

LAFAYETTE COLLEGE
LGBTQ ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Interview of
Stacey-Ann Pearson '15

Conducted by
Mary Armstrong

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Special Collections & College Archives

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Lafayette College

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PEARSON

MARY ARMSTRONG: -- these are just, all right, to help me think of something to say. Okay, so this is Mary Armstrong. I am professor and chair of Women's and Gender Studies at Lafayette College. It is Friday, April 14th, 2017. I have the great privilege and pleasure of having Stacey-Ann Pearson with me (laughter) this morning, who has made time in her busy, busy -- and we want to say busy -- (laughter) life to come and do an interview for the LGBTQ Queer Archives Picture oral history project. So thank you so much, Stacey.

STACEY-ANN PEARSON: Thank you for having me, actually.

MA: It's a great pleasure. And it's a real pleasure to see you again. (laughter) I miss seeing you on campus. So the usual formalities. I'll ask you to state your name and confirm your participation and voluntary and you've given your informed consent.

SAP: Okay, my name is Stacey-Ann Pearson. I gave my consent to do this interview and it is completely voluntary [00:01:00] and I will try my very best to be as open and not trigger myself. (laughs)

MA: That is deeply appreciated. Which brings me to my next point, which is -- for every interview, the interview is

about you and sharing the things that you want to share. Decline to answer any question that you don't particularly wish to address, and certainly elaborate on any question. If I don't ask you something and you think wow, there was that really important thing, by all means, right? It's not about my questions; it's about your story. So you want it to absolutely focus on what you want to say. And the other thing is if you're like me, about 15 minutes after you're done talking you think of something that was really important. (laughter) The interview is not time-bound, right, so it doesn't have boundaries. So if you think, jeez, I thought of this thing -- write an email, even months from now if you think there was this one story or one moment you totally forgot, and you just wanted to add a thought -- but they're open ended, so they belong to you. They don't belong to us, right, (laughter) [00:01:00] so add anything you like post interview. If you come across any papers or bits of (inaudible) you're like, I wonder if they'd like that? Yes, we would. If it relates to your work here -- old fliers and stuff like that. People send us that. So now we've got you and we're always in touch with you. (laughter) Anytime. So a few other details. What personal pronoun and name do you prefer me to use?

SAP: She, her, hers.

MA: Okay. And Stacey or Stacey-Ann?

SAP: Stacey is fine.

MA: Stacey's fine. Okay, excellent. So how do you define yourself as a member of the Lafayette community? That's meant to be an easy question, so like alum, right?

SAP: Yes.

MA: Okay, so that's the main thing. And class year and major?

SAP: Class of 2015. I majored in civil engineering and minored in economics.

MA: Okay, excellent.

SAP: Yeah.

MA: Wonderful. So how do you identify as a member of the LGBTQ community? I guess that's a sort of what letter? Or some thing different (overlapping dialogue; inaudible) --

SAP: Right, right, L.

MA: As L, okay.

SAP: Yes, as we know.

MA: And [00:03:00] how do you professionally describe yourself? That can be employment, that can be life, that can be vocation, that can be -- you're shaking your head.
(laughter)

SAP: That is my current, ongoing struggle of defining my professional -- but in the past two years I was a risk analyst in the financial services industry. I just quit my

job last week. So I'm making a transition into trying to be a world changer. More specifically -- doing work in the Caribbean that matters to me. So yes, yeah.

MA: So talk a little bit about -- yeah, we have to talk about -
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SAP: (overlapping dialogue; inaudible) So I went into the financial services industry. I needed sponsorship. I needed a job. I needed money to pay my bills, and that was a really related field. I wanted to learn about economics. I wanted to learn about how markets work. Because I figured that I could take those skills and do something else. I didn't plan to [00:04:00] be there that short, (laughs), you know, for such a short period, but I think maybe a year in I realized this was not something that was fulfilling to me. I know that there are persons who find that fulfillment in that role, but I wasn't that person. I was spending all my waking hours at work and then all my night hours and weekend hours volunteering to sort of --

MA: Cleanse yourself?

SAP: Cleanse myself (laughs) from the work that I was doing. So when I realized that -- I knew it was time to find something else. And so that's when I started looking into this program that I'm about to do, and to really figure out what I wanted to do with the rest of my life. That's when

I realized that I wanted to go back home to the Caribbean and try to do financial reform, investment reform and LGBTQ reform. So (laughs) those are some big projects. So that was big breakthrough for me in the past six months, is knowing that I wanted to [00:05:00] go back home, because that wasn't something that I was planning on.

MA: Absolutely, right, right. Those are big. And home is Jamaica.

SAP: Home is Jamaica. That's correct.

