

Transcription of Oral History Interview with Russell Wilbur

Riley: So today's date is November 2019. The location is 158 North Street apartment 120 Portland, Maine 04104. My name is Riley Kirk, R-I-L-E-Y K-I-R-K and I use the pronouns she, her, hers.

Sam: My name is Sam Penley, S-A-M P-E-N-L-E-Y and I use the pronouns he, him, his.

Riley: And Russell could you spell your name for us?

Russell: My name is Russell Wilbur, R-U-S-S-E-L-L W-I-L-B-U-R.

Riley: And then this interview will last sixty to ninety minutes. At any moment, feel free to refuse any questions you do not want to answer and just a reminder you can stop this interview at any moment.

Sam: I guess to start off uh, if I could ask you some basic information like uh how old are you?

Russell: I'm seventy

Sam: What pronouns do you prefer?

Sam: If any.

Russell: Gay man? Is that what you are looking for? Is that your question?

Riley: Just kind of like do you identify as he, him, his?

Russell: Oh him.

Riley: Okay.

Russell: Yep.

Sam: And what race or ethnicity do you identify with?

Russell: Canadian, French Canadian native.

Riley: And then now we are going to ask you questions about your family of origin.

Russell: Sure.

Riley: Where were you born?

Russell: Waterville, Maine.

Riley: Is that where you grew up?

Russell: Yes.

Riley: And what was your family structure like growing up? Did you live with two parents?

Russell: Do you have more than ninety minutes? No I was born in a family that, my mother was never married and there were eight kids with eight different men. Like to know anything else?

Riley: Did you have any siblings you were close with?

Russell: None.

Riley: None of them?

Russell: Nope, not really. From the age of eight, the first eight years of my life I was born at my grandmother's house. And there were four siblings and my mother and an uncle living there. At the age of eight, my mother pulled us out of my grandmother's house and moved us from Winslow to Waterville in the slums. We lived there probably for ten years or so.

Riley: So until you were roughly eighteen give or take?

Russell: Seventeen, eighteen. It was um a cold water flat and there was garbage behind the building. Everyone threw their garbage out the window. So there were river rats and cockroaches that came in every night.

Riley: That's crazy.

Russell: It's the truth. I laugh because it is so hard to believe.

Riley: How does it make you feel like growing up partly with your grandmother and then partly with your mother?

Russell: Well, I thought about this a lot lately, if angels really exist, my grandmother was an angel. She loving, kind, selfless. She was probably one of the most loving people I have meet in my life. My mother was a royal bitch. I think that she had some kind of mental illness. She physically and mentally abused us. And then, my siblings at the time of course when your younger you not aware of this, that they were all homophobic. Because from nineteen- sixty to nineteen-seventy being gay, lesbian, transsexual or whatever you might identify as. It was a mental illness and they could put you in a mental institution from the age fourteen to eighteen and give you shock treatment every day. So I made damn sure that nobody knew. I knew I kind

of knew that I was gay, but I was certainly wasn't accepting of myself yet. So there was no way anybody was going to find out because I would end up in a mental institution.

Riley: That's crazy.

Russell: That's very crazy. I saw a documentary a couple of years ago about a young girl. She lived out west and she was fourteen and her parents stuck her in a mental institution, it was in the sixties. And then they did shock treatment everyday she was there for four years. It was amazing that she even survived. It is very sad, very heart breaking. So that was from sixty to seventy. And then by seventy the psychiatrist realized that it was not a mental illness, ha ha ha. I got clean and sober in seventy five and I totally change my life around. And my siblings didn't want uh, of course I didn't know at the time, but they did not want me to be sober. Uh because they didn't know how to handle me because I started advocating for myself you know. So I stop going there about Waterville about ten or twelve years ago. Because there was three at that time three out seven are not three all seven had called me an f'ing queer to my face. And that was really hurtful so I just I have never gone back there and I don't speak to them. In the beginning when it happened it was really very tough and then as the years have gone by I've realized that it is not my loss, it's their loss. And I started making new family when, well actually I made new family while I was there after a couple years of being sober. And the people I met after a year sober in AA were uh four Milton Dykes. I mean that is what they called themselves. So they were the ones that helped me tremendously, tremendously. And they talked after like a year hanging out with them because we were all in the program. After about a year or so one of them said to me, you know got to go find some gay male friends because you know you gonna end up being a lesbian. And I said no I don't think so, but there was nobody at the time that I knew that as far as a man in AA that was out at all. I knew they were there I was not the only one, but nobody was out so it was really difficult and even in AA at the time there was discrimination you know. Cause I one time I spoke after two years sober and I spoke and I told my whole history basically. The next day I got three phone calls from three different guys that told me that they didn't want my kind there. And what they didn't realize was that how much of a big favor they did me because that was the first time I found my voice. And from that moment on, I said to myself, nobody is ever going to beat me again or abuse me in any way because I'm going to stand up for myself and I don't give a shit who you are. That was my view and it's been like ever since.

Russell: Yeah because when they told me they didn't want me there I told them I said tomorrow night I will be sitting rate next to you. Turn it around.

Riley: So other than that discrimination you faced at AA was there any other discrimination you faced for being out?

Russell: Well in nineteen seventy-seven there was this little gay dance club just outside of Augusta Maine. And it probably held about fifty people and people came all the way from Bangor, Skowhegan so we could have that connection. And in nineteen seventy-seven two guys

walked in and threw three bombs in the place. They were gas bombs so you couldn't see. So do you know what bottle necking is?

Riley: No.

