

**LAFAYETTE COLLEGE**  
**LGBTQ ORAL HISTORY PROJECT**

**Interview of**  
**Kristen Berger '15**  
**Conducted by**  
**Mary Armstrong**  
**October 13, 2018**

Special Collections & College Archives

David Bishop Skillman Library

Lafayette College

2018

**Berger**

MARY ARMSTRONG: This is Mary Armstrong, and it is October 13, 2018. I'm professor of Women's and Gender Studies at Lafayette College, and I'm sitting here with Kristen Berger, class of 2015. It is homecoming weekend, and Kristen has been generous enough to willingly do an interview for the Queer Archives Project. Thank you very much, Kristen.

KRISTEN BERGER: Happy to be here.

MA: Great, so we'll begin the interview with asking you to state your name and year and confirm that your participation is voluntary and that you've given your informed consent.

KB: Kristen Berger, I graduated Lafayette in 2015, and I have given consent and my participation is voluntary.

MA: Wonderful, thank you so much. Would you allow us to take a photo for the queer archives project?

KB: Yes.

MA: Would that be okay? After the interview?

KB: Of course.

MA: Okay, thank you for that. I forgot to ask you beforehand, but thank you. So a few things as we get started. Every interview [00:01:00] has its own structure, and the

structure is basically determined by the person who's giving the interview. We have a set of prompts that are basically designed to jog memories or to bring up some themes that you might not think about. Often people will say, "Oh, I wasn't involved in that. That doesn't really—" And people will say, "Oh my gosh, yes, that was so important," and talk about it. So the interview's not designed to get you to answer a series of questions but to tell the story you want to tell. It's your story. That's what we want. So there's nothing we really need an answer for.

KB: Okay.

MA: It's more like we really want to hear what it was like for you while you were here. You can decline to address any topic any time, and you receive a copy of the transcript for review. You have it for two months before it becomes available, and after the interview, if you think of anything you wanted to say you are more than welcome to send us anything in writing. It's not like the interview closes and that's all there is. [00:02:00] Right, so the stakes should not feel high around the interview. Occasionally people have sent us pictures afterward or memorabilia. We've gotten some sports memorabilia, some photos, which is really important because the whole person

is made of many different parts, and then it's permanently in the archives. People like to have it here with us. So if you think of anything we welcome it. What personal pronouns and name do you prefer me to use?

KB: She / her / hers.

MA: Okay excellent, and so your relationship to Lafayette is that you're an alum.

KB: Yes.

MA: And how do you identify as a member of the LGBTQ community?

KB: Lesbian.

MA: Okay, and professionally what are you doing?

KB: I am a professional insurance underwriter. I underwrite the directors and officers of publicly held companies, so the board of directors or executives officers in New York City.

MA: Oh very cool. So you live and work in New York?

KB: Yes.

MA: Oh neat. That's great. [00:03:00] Anything to add very generally about who you are in this sort of blocky box-checking way?

KB: I guess recently engaged as well.

MA: Congratulations. How fabulous.

KB: Yes, so getting married next September.

MA: Next September, wow.

KB: Two thousand nineteen, yeah.

MA: So that's a year away. Your smile is really quite, as it should be, quite immense and dazzling at this moment. Well congratulations. That's really wonderful.

KB: Thank you.

MA: And so you've got a wedding to plan.

KB: Yes.

MA: Big wedding?

KB: It'll be around 150 people, so yeah, pretty big farm wedding.

MA: Really?

KB: Yeah.

MA: Pretty magnificent, congratulations.

KB: Thank you.

MA: That's great. That's really wonderful. So very broadly, just to start out, talk a little bit, if you'd like, about the general situation on campus for people who were queer community members while you were here. You might want to start the story somewhere else and talk about what it was like for you sort of coming out or not or whatever, but just a sort of a feel for the place [00:04:00] while you were a student here.

KB: Sure, so I guess my story probably starts my junior year of high school because I was a softball player being actively

recruited by different colleges, so the first time I probably talked to a Lafayette coach, I'm going to say, it could have been earlier but probably junior year of high school, which is usually when you first come on campus, get the vibe of everything, and at that time I was not even out to myself. I had no idea. I had a boyfriend in high school. So, you know, coming to campus for the first time, LGBTQ was not on my mind. I was not looking for signs of inclusion or anything of the sort. And then fast forward, got to campus, was at the fall of 2011 still, not out to myself, still had no idea, so once again wasn't really, you know. And I'm on the softball team, if you want to throw in some stereotypes, which of course, [00:05:00] you know, some are true, but as far as I knew on my team everyone was straight, female, nothing was ever talked about gay, straight, no conversation about it at all. And then early on in my freshman year is when I started to realize like, I think I might be gay but didn't say a word to anyone, didn't see it represented, especially in athletics because that was such a huge part of who I was on campus. I was an athlete.

MA: Yeah, you came here to be an athlete as well as a student.

