

Interviewee: Dr. Wesley Harris
Interviewer: Christian Estrada
Date: March 14, 2022
Location: Virtual (Zoom)

**LGBTQ+ Center Oral History Project
Queer Public Histories – Spring 2022**

[Beginning of Audio File]

Christian Estrada: Okay, it says it's recording. Alright and scene. Okay, so hello future listeners. This interview, with Mr. or Dr. Wesley Harris, is intended to be a part of my Spring 2022 Queer and Public Histories class's Oral History Project that will soon be a part of the Wake Forest University Archives. So, my name is Christian Estrada, and we are currently recording virtually on March 14, 2022, via Zoom. So, this interview will essentially be about Dr. Harris's background and interactions/ involvements with the Wake Forest LGBTQ Center. So, to kick things off, I would love to hear a bit about yourself. So, I'm going to put this in the Zoom chat, just some of these things, if you can just tell me um like your age, your pronouns, current location, occupation. And anything else I guess you'd sort of like to add.

Wesley Harris: So, I am, as you said, Dr. Wesley Harris, I'm currently at Iowa State University working in a program that looks to increase the number of Iowa Youth who pursue careers and majors in AG- science, technology, engineering, mathematics, and education. I'm a Wake Forest alum or a Double Deacon, as a lot of folks would say, I did my bachelor's in History at Wake and then returned later for a Master's in Counseling. And then worked at Wake Forest University from 2012 until 2015 in, what was then, the Office of Multicultural Affairs, it's now the Intercultural Center. I think you asked, how did I come to know about the LGBT Center?

Christian Estrada: Well, yeah, I just sort of. So, you talked about being a Double Deacon and a student, so just sort of how did you like end up at Wake Forest? So, we'll just start sort of from the beginning,

Wesley Harris: Okay. Yeah, I think. *[Cross Talk]*

Christian Estrada: When you were a student.

Wesley Harris: Okay. And I use he/they pronouns. I'm originally from North Carolina, in a small town called Albemarle. For folks who listen to country music, Kellie Pickler is-

Christian Estrada: Yes! [*Cross Talk*]

Wesley Harris: -is kind of our claim to fame. And I attended the North Carolina School of Science and Mathematics in Durham for my junior and senior years of high school. It's part of the UNC system, a unique school in that it's a public residential high school. And while I was there, the I guess, I don't know the official title, but the director of a kind of diversity recruitment, multicultural recruitment, is an alum of my high school from my hometown. Someone that I kind of look to as the standard for black boys, as I was growing up. He worked in that position and Wake actually wasn't on my radar. I went to college night. You know where they have their booths set up in the gym? And then a couple of select schools, a few select schools have kind of a designated room that they're in, where they're recruiting students, talking to students, about coming to Wake. And I told my mom that we had that event. And she said, "make sure you go and say hi to Marcus," Marcus Ingram, who was from my hometown, as I said. I talked to him a while he asked, you know, what am I looking for in the school? And some other things we caught up on, you know, how our families were doing? He told me a bit about Wake, convinced me to come for, come for a visit. And another friend of mine from high school also was really interested in Wake and had already planned to go to that visit day. And so, I drove us down to campus, and we fell in love, with how beautiful the campus is. And then just the small class size, kind of an intimate relationship you get to build with faculty and staff there as well as other students. And ultimately applied to Wake early decision, got in, was trying to figure out how am I going to pay for this? Because at that point, this was the early 2000s. And Wake had just crossed the \$30,000 threshold, which I just looked up a couple of days ago to see how much it cost now and was blown away.

Christian Estrada: Yeah, it's approaching like \$80,000 [*Cross Talk*]

Wesley Harris: But I was yes, yeah. More than twice that now. 80,000 a year.