Russell: Well it's kind of like when traffic is all backed up and is going like this. We kind of all liked squished together and because we couldn't see we tore two emergency doors off the hinges. And then cell phones weren't around at the time and computers didn't exist so it was out in the country. So I went next door and ask the lady if she would call the police and she said I'll call them, but my husband does not like you people. So they called police they showed up and it was like they we were bothering them. And I took a friend of mind to the emergency room and the doctor was not nice to him whatsoever. But we had no rights you know. Then fall that same year we were getting out of the bar at one in the morning and somebody had smashed every window and every single car. And so I said to friend of mine that lived in Skowhegan I said are you going to claim on your insurance? He said no I can't. I said why? He said because he worked in a bank, he said my boss would fire me. It was never written up in a newspaper at all.

Riley: Really?

Russell: Truly. It's kind of hard to imagine because of your age you know, but it existed. That's what I tell my friends about pride every year is that laws have made change, but not everybody's attitude changes. And when you get older, I have had these conversations with friends of mine. That when you get older hopefully it doesn't happen, but you end up in a nursing home there is more discrimination. You certainly can't advocate for yourself there. I was telling my PCB that last week and she said that oh I never realize that. I said of course you wouldn't your not a lesbian. You know, but I said those are the things that do exist in our world.

Riley: Do you find that you face any discrimination living here where you live now?

Russell: I do, yes. But I like my apartment and it's awful hard to prove that, you know it's a real long process because this is elder housing, public housing. So it's like you have to go through all the hoops and they basically I have learnt that too people just lie, you know to protect their ass. So, that goes on here. I'm and sure it's not the only place for public housing, it's not like I chose at one point in my life oh I think when I'm sixty or seventy and I no longer can work I think I want to live in public housing. You know because I have always worked for myself and things happen in our lives that we have no control over.

Riley: Do you feel like you have a community here that's supportive?

Russell: Not really. I've become friends with a woman across the hall and one other woman and that's it. There's four lesbians that live here and another gay man but it's nothing that is talked about. I don't hangout in the front lobby, I don't want these people knowing any of my business. There is a back door like I have home health, I have nurses that come and see me

every week and I have them take the back door because I do not want them knowing my business. I just like to be living in peace and quiet, leave me alone.

Riley: You have a nice space for it, it's really beautiful here.

Russell: Thank you. This is the biggest apartment between the two buildings.

Riley: Sam, do you want to move onto the next section?

Sam: Yeah. We saw you circled religion and we were wondering if you had a religion that you followed?

Russell: Nope.

Sam: Was religion ever a big part of your life growing up?

Russell: I grew up Catholic, and the only god I ever knew was the punishing god. You know if you are queer forget it. So, once I got clean and sober like maybe two or three years later, I made a decision that I'm not Catholic you know. I'm not Catholic. I remember one time I went to confession and I was sixteen years old and I told the priest that I had sex with another guy. Oh my god he went off on me. So basically I told him to go screw himself and I walked out of the confessional booth. That's not love.

Riley: Do you think disowning your religious identity per se gave you a lot of strength and power in who you are today?

Russell: Do I have strength and power?

Riley: From saying I'm not going to identify with the Catholic Church or anything. Do you think that brought strength and power into your life?

Russell: Almost definitely, not at the time, but as I got older and got my life together, oh yeah definitely. Whenever I am in the hospital I don't identify with any organized religion whatsoever. I believe there is a power, but it doesn't have a label of any kind. It's kind of how I live. In my feelings I have this little paperback for fifteen years and it's called Random Acts of Kindness and that to me is what love is really about. I like to share just one brief story in that book. This was in the early eighties when AIDS just broke out. And there was little gay coffee shop and a man would walk by everyday back and forth with a sign something about gays should be burnt in hell and everything. And uh this man ended up in the hospital and had a blood transfusion ended up with AIDS and you know who took care of him until the end of his life? Those gay men in the coffee shop. Pretty amazing I think.

Riley: Crazy

Russell: Yeah it is crazy.

Riley: Do you have anything else you wanted to?

Sam: No.

Riley: Okay well speaking of AIDS when did you first become aware of HIV and AIDS?

Russell: 1981, two friends of mine were diagnosed with AIDS.

Riley: Did they survive it?

Russell: No those two didn't survive it no. They died shortly after they were diagnosed.

Riley: Did you care for them at all?

Russell: Oh very much so, yes.

Riley: How did that affect you?

Russell: Quite deeply. Yeah still to this day and that was nineteen eighty one eighty two and since then I have had a few other friends that have died of AIDS. To this day I still think about them, how much I miss them.

Riley: Do you care to talk about your relationship with your friends?

Russell: With my friends?

Riley: Yeah the one who died?

Russell: No it's fine.

Riley: Okay. Were there any good organizations to assist them in the community at the time when they were diagnosed?

Russell: Did they do what?

Riley: Were there any community organizations that assisted them?

Russell: Yes, I think that's when Frannie Peabody house started, around that time. And one that I know of used to go to the Fenway clinic in Boston. Lets see and then one of my first friends that passed away from AIDS when he was diagnosed he put together a growth group of his friends to help him go through his dying. There were probably six to eight of us men in that group every week. And six out of seven I was the only one that didn't pretend that he was going

to die. There was like oh we are still going to go fishing and antiquing and it was very difficult. But I looked straight at him and said Bill antiquing isn't going to happen anymore, dinners together isn't going to happen anymore, and I said you can't imagine how much this is breaking my heart. So it's tough it was very tough. Yeah he had lost like one-hundred pounds in six months. [Pause].

Riley: So you said there was a group that he kind of had that supported him?