KB: Right, I came here to be an athlete. That's who my friends were for the most part. I hadn't really gotten myself set

in academics yet to find where you fit in, so my whole life was athletics, and I did not see any representation or any sort of pride around the LGBT community. So [00:06:00] and then moving forward it was junior year when I was forced to come out. Some problems happened with the softball team. [Section redacted by a QAP reviewer] I used a team building event to do that. So I came out [section redacted by a QAP review], and then I had to subsequently explain to my parents why I was getting in trouble with softball.

MA: Oh wow.

KB: So then that same day my mom came, and I had to come out to her because the story wouldn't make sense without me saying, "No, I was really talking to the team about the fact that I'm gay."

MA: Oh you couldn't explain the incident.

KB: I couldn't explain the incident without me saying like, no, this is what the team meeting was about. [Section redacted by a QAP reviewer] I was coming out to the team, and it had nothing [00:07:00] to do with softball.

MA: And in order to contradict [section redacted by a QAP reviewer] story and defend yourself you were forced to come out because that was really what was happening.

KB: Right.

MA: That is really difficult.

KB: Right. It was not my choice, but it was just this whirlwind where I'm like, well, okay, like this is who I am, and by that time I had enough self-time to process everything where I was like, all right, like I guess I'm going to be out.

MA: You were out in self-defense?

KB: Right, so that was the end of my junior year. And still on campus, like not that I was necessarily looking for it, because I wasn't, but I was because as you're trying to realize who you are you're trying to gravitate towards people that might be like you, and there wasn't, beside the Quest office, which Stacey-Ann Pearson said in her panel today, if you go in there, [00:08:00] you are making a statement, and it's very visible. It's in our student center and our student center is the heart of campus.

MA: Great big label attaches to you.

KB: Yeah, big rainbow flag, and it's everything. Like, I don't know if I -- like I wouldn't want to be seen there on a daily basis now. It's just not my personality, even being comfortable with who I am. So it wasn't until the end of that junior year and then senior year where I was really aware of how lacking Lafayette was in just safe space and conversation around the LGBT community.



MA: Yeah, and that was a ringing silence. As you needed more conversation you started to realize there was none.

KB: Right, as I was seeking out things, I mean, we're lucky now. We have YouTube and all social media where you can go, and you can make a world for yourself where your normal is represented very well, but you step outside into the real world, and then you don't see any of that. So I was, you know, using social media to get through things, [00:09:00] and then you go to mirror that in your real life, and it's silence at Lafayette.

MA: Do you think in a weird way that makes it even crazier that there's a world where you're out and everything is cool, but it's a virtual world?

KB: Right, or you see your friends at other institutions where they're doing great things and being out and proud, and you don't see that mirrored in your own day to day life.

MA: Wow, yeah.

KB: So yeah, I guess in a way it makes it harder.

MA: By comparison you start to realize either whether it's virtual or other people's college experiences how shut down Lafayette was while you were here in terms of these issues.

KB: Yes.

MA: Wow, that's really powerful. Did you have a sense, I mean, it's sort of that arc of coming out that you described, do

you have a sense if there were pockets of gay life on campus, or was it mostly one version, and that version was Quest?

KB: I would say for the most part that version was Quest because even, and I'll go back to athletics, [00:10:00] it was always, I would say, like whispers about like, "Oh, so and so, you know, we're not going to talk about it, but I think she's gay." And forget male sports. I won't even touch on that because they have further to go than the women's sports. So it was always like a hush-hush tone, and you knew a couple coaches who were gay, but did you ever see their partner come? Or did you ever see them put the safe space rainbow in their window? No. Like, there was just none of that.

MA: Wow, so that don't ask don't tell mentality, that's a powerful form of oppression because even if you know you can't say, or even if people know you're not demonstrating an inclusive community.

KB: Right, and no one came out and said like, we're not going to talk about it, but just the way, if you hear it, if you're a freshman and you hear the seniors talking [00:11:00] about it in a certain way, oh, that's just how we deal with that here. So then you can see how that just gets passed along.

MA: Yeah, it's secretive and furtive, and then if you're a lesbian or a gay person you're supposed to behave in a secret and furtive manner.

KB: Right, that's exactly how it felt.

MA: Yeah, yeah, so it's teaching. It's teaching a culture of secretiveness and hiding, yeah. Powerful. Did you get a sense that there were support outside of athletics? Did it feel like there was a culture of well-being or health for LGBT people, or was it just sort of, good luck to you. Go to the counseling center.

KB: Yeah, I did not feel like there was a big push to make things feel inclusive. And I guess Quest, I wasn't really sure, and I wasn't, I guess, willing to take the chance to find out what it was all about. It just was a little bit too loud to figure [00:12:00] out like, maybe I fit in here. What is their mission? How could they help me? But just to get there, it seemed like that was a leap that was hard to make as someone who was questioning or newly out or just a more reserved person.

MA: Yeah, the zero and one model of being out which was you dive into the deep end of the pool by joining Quest, and there's no going back. And there's no granularity to it. There's no degree. You're like out 100 percent all the

time. You become a poster person for this community, which is a lot to ask as a first step, but it's that or nothing.

