

LAFAYETTE COLLEGE
LGBTQ ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Interview of
Leah Wasacz '16
Conducted by
Mary Armstrong
December 11, 2016

Special Collections & College Archives

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Lafayette College

2018

Wasacz

MARY ARMSTRONG: OK. That's on and running. That also seems to on and ready. It is December 11th, 2016. This is Mary Armstrong. I'm professor of Women's & Gender Studies and English also chair of Women's and Gender Studies at Lafayette College. And I'm here with?

LEAH WASACZ: Leah Wasacz.

MA: Class of?

LW: Twenty-sixteen.

MA: Twenty-sixteen! OK. I was going to say, "just." Like this year.

LW: Yes. Just now.

MA: And she is kind enough to join me today for an interview in our LGBT Lives at Lafayette Queer Archives project. And we're very excited and grateful, thank you Leah.

LW: And so am I.

MA: Oh, that's so nice for us. You already stated your name. There's a little bit of paperwork to confirm that your participation is voluntary.

LW: Mm-hmm. Yes, it is.

MA: And to let you know, which you already know, that you can decline any answer you don't wish to [00:01:00] answer, or just skip over it, or answer questions I didn't ask,

elaborate on any question, if I go too fast through something, and you're suddenly like "No wait, that was really important" -- anything I forget. The interview today looks like a few questions about who you are -- so, anyone who accesses this will know your framework relative to the college, and then some questions about your experience on campus. So first of all.

LW: Sounds good

MA: Could you briefly describe your relationship to Lafayette, and how you define yourself as a member of the Lafayette community. So -- alum, I'm guessing?

LW: Yeah. I'm an alum. An alumna.

MA: Alumna?

LW: It's hard one to start with. (laughter) My relationship to Lafayette and the community?

MA: I suppose we could give it the short answer, is you're an alum, as opposed to faculty member -- and then we'll let you --

LW: That's fair. Yeah.

MA: -- go ahead -- OK

LW: Well -- I have something I could say. I mean, Lafayette [00:02:00] is really special to me, you know? Because, a lot of people talk about how high school was a big place of changing for them. You got puberty and stuff going on, but

also, just their opinions and taste and thoughts on things change. And I very much wasn't like that in high school. I sort of had this fluid, continuous thing from middle school where I was mostly the same person. And college was just this huge, crazy time for me, changing everything -- including my gender. (laughter) So. It's like a place of great change for me. And I like it a lot because of that.

MA: Wonderful. Thanks. And, you identify within the LGBT community as?

LW: I am transgender -- MTF. Male to female. And, I'm also bisexual.

MA: OK, great. [00:03:00] Thanks. And, how do you professionally describe yourself? Any way -- vocation, work, employment? (laughter)

LW: Well right now, I'm a math tutor. And I work retail. But I would describe myself as a writer and a poet. And a mathematician. I like math.

MA: That's great.

LW: Those would be the main ones I guess.

MA: Alright. Wonderful. And anything more on that? That's sort of how you would describe yourself?

LW: Just describe myself in general?

MA: Just sort of your place in the world, I guess. Without being too philosophical there.

LW: I guess -- yeah. I guess those things. If I would describe by hobbies, the other thing I would throw in is that I'm really obsessed with competitive video games.

MA: OK! (laughter) So! See, that's the kind of thing--

LW: Yeah, that's the only other big one. (laughter)

MA: OK. So, some generic -- you're very recent alumna. So, we ask folks to describe -- and you can imagine that, over history, this changes, how the general situation on campus [00:04:00] was for people who identified as LGBTQ, or like yourself, while you were here. And that might change over four years. It depends.

LW: Yeah. I think it was pretty positive while I was here. It wasn't perfect, for sure. But there was a lot of organizations making big efforts. I don't have the perspective beyond the four years I was here to know if those were big efforts for the first time, or how large those were, but, it seemed like, in certain situations, especially with trans stuff that they were pretty novel. I remember -- well, you were there at the talk, I think, about -- I don't remember specifically what it was about, but I think it was just trans people at Lafayette. And it seemed very much like a general information kind of thing. [00:05:00] I thought that there were also organizations

like BCD, which I'm sure I'll end up talking about a bunch.
Which were super helpful to me --

MA: That's Behind Closed Doors.

LW: So, there was like that infrastructure -- yeah Behind
Closed Doors, for closeted and questioning people. Secret
meeting group. And -- or Geology Club, as we called it, to
keep it secret.

MA: (laughter)

LW: That's the name of our Facebook group.

MA: That's wonderful.

LW: So, there was stuff like that. It wasn't perfect, because,
Lafayette was working on bathroom access. And I was
fortunate that I lived on a really queer floor in general.
I lived -- when I came out, for my junior and senior year,
I lived on trap floor -- the gaming interest floor,
basically. And that floor had a lot of queer people on it,
for whatever reason. [00:06:00] But even then, my senior
year, the floor had a vote on whether or not to make the
bathrooms gender neutral. Or what they would do with the
bathrooms, since there was me and I think one other person
who had a question about that. And one of the floors voted
no. Like, the bathrooms won't be neutral. Because we had
a non-binary person on the floor. And so, that stuff --
those are more personal things, that aren't the

administration. But I could still -- it was moving in that direction, but hadn't gone there entirely yet. And I think, now, in Keefe, the bathrooms are all gender neutral, if I recall correctly.

MA: So that was a specific challenge, just thinking, during your time on campus. That was a challenge, right? The bathroom issue. [00:07:00] Were there others that particularly -- that you recall?

LW: I mean, the bathroom issue was a big challenge. There were times where I got -- I guess, I won't say derogatory necessarily, but strange comments, for how I dressed. Because I wasn't, and I'm still not, passing. That's just something I deal with. Even people just having a judging sort of look. But fortunately, those were few and far between, which was good.

