

Queer Newark Oral History Project

Interviewee: William Courson

Interviewer: Kristyn Scorsone

Date: December 4, 2018

Location: Home of William Courson, Montclair, NJ

Kristyn Scorsone: That's good. Okay, today is December 4, 2018. My name is Kristyn Scorsone, and I'm interviewing William Courson for the Queer Newark Oral History project at his home in Montclair. Beth Williams is joining us as well. That's Bill's good friend. Just to start off, thank you for doing this—

William Courson: You're more than welcome. It's my pure pleasure to do it.

Kristyn Scorsone: - and to ask you when and where were you born?

William Courson: Well, I was born in Neptune, New Jersey. That's a community located at the Jersey shore in 1952, and grew up at the Jersey shore.

Kristyn Scorsone: Who raised you?

William Courson: My parents. My parents had me very, very late in life. They were actually elderly by then contemporary standards when I was born. My mom was born in 1910 and was 42 years old. My dad was born in 1898 and was 54 years old. When my dad was born the Sultan ruled in Constantinople. Victoria was on the British throne, and Cuba and the Philippines were part of the Spanish empire: quite amazing to me.

Kristyn Scorsone: What did they do for a living?

William Courson: My mom was a homemaker. My dad stayed in France after the Second World War, and studied cookery at there, and became an executive chef.

Kristyn Scorsone: Awesome. Did you have any siblings, too?

William Courson: I didn't. I had siblings, but they weren't human. They were four-footed. My parents raised Boxer dogs.

Kristyn Scorsone: Oh, that's cute. What were you like as a child?

William Courson: I would say my earliest childhood I was pretty convivial. I was pretty social. It was the usual 1950s childhood. Let's go out and play cowboy or cowgirl as the case may be. It was a standard 1950s suburban upbringing. Eisenhower was the president. The

country was asleep. There were no gay or lesbian people, but a great many people who were shy in the parlance of the time.

Kristyn Scorsone: Did you know of any gay people when you were a youth?

William Courson: When I was very young?

Kristyn Scorsone: Yeah.

William Courson: No, no. I ultimately learned that certain relatives and friends of the family were gay or lesbian, but at the time I was growing up, no, I had no idea.

Kristyn Scorsone: What is one of your earliest memories?

William Courson: I would say—my earliest memories?

Beth Williams: Lamb chop?

William Courson: Oh, yes. I was raised in restaurant and hotel kitchens, and as I got a little bit older, maybe 7 years old, my greatest joy in life was “helping” my dad in the kitchen. I’m making quotation marks around the word helping. Yes, one of my earliest memories I think was being on the beach in Belmar, New Jersey.

My dad was catering. He was a standard agent contact caterer for the Belmar Fishing Club. He would take a break now and then and go swimming with me, and carry me in his arms as a little boy in the deep, deep water. I remember that. What did you just say? You just mentioned something.

Beth Williams: Lamb chop?

William Courson: Oh, yes, my favorite—I grew up with fine food, and one of my favorite foods as a child was a lamb chop. I was not a vegetarian then. I’m talking about the lamp chop, was cut and it was actually a picture of me in my little diaper holding a lamp chop, which was referred to by my parents as a lamb pop.

I have a lot of early memories. That’s one of them. I remember my first day of kindergarten. Remember all my grammar school teachers. Remember the television programs I watched. I have a pretty intact memory.

Kristyn Scorsone: What were some of your favorite TV programs?

William Courson: Oh my goodness, certainly *The Three Stooges*, *Popeye*, let's see, *Wonderama*, *The Flintstones*, *The Jetsons*. That was pretty much all you had a choice of back then. I remember when I was seven years old I contracted measles. I not only contracted measles, I happened to be allergic to the measles microorganism. It's a virus.

Beth Williams: I think it's a virus.

William Courson: To the measles virus, and was lingering near death, running temperatures of 107, and it looked pretty much like I was a goner. My dad, God rest his soul, went out and got the host of my favorite children's television show, Captain Jack from *Popeye* to come to my hospital room, thinking that I would not be around very long. I had very doting parents.

Kristyn Scorsone: How did he do that?

William Courson: I don't know. It was probably magic, but I remember him walking into my room. I looked at him. It was like, oh my God, it's God. I was raised by very loving, very doting parents as you can imagine, only male child of a very elderly, by then standards, elderly parents. Yeah, I would say I was treated like a little prince. I was spoiled, I would say, not with material things, but with attention.

Kristyn Scorsone: That's really sweet. Did you go to the same schools? Did you stay in the same household the whole time—

William Courson: Oh, yeah, I went to Avon Public School until let's see, fourth grade. Then, I went to St. Peter's Grammar School until the eighth grade, a Catholic school. Then, went to—did I say St. Peter's? Then, went to St. Rose Catholic High School. The notion - grossly mistaken - was that one got a better education at a Catholic school. One doesn't. I had an absolutely horrendous education.

Kristyn Scorsone: Really?

William Courson: Yeah.

Kristyn Scorsone: What were your subjects that you—

William Courson: I particularly enjoyed English and what were called social studies or civics. I enjoyed history. Loved chemistry. Loved biology. Loathed mathematics.

Kristyn Scorsone: Were you raised very religious then?

William Courson: No. My dad was a Southern Baptist who converted to Roman Catholicism to please my mom's family who were Irish and extremely Catholic. It wasn't taken seriously. I mean my parents thought that Christian notions like vicarious atonement and the resurrection were absolute balderdash and I think it must've been around 10 or 11 years old when they told me as much

For them it wasn't being religious, it wasn't lending assent to a set of theological propositions. It was a cultural artifact. Let me put it this way, okay, my dad's relatives were all in Alabama. My mom's relatives who all came over from Ireland were in the Bronx in New York. They were always in the house, and Mom put on a good show for them. There were three religious pictures hanging on the wall. On the left, the Sacred Heart of Mary. I'm sorry, the Sacred Heart of Jesus. On the right, the Immaculate Heart of Mary, and then in the middle, five or six inches higher than the other two, Jack Kennedy. That was my religious upbringing. In my late teens I put as much distance as possible between myself and Roman Catholicism, happily walking away and not looking back.

Kristyn Scorsone: What are some challenges you faced in childhood?

William Courson: I was a very social child. I liked playing with my friends, but as I got older, I'm gonna say, 9, 10, 11, it would be a case of, "Billy, come on out, let's play baseball, or let's shoot baskets." I would have my nose buried in a book and I'd say, "No, why?" I turned into a very bookish little boy.

Kristyn Scorsone: Were you shy in school then, too?

William Courson: No, I was probably among the more sociable.

Kristyn Scorsone: Yeah, so you got along with people and everything?

William Courson: Yeah, yeah. I didn't have a bully—

Beth Williams: Billy—

Kristyn Scorsone: Yeah, yeah?

Beth Williams: Can you tell the story of your friend's dad who I think they—

William Courson: Yes. Yes, I'm sure you can edit out last names. I lived in Avon by the Sea. I had my little gang. One of my pals was Betty Ann.

Beth Williams: How old were you, Bill, at that time?