KB: Right, and I think Quest also always encompassed sexuality outside of like LGBT, outside of how you identify. It was like the sex part of that was a big part of who the club is. They have game nights that are condom bingo. Like, there are people [00:13:00] gay, straight, however you want to identify, all of this who are not going to identify with that. That's not how they want to spend their evening. I was not one of those people who wanted to go and talk about like sex games, and that just didn't interest me.

MA: Yeah, and I think that's a really important point because I think it's easy for a community that's not very subtle, to put it nicely, to confuse sexuality, desire, and behavior with a social identity that might oppress you, which is a social identity, right? And it's not about your sexual behavior in an interesting and funny and ironic way. It's about social judgment.

KB: Yeah, so they really brought the sex aspect to it.

MA: Yeah, it did.

KB: Which I think there's plenty of straight people who are not -- like, some people just aren't comfortable. Yeah, so very loud.

MA: Or that's not what about talking and thinking about being a gay person is about for them.

KB: Right. [00:14:00]

MA: Which is more than fair, but that alternative wasn't there other than this.

KB: They're one in the same, so it's tough.

MA: So it's a lot to ask in terms of like, one version of coming out, and it looks like that.

KB: Right, it's a big stop sign for a lot of people.

MA: Right, so we're coming up, I think, on the founding of Behind Closed Doors in some ways, but before we get there I'm wondering, were there allies on campus, that you felt there were allies and supportive people because we talked a little bit about that, you know, sort of absences of support. Did you feel like there were allies?

KB: I do think there were allies, and I think a lot of that was with faculty. You knew some faculty who maybe were LGBT themselves, who brought their partners and showed their families on campus. I think that was huge. For me that was definitely big. I was a geology major, so in that department, which was like a family, [00:15:00] I got to see that, and so there were definitely faculty mentors and other administrators who, you know, were living their lives

out, and so you knew if you needed to go talk they would be a good person to start with.

MA: That's wonderful, great, so there were some folks there for you just to look to. So given that one version of support called Quest, does that lead to the founding of Behind Closed Doors? You want to talk a little bit about that, because that's a big part of the story of your time on campus, and your leadership in that regard?

KB: Yeah, so it was actually the beginning of my senior year, so I had had, call it four months of being really out, and over those four months got pretty comfortable with who I was, so, you know, started out senior year. And I was like, I'm going to go to a Quest meeting to see what it's about, and Stacey-Ann Pearson was also there, and I had not really been acquainted with her before that night.

[00:16:00] And we were working in small groups during the meeting, and I remember at the end of it she came up to me, and I don't even remember what the meeting of Quest was about that night, what the topic was, but she came up to me at the end. She was like, "Are you kind of interested in this idea of maybe starting a club where it's removed, quote unquote, "behind closed doors," for people who maybe aren't comfortable being in this setting and/or aren't out yet or questioning?" So she approached me about starting

this up, and I thought it was something that could have helped me in years prior, and that's kind of the first night of BCD.

MA: Oh, that's the origins.

KB: That's the origin, yeah.

MA: And then how did it unfold?

KB: So we, I think, sat down a couple times and tried to talk through what was important about, what were we trying to accomplish in this club and all of the hurdles you have to jump through because [00:17:00] we all know there's, as I think talked about earlier today, this cloak of secrecy and all the layers that go with it of, you can't just say -- so first of all you had to find a safe space to talk. So what classroom was that going to be? Okay, pick a classroom, but if, you know, Joe Smith from the football team walks by Tuesday at 8:00 every night he's going to start wondering what's in that classroom. So making sure it was an anonymous location.

MA: Yeah, did you change locations?

KB: We did. We changed every week. So how it all started was we decided the best way to get the word out was by just a flier that you would see around campus, and on this flier we listed Stacey's name and myself, and we put our email addresses, and we decided we were both comfortable enough

to put our personal email addresses. And the way you could find out about where and when the meeting was or just more about the club, you had [00:18:00] to email us. And obviously -- there was no official protocol. You just were kind of taking trust in Stacey and myself that we weren't going to share your information or anything. So we started getting emails as soon as the flier went up.

MA: I remember posting them in Pardee.

KB: Right. I mean, I think we went to you, a couple other professors. I think Kira Lawrence in geology was one of them. I put them all over the geology building. Stacey did the same in engineering. And we just starting putting them up. I'm pretty sure I put some down at the athletic center as well.

MA: Good, good.

KB: Yeah, and the first night we put them up, and we decided, okay, we're going to put these up. People can email us, and then we're going to get a classroom reserved, and we wouldn't say -- I think we figured out a way that even to reserve a classroom we didn't want anyone to know, not even the administration, [00:19:00] that this club was happening at that time. And we explained that to whoever it was we had to go through to reserve. We explained that to them, and they were on board with it. So we would just say,



everyone once in a while, hey, we need this classroom. We wouldn't list what it was for, and then that first time we posted the fliers, I think we probably got five emails between the two of us, which, all we wanted was one.

MA: Absolutely, five is pretty impressive for a first run.