Which is a whole other thing. But yeah! So, came to Wake, originally thought I wanted to be Pre-Med. Quickly found out after taking, what was then like molecular and cellular biology, it used to be one class. I think my class was the last that had it as a combine, and then they split it down into two. And that was the class that help me make the decision. I was already kind of on the fence of whether I wanted to switch major and I switched to history. And for a little while, had an English and History double major and ultimately dropped the English major and graduated with a History degree. I actually left school. I'm one of the students who would be a "stop out" student. I left school for a few years and was working and taking one class each summer; For a few additional years beyond when I should have graduated if I graduated with my cohort. Yeah, I met my wife at Wake, helped to charter the Omicron Sigma chapter of Kappa Alpha Psi, and along with seven other guys help bring that fraternity to campus. And then I served as an advisor for the Kappa's as well as Lost In Translation, a dance crew, ASIA- the Asian Students and Interests Association, and a few other student organizations when I was back working at Wake.

Christian Estrada: Wow, so you really did it all?

Wesley Harris: Try to be involved? Yeah.

Christian Estrada: Awesome! So then when did you sort of first hear about the LGBTQ Center? Was it called that at the time? Was there even one at the time?

Wesley Harris: Yeah, so when I was an undergrad, there was I'm blanking on the name, but there was a student organization, I think it was Gay-Straight Student Alliance or GSSA, I believe is what it was called. So, there was no center. The only center that specifically worked with students with minoritized, or marginalized identities was the Office of Multicultural Affairs. And then, when I was in when I was back in grad school, I was back at Wake- 2010 to 2012 doing my master's. I believe it was, like early in the spring of 2012. Maybe? Or it might have been 2011. I'm blanking on the dates. But my younger fraternity brothers who were on campus at that time, Melbourne Washington, Steve Clark, and a few others, were having an event called "Hashtag No Homo," in collaboration with AJ and the LGBT center that was pretty brand new if I'm not mistaken. And I didn't know that we had created an LGBT Center at that point. Because as a graduate student, I was somewhat removed from all of the happenings that were

going down on campus and I think the decision might have been made prior to my return for graduate school. But I went to the event, had a chance to meet AJ, really enjoyed their energy, and the way that they talked about the work that they were hoping to do on campus. You know, the “Hashtag No Homo” event was kind of a play on kind of the colloquial phrase that folks were using, especially in Black men and the Black community to kind of shield ourselves from. Or not even shield ourselves it was like a way to project your homophobia without kind of negative recourse or whatever. So anytime you said something that could be perceived as “gay” or “homosexual” or you know, kind of blurring any lines of heterosexuality. You would say "no homo," or "pause" would be, you know, one of the other phrases that folks used, so it could be like, "Yo, I really liked that chain. It, you know, looks really nice on you, bro." And then you say, "no homo", you know, or "pause" or something like that. And so, the event specifically, because Kappa Alpha Psi is a historically Black fraternity, meant to bring attention to homophobia in the Black community. And it was a panel discussion with a few other folks, including AJ, to talk through. What is homophobia? How does it show up? How does it manifest it? How do we kind of maintain it? How can we push back against it? And you know, resist the urge, or the need to say “no homo” if you're secure in your sexuality, or you're secure in your manhood if you would. And things like that, why is there a need to say, “no homo” or “pause” or something like that? And so, after that, North Carolina was trying to pass a Constitutional Amendment to define marriage as between one man or one female and one male, I believe. I can't remember if the language was man, woman, or male, one male, one female. And the LGBT center, AJ, and folks, we're hosting a series of events to bring attention to the harm that this could cause to the state of North Carolina and not just to LGBT identified folks, who were hoping to make their partnerships official and things of that sort, but to be able to bring attention to how it could impact the economy of the state. How it could impact you know, folks across residents of North Carolina, broadly. I went to that event, they had T-shirts, they had conversation, they had you know stickers, and buttons and things I think that we're being given out. Basically, to encourage folks to vote “No” to Amendment One. And they and I had some, you know, more conversations and things like that. And then I graduated from Wake in my master's program. And I applied for an Assistant Director of the Office of Multicultural Affairs position. And during that interview process, and the process of being onboarded to the University, I had a chance to more formally engage with AJ in the LGBT

Center and other staff there. So that's kind of how I found out and then I don't know if you have additional questions about collaborations or things of that sort?

Christian Estrada: Yeah. Yes, you mentioned that you, yourself, partnered with a lot of different groups like Lost in Translation and different cultural associations. So, did they or organizations I guess, did they ever like partner with? Well, and I'm assuming because your fraternity also partnered with the LGBTQ center when you were in Grad school or when you were in Undergrad?