MA: And those are two tall orders, as they say. I'm thinking you can do them.

SAP: Yeah, I hope so.

MA: That's exciting work.

SAP: And related to this, one of the biggest drawbacks was the environment, what that atmosphere is for queer people in the Caribbean, so -- that's something I'm still grappling with in terms of how to deal with that.

MA: Right, that's it. And it is, indeed, a profound issue. I know from talking to one of our professors, Ian Smith, who's on the advisory board actually, for this project, that he has said to me many times -- the Caribbean -- that's sort of queer identities. There's a lot to be done, a lot to be understood, and a level of complexity that is really profound. So hats off for that. The program that's

supporting you is very prestigious. And you want to name it and talk about it for a second? [00:06:00]

SAP: Yeah, sure. (laughs) So it's the Schwarzman Scholars Program. It was founded by Steve Schwarzman; he's the founder of Blackstone, the P/E fund. And he, you know, recognized that China and the rest of the world don't really understand each other and in order for us to have a -- well, he hopes a peaceful future, as leaders all around the world need to understand the inner workings of this up and coming super power. And so he founded this program. He fundraised -- and then he opened it out. He opened it out to international students, US citizens, Chinese -- so it really is a diverse program. It's 45 percent Americans, 25 percent Chinese, and then everybody else is from all over the world.

MA: Fascinating.

SAP: Yeah. So he really poured his heart and soul into this project and so I was accepted to the second class, so Lafayette's first Schwarzman Scholar. And I'm looking forward to just seeing [00:07:00] what those opportunities are, and trying to get more Lafayette students to apply and know about it so that we can have those. So also the first Caribbean scholar. So, really excited about that.

MA: Oh, is that right? Wow, how marvelous. So that's China for a year?

SAP: China for a year. China for a year and then --

MA: Yeah, and it starts this fall for you.

SAP: That starts this fall in August. So I'll be figuring out during that time what the next step is. I know what my end goal is; I just need to figure out how I'm going to get it.

MA: Yeah, what an achievement.

SAP: (laughs) Thank you, thank you; I appreciate that.

MA: Congratulations, on many, many levels. You know, it makes you really proud. Right? (laughter) You know, it's a really marvelous thing. So, anything else to add? Just self-descriptive?

SAP: No.

MA: No, that was a lot. We asked you a lot of things. So the Queer Archives Project works to try to restore the invisible history of LGBTQ people at Lafayette, right. So our earliest [00:08:00] person so far has been a 1971 graduate, and we're trying to capture men and women and trans-identified people from every decade. And it's been exciting and the focus of the project has really been trying to summon up the lived lives that have happened on this campus, where people say there hasn't been LGBTQ experience, but of course there has. So the interview

focuses without any sort of front parameters, but it focuses on the experiences of people who have been here as faculty, staff, and alums or students. So where we usually start is trying to get a sense of the generic on-campus situation when you were a student, right. So, talking for you, that would be from 2011 to 2015. You know, it varies with people's majors a great deal and sort of their location, and all kinds of identity frameworks: their religion, race, blah-blah-blah, kinds of things. So [00:09:00] was the community safe? Was the community visible? There's lots of different ways to talk about this -- pockets of LGBTQ life.

SAP: Yeah. So when you (laughs) sent me that message and then Berger reached out -- Kristen Berger reached out to me. I said, "Okay, I'm going to try to prepare myself each day for this conversation because I haven't had it in a while." The last time I had this conversation was when I was back here in 2015 -- the last time I sort of remembered it was when I was actually applying for this scholarship, where I wrote about one of my experiences here. So mine was an interesting journey because I actually grew up in a pretty homophobic society and I, myself, in hindsight was probably very homophobic, and a little [00:10:00] vocal about that. I grew up in a very strict, Seventh-day Adventist

household. And for relativity's sake, Seventh-day Adventists think of Catholics as heathens. That's how conservative the SDA Church is.

MA: Wow. Okay, that's a very telling framework. It's very useful.

SAP: Yes. And so when I graduated from high school -- so I'm on the -- Jamaica's on the UK system, so I graduated from high school in 2008, and then I went onto sixth form in 2010. Then I took a gap year. So between 2010 and 2011 that's when I figured out, wait a minute. Something isn't right. And that scared me. A lot. And then the prospect of coming to the US for school -- that was sort of my beacon. That was my light at [00:11:00] the end of the tunnel -- the closeted tunnel in Jamaica. So I just remember looking up stories about people who moved to America and all of the sudden they're able to express themselves, and have a partner, so I'm very excited about that. So I come to Easton Pennsylvania -- (laughs) expecting that yeah, your face is very telling of where this is going.

