

Wake Forest University LGBTQ Oral History Archive

Transcript (with emphasises added) of February 21, 2012 interview with: Susan Parker
by: Lindey Campagne

CAMPAGNE: Today is February 21, 2012. I'm Lindey Campagne at Wake Forest University conducting this interview as part of Dr. Angela Mazaris' Queer Public Histories course. So, first, can you state your name?

PARKER: Susan Parker

CAMPAGNE: Can you tell me your birthday?

PARKER: 11/8/58

CAMPAGNE: Can you tell me where you're from and where you live now?

PARKER: I am from a small town in the Western part of North Carolina called Maiden. And currently live in Winston-Salem.

CAMPAGNE: Okay, can you tell me your occupation?

PARKER: I am currently the pastor for Pastoral Ministry at Wake Forest Baptist Church.

CAMPAGNE: Can you describe your sexual orientation?

PARKER: I consider myself lesbian.

CAMPAGNE: And what pronouns do you use to refer to yourself?

PARKER: I--female pronouns.

CAMPAGNE: Can you tell me your racial and religious identities?

PARKER: I am Caucasian, and, um, I am, have, born into a Southern Baptist household and currently just a Baptist who happens to be in the South.

CAMPAGNE: Okay. Can you describe your family life both when you were growing up and your current family situation?

PARKER: Sure. I again was born into a farming family in the western part of the state and very involved in church life. So I was in church at least three or four times every week, and that was really all I knew for, until I reached my mid-teens, and it was like a second home to me, so, it was a very very important part of my life. And growing up in a small town, growing up on a farm, my world view was pretty narrow, so that was how I understood the world--through the lens of what my church taught me.

CAMPAGNE: So do you think that's why you went into the occupation you did, or was there some other driving force for that?

PARKER: No, in fact, for a long time I ran from working in the church because of bad experiences I had when I was a teenager, uh, with this church that I thought loved me and cared about me. [laughs] So I ran away from the church for about twenty years before finally coming back to Divinity School.

CAMPAGNE: What did you do during that time when you were away?

PARKER: I was--I was actually trained, my undergraduate training was in speech pathology and audiology, but I took a job right out of college--the summer I was taking a break before going back and doing the master's program, and I got involved with a market research company in Greensboro. And they were rapidly growing and suddenly needed employees and were paying very well. And I began looking at my student loans thinking, "hm, I can go back and collect more student debt, or I can actually have a job making some good money," so unfortunately, I took the money [laughs] and ran and worked at that for about ten years before doing a job as a photographer. I had, I had been doing it as a hobby for a while and decided to try it as a business and did a lot of wedding photography and again, for about a ten year stretch.

CAMPAGNE: Okay. So you said that you had negative experiences as a teen in the church. Was that because, at the time, you were out? Or was that before you came out?

PARKER: No. I knew--I knew that there was something different about me probably by the time I was nine or ten, but I didn't have language for it. And again, in a small-town setting, a very sheltered life, I really didn't know who I was in that regard until I reached puberty and realized my attractions were for other girls. Then, I couldn't put together the messages I was getting in my church where, you know, they would say these horrible things about, about homosexuals, and so I didn't feel like that was--that fit me, but yet, I also knew my attraction was to girls and that's-- and that's what I was. Um, but I never talked to anybody about that. I didn't feel safe having that conversation with anyone. And so I would do a lot of reading, and there were, again, very few materials at the time, that would have been roughly '73, '74 by the time I was doing a lot of my own reading about that. One day at church, I was very close to the

pastor, and he was younger and so we talked, you know, about a great many things, but we never talked--we had never talked about this. And one day, out of the blue, he just said, "Are you homosexual?" and I was really taken aback because no one had ever said that word out loud to me, and umm, and I lied and said "no," and he said, "oh, well, that's good because if you were, you couldn't be part of the church. God wouldn't love you." And, it felt like he took everything away from me. This was a place I felt very safe. It was a place that I felt like I would, you know, be able to, you know, continue to be a part of, and from that moment on, uh, I--I couldn't be part of that church. And I realized it was probably not safe for me to stay there. So I began trying to figure out ways of getting--getting away from that town. Fortunately, my parents knew I was very upset. They didn't have a--a sense of why I was upset, but they could tell my behavior was changing, my grades were dropping. So they knew something was wrong, and my mother talked with a friend in town and found out about Salem Academy here in Winston-Salem. So for the last two years of high school, I came here to Salem, and that was a world changing experience because suddenly I'm with--with girls whose fathers are the heads of, you know, international corporations. And they've lived all around the world, and they've seen the world. And I felt like my whole world just opened up, and I realized there were places that I could--that I could be safe, I just needed to be in bigger, in bigger cities and get away from that small hometown. So it was a life--probably a life saving experience, really.

CAMPAGNE: So at that point your parents just, instinctively, knew you needed to be somewhere else, but they weren't exactly sure why?

PARKER: Right. They--I did not come out to them until I was--uh--uh--gosh how long ago would it have been now? Maybe twenty-five years? So I was, I was already well into my adulthood when I finally told them, and um, it did not go over well with my mom, in particular. She still has some issues with it, she still doesn't understand, but we've been able to keep a dialogue going, and so, we've not lost that relationship, but it's been tenuous at times. Most of the rest of my family is great. I do have a brother who is very, very--very conservative and really doesn't, just doesn't want to talk to me at all anymore, but then his kids are close to my age because my brothers are so much older than I am. His kids are closer in age to me. They're all great, love me dearly, and uh, my other brother and all of his family are very supportive, so I felt, you know, I feel affirmed in the family even though there is a couple of outliers who are not so happy. [laughs]

CAMPAGNE: Right. So how would you describe your current family situation? I mean where--do you have a partner? Where do you get support?

