry that I was supposed to be the perfect blah, blah, blah, blah, blah or whatever and then I did this and I didn't even share it with her. It's kind of like—

ALBIN: So what happened with the fellow who had the porn on his computer under your name?

JOHNSON: Oh fun story. He was sent (laugh) away to this kind of Catholic, I call it a brainwashing camp. Don't know if that's actually what it was, but his stepmother basically packed him up and sent him away to this aunt of his who runs this kind of Catholic reprogramming group for troubled teens, yeah. He recently actually came back in contact with me a couple years ago, but he hasn't contacted me since so yeah. It was just—it was crazy. It was like, That, that, that. And like in three nights the entire world was on its ear and it's like—

ALBIN: Wow—

JOHNSON: Yeah, it was really weird.

ALBIN: Wow. And so what else happened to you in high school? Because you still had, what, another year or two to go?

¹ Edited by narrator during the review process.

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JOHNSON: Right. I still had another two years to go. And they were probably at the same time the coolest and weirdest and worst two years of my life. I'm sorry, if you're a normal teenager you hate high school. You're ready to get out of there. I'm just saying that's what it is. If you love high school there's probably something wrong with you. But it was really strange to see the people who just totally accepted me for who I was and the people who were kind of nervous about accepting me for who I was because you grew up around these people. It's like, I'm still the same, I'm still the same, I'm still the same, but there's just this one thing that I didn't really share with you guys. So it's kind of once again one of the plusses and downfalls at the same time of living in a small town, because you just have this little community that you're a part of and they're going to support you, but at the same time they're kind of just supporting you because you're a part of that community. So high school was really weird. It was a time where I kind of realized that my peers weren't quite what they were cracked up to be anyways. So like I would spend a lot of time with my teachers. I remember my band teacher had to like kick me out of his office because I just didn't want to leave. I would skip lunch and just hang out with the band teacher. And he'd be like, Okay, kind of got to teach a class now. I was that awkward kid. Like my English teacher became my best—one of my best friends. I just loved to hang out with him and my art instructor and hung out with them, and like only a very few amount of my actual peers did I really hang out with.

ALBIN: Right. So did the teachers—so you're out to the teachers at this point?

JOHNSON: Yeah, I was out to—I was out to the teachers. And it's like one of those things where like, I know that teachers don't read Xanga so if I'm going to be out to them, I'm going to be out to them, it's really not a big deal, right?

ALBIN: Right.

JOHNSON: So yeah, the teachers were cool. And the teachers actually really helped me—especially my English teacher because I then got to work on how I pinpoint my sarcasm that is so much a part of me, and I started realizing that with my sarcasm and kind of my tongue-in-cheek, tear-you-down-but-still-give-you-a-good-time demeanor I could connect with my peers that way. Because I reached the point to where I was like, you know what, I'm going to get out of here. I love you guys but I don't care what I say

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to you anymore. (laugh) I'm just going to say what I think. And that's kind of the way it's going to be. And it actually connected me to quite a few of my peers. I think it kind of created more of an openness for me to talk to them, if that makes any sense. Yeah. And it was kind of cool. And then I started kind of like gaining popularity again. I'm like, Uh, I don't know where this is coming from but I'm all right with it if it's not going to get me beat up in the hallway. (laugh) Yeah.

ALBIN: Had anybody ever been violent towards you?

JOHNSON: Nobody had ever been violent towards me and I think it's because once again of the small town thing. Like my family's been there for years. My grandmother and grandfather still live on my grandfather's original family plot out in McLouth. I mean, they've just been there for years. Everybody knows my family. My mother and her three sisters were kind of like those girls that were running up at the school and they each had their individual personality but they were still those girls. I mean it's just—that's the point where your ties to the community really kind of come into play. I just kind of tried to start to make a name for myself since I had been so quiet in the middle years when everybody's hooking up and being friends and being boyfriends and girlfriends in middle school. I was kind of making up for lost time, just kind of stating a name for myself.