MA: Oh dear, yes, yes.

SAP: So Easton Pennsylvania, obviously I'm not aware of what the spectrum of politics and liberalism is in America. I just expected it to be the same across the board. So I was very excited. Very excited to meet other people, queer people

like myself or just to meet people who just accepted it. So it must have been my second day on campus -- we had a picnic out on the quad for the first years and I was sitting in a group that I didn't know anyone and they were speaking about [00:12:00] some obnoxious lesbian who was hitting on women in the bathroom and how disgusting and --

MA: Oh wow, the second day.

SAP: Yeah, the second day. So hearing that I just -- I gave up on all thoughts of coming out, of being comfortable here, and I went back in the closet. So I was closeted for two years -- at Lafayette. I sort of hovered around the Quest office. Tried to pinpoint who was queer, based on obviously stereotypes and try to get conversations out of them. And they probably did recognize -- there were probably seniors who were like, yep, you're a little baby gay (laughs) and trying to come out, just not knowing how. So I remember conversations with people and they were like, yeah, so this is our community. Are you interested? I'm like, no, no, I'm not gay. I'm not; I'm just wondering and things like that. [00:13:00] And so that was a really, really tough time for me. That was a really tough time. And I ended up being in probably not a very healthy undercover relationship with one of the basketball students who was also an outcast in her experience. That was the

end of my first year into my second year. So that was tough. But then a turning moment for me was finding out that I was going to New Zealand during my sophomore year. So the second semester of my sophomore year -- and I decided, you know what? I'm going to a new place. I'm going to try to figure out myself over there and hopefully have the confidence (laughs) so that when I come back I can face all this nonsense. And it turned out to be the case. I went on the Frontiers Abroad trip to New Zealand and luckily it was with [00:14:00] the geology camp. And I don't know if you know about the stereotypes about geologists, but there are a lot of queer ladies in geology and it turned out to be the case. It was such a supportive community. Not even in the sense that they were vocally supportive, just that they just lived. It was just them. And there was actually a trans -- man or a young person/man/boy, I guess, he wasn't a man at the time, but was still trying to figure out how to publicly demand his identity be acknowledged.

But on the trip -- and his struggle to sort of -- really demand that people acknowledge him as his identity was really empowering for me. And I didn't realize it. Now I'm just talking about it; I didn't even remember about him. But he was a big part of me sort of saying, well, if

he can go through that and sort of demand that acknowledgement [00:15:00] of his identity, then I can certainly do that. So.

MA: Role models, right.

SAP: Role models, role models.

MA: Oh, wow, so important --

SAP: So I went through. I didn't recognize it at the time, but I was going through a sort of gender -- neutral sort of sexual identity crisis. But after coming back from New Zealand that's why I realized, you know what? I don't care anymore. I'm going to be out. And that's when I first met Gene Kelly¹ and I went to my first Quest meeting and it was unbelievable -- the transition. So I came back to campus, and then after a semester I told my mother, which I never thought I was ever going to do. And from there -- that's when it rolled into realizing that closeted students aren't really supported on campus. I went to Quest meetings. I realized how much confidence students had to have to walk into that space. Because once you walked into [00:16:00] that space, whether you were an ally or not, you were immediately labeled as that.

MA: Yep, you had shifted.

¹ Associate Dean of Intercultural Development and Director of Gender and Sexuality Programs

SAP: You had shifted. And so the first -- even with my newfound confidence, it took me a while to get used to thinking that people are staring at me or who is looking at me? Or, oh my God, I see my other Caribbean friends. I can't go to Quest tonight. Because they're standing with me and they're talking, and I told them I had a meeting and now it's time to go to the meeting, and they're going to ask me, where are you going?

MA: Yeah, that's powerful. It's that powerful.

SAP: It's crazy. And so when I approached Gene Kelly, I was like, is there anything that can be done? And he told me about a project that they had had, but they had to shelve. I was like, you know what? I'm really interested in bringing that up. And so I brought in -- Kristen Berger, because I didn't want to do it by myself. And we worked together [00:17:00] to put together BCD [Behind Closed Doors]. We had a lot of institutional challenges. (laughs) We had a lot of funding challenges. We had a lot of backlash from different members of the community, but you know what? We decided that we were going to get it done.

MA: So that's the origins of Behind Closed Doors. Right?

SAP: Yeah.

MA: Wow. And that's an amazing story. Your own experience was there's this population of closeted people who need support, and the institution sort of demanding that they come out before they're supported --

SAP: Yep, before they're supported.

MA: Wow. You saw a real need and filled it. It's still -- we've got signs.

SAP: I saw that. I saw that. It felt really good to see that.

