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Interviewee: Maria Warren

Interviewer: Debbie Gable

Date of Interview: March 8, 2015

Location of Interview: York, Pennsylvania

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Abstract:

Maria Warren grew up in Baltimore, Maryland, in a religious family with both her blood-related and adopted siblings. Maria was very involved in her mother's church, attending Sunday services, Bible study, and choir rehearsal, but realized that she was gay around age 12. In order to escape her feelings, Maria immersed herself in religion and married her boyfriend after graduating from high school, but her marriage was fraught with tension and ended in divorce. In this interview, Maria discusses the issues in her previous marriage, her relationships with her three children, and the importance PFLAG [formerly stood for Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays] played in her coming out process. She also describes her experience of couples counseling with her ex-husband, who eventually outed Maria's sexuality to most of her family, and the LGBT community in Baltimore that she relied on when the two separated. Today, Maria is living her self-described "dream" life with her partner in York, Pennsylvania, and hopes that by participating in the LGBT History Project, she can help prevent other LGBT individuals from experiencing the same difficult coming out process that she did.

DG: Hello.

MW: Hello.

DG: So, it's March 8, 2015, and I am Debbie Gable, and I'm interviewing Maria Warren, and Maria, just for our records, can you please tell us—did you give permission for us to record this interview?

MW: Yes, yes.

DG: Thanks so much. So, we just want to get started and just tell us a little bit about yourself, where you grew up and about your family and that sort of thing?

MW: Sure. Like you said before, my name is Maria Warren. I'm originally from Baltimore, Maryland. I grew up in a family of three—started off that way, and that grew to six after my parents adopted a couple of kids. My family is very religious, so I grew up in a very religious household, and now I have three grown children of my own. Two girls—two girls—two boys and a girl. [laughs] I don't even know how many kids I have. [laughs] Two boys and a girl. [shrugs] Yeah, that's it about me right now.

DG: Tell me a little bit more about talking about being from a religious family.

MW: My mom is a minister, my grandmother was a minister, and I grew up in church. They called me—like we would call people who grew up in church "pew babies," because you lived in

the pew, you know? You were there all the time. We had services every Sunday, sometimes a couple services on Sundays and then Bible study and choir rehearsal and all that, so, it was difficult for me for a while, 'cause I knew at an early age that I was different, but I just didn't know how to really tell anybody about what was going on with me, and so I took cover in religion and immersed myself in it to ask God to help me move these feelings that I was having and not realizing that for me it was—it was from God, that this is who I am. But it—it took me a long time to get to that point, so...

DG: Was there anything specific you were learning in the church that made you feel like your feelings weren't okay, or?

MW: Well, I mean, it was made clear that, you know, your—when you have a relationship, it's between a man and a woman—that there were no same-sex relationships at all... and my father made it clear early on on his stand against homosexuality, because he would make comments and derogatory remarks, and so I knew in the back of my mind that I couldn't tell him, and—yeah, but in church, like I said, they—they just made it clear that that was their stand and, you know, if you wanted to be a part of God's kingdom, that you had to do away with all evil works and all this stuff so, but like I said, I knew at an early age that that's—that was who I was, and so I tried to pray it away, and I would be at the altar praying and carrying and waiting on the holy ghost to make it happen, and, you know, it didn't happen. [laughs] It didn't happen, so...

DG: Can you tell me more about what you mean by an early age and what you were feeling?

MW: [clears throat] I would say I guess about... at 12, I knew that I was gay, and—but I would say it actually started before then. So when I say "an early age," I would say around eight or nine is when I knew that I was feeling different about other people. Like, I would hear my friends say, "I like him," like a girl would say, "I like him," but I didn't—I didn't have any of those feelings, but when I was 12, I had a crush on a young girl—I'll never forget her [laughs] in sixth grade, and—and I remember the boys giving out their... giving out their cards to people—you know, how you would like write up the little cards when you were in school—slip somebody a note to say, you know, "I like you. Do you like me?" And I remember wanting to do that with her and just realizing that, "Okay, nobody else is talking about doing this with somebody of the same sex. Well, I don't think I should do this." [laughs] So, yeah.

DG: Did you hear derogatory comments from your friends and in school?

MW: Yes, I did. And—and it was something, 'cause when I was in school, I was never a part of the in-crowd. I was always a part of the crowd that was just a little bit different, you know, that person whose clothes wasn't quite up-to-date with everybody else's or the person who people were put off as being "the nerd," you know, I was always a part of that crew, and I had no problem being a part of that crew, and it just so happens that generally as a part of that crew were those people that they—that people would say were gay, or, you know, they just weren't quite sure of their sexual orientation at that time, but, you know, so I didn't have a problem with being a part of that crew and being different, so I didn't get any type of derogatory remarks at that time, because I had a reputation as being somebody that would fight [laughs] if you—if you would say anything bad to me, so no, I didn't. It wasn't until high school that really the

derogatory remarks started that I could hear, but because at that point I was so immersed in church that I wasn't—I wasn't a part of that group, but I would hear people talk about it, you know, and call people different names, you know, but, yeah... (6:30)

DG: Tell me a little bit more about your family. You mentioned your parents adopted children?