William Courson: Eight, seven, eight, I don't remember exactly how old I was, but I was in that continuum. Betty Ann was without question a dyke in training.

[Laughter]

William Courson: Okay, so naturally, I gravitated to her as an aspiring queer. We palled around. Now Betty Ann came from what I'm going to say was a disrupted family, a rather materially poor family, but she was pretty much my constant companion along with Lloyd, Toby, Chuck, Darlene. We had our own little gang.

One day I remember thinking, where's Betty Ann? We wanna play. We wanna go to the playground and fuck around, although we surely wouldn't have used that term. Why don't you go over to her house, Billy, and see if she's there.

Okay, so we went to her house and her father comes to the door *[laughter]* I think smelling pretty heavily of alcohol, torn, stained t-shirt. You get the picture? I said, "Oh, Mr. XXX, is Betty home?" "Hold on a minute, kid. Hey, Betty, your little sissy friend Billy is here." That left an impression. I remember that to this day. "Why'd he call me a sissy?"

Kristyn Scorsone: Did you understand the implication or no?

William Courson: Not really, but I know it wasn't a compliment.

Kristyn Scorsone: How would you describe your sexual orientation now?

William Courson: Oh, queer, 100 percent homosexual, interestingly enough because most of my best friends are women.

Kristyn Scorsone: Yeah, when did you come to understand that about yourself?

William Courson: I would say probably around seven or eight years old I start realizing I was different. I remember being on the beach. Mom and Dad and I and one of my friends went down to Point Pleasant about 20 miles distant. No, not 20 miles, 15 miles distant, for the weekend and I was walking along the boardwalk and looking at a news stand.

One of the newspapers on display was the *National Enquirer*. The headline like 20-point type was, “Mother Kills Homosexual Son. I tore out his bleeding heart and stomped on it. Did not want to see him grow up in that way or lead that kind of life.” I thought, oh, hmm, let me check this out. I’m reading it.

I got to know what the word homosexual was. I’m thinking oh, I’m pretty sure I’m one of them. I know something went through my little child’s mind along the lines of, “Oh fuck, I’m on the wrong planet.” Mom had some books at home, *The Mother’s Encyclopedia*. When they weren’t around, I pulled out the H volume and checked things out and thought, oh my God, I’m none of those things, “those things” being the way that homosexuality was widely conceived of by the a majority of the population in the 1950s and early 1960s. I was pretty young when I came out to my parents. I guess I was 12, perhaps 13.

Kristyn Scorsone: Wow.

William Courson: My parents were like, I don't even know if you'd call it liberal. I'd call it loving and indulgent. I remember my dad saying something very close to “Billy, what you are is okay, but you must never, ever tell anyone.” That was impressed on me. “You must never tell anyone. They can and will hurt you really, really badly.”

Kristyn Scorsone: How did you feel when he said that?

William Courson: Relieved that there wasn't anger, there wasn't rejection, kind of afraid that bad things would happen to me, but I'm pretty brave, so I felt mostly relieved that Dad and Mom were okay with it all, just stay in the closet forever. But even though I was vaguely anxious about telling them something that most parents would be horrified by, I had an underlying intuition that irrespective of what I would tell them they wouldn't stop loving me. There was never any really deep question in my mind that I was going to be rejected or disowned – they just were not that kind of people and certainly were not that kind of parents.

Kristyn Scorsone: Did you start dating around that time or later?

William Courson: No, no, no, no, much, much—well not much later, several years later. You see Avon by the Sea is this little town, one square mile on a side that time stopped in about 1957. When I got of dating age, Asbury Park was the magnet. Now within a couple blocks of the center of town were four gay bars: Paul's M&K, Chez L which

was mostly lesbian, but mixed, The Blue Note, and a fourth bar, whose name I can't remember.

The Blue Note was huge. It was a big, big bar. Had something of a reputation of a "wrinkle room," in other words, the kind of place where older people, that would be me right now, went to. It was actually so big, the Monmouth County District Court rented part of the building from this bar.

I think that Asbury Park for whatever reason, has always been a LGBT friendly town. The joke is that the town was founded in 1888, the same year this house was built, by Captain Bradley, and the joke that we had then was that if you look at the town's coat of arms, the seal, the town's official coat of arms, the Latin motto translated as "we suck cock here".

[Laughter]

Kristyn Scorsone: How did know to go to Asbury Park?

William Courson: Everybody knew what Asbury Park was. It was there I think I reached my sexual definition.

Kristyn Scorsone: What was it like going into those clubs for the first time?

William Courson: Scary. I went with a friend. I went with a friend, Joe, who passed away just a couple of months ago.

Kristyn Scorsone: I'm sorry.

William Courson: I think we're both pretty frightened. It was one of those cases where you think, "It's gonna be alright? We'll be fine. I'm scared."

Kristyn Scorsone: Was Joe your first friend that was gay?

William Courson: No, no, we kind of knew in high school. I think if I remember correctly, there were cliques and gangs. There were the cool kids who were usually the basketball players and the cheerleaders who all had minds about the size of a walnut and grew up to be Republicans.

There was a gang that I was in, the kids who were the druggies, the really, really bright kids, the Mensa trash, and the queer kids stuck together. What the affinity was between those three groups, I have no idea, but we stuck together.

Kristyn Scorsone: What kind of music was playing in those clubs?

William Courson: God, that I don't remember very well. That I don't remember. Bouncy, dumb, sugary, I'm not a—I don't like the kind of music that was being played in the clubs. I was always a Grateful Dead person myself. I also loved Jefferson Airplane (in 1968 soon to become Jefferson Starship) loved Led Zeppelin, loved Rod Stewart and Faces. Enjoyed Cat Stevens. Love the British experimental stuff like King Crimson. My tastes were pretty eclectic. But my taste didn't embrace bouncy and sugary

Kristyn Scorsone: This was in the '60s that you went to those clubs?

William Courson: Mm-hmm.

Kristyn Scorsone: You mentioned before that you remember Stonewall, right?

William Courson: Vividly, yes.

Kristyn Scorsone: What was that like for you?

William Courson: Shocking. Transforming, but if I'm remembering, I always had the notion that things are going to work out. You can't hold a people down forever. Eventually, even a worm will turn. I think I was pretty optimistic. I remember in high school, probably during math class, I would have my notebook open, and I would draw things in it. One of the things I drew was, I remember, a globe, the United Nations symbol, the globe, surrounded by the leaves, and in the middle of it a huge sign. We didn't have the Lambda then. We certainly had no idea what the rainbow flag was, so I draw a little symbols of interlocked male and female symbols, world homosexuality, and the motto some day the world will be ours. Hey, I was a little kid, a very optimistic little kid.

Kristyn Scorsone: That's cool. What did you like best about being gay?

William Courson: Asbury Park.

Kristyn Scorsone: Yeah?

William Courson: Yeah.

Kristyn Scorsone: Why?

William Courson: It was just fun. You could spend the day there. You could spend the day and night there very easily. It was—

Kristyn Scorsone: Did you go off to college after high school?

William Courson: My initial plan was to. I had been accepted into what in its day was a very innovative program. It was a six-year direct entry from high school MD program at Brown University. I was accepted to it. Unfortunately, my dad died very shortly before I would have started planning to go away, and left the family economically devastated.