KB: Yeah, so what would happen was the student would email one of us, and just pretty much ask about the club or when the meeting was, and then we'd be able to send out the information of when it was going to be, and then the first meeting we had I think we had three. It was Stacey, myself, and I think three other participants, and then we set a meeting and a location for the next night, and we compiled [00:20:00] the email addresses. So we had a blast email every week from anyone who ever gave interest. And there are people who emailed and never showed up, but they continued to get the email every week. Hey, this is where it's going to be. And Stacey and I would come up with a little curriculum. We said it would be like an hour, and we'd pick a topic to discuss in case, you know, wanted to share anything we had something. We tried to make it something more educational rather than storytelling to start. And it was kind of --

MA: That's fantastic. That's a great idea.

KB: Like, I don't even -- maybe what all of the different labels mean was the first one. What's it mean to be lesbian, gay bisexual, pan-sexual, demi-sexual. I mean, Stacey and I were doing a lot of research just to prepare for these.

MA: Yeah, to keep up with all those names, and that's a lot, yeah.

KB: Right, and the topics are endless. So we would do that, and said, you know, this is going to last an hour, and it did. And I think the first or second time [00:21:00] meeting we then started, all of a sudden storytelling, or like you'd start talking about other people on campus. So it turned into a two-hour event.

MA: Which is a lot of time for a student so busy.

KB: Especially for a group of a couple people to start off with.

MA: That's amazing.

KB: And the first go around we had one person who was not out, and then I think two people who were more out on campus, because Stacey and I both knew of some people who were out, so we were like, you know, would you mind coming because I think it would be a good way for people to feel comfortable, and your stories are going to matter, and people are going to need to see what the path looks like.

And so by the second meeting we were calling it BCD After Dark. So you'd have an hour of really like kind of structured discussion and then an hour of just like fun stuff, talk about stuff going on in the media related to LGBT stories. It was a good way to just be totally [00:22:00] immersed in what's really, really on the forefront of your mind in the LGBT space, and you were not going to be judged. Everyone wanted to listen to every story. It was really cool.

MA: Wow, it sounds absolutely magical.

KB: Yeah, it really was, and by the end of the year, our last meeting we had 20 participants.

MA: Did you really? You must be proud.

KB: Yeah

MA: That's pretty fantastic.

KB: And it ranged, our participants, from out to still questioning, to out and proud to still questioning, gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, which was amazing. I think Leah talked today in the panel about painting her nails for the first time. She was like, "I think I want to paint my nails." I was like, "I'm bringing my nail polish. Next go around we're going to show you." And it was just really -- you learned as much from everyone else as you could give. It was really inspiring. [00:23:00]

MA: That's a beautiful story. You have a lot of be proud of. In the library, today's homecoming, there was a panel called "Out Loud: Tales from the Queer Archives Project" featuring a number of alums who have done interviews for the queer archives project, Riley Temple, Harlan Levinson, Stacey-Ann Pearson, and Leah Wasacz. And Leah was discussing her experience at BCD and getting her nails painted, and it's really marvelous to talk to you today and have you talk about being the nail painter.

KB: I was like, "That was my nail polish!" And I left her with -- and at this time she was still using male pronouns and her male name and very scared of -- it was very, very early for her, so I left her with the nail polish remover because she was like, "If my dad comes to visit I need to take this off." I was like, well, we've got something for you there too. Here you go. So it just became this ultimate safe space where people got to come and just be [00:24:00] you.

MA: That's a pretty beautiful story. It's really quite moving. I have to say, the going from a few students taking it on and their leadership to having a couple of people to having 20 people. I mean, you built a community, 20 people is a big group of people to come together voluntarily to talk about something like, you know, queer issues.

KB: Right, and on a campus of, what, 2,000, 2,400.

MA: Yeah, that's impressive.

KB: It was pretty great.

MA: That's pretty marvelous, and in many ways you can see BCD filling that need that was between the zero and one, you're in the closet or you're in Quest. That really built, that built the space people needed, and it seemed like, I mean, what we're learning is that for trans people that was especially important because it seemed like the stakes were higher.

KB: Absolutely because if you look at the overall student body, diversity in terms of culture, race, okay, you can [00:25:00] say there's some diversity there, sure, not as much as some other schools, but for Lafayette, I mean, they do fairly well, but if you look at how people dress, the types of clothes they wear, how they present themselves, across all of those cultures, even economic backgrounds, it's pretty standard. So to deviate from that and to, you know, you don't see many girls walking around campus with, you know, short hair or the shaved on one-side. It's all long hair, and all the men look a certain way, across boundaries, other boundaries, so I think to deviate from that as a trans person, you're walking, and I'd have people come up to me, and it was like, wait, "Did you know there's

a guy walking across the quad in a dress?" That gets noticed.

MA: Yeah, yeah, the stakes are high.

KB: And the stakes are high because it's a small school.

[00:26:00] So if you were Joe on day one, and all of a sudden you're Josephine, people know.

MA: Yeah, everybody knows.

KB: People knew you as Joe. Most people knew. So the stakes were definitely higher.