PARKER: Yeah, I uh, I have been with Eleanor now for about five years, and she is a teacher, a special education teacher, but who--she was also in ministry for a, for a time herself and so we've got that, kind of, shared experience. She had, had been in a straight marriage at an earlier

point in her life and had a couple of kids. And so one of those kids, whose now--they're both in their twenties--one of them has now come back to live with us with her, with her two children. So we're being, we're being grandmothers now to a two and a four year old, which is a very different experience. [laughs] But it's fun! We're having a good time. [laughs]

CAMPAGNE: So, how do you think the Winston-Salem climate is for your lifestyle?

PARKER: I've never felt unsafe here. I certainly don't feel affirmed, but have never felt unsafe. Yeah, I--having lived in both Winston-Salem and Greensboro for a time, Greensboro does seem to be a much more open and accepting community all the way around than Winston-Salem. Winston-Salem is still very, very provincial in many ways. So it, it's frustrating to be so close, geographically, to a city that's much more open and to feel like Winston-Salem is kind of stuck in many ways. And I think that also is part of what makes it so that Wake Forest University continues to be stuck in many ways too just because of its location here.

CAMPAGNE: What do you think is the main reason people are, are stuck in a particular mindset? Do you think it's a generational thing, or a religious thing?

PARKER: I think it's, uh, I think it's kind of in the city's DNA. I think because of the history of the, you know, Winston-Salem was a town that was run by a handful of very prominent businessmen, and so, you know, a lot of those patterns continue to repeat themselves, and you have very conservative corporate leadership that doesn't want to--that doesn't want to kind of change and become more of a 21st Century sort of place. Another great snapshot is looking at the school boards. Our school board is very, heavily biased religiously against LGBTQ folks. And there again, when you look at what's going on in Greensboro their school board--they have, they have folks who belong to GLSEN [Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network], who are members of GLSEN, who are members of the school board so they couldn't be any more different. And it just, it just feels like we've probably got another fifteen or twenty years, here in Winston-Salem, before we can shake loose some of that old--that old thinking.

CAMPAGNE: Have you ever considered moving away from this area to another place?

PARKER: [laughs] Oh, bunches of times. [laughs] Yeah, bunches of times. And yet, it's just that stubborn streak in me, I feel I've invested so much time and energy in this community that, doggone it, I wanna stay here until I see things getting better 'cause I'm really, you know, really irritated that it's taking so long to--to make changes here. But by golly, when they come, I'm gonna be here to celebrate them. [laughs]

CAMPAGNE: So, how would you describe, the Baptist Church community here, and how much do they know about your lifestyle and how public are you with it?

PARKER: Well, obviously, our congregation has been very, um, has been very out for--for a while now. We started having conversations about sexuality in--in the nineties. While we weren't the first congregation in North Carolina to deal with this very much head-on, we were certainly among the early congregations who did. And so, um, it's um, it's been great to be a part of this church because they have been so supportive, they have been so out in the larger community. So, um, you know, personally, that's given me the opportunity to be very out as well, and there just is no place in my life where I'm not, I'm not out. And that's very nice, that's very nice.

CAMPAGNE: Do you think, well, when you came here, which was when?

PARKER: Um, I actually started attending church here in 1995. That was before I went to Divinity School.

CAMPAGNE: Okay, so then how long have you been practicing as a pastor here?

PARKER: Um, I was in the first class of the Divinity School at Wake Forest, and that class graduated in 2002. So I came on staff as a pastor here in 2003.

CAMPAGNE: So do you think that because of your identification, then, that is sort of had to be brought up? Or do you think it was still in the works, being worked on, before that?

PARKER: Well, there had been--there had been other folks who had come before. Um, there was a--a gentleman who had joined the church in the eighties and had said, "If I'm gonna come to church here, I'm gonna be open about my orientation," and um, and he was encouraged to join and then he had become very active in the congregation. So there had always been conversation about that, and I don't think the congregation was ever really--I don't think they every really had a problem with, with LGBT members. Uh, the rub came when there were questions about, could, you know, could same-sex couples have, have wedding ceremonies here, could they serve as pastors, could they be deacons? That's when, that's when it got a little bit more difficult for folks to figure out how to navigate that. And so, we went through a pretty--it was a pretty big process between--beginning like in 1997/98 all the way through 2000 before we really got everything settled. Um, and even then there, you know, there were some folks who had some problems with it, and we lost some members because of it, but um, you know, right now, I mean, we're obviously one of the more open congregations in town. And, um, so--so we've lived into that identity well, I think.

CAMPAGNE: So, when did you get to a point where you said, "I can navigate my religious life with being, as part of the LGBTQ community?" I mean, because there was a point where you didn't want to have affiliations with the church, but how did you come to that point?