He was a very good chef, a very poor financial planner. I had to go to a local school. It was then Monmouth College. It is now Monmouth University. It was very disappointing. It was basically a high school with ashtrays. Then, they took away the ashtrays.

Kristyn Scorsone: What did you major in there?

William Courson: Starting with pre-medicine, moved to medical technology, decided it was horrifically boring. Moved to philosophy and religious studies, and ended up in accounting because I knew that I would pretty much have to sustain myself. I wanted to get into a profession that would afford the maximum compensation with the minimum academic involvement.

Kristyn Scorsone: Did you find work after college?

William Courson: Yes.

Kristyn Scorsone: You became an accountant?

William Courson: I did, not immediately in the field of accounting —well, I didn't work in a public accounting firm. I was a managerial accountant. I was a certified managerial accountant. Initially I worked at the Sprague Library at Montclair State University, and afterward at a newspaper known as the *Aquarian Weekly*, which was a musical trade/countercultural weekly newspaper published from here in Montclair.

Kristyn Scorsone: What was that like?

William Courson: Hmm?

Kristyn Scorsone: What was it like working with them?

William Courson: A lot of fun.

Beth Williams: You met Mary Ellen there, right?

William Courson: I don't remember Mary Ellen.

Beth Williams: Really?

William Courson: I'm anxious to meet her again.

Beth Williams: Yeah, she remembered you.

William Courson: I don't remember Mary Ellen.

Beth Williams: She was a photographer.

William Courson: I probably would not have seen very much of her. What was it like working there? It was a lot of fun. The people were very smart. The people were very nice. Real free and easy with the drugs, there was a lot of drugs going around. Insane boss, so it was interesting. I was working there from 1978 to 1982.

Kristyn Scorsone: Did you get to go to a lot of concerts?

William Courson: Oh, yeah.

Kristyn Scorsone: Yeah? What were some of your faves?

William Courson: Oh, golly, there were so many. I do remember though with special fondness Janis Ian. Janis Ian kissed me on my 26th birthday. She kissed me on the lips, and she kissed me on the neck, and that was in a place that at the time was called the Morris Stage. one of the bigger musical venues in North Jersey. Now it's a community theatre, but I haven't washed this spot since.

Kristyn Scorsone: Did you go up on stage or you just—

William Courson: Oh, no, she came over and—I think Camille and her partner at the time, Maura, had something to do with that. Yeah, oh, good Lord, more Grateful Dead concerts than I can even imagine, a lot of concerts at the clubs by tribute bands in Asbury Park.

Asbury Park was thick with nightclubs at the time. Going back a little bit to the age of 16 or 17, on Cookman Avenue in Asbury Park, atop the Thom McAn shoe store was a little underage juice bar called the Upstage. I remember having gone there with friends and heard a young man play that I was very, very impressed with. I

thought, wow, he was really good. He turned out to be Bruce Springsteen.

Kristyn Scorsone: Wow.

William Courson: Yeah.

Kristyn Scorsone: That's really cool.

William Courson: Music was a big thing in Asbury Park. There was quite a countercultural presence, quite a gay presence.

Kristyn Scorsone: Did you ever experience any discrimination for your identity at any of the places you worked at?

William Courson: Not that we've covered so far. That comes after the *Aquarian* and that would be a now defunct real estate investment trust called Delaware Valley Financial. Was there for quite a long time until 1996. Most of my coworkers were sympathetic, but the higher management and my direct supervisor were Orthodox - or so I thought - and very, very conservative.

So they had quite an antipathy toward homosexuality and homosexual people. It wouldn't come right in your face, but it was pretty easy to tell that—it's like the old joke. "What is a faggot? The homosexual gentleman who just left the room. What is a dyke? The lesbian lady who just left the room". You get that sense, really, really quickly.

Kristyn Scorsone: Do you feel like they held you back at all?

William Courson: Held me back from what?

Kristyn Scorsone: Like any sort of advancements or anything like that

William Courson: Probably, probably, I don't have any rock hard proof of it, but probably.

Kristyn Scorsone: Where did you go after that position?

William Courson: Well, 1996, I like to say 1996 was the worst 15 years of my life. A relationship ended. The company went bankrupt. What was the third thing?

Beth Williams: You ate a lot of Korean food and gained some weight.

William Courson: Oh, all my life I had been a pretty thin guy, pretty fit, 157 pounds. The needle never varied. I had to find some way to sustain myself. I was very depressed because by that time I had had it with accounting. I would actually go the park and feed the pigeons and think what was to become of me.

It's almost cartoonish, like that scene from *Mary Poppins*. I had to take contract assignments, and one of them happened to be with an international relief organization headquartered in the Empire State building.

The Empire State building sits at the head of what is known as Korea Canyon, surrounded by some of the best Korean restaurants on the face of the earth, better than Seoul, better than Busan so I became a great aficionado of Korean food and ate a lot of it. I was depressed, so that's where we went from slim guy to big fat guy.

Kristyn Scorsone: What happened with the relationship? Who was that and—

William Courson: Well, the relationship ended. Let's make Camille a background. Let's put a parentheses or an asterisks there.

Beth Williams: Is that the year that you got divorced?

William Courson: Oh, God, no, we got divorced in 2004 or something like that.

Beth Williams: Which relationship ended in 1996?

William Courson: Oh, that was Ed. You wouldn't know him.

Beth Williams: I don't think you've ever spoken of him to me.

William Courson: Well, there were several. You let me know when would be a good time to—

Beth Williams: I think now is a great time.

William Courson: I had a very, very good friend that I met in school whilst we were doing medical laboratory science. Her name was Camille. She actually became my dearest friend and continues to this day (Let me say here that she just passed away, on January 10th of this year). She was at home in a very—in Newark, in a very traditional devoutly Catholic, very patriarchal Italian family. By the way, your last name Scorsone is the same last name as an openly gay judge on the Court of Appeals in Kentucky in the Lexington—the Court of Appeals for Fayette County.

Kristyn Scorsone: Wow.

William Courson: Ed Scorsone. I don't know if you're related or not, but to be an openly gay judge in Kentucky is a rare thing. Anyway, Camille's family had discovered that she was a lesbian and started giving her a very, very hard time about it. "If you don't stop, Camille, we're gonna take you to see Uncle Tony."

Uncle Tony was a psychiatrist, devoutly Catholic and the chief psychiatrist at the time for the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Philadelphia. That's how Catholic he was. Camille was saying, "Bill, I don't know if I can put up with this. I don't know if I can live this way. I'm gonna shoot myself."

I said, "Well, there's no need for that. Here's what let's do. Your parents know me. They like me. Let's get married." She said, "That's a great idea." I mean, hey, you do what you can to survive. I said I can't let you go on like this." So we got married. You saw my wedding pictures.

Beth Williams: I did. Yes.

Kristyn Scorsone: What was your wedding like?

William Courson: Italian.

Beth Williams: Very.

William Courson: Very Italian. Most of the guests, a good number of the guests looked like they were employed by—

Beth Williams: Mr. Soprano himself.