Wesley Harris: So, there was no LGBT center when I was in undergrad?

Christian Estrada: Yeah, I was saying. [*Cross Talk*]

Wesley Harris: Yeah, when I came back for my master's program, I think that's when the LGBT Center was founded. And AJ was hired to be kind of inaugural Director and to set the course for what LGBT students, faculty, staff support, advocacy, education, all of those things, what that will look like at Wake.

Christian Estrada: Yeah. So, you talked about a lot of the like, more broad social issues that we're sort of going on in like the North Carolina/ Winston Salem -State area, but do you really recall how it sort of felt on campus? or how that all sort of, like, impacted the campus in terms of like, was the campus very synonymous with what the local community was sort of reacting to the LGBTQ center? or sort of some of these controversial issues at the time?

Wesley Harris: So, Wake is an interesting place. You know, it was founded as part of the Baptist State Convention. And although ties were severed from the Baptist Convention in the 90s, Wake is still a very conservative population of students, alumni, etc. Not very progressive. In a lot of ways, there are pockets and so some of the pockets I was in, and to be completely honest, I tell folks, I'm a recovering homophobe. When I was in undergrad, I probably no, not probably, I would have been one of the guys who were saying, you know, "no homo" or "pause" or whatever the you know, phrases at that time would have been because I'm from a small I don't know if I would call it rural. It's not a suburb, but it's a small town of about 15,000 people. Bible Belt. I grew up-my mother and most of my family are Christian, my father's Muslim. So, I grew up going to mosques and to churches and in, the Black community in the South, in particular.

Homophobia is kind of the air that we breathe. In you, I've learned. And we're socialized in the same ways that a lot of people, not just in the South, but across the country and around the world, in a lot of ways. We're socialized to believe that, you know, the Bible says, you know, these things about homophobia or sexual immorality and things of that sort. And I had no other real frame of reference. It wasn't until I knew people who were homosexual. There were folks in my church and my community in my family. But a lot of that was masked, a lot of people were closeted, or they were closeted when it came to talking to family. I remember, in particular, several cousins who had, you know, these quote-unquote, roommates, who were, you know, they were adult men, and they still lived with other people. And when they would come home. If that person would come home with them, who I later learned, you know, this was actually their partner, someone they were in intimate relationship with. They had to say that "this is my roommate," or "this is my friend," or "this is my colleague," or something like that. They couldn't just be openly themselves, and so Wake, like my home community, like not until I got to college, and embarrassingly, I would say, probably into adulthood, where I learned more about homophobia, about homosexuality. About, you know, the different letters that the LGBTQIA+ kind of acronyms and what those stand for. And what the difference is between the different types of sexuality and different types of genders and gender identities are. That I had to do a lot of unlearning, a lot of relearning, a whole lot of kind of unpacking of my own stuff, my own self-work, to be able to be in community to be in support. To not just say, "I'm an ally," without doing the work, and not to give myself that moniker, but to let my actions speak. And if folks in the community chose to label me that and labeled me as that, then cool. If not, then continue to do the work. And so, Wake I think there were pockets of folks who were definitely in support of what the LGBT Center was doing. Folks who were pushing against Amendment One. But there were also a lot of people who were in support of Amendment One. And if I don't, if I'm not mistaken, I want to say it passed, like 66% in approval of Amendment One, and so it became codified in the State Constitution, that marriage is between one man or one male and one female or one woman. I can't remember the specific language that was in the Constitutional Amendment. And it was devastating to those of us who thought that folks should be able to get married who believe, that love is love. And you know, all of those phrases that we put out, and I can't remember if it was at that time that the LGBT center put out Love is Love shirts. And I think they've continued to print

those. But yeah, so there was a pocket of folks at Wake, but overall I don't think as an institution, anybody ever came out publicly in support or against, but they're definitely were groups and people on campus who were organizing and supportive of Amendment One and the same thing was happening in the local Winston Salem community and communities across the state.