I would say the other major challenge on campus for me, if I would say -- when it comes to LGBT stuff -- I mean, Lafayette is just extremely challenging, in general (laughter), was just that, as far as I knew, I didn't know a single other -- I knew exactly one other trans person [00:08:00] who had graduated the year before my senior year. So, in effect, I knew no other trans people on campus. Well, or -- let me be specific, because I did say we had a non-binary person. I knew nobody else who was

taking estrogen on campus as a trans person. And that -- there's just a loneliness to that, I guess. And I don't know if there were? But I just didn't know them.

MA: Right. Right. So -- the isolation of not having a community?

LW: I mean, I had my people. I had BCD. But BCD, you know, everybody else in BCD was cis, just for example.

MA: So support community, but not people with similar --

LW: Yeah. I believe everybody else was cis. We might have had another non-MTF trans person, but, yeah.

MA: OK. Gotcha. So isolation, in terms of you had support -- I was just thinking, the next question is about [00:09:00] allies. So, you had allies, but that's different from people with shared experiences.

LW: Who are exactly like -- yeah, yeah. And I had a lot of allies, and a lot of really close friends. You know?

MA: So you had good allies and support from your peers?

LW: I would 100% have not even come close to graduating if not for good support from good peers.

MA: How did that community evolve?

LW: Of my peers?

MA: Of having a good ally support -- because I could imagine someone going through Lafayette as a trans person without that.

LW: I mean, so -- OK, so I'm really fortunate in that I didn't identify as trans when I came in. I came out after I already had a number of friends on campus. And that was a huge boon to me, because I feel like if I was a non-passing trans person when I came on campus, I feel like it would have been really difficult for me. [00:10:00] But, fortunately, I had cis male and cis female friends who had been my friends for years when I came out. The way that it changed -- well, two of my friends who I knew before I came out, like later came out as bi. So, that was interesting because our whole friend group got a lot more queer, really quickly. Which was cool and helpful, and I talked to them about stuff. As -- also as a bi person. And it was obviously a transition for everybody to start using the different names and pronouns. But they were generally really good about it. I would say probably the biggest transformation was just that, as I was physically queer, I knew more and more queer people, and they became more [00:11:00] my closer friends, just because: that's how it works, you know?

MA: Right, sure. Absolutely. And outside of -- other than your peer group, your friends, were there other sources of support at the college? Faculty -- staff, community life -

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LW: Yes. Yeah. There was awesome faculty. I don't know if they want me to name them --

MA: I would imagine that that would not be a problem.

(laughter)

LW: So -- Liz McMahon was really helpful. I was in her abstract algebra class my senior year, taking abstract algebra for the second time, because, oh my gosh. That class is so hard. (laughter) I was taking it for the second time, and I had to drop it for the second time. Largely because of terrible depression and dysphoria like screwing with my entire life. And that -- I like mathematics, but English is my passion. So, if there was a class that I was going to drop, I had three English classes, and that. And that was the class that wound up having to go. And I had a long [00:12:00] conversation with her about trans stuff in her office, and she was so nice, and so helpful and so great. And totally understanding about having to drop it, and being just helpful. You know?

MA: Yeah, right. That's great.

LW: Yeah. My thesis advisor was really helpful. As was Professor Caroline Van Dyke. Actually, a funny story about Van Dyke. I guess she knew of me, from other English professors -- which is weird! And maybe uncomfortable.

(laughter) But she sent me an email one day after I was

walking around on campus. And after it was public that I was trans and out, she said, "Oh, I saw you wearing this beautiful blouse walking around, and I just wanted to say, go you!" (laughter) And I was like "Thanks, Van Dyke! I've never had you [00:13:00] in a class, but thank you!"

(laughter) And then later, I took her class and it was awesome. That stuff was super helpful. I didn't get super involved in any student government, or other stuff like that, so I can't really comment on whether any of that was helpful. [Sentence redacted by QAP reviewer] So -- yeah, my friends, professors. I think those are the main ones. Unless I'm forgetting another big part of campus. But I guess I would remember that. Yeah.

MA: Right, right. Well, OK, that's fantastic! Sounds like there was a good community that emerged for you, and that's a good thing.

LW: Also sorry I'm really rambly.

MA: You're not rambly at all! You're perfect! I mean, that's wonderful. And -- you're -- she's perfect!

LW: That's definitely not true.

MA: [00:14:00] She's close. Social life. So, this is the thing we always ask. So what was the social scene like? I guess this includes the friendship scene, not just something you

would mean the dating scene. But, all of it -- so, how did it --

LW: Oh, gosh. The dating scene! Oh gosh! (laughter)

MA: Oh gosh! So, it's a question any way you would like, but just sort of thinking about the social world. I mean, for some folks that involves the Greek experience, for some people, not at all. So, just give us a sense of your experience.

LW: So, I was unaffiliated. I was never in a fraternity or sorority. Although, sometimes, I like to think what it would have been like. I mean, even before I came out, I definitely would not have been the type of person to join a fraternity, but, if I was allowed in a sorority -- which I never bothered to pursue - I'm just so curious what that would have been like.

MA: Wow. What a gender experience.

LW: Yeah -- what a weird gender experience. I [00:15:00] feel like they, at least some of them -- they have a stated national policy about trans women. But some of them don't, I think. But, I'm not the expert on that, so I don't know. But social life, well. The weirdest thing -- or maybe it's the most common thing about my social life, was that it was largely -- all of my best social interactions with people were when we were mutually together, trying to do our

homework, and neither of us wanted to do our homework, so, instead, we just did things. Procrastination is a great force of friendship!

MA: (laughter) Bonding through avoidance!

LW: Yes! (laughter) Bonding. And so, a lot of my best interactions with my friends were largely we were hanging out in our dorm, or something. And -- I'm not a huge partier, but I do like small-ish parties, mostly of people I know. I'm not super big into [00:16:00] drinking, but I enjoy a drink occasionally. Like, light social drinking, basically. So --

MA: Got you.