MA: (laughter) I wanted to know. Yeah, it's really, really -- it's a need that is still -- people are working to fill. So as it got started, what were the challenges? I mean, it sounded like there were some serious hurdles.

SAP: Yeah, there were. And Gene Kelly was just such a great support for this program, [00:18:00] but the -- what is it called? The counseling center? They were one of -- actually one of the persons or groups that were vehemently against it. Because it was the -- the idea was -- okay, well, you're not a counseling group. You don't have training to help these students. And I was saying, well, okay, so we may not have training to help these students, and you have training to help these students, but you aren't reaching these students. So it doesn't matter if you have training or not. If you don't reach the students, then that makes it a moot point.

MA: And it presumes that you're in crisis.

SAP: Exactly, exactly. And so we battled with them. We also had a little bit of a kerfuffle with religious life, but they eventually came around when Alex [Alex Hendrickson, College Chaplain] joined. [00:19:00] And then funding was the biggest hurdle. But we spent -- we were supposed to start, actually, in the first semester of my senior year. Because we had talked about it the summer before and that's when Gene said, "You know what? We have too many hurdles. We can't do it this first semester," so I worked with Gene and literally, we were canvassing support. And we eventually -- they relented and we started in the second semester of my senior year.

MA: Wow. You really had to fight for it.

SAP: We had to fight for it.

MA: That's an amazing story because to me it seems so patently obvious as a good idea that when you describe hurdles, I'm drop-jawed.

SAP: Mm-hmm. And you know, it's well-meaning individuals, obviously. They want the best for the students, but it's -- they were in such a -- and I say "privileged" in terms of being able to express their identity. They were in such a privileged -- [00:20:00] state that they didn't recognize what that gap was. And I have to say, that was the same

thing with Quest. The Quest members and the board members, they had reached such a level of comfort that they didn't really see, well, what are you talking about? We're right here. Like we've got the rainbow flags. I'm saying, yes, but that's exactly the issue. And you know, the disconnect was that we didn't want to quiet the out community, because it was so important for that community to be out. But we do also have a very large community of closeted individuals. Both -- you know, along the entire spectrum. And then of course, I know you remember -- our first out trans woman on campus. Uch -- she just reached out to me the other day. Anyhow --

MA: Reid?

SAP: Reid. Reid, Reid, Reid. Yeah, yeah, yeah.

MA: Yeah, Wheelock² yeah.

SAP: And after that came the second -- [00:21:00]

MA: Leah [Wasacz]³.

SAP: Leah. Yep. And they came. They came to BCD and obviously we weren't their primary support, but we were one of those supporting columns for those women. And we would constantly talk about how important this would have been

² Now Willow Wheelock and a participant in the QAP.

³ Leah Wasacz, a participant in the QAP.

for each of us -- (laughs) if this had existed the whole time. We would have been supported. We would have been encouraged and I remember one of my best friends who was going through a terrible crisis -- the identity crisis as well as relationship crisis -- and [section redacted by interviewee]-- that's my senior year. And she knew about this project. And even for her, knowing that I was the person running it, knowing that her best friend was running it; she had reservations, and it didn't take her until the last month of her senior year to come to her first meeting. [00:22:00] That's how important it was to have that space, because nowhere else on campus had that space existed.

MA: Wow, it's so powerful and it almost sounds like if you were listening to this -- it's 2017 right now; we're talking about 2015. We're talking about two years ago. On Lafayette campus. That you don't have a space where -- and one of the reasons why I said Reid Wheelock and Leah Wasacz names, is because they've both given us interviews. So they are actively part of this project. And one of the things that they have said and the interviews corroborate, but I already knew because I'm also like in that world, right --

SAP: Mm-hmm. In that space, right, right.

MA: Is that -- Behind Closed Doors has been of momentous importance in the history of LGBTQ community at Lafayette because it created a space for the trans community to be the trans community -- [00:23:00] for people to find other people, and to come out. I think it's been the single most important variable in creating a trans presence at Lafayette College. You should be very proud of that achievement.

SAP: Yep.

MA: I find it really moving. It's really powerful.

SAP: It was. And Leah -- I had an inkling that this was what she was speaking about, but a few months ago she reached out, or maybe it was weeks -- she reached out to me and she was like hey, can I drop your name? I'm doing a project with Lafayette -- and she just wanted to get my permission that I was out and okay with my name being there. So I didn't realize it was this, but when she first came to us -- she wasn't femalepresenting. And it did take her a couple weeks, actually to tell us that she was not, she was not only bi, but also trans and we were shell-shocked, because even ourselves, in the community, we just didn't envision that [00:25:00] oh, we could be a space for trans-identifying -- community members. So that was also really empowering for us. And in the community we gained -- I'm

getting chills -- we gained strength from our trans members, because we're like, look if they can do it -- we don't have any excuse -- (laughs) not to do it. And so Leah always said, "Oh my God, you guys, like I've started X-Y-Z and you guys have been so --" and we're like - Leah, we're looking at you! (laughter) Like you're the one giving us -- you know, so it's a really, such a supportive community. When we started we didn't think it was going to be so impactful for us. Because we thought, we're out. Yeah, we've been doing this for a while.