Russell: Yeah, to help him go through his dying. And then he ended up at Mercy hospital and because of the pain they slowly gave him more and more morphine of course. And he denounced his homosexuality with a priest and he was brought up Catholic and he never went to church, he abandoned that. But because he was under morphine, he denounced his homosexuality and I thought how friggen sad. You know he wasn't in his right mind anyway so, but I thought that was pretty low of the priest.

Riley: That's hard.

Russell: It's very hard..

Riley: With the HIV AIDS epidemic did you find that your friends and everything faced a lot of stigma from the community?

Russell: Yes.

Riley: How so if you care to talk about it some more.

Russell: Trying to think of one of my friends Steve when he was in the hospital around the end of his life. When people came to see him including nurses or doctors would not come all the way in the room.

Riley: Really?

Russell: Because they were afraid they were going to catch what he had, which was the opposite. It was worse for him because he could catch whatever illnesses or cold or whatever from them. So that was quite sad. I went in walked in the room and didn't let it bother me at all. And I have to admit that in '81 I was in a relationship and we had this friend Michael and Michael was quite active. And not proud of it, but my boyfriend and I discriminated against him. We didn't really want him to come over and use our bathroom or anything and I stopped that after a couple of months when I started getting an education about AIDS. I just thought of that you know.

Riley: How did you learn about it?

Russell: Did I worry about it?

Riley: No, how did you learn about AIDS?

Russell: Well I went to one of the first, it was a small lecture at the University of Southern Maine. It was this doctor from South Africa and he was one of the first doctors that was treating people with AIDS. I remember they showed a film and it was a gay that was dead on a slab and that's was when I started getting an education. What's interesting is that doctor, one of the first ones, ended up dying of AIDS.

Riley: One of the doctors did?

Russell: Yep, the first one that came here to Portland. Yeah, and then there was another doctor after him and I'm not sure if he is still alive, his name was doctor Pickus he is now an attorney. He helped a lot of men that had AIDS, a lot of men.

Riley: Were you personally active in any organizations that focused on AIDS?

Russell: Except for going to that group every week. I guess I would say I was active with was AA. I started when I came here in seventy-nine. By nineteen 1980, '81, myself, this lesbian friend of mine, that actually became my sister, we started two gay and lesbian meetings.

Riley: Really?

Russell: Yep. That was thirty something years ago. Like thirty seven years ago. And actually two of them, one was I don't like the word straight, but it was a mainstream AA meeting that one is still in existence. And the gay, lesbian, bisexuals, transgender, queer which at that time we only called it gays and lesbians. That one is still in existence to this day. So I was pretty active in the community. [Pause ]

Riley: Other than having some of your friends pass away, did the AIDS epidemic affect you in any other ways personally?

Russell: Well my first boyfriend of eleven years, he slept around. So, fortunately I did not end up having AIDS, but it still was that Russian roulette that I was looking at, but I was so codependent that I wanted somebody to love me. But that wasn't happening, that took me eleven years to realize that. [Pause]

Riley: To bring it back a little bit do you want to talk about the process of coming out for you?

Russell: Process of coming out. Well I would say the very beginning is that four or five lesbians came into AA a year after I was sober and they didn't really give a shit if you knew who they were. They made it very clear who they were and, I like I said, they were dykes and they did not like men. I think out of four of them, I only ended up getting close to one of them. But nevertheless they still helped me an awful lot. I had asked them, the women that I became very



close to Janis. I asked her when did she realize she was gay and came out. She said oh Russell I've been gay my whole life, I never came out. So it's really not a big deal. She had we both [pause] came into a balance. I learned a lot from her as far as being a women and also being a lesbian women and she learned an awful lot from me. And we ended up really respecting each other for our differences. She passed away about eight years ago. I miss her an awful lot too, she was a great advocate. I remember she said to me about twenty years ago, I don't remember what the situation was, but she said to me you need to learn how to advocate for yourself. I didn't quite know what that meant until I was facing it, of course today I know what that means. So she gave a lot of good suggestions. So I remember the first Christmas that I was sober and I went to a family reunion and it might have been thirty five people there, lot of relatives and stuff. My oldest brother was a redneck and he was also racist and he was telling, as he put it, fag jokes. It took all the strength I had and I spoke up and said excuse everybody, but I am a minority and you're the majority and if he is going to continue to do this I am going to leave. So he stopped doing it then he went on to the N word, just a racist bastard. So I had nothing to do with him at all and very early stages of my life. So that was my first step and it was still very difficult, but I still hadn't completely accepted who I was. Because of hearing things like, your nothing but an f'ing queer, you're a fag, you're going to end up being nothing. I remember when I moved here my siblings encouraged me to move after.

Riley: Like move to Portland?

Russell: Yeah, move to Portland. What I didn't realize at the time was the reason they wanted me to move, they encouraged me to move, was because I had a reputation in Waterville and they knew how outspoken I was that it would affect them in some way. And because I had spent a year in prison when I was twenty and that was a whole other experience for a year. So I left and they use the reasoning that because I had reputations as far as selling drugs and I wasn't going to live it down. They were absolutely right, but that wasn't their intention of why they thought why I should move. Then I remember one of them said to me well are you going to live as a gay man in Portland? And I said of course I am going to live my truth. And they said that you are gonna experience a lot of problems. And I said I don't really care, I'm not going to live a lie anymore, that's for sure. So they did me a favor once again, they just didn't know it.

Sam: What age would you say all this happened? Or just give a timeframe.

Russell: From the age of, well with that process with getting clean and sober, I would say from the age of twenty-five to thirty. [Pause].

Sam: Did you ever come out to people outside your family?