ALBIN: Right.

JOHNSON: Which was funny because it actually won me the kind of winter homecoming king my senior year of high school. I was a big band geek. I'd been in band since fifth grade or whatever. And one day, it was right before like the election that they have or whatever for the Valentine's Day dance and it's King and Queen of Courts. And I was like, You know what, I'm going to do it. I'm going to put my name on the ballot and go. And I ended up winning the King of Courts for (laugh) my winter—

ALBIN: Wow.

JOHNSON: I know. I know. It was so funny to me. I was laughing the entire time.

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ALBIN: So how do you think you won it? Was it the instrument you played or—

JOHNSON: I think I carried the band and the cheerleaders and the girlfriends of the basketball team. (laugh) I have no idea how the hell I won. It's still an anomaly to me in my head. But I thought it was really funny that I did. I think part of it was that people—I think people secretly enjoy watching other people kind of rag on everybody else. And I would never rag on anybody in like a mean way. I'd always do it in kind of a sarcastic kind of, eh, (unintelligible) way. But I think people found that funny and I think people found me funny and that's, I think, why I won. Because I'm a funny guy, let's all just admit it. But yeah. It was so funny to me that I'm sitting out there with these basketball players and these popular girls from school and stuff like that. And I'm just looking around and all of a sudden they call my name and I've won the—(laugh) I'd won the King of Courts. And it's funny to me because I'd always said it wasn't important. And at that point I was just like, Oh my God, this is kind of an important deal. And then I went back the next year after my freshman year of (laugh) college to hand back the crown and I did it while wearing high heels so that was fun. (laugh)

ALBIN: That's great.

JOHNSON: It was kind of interesting. (laugh) I'd brought—Oh my God—I'd brought one of my roommates back—oh my gosh, microphone. I'd brought one of my roommates back with me to kind of see my hometown because he was from Kansas City, and he was Hispanic. And (laugh) the first thing, we walk in the door, one of the moms of my classmates, Oh my gosh. Michael. Is this your friend? I was like, Yeah this is my friend from Emporia. And he's like, Hey how you doing, blah, blah, blah. And she's like, You are such a nice young man. Blah, blah, blah. And then he turns to me and goes, I am the darkest person in this entire auditorium. And I was like, Yeah and they think you're my boyfriend too. And he was like, All right. I accept that. I accept that as a reality. It was just fun to see somebody else come into what I grew up with and go, (whispering) Wow, this little gay kid came from here.

ALBIN: And did anybody else come out to you?

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JOHNSON: Yeah. It was somebody younger. It was a younger student after I left came out to me. And there were actually a couple students who—God, thank God for the Internet—got on Facebook and Facebooked me or found my e-mail and e-mailed me or whatever. And I think that a couple of the guys at least who e-mailed me were seriously questioning themselves, their sexuality. And I tried to—I tried to just tell them my experience from growing up in a small town but keep them kind of levelheaded because I think that it's really easy when you come to realization that you are gay or lesbian or whatever that you instantly fall into kind of everybody else's stereotype of what that should be. And I think that can really ruin somebody's personality when they let themselves become this stereotype of what someone else thinks they should be. And I think that's what makes gay teens and gay people from small towns kind of more special. Because if you can escape from a small town as a gay or lesbian or bisexual or transgendered or whatever and maybe be mildly jaded but not ridiculously jaded, be able to look back and appreciate the experiences you've had and to just come out of it as a stronger person and your actual person, I think that makes you more of a special person, just in my head.

ALBIN: So when you're talking about the stereotype, so what types of issues were these people up against?