MA: Yeah, yeah, no, the homogeneity generally of behaviors and not just identities is really, yeah, constricting. So it's a great story with Behind Closed Doors, and your success is attested to by the fact that other people mention it and how helpful it was, so that's really some great leadership. Thinking about what's next, one of the things that comes up a lot is the idea of social life, and obviously you weren't out when you got on campus, but was there a sort of queer social life at all, or was that all very --

KB: I would say, as far as I knew, no. There was no -- outside of events Quest might run, once again, [00:27:00] it was not -- and I think that was odd because I talked to people, even to like Professor Lawrence. I talked to her about, she played basketball in college at a Division One level, so we could share that experience, and I was saying I was

the only lesbian on the softball team or out lesbian in the athletic department. And she was like, "What are you talking about? I went to school, you know, over a decade before you and we had that group of people." And I saw friends at other schools that, maybe it wasn't an organized campus, administrative-run initiative, but like there was a group of gay athletes, gay students who would hang together because you gravitate towards people like you.

MA: Yeah, support structures.

KB: There was definitely none of that.

MA: So in terms of athletics, there was literally -- I mean, you said at the beginning of your interview, it's a stereotype, [00:28:00] but it's also kind of true, right, in the sense of --

KB: It is. Women's sports in general, I think you find, I don't know the statistics, but it wouldn't shock me if out of the general population and then the population of women athletes if the rate was a little bit higher for lesbians. I don't know if it's true at all. It does kind of seem to be on the face of things, but even statistically speaking, in the general population it's impossible for there not to be more gay athletes.

MA: Yeah, like just numerically there was a group of gay athletes. They were in a group, and they didn't know each

other, but any segment of a population is going to have gay people.

KB: Exactly, we just didn't know who each other were.

MA: Actually the really crazy thing is that there wasn't a group because every group that size has a group of gay people in it. That's the crazy part, that there wasn't a group. Its absence is profound. So an athletic division that seems not to have gay people, that's a frightening thing, right [00:29:00] because it means it's so closed no one's coming out.

KB: Right.

MA: So did the experience of athletics get any better or was it always just shut down, or how do you sort of see athletics now? I mean, there's probably more to the story. You had a rough go where you had to, you know, you had to come out in self-defense.

KB: Right, so I was out, and everyone, my teammates were more than supportive, so I'm trying to think the timeline when - - I'm forgetting when Michael Sam came out. He was a football player at Missouri. I want to say this is 2013 or 2014. I think it's 2014, and the *Lafayette* newspaper, I was still a member of the softball team at this time, and the *Lafayette* newspaper ran an article with a football players body with -- it was the Lafayette jersey, and then



in the mask of the head [00:30:00] it was a question mark. And it said, "Could there be a gay Lafayette player?" And this was front page of the *Lafayette* newspaper. Flash forward to a week after the fact, and Gavin Studner ['16], a former Lafayette tennis player was on the front page of the paper holding the prior weeks' article saying, "I am gay, and I am an athlete at Lafayette." And at the time he was the only out athlete at Lafayette, and they wrote an article in the paper all about him, and I was interviewed as a captain of the softball team by the journalist who was doing the article, and I was not out to anyone yet at this point. And the interviewer sat down across the table from me at Skillman café, and my face was probably the shade of like Santa Claus [00:31:00] red. That's how red I probably was because he said to me this exact question. He was like, "What would you say to a teammate on your team if they were gay and in the closet?" And in my head, I must have just been beet red because this was right before I came out to everyone, and --

MA: Is gay life the weirdest? It is just the weirdest.

KB: I was like, he knows. And my response to him, I forgot. I said something really lame, which I wish I could have gone back and taken back, and all I wanted to say to him was, "I don't know. Go ask my teammates." That's what I wanted to

say but I didn't. So Gavin being the first who openly came out and said, "Hey, I'm gay. I'm an athlete." And then I came out a couple weeks after that. So I was like, okay, so there's two gay athletes. You're telling me there's two in this when 25 percent of students here are athletes. So I had that fact. That didn't sit well with [00:32:00] me. And then everything that happened, I had a bad experience and was just like, I don't feel supported. After I tried to defend myself [section redacted by a QAP reviewer] and I was asked not to show up the next year on the team. So then I went to Kira Lawrence in geology and was like, I think we need to change something in athletics because this is how this shouldn't be received. And I think I can say this. We can always redact it. My parents were really upset about the whole fact, and it seemed like you were totally discounting the fact that I said like, maybe some of this animosity was coming from the fact that I'm gay, [section redacted by a QAP reviewer] you know, this has all been really tough. Maybe you should check in and say like, "Hey, how are you doing? Is [00:33:00] everything okay?"

MA: Support a person.

KB: Here are some resources. None of that, and so we brought it up to the college, got a lawyer, didn't want to do it. That's a long process, so didn't really do anything, but

the first response we got from the college was, well, in Pennsylvania it's not illegal to discriminate based on sexual orientation. That was the first response we got.

MA: Wow, so it might have been homophobia, but we don't really care because we're not liable for that.

KB: Right, we're not even going to look into it. We're not even going to give you the time of day because guess what, you have no basis.

MA: Wow. That's profound.