MA: We're there. (laughs)

SAP: Like we're there. But it was beautiful. It was magic. We had a few members who said, "Look, we need this to be every week." [00:25:00] Because we used to have every other week, they said, "We need this to be every -- this is the only thing I have to look forward to -- this is the only place I can be myself." We had a few athletes, we had a few musicians, and we had trans-people. And it was unbelievable.

MA: Absolutely wonderful.

SAP: And one of the things where we knew this -- we needed to continue was -- we had people reach out to us. And saying that, you know, expressed interest that they wanted to come, and they never came. But we always knew that they

were out there. So we knew that we needed to keep it, because even if they don't come, they are internally working through getting the courage to come to a meeting. And that was like my best friend. So the first time we had two people show up. That's it. We had two people and it was a long time before we got a core group of people and this is the second semester of our senior year. We didn't have that much time. (laughter) You know? So Berger and I, you know, [00:26:00] there were -- even when we started it, there were some bad days. We had days when only one person showed up and it was just Berger and myself and this other person. So we had to work through those times, but we knew that it was necessary. Because Berger and I both knew that for us, this would have been a space that we would have wanted when we were freshmen. So.

MA: Right. The way you're describing it, it's almost like the group had two functions. It had the function for the people who came, then it had the function for the people who knew -- even if you never knew who they were. It said there's a safe space for you. Like you can move towards that space, even if you don't actually enter it. Or you do in a year. And that's --

SAP: That's exactly --

MA: You can't really measure that, but you know it's --

SAP: And that was part of the problem. We weren't able to measure it. We weren't able to prove that, look, even just having this space is powerful. We didn't know how to verbalize that. So we just had to keep working on actually getting people to come. Because one of the measures, you know, when you look at, is a group successful? [00:27:00] Does it still need funding? Is: how many people attend? What do you do? We're like, okay, but there's another variable that we can't really -- it's not tangible.

MA: Yeah. There's a deep question and there's a project, there's a research project that you and I are getting to, which is what does it mean to talk about a community that is afraid to show itself, for really good reasons? Like when you have only demographic measures, which drive me nuts anyway -- like you have enough people like this and enough people like that. You know. When you only have a demographic metric measure, what does it mean to serve a community that's afraid to come out? You cease to serve them because you can't measure them? They're afraid to show up and then they're dinged for not showing up. I mean, it's a powerful question about this community. How do you serve a community like that? And you're right at the forefront of that question.

SAP: And you're right at the forefront. And what it takes is
(laughs) one or two people to come out and demand it. You
know? And it sucks because -- [00:28:00] it means, just
like you're saying, it means that those people need to make
themselves not invisible. And it's very hard to do--

MA: For you and Kristen, who I'm going to interview -- you
know, put yourself -- you have to be the bridge. Right?

SAP: You have to, you have to, yeah.

MA: But you've saved some people.

SAP: Right, I --

MA: I mean, right, 2015 -- there's no doubt when people -- it's
like, talking to Leah and talking to Reid, it's like, what
would I have done without the space to go say, I wonder?
You know, and the flexibility of the LGBTQ identity for
many people it's a developmental question. You're 20,
you're 18; you need a space to think about things, before
you sign on the dotted line.

SAP: Right. And you (laughs) need a space to think about
things, but before you can even get to that space you have
get through -- well, is this something I can think about?
Is this even a possibility? And for persons who are living
that dysphoria, sometimes you can't get to that place
[00:29:00] on your own. And if you don't see any flags or

any sort of spaces around you, then how can you reconcile in yourself that it's okay to think about it.

MA: Yeah. Like where can you moor yourself? Where can you orient yourself, like literally to what group of people? It's funny -- it does give you chills to think -- I mean, I wonder how many people that we don't know saw that group and felt like there was some sort of hope -- that you never met, that we don't have on our interview list, that are just that, saw that and saw -- well you know. Somebody here is like me, which is on a bad day enough to go forward (laughs) --

SAP: It is so much, it is so much, so much.