MW: Yes.

DG: So...?

MW: So, my parents—my mom—well, both of them, my mother and my father are very loving and open, kind-hearted people. My mother's mother actually always had people in her house, and I think that's where my parents got it from. My father lost his mom when he was a teenager, and she died from breast cancer, and they were—he had—there were seven of them all together—seven—he had seven brothers and sisters, and they were split between different family members, and I think for him, you know, having a large family was just always something that he had to do, you know, so he—both of them together just, you know, had that love for having children around them, so when I was—at that time, I think I was 18 or 19, actually, getting ready to get married, and my parents started talking about adopting a little boy, because at that point, they had three girls. 'Cause my father always wanted a little boy, and here it is always in the back of my mind, I consider myself my father's boy. 'Cause I was always what they would call tomboy, so I loved sports. I was always the one getting hurt. [laughs] I was in the emergency room all the time between busted head and sprained ankles and, you know, but I considered myself his boy, so... but at that point, I was getting ready to get married, and they adopted my brother first, and then my mom's youngest sister got into some issues, and they ended up adopting her two youngest children, and so my brother and sister is actually my cousins. [laughs] So...

DG: So with a big family like that, how did—did anything come up with your siblings, did they suspect anything when you were having these feelings? Did you ever talk to any of them about it?

MW: [shaking head] It's something, because I've never had this discussion with my natural sisters until I actually came out to them, but my little sister—it's almost like it's a natural conversation between us, and she's the one that has been so insightful just about our family all together and stating that how we keep secrets, and how these secrets has hurt our family in the long run, and she was saying that she had a feeling that I was gay, but just didn't know how to approach the subject and because I was at this point, I had already come out to my kids, and she is the same age as Dessy (sp???), or I think they're a year apart—

DG: Dessy (sp???) is your daughter?

MW: Yeah, Dessy (sp???) is my daughter, and because they are so close in age and just have a close relationship with one another, there have been times when she's spent time with me, and when I was talking to Dessy (sp???), I just opened up with her and confided in her as to the things that was going on with me. And she—she actually asked me a lot of the questions that

you're asking me now: "Well, how did you know? How come you didn't tell anybody?" You know, and she was like, "Do you think if you told somebody when you were younger how your life would be different?" and so she was the first person who actually, like, was really interested in knowing, like, the true me, you know, and wanting to know, you know, how I felt about where I am now, you know, so... yeah, she was the first person—I still have not had that conversation with my two natural-born sisters who have just essentially said across the board. "I don't care what you are, I'm going to love you regardless." So that within itself has just been comforting, but I think sometimes it would be nice if they would just take that step to go a little bit further and say, you know, we're really—how was it growing up knowing that nobody really supported you where you are? You know, and that you couldn't come out at an early age?" So...

DG: So talk a little bit more about getting married.

MW: [sighs loudly] That was my way out. I had it figured out in my mind that, if I can't pray this away, then maybe if I get married, it'll go away, and I went into it very naïve. I was 19. It was my way out, and I thought that that was gonna be my saving point. That everything I was going through, that it was going to end. And it just made it worse. It was, yeah.

DG: At that point, had you had any relationships with a woman?

MW: [shaking head] I hadn't had any relationships at that point. Having been with anybody. I was trying to save myself, you know, and hoping, like I said, that once I was with somebody that all those feelings would go away, but it was horrible. It was horrible.

DG: Do you want to talk more about that?

MW: It—it was just a hard time. I just remember that first time having sex, and I just remember being like, "Oh my god, is this—what is—this is what's supposed to be like?" and I'm like, "I have to do this for the rest of my life?" I was devastated. I was—I was completely devastated. And I just kept saying, you know, I gotta pray. God is going to make this right, you know. [shakes head] And like I said, it went on for—for years. And—and I realized that the feelings weren't gonna go away and that, you know, God wasn't going to magically make it better. I had to do something for myself, you know, so...

DG: Did you have any conversations with your husband about...?

MW: [laughs and nods] Not in the beginning. It was not until years later that I actually had a conversation with him, because things had gotten so bad that we weren't really communicating. We weren't having any type of sexual relationships half the time, because I was just having such a hard time, but I couldn't tell him what the issue was, and we actually separated for some time before—[burps] Excuse me, I'm sorry—we actually separated for some time, and it had nothing to do with me coming out at that point. We were separated for about two years and during that time period, I came out. And... I was out—I guess for about a year—

DG: Can you describe what that means—you came out?