JOHNSON: I think that it comes down to a line of kind of masculinity and femininity. I think that sometimes men think they should act more macho if they're gay because they don't want to be seen as the limp-wristed gay stereotype that we all have seen in old movies and stuff like that and even recent movies and TV shows. I think that they try to butch themselves up or I think that they can try to go the complete opposite way and become everybody's worst nightmare of what they think a gay man is. And I think that you should just throw those off and just be who you are naturally and let the fact that you're gay be a part of that. I think that people don't—I think people can sometimes get it in their head that they need to act a certain way if they are gay or lesbian. And quite frankly, I think that comes down to issues with sexism. I think it comes down to a gay—I think in (laugh) patriarchal society—Oh my God just took a deep turn—I think we're taught that to be a woman is a bad thing. And I think that men see gay men as wanting to be women. So I think if they are a gay man that they want to go the furthest away from being a woman as possible and they don't want anything to do with men who are

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more effeminate which some men are effeminate and some men are very not effeminate. It's just like they run the gamut. But I think that men are so terrified to see themselves as women because it's just—it would be the downfall of their complete existence because nobody wants to be a woman, right. It's like the most ridiculous thought pattern ever to come out of male society. (laugh) I think that's what a lot of the homophobia from small towns comes from.

ALBIN: Right. Right. So after you left your high school and there are these other kids coming out has anything—do you know has anything happened in your high school to support GLBT teens?

JOHNSON: I don't think anything's happened majorly just because I think people there are still so set in being the way that they are. I just don't see a GSA popping up in my high school anytime soon, because I think that there will be the one or two brave ones that come out, but then I think they'll just have their close friends around them and that's all they will need until they can get to Lawrence for the weekend or so they can do whatever. So I won't say there hasn't been anything that hasn't supported them, but I'm not sure that there's anything that has come out to support them as well.

ALBIN: Right. Right. But have you noticed any changes at all—you're saying that it's set, but you're now out to your entire family who is still in that area, has been there for many generations. So do you think—has your family support maybe changed the community in any way or—

JOHNSON: I think it may have. Like with your family it's always, you have to deal with the individual. It's like, Okay so I have this one aunt who I'm cool, I could talk about whatever, I can bring somebody home and do whatever. But then the other aunt, she loves me and she'll talk to me about anything but not being gay because that just cannot exist. And my grandparents, God love them, they just were like, Okay we love you. Do whatever. And it's just—it's a type of support that's very specific to the individual. And I think that when you take that out to the community the community responds to that in kind of a positive way. It's like, Okay I can support this person and do it in my own individual style instead of having to have a Gay Pride parade going down the middle of

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McLouth, Kansas, which I would love to see at some point, but I'm not counting on it anytime soon.

ALBIN: Right. So you finished high school—

JOHNSON: Uh-huh.

ALBIN: You were prom king?

JOHNSON: Yeah—

ALBIN: You finished high school. And so what happened after that?

JOHNSON: I went to Emporia State University where I was out—I actually lived with a person from—that I graduated with my first year there in the dorms. And I remember one night we were just hanging out in the dorms and he's kind of looking around. and he's like, Man, I knew you were gay in high school but I didn't know you were this gay. (laugh) I was like, Yeah, sorry about that. It just was going to kind of explode. We all knew it was going to happen, we're going to have to deal with it for a while. And yeah, I loved college my first year. I was like, I can do anything I want to, like any college student. But I was like, Oh my God, I might make out with a boy some time. It's like, endless possibilities. And yeah, I did that and I—I mean, I stayed in contact with the people that I wanted to stay in contact from high school and the ones that I didn't it's whatever and I've come into contact with some who I thought I wouldn't.

I actually ran into one of the guys who was probably one of the biggest jocks in my high school. And I ran into him in a bar in Emporia just recently this last year—well last year but just recently. And he came up to me and he apologized for being such an asshole to me when I was in high school. And I was like really? Are you kidding me? And he goes, No. I know we had our differences and I probably made fun of you and said things that I shouldn't have said and that no one should say about anybody. He goes, but I've gotten out into the real world a little bit, and he says, and I've screwed up and I've had people judging me and I've had this, this, and this. And he goes, And you know, I've kind of had my eyes opened by some of the gay people that I've met and

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some of the blah, blah, blah. And he said, And I'm really just kind of sorry for how I treated you. And that was a really cool moment for me.