LW: -- that would happen, and I do feel, incidentally, I have nothing to back this up that I wound up going to less parties senior year than I did junior year. And I have no idea if that has anything to do with transition, or if that's purely that people I knew who held parties graduated, or--

MA: So, you don't see a connection between transitioning, or coming out, and --

LW: I don't think that that affected, but that's something so vague and nebulous, so. Yeah. There's one other thing I was going to say about the social life, which was -- I was involved in a lot of clubs and stuff. That was my main

thing. I was the editor of the lit mag. So I was super involved in that.

MA: Oh wow. Yeah. (inaudible)

LW: And, the lit mag was [00:17:00] really great -- if extremely stressful. (laughter)

MA: Gotcha. Yeah! As such things will be.

LW: Oh wait! I have one other thing I wanted to add to the faculty thing? Because I just remembered something.

MA: Yeah, do.

LW: Which was -- I also was a writing associate at the College Writing Center. And my boss, Christian Tatu was awesome, too, about trans stuff. I talked to him and I lead a staff meeting, along with him, of WA's. And he kind of announced to the staff meeting, and used my pronouns, and that was really helpful, having his support on that.

MA: Wow, that's great. That's really powerful, right? Because that makes it official in this way.

LW: Yeah. Yeah. Not that I think there were WA's who were jumping at the bit to have it not work that way. But I think that having that message that it's from the top --

MA: Makes it official, gives it authority, and [00:18:00] feels good for you, too.

LW: Yeah.

MA: So social clubs. I was thinking here --

LW: Yeah. I listed a lot of clubs on the pre-interview!

MA: So one of the questions was -- one of the way we think of it is the way that clubs and organizations -- if they played any role. And you just said you were in a lot of them. If they played a role in your transitioning or your coming out or your being LGBTQ, or being (inaudible), at Lafayette?

LW: Can I see the list, if you have it? Of clubs? I can't remember the list of clubs.

MA: Oh no, no, no, you actually just said, "I was in a ton of clubs. I think and also the lit mag. Especially the lit mag."

LW: Oh. I remember on the pre-interview thing --

MA: Oh, I'm sorry: I didn't bring that with me.

LW: That's fine. I mean -- I remembered it off the top of my head, then. There's just a lot to go through. I mean, so -- the biggest club, obviously, was Behind Closed Doors. That place was, like -- it was just everything I needed, at that point in time. [00:19:00] Because I started going in December of my junior year. And at that point, I was so nervous that, like I barely talked at all during the first meeting, and didn't even like exactly specify. I think I said, "I might not be a guy," and that took so much that I just stopped speaking for the rest of the meeting. And

that place was just so fantastic, because, like: the moderators who led it -- the two students who led it, Stacey and Chris -- I actually talked to Stacey, and she said it was OK to use her full name. So that was Stacey-Ann Pearson, if you knew her. She was just, like -- ah! She was so great. And was so good at making a supportive atmosphere where it was OK to be goofy and silly, but also to talk about [00:20:00] serious issues.

And it was also really incredible because it was a super-diverse place. Like: BCD, when I started going, was like half-Black, and Stacy is Jamaican, and we had international students there -- and Gay men, and Lesbians, and I was a trans person. It was so -- a microcosm of what Lafayette talks about when they talk about diversity. And that was really cool. Other clubs that were really helpful? I'm trying to just run down the list of clubs. Because a lot of the clubs on that list I sent -- it was stuff I did my freshman and sophomore years, before I came out.

MA: Was it related, maybe, to your experiences? Or maybe not?

LW: [00:21:00] Not as much because I wasn't out. But one weird thing: I was on Lafayette's Speech and Debate team. And I owe a lot to that team. Like they taught me a lot, and helped me with public speaking a lot. But, one weird thing was that, in speech and debate, for tournaments, the

uniform you have to wear is formal dress. So I would go to tournaments wearing a full, like broad shouldered suit that the school had bought. Which is very nice of them. But, I'm thinking -- every once in a while I think, what if I had stuck with the team when I came out? And then would have had to go through trying to wear a women's formal suit, or trying to not present at a tournament. And that would have been really shitty having to deal with that, basically. Because judges in that were like: super judgmental, about your clothing -- which is dumb, because you were giving oral arguments. It wasn't a fashion show. But they treated it like it was. So, [00:22:00] there was stuff like that, which was a source of, I guess, dysphoria -- before I would've given it that name.

MA: Right. So, looking back, you can see those moments -- now, in a way?

LW: Yeah. Like, in a way that I felt at the time. I've never liked wearing ties. And suits. Like, because -- unsurprisingly, I guess! But, at the time, it was just a quirk of me. Not that women have to dislike wearing suits and ties. But I just don't, because it doesn't feel congruent with how I want to present.

MA: Mm-hmm. Right. Sure. One of the things we ask about is athletics. Did you do any athletics? Were you on --

LW: (laughter) No. I wasn't involved at all. (laughter)

MA: We're making no assumptions here!

LW: I was in the Wally Ball club. For like one semester.

Where four people got together and played Wally Ball in the gym. But, no, I was not a part of athletics.

MA: OK. (laughter) [00:23:00] It's always -- never assume, right. You never know. It sounds like Behind Closed Doors was super important, when it came along for you, and the particular relationship to trans people needing to do their own figuring out before they come out, in ways that, are -- or, any member of any community --

LW: And the fact that it was secret. And I went to QUEST occasionally --

MA: Yeah. I was going to ask you about that.

LW: And QUEST does awesome work. But, the downside is that QUEST becomes so crowded that -- not that it's not intimate, because there's like a sense of community there, and people are very open and welcoming, obviously. But there's so many people, that you don't get a lot of time to personally hash out your issues. And it's also not a therapy group, it's like a meeting group -- not that Behind Closed Doors was a therapy group, but, it was a intense discussion group which often led to [00:24:00] therapeutic

moments. And that was what I needed more than QUEST, which was, like awareness, I suppose. Yeah.