PARKER: Um, I had, I had felt as a child, um, that I should be in ministry. That was a call I felt very strongly when I was about twelve. And, um, so that would come back to me occasionally in my adulthood, and I would think about that, and I would, I would realize that I was missing, you know, not being part of a faith community. And so, at a point, um, that coincided with my dad becoming very ill, I think I just reached a point of--of saying, you know, life's too short, and I need to figure this stuff out and do something about it. So I began reading a lot, and uh, there were some wonderful books that were being put together then, some of the early books on sexuality and religion, and, um, I was just devouring them, and reached a point of saying "Okay, I'm convinced that they ain't nothin' in scripture that says there's anything wrong with me." And once I became convinced of that, that's when I--I really felt like I could start stepping out and, once again, finding a faith community and becoming very involved. And actually found this church [WFBC] because there was a group of--of religious folk who were meeting here in Winston-Salem, and I, uh, went and attend one of the group meetings and found that there were four or five members of this church who were part of that group. They invited me to come and worship, and I--and I never left. [laughs]

CAMPAGNE: So, do you have a group of ministers that you identify with that is also dealing with the same thing as you, as part of the LGBTQ community, or do you feel, kind of, isolated in this position?

PARKER: No, no, no. Not at all. There's two--there's two, kind of, groups that intersect in many ways. Um, there's a group of open and affirming congregations that forms a group called Interfaith Voice. And, um, the clergy from those congregations are all friends of mine, so um, I--I get to interact with them, not only as part of that group, but they also happen to be member organizations of Change. So I get to see them at the clergy caucus at Change, as well. So, yeah, there's a--there's a very strong, uh, tight-knit clergy group here that we have, and that's really good. There's a lot of folks, you know, I could pick up the phone and call, and they're right there, so.

CAMPAGNE: So, you discussed a little bit about the same-sex marriage issues. Can you explain what that situation involved, and the time period over which it--it took place?

PARKER: Um, my--my then partner and I had been through a series of, um, uh, strains in our relationship, and we felt like we had found another good place and that we were gonna--we were gonna be okay and actually make it. Um, so we had--we had said to the church, and we had asked the church in '98 to consider letting us have a ceremony, and it took a long time (and anyone knows anything about Baptist polity, knows that Baptists will talk something to death). And so, we had committees, and we had study groups, and we had, you know, lots of, uh, lots of things that were taking place, but we also have a unique location, here on the campus, in that the

church has always been associated with Wake Forest University, and yet we--we don't, we don't pay for our space. We've just been, kind of, grandfathered into the university. So, there was also concern in the congregation about what the university would say if we were to start doing these services. Would they have a problem with that? And so that was always in the background too even while the church was discussing it, and it was a--it was a pretty convoluted situation, but the church finally voted in November of '99 to allow the services to be held. And yet, when we [Parker and her partner] then went to Chaplain Chrisman to try and schedule the Chapel for the service, he felt like he needed to have a ruling from the university about whether he could do that or not. So he went to President Hearn to ask for a ruling. Well, then that got the trustees involved, and before we knew it, the trustees had decided to weigh in with a statement that, um, (it--it would be worth your time to go to the archives of *The Old Gold and Black* and just pull it out) it was a--it was a statement written by a team of lawyers. And so it said a lot, but no one was quite sure what it said. Um, and many people interpreted it as (and the media as well, because the *Winston-Salem Journal* was also writing about this frequently), um, that, most people felt like it was saying "you cannot use the Chapel for same-sex ceremonies." And uh, so we went through a holding period where no one was quite sure what to do, and then, other entities started getting involved--the Law School, a group of Law School professors, wrote a letter, you know, castigating the university for going against its own non-discrimination policy that had been in place since 1995. And, uh, other, you know, the University Senate got involved, um, there were lots of--there was lots of student angst around this. The GSSA and some other student groups got together and did a petition drive, and the students did one of the most beautiful things I've ever experienced--in that, shortly after the trustees decision came down, the students had done this petition drive, and then said, if you support the church, show up on Sunday morning with flowers. And the steps of Wait Chapel were filled with flowers that Sunday morning, and people were coming from everywhere to put flowers out. It was a--it was amazing. And we then incorporated that into the worship service and had students coming to bring flowers down to the alter during the worship service. People were cryin'. It was, I mean, it was an amazing outpouring of support. And so, after all of these--there were several weeks there where all this stuff was percolating, and, you know, obviously, people felt like the trustees had said "no." And then, suddenly, President Hearn does a State of the University Address where he said everybody misunderstood the statement, and the statement never said we couldn't do it, just that they would recommend against it, you know, was kind of the way he worded it. Everyone felt that it was just a slick way to get away from a disaster, PR-wise, that had been caused by the earlier letter, and so, at that point, the Chaplain felt like he could schedule the service and so in September of 2000, we had a service. So, um, but it was a--it was an ugly process getting there. [laughs]

CAMPAGNE: At that point--

PARKER: Lots of twists and turns.

CAMPAGNE: were all Baptist churches allowing those ceremonies?

PARKER: Um, Pullen Memorial in, uh, Raleigh [North Carolina] was. Um, and I think at that point, Pullen was the only other Baptist church in the Southeast. Yeah, I think we were the only two churches in the Southeast, at that point, that were allowing services. Um, and Pullen had actually gone through their process about six or seven years before we did. So they were really on the early--the early lines of this. And of course, we got hate mail from lots of places. Um, lots of--the Baptist associations kicked the church out. We had, uh, Fred Phelps [Pastor at Westboro Baptist Church] and his gang from the Midwest came and protested at the university. It was a zoo, it was just a zoo. [laughs] But somehow we made it. [laughs]

CAMPAGNE: So at this point, are those services able to take place without a lot of backlash, or is there still--?