KB: That really -- that just pissed me off really bad and my family. So there's plenty of ways you can handle that, and so I went to Professor Lawrence and was like, let's do something about this. Let's just make this better. And so with her help, a lot of her help and the help of many other faculty members [00:34:00] and then ultimately the cooperation of the Athletic Department we started the Respect Initiative, and the basis of it is all diversity, not just LGBT but just to end the silence, is basically what that was about and to get some education to the coaches. We sent out a survey to coaches and to athletes and just to kind of -- it was a climate survey just to take the temperature of the department. And the results weren't great. They weren't horrible because none of it, by the athletes, is usually meant to be hostile. So it's really

tough to be like, oh, it's just quiet. But if you're not gay and in the closet it's hard to say how important that silence is, how painful it is.

MA: Right, it's difficult for people to understand. I mean, if heterosexuality is the default setting of everybody's life, it's hard, as a straight person to understand [00:35:00] being erased. It's very, very difficult. The absence of violence or overt homophobia seems to signal all is well when it in fact signals all has gone underground.

KB: That's exactly what we found, and I don't even think it was -- I don't even think the results like, people really realized what they meant when it was like, oh, this isn't as bad as we thought. I don't hear people saying like, "I hate gay people," or "We don't want any gay people on our team." It's like, that's great. That's one step, but I never said that was the problem. The problem is there's zero support system and zero conversation.

MA: Yeah, and you're at a low level if you're looking for -- if you need incidences of homophobia, right --

KB: To prove that you're not homophobic.

MA: Actually if you need that that's a pretty low bar.

KB: If you need a survey to prove that you're not homophobic there's something that's not quite right.

MA: Things should be in place to make things --

KB: And this was 2015.

MA: It's incredible. [00:36:00] That's incredible. It sounds like you're talking from decades ago, and I'm even thinking of your description of the Lafayette with a question mark, "Could there be a gay athlete at Lafayette?" It sounds like we're talking about 1982.

KB: I know previous athletes who are now in gay marriages who played at this school way before that article was written, so yeah, I think there can be a gay athlete or two.

MA: Or three. It's pretty amazing, but I mean really, the whole -- the conspiracy of silence, right, which is telling you over and over to stay silent, it's hard to recognize that as a form of speech. Silence is telling you, don't speak, right, and it's hard to realize that that's a narrative. To not tell is a thing, yeah, and that's very powerful. So you started the Respect Initiative, and that took off like wildfire.

KB: That has been received extremely well by the athletic administration down to the coaches and the teams, and were into the like, [00:37:00] if you think about the athletes and what generation they come from and you're in a very open-minded generation, so you're going to get support at that level. It's changing the minds of the administrators to show, okay, we understand there's no hate crimes

happening here, but let's make a more supportive community, and I think it has taken off extremely well. They had Hudson Taylor of Athlete Ally on campus to give a speech, and his whole thing is, he's married to, I think he's a straight cis male, white male married to a woman, and his whole thing is just as an athlete we need to be allies for each other, and you know, if everyone can be their own self and be true we're going to have a better team. So we had him on campus. They started the *You Can Play* video, which I think is extremely [00:38:00] important. That was one of the biggest things I found in my research that I thought it was a very actionable step we could take. And it spans to any type of diversity you can think of really, not just LGBT, but the basis of the video is saying like, hey, if you can catch a ball you can catch a ball. If you can swim a lap you can swim a lap. If you can play you can play. We don't care who you are and what's important to you. If you can help this team we want you. So they implemented that fairly quickly. And we actually have, our video is our own students and our own administrators saying this, so if you're a new recruit on campus or a freshman and you go to the football game, you're going to see this ad. It's going to matter because if you're sitting there looking for a sign, 90 percent of people will not even -- they'll be

like, oh, that's a cool video, moving on. And then there's going to be those couple of people who are like, wow, I matter here.

MA: I'm going to be okay [00:39:00] here.

KB: Yeah, they care about me. It's cool. Because that's really, at least from my perspective, all you wanted. You didn't want a pride parade every day. You just wanted --

MA: Yeah, as fun as that is.

KB: Yeah, that would be great, but you just want it to be a non-issue but supported at the same time.

MA: Yeah, that sort of equal self-representation. Let me be a person the way everybody else is a person. This is my girlfriend. This is my boyfriend. I'm dating this -- let me just be a person like you get to be a person.

KB: Exactly, you know, if you're going through a breakup and coach is like, "Oh, that's so tough," like, you should get the same. It shouldn't be like, "What's wrong with you today?" And not being able to talk about it.

MA: Yeah, that's pretty powerful. And has there been one *You Can Play* video? Is there another one? Do they do new ones? How do they --

KB: As far as I know there's one that should last, I would assume for a while. I mean, I guess we should update it every once in a while to get the new students in [00:40:00]

kind of stuff, but as far as I know that's played on our big screen and can be found on the website as well.

MA: Yeah, I saw it once at a football game, actually, and I was extremely excited because I knew some of the students in it too. The climate survey for athletics led to the initiative, Bruce McCutcheon, obviously, behind that. I think there was a panel you were on. Am I remembering that correctly?