ALBIN: Wow.

JOHNSON: Yeah. Yeah. It was really cool to me.

ALBIN: So why did you choose to go to Emporia?

JOHNSON: Okay so I lived in McLouth. McLouth is twenty minutes away from Lawrence. Some of my best friends live in Lawrence. I could have gone to KU, but God that's so close to home. It was just like, I have to get out, I have to go do something. I wanted to do theatre and art both as a double major and—I'm not going to bash on KU's theatre and art programs but Emporia State's got kind of kick-ass theatre art programs and it's so much cheaper. It's just like, It's far enough away to where I can do my own thing, but if there's an emergency or if anything happens I can be back in McLouth to be with my family or my family can come to Emporia to be with me. Yeah.

ALBIN: So what's your experience been like at Emporia? What's the student population?

JOHNSON: The student population of Emporia is probably about 6,000.

ALBIN: And what's the size of Emporia itself?

JOHNSON: Not big. It's probably a little smaller than Lawrence is. But it's really funny to me because (laugh) if I could take the campus from [Emporia State and put it at KU] I'd be fine. I just—I love the mentality of both of them and I love the mentality of Lawrence as well, but the campus at Emporia State is actually fairly liberal, as well as the community.² I mean, the community is Middle America, Republican, majority conservative. And a lot of my friends are Republicans there. They're so liberal and progressive in their thoughts towards gays and lesbians, because they grew up in small towns too and they saw people who left and were gay and lesbian or they had an aunt

² Edited by narrator during the review process.

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or uncle along the way. And they're like, It's not my thing but it's whatever. It's kind of like that—don't mess with me and I won't mess with you mentality that I think a lot of rural America has. Plus there's the lesbian Mafia there so it's whatever.

ALBIN: What's—

JOHNSON: Emporia apparently, as I've been told, has been known for their lesbian citizens. I've met a few. I don't know if they're associated. I don't want any trouble from this, I just was stating that it might be a thing.

ALBIN: Interesting.

JOHNSON: Yeah.

ALBIN: Interesting.

JOHNSON: But yeah it's been—Emporia and their gay and lesbian scene has been kind of interesting. It's always fun to meet the people who are still in the closet and will be in the closet for a while. It's fun to meet the people who are so far out of the closet that they're kind of crazy. I like to think that I'm a nice little mix. (laugh) It's just yeah. It's kind of relaxing to meet a wide variety of gay and lesbian people in such a small place but at the same time it's kind of frustrating to meet the largest majority which is kind of like the jaded gay man or the closeted gay man who wants to come out but can't come out because of what his ties are to that area or whatever, which I think is still a big problem with rural America or rural Midwestern Kansas anyways.

ALBIN: And you talk about the jaded gay man. Do you have an idea of what has made them jaded?

JOHNSON: I think that they've—I mean, I think they probably didn't have any kind of support system at all. I think that they hit a certain point to where, Well everybody just hates me because I'm gay so I'm just going to keep on doing my thing and hate them right back. I think that sucks. I think that sucks for anybody to fall into it, let alone gay,

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straight, whatever. I think it sucks for anybody to be jaded like that, because I think it cuts you off from finally finding that support group that you could have.

ALBIN: And so are there support groups in Emporia? I mean, I guess in Emporia and then in Emporia State?

JOHNSON: Yeah. At Emporia State they have a group called P.R.I.D.E., People Respecting Individuality and Diversity in Everyone. And it's the big gay group on campus basically. And I was involved with them for a little while but as a double major my time was so that I really didn't have a chance to like go to meetings and do all that stuff. So that's there on campus. And then Emporia just recently started their own chapter of the Kansas Equality Coalition. And fun story actually, the Kansas Equality Coalition was started in the—oh was it the [Kanza] Room at Emporia State University.³ Yeah, which is weird that it started there but we didn't have our own chapter until recently.