William Courson: - Mr. Soprano. They were very sweet people.

Kristyn Scorsone: Funerals like that, where Tommy Two Feather shows up.

William Courson: Oh, yes, yes, yes, so we got married. Got her out of the house. She had her relationships. I had my relationships. Well, there are not that many of them. I worked like a dog.

Kristyn Scorsone: Where did you live together? In this house? Wow.

William Courson: Actually, our first house in Montclair was on North Fullerton Avenue, 68 North Fullerton, but we moved here in '85. Rick and

his wife own the house. We initially had an interest in it, but then things went bad economically, and we were forced to back out.

Beth Williams: Rick is Camille's brother.

William Courson: Rick is Camille's brother, yes, so Camille and I had a very happy existence. She had her relationships. I had mine. Although, hers were numerically far more than mine. Finally, she met a woman in Ocean Shores, Washington, right on the shore, what they know locally as the Tsunami Riviera.

They got together. She moved out to Ocean Shores, Washington. Camille was Italian. She had ancestors from sunny Naples. She had those Italian genes and 320 days a year of rain and clouds and no sun in the Pacific Northwest, she said, "Bill, I can't take this anymore. I need to see the sun."

They researched the notion of living somewhere else. They researched maybe Madison, Wisconsin, maybe Ann Arbor, Michigan, maybe Sioux Falls, South Dakota, maybe Davenport, Iowa. They did a lot of research on these little smaller cities some of which are really fabulous, undiscovered gems.

They came across Berea, Kentucky, which is this town of 9,000 souls with a very well-thought of college, Berea College, right smack in the middle of the State of Kentucky. It was a little island of blue in a sea of red. The cost of living there is extremely low. The quality of living is very high so they said let's move to Berea, Kentucky. She and her then partner moved to Berea, Kentucky. I think that was around 2005. We had been divorced for a while by then.

Beth Williams: How many years were you married?

William Courson: Twenty-three, so '78 plus 23, 23, so we must have been divorced before—when I say married, living together, but quotes around married. They moved to Kentucky and things went bad between Camille and her partner, who I think had some serious emotional and behavioral issues stemming from an abused childhood that were never properly treated and never addressed.

I'm not a behavioral science clinician, so I really can't give a name to whatever the problem might have been. They broke up and Camille found another partner from the hills of Kentucky, Eastern Kentucky, Pike County from a little town if it can be called a town, of Ashcamp, who was a retired nurse.

They got together and it was love at first sight. Before they moved, I had actually lived with them for a while and experienced Kentucky. It's a beautiful place. Physically, you can't get much prettier. People are very nice. Politics, scary though.

Beth Williams: Could you say a little about Chris maybe?

William Courson: Oh, yes, when we were together, our next-door neighbor to whom we became very close had health problems. She could not raise a child. The husband had long ago abandoned the family, and there were two children, Stephen and Christopher.

Stephen went with this aunt and uncle. His mother, asked Christopher, "well, who would you like to take care of you" and he said right away, "Bill and Camille." So we were quite surprisingly cast into the roles of mom and pop." We raised Christopher from the age of 11 to—well, he's 50 now, 50. He is a truly wonderful, gifted human being and the apple of both of our eyes.

Kristyn Scorsone: Wow.

William Courson: He's a great, great kid. If you can call a 50-year-old kid

Kristyn Scorsone: How did you navigate that together?

William Courson: I'm sorry?

Kristyn Scorsone: How did you navigate that together, raising this kid and also having—having other outside relationships and—

William Courson: I don't think we had to think about it. I don't think any issue arose that we ever gave it any thought. There was no issue—everything seemed to flow together nicely.

Kristyn Scorsone: How long did he live with you guys for?

William Courson: Until he was done with Rutgers, which was—he had tried a number of schools. He tried Lynchburg College in Virginia, which was a playpen for well-off kids. He tried Northeastern University in Boston, much too cold. Finally, ended up at Rutgers.

Kristyn Scorsone: Newark.

William Courson: Yeah, and graduated, I don't remember the year, with a degree in economics. Basically, he was with us until a year before he graduated college. I don't remember the exact years involved.

Kristyn Scorsone: Did anybody on either—well, I guess not so much your family, but did anybody suspect, or was there any issues around holidays, like visiting her family? Were they—did they just accept it like, oh, you guys were—

William Courson: No, no, they had no idea that we were both gay. The marriage was one on paper only.

Kristyn Scorsone: They didn't suspect?

William Courson: Until long, long, long after. No, our holidays were always spent with Camille's family. I had no family left by that time. My mother had passed away and my dad had passed away when I was very young. No, the issue never arose.

Kristyn Scorsone: What were some of your significant romantic relationships?

William Courson: Ed, a young man about five years younger than myself, that lasted for a while. We just grew apart. The passion and oomph had left the relationship; David, pretty much the same. I was working so damn hard. I barely had the energy to go to work and get home and fall asleep.

Kristyn Scorsone: What is your connection to the LGBTQ community in Newark?

William Courson: Really pretty tangential. I had a number of clients when I was at My job in Newark and of course, I would go to Murphy's Tavern on Edison Place and met a few people. Met Laquetta who was active in founding the New York Pride Alliance in, I believe, 2004 and actually tried to pressure the then mayor into—after the—

Kristyn Scorsone: Was it *Corey Booker* at that time?

William Courson: No.

Beth Williams: No?

Kristyn Scorsone: Maybe Sharpe James?

Beth Williams: Sharpe maybe?

William Courson: Yes, it was Sharpe James, into creating an LGBT community center or helping to—he made promises that he never kept.

Kristyn Scorsone: Right.

William Courson: Which knowing the man was really not a surprise at all. I believe there is now an LGBT center in Newark, and I believe that Cory Booker was instrumental in its creation. I was, for a number of years, the vice president for communications and development of New Jersey Stonewall Democrats, which is the LGBT caucus within the New Jersey Democratic Party.

In that, I was very active with Jim Credle, who was Rutgers University's Dean for Multicultural Affairs with my friend Laquetta Nelson, who at the time lived here in Montclair. Let's see, who else was on the committee?

I don't think Ulysses was on the committee, or he may have been. I don't recall his presence at meetings. Couple of other individuals whose names escape me. As I say, my relationship with the Newark LGBT community was pretty tangential.

Kristyn Scorsone: What was it like in Murphy's?

William Courson: Dark, smoky, kind of fun in a honky tonk way.

Kristyn Scorsone: Can you describe what Laquetta is like as a person?

William Courson: I'm sorry?

Kristyn Scorsone: Can you describe Laquetta, like what she's like as—

William Courson: Laquetta?

Kristyn Scorsone: Laquetta?

William Courson: Well, former military person, master technical sergeant is the rank I think she had with the Air Force when she was in Germany. Came back to the States. Actually, was a driver for DeCamp bus lines for a number of years while studying for her undergraduate degree in philosophy at Rutgers in Newark.

Very, very active in Democratic Party politics and the New Jersey Stonewall Democrats. Wonderful person, very much concerned with queer youth in Newark at the time. Until fairly recently, if you were gay in Newark, you might as well be living in the 1950s.