Russell: Only gay people I knew. That was it because growing up which was kind of interesting and in living in Waterville, only before I met these lesbians, the only gay people I knew were vicious drag queens. Very negative, fifthly mouths, drunks, and it was like if that's what gay is I don't ever want to be that, whatever gay was or is. That is kind of what I grew up with when I was young. But, to answer your question the only people I came out to were people I met at

the dance club, you know other gay men and that was probably about it, at that time. And now I don't really care I just picked up my car and the mechanic that I deal with is very heterosexual, but he is a wonderful man. He just called me a while ago to come get my car and he fixed all the things that I thought were going to cost me a lot of money. I said jeez Greg I would take you out to dinner, but I am gay and people would talk. He said why I really don't give a shit who talks. Now try that ten years ago that wouldn't go over very big. So those are the differences they're very positive, very very positive differences. And no ego, but I'm very proud of who I am today. It's been a long journey.

Riley: So did you find moving from Waterville to Portland was kind of a new leaf for you, a new start?

Russell: Brand new start, yeah brand new, yeah definitely. Came in and saw more gays, lesbians, bisexuals, and so fourth that were very visual, to me. Then that's when I was going to, did you know about the Underground?

Riley: I've heard about it.

Russell: The Underground was one of the oldest gay dance clubs in Portland at the time and I use to go there and have a great time. Met a lot of drag queens, met a couple transsexuals, and I met one of the first transsexuals in Portland. Jennifer Harvey. So people were more visual here in Portland. When we step outside Portland and start going north it's not very pleasant.

Riley: Outside of the Milton Dykes I think you said in Waterville, was that the only gay community you knew there?

Russell: That was it, yeah just a handful of gay and lesbian people.

Riley: That's crazy.

Russell: It is crazy. You know when you grow up in that era you think your the only gay person in the whole wide world. I lived in fear for a very very long time if anybody finding out I was gay because like I said it was considered a mental illness. I asked my psychiatrist I use to see a couple of years ago. I said to him, I already knew the answer, but I wanted him to confirm it. I said from nineteen sixty to nineteen seventy was being a gay person a mental illness? And he looked at the floor and said yes. I said oh I'm not accusing you, I just wanted to know. I mean you weren't old enough, you weren't even a psychiatrist back then, but I just wanted to know.

Riley: What do you think was the major aspect of getting you out of that fear you lived in?

Russell: At that time?

Riley:Yeah

Russell: I'm sorry, could you say that again please?

Riley: You mentioned that you were living in fear. What was transition to moving out of that fear? If that makes sense?

Russell: Was getting clean and sober.

Riley: Do you think being a gay man at that time partook in why you drank and used?

Russell: That was part of it. Part of it was how I was growing up and the environment I was growing up in, that was you know part of it. I mean I couldn't even describe to you what kind of atmosphere I grew up in, at a young age. So that was a big part of it because I drank, well I drank because I am an alcoholic. But also I drank because I could block out all that music in my brain you know. Because today I know a little bit more about psychology and I do a lot of reading up on it because I was diagnosed with PTSD, from my childhood. That my mother was definitely narcissistic. I mean she characteristics of being a narcissistic person. She was a pill popper and the list just goes on and on and on. So that's got me out of getting clean and sober. [Pause] I have been clean and sober for a little over forty four years now. I'm ancient! I come from the dark ages. [Pause]

Riley: Was your grandmother still alive when you came out at all?

Russell: Nah she wasn't unfortunately.

Riley: So you were never able to have that conversation with her?

Russell: No. She actually passed away at our place.

Riley: Really?

Russell: Yeah, she died she had dementia, no Alzheimer's. Yeah she was a great woman, and whenever she did anything for me special, she would always say don't tell your mother. And then when we moved out of her place, she lived in Winslow uh she had a very modiste house. She lived in Winslow we moved over to Waterville which is crossed the bridge. And when I would go to Winslow and I would walk by her house I would always go in to she her. And my mother would say to me now don't stop at your grandmothers, but I would stop anyways. And my grandmother always fed me and my grandmother would say now don't tell your mother you came here. So you know as a kid you don't know what the hell is going on. She was a good woman.

Riley: Did you ever come out to your mom at all?

Russell: I did I, thirty years old. It was my birthday and I never went to my mothers or anybody else looking to collect a birthday gift because it just was not a big deal to me. But I went to her

place and she said what do you want for your birthday. I said well, I want to give you one thing and I want to ask you one thing. I said I would like to know who my father is. And she said, oh you are never going to find him and she went on and on and on. And she said what was the other thing? I said I wanted to tell you that I am gay. And then she just started crying and crying and I'm like oh give me a break, I'm out of here. So I was leaving, my sister who is a year older than me was coming in. She said what is she crying about, I said uh she is ridiculous go talk to her. So that was my experience coming out to her, but I knew that she knew. My belief is that when a woman has a child the mother is the first one to know, senses it. I have no doubt about that for so reason. [Pause] Jeez you're bringing up questions I haven't thought about in a very long time. You know it just doesn't seem, it's like watching a movie that I don't relate to what so ever. Because when I was in prison for a year, I was a target the minute I walked in. Because I was at that time I was five feet tall, believe it or not, and I probably weighed only about a hundred fifteen hundred and twenty pounds. And I got beat on and pushed around and I actually paid some guys, a pack of cigarettes and two candy bars every week to protect me. And then after being there six months I got a new cell mate and he was gay and he committed one of the worst crimes in Augusta at the time. Uh he killed a man over a pint of whiskey and I knew all of this, but I didn't have to pay for protection anymore just being in the same cell with him. But everyday he would say to me, are you afraid of me? And I said yes. This went on for two weeks and then finally I said to him I'm not afraid of you anymore. He said, well that's good because I'm in love with you. I'm like fuck, like that's wonderful. And when I left he started crying. He gave me his mother's phone number and I threw it away, never wanted to go back there again. So I didn't drink for a whole year, the minute I got out that day I got I started drinking again for the next four years.