Christian Estrada: Wow. Thank you for sharing that very personal evolution of your experiences with the community. I was sort of wondering if you see like any similarities or differences between the LGBTQ Center and other identity centers on campus or I guess organizations on campus?

Wesley Harris: Oh, yeah, definitely. I think beyond the general charge to support, educate, advocate for, providing services, and programs for a particular marginalized community. With the LGBT Center, specifically being around gender equity. And I'm sorry, not gender equity. Being around gender identity and sexuality, whereas the Intercultural Center is more around race, ethnicity, culture. And then the Women's Center, which was founded at, either around the same time or at the same time as the LGBT Center, I can't remember the chronology, but that's around gender equity. And, again, raising awareness, advocacy, education, programs, and services supports for students in those different communities. And then, around those same times, there were new positions being created in the Chaplain's office as well. And so, you had Wake being kind of Christian hegemony running rampant. You had the need for students who practice other faith traditions, or no faith, to be able to have support for that. I'm somebody who researches and studies race, racism, and racialization. And so, I think, I like a lot of other folks, believe that race is kind of the central category, that the US hierarchy has been established around and try to make ties between how white supremacy, kind of runs broadly across different dimensions of identity, different systems of oppression and privilege, and those types of things. And so, I think there's similarities at Wake, as in the South, as in many places. We operate very much on a Black-White binary. And so, I think the Intercultural Center or Multicultural Center, as it was called then, definitely benefited from the fact that it's been on campus for 40 plus years now, at this point. And so, the expectation was that that space would be all things to everyone who didn't fit the quote, unquote, Wake mold. So, if you weren't white. If you weren't Christian. If you weren't straight. If you weren't cisgender. If you weren't a person with lots of wealth or who came from money, you know,

etc. You add on additional identities and things. The OMA or IC was the place where you were expected to get support. And then with the LGBT Center, the Women's Center coming on board, you know, 30 years after the rest of the country, had created those centers and had been running those centers. It became a challenge, sometimes, I think, to not get into the tug of war, Let's fight over this slice of the pie when you know. There is tons of other slices, there's the rest of the pie that we could be pushing for resource allocation and other things. Let's not fight amongst ourselves, let's figure out ways that we can collaborate. So one of the things I think is really interesting, and AJ and I talked about it a lot, was the fact that a lot of the majority of the students who went to the LGBT Center when I was working on campus, were Black, Brown, Indigenous students, and so some of those students did not come to the Office of Multicultural Affairs space because they felt the HOMO and transphobia. They felt kind of the ostracization that happened and felt like they didn't belong in that space. But they felt really comfortable in the LGBT Center. Meanwhile, white LGBT folks were not utilizing the space at the center, the LGBT Center provided. And we were trying to figure out how is it that this is happening? And what are the ways that we can collaborate to bring in speakers to host programming to do all these different things? So that all of our spaces --the Women's Center, the LGBT Center, the Intercultural Center, and then other spaces on campus. At that time, it was Pro-Huminatate Institute, I think it's now the Center for Campus, Campus, and Community Engagement or something along those lines? So, working with Shelly and Marianne and the folks who were in that space as long, as well as the Student Engagement space, how can we host programming that we know you get the students who are interested in being engaged in the community? And you need students of color to participate in those programs too. And we want to make those programs as inclusive and equitable in the ways that they operate. So, let's work together not just at the end when you have already put out a call for participants in a particular program, and you don't have any Black and Brown folks. And now you come to us and say, "can you give us the names of some folks." But how can we collaborate to make sure that the program offerings, that the way it's built, and scaffolded is something that's appealing to people of color? Who are interested in community engagement? And how can we make sure that it's appealing to LGBT folks who are interested in community engagement? Or how can we, you know, do those types of things? So, we did "Out At Dinner," we did bring in people of color, who also identify as LGBT, like Laverne Cox bringing in, and doing programming where we

can host and get people into the different spaces. So can you know, the IC Staff host one of the coffee talks that was happening in the LGBT Center, and we physically are on in the space and encouraging our students who regularly come to our space, to come to the LGBT Center and vice versa. Yeah, and I'll stop there.