MA: So one is processing the identity and thinking about it, and the other is more like, acting on it.

LW: Yeah, yeah, yeah. That's what I would say. Yeah. QUEST, I think wouldn't have been -- maybe, if I were more involved in it -- I was never super involved in it -- it would've been a helpful place, but I know, too, that BCD partly was formed because people felt like QUEST wasn't giving them what they wanted. So.

MA: Right. Right. Gotcha. So. Because, those are really different things when you think about it. Like, QUEST requires you to already be present in an identity, in a sense -- because you're moving from it.

LW: Right. And there's a lot of allies, in QUEST, but, at the same time, because it's public information -- that's like a thing.

MA: [00:25:00] Pockets of LGBTQ life. So, you have Behind Closed Doors. And you have QUEST out there, which is less, sort of, less significant in your experience. Were there ways to find friends? Or was it just, sort of, you already had your friends? I'm thinking about your experience. Forms of code? Ways to get to know other people? I know you said you were isolated, so, I'm wondering if --

LW: What do you mean, ways to get to know people?

MA: You know, sort of across time, the communities have different ways of, sort of, forming and communicating.

LW: The one thing I can think of is that a lot of my friendships after I came out, especially with cis women I knew, a lot of our conversations turned towards me processing feminine identity, which I didn't know really well, obviously, even though I had an [00:26:00] internal sense of it, obviously. There was so much [laughter, inaudible] -- I'm sure you know this, it takes so much effort.

And they would help me with passing stuff -- tips.

Somebody from BCD taught me to paint my nails, which was awesome. So, there was a lot of that. There was also just kind of -- a lot of my friends from before I came out didn't know certain -- they studied things like heteronormativity in their English classes, but I had to explain to them the concept of cis and trans for example, or passing and stealth, or -- a lot of trans-specific terminology. Because, I guess -- it was sort of interesting, I guess. I had a Shakespeare class where our professor went super into [00:27:00] queer interpretations of Shakespeare, but those were largely about same-sex relations in Shakespeare. Although there was a little bit

of cross-dressing discussed, because that does come up in Shakespeare. Cross-dressing was -- it's pretty separate, not separate, but, you have to go another couple of steps to get to trans stuff from cross-dressing. And, that's just not in there. Or, it's not obviously in there. So that stuff was just missing from their vocabularies.

MA: OK. So, we were lagging in the trans relative to --

LW: I feel like that's a societal thing, though. I don't think that's because of any problem on Lafayette's part.

MA: So, we've synced up with the rest of the world in that sense.

LW: Yeah. I had to do that same thing with my friends at home, and my family. I still -- every once in a while, have to explain what cis means to my mom. And I'm like: 'I thought I explained this already!' (laughter)

MA: [00:28:00] It's a learning curve, with trans. It's steeper than LGB -- the sort of the LGB is a little ahead, in terms of media and social representations, so there's a little bit of a lag at Lafayette and elsewhere?

LW: I guess so? I don't know. I think there's more trans representation in the media now than there used to be.

MA: Sounds like, what I'm saying back to you -- sounded like you had more explaining to do than some of your --

LW: Yeah, but I also haven't -- it's weird, because I'm bi, but I don't really encounter having to deal with bi stuff a lot because, (laughter) -- I'm chronically undateable.

MA: Chronically! I don't believe it.

LW: That's self-deprecation. I haven't -- from the time that I became really, deeply questioning to when I came out, and now -- [00:29:00] through that whole period, I haven't had romantic relationships. So, that aspect of my identity, I haven't had to explain to people. So, if I do wind up having to explain that, maybe that will be an equal amount of work. But, I don't know.

MA: Gotcha. That makes sense. So -- other aspects of identity -- race, religion, ethnicity that you have felt impacted your experience as a trans person?

LW: At Lafayette?

MA: Yeah.

LW: Well. As a white person, I've had the privilege of not having those multiple kinds of oppressions levied upon me. And, fortunately, I come from a family who is decently well off. So, [00:30:00] those are major blessings that I am thankful for, but a lot of trans people don't have those privileges, so. At Lafayette, I had a pretty deep experience with religion my freshman year. Which was kind of interesting, and might have affected my -- it definitely

affected me for a while, and especially how I viewed myself and coming out. My freshman year I got really involved with the Lafayette Christian fellowship, was what it was called, at the time. But now, I think it's called the Lafayette Disciple-Makers' Christian Fellowship, if they still have it. It was like -- I want to say Evangelical, but I don't think they identify Evangelical Christian youth group on campus. And so, I got really involved with that for a lot of my [00:31:00] freshman year, because I had friends who were in it.

And then, at the end of my freshman year, they had a retreat -- like, a religious retreat -- where we went up in the mountains. In the Poconos. For like a full week, and just read our Bibles all week long -- which, (laughter) I don't know why I agreed to that. And there was a workshop there about sexual sin, where, basically the pastor started talking about the morality of gayness in not so bright of a light. And after that -- that just pissed me off so much, at the time, even though I didn't identify like that, that I kind of stopped getting involved with that stuff. I don't know if being involved with that did any damage to -- I mean, it [00:32:00] definitely did damage to my self-esteem when it came to stuff like that, because questioning, during when I was coming out -- there's so

much questioning that trans people have to do. Just because -- there's so many cultural, societal, historical things we have levied upon us, that seem, to your mind, perfectly legitimate reasons not to transition, even if doing so would make you happier. And I think that did affect me a little bit, being so deeply involved with that stuff. I would say that was maybe the biggest experience with those different institutions and forces that ended up affecting me, on campus.

MA: Right. Made the hurdle a little higher.

LW: Yeah, I feel like.