KB: Yes, there was a panel of -- it was two. It was me and Gavin Studner because he was the other. That was the hardest part, coming up with a panel of alumni who were gay athletes. Well, we couldn't really think of any, so it was me and Gavin and two current student athletes at the time who identified at LGBTQ. And we kind of just talked about our experiences, and at the time I was only two years out of school, and Gavin was only one year out, and the difference we saw just from the Respect Initiative, the current student [00:41:00] athletes were like, "Yeah, so I came out, and it was okay, and like this was here and that was here." And I was like, wait, but like I was just graduating, and you were just starting. Like, we overlapped. We are not different generations really, and how fast these small impacts.



MA: Yeah, of which you've been an incredible part. I mean, it's so impressive when you think of BCD and the athletic stuff. You've made a huge difference for LGBTQ people on this campus.

KB: It doesn't take --

MA: It takes a lot.

KB: It does take a lot, but it's not -- what I think is so important is like, you're not going and asking the college for a million dollar endowment on something. Like, this is just changing minds.

MA: Yeah, and in a funny way asking them to do what they say they care about to begin with, right.

KB: Right, because I don't believe that anyone at the root, the majority, 99 out of 100 people that I talk to at Lafayette, [00:42:00] I don't believe -- I do believe that they are supportive and want a safe environment, but if you are not experiencing it in your day to day life it's not at the forefront of your issues.

MA: Well, you were the spark that made a lot of people pay attention to a lot of that. Just to see the worlds collide with a freshman coming in and being -- a first-year coming in and being out and you going through what you went through and literally you're on the -- it's like worlds colliding, two different worlds. One person is a senior,

one person is a first year, and it's just different experiences of the environment, and the climate at Lafayette, well, you made a difference for that person, right. I mean, that's a really powerful thing because some people just try to survive or need to just survive and come out the other end.

KB: Yeah, I was lucky to have support in all the other aspects.

MA: We ask about things like clubs and organizations, and you founded one, and then you founded a major initiative, [00:43:00] and then you were an athlete, were there other clubs or organizations you were part of?

KB: I was heavily involved in geology. I was a peer tutor and a teaching assistant there and then the geology club. So that was my home base, so to say, and then I was also an admissions ambassador, so I gave tours to new families.

MA: Oh great, that's cool. Well, Professor Lawrence has signed up to do an interview.

KB: Great.

MA: And so we will do one with her as we move forward, but you had a mentor in the community, and clearly you've mentioned her a number of times, so having a mentor, an adult who will, you know, sort of share experiences and listen to your story and give advice, that was a big part. She played a big part.

KB: She played a big part and was receptive with the million things that she and most faculty here have on their plates. It's not easy, and especially the Respect Initiative. It took a lot of work from -- and she spearheaded it for sure, but there were [00:44:00] many other participants that had to get this through to the right people because it needs to be elevated to a certain level, and it's easier. But then even BCD I remember I came to your office and sat down and said like, "What do you think the best way is with this to get it out and to do that and to get the fliers out?" So help from faculty at Lafayette is -- I never went into a professor's office and was shut down.

MA: Cool, that makes me very happy as a faculty member, very happy to hear that. Greek life on your radar screen at all?

KB: No because of softball. I had my own sorority.

MA: (laughs) That's pretty cool. We touched a little bit on academics, but the classroom climate, I mean, you obviously had strong support from geology and other faculty members, what was it like being a gay student here? Was it eve-- like, geology major, that might not come up, but was it in the curriculum [00:45:00] at all, thinking about queer issues or?

KB: Yes, I was geology and economics double major, so in those two disciplines they're probably not going to come up much, but what I love so much about being a liberal arts school was you get forced to take other classes outside your main disciplines, and I regret not diving into women and gender studies earlier because it was so fascinating, and if I could go back and do it again in today's climate I think there's some serious work to be done if you have a WGS degree. You could be pretty impactful right now. And that was, you know, even senior year I was just looking for electives, and reading course descriptions I was able to do women and gender studies 101, and then I was able to go on and take a high level sexuality studies class, so those were both great, especially the sexuality studies, great outlets to go find history and research and facts [00:46:00] behind passions. I remember in, and you were the professor of the sexuality studies class, doing the report, and I did, there weren't enough women coaches, and then that turned into gay athletes. So I got to kind of pick all of my passions and go and get hard facts. And I come from a science mind, so I like facts. So yeah, it was definitely, I found it in the curriculum. You know, I went out and searched for it a little bit, but it was there.

MA: I remember you in my class, and I was just thinking when you were talking, oh my gosh, you probably participated in the first queer archives. Like, you're so connected to so many things. Our first dive into the archives to ask people if they wanted to do research on queer topics, and some people worked on Lafayette, and you were at the very beginning of the queer archives project is very much a product of that class.

KB: Right, I think we went back, [00:47:00] and we were looking for like, yeah, we started looking for any queer anything in the archives.

MA: Yeah, any queer anything, yeah.

KB: And it started with when I was doing the athlete thing, looking for queer athletes, and then I actually had to expand it outside of Lafayette because we didn't have enough history. There were a couple magazine and newspaper articles like from years and years ago that like mentioned gay or something like that, and then that first real one was that 2014 issue that I mentioned earlier with the unknown.