Riley: Were you a target in prison for being gay?

Russell: Target because of my size and I couldn't defend myself. I thought I was tough because I thought I was a thug on the street, well I wasn't so tough as I thought I was.

Sam: We saw you also circled love and romance. I guess we were wondering when was the first time you fell in love? If you remember?

Russell: Do you mean with another man?

Sam: Yeah sure.

Riley: Or either it doesn't matter.

Russell: No I never did.

Sam: Never did?

Russell: No I thought I did. I was in two relationships for both for the wrong reasons, I just didn't know it at the time. My first relationship of eleven years my mother like I said she exploited me

financially. First job I had, I was twelve years old I was shining shoes at night clubs and when I would get home she would take all the money. And then at the age of fifteen at the age of fifteen she signed papers so I could quit school and she put my ass in a chicken plant. I was there for another three years after I sobered up. So I was twenty eight years old and then moved here, so I was there for thirteen years. And she took my paycheck every week and gave me a couple of bucks for the week.

Riley:Really?

Russell: Yeah really.

Riley:So you dropped out of school at fifteen?

Russell:Fifth-teen, yeah so I thought that part of why I got involved with this first guy. He was a graduate from Bowdoin College, he was eight years younger than me and he was one that was in the top of his class. So I related um no education meant that I had, no formal education meant that I was stupid. So that was partly why I got involved with him, I was fascinated with his education I never had. And he was fascinated with me because I had such a colorful life. But I ended up finding out after all of those years, that I'm smarter way beyond he was because he controlled the checking account because I didn't think I could do that. So I didn't have a checking account until I was thirty one years old. So he basically used up all the money. And I've always worked very hard, I'm not bragging I've always worked very hard my life. And he told me that when I got older because I worked so hard that he would take care of me. Today I would say to him I think you did a really good job taking care of me, you took care of the money I earned. So that's why I say I married my mother. He was abusive just like my mother was. The only thing he wasn't was physically abusive, until I told him that I was leaving and he chased me around the apartment with a brass candlestick. And finally I stopped running and put the breaks on and turned around and said, no fmg bastard is ever going to abuse me again. I said because you ever think of even touching me, I will bust your ass. He was very shocked. So that was another time I started advocating for myself. Because I thought I dismembered all this stuff. This is very difficult to talk about by the way, it's not easy.

Sam: Thank you for sharing

Russell: But it is also, what is the word I'm looking for? [Pause] Oh it's like purging. I guess that is the best way I can explain it.

Riley: Thank you for sharing this with us.

Russell: Pardon me?

Riley:Thank you for sharing all this with us.

Russell: Your more than welcome. You know so if I can, I guess one of my goals of being a gay person is that if I can pass this on to somebody else that it might help them. I remember this last pride, I met this guy at Deering Oaks, his name was Vinnie. We sat on the bench and talked with this kid for over two hours and he was telling me that this past September he was going to Rhode Island School of Design. And I said to him in a very nice way, I said to him Vinnie are you aware of your privilege? He said oh yes, very much so. And I said you must have some loving parents and he said yes I do. And that's when I shared with him a little bit where I came from. Just a really nice young guy. So, I was sharing this with one of my friends about that encounter and they said well are you aware that you are a mentor? I said I don't think so, but thank you. So if it can help just one person, you know because what they say in AA is that you have to do service work. Service work for me is not only in the program, it's also out in the world. If I can be kind to myself, I can definitely be kind to other people around me.

Riley: You said you were two relationships?

Russell: Two. The second one was a three year relationship. He was much much younger than me, but everybody thought he was older than me. He was nine-teen years younger than me. I actually you know what? I did love him and he wasn't very nice to me either. He exploited me financially as well. To this day I don't know why I have never be angry at him, and I did truly love him. My first boyfriend I came to the conclusion I didn't even like him. So that was a three year relationship. [Pause] And I haven't been involved with anybody for twenty years or more.

Riley: Do you find that empowering?

Russell: Actually, yes I do. Very much so. Because friends of mine use to tell me, you know you get involved with somebody you just give away all of your power. And I had to think about that for a very long time and thought, I guess they are right. Here take me and you do whatever you want. And I also have had experiences like in ninety six, that also changed my life a lot. Is that I was diagnosed with colon and rectal cancer. So that has been a trip ever since then. That's changed my life, it's made me realize what my true priorities are in my life. You know even though I have a nice place, I did the majority of this myself. I have creacher comforts, like most people would want, but that's not my identity is this place, it's a lot more than that. I hope I don't sound like I am preaching.

Riley: No you're not. Not at all.

Russell: Okay. Because I do not want to come across that way.

Riley: To change up gears a little bit, so you said you dropped out when you were fifteen? Did you ever go back to school at all?

Russell: No, because my job took up a big majority of my life. Actually when I first got clean and sober I did go back to get a GED. This sounds awful too, but there was something that I wasn't

getting correctly that I was reading. So I asked the teacher to repeat it and she wasn't very nice. She said, you don't get it? What's wrong with you? So I got up and left and never went back

Riley: So you never finished your GED?

Russell: Never, no. I felt guilty for many years and shame about all of that, but that boils down to what was is it was not my fault. My mother robbed me of my education and my childhood, and there is nothing I can do about that. Expected to accept it.

Riley: Do you find that you have accepted your past now?

