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# Those who choose to stay: Narrating the rural Appalachian Queer experience

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To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Amy Michelle Jordan entitled "Those who choose to stay: Narrating the rural Appalachian Queer experience." I have examined the final electronic copy of this thesis for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Science in Social Work, with a major in Social Work.

David Dupper, Major Professor

We have read this thesis and recommend its acceptance:

Rebecca Bolen, Mary Rogge

Accepted for the Council:

Dixie L. Thompson

Vice Provost and Dean of the Graduate School

(Original signatures are on file with official student records.)

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**Those who choose to stay:  
Narrating the rural Appalachian Queer experience**

**A Thesis Presented for the  
Master of Science in Social Work  
Degree  
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville**

**Amy Michelle Jordan**

**May 2015**

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## **Dedication**

For the women who left this world too soon and whose love has propelled me forward: My cousin Julia, my friends Jess and Tabby, and my aunt Rebecca, whose life ended in 1989 before she was able to complete her Master of Science in Information Sciences at the University of Tennessee.

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Finally, Thank you to the youth to met with me and told me your stories—thank you for your time, your courage, your openness. Your stories have given my own greater context, and I hope that I am able to do honor to your words and experiences.

There are others I've forgotten or left unnamed, people who have offered me kind words, pushed me to continue reaching further, shared my call for participants, and offered their assistance in so many meaningful ways. Thank you! No thing exists in a tunnel, no project is accomplished without the help of many players!

## **Abstract**

“Those who choose to stay” is a qualitative exploratory study comprised of four LGBT youth from rural towns in East Tennessee. These young adults were recruited through LGBT listservs, pride festivals, and word of mouth. Each young adult was interviewed over the course of one to three hours. The interviews were then transcribed and coded using Atlas.ti software, allowing codes to surface from the text. Four main themes were discovered: religious atmosphere, family, coming out, and peer networks.

Religious atmosphere was generally found to be a destructive part of these youths’ environments, making them fear for their safety and worry about coming out to their families and friends. The very conservative type of religion particular to the geographic area also acted as a barrier to one’s own coming out: instilling shame, undermining feelings of self-worth, and causing friction among family members. However, the majority of these youth were able to maintain relationships with their families and listed their family as one of the top reasons they stay in their hometowns.

While there was significant anxiety surrounding the coming out process, every youth reported feeling relief and greater personal satisfaction after coming out as well as articulating the deleterious effects of hiding one’s gender or sexual orientation. Forming peer networks with other LGBT youth and adults was found to be a significant part of the coming out process. Not only did peer networks help to normalize experiences, but also they provided a protective factor against the unfriendly larger culture.



In conclusion, we must continue to support youth as they come out at younger ages, providing information and support. A better relationship between the mainstream LGBT movement, its advocates, and people living in rural Appalachia would be beneficial. When working with youth, it is important to recognize that while religious involvement is generally a strength, some members of the LGBT community may have a history of trauma and victimization in relation to their church communities.

## **Preface**

The goal of this project is to create a narrative of the queer experience in rural Appalachia at a particular point in time. To be absolutely clear in my approach to research, it is necessary for me to describe who I am, the experiences that have led me to this place-time, and my motivations. I approach the subject matter first as a middle class white queer person with working class roots who experienced zir girlhood in Loudon County, Tennessee.

I have a deeply ingrained feminist aesthetic and believe, as Adrienne Rich stated in her essay “Resisting Amnesia,” that “to say yes, over and over, to our integrity, we need to know where we have been: we need our history.” I think that an essential element of reimagining power structures is to acknowledge where the conversation is centered. One way that systems of oppression function is by assuming that all persons fall into the dominant group and silencing any dissenting voices. In the case of heterosexism, we are all assumed to be straight until coming out—not only to ourselves and our family and friends, but also to every new person that we meet. It becomes our job to act as unwitting teachers and ambassadors of our experiences; to articulate our difference at every turn.

Unlike other cultures, queer culture is not typically something into which children are socialized by their birth families. While we are born LGBT, our parents are most likely not. Because mainstream culture is cis/straight culture, each individual must seek out a community for themselves or create their own image of wellness. For many people this is a complicated and lengthy process that can be made more difficult by the

loss of the original support system—familial, religious, cultural. Yet we are not a homogenous group.

As a social worker, feminist, and trans advocate, naming and exploring intersections of identity is important to my work. The strength of identity politics is not only in naming, or putting a voice to, different types of people—it must also include an analysis of how our differing identities overlap and interact with another—how these intersections create points of strength or pressure for individuals. For example, a middle-upper class white femme lesbian is going to have a very different experience than a working class black trans woman. I chose a narrative structure for this project as a way of focusing on the language that my participants use to construct their own identity and as a way of examining similarities and differences in and among individuals.

The narrative focus of this paper is also meant to illuminate what it is like for some youth living in Rural Appalachia today. Because we live in a heterosexist and transphobic society, many cis/straight people know very little of the experience of LGBT people. Because the American LGBT rights movement has primarily organized in cities, particularly those on either coast, many activists have little knowledge about the experiences of those of us living in rural areas. This paper is not meant as a guide for change or intervention—rather its goal is to create a coherent introduction for current practitioners, policy makers, and LGBT activists as well as a touchstone for personal growth and reflection. My aim is exploratory, to share some individuals' experiences in a way that honors the cultural context that they share and to articulate the strengths that they possess and the struggles that they endure. I expect that my goals will be different

from those of the mainstream LGBT movement and will provide a relational model for heterosexual/cisgender practitioners, change agents, and the LGBT youth whom they encounter in their work.

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## **Chapter One: Theoretical Framework**

This paper was written within a trans theory framework. We live in a society that still equates biology to destiny so that sex determines gender identity determines sexual orientation determines gender expression. When approaching the LGBT community, it is important to distance oneself from the social construction that frequently presents itself as heterosexism (Burdge, 2007). Rather, it is important to conceive of these categories as fluid, subject to change, ambiguous, and independent of one another. In “Gender Outlaw: on men, women, and the rest of us,” Kate Bornstein (1994) articulates the damage that has been done in the name of a binary gender system. Bornstein communicates the ways in which this binary perpetuates a clear power structure with a vested interest in maintaining an absolute division between categories. The work of maintaining that divide to legitimize male power is often where one can find the manifestation of homo- and transphobia.

To a certain extent, all of the youth included here are “outlaws” in their own rights. The narrative structure of this project is intended to be a snapshot of how one oppressed group copes with the stresses put on them by the expectations of the dominant group while also highlighting the extent to which queerness is embedded already in the unexpected place-time of rural Appalachia.

While the mainstream LGBT rights movement is focused primarily on obtaining specific rights and privileges of dominant culture and assimilating queer culture into the mainstream, there is also a movement that seeks to revise what is considered normal, conventional, and meaningful. As an unnamed activist in Meagan Davidson’s 2007 study

of the Trans activism observed, “the ease with which identity can be abandoned in favor of issue-based organizing corresponds to increased levels of social privilege.” This quote highlights the relative privilege that it requires for one to pick a single issue on which to focus—for an educated, wealthy cis white male couple, marriage may seem like a no-brainer. When the LGBT movement chooses one issue (such as same-sex marriage) above others, it does so at the cost of other issues, often those affecting the most vulnerable in the community—such as safe medical care for trans people, job protections, youth homelessness, and many more. While the marriage equality movement has been hugely successful, this particular focus tends to downplay difference within the community with the unfortunate side effect of alienating those with less privilege.