Christian Estrada: Wow! So, just from what I'm hearing, for me. It sounds like the LGBTQ Center and sort of all these other like supportive organizations that were on campus, during your time here, whether Undergrad or Graduate or I guess when you were a professional. They sort of probably shaped your experience and sort of made you like. Would you say, more open-minded to the like? What do you think was the turning point for you switching sort of the mentality that you said you previously had?

Wesley Harris: Um, I don't know how much of it I'd necessarily credit to, like, what Wake offered because as an Undergrad, there wasn't much that was there in support of LGBT students, and faculty, and staff. I think it was relationships that I built with individual folks at Wake who I had an inkling that you know, a few of my friends might be Queer, and wasn't 100% sure. It wasn't until many of us left college that I think they felt comfortable enough in who they were, or who they are, or that they felt that they had grown, they had developed, you know, their self-confidence and things like that. They didn't want to hide their true self and things like that. And they, you know, came out. Having a few of my friends who I think felt comfortable enough in our relationship to come out to me. At first, I was like, I don't know what to do with this information. For some of those friends, like, I think in our friend circle, we knew we were just waiting for them to feel confident enough or comfortable enough or to try to show ourselves to be, I guess worthy of them coming out to us, where they, you know, felt comfortable enough with us to be able to share, their full self, their whole self with us. And so, I think some of that was like those relationships more than it was anything that Wake offered. But then when I was back in grad school in the LGBT Center came to campus and I was working, it gave me the opportunity. Like I was learning along in some spaces, I was learning along with students who were participating in these programs or other members of the Wake Forest Campus Community as we were learning the difference between you know, polyamorous and poly polysexual, or what does it mean to be demisexual? Or what does it mean to be like, some of those things? I just had no exposure to and hadn't interacted with anybody who had who had identified as such. And so, they

were just words in a, you know, LGBT glossary for a while, until I actually had the opportunity to engage with folks who, who had those identities and who were willing to be patient with me and to explain different differences between some of the different identities and things like that as we built relationships.

Christian Estrada: Also, when did you end up leaving Wake Forest after Grad school and working? Because I know you like joined in like the, I would like to say the mid-2000s. But that's not the mid-2000s. Probably like 2010 ish. So when did you?

Wesley Harris: Yeah, so 2010 to 2012. I was doing my master's. And then as soon as I graduated with my master's, I think, graduated in May, and started working in the Office of Multicultural Affairs in July, kind of on the new fiscal year, for the university. And then I worked at Wake from July 2015 until July 20. I'm sorry, from July 2012 to July 2015. And then I and my family, we moved to Iowa. I came to do a Ph.D. at Iowa State University. And we're still here now.

Christian Estrada: Awesome. So, sort of, I guess my last question that I have written down, obviously, you add stuff in a minute if you'd like. But what was your favorite memory or experience with the center from your time in grad school to working with the position? If there was like one that you could pick? I know you mentioned a lot of like awesome events that they hosted.

Wesley Harris: Yeah, oh, my favorite event? Oh, that's a hard one. Um, I would have to say like one of my favorite events is... I don't even remember what it was called. But I think it. It always took place outside on Manchester Plaza, the lower quad on the kind of brick, kind of concrete, whatever stage area. There was always food. And I think there's different foods and different years is usually we were passing out Love is Love shirts. I don't know if it was like a specific day, or if it was just, you know, whatever they worked with Calendar. But I think that was a really awesome event because we got a chance to interact. Like people didn't have to come to a specific room at a specific time to hear a speaker or any of that type of thing. It was just members of the Wake Forest community who were there. We were inviting folks over like if we saw students that we knew from different spaces across campus, and all of the different kinds of staff members who worked in different spaces across campus kind of either volunteered or participated in the event. And so, you had the opportunity to engage in