Russell: I just don't put up with bullshit at all. There's a woman here. She is a bitch one day to me and the next day she asks me how I'm doing. Like I'm not telling you how I'm doing.

Riley: A very two faced relationship.

Russell: Yeah, very much so. Yep, they got some real screw ups that work here. I think it was last month, last month I was storing stuff in my storage unit in the basement. I forgot a couple of boxes outside of my storage unit, the next time I went in the basement somebody threw all my stuff away. And the joke is that, honey you don't throw a drag queen's clothes away. They threw all of my drag queen clothes away. I was not happy.

Riley: Wait your drag queen clothes? Do you dress in drag?

Russell: I dress in, I call it gender bending, but yeah I guess you could say I dress in drag every pride.

Riley: Really?

Russell: Yeah, it's just for pride. I do a new costume every year, myself.

Riley: That's awesome.

Russell: Look on your computer and ask for pride of 2017 for my name. And right after pride each year I start thinking about what I'm going to do for the following year.

Riley: Any idea of what you are going to do for this year?

Russell: I have a pretty good idea, I can't quite describe it, but I can see it in my mind's eye, but I can't describe it. It's going to be better than last year and the year before that.

Riley: It's always better the next year.

Russell: Exactly! But, this past pride I marched and there was a space where I was walking, there was space probably from that window, probably to that wall that I had. The crowd was behind me was that far away and the crowd in front of me was that far away. So I had a great time. I get very high, not with drugs. I just get very high like excited, it's expressing oneself. So I do drag, I guess you could call it drag every year.

Riley: We don't have to call it that.

Russell: Right, I design everything that I wear.

Riley: Really?

Russell: Yeah, and I find things in the strangest places. Yard sale, flea market, good will. It's a fun day for me.

Riley: Would you consider pride a holiday?

Russell: Oh pride is, oh well when you look up 2017 the guy from the Portland Press Harold took my photograph asked me what pride meant to me. I said pride is my Christmas every year because I don't celebrate Christmas because it is a christian holiday. It's a special day. [Pause]

Sam: I guess to switch gears from that.

Russell: You got to have some laughter.

Sam: We were wondering because you circled employment what kind of different jobs have you had.

Russell: Chicken plant, twelve years old shining shoes, then when I moved here I worked at a restaurant as a bus person for a year in the old port. Then I started up networking and I started cleaning houses and I did that for twenty eight years I think. I felt I got a lot of gratification out of that because I remember the first couple of customers I had. The first one I had to polish her silverware every week and I thought to myself you know what if I was still drinking that shit would be in my trunk. And then as I was doing it, new ones I clean these people homes and they are very happy and they give me money for it. I find it gratifying to begin with, I wasn't going to do it for free, but. So that was my other job, then part time I as doing that plus I was working at a restaurant that I worked at out in Gorham for fifth-teen years. Since the past ten years I have been disabled, so basically that's it. If I had a choice, I still would be working to this day, I really miss being productive. And one of my dreams has been if I were physically feeling a bit better, one of my dreams has been to be a speaker at high schools, public speaker.

Riley: What do you think you would say?



Russell: I would talk about recovery, talk about my childhood, basically to wrap it up, I would talk about my journey in life. If once again if I could affect just one person, I've done my service work. Yeah because it may sound corny, but my great belief is that I'm sure I'm not the only one who believes this that we are like a human chain, were all connected in some way. I believe everything is for a reason, and that's why the two of you are here tonight. [Pause]

Sam: When you cleaned houses was that on your own?

Russell: On my own, it was my own. One man band, it was just me, nobody else. I hired two guys at one time at different times and I was losing money by having them work for me. It was costing me to pay them, and I wasn't making anything. Because the thing is that if you are going to make any kind of money at all you have to be really quick and you have to be very theral.

Sam: Was it empowering to you having your own business?

Russell: Oh definitely. And I got a lot of respect from some of these wealthy people. The thing was if I cleaned for you and you were wealthy I didn't charge you anymore, than I charged the person who was working class person. I remember one couple in Cumberland foresides there from Switzerland. She is a big wine person and he was a CEO of a big company and he had a lot of respect for me because of what I did. I started this up all by myself, so that was really nice to hear. It's given me even to this day, it's given me a lot of gratitude. And of course I didn't think I could do anything like that because you know when you are working with the public, especially cleaning somebody home you can't get anymore personal than that. Is that I didn't think that I would be able to communicate with people on that level. Because their education and they have wealth you know, but I realized that I could. You don't just hire so any old person to come to your home and clean it and all my work was all from networking. And then I had some wealthy people, oh my god. They were, I could just write a book just about them, I mean crazy, crazy, crazy. And I've seen things I wish I had never seen, pretty screwed up.

Riley: Did you have a name for your company or anything like that?

Russell: Well one of my names was sparkle. And then I had this fantasy once, I was just telling my friend this crossed the hall today, I never shared that with her. One of my fantasies was to have a black hurs and the sign on the doors would say are you dying to have your home cleaned? But I don't think I would have gotten very much business. A sense of humor is a lot that has gotten me through a lot of this stuff, positive attitude, sense of humor. Sense of humor about some of the most serious crazy things in my life. I have a friend of thirty four years who lives in Florida. And we laugh about some of the sickest things that neither one of us would tell you about, but it gets us through a lot of things. So yeah that is very important.

Riley: When you were working, were you out to the members you were working for in the restaurant you talked about?

Russell: People I worked with, yes. Customers not so much at all.

Riley: Do you think the people you worked with knowing that you were gay did that effect your work relationship at all?