PARKER: There's no--yeah, there's nothing to stop it now. There haven't been many, truthfully, because I think, uh, um, I think for a lot of folks, they want it to be paired with the legal recognition of the state and federal entities, but yeah, there's nothing--there's nothing to preclude it for the church. Now, I'm still not sure if the university has ever addressed what would happen if alums wanted to come back and have a service in Wait Chapel, which many straight alums do. Um, I don't know if there's ever been a couple that's actually--that's actually asked that yet. So, I'm not sure that hurdle's been crossed for alums--or even for faculty, for that matter, that might want to use the Chapel. [pause] It'd be an interesting question. [laughs]

CAMPAGNE: That's true. [laughs] I don't know who to go to ask that, but-- [laughs]

PARKER: Well, the Chaplain's Office still schedules the space, so I imagine Chaplain Auman could tell you whether, whether there's been a--a situation that's come up yet.

CAMPAGNE: So what has been *your* greatest challenge since you became a minister dealing with the LGBTQ life here at Wake, and the congregation, and just the community, in general?

PARKER: Oh, um, just a recognition that Wake Forest is a--that the student body is a lot more conservative than most people would imagine. Most people see college campuses as being, kind of, liberal bastions. Certainly, a lot of the faculty would probably label themselves as liberal, but the student body is just, just not that--just not that open and affirming. Um, and that's--that's troubling to see. And I know, just from conversations with students, who will occasionally either get involved with the church, or will just come to talk, that they don't feel particularly safe in many situations. And, um, and that's troubling. It's just, again, it feels like the university community in some ways is as stuck as Winston-Salem is in moving forward and being more of

a 21st Century community. [laughs]

CAMPAGNE: One thing we've talked about a little bit in class before is the need--and especially in the South, we've been looking at--the closeness of sexual identity with religion and needing to bridge those two. Why do you think there is such a pull to bridge the two?

PARKER: Oh, I think, particularly in the South, so many people were raised in religious households. And it's, um, unfortunately, conservative religious folk have, kind of, taken this on as--as though they have all the answers around what religion allows when it comes to sexuality and I--I [pause] I despair sometimes because I feel like--I feel like many progressive religious folk have *tried* to re-frame that argument, but we just can't seem to get there. And so, when it comes to things, uh, debates, you know, situations with the news media, when they're talking with people--it always seems like the conservative religious folk get a bigger voice in the discussion, and um, that's very frustrating to me because there is nothing, there is nothing, I understand about my--what I consider to be my holy scripture, that denigrates LGBTQ people. And so, to feel like that argument continues to be pulled away from me is just, maddening. And again, particularly here in the South where people treat you like a pariah if you, um, if you make statements supportive of LGBTQ people as a clergy person. And I've not--I've probably not taken as big a brunt of that criticism as some of my straight clergy friends have. I mean, in that regard, there is a little bit of protection, I think, we get because we are located here on the campus. I think there's some crazies who don't send things to us because they--because they feel like maybe the university would do something to them. But folks who are in, you know, free-standing churches elsewhere in the city get lots of crazy phone calls and have, actually, in some cases, resorted to having police protection for some events because they just don't feel safe. It's maddening. It's maddening. And I hope, I hope, I hope, that we're reaching a day--maybe the work that's being done around Amendment One will be, somehow, helpful in that because I've noted a lot of clergy around the state are now coming out against Amendment One, and I think that can only help the debate as we go forward.

CAMPAGNE: What effect does Amendment One have on decreeing something as a marriage? I mean, Amendment One isn't allowing marriage between a same-sex couple, but does it have any effect on the marriage in a religious sense?

PARKER: No, and that's another thing that we should--we should be smarter about, I think, as progressive religious folk. I don't sign marriage licenses for opposite-sex couples because I don't want to be--I don't want to be doing that job for the state. I think there should be a very bright line between the two things. I do religious ceremonies. The state should have a system set up so that they can, uh, recognize the relationships that have been formed. I don't care what they call it, marriage, civil unions, whatever they want to call it, but they should treat everybody equally. So, if two people have said we want to commit to each other and take care of each

other, and maybe raise kids together, the state and federal government should recognize that because they shouldn't be in the religion business. And what they're allowing now, is they're allowing religions to tell them [couples] who can be married, and that's not right. I mean, that flies in the face of separation of church and state. So that's why I don't sign marriage licenses. I think it's wrong for clergy to be involved in any way, shape, or form with what the state's doing. I do religious things, and I would work with any *couple*, any *where* to do a religious ceremony, just don't involve me in what the state's doing. And if we could ever get that divide bigger and more, you know, more well understood, then maybe some of this, uh, some of this heat around the religious arguments would start to fade away a little bit. In some ways it's kind of like the contraception arguments that are going on right now. It's whose religious trumps whose religions, you know, why should the state be involved in any of that? If you're taking federal money, you should abide by federal rules. It's as simple as that, and if you're a religious groups that believes a certain way, then don't get involved with the government. It's that easy. [laughs] Then you can have your own rules. [laughs] So don't mix those two things, and we've got them so mixed up that it's hard for people to tease them apart and figure out what makes sense.

CAMPAGNE: So, when you, when or if, you conduct a ceremony between a same-sex couple, it's going to be the same one you would conduct with a straight couple?

PARKER: Absolutely, absolutely. Work with the couples in exactly the same way, we have exactly the same process, the same questions, the same, you know, working together to come up with a service that's meaningful for them, and there is no difference between them. And in my view, God honors them all. [laughs]

CAMPAGNE: [laughs] Just not the state's view.