That has, of course, turned around considerably from what I'm told. Ultimately she left New Jersey and now lives in Maryland. She finished her MSW degree at the University of Delaware and she was practicing social work, I believe psychotherapy, and is now retired.

Kristyn Scorsone: Just to be clear, did you say that you went up to Murphy's first and that's how you met everyone or are you joined the New Jersey Stonewall Dems and met—

William Courson: New Jersey Stonewall Dems came after my Murphy's period. It was a place that I liked to go to. The only place really around in Newark after work.

Kristyn Scorsone: How did you find out about Murphy's?

William Courson: You know I don't recall. There was nothing else there. Undoubtedly it was word-of-mouth.

Kristyn Scorsone: Have you ever been to Newark Pride? Have you ever been to Newark Pride events?

William Courson: One year, some years ago I believe I was. You were at Newark Pride, weren't you?

Beth Williams: Mm-hmm. Yeah, a couple of years. Did you know Peter Savastano?

William Courson: Yes, Peter Savastano lived in the same apartment that you're living in here in Montclair. I noticed that now that he's a theologian and took his PhD in New Testament theology I think at Drew. Taught for a while at Seton Hall. Left to teach at Rutgers. Ended up at Drew University. Brilliant fellow.

Has been out for years, years, and years. I noticed on a bulletin for St. Luke's Episcopal Church here in Montclair it was Reverend Peter Savastano. Peter's a great guy, and he was active in The American Academy of religion. I believe he was involved with their committee on queer spirituality and on Afro-Caribbean spirituality, If I remember correctly.

Actually, I met Peter in November of 1998 at a coffeehouse here in Montclair called the Eclectic Coffeehouse. I thought—you remember the Eclectic. Long gone and lovingly remembered. It

was November of 1998 when Camille, and I, and our friend, Jennifer. You met Jennifer.

Beth Williams: I did, indeed.

William Courson: I said we really should have an LGBT organization here in Montclair. We put the word out. It was an organizing meeting and at the time, there was something of a controversy around the name. I wanted to call it Queer Montclair.

Some of the older members of the group object to the use of the word. It was a pejorative. We settled on Out In Essex, and that existed for a few years. Then, dissolved into oblivion. It was at a point where Montclair didn't need an LGBT organization. If you want to meet LGBT people, join the First Aid squad or the Garden Club or Red Cross or attend a church or temple. You'll meet them (us) everywhere.

Kristyn Scorsone: Wow, so you guys just met at the coffee shop, like you just started talking?

William Courson: Yes.

Kristyn Scorsone: Oh, that's cool. I sat in on his oral history. He's a great person.

William Courson: I beg your pardon?

Kristyn Scorsone: I sat on his oral history. He's a great, great person.

William Courson: What did he teach?

Kristyn Scorsone: Peter?

William Courson: Yeah.

Kristyn Scorsone: No, his oral history for the *our* project.

William Courson: Oh, I see. I see.

Kristyn Scorsone: Yeah, he's at Seton Hall now. Yeah, I love him.

William Courson: He's at Seton Hall now?

Kristyn Scorsone: Mm-hmm. Yeah.

William Courson: Really? I thought he was at Drew.

Kristyn Scorsone: Hm-mmm. Yeah, Seton, yeah, he's great. Have you been—

William Courson: He's also an very competent astrologer.

Kristyn Scorsone: Oh, yeah, I bet. Yeah. I really like him. Did you go to any other queer bars or clubs in Newark besides Murphy's?

William Courson: Not that I can remember—what?

Kristyn Scorsone: Besides Murphy's?

William Courson: I can't remember any besides Murphy's.

Kristyn Scorsone: Yeah, let's see.

William Courson: In those days it was either Murphy's or Grace Episcopal Church right next to the federal building. Those were the two sanctuaries.

Kristyn Scorsone: You also talked about prior to when we started recording that you went to the funeral of Sakia Gunn.

William Courson: Yes.

Kristyn Scorsone: What was that like, and how did you wind up going to that?

William Courson: Laquetta had been active in Newark LGBT affairs for quite a while, and it was I who made her aware of the murder of Sakia Gunn, reading that morning's *Newark Star Ledger*. I said "Laquetta, did you hear about this? No? Well, we have to do something about this."

I think that was the genesis of the first Newark Pride, the organization, not the parade. We went to the funeral, and it was packed, absolutely packed, but it was so, just heartbreaking. I just looked into the casket, and here was this 14-year-old child and I will never go to the funeral of a child again. It was just too heartbreaking.

Kristyn Scorsone: Do you remember where it was?

William Courson: It was in a funeral home near to the church from which she was buried. No, I don't remember the name of the funeral home.

Kristyn Scorsone: Did you meet her family?

William Courson: No, I just met her partner, who actually had a severe, really severe, panic attack and fell to the ground, unable to catch her breath, and Laquetta calmed her down and brought her back from the very dark place she was in.

Kristyn Scorsone: Wow, that's rough. Did you help at all with the Newark Pride after that, or you were more involved in the New Jersey Dems?

William Courson: I was more involved in the New Jersey Dems but I did the first website for Newark Pride.

Kristyn Scorsone: What was it like working with the New Jersey Stonewall Dems?

William Courson: It was lovely. This was when the group was just getting together. At the time, it was Laquetta was the chairperson or what was it, president? President. A gentleman now long past and one of the founders of the Mattachine Society in 1948, Dr. Arthur Warner, was a member and active. Who else was involved? Oh, yes, yes, the young man who was the founder and executive director of Garden State Equality - Steve Goldstein, he was very involved.

Kristyn Scorsone: What was Jim Credle's role? He was just on the committee?

William Courson: I'm afraid I don't recall: he was a regular attendee at meetings.

Kristyn Scorsone: Oh, okay, what kind of stuff did you guys get done? Did you help—I don't know. I don't know how it works. Did you influence legislation?

William Courson: Well, yes, that was our principle work in the New Jersey legislature. I was the legislative affairs liaison for our legislative district, the district that we're in now.

Kristyn Scorsone: Anything that you were particularly proud of that came out of that?

William Courson: Oh, I'm sure there were a good number of things, but I can't remember in detail what they may have been.

Kristyn Scorsone: How long were you with it?

William Courson: Four or five years.

Kristyn Scorsone: Yeah?

William Courson: Yeah.

Kristyn Scorsone: What happened after that? Were you involved in other activist organizations?

William Courson: I was working so hard. I really wasn't. I really didn't have any time to spare.

Kristyn Scorsone: Did you continue working as an accountant?

William Courson: Up to 1998. After the company I worked for became bankrupt, I did take some contract assignments, some per diem assignments, but I knew that I loathed accounting and found it stultifying, not to overstate it. I had always loved healing. I had always been interested in medicine. That would've been my career, but for my father's demise.

While looking for something to do, I had some friends who operated a yoga studio here in Montclair. It was North Jersey's largest traditional yoga studio called Starseed, the Starseed Center for Yoga, Shamanism and Wellness. They took the word shamanism out of the name because it was just too spooky for suburbia. If potential students are scared, they won't come to yoga classes.