ALBIN: Right. That's interesting.

JOHNSON: Yeah. So there is, there's a community and there's a thriving little base there. The amount of straight allies that I found has just been phenomenal to me. People always make fun of me because I'm always hanging out with the straight guys. I'm like, Well they're my friends, sorry. (laugh) It's like, They have to have love from some gay man, I might as well do it. It's like, Yeah, we kind of take care of each other. It's a good thing.

ALBIN: So now doing a double major, what—so what has your experience been like at Emporia?

JOHNSON: As in just—

ALBIN: In general.

³ Added by narrator during the review process

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JOHNSON: (laugh) Crazy. (laugh) I—listen up kids because this is how you can go crazy at Emporia State University. I at one time was taking twenty-three hours and I was working a job from five o'clock to nine in the morning. I would go to school from nine o'clock to probably about four o'clock in the afternoon, from seven o'clock to about eleven o'clock I would have rehearsals. From eleven o'clock until about three I would do homework and work at the art studio. That's Monday through Friday. Saturday and Sunday I worked at a local chain restaurant all day long. This is how you go crazy because it leaves you no time for relationships. Yeah, I just—I just buried myself in schoolwork because I knew that I wanted to do it and I wanted to get out of there and then I burnt out like that. I just couldn't do it anymore, I couldn't do it anymore. End of my sophomore year I started to kind of like rebuild myself and be like, Okay I have to quit something at some point soon. And I think I'm still trying to figure out the balance between, This is what I can do for fun and this is what I can do to help my school stuff, and this is how I can still be active in the gay and lesbian community and yeah. Yeah. It's been a crazy time at Emporia State. (laugh)

ALBIN: Okay, I'm just going to change the tape. So glad Maggie came down to join us.

JOHNSON: Is that Maggie? This is so cute. It's like Ander's kitty.

ALBIN: I interviewed a guy—one guy one night (laugh) Maggie was biting him during the interview.

JOHNSON: Are you serious?

ALBIN: I was like, Maggie stop biting, stop biting. It was terrible. All righty so we're back. So you ended up having to give up some things so that you could get through your work?

JOHNSON: Yeah. The director of theatre—we always have these interviews at the end of the year for theatre to make sure that you're doing all right in grades and that you performed okay and whatever aspect of the show you're taking part in and all that stuff. And basically it's you and all the faculty and staff in the theatre department and they're all talking to you about how you did that year. And the director of theatre looks at me

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and goes, Stop doing so much. Take time for a relationship. Sleep. I was like, Oh wow. Those are things I kind of miss and I haven't heard of these for a while. But it's hard. I mean it's kind of—like for a relationship it's just really tough to go out and meet somebody, especially in Emporia because you go to bars. And while Emporia is fairly levelheaded about, Gay people are okay, it's whatever, there's still a kind of, Well if a gay guy hits on me I'm done. It's on. Or it's just—there's a very kind of a tense atmosphere sometimes and you can't quite—you can't quite call someone out for being mean to you or for being—I mean even somebody that's attracted to you or whatever, you can't go out and have a good time all the time because of the people or the surroundings that you're in. Because, yeah, anytime you have a bunch of college students drinking together it's going to—(laugh)

ALBIN: So are there any like queer-friendly locations at Emporia?

JOHNSON: Yes, but they kind of change. You kind of get to know the bartenders or the people who own the restaurant or whatever you're going out to. And you kind of figure out what nights they're working or when they'll be on next or whatever and then you go at those points. And if you don't you just kind of chill out at your house or you do whatever with the group of people that you know you can hang out with, yeah.

ALBIN: So do you find that living in Kansas as a gay man to be difficult?