PARKER: [laughs] Yes, unfortunately. [laughs]

CAMPAGNE: Right. [laughs] So, have you been married in one of these ceremonies like this to a past partner, current partner?

PARKER: Yeah, that was the ceremony Wendy and I had in September of 2000. Unfortunately, it was a few years after that that we realized we really , we really couldn't make this work. We had, at that point, we had been together for almost twenty-five years, and it just wasn't working for us. So it was an amicable separation, and, uh, we continue to be in touch with each other. But, it just, uh, it just didn't work anymore, so, that happens just the same as it happens to opposite-sex couples. [laughs]

CAMPAGNE: How many relationships have you had since you realized that you identified as lesbian?

PARKER: Um, the um, the twenty-five year relationship with Wendy and this five-year relationship with Eleanor, yeah.

CAMPAGNE: So, what were, sort of, your defining moments even as a teen or early adult where you said, “this is the lifestyle I want to live”?

PARKER: Uh, probably, probably the first place, like I said, when I came to the Academy, it was really helpful for me to understand that the world was a much bigger place than I thought it was. And while the Academy was certainly not open and affirming, and still isn't (based on what students today are telling me), um, it at least gave me a view point of recognizing, okay, there are places in the world where I can be who I want to be and who I am. And in college, then, I got to actually experiencing that more and realizing that there were more--lots more--people like me. In fact, UNC [University North Carolina] Greensboro probably had one of the earlier gay-straight alliances, and while it was still a little scary (there were a lot of closeted students who didn't want to be identified as coming to the group), but it was at least a place where we could be--um, we could be together. We could talk about things going on on campus, we could give each other support, um, I think we probably had forty students show up for our first--first meeting, even though the notices had gone out, kind of, in a clandestine sort of fashion, that was a lot of students to have show up for something like that. So that was a good, that was a good first step. I kind of went back, to--into the closet when I graduated though because I knew--the market research company I was working for--I knew their thoughts about that, and I knew that they might well fire me if I came out. So I stayed in the closet, pretty much, during that period of time--was out to some folks, but at work, not very many people. It was only in my private life that I--that I was able to be more open, um, but then, that changed again when I took the photography job. I'm my own boss, so I don't have to worry about it anymore! [laughs] And then I did *not* go back in the closet to go to Divinity School either. That was one of the first things I did, was sit down with the Dean, and just, just tell him, flat out, “if you accept me, I'm not gonna be a closet case. I'm gonna talk about these issues.” So for the first year, I was the only, openly LGBT student at the Divinity School.

CAMPAGNE: So how did you experience, in terms of social climate around this, at the Academy compare or differ to the one at the Divinity School?

PARKER: Um, at the Academy, there was--there was no discussion about it at all. It was the thing everybody was afraid of--a girl's school where there would be a bunch of lesbians. I mean, that was just [gasp]--no one wanted to talk about it. And its, you know, its affiliation with the Moravian church and, you know, I think there were a number of church leaders who wanted to make sure that was just not a subject that was--that was discussed. And by the time I got to the Divinity School here, then, there were professors who didn't really know how to talk about

LGBTQ issues, early on, but they were open enough that when situations would come up in class, I could bring up, you know, I could bring up the subject and we could actually talk about it together. And there was a little push back from a couple of students, but for the most part, the administration said, “Wake Forest University has a nondiscrimination policy so everyone is accepted here at the Divinity School.”

CAMPAGNE: Do you think Wake, from when you first started to become affiliated with Wake until now, I mean, what sorts of improvements or advances do you think its made in making a healthy environment?

PARKER: I mean, I was really--I’m really glad to see some of the policy changes, like allowing for domestic partner benefits and that sort of thing, but I guess what continues to trouble me is what I hear from students that, you know, it’s kind of like the administration has lined up things to try and make the climate better, but it feels like the student body (as we talked yesterday), it feels like the student body is not at a place where they can even have good, healthy discussions about it. A lot of people just kind of shut down and don’t wanna talk about it and don’t wanna deal with it.

CAMPAGNE: What do you try to recommend to those students, in terms of, making a safe place for themselves? I mean, what would you say to them?

PARKER: Well, I think it’s certainly great that, um, there’s an active GSSA [Gay-Straight Student Alliance]. I have heard some complaints that the GSSA is so straight-heavy that LGBTQ folks feel a little bit, ah, is this a place for me? And, and again, I don’t know how to nurture that anymore. One of the things we did as a church though was to say, you know, there’s no campus entity, there’s no religious entity, that is open and affirming so we offer a space now on Sunday nights at eight o’clock where we invite LGBTQ folks to come, students in particular, but, you know, any young person is able to come. We have some folks in their early twenties who are coming, and it’s a LGBTQ spirituality group every Sunday night at eight. And anyone is welcome to come. We would love to have folks from GSSA coming regularly, um, and that would be a place, at least for students who have a religious identity, to feel affirmed and to feel safe. We hope that by offering here at Wingate it might not be as scary for some students as it would be going to the [LGBTQ] Center, here on campus, where (depending on who sees you going in) you might feel like you’re being outed. But it’s difficult, we--Angela [Yarber] and I are just trying to plug ourselves in everywhere we can. So we’re trying to say yes to every request that comes from students around LGBTQ issues and just trying to plug in wherever we can and offer whatever we think we can to help the situation, but it’s a tough one. It’s a tough nut.