Starseed was an alternative university for me. It opened a lot of doors to places that I didn't really know existed or knew existed but didn't know very much about. I was taking this as a temporary thing. They approached me and said, "Bill, would you like to do some accounting work for us?" I said, "No, I love you, but no." They said, "Well, there are other things you could do."

I happened to have some skills that they were in need of. It was a rather unusual concatenation of skills between accounting, light paralegal stuff, corporate housekeeping, website design and promotion, publicity and copy—it was just a weird little combination of talents. I went to work for them, and it was initially supposed to be 10 to 15 hours a week. It ended up to be 50 or 60 hours a week. I loved it. I loved every minute of it.

Beth Williams: Is that where you met Jason and Jyoti?

William Courson: Yes—

Kristyn Scorsone: Who's that?

William Courson: - and many of the other people that you may or may not have met.

Beth Williams: Frank?

William Courson: Yes, Frank..

Beth Williams: Right.

William Courson: While I was there, I'd always been interested, as I say, in medicine, particularly in its holistic and complementary dimensions. I've always been interested in herbalism. While I was there, I became very familiar with the history, theory and practice of yoga and some of the other what are called Vedic disciplines, practices that have their origin in the foundational scriptures of Hinduism. Do you know what ayurveda is? If I use the word ayurveda to you, would you know what I was talking about?

Kristyn Scorson: No.

William Courson: Ayurveda is the traditional system of medicine that has existed in India since, to use a colloquialism, the mists of antiquity. No one knows how old it is. One day they were having a lecture by a young doctor from India on the subject of ayurveda. It was an eight-hour long orientation to the principles of ayurveda for aspiring yoga teachers. So Jyoti said, "Bill, why don't you take a day off and go to that?"

Kristyn Scorson: Who is Jyoti?

William Courson: One of my employers, the couple that owned the studio, Jyoti and Jason, and I did. It was taught by a young ayurvedic physician from India named Dr. Aparna Bapat, and I sat in on it, and at the end of those eight hours, I know that this is what I want to study. This is what I want to do every day for the rest of my life.

I studied ayurveda under Dr. *Bapat* for a number of years, and helped to create an ayurvedic practitioner training program, a 16-month program at Starseed. I both involved myself in that program's organization and was also a student in it. After I finished that program I continued my education through an institution called Sai Ayurvedic College in Miami, Florida and continued my education there and in 2017 (after having taught first-year level courses there for a couple of years) was awarded a doctorate in ayurveda.

I began to practice ayurveda out of Starseed casually, but in 2007, as I just said, starting to teach ayurveda at the Sai Ayurvedic

College in Miami. I had a baccalaureate degree in ayurveda at the time.

Presently I am teaching ayurveda in Florida and in Kalamazoo, Michigan, a city that I love. It's like "Montclair on steroids" and also in Puerto Rico.

That's what I do now. I have an ayurvedic practice that I've had to let lie fallow for the past several months. I became ill at—when did I get sick? See the memory from the '50s is real good. The memory from yesterday sucks.

Beth Williams: Probably around February?

William Courson: Oh, I remember what it was. In March, I started having these little symptoms. I went to the doctor. She thought it was chronic bronchitis. Took an x-ray. Didn't get any better. Got worse. Sent me for a cat scan, and an MRI, and the things lit up.

I had a melanoma, metastatic melanoma, Stage IV, too many suntans as a child, because in those days you wouldn't want to end the summer without a deep tan. It was a dreadful social faux pas if you ended the season as white as a boiled fish.

We all wanted to get really tan, slather on baby oil, so when we turned 60 the cancer would be really devastating. From this little mole about half the size of a dime in a really invisible and inaccessible place on the back of my shoulder, 60 odd years later, that little mole decided to effervesce and become melanoma. You, and I, and Frank were at a cottage—

Beth Williams: In June.

William Courson: Couldn't have been June.

Beth Williams: It was.

William Courson: Was it June?

Beth Williams: Yes.

William Courson: I was getting treatments, getting immunotherapy treatments, which is supposed to be less negatively impacting than chemotherapy. I was kind of weak and tired at the time. Didn't get any better. I had three treatments of four that were planned. After my third treatment, this was after we spent time at the lake, I started feeling

not very well, tired, without an appetite. I dismissed it as just the usual reaction until, take it away—

Beth Williams: Me and our good friend, Frank, had not heard from Bill in a day or so. He's usually pretty quick to text so we decided to come over and check on him and found him passed out on the floor of his bedroom, butt naked with a little comforter around his waist, clinging to the side of his bed, mostly incoherent with a very, very high fever.

William Courson: Now—

Kristyn Scorsone: That must've been scary.

William Courson: I was in a condition that well, we used to say if you got really, really drunk, we would say you were a "beached" or "whaled".

Beth Williams: You were.

William Courson: I was beached and whaled and hadn't been drinking at all.

Beth Williams: Orca-ed.

William Courson: These two come over and they find me beached and, "Bill, we've got to get you to a hospital." I was mumbling, "No, I'm fine. I just need a nap."

Beth Williams: Forever? *[Laughter]*

William Courson: For all of eternity.

Kristyn Scorsone: It's just a flesh wound.

William Courson: For all of eternity. They took me to the hospital and I had a fever of 103.7, and no detectable pulse, and a blood pressure of 83 over 40. In other words, one foot in the grave and another on a banana peel. It turns out that I had sepsis, which turned into severe sepsis, which turned into toxic shock syndrome.

Had they not found me and taken me to the hospital, I would be dead as a doornail. You know what's odd? I didn't feel that bad. I just really felt tired, but then as things progressed, I lapsed into a semi-lucid state.

Kristyn Scorsone: How long did it take for you to recover?

William Courson: I was in the hospital from August 29th until September 23rd, and I don't think I've ever heard of anybody being in a hospital that long unless they had a heart replacement or something. Don't have any memory of it at all. I just know that I'm back to myself trying to revive my practice, and happily it's happening.

Kristyn Scorsone: Yeah, so you're feeling better and getting out there.

William Courson: Well, I still feel pretty compromised, and that's not from the cancer. By the way, the cancer is totally and completely gone. The doctor told me a couple of days ago I am, as they say—they never say cured, they don't even say in remission anymore. They say you're NED, no evidence of disease. That was a nice email to get.

Kristyn Scorsone: That is awesome. Yeah.

William Courson: Yeah, but I still feel pretty weak, and that's not from the cancer, that's from the toxic shock syndrome.

Kristyn Scorsone: I guess I wanted to ask you a little bit too about—

William Courson: I've gotten a little off the track of LGBT issues.

Kristyn Scorsone: No, that's okay. That's completely fine. Yeah, just to take it back, I guess a little bit, I was wondering how or did it affect you the AIDS crisis?

William Courson: I lost a lot of friends.

Kristyn Scorsone: Yeah? What was that like? Was it—did you go to a lot of funerals or was it just people—

William Courson: When I was 55 years old, I had to be one AIDS funeral for every year that I had been alive, so I went to a lot of AIDS funerals. It was devastating.

Kristyn Scorsone: Were you afraid—

William Courson: We had a president at the time—I wasn't having all that much sex. I was pretty celibate. We had a president I think at the time who never used the word AIDS while he was in office.