MW: Well, I came out, and I actually started living my life as a lesbian while we were separated, and—and I did that for about a year, and I had a family member at a church that I was going to tell me, you know, “You need to try to do everything you can to make your marriage work,” you know, “It—you can get through this, this is just a rough spot” and whatever, so things were just really difficult at that time. The kids were really small. I had three kids at—well, yeah, at that point, I had all three of my children and just like, I have to try to work this out, you know, with him to see if I can get things back together. So, after about two years being separated, I went back to him and at that point, I told that, you know, I believe truly in my heart that this is who I am, that I am a lesbian, and that if you want to be with me, this is just a part of who I am, you know, and he was like, “Well, we can go to counseling,” you know, “we can work through this.” And so, we got back together, and we did, we started going to counseling, and it—it wasn’t—and I’ve heard like some of these organizations that try to... like, change—supposed to like change the way you are. Like, you can get rid of being gay, and the counselors that we were going to, there wasn’t—it wasn’t anything like that—that—that really like, were harping on it, like really trying to bang it into your head, but it—it was subtle Christian teaching. But over time, I realized that [shaking head] that—that wasn’t for me. And so, when things really got rough, and my husband realized that this wasn’t working, that the counseling wasn’t going well, he actually outed me to my parents. He called them and told them what was going on with me and actually to other family members as well, and this is why we were still together. It was supposed to be working on our marriage, and [shakes head] that was a really hard time. The—that was a really hard time, because even though he had outed me to my parents, I still had not spoken to them about it, and I was still active in the church. And my mom was still a minister at the church that we were attending, and I didn’t want what was going on with me to reflect on her, and so I kinda—I withdrew. I stopped going to church, and I stayed away, because I wanted to make sure that, you know, what I was doing didn’t reflect on her, and... after some time, my husband at the time asked me to leave, and I told him, “Give me some time. Give me about a week or two.” And I thought about it, and I said, “I think that’s the best thing for us to do is to separate.” So, that’s where I am now. Separated.

DG: I’m wondering about when you said that you separated and you came out, but none of your family knew and your parents didn’t know.

MW: No. No, I chose—

DG: Did that feel like...?

MW: In a way, it felt like freedom, but it was only a partial freedom, because I was living life the way I thought I should’ve been living life all along, but I felt like my life had been a lie, because I wasn’t out to everybody, and it was only like to certain—certain groups of people, and I had to—I felt as though as I had to keep myself sheltered, you know. And so, during that time period, it was—it was fun, but then I—I was just scared – I was scared out of my mind, you know, and then I was all over the place, because I went from having long hair, wearing it permed and styled and—to completely cutting all of my hair off. I went from wearing skirts and dresses to baggy clothes—I mean, it just went from one extreme to the other. So, at one point when my father saw me, I hadn’t told him at that point that I was gay, but he looked at me, he said, “What is wrong with you? What—what is going on?” you know, he said, “Yesterday, you know—you

looked like this, and now today,” you know, “you look like this. What’s happening?” I’m like, “No, I just want to try something new.” But I wouldn’t say anything, so...

DG: Had you found a gay community in Baltimore [Maryland]?

MW: Yes. [laughs]

DG: How did you do that?

MW: Through some friends. I’ve always—like I said, even growing up in high school, I’ve always been a part of that crowd where I knew somebody that was gay or bisexual, so I had a couple of friends who I just—I had befriended them a long time ago, and I actually came out to them long before I came out to anybody else. And just began to spend more time with that group of people, and some of them I’m still friends with today, so yeah, and they supported me through the whole thing. Like, trying to figure out where I fit in and the whole thing, they just accepted me for who I was, so...

DG: So, what was that community like? So it was just a community of friends? Or were you going to bars? I guess what I’m wondering about it is as far as what did you find as far as the gay community in Baltimore [Maryland]?

MW: It—well, in the beginning, it was extremely interesting, because like I said, most of my life, I had been extremely sheltered as far as being in church all the time, so I had never had a drink, I had never been to a bar—

DG: That’s what I was wondering about.

MW: Right. [laughs] I’d never been to a bar. Yeah, so, my first time actually going to a bar was a gay bar. It wasn’t even in like a regular bar, so, yeah, my first time getting drunk. [laughs] I think I was 30, my first time getting drunk. You know, not that it was—it wasn’t planned that way, but just happened, and so yeah, it—and it was a different experience for me... like I said, I was scared. I think I was more petrified than anything, but it was a freeing experience at that. You know, I—I looked at those people that were there, and I was like, this is what my life is supposed to be. This is what it should be like. This is what it should look like. Not so much being in a bar, but just seeing people freely express themselves and be who, you know, they wanted to be, you know. And living in it wholly. And I just wasn’t there yet, so...

DG: So, let’s go back to separating from your husband. So, what happened next?