MA: Thinking about academics -- your [00:33:00] wonderful words about my wonderful colleagues. Part of the experience of anyone in their identities is always being in the classroom in some way, so, just trying to think about how the classroom climate -- and obviously, you're here for four years! That's a lot of classes, but how the classroom climate was, relative to queer community issues. Sort of, what role academics played, since that's come up a number of times, in your experience as a member of that community. I guess those are two different questions, right. Sort of how the climate was, and what it was for you, and what you think it was at the school, at the time.

LW: I think the climate in my classes was generally supportive, but I felt immensely awkward in all of my classes. I was in the English department, which -- maybe only the women's and gender studies department would be more pro-LGBT.

[00:34:00] And the math department is, too, is -- was pretty accepting. They were all generally supportive, and fostered an atmosphere of respect when it came to LGBT stuff. I felt crazy awkward, though, because I had pretty clothes I wanted to wear, basically, but I knew it would make me uncomfortable to go around wearing in public. So there were days in class where I would come in like significantly more dressed up than other days. And it did draw attention. There were people who looked at me. I don't even think they even meant it in a judging way. But just knowing that you stick out like a sore thumb in the class. [00:35:00] I remember -- it was really different, taking a lot of the English classes, too, because I already had a lot of people I knew outside of class in that. But, my very last semester, I took a class on climate change in the environmental studies department, and I knew one person in that class. And so, the first day of class, I come in, I get roll called by my birth name, and I come in, and talk to the professor afterwards, and tell her "Hi, I identify like this, use this name and these pronouns." And she was

very good about that, but the next day, I walked in wearing a skirt -- and it was weird. It was really weird. And it hurt.

MA: The response from the class. The sense that people were [00:36:00] responding, in some way?

LW: Like, nobody said anything. But I always have this really paranoid part of my mind that's wondering what they're thinking. Like, even the most supportive person might be thinking "Good for them." But also might be thinking "That looks bad on her," because it did. I mean -- it didn't fit with my body. It's fitting more with my body now that I've been on hormones for a year. But it still doesn't fit perfectly. And I'm really tall, those things mattered. Even if people didn't say them.

MA: Right. Right. That makes a lot of sense.

LW: And that's like something that, to a large extent, that's almost unavoidable. Because the classrooms were statedly and purposely and very directly very supportive, but, at the end of the day, I was the [00:37:00] first trans person that so many of my classmates had ever met. And they told me that. "I had never met a trans person before."

MA: And so, they're having a cultural --

LW: Moment. Yeah. Too.

MA: Yeah. And that's you doing it. And that's pretty powerful.

LW: It feels powerful. But it's also really scary. Because, like --

MA: Powerful, scary.

LW: What if I show somebody -- what if I'm like the archetype for somebody, in their brain, and then that has some sort of effect on how they see other trans people? You know? Like, if I'm a white person, would that make it harder for them to accept black trans people just because it doesn't immediately fit with the image in their brain. Or trans people who pass worse than me, or pass better than me. Or female-to-male trans people. Or non-binary trans people. [00:38:00] And I'm really uncomfortable being like, "Hey. This is my go-to example." In their brains. But I can't not do that. Because they met me.

MA: Feels like a lot of responsibility. In some ways. The way you describe it -- whether you like it or not, the sense that that might be the case.

LW: Yeah. And, on campus, I generally felt like I talked with a lot of people in an education-y way about it. Like, there were a lot of people where I would sit down, and -- I liked having this kind of conversation with people, because it was scary, but I wanted them to know. Like, there were

people I sat down with, and they asked me a lot of questions, like "How long have you known," "How did you figure out," "So what are you going to do about X" -- especially, like "What are you going to do about the status of your genitals," which is always a weird question.

MA: Yeah yeah yeah yeah. That's a lot. And I can imagine thinking about [00:39:00] saying you didn't know other people going through -- you had a lot of allies and a lot of support and a lot of community, but not knowing other people being asked those same questions, that's got to feel isolating. I can connect the two as you described this.

LW: Yeah. Yeah. I mean, I could say talk to Sam, Sam uses she pronouns still I think. I could say talk to Sam, she would know about binders, and stuff like that, but very laser-focused on what does estrogen do to your body, like, I don't have other people to --

MA: Yeah. Right. Absolutely. Was there much -- I'm thinking of your being an English major -- academic content --

LW: Yes.

MA: There must've been. Only in the English department? Or? Well -- you were in English, and math. So that must've been an interesting sort of [00:40:00] combination of things. And were there other places?

LW: Well -- let's see. Because it definitely would've come up I took anthropology and philosophy and psychology when I was a freshman and sophomore, and if I was taking them, they would've come up then, but I transitioned -- came out and transitioned like junior and senior year. So -- or questioned, realized, dealt with, struggled, came out, and began transitioning through those two years. So, I would say it was all in the English department. I don't think it really came up in climate change at all. But, in the English department, it did come up, actually. I was in a class on women in the Renaissance -- women writers in the Renaissance, which is a cool class. Taught by Professor Donahue. And we had a big topics paper where we just, based off of what we read, find [00:41:00] something to say about the time period, and discuss it with her. So, I wound up writing that big research paper on trans people in the Renaissance, which would up getting really complicated, because we talked about the historical construction of a trans identity, and like -- what's the word? The anachronism of taking that and applying it to the Renaissance. But I was still ultimately able to talk about -- like, there's a lot of research on -- what are they called? Tribads. Which is like a lesbianism. Which (inaudible) tribadism. And sodomy laws. And concepts of

sodomy. As well as the legality of cross-dress in England -- the sumptuary laws.

MA: Fascinating.