MA: Yeah, so wow, the institution has a lot to thank you for. Thinking about Behind Closed Doors -- the way that people sort of -- you had a really bad moment your first year and I think those negative peer moments have such an incredible impact. The general [00:30:00] sense, it was a sort of -- I see that as a casual homophobia. Right? You have casual heterosexism here, but we also have casual homophobia, which you encountered, which you described. Was it a casually homophobia place in your experience of it?

SAP: Oh yeah, oh yeah. And I'd say probably not even casual about it in 2011; it was a hostile -- (laughs) a hostile environment.

MA: Yeah. A lot of language, like --

SAP: A lot of language. Those gays. I don't want to change around them. I'm sitting there looking like, ah-hah, really? (laughter) No, but I'm sitting there -- I can't -- because I'm still in that space where I'm hiding, so I'm internalizing every single word that is coming out of their mouths. So I wasn't even a space to say get over yourself. I was in a space of saying --

MA: You're like, am I the (overlapping dialogue; inaudible) --

SAP: Am I that thing? That was (laughs) the space that I was in.

MA: So bad.

SAP: Right. Right. [00:31:00]

MA: We've all been there.

SAP: And we've all been there. We've all been there.

MA: Which is like, are you talking about me? Is that me? Is that threatening individual me?

SAP: Right. Or one of the other questions I frequently said was, "I don't want to be that." So it was the baseline assumption that, okay, that is the community. But you know what? Right. I'm not going to be like that if I ever do decide to come out. That was so toxic. That was so toxic.

MA: That is so toxic.

SAP: To just think of my own community accepting what they were, you know, the deviant behavior that they were blindly assigning or blanketing across the entire community.

MA: And the rate of absorption when you're on a college campus

SAP: So high, so high. I was living in an all girls' dorm -- of athletes and Christians and Conservatives and it was rough.

(laughs)

MA: That is rough. That is rough. [00:32:00]

SAP: It was rough. It was rough.

MA: Because you're hearing that and you're sorting-- like people are handing you this horrible stuff -- (laughs) for you to wade through, right. Oh man, that is brutal.

SAP: Mm-hmm. It was. And I had a very Christian upbringing, so I was also in the Lafayette, whatever they call it now -- LC -- Lafayette Christian Fellowship, LCF. And I didn't even put it on it; I forget about that. I was there in that group for two years. And I was surrounded by it every single day. You know? And it was --

MA: Talk about dissonance.

SAP: I was just about to say -- it is so jarring to hear the message of love -- and then to hear the message of -- you're going to hell. I would literally -- I don't know if you've ever seen *The Book of Mormon*, the Broadway show.

MA: No, I haven't, to my --

SAP: So there's a song in *The Book of Mormon*, I can laugh now but there's a song in *The Book of Mormon*. It's called *Spooky Mormon Hell Dream* -- (laughter) and it's about this [00:33:00] Mormon has these thoughts and sins, and one of the Mormons is gay. But of course, he has to hide it. But he wakes up in cold sweat because he's dreaming that he's in hell, burning in fire -- I used to have those dreams. I wasn't Mormon, but it was Christian dreams, about waking up, burning in hell. How do you care for people on one hand, and then explicitly tell them that they're going to burn in hell?

MA: That's a deep psychological terrorism -- that feels like terror -- you sense it's operating on terror and fear.

SAP: Right. Especially in your developmental stages. Like I've been hearing that message since I can ever remember. I remember the torture I would put myself through during that year, my last year in Jamaica, when I was going to church [00:34:00] knowing that I'm probably going to hell. Sitting there, people are like, "Well, why aren't you singing?" I don't know how to be right now. (laughs) Because I'm sitting there believing in this being, but also knowing that I'm so different.

MA: You are. You are you. You are you.

SAP: Right. And trying to --

MA: In that context.

SAP: Trying to reconcile that. And not being able to reconcile that.

MA: Right. Like being torn in half. Right? Only it's just -- oh.

SAP: It is literally being torn in half and trying to make -- well, if I do this or maybe I'll --

MA: Make a deal.

SAP: Right, make deals. I was literally making deals, trying to make deals with God in terms of okay, well maybe if I do enough good -- you know, for it to --

MA: (inaudible) I mean it's good we can laugh about this years later, but when you're living them, living them is -- I mean, there is an absurdity to them that makes us laugh later and it's a story of a lot of LGBT people. A, you laugh because it's absurd and B, you cry if you [00:35:00] didn't laugh. But it's so profound, in terms of that dissonance, and so that was part of your community when you were here, and were you in other sort of communities? Like athletics or there are social clubs, and how did they sort in this mix?