Narrative projects can help to locate sources of pain and struggle as well as unique nexuses of strength and resilience within our community. Many problems may not be as easily solved as removing the Defense of Marriage Act from the U.S. Constitution or enacting other specific policies. Because it is my intention to represent as authentically as possible the point of view of the youth depicted here, I will attempt to make clear when my voice as the researcher is in use. Ultimately, it is the youth whose point of view I am seeking to articulate and not my own.

## **Chapter Two: Literature Review**

LGBT youth today face many challenges in their school and peer environment, from bullying and harassment to hostile school climate. In addition to direct forms of attack from peers, LGBT youth typically also face school systems that choose not to represent LGBT history, individuals, or families in its curriculum. This erasure and neglect in concert with hostile environments can give strength to feelings of exclusion or shame in LGBT youth and lead to negative mental health outcomes such as risk of self-harming behavior, depression, and substance abuse (Elia & Eliason, 2010; Fedewa & Ahn, 2011; Lui & Mustanski, 2012; Poteat, O'Dwyer, & Mereish, 2011; Vega, Stephanie, Crawford, Heather, & Pelt, J-Lynn, 2012).

While students in schools with Gay-Straight Alliances (GSAs) tend to believe that they can be more open about their sexuality and are less likely to hear slurs, it is still difficult for many students to create these groups. Even when GSAs do exist, they tend to under-represent students of color (Elia & Eliason, 2010). Safe gathering spaces for youth, such as GSAs, might be particularly important for LGBT persons because they are more likely than the general population to report a lack of support from formal and informal support systems (Ahn & Fedewa, 2011; Palmer, Kosciw, & Bartkiewicz, 2012).

Overt homophobia is not only linked to bullying and aggression in the overall student population, but has been reported to cause distress among all students, not only those that identity as LGBT (Ahn & Fedewa, 2011; Poteat, O'Dwyer, & Mereish, 2011). Even though all students can be a target for victimization and LGBT slurs, when the



student does happen to be LGBT, they tend to have higher negative outcomes (Poteat, O'Dwyer, & Mereish, 2011).

Discrimination and oppression within school systems seem to be a reflection of mainstream society and not a product of the school system. As such, youth enter the adult world already inundated with institutional homophobia (Boes & Wormer, 2002; Elia & Eliason, 2010; Vega, Crawford, & Van Pelt, 2012). In a 2012 report on School Bullying by the United States Government Accountability Office (GAO), recommendations were made to begin collecting information by sexual orientation and gender identity; the problem of anti-LGBT bullying and the acknowledgement of high risk of suicide in this group is finally leading to greater recognition for change in schools. While gender identity is only loosely covered under sex-based discrimination with the Civil Rights Act of 1964, there have been steps in recent years to clarify that language to be deliberately inclusive and eliminate bias (US GAO, 2012). For example, on December 18<sup>th</sup> 2014, the Department of Justice (DOJ) issued a memo stating that they “will take the position in litigation that the protection of the Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 extends to claims of discrimination based on an individual’s gender identity, including transgender status” (US DOJ, 2014). At present, there are still many LGBT people for whom employment and other discrimination protections do not exist.

Regarding the atmosphere in the south, a 2013 Pew Research study of LGBT Americans discovered that adults living the American south were more likely to report experiencing four or more incidents of discrimination against themselves than those living in other areas—29% compared to just under 20% in other regions. They were

also much more likely to say that there was no acceptance of the LGBT population where they live than those living in other areas—39% in the south, versus less than 20% in other regions. Concerning students in Tennessee schools, over 90% regularly heard anti-gay slurs, and over 80% heard negative remarks regarding how someone expressed their gender (Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network, 2014). These remarks were not exclusively from other students—around a third of students reporting hearing homo- and trans-phobic language from school staff (GLSEN, 2014). The majority of LGBT students in Tennessee schools experienced verbal harassment—about 80% based on orientation, and 60% based on gender expression—and around half were physically harassed (pushed or shoved), with just over 10% were physically assaulted (punched, kicked, injured with a weapon; GLSEN, 2014).

LGBT people in rural areas face similar issues as those in urban areas, though they may also face circumstances particular to their environments. There are some marked differences, not the least of which is isolation. This isolation is not just because of smaller numbers and more physical distance between individuals, but also a distinct lack of services/supports that target LGBT groups, absence of visible community, and a greater chance of experiencing harassment, discrimination, and stigma (Boulden, 2008; Cohn & Hastings, 2010; Hastings & Hoover-Thompson, 2011; Horowitz, 2014; Leedy & Connolly, 2008; McCarthy, 2000; Wang, 2011; Willging, Salvador, & Kano, 2006). Family and community support networks may not be accessible to LGBT individuals in the same way as they are to straight individuals, because of the higher prevalence of the fundamentalist church and greater reliance on heteronormative gender roles and

expectations (Dillon & Savage, 2006). This common situation may lead to pressure for LGBT individuals to stay in the closet (Cohn & Hastings, 2010; Dillon & Savage, 2006; Hastings & Hoover-Thompson, 2011; Kennedy, 2010). Being out in a rural area may look very different than being out in an urban or suburban environment. Often, rural people may consider themselves to be out, but are not openly queer at their workplace or in public areas such as restaurants, for example (Boulden, 2008; Leedy & Connolly, 2008; Kennedy, 2010).

The sense of isolation that many rural people feel is key to understanding their experience. Resilience literature points to the notion that young people are much less at risk when they have at least one supportive adult in their life (Cohn & Leake, 2012; Cohn & Hastings, 2010). An atmosphere where silence is the dominant mode of communication and LGBT individuals live in fear of discovery can create a shattered sense of self. One is always calculating how much they can trust various people in their life, while living in fear of losing relationships or enduring judgment based on their status as a sexual or gender minority (Kennedy, 2010; Boulden, 2008). In a small town, being out might mean becoming a sort of scapegoat or at the very least the go-to person to “explain the gay lifestyle” for their straight friends—this can be tiring and emotionally grating for individuals (McCarthy, 2000; Cohn & Hastings, 2010; Boulden, 2008).

In terms of gender difference, one qualitative study exploring the lives of gay men and lesbians in Wyoming found that while both groups reported societal and institutional discrimination, lesbians in isolated areas reported very high levels of institutional discrimination—a testament not only to homophobia, but also deeply

entrenched sexism (Leedy & Connolly, 2008). Lacking a visible community and relying on mainstream media for information can also lead to rural lesbians coming out later and internalizing the misogynist ideals of popular culture, such as struggles with body image and slut-shaming or otherwise repressed female desire (McCarthy, 2000; Yost & Chmielewski, 2011).

For rural men who have sex with men, silence and isolation may lead to a greater reliance on the internet to meet sexual partners, a practice that has been linked to risky sex behaviors (Bowen, Horvath, and Williams, 2006; Kakietek, Sullivan, & Heffelfinger, 2011; Kennedy, 2010). There is some literature on rural gay men that has found that there is high pressure to conform to hyper-masculine gender expectations resulting in high levels of internalized homophobia and effeminophobia—as seen in an over-emphasis on similarities between themselves and rural straight men as opposed to urban gay men, who are typically believed to be more feminine (Annes & Redlin, 2012; Kennedy, 2010). This literature also reveals the supportive factor that the rural environment may provide—the calm and quiet of isolation and the accessibility to nature may help to relieve the stress of the xenophobic town (Annes & Redlin, 2012; Boulden, 2008).