LW: Yeah yeah yeah. So that was really cool. And super enlightening, too. Like, it would have been really unfair to say they had [00:42:00] trans people, as we think of them, in the Renaissance. But, finding all of that stuff, and being able to look at it in reference to today, was really cool. And maybe the most cool thing was that, as I was researching, I found a specific person, named Marin le Marcis, who was born as a woman, but spent his entire life going by male pronouns, having a male name and being married to a woman. And I was like, "That's a trans person! I found them!" And that was so cool. I think that was the big time. I also, when I was working as the English department assistant, I helped Van Dyke clean out her office. And as we were cleaning out her office, I found an old honors thesis called [00:43:00] "The Birth of Venus," and it was like an old anthro thesis about this girl who had gone to a transgender support group -- transgender/transsexual support group, and done anthro research on them. And I was like, "Hey, for no particular reason, I would like to read this. Can I borrow it?" Because I wasn't out at the time. And Van Dyke kind of

gave me the eye, and she was like, "Sure." (laughter) So, those were my biggest academic experiences with it. And that thesis was sweet. That was really helpful, actually, reading that.

MA: That's nice!

LW: Yeah. That was cool. I don't remember who it was by. I think I still have it in my room. And I remember reading it and thinking, "Oh, that's so interesting." So.

MA: Academics really matter.

LW: It does! It really does. I stand by that. And the fact that I had the opportunity to explore -- even within that really narrow topic in that class, was really helpful. If I had more time, or if I had realized earlier or planned it better, [00:44:00] I would've definitely tried to take WGS classes. Because, obviously, gender is fascinating to me. So.

MA: I'm thinking, oh, I wish I'd had the great pleasure of having you in a class --

LW: I really wish I'd took them. Maybe one day.

MA: And having had trans students, and having them now, I have to go on record by saying I admire your courage so much. I know what it takes. It really takes a tremendous amount.

LW: It's hard being a professor, too.

MA: Yeah, but, you know. The vulnerability when you're with your peers, you know? You described it so beautifully. I don't need to describe it, but I really think the college owes you a vote of thanks for being out on campus. It really makes a big, big difference. I mean, you change a community when you're like that. And the burden you describe, of taking on so much of that -- I guess the word is, educational work. It's hard to do that when it's your life. I get paid to do it, right? (laughter)

LW: (laughter) Yeah, I should've [00:45:00] charged by the hour.

MA: You could have made a sweet little bundle of money doing all my job for me, basically. But it really is -- it really is just so deeply felt by so many people. And even talking about it on this interview, it really is huge. We've always had lots of trans students. We just haven't had out trans students.

LW: It's hard to find them. Yeah, we're sneaky.

MA: So, you know. They're wonderful, wonderful folks like you. And others, have always been -- because there've always been trans people.

LW: Of course, yeah.

MA: We all know that. But it's really great to have a voice put to that. And it's really a gift to the community.

LW: Thank you. Thank you so much.

MA: That you're out, and with us. The thing I was thinking is -- one of the things we ask is were there any public moments on campus that really stuck with you as moments for the LGBT community on campus?

LW: Yes.

MA: What were they?

LW: The pride rally my junior year was huge. [00:46:00] Incredibly huge. Because that was when I came out on campus, actually.

MA: Can you talk about that a little bit?

LW: Was that when I came out on campus? Wait one sec. Na-na-na-na-na-na-na -- because I could've sworn that rally must've been at the end of junior year, right? So, in the spring of 2015. There was a pride rally, right. OK. OK. I was just trying to reconcile events. So, that was really big. Because that was when I came out on campus. It's like an event, obviously, to have that pride rally, and have people come out, and be like, "Woo!" So, I wore this really, really tacky skirt. That I had purchased from a thrift shop. In Easton. That looked like it was straight out of the '70s. [00:47:00] And completely didn't match with the LGBT shirts. I had a poem. I got up on the mic -

-

MA: Your own poem?

LW: Yeah. A poem that I wrote. And I got up on the mic, and said, "Hi, I'm trans and here's a poem that I wrote." And then I read it. And it was just a really awesome moment because people came up to me and hugged me "I didn't know. But I'm so happy for you."

MA: That's beautiful.

LW: Yeah. That was awesome. And that whole event, too -- just like, hearing person after person coming up saying, "I'm this," etc. -- "I'm queer in some way on campus, and I love you all, and we're going to do good stuff." And at the time, I think that rally, in particular, was -- marriage equality had just been legalized recently, but it was about workplace equality and workplace protections. [00:48:00] And hearing people talk about that was super awesome. (laughter)

MA: Yeah. Wow.

LW: That really, really stands out to me really intensely in my mind.

MA: And that was the moment where you declared it more publicly. That was your public moment?

LW: That was my first public moment. The weirdest thing -- and I'm sure other queer people would talk about this constantly -- the weirdest thing for me is that, before I

came out, I thought that coming out was a singular moment.
(laughter) As if! You did it once, and then it was over
with. I'm still coming out to people. You know? It's
just like a long, arduous, continuous process.

MA: The job that's never done.

LW: The job that never gets finished. Yeah. So, that was when
I was out on campus. And, before that, I had come out to
my dad. And before that, I had come out to my mom. And
before that, I had come out to my friends. And before
that, I had come out to BCD. And then, after that moment,
[00:49:00] later, I came out on Facebook. And after that,
I came out to my employer. But that was maybe the one of
the biggest coming out moments. Other than making a big
Facebook post about coming out. Which is I guess the most
publicly I could've done it. Which is weird that the most
public thing would be on the internet. That was big, too.

MA: That's powerful. Did you still have the poem?

LW: I keep trying to find it, but I can't find it!

MA: Please, share it with --

LW: It's in this tiny little Moleskine notebook that I
completely freaking can't find. But I've been meaning to -
- this always happens to me with poems. Is that, I want to
save them. But, they're in a notebook I don't what I've
done with them with. So, I've been meaning to go through

my books at home. And it's on my to-do list, to like organize my bookshelf, which is, right now, just blargh! Pile of books! So if I find it, I will let you know.

MA: Oh, that would be lovely! Because I was just thinking -- that [00:50:00] would be wonderful to have the poem if you would share. That would be great.