SAP: So one of the good things about my experience was I just had so much -- bad word -- that I had to get done -- I didn't have a lot of time to simmer over it. So I was also

in a financial crisis when I was here at Lafayette. So I was working, I was studying engineering, I was figuring out my gender identity, my sexual identity. I also wanted to be doing every bloody leadership thing on the face of this earth. I was also just figuring out that engineering wasn't for me. So I didn't really have time to [00:36:00] wallow in any of my issues. So I had issues on the sexual identity crisis and the financial crisis and then of course, on a professional crisis. So I didn't have time to focus on any one of them, so I was constantly doing things to try and alleviate whatever those concerns were. So that was one of the nice things. I literally did (laughs) everything on campus. So that was --

MA: I remember seeing you everywhere when you were really busy and you were a leader.

SAP: I had to be.

MA: You had a lot of responsibility.

SAP: But thinking back, I had to be. If I didn't, -- I wouldn't have made it. I would have drowned in everything that was happening.

MA: Understood.

SAP: So it was sort of the --

MA: Right pattern.

SAP: Kind of, yeah, patterning to stay afloat --

MA: But achievement is a lifeboat, I think, for a lot of people under great duress. It's a way to survive. It's a way to keep swimming. It's a positive way. I mean, it involves good choices, but it's part of what how much is asked of us, to get through. [00:37:00] That we're always really attentive and I'm always thinking about -- you talked about religion -- race, ethnic identity, social/economic class, age or any of these things that really influence the LGBTQ experience on campus -- you had a lot of them going. I mean, you mentioned Christian as a profound one. With a lot of intersectional moments.

SAP: Mm-hmm. It was tough. (laughs) It was tough. And I know that there are other persons here that are going through that and especially in the black American and black Caribbean communities. I know for a fact that there were persons who reached out to me, that did the same thing that I did when I was a freshman, where they were like, "How is it here?" You know, not ever voicing -- and I knew that they were scared. And I couldn't help them, but I knew [00:38:00] that -- I told them about the space and I said, "Look, when you're ready, use the space." But obviously I left, so I didn't know if they ever used the space, but that existed, prevalently, throughout the entire community. And speaking with Berger, knowing that she experienced that

on the athletic side, and it just meant so much more -- so I was really proud of her for following through with her, the allies, yeah. It was needed. And I didn't experience it firsthand, but my secondhand exposure was dating that woman on the basketball team and she left. She had to leave. Because it was too much. She just did not feel supported here and so she left. I also had an inkling about one of my roommates, who probably is and probably will forever be closeted. [00:39:00] But those are the kinds of things that make you realize how important, as you said, language is. How important that community is, or just hearing any sort of positives -- message -- how important that is. To sort of guiding you out of the darkness. (laughs) Because it is dark. (laughter)

MA: If the lights are easy to see, in the absolute darkness.

SAP: So easy to see.

MA: They're so powerful because of that --

SAP: Speck of light.

MA: One person, one thing, yeah, absolutely. How about academics? Was it a homophobic space? Was it an inclusive space? Was it a don't ask, don't tell?

SAP: Just didn't exist. Yeah. Just didn't exist. Don't ask, don't tell.

MA: You were in --

SAP: Engineering. Civil engineering. I was really excited and I remember and I saw Professor [Anne] Raich and she was very -- just a non, you couldn't tell and that was my beacon.

[00:40:00] Of course, when I found out she had a daughter and she was straight, I was like, oh, god dammit. You know what? I have to say --

MA: (overlapping dialogue; inaudible)

SAP: Right, right -- (laughter)

MA: Please be gay. (laughs)

SAP: So when I found out that, I was like, you know what? I'm just going to pretend and keep positive. (laughter) I'm going to look up to her anyway. (laughs) So that was where I was at that time -- just hanging onto any straw.

MA: Absolutely.

SAP: And then -- oh, what's her name? Engineering studies professor. No, no, she was probably chemical. Anyhow, then an out female professor came --

MA: Yes. Julia Nicodemus.

SAP: Yes, Nicodemus. Then Nicodemus came, I was like, oh -- (laughter) so precious. And she had her partner and they had a little dog and --

MA: Brave new world for Lafayette College.

SAP: It is a brave new world, especially in engineering.

MA: Engineering, yeah.

SAP: Unheard of. Because it just wasn't talked about.

[00:41:00] I remember my closest adviser, Art Kney and it wasn't until my senior year where I just casually mentioned, he was like, what? And it was a shock to him. Because just no one speaks about it. But I felt -- he was one of the reasons I made it through. But knowing that even someone that was so instrumental to me surviving Lafayette -- he was shocked. That's how much it just wasn't talked about. In engineering.

MA: That's heterosexism, right?

SAP: Yes.

MA: It's like nothing personal but we don't think gay people exist.

SAP: Right. Right. Right.