There are very few focused studies of transgender individuals in rural environments. However, studies indicate that these individuals endure similar or higher victimization rates as their LGB peers as well as other negative outcomes—such as negative self-worth (Balleur-van Rijn, Steensma, Kreukels, & Cohen-Kettenis, 2012; Lombardi, 2009; Liu & Mustanski, 2012; Palmer, Kosciw, and Bartiewicz, 2012; Poteat,

O'Dwyer, & Mereish, 2011). Rural trans people also face very real concerns about employment once they have come out—while people in larger cities might be able to use anonymity in their favor, those working in small towns with already limited employment prospects might feel they will become unemployable or endangered at work if they come out or begin to transition and plan to continue living and working in the same town (Walinsky and Whitcomb, 2010). The literature reinforces the notion that the needs of the trans community are unique from the larger LGB people and often unexplored (Burdge, 2007; Perrson, 2009). One comparison study on mental health, substance use, and sexual risk behaviors found nearly no differences between urban and rural transgender male and female populations, with one significant difference. Rural trans men scored significantly higher on depression and somatization scales, and suffered from significantly lower self-esteem than their urban counterparts (Horvath, Iantaffi, Swinburne-Romine, and Bockting, 2014). From a provider's prospective, Eliason and Hughes' found in their 2004 study of urban vs. rural drug treatment counselor's attitudes towards LGBT clients that while there was a lack of training and education on all groups within the queer spectrum, the lack of preparation to work with trans clients was substantially higher. The same researchers, however, found that training and exposure to LGBT groups did not seem to affect attitude toward transgender clients.

The rural environment can affect us in various profound ways. Michael Kennedy's 2010 study "Rural Men, Sexual Identity, and Community," focuses on rural men from two basic groups—those from the area (natives) and those who have chosen to move to the area (transplanters). Transplanters tended to be more stable and supported. They tend

to be in a committed relationship with another man, of higher socioeconomic status, and they could choose who they interact with and what social networks they are involved in rather than travelling in the circles in which they were raised—many viewed their very existence as a radical act. Kennedy (2010) found that while native men were more entrenched in their communities, they also experienced much pain and hurt related to their community, which could hinder personal growth or community involvement. One of the primary examples is a rejection of religion and the ubiquitous religious community all together as a result of being cast as a sinner. However, a study conducted in the southwest, rather than the Midwest, found that many LGBT people, particularly those who are not white, continue to rely heavily on faith communities for mental health services. However, they may pay for this care with their silence or willingness to stay closeted (Willging, Salvador, and Kano, 2006).

It is apparent that religion is an issue with which many rural LGBT people wrestle. As described above, many feel that they must reject the community that has rejected them or they must silence themselves to continue being a part of an institution integral to their life. In the rural south, religious involvement is even more prevalent than anywhere else in America, as evidenced by church attendance (Dillon & Savage, 2006). Additionally, many rural southerners are Southern Baptist, evangelical, born-again Christians—a group typically at the most conservative edge of American politics and religion (Dillon & Savage, 2006). Michele Dillon and Sarah Savage (2006) found that 75% of southerners thought that same-sex relationships are “always or almost always wrong.” According to the Pew Research Center (2014), while support for same-sex

marriage is steadily rising over time, white evangelical protestants continue to lag behind, with only 23% supporting same-sex marriage. Contrast this to mainline protestants at 62% in support of gay marriage.

Twenty-nine percent of all LGBT adults report that they have been made to feel unwelcome in a place of worship. It is significant that nearly half of all LGBT-identified adults say that they have no religious affiliation, as compared with only 20% of the general population. Of those adults do have a religious affiliation, one-third say that there is conflict between their religious beliefs and their LGBT identity (Pew Research Center, 2013)

For rural individuals, system-level change and opportunities to gather openly may be key to personal health and wellness (Snively, 2004; McCarthy, 2000). In a small town environment, queer community is often a much-needed lifeboat for an otherwise drowning swimmer, although these communities may struggle to develop because of the homophobic pressures of the greater community and vast physical distance (Boulden, 2008; Kennedy, 2010; Yost & Chmielewski, 2011; McCarthy, 2000). With regard to GSAs, rural high school students attend much more frequently than their urban and suburban peers—wherever formal or informal groups exist, rural people tend to flock (Palmer, Kosciw, & Bartkiewics, 2012). This may be related to the findings of a recent study by GLSEN entitled, “Strengths and Silences: The experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender students in rural areas and small towns,” which reveal that rural schools consistently pose the greatest threats to the mental health and safety of students (2012).

While being out at a young age poses a higher risk of victimization for all LGBT youth (Yarbrough, 2003), the risk is exaggerated in rural environments (Palmer, Kosciw, & Bartiewics, 2012). These students overwhelmingly attend school districts where there are no harassment or assault protections for sexual orientation or gender identity, lack of inclusive curriculum, and school officials and teachers who are not trained on LGBT issues and are thus less likely to intervene (Palmer, Kosciw, & Bartiewics, 2012; Vega, Crawford, & Van Pelt, 2012). Indeed, 21% of rural LGBT youth surveyed by GLSEN attend schools where there is no bullying policy at all; nearly all students surveyed reported feeling unsafe at school (Palmer, Kosciw, & Bartiewics, 2012). Despite this, the same study found that rural and small town youth have the same rates of being out as their urban and suburban counterparts, despite much higher rates of victimization and lack of resources or policy protections (Palmer, Kosciw, & Bartiewics, 2012).

In qualitative studies of small town queer adults, there is much discussion about silence around one's identification or "passing"—allowing others to believe that one is straight and adhering to dominant culture's beauty standards and gender roles (Annes & Redlin, 2012; Boulden, 2008; Kennedy, 2010; McCarthy, 2000). Relationship networks are often different for rural individuals than urban ones. Rural LGBT people may have primarily straight friends in their social network and who may only have the fact they are queer in common with other LGBT individuals. In Linda McCarthy's 2000 study of rural lesbians, the women to whom she spoke were always seeking out relationships with more diverse lesbians and communities. They put great investment in their relationships, in part because it was so difficult for them to find like-minded others. Like



the men in Micheal Kennedy's (2010) and other studies, these women sometimes felt they had to pick between their rural and sexual identities—usually with the rural identity winning out (McCarthy, 2000; Boulden, 2008). This amounts to an individual who never identifies as homosexual or interacts with the LGBT community at large (though they may continue to have same-sex relations), because they are afraid of breaking with their families and communities and becoming a pariah (Kennedy, 2010; McCarthy, 2000; Willging, Salvador, & Kano, 2006).

Willging, Salvador, and Kano's 2006 study of rural LGBT people in the southwest found that some people of color returned to their families and rural contexts in order to heal from substance abuse disorders that had spiraled out of control during their time in the urban LGBT scene. As mentioned earlier, ethnic and religious communities were important vehicles for support and mental health, although accessing either could require silencing one's sexuality.

Going into this project, there was an expectation that youth may not feel the need to choose between their rural and sexual or gender identity and that they may be comfortable with a higher level of ambivalence than middle-aged people. A good example of the inclusive resourcefulness of youth can be found in a 2010 study of genderqueer youth. In this study young adults were able to name numerous paths to change accommodating more than two genders, changes that might not be as easily recognized by older people (Satzburg & Davis). Today's young people are uniquely situated to be leaders in a new vision of emotional health and community wellness. At a time when LGBT activism is creeping into the mainstream and more of us are living,

loving, and growing out of the closet than ever before, these young adults work not only to understand themselves and their desires, but the shifting political and cultural tides of the world around them with an eye of opportunity (Durso & Gates, 2012; Palmer, Kosciw, and Bartkiewicz, 2012; Pew Research Center, 2014).

### Chapter Three: Methodology

Four LGBT youth were recruited to participate in this University of Tennessee Internal Review Board-approved project over the course of a year. The researcher distributed a call for participants and two videos describing the project through local LGBT listservs and mailing lists, colleges and universities, LGBT organizations, GSAs, social media, and word of mouth. Calls for participants were also handed out at a local pride festival and academic seminar. One participant was referred to the project by a professor, two heard of the project through word of mouth, and the fourth heard of this project at the pride festival. Demographic information for each individual can be found in Table 1. All of these individuals were living in East Tennessee at the time of the interview, are white, and all but Justin were enrolled in two or four year colleges or universities.