Russell: [Pause] No, I do not think so. There was one guy I worked with who I knew for many many years that was very closety and he would try to out me all the time. But that always backfires on him because I could out him. It was like please give me a break. You might have had a friend that you called a girlfriend, but I do not know who you are trying to bullshit here. Then one time this was in ninety five, I would go in the kitchen to get my food and I was facing the chef and there was a kid behind me to the right washing dishes, he was probably like sixteen years old. I was just looking around the kitchen and he turn and said to me, I don't like it that you are looking at my ass. I'm thinking what? And he said yeah I do not like it. I said okay. So I went back in and he did the same thing. I went out and spoke to the manager and I said look, this little bastard is not going to discriminate against me and if you don't do anything about it. I said I'm going to file a complaint. So he went in and talked to the kid and the second time the kid said that, I said look let me tell you something. I don't mess around with kids, and B I don't mess around with men that are heterosexual, and further more you are one ugly little shit anyways. Well that really bruised his ego. So, I'm sorry that isn't going to happen at any cost I don't care what it is. So growing up that's what's empowered me to this day. Because of how I grew up discriminating and being beaten and all of that.

Riley: If you had a dream job, what would it be?

Russell: A dream job?

Riley: Anything.

Russell: I guess being an entertainer? I have never done entertaining, but my stage name is Ross short for Rosalind. And your way way to young, I don't know if Wendy would know this? But there was an actress, many many years ago and her name was Rosalind Russell. So some of my close friends call me Ross. So I would think it would be entertaining. I also have been told by my friends that I am an interviewer, I interview everybody that I get to know. Like the young guy Vinne at the park, I interviewed him. And I just found his life very fascinating because it was totally the opposite of mine. And I believe also that everybody has a story, I don't care where you come from. I think each and every one of are very fascinating.[Pause]

Riley: So this is a change up again. Friendship and chosen family, so you said the Milton dykes when you were younger and then now do you have a chosen family that you associate yourself with?

Russell: Yeah, they use to be mostly gay men, I would say the majority of them now are heterosexual people and they love me for who I am, so I would say that would be my family today. That's who my family is.

Riley: Do you have any contact with your siblings or mom now, or anything like that?

Russell: My mom has passed away, I have zero contact with them. The only time I hear from them, my youngest sister is married with two kids. She will call me every once and a while and announce that someone has died in the family. And I will ask her well what did they die from? Then she would say, well I'm really busy I got to get going. So she hasn't called in over, I think the last time she has called was two years ago when my oldest brother committed suicide. So it has been two years and I decided when, of course somebody is going to pass away if it isn't me, but them. I decided that I'm going to ask them not to bother to call me anymore because they don't exist in my life. They are just people I grew up with. Their world is Waterville and it's very tiny.

Riley: Did you find coming to Portland was kind of your new life sort of, coming here just like everything changed for the better?

Russell: Yes, definitely.

Sam: Did you ever have a close friend growing up?

Russell: Yeah, actually I did his was Patrick Coats. Grew up with him from the age of seven and we were both the same age and he died when he was twenty one, he was an addict and got into a car accident that killed him. That was probably one of the saddest times in my life at that age.

Riley: How old were you when that happened?

Russell: I was twenty one and he was twenty one. He had been in Vietnam and he became an IV drug user. So you bring all this stuff up from the past I haven't thought of him in a while. Yep, he was my best friend at that time. And now one of my best friends he lives in Florida, Bill. He is someone the both of us we can talk about anything and we don't judge each other. Were both very accepting with each other, it's great. So he is my best friend, of course I have a few other best friends, but he is the longest lasting best friend.

Riley: Have you gone down and seen him at all?

Russell: No, I was going to go down to see him. He has been there five years, I was going to go down and see him a couple of years ago, but that was when I was diagnosed with Parkinson's disease. I couldn't walk at all, Parkinson's disease is [pause] dopamine in your brain that doesn't work very well and so I couldn't walk because I had horrible tremors. That's the effect of Parkinson's and I also to this day still once and a while hallucinate from Parkinson's. About a year ago, I was suppose to have three brain surgeries from it.

Riley: Did you ever have brain surgery?

Russell: I didn't it, but I was very close. The medication started working a little bit. It's very good, it was going to total up to with the three of them six hours. The second surgery they take a probe and your awake and they take a probe and put it in your brain where your dopamine is.

Riley: That's crazy.

Russell: Crazy's right. It's like frankenstein for crying out loud. There was actually, I saw a sixty minutes one night there was a women having it done and it was the second brain procedure and that's when she was awake for two hours and she played the violin. Because they keep you awake for those two hours because they want to see if that probe is working or not. Trip uh?

Riley: It is, it's really interesting to hear about.

Russell: Yeah so today I'm not doing to to bad with it. I still am have tremors in my right arm, but I've learned to deal with it. I just now have to use my left hand and not so much my right, challenges. And I was very angry when I got diagnosed I felt a great loss, I was real pissed and I think that is the same process of someone passing away in your life. You bargain, your angry, you feel this great loss and once I was able to go through all that thing, then I started accepting. This is what I have, these are my challenges and just have to deal with them.

Riley: You have shown a lot of resilience throughout your whole life.

Russell: Well, I have had fifteen surgeries since ninety-five. For various things, cancer, heart disease, Parkinson's disease, and now I have kidney disease. Some people tell me I am inspiring, I say I would rather not be.

Riley: I truly have found this whole story, your whole life inspiring. And how you said you wanted to if you were well enough to go to high school and to share your story, you would be amazing at it. Honestly.