conversation and to talk to folks about LGBT issues to you know, ask if they wanted a shirt and would be willing to wear the shirt. You got a chance to kind of engage with folks again, across the campus community, faculty, staff, and students. And it also was a really kind of organic way to gauge the type of support, the type of kind of feelings, and thoughts that existed on campus. Because oftentimes in doing kind of work in supportive, marginalized communities, it can be tough. Like it can be, oh, we're responding to somebody having written, you know, this homophobic thing or this racist thing on somebody's whiteboard in the residence halls or this public debate that's happening around marriage equality or around other issues. You know, right now in Iowa, there's the ban on transgender youth participation in athletics, and things like that. And then, you know, in North Carolina, there was HB, HB two and, you know, all of those types of things. There's Amendment One when it can be a heavy space to be in. But I really enjoyed and tried to remind folks that there are opportunities, lots more opportunities. Where we get to create the community that we want. We get to, you know, bring the world that we want to exist into existence. And we got to choose joy and got to build community because it's not something that just happens by bringing a bunch of people into the same space. It's messy, tough work that we do. But there is joy there is the sharing of ourselves and the things that we care about in different spaces. And those are the activities that I enjoy. I mean, I also enjoy Out to Dinner events, where it was like a plated meal, I want to say in the what is that the Oak room is that a thing?

Christian Estrada: Oh, like in the Mag room in Reynalda?

Wesley Harris Yeah, the Mag room and the adjacent room to it, but you know, inviting folks who identify as LGBT or allies to serve as kind of facilitators at those individual tables and being willing to share their experiences their stories with folks who signed up. And it was either folks were interested in engaging around LGBT topics, issues learning more, or folks were already kind of identifying themselves as allies. But some of the folks, you know, we're genuinely, I think, more curious than anything. And so, engaging in those conversations, and it's, yes, a scheduled programmed thing, but it's also like the conversations are organic. And then you sometimes would have, you know, some prompts and things like that in the center of the table to keep the conversation going and things. But those were ways for folks to. Not everybody who is not understanding of LGBT issues is a bigot. Some folks are just ignorant and haven't had that exposure. And so,

providing opportunities for folks to engage in ways that don't cause harm to LGBT folks, I think is always a plus, not to necessarily try to change hearts and minds, but for folks to come in engage and kind of learn that some of what they thought they knew. Is completely, completely incorrect. Yeah.

Christian Estrada: Awesome. Well, thank you, again, so much for participating in this project! I feel like this was very insightful. And I'm very glad that I was able to meet with you and sort of hearing your experiences. And oh, is there anything else that you'd like to add? That I didn't ask? I feel like you've covered a lot.

Wesley Harris: Yeah, I think. And I apologize for rambling.

Christian Estrada: Oh, no. [*Cross Talk*]

Wesley Harris: It's just so much. That's there. Yeah. I think AJ is amazing. If this is heard by any of the Wake administrators, they are more than deserving of a raise. And you know, they're one of my dearest friends. Or, you know, I haven't lived in Winston in almost seven years now. But we still text. We were texting before I got your email. And then they actually said, "Hey, I had a student who was reaching out to you." I, and that's what actually reminded me that I'd never hit send on my email. Because I went to look for the email thread and saw that. It was like in my unsent box, and I was like, oh, let me let me just respond to it right now. Well, yeah, but I think the LGBT Center is doing an amazing job deserves its own larger space, and all of that stuff, too! So whatever y'all can do as students or other members of the community to push Wake to allocate resources would be amazing!

Christian Estrada: Awesome and Hopefully, this project will be a step in that direction, and I second everything you said they deserve a raise. They deserve a bigger building for all the work they've done. But I think that pretty much concludes it. So.

Wesley Harris: Okay. [*Cross Talk*]

Christian Estrada: Thank you.

Wesley Harris: Thank you so much.

Christian Estrada: No Thank you. [*Cross Talk*]

Wesley Harris: And do I just email those forms to you once I find them?

Christian Estrada: Yeah, you can just, you know, I think you can do it electronically, or just print them out. Take a picture. It should be fine. But yeah, as soon as you send it.

Wesley Harris: Okay, I was gonna ask if a picture is, Okay? [*Cross Talk*]

Christian Estrada: It should be I mean.

Wesley Harris: Okay. Okay, okay.

Christian Estrada: All right thank you so much again!

Wesley Harris: Have a good rest of the day.

Christian Estrada: Take care. Bye. Nice to meet you.

Wesley Harris: Nice to meet you as well.

[*End of Audio File*]