CAMPAGNE: Do you think other churches, like yours, are doing those things, or do you think

most of them are still in a more conservative place?

PARKER: In Winston-Salem, we have about fourteen congregations that are part of Interfaith Voice. So for a city our size, that's a lot of churches, and the Temple, and that's a lot of religious folk that are saying "yes." Now, whether they're able to really offer things to the students, I'm not sure that they're--I don't think they feel connected enough to Wake Forest to feel that they can actually offer something directly to Wake students. Although, I'm sure all of them would welcome Wake students to be part of the congregations, so uh, it just depends how comfortable students feel about that attachment.

CAMPAGNE: Okay, how has being at Wake influenced, or has it influenced, your own identity as part of the LGBTQ community? Do you think it's affirmed it or created more challenges?

PARKER: I think for the most part, it's been--it's been more affirming than not. Uh, yeah, we struggled during the Hearn [President of Wake Forest from 1983 to 2005] administration, but, uh, as soon as that episode was over, it felt like the administration was working really hard to live into the non-discrimination policy. And so, more fully into "Pro-Humanitate." But again, I guess I just continue to be concerned at what's--what's really happening at the level of students, and is there a way we can be more supportive of students? And I'm open to suggestions, so if you know of people who are talking about this and asking questions, you know, I'd love nothing better than to facilitate a conversation around that.

CAMPAGNE: Before you became part of the Wake Forest Baptist Church, even just as a member of the congregation, I mean, what was your impression of Wake Forest? I mean, growing up in a nearby area, what did you hear about it?

PARKER: That it was the--it was the Baptist college. You know, for most of my childhood, that's all I ever understood was that Baptists went to Wake Forest. Then, getting here and realizing how the student body was changing was really eye-opening because if you go back and look at the church's history from the time the university opened in--or the college opened in '56 here, um, we would have hundreds of students join on that first Sunday of each new year. And, um, now, when you look at the makeup of the student body, I think it's some ridiculously low number like maybe 12% of the student body identifies as Baptist. And I'm sure that most of that--that small percentage would be much more theologically conservative than we are, and would probably have a hard time fitting in here. So it's, uh, you know, the college now university has changed so dramatically over the course of that fifty plus years that, yeah, it's hard to imagine that it used to be mostly Baptist. Very hard! [laughs] And in some ways, I think it may have been--I think the student body may have been more progressive *then* than it is *now*. They were, you know, those students were dealing with some really, you know, hard issues around--at one point around evolution, at one point around, uh, allowing African American

students to be part of the campus. You know, there were some hard things being dealt with, and students were right in the thick of it. And I'm not sure they would be now. I think it's just a different climate. Some would, certainly, but would there be a groundswell of students who would get behind a progressive change? I'm just not sure that they could.

CAMPAGNE: Do you think it's because they [the students] don't think it's necessary, or that they're not willing to put the energy into it?

PARKER: [sighs] I think it's a combination of things. I think part of it is more of a focus on "get me graduated and get me a--a high-paying job," and maybe more conservative religious backgrounds among many of the students. Um, and, um a lot of things competing for people's time and energy, you know, for a lot of college students it can be just "all about me" and you don't take time to think about what's going on around you. Again, not *all* college students, but I can certainly see that being the cause for some.

CAMPAGNE: So, thinking about just the social climate overall, from when you were growing up until now, surrounding homosexuality, how do you think it's changed? I mean, even just in your hometown and--?

PARKER: Oh, oh yeah, it's changed much more than I ever thought it would. I never, ever thought in my lifetime I would see a potential for same-sex marriage. It never occurred to me that it would happen, so I've been very heartened that we now have seven or eight states--well, it depends on how you count New Jersey 'cause that's not gonna stand, but it's so encouraging to see that now, and to just think "wow, that's" [sighs] I just never thought it would happen. And that depending on what the next administration is, you know, if the Obama administration makes it another four years, that we could actually see *maybe* something change on the federal level. Never thought that would happen! And then on the other hand I get so disgusted that we're having to spend all this time and energy working with this stupid Amendment One here in North Carolina. What is that about? I mean, it's just awful to think that we're wasting out time doing that, um, but it's the way it is. I wish it were otherwise, but overall, I've really been amazed at the--at the changes that have occurred in my fifty-three years on the planet. [laughs]

CAMPAGNE: What were some of the first depictions you had as seeing someone with a lesbian identity?

PARKER: Oh, it was--it was horribly stereotypical. I mean, all lesbians wore flannel and, you know, terrible shoes and played softball. And all gay men were just, you know, fabulously quaffed, and gem-hard bodies, and thought about nothing but decorating houses. I mean, it was horrendous--the stereotypes. That, coupled with, um, in literature and in movies, through the early part of my life, you know, the LGBT character always either died or something dreadfully

awful happened to them in the course of the book or the movie. So you're like "well, [laughs] please, can it not be something positive that I can read?" And it wasn't until--there used to be a bookstore in Greensboro called "The White Rabbit," in fact, I think they still have a "White Rabbit" in Charlotte [North Carolina]. Um, and he was one of the first places that actually carried books *by* LGBTQ folks *for* LGBTQ folks, and you could actually read novels that were--that were, you know, positive and affirming, and it was like, "oh, this is great, I like this." But yeah, oh my God, you know, and Hollywood was just horrendous when it came to depictions. There was this awful, awful movie called "Cruisin'," and it was just awful, awful stereotypes. Yeah, that's another thing that, thankfully, has changed a lot. I mean, it made things much better, I think.