**Table 1: Demographics**

<b>NAME</b>	<b>AGE</b>	<b>GENDER</b>	<b>SEXUAL IDENTITY</b>
Fallon	18	Agender	Biromantic Demisexual
Justin	19	Male	Bisexual
Tammy	21	Female	Bisexual
Alice	21	Female	Attracted only to women

Twenty-one individuals contacted the researcher via email expressing interest in the project, though only four fit in the inclusion criteria. Criteria include: must be between 18-21 years of age at the time of interview, must have lived in the same county for at least 10 years, must have attended a high school zoned as rural by the National Center for Educational Statistics, must live in a county identified as Appalachian by the

Appalachian Regional Commission, must identify as a gender or sexual minority, and must not have any immediate plans to move. Of those not included in the study, eleven were not interviewed because they either no longer lived in their hometowns, had plans to move, or their high schools were not zoned as rural; four were outside of the age range; contact was lost with one individual; the final young person did not identify as a gender or sexual minority.

Each individual who fit the criteria was interviewed face to face over one to three hours at the location of the interviewees' choosing. Most interviews took place in public parks, though one took place at a fast-food restaurant. Each interview was audio-recorded on the researcher's computer and then transcribed by the researcher. All names were changed; each individual chose a pseudonym for themselves though the researcher re-created names for family and friends referred to in the course of the interviews. The researcher obtained signed consent forms for each individual before each interview and distributed a list of mental health resources in the event that recalling their story was triggering of past trauma. The interviewer contacted each youth about a week after the initial interview for follow-up to address any additional concerns.

There is one notable instance of deviation: the first interview with Justin was repeated due to a computer malfunction during the recording process. At the second interview, Justin had moved to another county where he was staying with his boyfriend while looking for permanent housing for the two of them. Because he previously fit all inclusion criteria, had yet to secure a new permanent address, and both reasons for the

first interview were invalid and the move were because of reasons outside of the researcher's or participant's control, the researcher chose to include his interview in this project.

Atlas.ti was used to code the four interviews. The researcher did have the help of a peer reviewer during this process for the purpose of inter-rater reliability. The researcher used an inductive coding process, allowing codes to emerge from the text. After coding all four interviews, the researcher clarified code definitions, removed extraneous codes and quotes, and added codes that emerged in later interviews to earlier ones where applicable. A colleague then reviewed all the coded material, resulting in a coding match of well over 95%. After composing the "Findings" Section, this section was distributed to each participant, who then had an opportunity to review the information and provide feedback in the interests of confidentiality, clarification, and transparency.

## **Chapter Four: Findings**

The top themes to emerge from the text were: Coming out, Religious Environment, Family, and Peer Networks. Three of these themes can be described as protective factors or sources of strength and resilience for these youth. The one exception is religious environment, which was the most frequently occurring code. Though the religious environment portion is rather brief there is significant overlap with other codes, particularly with family.

### ***Coming Out***

The young people included here were in various stages of outness. All of them were out to their friends, and most of them were out with their family. The pressures of heteronormativity are strong; the majority of these youth described a culture under the reign of silence for gender and sexual minorities. Everyone of them expressed their anxiety about coming out. Justin described his hometown rather succinctly in common terms:

Growing up I went to a very redneck school. High School. And they were kind of [all] the same way [as one another]. Christian. Country people that... a lot of them aren't accepting of homosexuality. A place where you would hear, "oh that's gay." Or "faggot" a lot.

The use of "redneck" or "country" as a pejorative to illustrate the danger in otherness permeates these narratives—the redneck/country norm is one that is built upon a certain kind of white Christian heterosexual ideal. All of these youth report either hearing, seeing, or being the victim of bullying or other acts of aggression against queer

kids in their hometown. Justin described watching other gay teens being bullied when he was in high school:

[S]eeing him getting picked on, it just almost—not just almost, it does—make you worry about coming out yourself. And just trying to hide [being gay]. And I was kind of lucky, being bisexual. I could still date girls and just...I guess it would be easier for me to hide it than any gay person, like full-on gay person. And so I was lucky in that instance, well...at least I can still do this. But still, it was...It was still hiding a part of me, and hating a part of me.

Tammy also described how feelings of fear and shame from hiding one's identity can create barriers to interpersonal relationships:

I've had a few people that I've talked to and we were, we were basically girlfriends but at the same time they didn't, they never wanted to say anything about it because of how it would affect their family or anything else. I mean, it really restricted who I could actually, you know, care about.

In addition to concerns about being bullied by peers, young people often do live with fear about how their family will react if they were to discover one's orientation or gender identity. In rural areas, many people live in a kind of fish bowl—once one person knows, it's not long until everyone does. For example, Justin was never able to come out to his family because he was outed to them. Alice came out to her mother only after she believed her mother had already heard. As a result of this lack of anonymity, young people often have to keep tight control over to whom they have disclosed the truth. When a piece of one's identity is hidden, one is constantly surveying the relative "safety"

of the people that are allowed into their confidence. Tammy explains how for her this meant that;

[Y]ou couldn't really tell anybody about what you thought. Because if you did, you would be exiled, you know?...you couldn't be openly gay in high school because like—I mean, you could but, it's just—you were subject to so much ridicule.

Most of the young people included in this study also talked about how coming out to oneself was a struggle. Alice explained that she first had feelings for another girl as young as kindergarten. However, she waited some ten years to come out.

I kind of looked around and I was like, “ok—I mean—is this normal? Are other people feeling this way? I guess not. I guess I'll just not talk about it.” It was not something that I ever felt bad about, but it was just like, “ok, well, I'll just wait until somebody else talks about it before I mention it.” That kind of thing. And I mean, I guess I did—I never really—didn't know about myself. So yeah, it wasn't really that hard to figure out who I was, it was just figuring out who else was like me.

She continues with,

I just wanted somebody to talk to and relate to. Not even just...like, you're sitting with your friends and you're 15 years old and you're telling them a story and you want their story to be like yours.

Alice describes part of the issue as not having the language for her feelings:

I guess [in coming out, I] was looking for a sense of community, looking for people that felt [the same way as me]. And to me, the way to do that was to have a



name for it. Simply to ask. It's easier, I think, to ask questions and learn things if there are words you can use to describe certain feelings.

Fallon describes a similar struggle when discussing zir gender identity:

I remember sitting in a car and talking to someone, and being little, I mean like 10 or 11 or something, and being like, "...I really think my brain does neither [gender]. What is that?" and they're like, "you're a tomboy." And I was like "ok." ...and I found...a person who has their blog describing their top surgery and everything and I got to them through that. Because I think I wanted to get rid of my breasts before I realized there was a name for what that meant. Wanting to look neutral before I realized everything neutral meant. And I was like, "oh, that's cool." I did, like, super-mega research for like two weeks and I was "That's really cool! Ok, that might be me." Then I was just like, "ok, I'll try it out." And it seems to fit me fairly well. I feel comfortable identifying as that, I feel ok. I feel like it fits.

And sexual orientation:

I thought I was normal until I was like, 13. And then I realized that everyone else felt sexual attraction and I didn't. Everyone was like, "what's wrong with you?" and then my friend Devin sat me down and was like, "Fallon, I think you're asexual, you need to look this up." ...And I looked it up, and I was like, that's cool, ok, I'm this...And, um, the summer after... sophomore year, I started dating [my current partner]. Once I got sexually active, I was like, "I'm kind of attracted to you, in kind of a 'meh' way, but still not to anyone else. I'm messed up." And this

one was like, “no. You’re demisexual.” And I was like, “oh, that makes sense. Ok. I’ll take that.”