Beth Williams: Indeed.

Kristyn Scorsone: Yeah.

William Courson: Pretty sure he's microwaving in hell today.

Kristyn Scorsone: You weren't scared then because you were pretty celibate, or were you celibate because had anxiety about—

William Courson: It was probably a mixture of the two.

Kristyn Scorsone: How did you feel about the gay marriage debate?

William Courson: Oh, I thought it was wonderful. We had it in New Jersey—well, it was passed by the legislature before our governor at the time, Chris Christie, a dreadful character, vetoed it. Between the time that he vetoed it and the legislature could have voted on it again, I believe the Supreme Court upheld it.

Kristyn Scorsone: Let's see.

William Courson: How did I feel about it? I was very happy.

Kristyn Scorsone: Yeah? Yeah, some people have their different takes on it.

William Courson: Well, realize now in the beginning of the early '90s, '93 maybe, the issue of military service and the right to marry became very, very central to the LGBT movement. When it started, getting married and going into the military were the last things that anyone would think of. And the earliest days of the move but, we were interested in those things at all. We didn't want marriage and the military to exist: we were about changing the culture before anything else.

We wanted to destroy, to erase the military. Marriage? We wanted to destroy conventional power relationships that masqueraded as marriages. Things have changed. At that time, there was a very grassroots community kind of texture to the gay movement. Now you have the human rights campaign, and you have, oh, goodness, you have the NGTLF, National Task Force, and you have—who else do you have?

Beth Williams: A lot of organizations.

William Courson: A lot of organizations that are well funded, and it's a different world from when the gay movement started.

Kristyn Scorsone: Do you miss the old way of seeing things, like the more radical way?

William Courson: I'm glad things that have progressed in terms of our rights and our equality, and I always had a feeling things would work out, but do I miss it? Yes, I do. You still see that kind of grassroots organizing, the sense of "deep community" in places like Kentucky where if you're gay, you're marginal.

Kristyn Scorsone: Right, yeah, yeah, it's not evenly spread throughout the country. Let's see. So far, is there anything that I haven't asked you that you wish I had, or we haven't covered that I'm missing?

William Courson: Let me think for a second.

Kristyn Scorsone: Yeah, take your time.

William Courson: I've pretty much told my life story.

Beth Williams: I have a question for you, Bill.

William Courson: Yes.

Beth Williams: Sort of like your spiritual autobiography, I know that you've said to me that when you were little, you wanted to be a saint, and one of the things that you've imparted to me as a gay person, as a lesbian, is this notion of queer spirituality.

William Courson: Oh, yes.

Beth Williams: Could you say a little bit about that in terms of your own spiritual development, and autobiography, and disavowing of the heterosexual cultural saints and spirituality?

William Courson: Well, my parents were both Roman Catholics. They were not particularly observant, and didn't take it particularly seriously. It was a cultural artifact. Like every other child at the time, I went to Catholic school. I wanted to be a priest and quickly got over that. Thank God.

I'm a religious person, but not conventionally so. I always have been. Looking at the various religious traditions around the world, I regard myself as holding multiple citizenships in the world, *esoteric* Christianity, Tibetan Buddhism, Vedanta and Sufism, but became very interested in the idea of queer spirituality, oh, maybe 10 or 15 years ago and the writings of—oh, you probably would remember the authors better than I.

Beth Williams: Judy Grahn is one of them.

William Courson: Judy Grahn is my Jesus. She's a poetess, and she wrote a book that you probably have read and if you haven't, you have to read it today or tomorrow. Because if you don't, they'll take your gay credentials away from you. It is *Another Mother Tongue: Gay Words in a Gay World*. You've read it?

Beth Williams: Oh, this is a must.

William Courson: Haha, failure to read it renders one excommunicable.

[Laughter]

William Courson: Yeah, Judy Grahn. Do you love the book?

Beth Williams: I do.

William Courson: I do, too. I think when we first became friends we had this conversation. I mentioned the book. You had not read it, and I said, "This is intolerable." I ran right down to Montclair bookstore and got you a copy and said, "Read this."

Beth Williams: That you gave to me for my birthday.

William Courson: "In fact, memorize it." Judy Grahn—

Kristyn Scorsone: Is this book all poetry or on—

William Courson: No, no, although she is, herself, a poetess.

Beth Williams: It's basically gay myths, gay legends, the history of something like the color purple, and how queer folk were treated throughout various ages and civilizations.

William Courson: Yes, the symbology, much of gay symbology was in the form of stagiography: a. Stagiograph is something that's in plain sight, but only the initiated few know it's import. Like the fish was used by early Christians in a context of Roman oppression, the Lambda going back some generations ago, the green carnation, the color lavender or purple—

Beth Williams: The labrys.

William Courson: The labrys, yes.

Beth Williams: The pink triangle.

William Courson: The rabbit, the hyena, the rat terrier—no, not the rat terrier.

Beth Williams: Would you say that your own spiritual evolution has been gay?

William Courson: We as queer folk hold an important office, and it is an office that we inherit from our ancestors and our ancestral lineage. It is not a biological one. It is a lineage comprising our first lovers, first lovers, first lovers, first lover back to Neolithic times, maybe Paleolithic times.

The office that we have that is so very important. It's to preside over times of transition and transformation, to serve as physicians in putting the old order to rest comfortably and painlessly, and to safely give birth to something new, to be midwives of what is being born.

I think that is on some subliminal level I think many, many queer people feel it. Does it have a name? I give it a name. I call it queer spirit. I know other people have also called it queer spirit.

The writings of Judy Grahn, things from the '70s, the writings of Arthur Evans. Have you heard the name Arthur Evans? For a brief period of time in the '60s, I believe he was president of the Gay Activists Alliance. You've heard of the Gay Activists Alliance?

Kristyn Scorsone: Mm-hmm.

William Courson: He was a philosopher. Didn't finish his doctorate in Columbia, but quite a brilliant writer and wrote two thick volumes, *Critique of Patriarchy, Volumes One and Two*. It was like Kant, you know? I read some of his writings and was very much touched by them.

The writer of a queer spirit or *Queer Spirituality*. Don't remember the author. I think he had a Hispanic name. Bear with me. *Visionary Love, Principles of Queer Spirit* from back in the late '60s or early '70s, Arthur Evans' *Witchcraft, Homosexuality, and the Counterculture*, and his whole idea of an underground stream of spirituality, several other things.

I think that we as queers do have a spiritual identity and a spiritual office. It is enormously ancient and enormously important. Do you have a more specific question about that?

Kristyn Scorsone: No, thank you for sharing that.

William Courson: Surely.

Beth Williams: There was another question I wanted to ask you—

William Courson: Yes?

Beth Williams: - about you had told me something about in selecting your profession you had considered becoming a lawyer.

William Courson: I had.

Beth Williams: You told me that you decided not to do that.

William Courson: I did.

Beth Williams: For me, I think that that was sort of an interesting story from your life.

William Courson: Well, the law had always attracted me. I think I read—when I was quite young in my early teens, I had read Justice—I forget his name’s *The Common Law*.