CAMPAGNE: I mean, who do you see now as, like, role models for LGBT life?

PARKER: Well, I mean, look at how popular Ellen DeGeneres is. Who would have thought, again, I would have never thought there would be a T.V. host like that that would be just, this--everybody just loves her. You know, so she's kind of become everybody's best friend, and how great is that? So that she can talk about Portia and about their marriage and their life together and, uh, folks are kind of okay with that. And, um, that's wonderful, that's life-changing for a lot of people--it really is.

CAMPAGNE: You mentioned, kind of, acting as a grandparent now. So how important is that identity, then, in raising grandkids? I mean, is it something that you don't discuss at all, is it something that you're open about?

PARKER: Oh yeah, we're, I mean, we're not, we're not hiding anything from the kids at all. At two and four, they don't really quite understand a lot of what they're experiencing right now, but, you know, we hold hands, we kiss, it's not--we don't become this sterile, you know, kind of couple when we're around them. And fortunately, their both very, very delightful, open kind of children. They've got big hearts and--and so I think they're gonna be really, really cool kids, and I think it's gonna be really fun to watch them move into a world that--where their grandmothers are gonna be treated a little better than they might have been otherwise. Yeah, that's pretty cool, pretty cool. Eleanor's grandma and I'm Shooshoo. [laughs] We don't know where Calvin came up with that name, but somehow that works for him and that's who I am. [laughs]

CAMPAGNE: [laughs] Hey, there you go! Um, do you see your relationship with your extended family (parents and brothers), I mean, do you see that changing?

PARKER: I think it's only gonna get better. Again, for the most part every body's very, you know very open and accepting, and we have a good relationship. Uh, so, yeah, I don't think that'll be a problem. My brother is gonna be my brother, and he's gonna do what he's gonna

do and--and be crazy about this stuff. But he also was crazy--his middle child, his daughter, married an African American man, and he couldn't accept that either, so he's just got his own issues. Um, and he's very unhappy on top of it, which is sad. I hate to think that someone who has been as successful in business as he's been could be that terribly unhappy with his life, but the rest of us are having a great time so he'll just have to get over himself. [laughs]

CAMPAGNE: What would you say to, I guess, anyone who is dealing with the situation of not having family support and dealing with their sexual identity?

PARKER: Mhm, yeah, I would just, you know, my encouragement would always be find *some* sort of support, *some* sort of community that you can build. Whether it's in a congregation, whether it's in a school group--somewhere that you can feel affirmed because, it's uh, it's a hard enough life anyway, but to constantly have people beating on you because of your sexuality, that's just crazy-making. It's very unhealthy, so the less isolation, the better. And it's hard sometimes for folks to feel empowered enough to go and create a family or create a community that's supportive. So, um, but as the world changes and as more congregations are open and affirming, that's only gonna help too, I think, uh, give kids an opportunity to grow up in a more--in a more affirming environment and give them the potence they need to continue to find that as they go through their lives.

CAMPAGNE: In thinking about the "coming out" process, to your family or something, do you think it's helpful to come out at a later age, or as soon as you become aware of it?

PARKER: I think it's very specific to--to your particular family situation. I've dealt with some teenagers who, if they came out to their family, might actually lose their homes. Um, and so if it's a question of you having a roof over your head, or not, then, you know, erring on the side of "let's not talk about it right now until I'm in a situation when I can take better care of myself." But I'm also encouraged to know that, you know, there are children who are actually coming out in elementary school now, and I think it's a lot harder to look at an eight or nine year-old and say, "we're gonna kick you out" than it is when you're dealing with a sixteen or seventeen year-old, or someone in their early twenties. So, um, in that regard--that's a very positive sign because now schools are having to figure out a way to deal with that and, uh, parents are much more likely to--to do the right thing in a circumstance like that. So, yeah, that's another thing that's changed dramatically. I don't know--I don't know that I--when I was growing up, I don't know that I ever would have imagined anyone being able to come out that early, but now it's becoming, just, almost routine, uh, in elementary schools. Wow. [laughs]

CAMPAGNE: So is that why you feel like you waited until later--?

PARKER: Oh, yeah, I was scared to death. I didn't know what kind of reaction I was gonna get.

And I had to be--well, I was already financially independent, but I had to be in a place where it was gonna be okay with me if they said “well, we don’t want to have anything to do with you anymore,” and it took a while to get there because we do want our parents to love us, and we do like making our parents happy, uh, for the most part. I just didn’t want to throw all that away, but once I got strong enough, I had to do it. I needed to do it!

CAMPAGNE: What indications had your parents given you that they would either be okay with it, or not okay with it?

PARKER: They didn’t really talk about it that much, but I knew just, because I knew what-what my preacher (at the church where I grew up), I knew what he thought about it, what he had said from the pulpit about it, and I knew that my mom, in particular, uh, treats scripture literally. So I knew she wasn’t gonna--she wasn’t gonna be able to move past that--that religious argument very easily. And she didn’t. She tried to be supportive at first, but then, uh, by the time I drove from her house in Maiden to my house in Winston-Salem, she had left, you know, four or five messages on my answering machine telling me, you know, that I was gonna go to hell, and did I really want to--did I really want to do that, and didn’t I want to go to heaven instead? And if I were gonna go to heaven, I needed to stop being like this, I mean, just all that craziness that-that you hear from conservative religious folk. And, uh, you know, I just, I just told her, I said, you know, I wanna try to keep a relationship going with you, but you cannot say things like that to me anymore, and if you continue to say those things, then I’m not gonna talk with you. So for a couple of months we really didn’t have any conversation, and then, she decided that she would rather keep her relationship than continue to say those things, so she stopped saying them and, and so--so we still have a relationship because of that. [laughs]

CAMPAGNE: What did she think about you, then, becoming a minister?