Despite lacking a visible queer community and ready access to information on LGBT people in their environment, every one of these young people described feeling relief after coming out. Alice in particular was adamant on this topic:

you hear all of these terrible stories about people growing up in this area, and that’s just not my story...before I came out, it was something that I worried about. Because that’s all you hear, and you know...you are 15 years old and you have just figured out “hey, I like girls.” And you’re looking on the internet and like, “what’s it like to not hide this?” and, and you hear all this...it seems like the stories that get told the most are the ones that are the worst. I mean, and I hate to say that, but you try to gauge what it’s going to be like for you. And I guess I worried so, so much about coming out, more than any issue that I had when I actually came out...It was kind of like, “ok,” like it took me two days and I was like, “what now?” You think of it as this big process and for a lot of people, it is I’m sure. But for me it was something that was very simple. And it was over very quickly.

Justin also explained his coming out as rather anti-climatic. After living in the closet and experiencing a good deal of torment and self-hate as he came to understand and accept his orientation, coming out turned into a positive experience:

I was very lucky, when I—cause I came out on Facebook after I graduated and after my parents found out. It was the first time I could really come out to

someone, because I didn't come out to my parents, they just found out...I got over 200 likes, and just like two hundred comments, a ton of comments, just "very courageous, good job, I'm supporting you." ...when I came out, no one said anything negative. And to come from a small town and a very strict Christian town and Christian school—to hear that was huge.

Fallon and Alice were the only two people who were openly queer in high school.

Fallon describes certain aspects of being out as personally fulfilling, such as in this instance:

I was at school one day and I was wearing something, I was very masculine, and I don't know what it was, but you couldn't really see my breasts the way I dressed or something, and somebody walked by and was like, "is that a boy or a girl?" and I was like, [smiles]. And it felt so good, for some weird reason. To the point where I went to the bathroom and doubled over and like, laughed so hard it hurt. I don't know, it just felt really good.

Yet Fallon also reported more harassment and bullying than any other individual. Fallon acted as a queer student leader, attempting to organize a gay-straight alliance at zir high school. While zie was successful in bringing together and empowering students to feel more positively about themselves and to create relationships with one another, zie also related instances of serious bullying that affected the quality of zir life and made zir a pariah in zir school. Zie described being physically assaulted on at least one occasion and despite finding some support from individual teachers, faced a hostile school

administration where even the adults, particularly teachers, did not seem to feel safe being openly supportive.

### ***Religious Environment***

Religious Environment is the most prolific code to emerge from these interviews. Though only three of the four youth grew up in a religious household, all of them describe the ways that religion affects their everyday lives. Talking about her family and her hometown, Alice put it simply when she said religion “was in everything they did and said.” The religious background of rural Appalachia is overwhelmingly Southern Baptist. These young people talk about how the presumptive religiosity of their hometowns has shaped them and interacted with their sexual orientation. When describing her first job, Tammy explains how her involvement in religion seems to be what led to the job offer:

the reason I got my first job is because I told them that I was—ahem—I told them that I was in bible class at the time and she was like, “So you believe in everything and the Lord and Jesus Christ” and I was just like, “um, yeah.” And she just... that’s the reason I got hired.

After she was hired, Tammy said she

just basically acted like I went to church every Sunday, I just had to act like a quote/unquote “Southern Belle.” And like, you know, go along with what everybody said and I just... I had to act completely different at work. I just kind of acted like “Sweetheart,” you know, tried to be professional and stuff. And didn’t

really, I didn't really talk about my home life all that much or my relationships or anything.

She goes on to explain how her high school offered a class on religion, but

the only religion they teach is Bible...they don't teach any other religions. Hell, I mean in history class they don't even tell you half the shit about what history actually happened! I mean, they tell you what they have to in order for you to get by.

As someone who is not religious, Tammy described how the ubiquity of a particular religious narrative is alienating and restrictive as she looks for opportunities to get involved with her community:

I mean, they have volunteer opportunities but most of them are through churches and things like that I don't really—you know, I don't really go to church so I can't really volunteer and do the things I want to do.

While religious involvement is a positive thing for many people, all of these youth talk about the ways in which a religious environment has harmed them. Religious morality in their rural communities is often tied to a heavy-handed and impossible to reach standard that places judgment on those who are seen as sinful or ungodly. In this atmosphere, atheist or agnostic adults and authority figures are often described as some of the most obvious allies. Fallon talked openly about her process of identifying friendly teachers and pin-pointing their religious affiliation was a big part of that. Similarly, when asked if she had had any queer teachers, Alice answered,

The closest teacher to anything like that was a non-religious teacher. Like, that was a big deal. We had a teacher who didn't believe in God and that was like...the biggest deal ever.

Justin, in particular, had struggles with religion on a very personal level.

My mother, father, [are] both Southern Baptist. Very conservative, very homophobic. Kind of racist, to a point. All that mess. And so, growing up I was taught that homosexuality was bad. I knew that I was bisexual, knew that I was attracted to both sexes. But tried to fight it for 18 years, I did everything—I prayed to God—I did everything to get over it.

He talks about how his mother was coached by her pastor to believe that homosexuality is

...an abomination. And that they needed to kind of kick me out of the house.

Cause we were kind of talking about that and I was asking her to accept it and she was like, "how am I supposed to accept it, especially when my pastor tells me to kick you out of the house?"

In this highly restrictive atmosphere, Justin's bisexuality becomes a source of tension for the entire family. Church and religion are a central part of their lives. It is something that they all have to work through and come to terms with in relation to his orientation. Talking about his mother, he states;

One minute she wants to meet my boyfriend—she doesn't accept this blahblahblah, "well I want to meet your boyfriend. [But] Bill,"—my stepfather—

“won’t allow me.” Cause again, they believe the man is the head of the household, you do what he says.

Many of Justin’s struggles in coming to terms with his identity and his family boil down to the conflict between self and community and religion and authenticity. As a young man who once wanted to be pastor, he is still very much in the process of discovering how to thrive and make sense of his history and his current state of being.

I believe, I think you can be a Christian and be gay. My boyfriend, he goes to [a religious college]. It’s a liberal Methodist school, so they are accepting of gays and stuff. So he’s, he’s a big Christian. And he’s gay. I—which he hates the fact that I’m—right now I’m confused. Because of the way that Christians have kind of—what is the word—the way Christians have treated me, has kind of made me lose faith. I know I can’t blame God for humans, the way they act. And I shouldn’t—that’s wrong. But at the same time, I’m just—let me try to get over this hurt, what people have done.

### ***Family***

All of these young adults are still very involved with their families: all but Justin live with their families or in a home owned by the family, three out of four listed at least one family member as a role model, all of them mention their relationship with their family as a factor when they discuss staying close to where they grew up, three out of the four mention that helping out their family is a central part of their life—either helping older relatives with household tasks, being financially present, or otherwise giving their time to make things easier for their family.

Tammy and Alice both have particularly close relationships with their families.

Tammy put it succinctly:

What makes me stay here? Is my parents. I, uh—I just—whenever I went to [a university further away], I mean, I missed my parents, but I was ok. Well, um, while I was there, my mom had a lot of back trouble. And she wasn't able to, uh, really even get out of bed. She got to the point where she was in bed for about a month and she had to have back surgery. And, uh, whenever I moved to [a closer university] because it was cheaper and everything, I also had to take care of my mom. And then my Dad had a stroke, and I had to take care of him. And I just...I didn't see any reason for me moving away. You know, because they need a lot of help and I love living with them. They are the best people I could probably ever live with.