MW: What happened next was that I moved out, got my own place, and I took it slow. I—I took it slow. I didn’t do like I did this, because at this point, this was the second time that we had separated. I took it really slow, and what I mean by taking it slow is I just lived my life, and I learned to accept myself for who I was. I learned to not look to others or not look to a God to justify the person that I am. And—and I just learned to be—I just learned to be whole, you know. I learned to be free to—to dress the way that I wanted to dress and not have, like, society—and when I say society, like at that time, the first time when I had come out was living as a lesbian, I

had other people telling me, “Oh, you should look like this. Oh, you should buy this,” and so that’s how I ended up going from one extreme to the other. [laughs] You know, and like, going into the barber shop getting my hair cut and people mistaking me for a man right away, just because of the clothes that I had on, so, you know, when I came out this next time when we separated, I just took my time, and kinda redefined who I was, and—and from the inside out. So, I started with the inside, and then those things that was on the inside just slowly began to work their way on the outside.

DG: So where did you find support during this time?

MW: PFLAG [formerly stood for Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays]. PFLAG has been a life saver. When I initially came out, I had moved from Baltimore [Maryland] to the York [Pennsylvania] area, and I knew really nobody other than my coworkers here in York [Pennsylvania], so I needed some support. I started looking online for support groups to go to, and I found PFLAG here in York, and have been going there for quite some time. When I say they were my anchor and my savior, I mean I’m tearing up thinking about it, because there was nobody here for me, and I couldn’t, at that time—at least, I didn’t think I could call my parents or call a family member and say this is what I’m going through, but when I went to PFLAG, they were there for me, and it was just like having my parents or having somebody say, “It’s okay.” You know—you know, “You will make it through,” you know, “It’s one step at a time.” And—and still to this day, I still go back to PFLAG, [laughs] because I like being that support for somebody else who’s coming out or maybe somebody else’s parents are there and their child has just coming—has just—has just come out to them. To be a voice to say, “Be there for them,” you know, “They—your kids don’t have to go through what I went through, you know. So you can be there to see them grow and you know, to watch them grow,” but yeah, I love PFLAG. [laughs]

DG: How were things for you at work?

MW: Work was definitely a transition. [laughs] But I have not had any issues at work at all. Everyone there has been extremely supportive. I have—I haven’t run into any issues personally where people have treated me any different, because I remain to be the same person. Just because my sexual orientation has changed, you know... that has not changed me as a person. I’m still kind-hearted, I’m still honest, I’m still hard-working. None of that has changed, so they don’t treat me any different.

DG: What about your children?

MW: My kids... [laughs] I thought it was interesting that while my husband and I were separating, he told my two oldest kids that I was gay before I had a chance to have a conversation with them. They both told me it doesn’t—it didn’t matter. My daughter actually told me she knew a long time ago and... [shakes head] was just waiting for me to say something, and she said it didn’t matter to her and neither one of them at that point. My youngest son [clears throat] at the time, I felt as though he was already having issues—other issues in things that were going on, so I didn’t tell him right away. I waited until he was 18—17, and I had a conversation with him, and he was like, “Well, I knew that a long time ago. That’s really—it wasn’t

important,” you know, and so I told him that I had already—he said, “Well, did you talk to you know, Desiree (sp?) and Darrel (sp?), and did you tell them already?” and I was like, “Well, yeah, I told them a couple of years ago,” and he was like, “And you didn’t tell me? You left me out of the conversation?” And—so he was a little hurt that I didn’t tell him at the same time, but I explained it to him, and he said it—it really didn’t matter, but he was just a little hurt, but they are just as supportive as they can be, and—and I think that was one of my fears is that they wouldn’t be supportive, even though I did raise them to love people for who they are and not to discriminate in any way. So—but it was still that fear, that underlying fear was still there that they may not—may not accept me, but that didn’t happen, so it’s all okay.

DG: Nice. So, what else is going on in your life?

MW: My life is full. [laughs] I have a wonderful partner now... and I have dreamt that this life could be like this... I dreamt it, and it’s actually coming true, and sometimes I have to pinch myself to say this is real. It is real. I—I’m as happy as I could be right now, and it... sometimes I think about, like, where I’ve come, and the—the things that I’ve had to go through to get where I am now, and I—I say I wish I didn’t have to go that route to get to where I am now, but those things have made me the person that I am, and those experiences have made me the person that I am, and I hope that some of the things that I say today will help people not have to go that route the way that I went, so that they can live their life and be who they are early on in life.

DG: Is there anything else that you want to share?

MW: No, I think I’m okay.

DG: [laughs] Well, thank you so much for talking about your life and your experiences with us. I think one thing that I forgot to say at the beginning that I’ll say now is that I was supposed to say where we are. So, we are, in fact, in York, Pennsylvania.

MW: Yes.

DG: Alright, thank you.

MW: You’re welcome.