LW: One other big moment, I would also say, was, that same spring semester -- right around the same time, even, right after the rally, I had this equally tacky dress that I had (laughter) -- that looked like a peacock! And I wore it to my advanced poetry class. And made a poem about trans stuff in that class. And, that day, we had been planning to go out to the steps of the library and read, just, in public. And Alison Byerly came by. Like during my poem, and then watched, and said thanks, and left. And I was like (sharp breath). And that was just another cool moment, and that was the first really supportive classroom about it, because that was the first classroom that I was out in.

MA: [00:51:00] Other speakers or events that stick with you? Or were important for your time here? Or, those were the biggies?

LW: Speakers? Belle Knox kicked ass. She was amazing. Doesn't really have much to do with trans issues. But,

just -- as a woman? Like, hell yeah. That talk was amazing. That was actually, believe it or not, that was the best talk I heard at Lafayette. She was just so -- she went in. And she was so forceful about what she said. And believed it so vigorously. And said it so eloquently. She's a really smart lady. There was also -- other queer stuff. I'm trying to remember. There were a lot of poetry readings I went to later, where I had yet more -- [00:52:00] gay poems. (laughter) To read. That became my thing.

MA: (laughter) Good!

LW: I also really liked -- this isn't strictly related to trans stuff -- when Kimberly Crenshaw came to campus and talked about intersectionality.

MA: Oh, that makes me happy.

LW: She was really good, too. You have -- oh, you have a picture of her.

MA: Yeah, the poster is --

LW: She's AWESOME.

MA: Yeah. We were really proud to bring her in. For the 30th Anniversary of Women's and Gender Studies, we wanted somebody that wonderful. And she was all that. And more.

LW: Oh yeah. Good choice.

MA: It makes me happy -- not just because we organized it in WGS, but, because, these sorts of moments are -- and she would want them to be -- for the trans community, right? Even though she's talking about, particular--

LW: Her talk was largely about Black women, in particular.

MA: But, Black women -- but the point is, it gives you these frameworks to think right -- these [00:53:00] really sophisticated models to help you exist, and are like, I'm here.

LW: And that stuff, like -- I always think of her talk and like intersectionality stuff during Transgender Day of Remembrance, which there was just a recent celebration of. In Asbury Park. Near where I live. And whenever they release the list of names that they found, there's so many Brazilians on it. And so many trans women of color. And I always think of that. Like, how many -- how much that affects your -- and I know, this is a bad word -- your murderability. Like, how reasonable it is in society to just kill you for that. And language like that gives you the ability to talk about that.

MA: Why that pattern has a logic to it that actually makes a terrible sense.

LW: A terrifying logic.

MA: A terrible sense to it. [00:54:00] So it sounds like you've had some great moments on campus. And that's really wonderful! The perspective is you literally just graduated this year. So, how much the campus has changed is not something we would ask you, as an alum. Just the sense of how changed over the four years -- it sounds like it's been a positive change.

LW: I would say that it was positive. I would say that it's a -- I want to say a small positive change, but I don't want to undersell how good it was already. And, honestly, the fact that we got gender-inclusive bathrooms, in Keefe, I'd say, is a big positive change.

MA: Great. Wonderful.

LW: I think so. And, especially, knowing the history of LGBT stuff at Lafayette, and the famous most homophobic campus -- knowing stuff like that, I would say, it did seem like a big change, just knowing our history.

MA: [00:55:00] I was sort of imagining -- hopefully you keep coming back to campus, and we get to see you a lot. And that becomes ever-more true of our queer alum community -- those of us who sort of live here, for lack of a better word, one of the things we really want is ideas about what does the campus need to do? To be a place -- how can the college become a place? What needs to be there, for the

LGBT community, really radically defined -- the non-binary, the trans person who's transitioning -- so that anybody can be at home here. What are some things?

LW: The one thing -- if there's one thing that I would say, that I do know, is at least -- when I checked back, at that one talk we were both at, the Lafayette School health insurance plan did not cover [00:56:00] gender-changing hormones or genital surgery -- genital reconstruction surgery. And there are other insurance plans at other schools that do. I don't know how feasible that is. But, I could imagine -- I have heard of and considered and talked to other trans people who said, "I attended this school specifically because it would cover my GRS." So.

MA: Interesting.

LW: That is a real factor. When people research things. Outside of something as concrete as that, more nebulous? I'm not sure. The campus already does a good job of supporting, and I think a lot of it is just, over time, things become more public and more acceptable. And just doing what you are doing and keeping the conversation [00:57:00] open and bringing in -- I mean, you just freaking brought Janet Mock to campus. I would say that's a pretty big victory. And you brought another trans person, right? Jacob --

MA: Jacob Tobia Absolutely.

LW: Jacob uses they/theirs?

MA: And, they were amazing, and they brought another perspective on trans life.

LW: Yeah, yeah and I was sad I wasn't able to see that, either. Which really makes me sad.

MA: They did a workshop with students as well which is nice -- when a culture's trying to look at an historically marginalized community, we assume there's a *kind* of person to be included, but in one particular way. But there's many. There's variety within variety.

LW: That's fair.

MA: So, the person who comes in and talks about -- they were talking about people's journeys. [00:58:00] Versus, so was Janet Mock, but in a really different way. So there's lots to be said.

LW: Oh one other thing I would say, and I'm sure you already know this book, but I know a ton of trans women, in particular, that swear by *Whipping Girl* by Julia Serano.

MA: OK. Yeah.

LW: I freaking love that book. It's a decently academic book, was so helpful in framing the problem with negative perception of trans women, and the mental structures that stop people from transitioning. And, even just -- I think

we have we have an eBook copy of it, but to have a physical copy of it in the library -- I don't know if we do--

MA: Oh. I can get right on that.

