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N.3: Undergraduate Internship Program: Fall 2013

Interview N-0026

Cecil Wooten

5 November 2013

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ABSTRACT – CECIL WOOTEN

Cecil Wooten discusses growing up in Kinston, North Carolina as part of a prominent family and his decision to suppress his gayness in favor of a career. He recalls casual sex with other high school boys as well as a closeted uncle who would take him and other high school boys to Europe and pay for college tuition. Wooten describes first being openly gay while studying and teaching at Indiana University as well as his statement of open homosexuality during his interview for professorship at UNC-Chapel Hill. He also recounts media coverage of his course Sex and Gender in the Ancient World, advising the Carolina Gay Association, leading the Williamson Commission to include more gay and lesbian studies in UNC-Chapel Hill's curriculum, and working with Carolina Gay Association leaders and Chancellor Paul Hardin to add homosexuality to the university's nondiscrimination policy.

FIELD NOTES – CECIL WOOTEN

Interviewee: Dr. Cecil Wooten
Interviewer: Corinne White
Interview date: November 5, 2013
Location: Murphey Hall, Room 215, UNC-Chapel Hill
Length: 79:22

THE INTERVIEWEE. Dr. Cecil Wooten is a professor of classics at UNC-CH. He was the faculty advisor for the Carolina Gay Association from 1985-1999. Hailing from Kinston, N.C., Wooten received a B.A. from Davidson College and a Ph. D from UNC-CH, among other degrees. Wooten's research interest lies in exploring gender and sexuality in the ancient world. Though retired, Wooten is currently teaching a graduate seminar at UNC-CH.

THE INTERVIEWER. Corinne White is a UNC student and intern at the Southern Oral History Program working on a project with other SOHP interns about sexuality at UNC in the 1970s.

DESCRIPTION OF THE INTERVIEW. The interview was conducted in the classics department chair office in Murphey Hall. Wooten insisted several times that his memory was not what it used to be. Throughout the interview, he seemed to bubble over with anecdotes, and spoke rapidly. At 34:30, Wooten had to leave the interview for another short appointment. The interview resumed an hour later. For the most part, the interview focused on the UNC-CH administration's attitude toward gay faculty and students, Wooten's experiences as the faculty advisor for the Carolina Gay Association, growing up gay and his changing attitudes towards sexuality and identity, and his academic interests.

TAPE LOG – CECIL WOOTEN

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Length: 79:22
Comments: Only text in quotation marks is verbatim; all other text is paraphrased, including the interviewer's questions.

TAPE INDEX

<u>Time</u>	<u>Topic</u>
	[Digital Recording, Starts at Beginning]
0:00	Introduction, "this is Corinne White here with Dr. Cecil Wooten"
0:25	Growing up in Kinston, N.C., "being gay was not really an option," describes two gay men who lived in Kinston, "I just assumed this was something I would have to conceal from the rest of the world for the rest of my life"
1:25	Decided at young age to dedicate self to career, academics, and friends only and ruled out romantic relationships; had an overall happy childhood
2:55	Town perceptions of other gay men; living with uncle who he now believes to have been gay
5:15	Uncle "adopted" male high school students, sent them to college and took them on trips to Europe; uncle later committed suicide
7:08	Religious background, mother was "social Episcopalian," father wasn't religious; relatives were always accepting of his gayness
8:25	Said he was "a little bit of a sissy," but was not bullied at school due to family's wealth and prominence; "gay was certainly never mentioned as a part of it"
9:14	High school senior class president; "I actually had a lot of sex in high school ... it was not romantic at all"; purely sexual, no feelings
11:03	Trip to Europe during college, not very different experience for gay life compared to the States, "overt gay life was probably more to be found in the States"
12:24	After Europe, decided that sex and romance was not going to be a part of life; devoted self to life of bachelorhood, career and education
12:47	Initial interest in classics began in eighth grade before even studying Latin; also wanted to position self in a place different from his father (a doctor), "I wanted to put myself in a place where I didn't compete with him and where I could develop my own identity"
14:56	"Public schools in Eastern North Carolina in the 50s were hard"
15:23	Speculates what it would have been like had gayness been discussed; "I assumed this would not be an open part of my life... that's not a very integrated life and it's better to have an integrated life"
16:28	Experiences at Davidson; "everyone who was my best friend at Davidson turned out to be gay"
17:14	Friend at UNC believed that one could not be a classics professor and be gay and that gay people could only exist in places like New York; "it seemed to me the option then was either you could be a professional person or you could be gay"