Alice and her fiancée live in her childhood home and pay the bills at that residence while her mother lives with her grandmother:

I take them both to their doctors appointments frequently, I clean my grandmother's house for her because she's not really able to anymore...Things like that. I mean, because they're both there all the time and they don't have jobs they kind of take care of each other more than I take care of either one of them. But, just because I have other things to do. But, I mean, I do help them out whenever I can. Mostly just money-wise and driving-places-wise. The most recent thing that happened was that my grandmother was like, dizzy. For like, three weeks at a time, and we couldn't figure out why. And we took her to the



hospital like three different times, but at the time my mother had just broken her foot...So it was very much up to me to do that.

With regard to family, another important theme was shared meaning or understanding. A note of discord often arose in these shared values when it came to the youth's sexual orientation and gender identity. The culture in their small towns is highly insular and the dominant view still equates difference to sin. For a family, it can be a struggle to come to terms with what they have been taught and what they know of their children. Queerness is often not readily accepted. Talking about her aunt, Tammy notes, "she's very, very conservative...and their view is that in the bible it says that if, you know, if somebody is sinning that you are supposed to point it out to them." From this mindset, accepting an LGBT individual might also be a marker of one's own moral breakdown.

The fear of rejection or being misunderstood can make it hard for young people to discuss their sexualities in the open. While Tammy's immediate family is not religious, these religious ideals impact them:

I'm not really open about the fact that I'm bisexual because my parents think it's like... they aren't really "against it-against it" they just think that, you know, that's something that I wouldn't be really. You know, they don't expect that...I mean, if I found somebody that I was committed to and I wanted to bring them home to my parents, I definitely would. And I'd tell them.

While Alice is planning her wedding, she has found that her family's religious beliefs have caused some strife. Not only for her, but also for other family members:

I recently got engaged...and my mom, when I got engaged, she told [my uncle]...And they kind of sat down, and he was like, “you know I’ve been—ever since [Alice] told everyone [that she was attracted to women]—I’ve been trying to work at this in my heart. And, um... because what I was raised to believe in and what I’m struggling with now is that I don’t—I can’t reconcile in my heart how that can be ok. But I feel like something that I’ve been taught, or something that I believe, has to be wrong. Because I can’t—” and he just, he started crying and he said, “I want more than anything to be ok enough with this to go to her wedding.” And it wasn’t like—the whole conversation was very—it wasn’t him saying “me, me, me this is how I feel, this is what I believe, this is why I can’t or why I can,” it was “I love her, I want to do this for her, she makes me see that something must be not right in what I think.” And that was a very...it just made me respect him more. If anything. Like I told some people that and they were like, “oh, does that break your heart that he might not be at your wedding?” and I was like, “all that matters is that he wants to be.”

In this atmosphere love and acceptance can get complicated very quickly. While every person interviewed expressed love for their family and feeling love from their family, it’s clear that often they battle with how to understand themselves as a member of a family that struggles to make sense of their queer identity.

Justin is the only person included here who had a younger sibling. For some time his parents did not want his youngest brother to know that Justin is bisexual. Not only was this frustrating for Justin, but his feelings of protection over his younger sibling led

him to becoming more directly involved in creating a more accepting family truth. The notion that he can take part in shaping his family's legacy is very important to him:

My brother didn't know until my step-brother's girlfriend told him because they didn't want him to know. Because [my mother and stepfather] didn't know any gay people until they were in their 30s. My little brother, he is going to be in contact with gay people in middle school, if not in middle school, definitely in high school...I even told them at one point, I want to talk to him about this!

Because if there is any possible way of him being this way, I don't want him to go through what I went through. I want him to know it's ok. You're not—God's not going to condemn you because you are this way and...just because you are being taught [that homosexuality is a sin] by your parents and by your preacher, it's going to be ok.

Sometimes the relationships are not as openly hostile, but difference can sit between two people in a way that creates a silent barrier. Fallon in particular talked about this particular form of distance. Zie's gender identity and sexual orientation mean that zie has to essentially come out twice, and knowing how and when to disclose this information for which one's parent may not have any framework is difficult. In regards to zir relationship with zir mother, Fallon states:

It, the relationship, is getting better. Um, I mentioned on facebook that I was getting top surgery without realizing that I didn't have anyone blocked from it, so she saw that. But I don't think she knows what it means, but I don't think she wants to ask, as a privacy thing. I really want to tell her, but I'm trying, but she

already knows I'm bi, but I'm trying to build up the relationship before I tell her  
"Hey, I'm much weirder than you think. I'm not what you think I am."

Despite the tension, many of these young adults also talk about their families as places of acceptance. Justin describes a conversation between his aunt's family and his brother:

they were in the car...And he was upset. They were like, "why are you upset?"  
And he was like, "Cause Justin's gay." They were like, "—k. Why does that make you upset?" "Cause it's wrong." They were like, "we don't think it's wrong. But also, why does that make you upset? Have you not had good times with your brother before?" And he was like, "well, yeah." They were like, "Just remember that. When you see him, don't think 'he's gay.' Think of the memories you have with him. Think of the good times you've had with him." And it was like, "ok, I can try that I guess."

For Justin, having that acceptance in his family is empowering. He talks about the kind of family that he wants to one day create for himself, which builds on the family values that he has been instilled with and creates a more inclusive vision:

what I want to teach my kids, I don't want—like I'll teach them what sexual orientation is because they are going to learn, I'll teach them that—but I want to teach them love. I don't want them coming home one day, "oh, I think I'm gay." I want them coming home one day, "I think I'm in love with this person, this boy" ...  
I just want to teach my kids love. And I don't like—Because I feel like my little brother has been taught a lot of hate—he hates a lot of people. And I've tried to

get through to him. And I've tried to get through to my mom, who wants to preach to me about being gay is wrong. Because the bible also says "if you hate someone, you hate God." Also it says, "if you hate someone you have committed murder in the eyes of God."

### ***Peer Groups***

Peer groups proved invaluable for these young queer people. For many, having LGBT friends was a key part of developing a queer identity. It was a way of normalizing one's identity and desires. Like-minded peers helped to create a positive buffer against other negative interactions. Alice describes feeling the need to seek out other gay people as a young woman beginning to understand her sexuality,

when I [was] first coming out...my friends were all very supportive. My friends who weren't gay... But they didn't understand, because it wasn't their reality...So I needed [people who are gay in my life]—I guess I needed validation. Is what I was looking for. And so I sought out the people that could give me that. And once I had that, I didn't—I could provide that for myself.

Young people repeatedly talked about the importance of having their feelings and their experience validated by their peers. Justin, for example, consciously sought out other gay men as he struggled to let go of the negative beliefs he had been taught about homosexuality:

I started a fake facebook account—not with someone else's stuff—it was my stuff, but with a different name. And I became friends with gay people on there. And that was when I met my first boyfriend, which was a long-distance relationship.

And so that was when I really—I think really kind of helped me to accept myself into that. And again, allowing gay people, more gay people, into my life to try to accept it. And knowing that they are in that situation and they've gotten better and stuff like that...So to surround myself with people who are already in that environment [where legal protections exist and acceptance is normal, people who] already are used to it and stuff. And I think that helped a lot with accepting it...Which I hated [when] my mom [said]—now we're talking about societies—“well, I know in society gay marriage is looked down on.” Well, not all society.