Beth Williams: Oliver Wendell Holmes?

William Courson: That’s it. I had read Maitland’s *The Civil Law Tradition*. I had read several—not professional texts because I probably wasn’t capable of it, but some of the general works in law. Was quite attracted to it. Now at that time, there was a struggle in a good many states to be admitted to the bar if you were a homosexual.

In fact, one of the people that I mentioned to you, Arthur Warner, was active in the State of New Jersey—State of New York rather, in breaking that barrier down, but I have become very much interested, particularly from an activist perspective.

Now the only school that made any overture to gay and lesbian students at the time, and specifically in their materials said we can’t guarantee that if you do get a law degree you’ll be admitted to the bar because you’re queer, and that was the People’s College of Law in Los Angeles, California, specifically created by the National Lawyers Guild to train activist lawyers.

I said, well, I’d love to have that kind of training. I’d love to do that kind of work, but the chances that I would ever be able to do it are questionable after investing that much time and some expense in pursuing it.

Beth Williams: You believed being gay was a barrier to entry into the profession?

William Courson: Oh, it was. It's not what I believe. It's a matter of historic fact. Yes, it was, and you could not be a teacher. You could not be a nurse. You could not be a physician. You could not be an attorney. You could not really occupy any position involving licensure.

Beth Williams: When did that begin to change?

William Courson: I'd say post-1983. Although the AIDS crisis was reaching its crescendo, things began to change. Probably the mid-90's, they were pretty much, you knew the way things were going. We would not go back. We would not go back in the closet and close the door.

Kristyn Scorsone: I remember you said that your father had cautioned you to keep it quiet.

William Courson: Yes.

Kristyn Scorsone: How long did you keep it quiet for?

William Courson: Oh, golly, not long. I don't remember exactly, maybe until I was in my middle to late teens, early twenties.

Beth Williams: Did the seemingly heterosexual marriage make it difficult for you to be completely out in the open?

William Courson: No, not really, not at all, not for either one of us, not for either one of us. It's weird. I got news that I was cancer free the same day that I got news that Camille was going into hospice with terminal cancer.

Beth Williams: Oh, I'm sorry.

William Courson: I'm really—I can't celebrate the fact that I'm cancer free. I'm happy, but I'm not like yay, let's party.

Beth Williams: Did all of your friends know that you—

William Courson: Oh, yeah, oh yeah.

Beth Williams: Just the family didn't know?

William Courson: Yeah, and that changed after awhile.

Beth Williams: Did her family ever come to accept her gayness, your gayness?

William Courson: Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah.

Beth Williams: Did they know you were gay, too?

William Courson: Oh, yeah, after a while, absolutely adored her partners.

Beth Williams: What do you attribute that shift to?

William Courson: Cultural changes, a change in the cultural matrix, maturity. One day, we were riding with folks. I don't know where we were or what we were doing. The parents had made the remark referring to the grandchild's possibility of being, "Well, oh, yeah, he could be gay." Saying, "Oh well, there's nothing wrong with that." We just looked at each other and said something like, "it only took you 40 years." It was I think probably is a story shared by many families, many people where initial rejection and suppression is followed by a period of learning and ultimate acceptance.

Beth Williams: If you had some advice to give to a young gay person today, what would you tell them?

William Courson: This sounds cliché-ish. It really does get better. That's not bullshit, okay? Things the way they are now are going to get even better. Sixty years from now, people will look back and probably most folks will wonder what all the bother was about.

Kristyn Scorsone: Do you think what's going on now with this current administration is like the last gasps of really harsh intolerance?

William Courson: Yes, I do. I do.

Kristyn Scorsone: How do you feel about what's going on with the trans community?

William Courson: I think that they will ultimately prevail. We have this thing called the Constitution. I think ultimately they will prevail, and even if they don't prevail now, some subsequent administration will annul all of the oppressive foolishness that we see this one trying to put in place.

Kristyn Scorsone: What does your favorite kind of day look like?

William Courson: My favorite kind of what?

Kristyn Scorsone: Your day, like your day, if you could spend your day any which way that you could spend it?

William Courson: I like fall.

Kristyn Scorsone: Yeah?

William Courson: I don't like summer. I've always hated heat, but I find since I got sick, that my sensation of heat and cold has changed enormously. I used to have my bedroom with the air conditioner set at 64-66. I mean you could store meat in my bedroom. Now, I find myself extremely sensitive to cold.

Kristyn Scorsone: Interesting.

William Courson: I mean I'm freezing right now.

Beth Williams: What would you do on your favorite day?

William Courson: Oh my favorite day would be in the fall. I love the fall. I'm an October baby, Libra. You are, too.

Kristyn Scorsone: I'm January, but I do love the fall.

William Courson: What would my favorite day be? My favorite day would be in the city, mobile enough to be in the city, in the city, going to a museum, walking through Central Park, just enjoying the day.

Going out for dinner somewhere really nice, either Chick-Fil-A or Burger King. No, somewhere really nice because I love food. Maybe taking in a movie. Yes, it's pretty standard. No, mountain climbing, no parachuting.

Kristyn Scorsone: Oh, that sounds perfect to me.

William Courson: Yeah, yeah.

Kristyn Scorsone: Is there any other questions that you have?

Beth Williams: I don't think so.

Kristyn Scorsone: Is there anything else topically that I didn't ask you or that was significant for you in your time, either I guess, like social events or cultural events or historical events?

William Courson: Well, I think probably the notion that things would be okay, that things would work out for queer folk, for queer nation as I like to call it. This took place in 1971 or 72, I think was the year: there was a huge demonstration in New York City, and it was part of an ongoing event sponsored by the National Peace Action Coalition called a March for a Moratorium on the War.

There was a huge gathering. I want to think it was by the library, in back of the library in Bryant Park, but Bryant Park couldn't possibly contain the number of people there. It was a big open venue in Manhattan. I was standing there with my friend Blaise, and we were listening to the speakers.

I actually came within hailing distance of John and Yoko. They waved back, so I like to say I met them. I didn't really meet them. I waved at them. Took cognizance of each other's essence so I was standing with my friends Blaise, David, and Scott *we* were the founders of the Gay Students Union in Red Bank, New Jersey in 1970.

I remember going to get a post office box, the postal clerk said something to me like, "You're fucking disgusting. I wish your kind were off the earth." Hey, it was 1970. It was part of the educative process. Anyway, I'm standing there with my friend, Blaise, listening to the speaker. I turn around. What's in back of me? But the gay contingent.

Now the rainbow flag did not exist until 1978, but they were all carrying signs, "Peace is a gay issue". I turn around and it was an landscape absolutely filled with queer folk. I thought—I turned around, and I turned to Blaise and said, "We've got this. This is gonna be okay." That was a moment that has left its impression on me.

Kristyn Scorsone: That's a beautiful moment

William Courson: Yeah.

Kristyn Scorsone: Thank you so much.

William Courson: You're most welcome.

Kristyn Scorsone: Thank you, too.

Beth Williams: Thank you, Billy.

Interviewee:

Oh my goodness, my pleasure, and I do mean it was a great pleasure.

[End of Audio]

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