JOHNSON: I do. I find it to be difficult in some ways but I find it to be kind of a privilege in other ways. I think that growing up as a gay man in Kansas I've seen kind of the worst of homophobia and the best of what my allies could be. I think that if you live growing up on like the east coast or the west coast in some big city I think sometimes it's really easy to be gay. I think that sometimes it's hard for people who are gay and who grow up in a big city [to] have any kind of concept of what it's like to live in a smaller rural area, I think it's really easy for them to just kind of forget that there are people who struggle a lot more than they do.⁴ Yeah, I think if you can make it out as a queer kid from the Midwest you're going to be okay.

⁴ Edited by narrator during the review process.

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ALBIN: Had you thought at all when you finished high school about going to the east coast or the west coast?

JOHNSON: I hadn't, but man money is funny. (laugh) I still want to go to the east coast or the west coast. I want to go out and see what that's like. But at that time when I graduated from high school my mother was a single parent and she still had another kid in high school. And I had a job working at a pizza place and it just wasn't really in the cards at that moment. I figured, Well I'll just create my own little east coast wherever I go or whatever. But yeah and I still would, I'd love to move out to a city just because I love being in large groups of people. I love—I'm a people watcher. I talk a lot and I'm a sarcastic bitch sometimes but man I love just sitting in airports and watching people. And I love watching people kind of collide into each other and see how they interact with each other. And that's—I mean, I want to be in the city, I want to be around culture, I want to be around the foods that I don't get living in Emporia, just everything. I want to have more options and all that. But I think that at some point from—after living in the city I would probably move back to a small town again.

ALBIN: And why do you think that is?

JOHNSON: Just because I think that it's a relaxing and overall comfortable place to live, because you always know that someone is there and someone that—someone has got your back in this small (unintelligible) community. No matter how many problems you have with somebody or how many things people say about you or whatever, you're still able to just kind of chill in this small town.

ALBIN: So do you think that this is possibly what you'll do once you graduate?

JOHNSON: Possibly. The possibilities are endless, though. Yeah, I really—once I graduate I want to go and do—I mean, I want to do *Cabaret* somewhere. I want to be able to paint. I want to audition for plays and TV shows and whatever. But I want to—I mean, I just want to get out there and see what I can do. I want to be the gay comedian from small town Kansas. (laugh) I don't—I just—yeah. I want to kind of take what I've gotten from living in my small town community and being queer and take it to other people. Because I still think there are people who—I think there are people who don't

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realize that there are people who are still living in the closet and living in fear and I want people to realize that. Because you kind of need to know that's how things are going to change eventually.

ALBIN: So have you noticed since you've spent a good part of your life in Kansas—have you noticed the politics change or anything happen with GLBTIQ issues in Kansas?

JOHNSON: In Kansas? Well I mean I think there are areas of Kansas that do. I think that Lawrence has always been a progressive community and Douglas County in general has been kind of a progressive little hamlet. But I think there's always—it's kind of a two-steps-forward, one-step-back kind of thing. I haven't noticed any major political actions that have greatly benefited. There was—Oh Lord, now I can't even remember. There was something protecting governmental workers and their partners.

ALBIN: This is the Sebilus?

JOHNSON: Right, the Sebilus, yeah. And that was the last big one that I could really probably name. But other than that I think that with the things that the Kansas Equality Coalition, I think that along the way coming up we'll probably definitely have a lot more political progression. I know that they were trying to find all of the school handbooks and make sure that sexual orientation was listed under the terms for school bullying. And I think that once that starts going I think that'll be a very huge step towards better living situations for gays and lesbians and bisexuals and transgender.

ALBIN: So I can't think of anything else that I want to ask. But I may follow up later on with another interview. But is there anything that you want to talk about that I didn't ask about?

JOHNSON: I don't know. Not especially.

ALBIN: Okay.

JOHNSON: No. That's it.

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ALBIN: All right, well thank you.

JOHNSON: Thank you.

ALBIN: Thank you so much.

[end]

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