MA: The unknown. That's like the Unknown Soldier, the unknown gay athlete. It's amazing how fast, how far. It's been such a rocket ride, but no negative experiences in the classroom? It sounds like you had really cool folks, and

then you had the opportunity as a senior to take some really fulfilling classes on the personal [00:48:00] level?

KB: Yeah, no issues on my academic side, that's for sure.

MA: That is very, very cool. So one of the things we always ask is big public moments, and your activism as a change-maker and a leader at the college has connected you as a leader to some of those moments, the founding of BCD, which is a subtle -- because it has to be changed, but then the splash of the intervention in athletics and the Respect Initiative, which I think has reframed athletics at Lafayette College in terms of its climate period. Like, I have out athlete students now, and I never had one before that ever. You and Gavin were the first I ever had.

KB: That's so cool.

MA: And I'm sorry, but if the queer students aren't in my classroom, where are they?

KB: You got a point.

MA: Right, I mean, I tend to see them.

KB: It's like, sometimes stereotypes are just true. Like, they didn't come out of thin air.

MA: They are patterns. There are patterns yeah, for sure, so I mean, are there other public moments? People talk about, you know, [00:49:00] famous parties or speakers that came.

Hudson Taylor certainly you mentioned. Are there any others that seem to be --

KB: I remember when Lea DeLaria came to campus. I forget -- It was in October, I believe, so I'm not entirely sure what that was tied to, but it was so funny because, I mean, she's on the show *Orange is the New Black*, which has, I mean, a huge following all around, but, I think, an extremely heavy lesbian following. So getting all my teammates to go to that and then just hearing her talk about stuff, she's very crude and just in Colton Chapel of all places on campus, and she has no filter. And that was just fantastic, and that was just feeling like other people on campus are hearing all these things, and she was making some gay jokes and stuff all in good fun. And it was [00:50:00] pretty cool.

MA: Yeah, that's great. That's great. That hasn't come up yet. I'm glad you mentioned that, so if you think of other sort of moments. Do you still have the climate survey or some --

KB: I definitely have materials around, and I think I have those.

MA: Because it would be great to have materials from -- that transformation of athletics was, you know, a snap of a finger quick because, like you say, people want to do the

right thing. I think it's heterosexism that keeps them from -- it's not an active homophobia it's just not realizing.

KB: Right, it doesn't touch their day to day life.

MA: Yeah, yeah, and they don't realize what it means for other people whose lives it does touch, but they're happy to help when somebody like you comes along and says this isn't right. Yeah, that's how change generally happens. So happily you were able to come to the alumni panel at homecoming today and be in the audience and see our speakers speak. What [00:51:00] still needs to happen at the college, do you think? I mean, obviously there's a lot going on very fast, but you see things that still need to change?

KB: This is a major step forward, just to have -- I don't know how long The Pride Network has been in existence.

MA: It's pretty new, couple of years.

KB: Yeah, I remember walking on campus on homecoming one day, probably down at a football game or something, and saw, it used to be in front of Gilberts right there, and I saw a rainbow flag. I was like, hmm, what's over there? And noticed, and then I tried to come the next year, and so I think that is just -- it's so great to meet people who came before you at the college and to see new students showing



up to these things. So I think it's just a massive step forward in the right direction. More conversation about it in your day to day life, even shout outs in the -- I get asked for money from the college [00:52:00] about like five times a month, but when the big newsletters come out, seeing this project being headlined in there or something like that. Like, I hope -- the new website looks amazing. I just hope it's visible on our website and we don't have to go digging for it. It's like it's the -- oh no, it's there. It's there. Just visibility, but I think we're going in a really good direction. It's exciting.

MA: Yeah, well you have done a lot to push us in that direction. The college owes you a vote of thanks.

KB: Thank you.

MA: Yeah, really, I mean, takes courage, takes energy. You do have a day job when you're a student, right.

KB: Yeah.

MA: You got classes to go to and homework to do. It's not like you were just sitting here thinking, maybe I'll found BCD with Stacey-Ann Pearson today, or maybe I'll change athletics culture because you really are, you know, I mean, I feel that so much because I work with students every day. They're very, very busy people, and they're committed to doing a good job and working hard, and you know, it's

really -- that's a generosity [00:53:00] to the college.  
So thank you.

KB: It was awesome and a huge learning experience, and just to hear like Leah talk today, and like when she came out I remember it was at -- every year we do one day. I forget what it's called. It's not like queer day or something, but it's like we give out the shirts.

MA: Oh, they do the Pride Rally, the Equity Rally.

KB: Pride Rally, yeah, she came out at that little rally we had where people get up and talk, and I was just like, that was all worth it, just one person, makes me want to do it. Now I'm in corporate America where we have plenty of changes to be made. Makes me kind of want to do it again.

MA: I bet you will. I was just thinking I can't wait to see the next thing you do, Kristen Berger. Who knows? Corporate America's not safe with you in it. It's going to be queer friendly. It's going to be --

KB: No, watch out.

MA: Ha, good. I can't wait till the next installment. Thank you for this wonderful interview.

KB: Thank you for the opportunity.

END OF AUDIO FILE