Often youth talked about finding groups of accepting or like-minded peers and having these groups and interactions provide a sense of protection against the homophobia and cis-sexism that they experienced in their families, in their schools, and in their hometown. Fallon discussed what happened when zir attempted to start a GSA was thwarted by the school administration:

We made like four facebook groups and we invited 300 people from like family and friends. And people were writing in like angry letters. It went over the fucking top. I didn't sleep for like three days because I was busy planning everything. Doing so much stuff! We made tee-shirts, too, we have this [adult activist who]...gave us 300 bucks and just said, “go do stuff that will help you.” So we bought, like, 60 shirts, and [the principal], when he was in the office had said, “We're Christian, we're atheist, we don't talk about those things in [this high school].” So we got together everyone we knew that would talk about things, even if they were 'AP kids' who were the jocks and everything and their shirts would

say “Atheist” or “Christian” or “Satanism”! We had one of those. It had the definition underneath, and on the back it had Tinker V. Des Moines, the court case that supports why you can express your religion, thought, sexuality at school. The whole thing blew up! And they stayed, for like two weeks, out in parks and on people’s back porches and made shirts.

The help and protection that young people offer one another varied from very pointed to more quiet and general. An example of a high-risk form of help would be when Fallon accidentally left out a card for a trans man group, zir friend took ownership of it instead.

[T]he card that the trans man group gave me was sitting out on my kitchen table and at my grandparents’...[My grandfather] picked it up. And that wasn’t good. And my friend who is in the closet was like, “no, no, that’s mine!” which would have been a big risk for her and I was like, “thank you, you’re awesome.” We do a lot for each other, I think. Like we take each other places, make each other feel better. I think it helps.

A less risky, but just as important example of this support would be the kind that Alice provided to younger people in her high school:

It wasn’t like they came to me like, “here’s my problem.” It was like I was out, and I knew they’d just come out and they would come hang around me. It wasn’t like they asked for advice, It was we didn’t really know each other before then. It was like they wanted to see that it was ok...Um, I mean, I’ve had people who weren’t out yet, but came out after we had talks about it. I’ve had that kind of thing, like people who are like, “well—sit down and talk to me about how you came out and

how you feel.” And a few months later they would come out, too. You know?...it made me feel good. That I could play a part, no matter how small, in helping people feel that they were comfortable enough to come out at school. Because I mean, that is a scary thing.

Often simply knowing that other gay people exist could provide enormous feelings of safety for these young people whose hometowns often lack LGBT resources and information. Justin talks about feeling safer in a nearby city because of the visibility of queer culture and gay pride:

There’s more [accepting people there], there’s some in my hometown, there’s some everywhere, but there’s more accepting people...I mean, you can go to [the mall in the city], a store like the one I worked in [in my hometown]. The one I worked at...there are no [visibly] gay people there. You go to [Knoxville]—whew. You see it everywhere. Like you can just sit down and be like, “Gay. Gay. Gay... Definitely gay.” You see it like... I saw this one older couple, they were in their 50s/60s, they were holding hands, and I was like, “uhhhh... cute!” Like you see that there. And I thought it was weird when I went to Pride and I saw these older guys...they had a feminine voice, and you’re just like...in my hometown you just don’t see that, you don’t hear that. And you’re just like... “Wow—I didn’t know old people could be gay.”

Each of these young people describe how being a part of a community helped to improve their self-image and has led them to reach out and to help others. This related directly to working with other young queer people—in official or unofficial capacities—but also



extended to other oppressed or vulnerable groups. Justin went on to describe how his involvement in gay rights has made him engaged with the struggles of other groups in America:

everything is always changing. We are always trying to make the world better with black rights—well with anyone’s rights—but women’s rights, gay’s rights—just because African Americans got rights doesn’t mean, “well, ok, we’re good!” No, we are forever trying to make the world good, the world and our nation better. We’re—it’s taking awhile, we go through phases. Ok these people need rights, these people need rights. The world is always changing. There’s always a group of people that need rights who aren’t getting rights.

## **Chapter Five: Limitations**

While the racial demographics of the county of origin for these four individuals is on average over 95% white, it is important to recognize that all of the interviewees in this study were white and that their experiences would likely differ from youth of color. Additionally, three of these youth were enrolled in a college or university at the time they were interviewed, meaning that they have more formal education than most of the people living in Central Appalachia.

It is also important to address the number of participants in this project. While four people is an appropriate number for a qualitative study intent on reaching deep into the experiences of a group of people, it is important to say their experiences cannot be applied to all young LGBT people in East Tennessee or Central Appalachia. While there is great diversity in the sexual orientation and gender make-up of these participants, there has been a conscious effort not to use their differing identities to draw conclusions about male vs. female experiences, cis vs. trans experiences, etc. because of the fact that the sample size is too small to draw such conclusions in a meaningful way.

Additionally, two of these young people had significant involvement in LGBT activism, so their involvement level and awareness of politics and culture may not be representative of the general LGBT population.

## **Chapter Six: Implications**

First, these findings highlight how the religious environment has impacted some LGBT people in rural Appalachia. For those in queer circles, it's not a secret that more of us choose not to attend churches than our straight and cisgender peers, knowledge that is confirmed with research from the Pew Research Center (2013). If these narratives offer any answer as to why, it would seem this might in part be because of the rejection and judgment that so many of us face, particularly in rural Appalachian or Southern places where fundamentalist religions are the norm. Many were raised religious or steeped in the religion of our peers and communities. When approaching LGBT youth in rural areas as a helping professional, it is important to acknowledge that they may have a difficult history in regards to church or organized religion. The youth in these narratives describe their efforts to steer clear of organized religion and religious people, going so far as to avoid taking part in activities only available through churches and seeking out atheists as friends and allies.

While there continues to be a rise in the number of welcoming congregations (Chaves and Anderson, 2014) and religious advocacy groups such as Believe Out Loud, we must consider how unexamined and reflexive religious involvement in our work affects, hurts, or embraces the queer community. It ought to be noted that there are several churches that have been at the forefront of the gay rights movement, such as Unitarian-Universalists and the Metropolitan Community Church. Particularly in rural areas, these churches may be among the first alcoves of support and the only gathering places from which to build momentum (Horwitz, 2014). There is a need to look closer at

how to appropriately support LGBT people, and particularly youth, as they work through their religious history and potential future in central Appalachia.

At a time when GSAs are on the rise and the first two LGBT community centers are working to open their doors in East Tennessee, we must continue to push for sanctuaries and gathering places for our young people. This is particularly true in areas that seem inhospitable. As visibility increases so do feelings of safety and awareness. Young people in rural areas will come out, and they need to feel supported and celebrated along the way. According to the U.S. National Association of Social Workers Code of Ethics, Social workers have ethical responsibilities to broader society to

promote conditions that encourage respect for all cultural and social diversity within the United States and globally. Social workers should promote policies and practices that demonstrate respect for difference, support the expansion of cultural knowledge and resources, advocate for programs and institutions that demonstrate cultural competence, and promote policies that safeguard the rights of and confirm equity and social justice for all people (2008).

It would seem that we can build on the family connectedness and peer networks that already exist in the region and work to support the entire family through their child's coming out and their life as a open gender or sexual minority. Often families want to be supportive but they lack information on LGBT culture from a person-centered perspective; they may be unsure of how to integrate the reality of their child's identity with their religious beliefs. Therapists, social workers, other helping professionals, and organizations that come in contact with youth should have working knowledge not only

about LGBT individuals and local support organizations but also be aware of the family members' own strengths and needs. At a time when 40% of homeless youth identify as LGBT and conservative preachers call for families to reject their children, working with the family as a whole is critical (Durso & Gates, 2012). The youth identified here continue to express their desire to be involved with their family and to re-define what love and belonging look like in their lives. However tenuous or strained familial bonds may seem, these rural Appalachian youth continue to stress the primacy of kinship. There is a need to further explore rural Appalachian family bonds and LGBT youth from a strengths perspective.