LW: (laughter) That book is sick. And, especially, there's a chapter on how trans people have been treated by the medical establishment. That was super eye opening. And gives a lot of historical context on, you know, how, once upon a time -- how [00:59:00] difficult it was, and, in some ways, still is, to get access to good healthcare as a trans person.

MA: Yeah, yeah. Just to have a conversation for a second, because those are great ideas. One thing that, historically in academia, which you see is as an always-been-there community, is sort of permitted entry by the majority, you have one Gay & Lesbian studies class, and you try to like, jam everything together. Like, one class about "women in history."

LW: (laughter)

MA: You know? One class! Where all the women that ever lived, in history. That kind stuff. The way in which trans experience -- for example, the difference between FTM and MTF. And sort of, all that. That needs its own -- like Julia Serano's work. Female sexual energy and the devaluing of the feminine has a particular effect. On

trans women, right? Except for being a trans-man -- that's something else.

LW: [1:00:00] She used the word trans-misogyny.

MA: Right. She's amazing. And so getting to articulate more of that, to understand it better -- we need more books like that. And more -- and then, yeah. The health insurance idea is also really great. Because that seems obvious, when you say it. That's the thing. You need a voice. It's so great. That's why, again, we really have to celebrate people like you, who have the courage to talk about these kinds of things.

LW: I think we need to celebrate everybody.

MA: We do, we do. But, see, we do celebrate everybody else. So we need to really celebrate you for showing up and having the courage to do that. Other things? Or comments? Or anything?

LW: There's just one or two things I wanted to make sure I said at some point during the interview.

MA: Please do, please do. We have lots of time.

LW: So one is, in retrospect, just going through the interview -- I think I've been slightly unfair to other trans people on campus. In addition to nonbinary people, I also knew a gender-fluid person, and there was another MTF trans person who graduated the year before me, like I said. [1:01:00]

And I did talk to them, and they were helpful. There was still a sense of loneliness. But there were more people than, earlier in the conversation, I had pointed at. And so. And, rightfully, they also deserve to be pointed at and known. Just to make a note of that.

MA: Of course.

LW: Two -- I just wanted to say, I guess -- earlier you talked about and asked about people's reactions on campus, I guess. And there's just like one story I tell people, that like affected me. One day, after I came out, I wore that same dress I'd mentioned before. And I was in the library -- and [1:02:00] one of the baristas at the library asked me, "Oh, are you a girl today," as if was a costume. And I was like, "Yeah." And she's like, "Oh, OK." And it was like a really awkward exchange. And later that same day, in the library, somebody came up to me and started basically asking me, "Hey, I'm just curious. I know there's a psych professor who does experiments about people's perceptions, and I was curious -- are you performing a psychology experiment about just -- why you're dressed the way you are?" And that hurt. To be suggested that what I was doing was so freakish that it was a science experiment. And that person, I'm sure, was well meaning. But -- it's fortunate that I could say that those were

[1:03:00] the most negative experiences I had with trans stuff on campus. And, for all things considered, what happens to other trans people, that is not that bad. Doesn't mean it wasn't shitty to have it happen. But just, for the record, I just wanted to say that. Also, I don't know who that Psych professor is or if they exist, because I have not seen other cross-dressed people on campus! So! (laughter) That's also kind of conspicuous.

MA: That's a little bit of an urban myth.

LW: Yes -- that's a little interesting and weird. OK, Yeah. Those are the two main things I wanted to share.

MA: Are you sure? Any other stories? Moments?

LW: I could say that I'm really happy that, when I started [1:04:00] going to BCD, the next year, after that, my senior year, there was a freshman who, at the time, identified just as gay -- he was a gay man, but, later, decided to transition. Now she goes by Jennifer. And, I spent a lot of time talking to her having lunch meetings with her trying to discuss, "This would be a good reason to think, 'Maybe I should transition,' but this wouldn't be, and a lot of people think about this reason and that reason." I was really glad I got to be able to do that. I was like her trans mommy. And I can't be a regular mommy,

so. (laughter) I guess -- that was good enough for me. That was a really positive thing. And I was glad I was able to help with that. So, yes. That is actually it.

MA: [1:05:00] Well, there's the possibility of -- I don't know if this happens to you, but I get home, and I think, oh, I forgot to write it down, and send it to us any way you like. If you think, oh, I've forgotten this, it's not like you're record is closed, and this interview is -- so please. If you think of other things, you find the poem, for example -- (laughter), or anything else --

LW: (inaudible) Let me get my phone right now! Because I want to write that down.

MA: And also, I know it says this in the paperwork: but, if there's stuff from your time here. Like the poem. Where you think -- I'd like to have that live on, not in a Moleskine notebook that you lose, but --

LW: There's a couple of things. There's other poems that I read at readings, that I wouldn't mind --

MA: I know the archives would love to have that. Part of making the community visible are those artifacts and those things they want to share.

LW: I have a lot of selfies from that time period, too, but [1:06:00] I don't know if you guys would want my selfies.

MA: Oh, we want your selfies! Send it! OK! Just one selfie!

LW: Maybe. They're pretty embarrassing.

MA: I feel, just, the dress that you referenced --

LW: I think I have it. No wait. Now I have to show you if I really have it.

MA: If you show me, you have to find a way to share this -- there'll be somebody years from now--

LW: Maybe, just because it's in the interview--

MA: Listening to your wonderful interview, going -- they're not going to? Nobody's going to -- I'm never going to see this dress? I can't believe I'm not going to see this dress, after you've referenced this several times.

LW: There, OK. Here -- oh no!

MA: We'll record the reactions.

LW: There's the dress! That's me getting ready for the day.

MA: Oh, beautiful! That's fantastic! You look marvelous! OK. So, I didn't know what you led me to expect. But, you have to share that. That's wonderful. If you're so inclined, email it to me. [1:07:00] Absolutely. Leah. We're so proud of you. So proud of you. And grateful, too. Thank you for the interview. And the great conversation.

END OF AUDIO FILE