- 18:13 Self-discovery while teaching at Indiana University, “I realized you could integrate the two”
- 18:58 Tense, “monastic” atmosphere at all-male Davidson; never aware of sexual activity between men “I was still at a stage in college of thinking that maybe I wasn’t the only gay person in the world, but one of a handful”
- 20:04 The only hard thing about being gay growing up was “the feeling that you were so different”
- 20:39 “I really didn’t come out until I was on the faculty of Indiana University”; joined group called Faculty Alliance of Gays
- 22:07 Return to North Carolina in 1980, decided that he wanted more of an identity as a gay person, said in job interview for UNC-CH that he was openly gay “I was much more sort of an official gay person”
- 22:41 “For about 10 years, being gay was extremely important to me and was a part of my life I wanted to develop because I had never developed it before;” later realized that he “was a professional classicist who happened to be gay”
- 22:37 First time feeling solidarity with gay community at bar listening to “We Are Family” and also marching in gay pride march in Durham
- 24:28 Spent a lot of effort in the 80s building a gay identity, emphasized it as much in the 80s as he had emphasized his professional academics in the 70s
- 25:56 Impact of HIV/AIDS crisis; started affecting him in 1985-6, but was already well-established in gay community and sex was less important; started having less and safer sex
- 27:34 HIV/AIDS and Carolina Gay Association reputation, rare Daily Tar Heel Letters to the Editor describing gay people as “Typhoid Marys”
- 28:14 Encouraged students in the CGA to come talk to him, but would mainly work with curriculum and nondiscrimination policy, not dorm life
- 29:11 “Students I think were very careful about what they said around me,” never personally experienced discrimination from students
- 29:34 Work on commission to gain more homosexual presence in UNC curriculum, provost put out memo encouraging people to integrate homosexuality into curriculum, San Francisco man left \$300,000 to UNC to encourage gay and lesbian studies, appointed committee chair on how to best spend that money
- 31:19 Homosexuality in the ancient world, “the assumption was that everyone was bisexual,” taught class called Sex and Gender in the Ancient World that was cited by the *News and Observer* as the first “gay studies” course on UNC’s campus
- 32:15 Adding homosexuality to the university’s nondiscrimination policy, described as “easy” process
- [Interview break, Wooten leaves for meeting, interview reconvenes an hour later]
- 0:18 Role as Carolina Gay Association advisor, attended almost all meetings, always tried to make it clear to students in classes that he was gay, source of support
- 3:17 Group meetings changed depending on whether chair was politically or socially minded, group got “edgy” and “rabid” reputation so a lot of people did not want to be involved, group was mainly half and half male and female with male co-chair and female co-chair
- 5:21 Social events organized by CGA, mainly dances
- 6:07 Political events, speakers in the Pit, readings of names who had died of AIDS

- 7:09 Tension between group wanting visibility and not wanting to “be in people’s face,” always a problem to attract more membership, different CGA leaders had different agendas, “things would be done and then dropped”
- 9:17 Doug Ferguson was best leader of CGA, had tremendous energy for organizing events, spoke at Lavender Graduation ceremony for gay students
- 10:47 Organizing gay book club called Mary Renault Society (1985-1992) as outlet for gay men who did not want to go to bars and wanted other social outlets, university professors, lawyers, accountants attended, “One of the things I’ve always liked about gay life is that it’s an equalizer, I associated with people I probably wouldn’t have met otherwise”
- 14:27 Classics as a particularly gay-friendly department, once had a dispute with a medical school professor on his gay curriculum initiative, most gay faculty were openly gay, might have been more discrimination towards gay staff
- 17:33 Has never had long-term romantic relationship, parents had very bad marriage, father was very distant
- 18:49 Impact of gay marriage on gay long-term relationships
- 20:22 Radicalism as a problem for the CGA, student body at UNC is very tolerant but there are many conservative students
- 22:45 “I had one bad experience about being gay,” teaching beginning Latin the year he first came up for tenure, one student complained that Wooten’s open gayness made him uncomfortable, accusation from department chair: “you don’t make any effort to conceal who you are”
- 25:33 Father was afraid being gay would endanger his career
- 27:11 Student boarder; German student studying classics stayed with him for seven years; no romantic relationship though others thought it was
- 30:11 Perception of professors with student boarders; Professor Gerry Unks and student boarders
- 31:38 Pattern of gay students coming to UNC from small towns in North Carolina and then going to big cities after UNC, calls this a “triage system”
- 33:15 Comparison of UNC to other large public universities, does not see it as exception in terms of gay community
- 34:44 Work with faculty group to try to get healthcare benefits for domestic partners; administrators extended every possible benefit it could
- 35:48 Media coverage of his proposed course called Homosexuality in the Ancient World, called “leading sodomite of UNC’s campus” by a conservative commentator, coverage of Williamson Committee to include more gay and lesbian studies in the curriculum, didn’t receive any negative mail
- 39:32 Doesn’t see self as an activist, minimalist view of life, “I have changed a few people’s minds”
- 40:31 Conservative student newspaper wrote vicious article on his course Sex and Gender in the Ancient World, student who wrote it admitted to it, apologized and said he changed his mind about homosexuality
- 43:12 Feels very lucky when reflecting back on life, has gained from being gay because he has some insight on what it’s like to be a member of a persecuted group