The young people included here repeatedly discuss the positive aspects of coming out in their lives. Having a queer peer group was an important part of not only forming a healthy self-image as a LGBT person, but also a source of protection and support. The peer group helped to mitigate some of the hurt and trauma that they had in relation to their families, churches, and schools. Because it would seem that young people continue to name their identities and choose to live them openly (Pew Research Center, 2013), it is even more critical that we heighten our awareness of LGBT youth and their needs as they organize themselves. While many groups are pushing work in rural Southern areas—most notably Southerners on New Ground—there is still a need to gather information on the lived realities of youth, elders, and everyone in between in these areas, with particular attention to people of color and transgender individuals (Cortes, 2014).

Coming out is a deeply personal decision. While the youth in this study found creative ways to research that process through the Internet and discussions with other youth, they often felt and continue to feel anxious about the aftermath of disclosing their identity. Once they have come out, however, they tended to be overwhelmingly relieved. The young people in this study reported hearing negative comments from school administration and witnessing bullying of LGBT peers in educational environments—these experiences were part of the difficult but changeable cultural factors that kept them from coming out.

Returning to the NASW Code of Ethics, we have a responsibility to our clients to “obtain education about and seek to understand the nature of social diversity and oppression with respect to...sexual orientation, gender identity[, and] gender expression” (2008). Following from this, we have responsibilities as professionals to “not practice, condone, facilitate, or collaborate with any form of discrimination on the basis of...sexual orientation, gender identity or gender expression” (NASW, 2008). We must keep these responsibilities in the forefront of our work as we approach rural Appalachian LGBT youth, with particular attention to how religion and the coming out process have impacted or continue to impact them as individuals.

The need for LGBT organizations to reach out to those of us who live in “unexpected” places remains. Whereas so much of the popular rhetoric relies on the belief that being gay is not a choice, the majority of funding and resources continue to evade the grasp of people living in rural areas, in the south, in Appalachia, poor people, and people of color (Hasenbush, Flores, Kastanis, Sears, & Gates, 2014; Horwitz, 2014;

Kan, 2014). While many groups advocate for marriage equality, transgender people in Tennessee and other states are unable to change their sex on their birth certificate leaving them vulnerable to discrimination and harassment when they are required to provide identifying documents, such as in the hiring process for a new job (Transgender Law Center, 2015). State and Federal barriers to changing one's gender with the Department of Motor Vehicles and Social Security Administration can leave one vulnerable every time they have to provide identifying documents; when, for example, being pulled over for speeding or picking up medication at the pharmacy (Auldridge, Tamar-Mattis, Kennedy, Ames, & Tobin, 2012). In the state of Tennessee and many others, we can be legally fired from our jobs for displaying so proudly the marriage pictures others fought to make possible (ACLU, 2011).

The youth interviewed here report great comfort in seeing how others live in peace and acceptance in Northern, urban areas and other countries. But that is a double-edged sword; it can also feel like that to be happy and complete, we must abandon our families, our accents, and the hills we call home. While the four youth articulate that they have been told it is safer or easier for them in cities, this study finds that there are many strengths in rural Appalachian queer communities—quiet resiliency, strong family bonds, and vibrant peer communities that often lead to greater social and political involvement.

## **Chapter Seven: Conclusion**

The young people in this story illustrate national trends. Notably that youth are coming out at younger ages despite the potential for discrimination, family rejection, and other negative outcomes (Pew Research Center, 2013). They are coming out and it is an overwhelmingly positive experience for them. If anything, what these stories illustrate is the transformative nature of living one's full truth.

Over and over again these youth talked about the negative story they had been told about their rural, Appalachian culture. That they would be bullied, harassed, hated, that it would be impossible for them to live in their hometowns. Indeed, those are statements that many of our young people are told point-blank by adults in their hometowns as well as those outside the region. The message that rural Appalachia is hostile to queer individuals is pervasive. It is important to recognize the truth in that statement and to recognize our opportunity to improve visibility and outreach. We must remember that negligence from leaders of the (mainstream, urban) national LGBT community to address our concerns does not mean that we do not exist or do not belong. There is growing momentum in the LGBT movement to seize the energy of the "marriage moment" and to continue to fight other critical battles and to spread our efforts into rural and Southern places (Horwitz, 2014).

Despite the slurs, the judgment, and struggles to connect with one's family and the religious community one may find oneself in, coming out is important work. It is work that generally leads to feelings of positivity about oneself that can also act as an entrance way into greater social and political involvement. This is re-enforced by the



Pew Research Study of LGBT Americans, who found that queer adults are more likely than the general population to recognize racism and xenophobia against other marginalized groups (2013).

This small handful of rural individuals exemplifies larger concerns about the ambivalence that many young people feel toward Central Appalachia. Family and place kept many of these young people at home, while also pushing them away. At times it can feel impossible to belong to a place where one is inundated with messages that you don't belong—where the church you grew up in calls you an abomination, where the teachers at your school might give you silent support or turn a blind eye when you are harassed daily, where you and your friends may live in fear that if your secret truth gets out you may end up without a roof to sleep under, where the notion of difference as sin so heavy that even strangers feel compelled to express their opinions in ways that might seem terribly gauche in New York, San Francisco, or even Atlanta.

There is a need to continue to learn how to appropriately and effectively provide support to youth in rural Appalachian areas, and particularly those who experience multiple forms of oppression. This study was too small to name differences between women who are only sexually and romantically attracted to women, bisexual men and women, and trans individuals. There remains a need to approach each unique group in the LGBTQQIAA spectrum as a separate demographic, with its own circumstances. This study is a limited introduction into the basic themes and concerns of rural Appalachian LGBT youth. Future research is needed to build knowledge of the diversity in our region as well as to develop evidence-based plans for intervention on multiple levels. There is

also a need to build on our quantitative knowledge—many national and even regional studies lump Appalachia in with the South if it is acknowledged at all.

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**Appendices**

## Interview Questions

Describe your experience growing up in a rural area. Did the rural environment shape who you are today? If so, how?

Who are your role models? Why?

Why do you stay in your hometown?

Describe your relationships with other LGBT people.

How do you identify your sexual orientation and gender identity? What does this identification mean to you?

Do you often visit the city? What meaning do those visits have for you?

## List of Terms

Zie/zir: Third-person pronouns for individuals who do not identify as male or female

Cisgender: A person who identifies with the gender they were assigned at birth

(sometimes shortened to “cis”)

Queer: An umbrella term for gender and/or sexual minorities

Transphobia: The fear and hatred of transgender people (Human Rights Campaign)

Heteronormativity: The rules and assumptions under-pinning social roles which

maintain that everyone is straight or that heterosexuality is the normal or natural way of being

Effeminophobia: The fear and hatred of feminine men (Richardson, 2009)

Biromantic: Capable of having romantic feelings toward both genders

Demisexual: A person who develops sexual feelings only after making a personal

connection with another person; a person for whom sexual and emotional feelings are deeply intertwined.

## **Vita**

Amy Jordan was born in Knoxville, TN and raised in Loudon County. Zie graduated from Lenoir City High School and went on to attend Mary Baldwin College in Staunton, VA where zie earned an honor's degree in English with minors in Women's Studies and Sociology. As an undergraduate student, zie was involved in many student organizations including Sisters Out Understanding and Loving Sisters (SOULS), Miscellany, various theatre projects, and participated in several activist groups. After graduating, zie accepted an Americorps\*VISTA position in St. Paul, Minnesota as a Volunteer Coordinator for the public library system's Homework Center program. After several years, zie returned to East Tennessee and began work on zir Master of Science in Social Work with a focus on Management, Leadership, and Community Practice, during which time zie completed field placements at the YWCA and Appalachian Community Fund.