PARKER: Well, that’s a very, that’s a *very* ironic story because even before I came out to her, I had talked to her about the fact that I was feeling this pull back to ministry, and she told me a story about when she realized she was pregnant with me, that she had had a conversation with God and promised God that if this baby were a girl, that she would give me back to--back to God. And, you know, make sure that I was in the church and that sort of thing. And so, when she heard that I was even thinking about ministry, she told me this story for the very first time, and said “oh, wouldn’t it be wonderful, it’s all coming true, you’re gonna be in the ministry.” She had no idea what she was saying. [laughs] Because then, when I came out to her, she was very confused, and she could not figure out--she still doesn’t understand--it’s like she thinks I do ministry differently from every other minister, so I don’t know what she thinks I--I don’t know what she thinks my job really is, but she certainly doesn’t understand it to be the same job *her* pastor does. She just cannot wrap her mind around that. And so, [smiling] one of the other things I did along the way, to kind of shake her up, was, um, we have a group of our older

members who we call the “Leisure Club” and occasionally, the “Leisure Club”--we take trips. So it'd be a van-full of seventy eighty year-olds, in once case a ninety year-old, and so, we were--we were doing a trip close to where she [mother] lives, and I just took them by so that she could meet some of my congregation members. So here are all these little people in the van who look like her, who love me. [laughs] And for whom, I'm their pastor. And it was--it was--you could almost feel like, oh my God, her head's gonna explode. There is no way she can understand what's goin' on here, but I just felt like she needed to understand that there were other people her age that thought I was, you know, the best thing since sliced bread. [laughs]

CAMPAGNE: Has she been to one of your masses [services]?

PARKER: She came to, uh, my ordination service, and that's the only time she's been here, and she didn't participate that day, but she at least came. And I was glad she, at least, came for it.

CAMPAGNE: Was she, when you first came out to her, was she expecting God to take away your homosexuality?

PARKER: Right, she felt like it was something I could just stop doing. You just don't have to be that way. [laughs] And so I--I, for a long time, I sat with her and I said, “mother, think about, think about who I was as a child. Think back to the way I functioned as a child,” you know, it sounds stereotypical, but at the same time, there's some truth to every stereotype. And I was very much a tomboy, I hated dresses, I hated having to put on patent leather shoes to go to church on Sundays, I was much happier playing with--playing football with the boys than I was every playing with dresses, or dolls, or anything like that. I hated to be in the kitchen, I was much more comfortable being out with my dad on the farm, driving a tractor or something like that. I said, “mother, didn't--did you not ever think that I didn't act like other girls?” you know, I was not interested in any of those things that other girls were interested in, “well, I just, you know.” She doesn't have an answer so she just kind of stutters through it, and falls back to the Bible. That's her world, and that's the only way she can understand it.

CAMPAGNE: Do you think it's ironic that you're both in this religious, pious position, but on opposite sides of this spectrum?

PARKER: Exactly, you know, it is very funny. It is very funny. [laughs] She's actually--and it's also interesting too she's asked me to speak at her funeral, and that's gonna be really hard because it's gonna be at that same little church where I grew up, and they're not gonna be happy about that. But, you know, so again, it's that, why does she want to do that? Doesn't she realize it's gonna be hard for--for them, you know, it's just interesting to me how she-- I can't figure out how she begins to juggle all this in her mind.

CAMPAGNE: Does she express that, in your hometown, she receives, I don't know, negative comments about your sexuality?

PARKER: She got, um, comments from folks when all the publicity was swirling around the--the ceremony controversy because it--it got picked up in papers. I mean, it was picked up in, in the *L.A. Times*, it was picked up in the *New York Times*, uh, we had a friend at the time who was living in Australia who picked it up on a news feed in Australia. I mean, it was just bizarre that it was going around the world this way. And so, of course, it got picked up in the hometown newspaper, and that was really hard--that was really hard for her. Um, and I had called her to warn her about that, but there was just nothing like-- [pause]. For my mother, if your name appears in the newspaper, there's only one of two reasons it should appear. One, you committed a crime, in which case, you deserve to have your name splashed over the newspaper. Or the other is when you die, and otherwise your name shouldn't be in the newspaper. So that was really hard for it, but, um, other than that, I don't think most of the people talk. They just don't wanna talk about it. [laughs]

CAMPAGNE: So is it hard for you to go home?

PARKER: When I go, I typically just go and spend time with her. I'm not--I'm not seeing other people that I grew up with or anything like that so. Don't know if I'd recognize them even if I did now. [laughs] I just don't spend that much time there.

CAMPAGNE: Is there anything else that you feel like is significant in telling your story about growing up or your time at Wake Forest?

PARKER: There's nothing that occurs to me right now. Um, no. I can't think of anything else at the moment.

CAMPAGNE: Okay. I think that concludes the interview--[laughs]

PARKER: [laughs] Okay. Great.

CAMPAGNE: Pretty comprehensive.

PARKER: Well, thank you.

CAMPAGNE: Thank *you*.