Russell: Thank you, I would like to do that, and I still feel like talking with the two of you that this is. You know I have always been told that speaking at meeting that I do a wonderful job. And I say like well I'm just sharing my truth in my life. For me it is still out of my comfort zone, but I do it anyways. As long as I speak my truth, I have nothing to worry about.

Riley: And then the last one we had to talk about was the culture and the arts.

Russell: Oh culture and arts?

Riley: Yeah.

Russell: Well in 1998I just been through two years of cancer treatment and three surgeries. At the end of all of that my cancer doctor said to me that because I tend to get very manic. He said to me you have a lot of energy and your very hyper I suggest you find something that you can

mediate. So I started doing frames, I started these here. I did all six of those, I did the one behind you, and I did a couple others over there to the right and the one behind you is a copper finish and a few others are gold finish. I did all those mirrors in the hallway. So I have been doing them off and on the past twenty years, I guess. And now I don't have any more room because underneath the couch is art work, behind that thing is more art work, I have artwork behind my bureau, underneath my bureau, next to my bureau, under my bed, and I have artwork in two of my closets, so I have no more room. So a friend of mine, Dave. He is a self taught artist and in my opinion he is very good, but he's also a school teacher full time. He said to me one day you know you have a good eye? I said, oh really, is there something wrong with my other one? He said no, I would really consider suggest you start selling. So I have tried to start a little cottage business. But I have been having a lot of set back because of my illnesses, but I'm still in the process of that because I'm not going to give up. Anything that you see in this room is for sale. Anything you see in the hallway is for sale. I want to pass it on and my price is very low because I'm not a retail person. That's my gratification. I've sold one mirror, small mirror, at first Friday a couple of months ago. Oh my god it was so gratifying. It wasn't expensive at all, but the girl just loved it. She said how much? I said twenty-five. And her boy friend I guess said oh I wish I had known that, I would have bought it for twenty-five and sold it to you for forty five. And that was the only time I ever did the art sale.

Riley: Would you find art a therapy?

Russell: Oh definitely. I try to imagine where these places are.

Riley: Did you paint the picture inside of them?

Russell: No, I didn't paint any of them.

Riley: But the frames you did?

Russell: The frames I did. What I do is like I will find a frame and I will do it over and then I will find a painting that would probably go with it. Or I will find a painting, and then I will find a frame and kind of put it together.

Riley: They are really cool.

Russell: Thanks. I painted all the furniture, that mirror up there somebody spray painted it silver with a spray can. I traded something with it for something for this. I did that mirror over.

Riley: We have about ten minutes left in our interview, was there anything you would like to add to all of this, or closing remarks for it?

Russell: I think it's time to put a candle on it, don't you? I have more, but I don't think you have enough time in the world. No there is nothing that I can think of, everything that I think I have

shared with you, the two of you provided me with memories and things that I haven't thought of in a very long time, so thank you.

Riley: Last question, has the interview led you to any new thoughts or insights on your life?

Russell: [Pause] Yeah I guess how much my life has changed. In my view it has changed tremendously and also it has made me extremely grateful for where I am today in my life. And I think about when you ask that question I think about how kind my friends are to me and how loving they are. I remember when I was first diagnosed with Parkinson's my friend Dave use to call and check on me everyday. He would say how are you doing? I would say to him, Dave that's the wrong question and I would start crying. And he said I really wish there was something I could do to help you out. I said Dave let me tell you love me, and you listen you can't imagine how much that helps me. That's what you are doing to help me. So those things, those are what my priorities are in my life. I just want to be a decent person.

Riley: I understand that.

Russell: There is so much horror and violence in this world today that, and of course there are still some kind people out there. I told my mechanic I don't know if I already have said this. I told my mechanic when he called me earlier to come get my car he did a lot of things in my car that saved me a lot of money. I said to him jeez Greg I would take you out to dinner, but I'm gay and people would talk. He said Russell I really don't give a shit. We both start laughing. That kind of stuff.

Riley: Yeah I'm glad times have changed from where they were from where they are now.

Russell: Yeah the problem I see or at least the problem I see in my life is that people don't connect with each other like they use to with cell phones and all the computer world, which I find very sad. Because I like to be able to talk to somebody like this, I don't want to talk to you over the phone because you might be sticking your tongue out at me or giving me the finger. I don't have a computer I'm not interested in that, this is what I do in my time. People's lives are just really busy and I have to nail my friends down. When can you pencil me in on your calendar? It's just the way life is today. I'm sure you don't know what a three party line is on a telephone, or an answering machine.

Riley: Nope.

Russell: Yeah back then you had to get together, you had no other choice. If I called you and it wasn't cellphone at the time and there was no answering machine, if I didn't answer you had to call me back. So you had to make an effort. I see things like, we will say it's your birthday and I had forgotten to the last minute and I send you an email I wouldn't want anybody doing that to me. I want to go out and look for a card that has some meaning to it because I'm thinking about you. Those kind of simple things, but very important things. Yep this has been pretty draining. It's a lot of thinking.

Riley: I think we both just want to say thank you so much.

Sam: Thank you very much.

Russell: Oh, you are very welcome.

Riley: Thank you for your time and bringing us into your home.

Russell: I'm glad that you were able to do this for me, I really appreciate it very much.

Riley: Sam and I will send you, not email you.

Russell: Like I said to Vinne in the park. Vinne do not text me, I do not have a computer so you can't email me if you want to talk to me you call me.

Riley: We will send you a hard copy of the interview once we get it typed out so you can review before we submit it.

Russell:Okay

Riley: I will give you a heads up that it is coming in the mail. And give you some time to read it and if you think it is good, that would be awesome.

Russell: Definitely, I'm sure it will be just fine. I have no doubt.