MA: We just forgot about it.

SAP: Yeah, right. They just don't present themselves in our field. And obviously I'd play the (laughs) who's with me game -- (laughter) in engineering -- and that's all I had in engineering. It was literally all I had. And so it was tough. [00:42:00] And now looking at the students -- my gaydar was really point -- but now looking back at the students who are out I was like yup I knew -- because when I came out, there were students who would avoid eye contact

with me. Because of course, just when you're closeted you think -- just the association of this person, like --

MA: Oh yeah, the paranoia is like off the charts.

SAP: Right. Off the charts.

MA: (overlapping dialogue; inaudible) Because you're afraid.

SAP: Right. And that's what I had. But when I came out, I knew, because just awareness and there were persons who would avoid me at all costs. And when I saw that I was like, wow, it's come a long way and you know what? I hope those students get that clarity when -- or that support that they really need.

MA: Yeah. You understood, it's nothing personal, but it's associating with baggage.

SAP: It's nothing personal, right. Right, right.

MA: People are afraid to even be associated with anybody who might be perceived, dot, dot, dot.

SAP: Yeah. And that was so real for me. I remember the first time my basketball [00:43:00] friend, a girlfriend, I guess -- I obviously never admitted that she was my girlfriend, but the first time that she said, "I want to hold your hand." We were walking on campus -- I freaked out.

MA: Wow, that would have been big.

SAP: It would have been so big. So you know what? I looked around, I didn't see anyone, so I said, you know what?

It's fine. So we walked for maybe, it was like five minutes. And then once we reached our hall, I like yanked my hand back (laughs) because people were coming up and blah, blah, blah. But it was such a powerful moment for me. Right? You know, I held her hand. It was outside. La-la-la-dah. The next day I had choir practice and someone came up to me, and was like -- ooh, who's that cute new boy you were walking with?

MA: No way.

SAP: I kid you not. I don't know what state I went [00:44:00] into, but I felt as though I had been launched back to my -- that first day I was on the Quad. So I was like, oh, it's no boy, like I'm not dating anyone. Like you didn't see anyone. Like we weren't doing anything. Blah, blah, blah. And I just defended it to the end. And of course, after that I told her, look, we can't be doing this. We cannot -- and it's really those types of things about association -- and just really well-meaning people, just really messing you up.

MA: (laughter) But that came back. Instantly.

SAP: I had met such -- instant, instant repercussion. The next day! (laughs)

MA: That was brutal.

SAP: It was so brutal and after that I just --

MA: And you're just like, this is why I'm worried.

SAP: Yeah. And then after that I didn't associate with her.

And of course, that was the beginning of the end and she was [00:45:00] -- it was rough, really rough.

MA: Wow, that was really, really rough.

SAP: Yeah. And I'm an introvert and INTJ [Introverted iNtuitive Thinking Judging-Myer-Briggs personality type], so I really know how to shut people out. In other words. And I shut her out. [Section redacted by interviewee.]

MA: That's a very powerful story; that's really tough.

SAP: Yeah. I'm not proud of that, but --

MA: No. Everybody's in survival mode.

SAP: Right. It's literally survival mode.

MA: Yeah. There's other things that are making that happen.

(clears throat) The dating scene -- did people date at all? Was there same-sex dating? Or was everybody just in survival mode, pretty much? It sounded like that was a tough situation --

SAP: The survival mode -- the only -- let me see, who might be -
- Shanequa Lassiter?

MA: Yes! She's a women's and gender studies major; I know Shanequa well.

SAP: That's right. [00:46:00] Shanequa was sort of my -- I aspire to be. I remember she was dating, [section redacted

by interviewee]. (laughter) The president of Quest at the time; I forget his name -- he was a senior when I just came in. He's on my Facebook, too; I just forgot his name. But he was one of the most stable beacons on campus. I remember looking at him like -- ah, that would be nice. (laughs) That would be nice. But other than that, everyone was -- because I was so scared to associate myself with that, I just didn't see it for those first two years. Only those two persons who were just really out. And then when junior year came now, then I found the sort of underground -- people they shouldn't be dating [00:47:00] -- really older people. You know, that sort of -- and that was the way they had to deal with it because those were people who were comfortable. Those were people who were out. Those were people who knew what they wanted. And we were young adults trying to find our way, so of course we were drawn to persons like that. So those were the other types of relationships that I saw. And then of course, when I became a senior, then I started recognize and relate to the staff, the faculty -- the faculty was a big one, because that meant that actually there's a future.

MA: Yeah. Tell me about the faculty.

SAP: Obviously yourself -- because I was dating -- one of your students -- [Name redacted]. Yeah, yeah. So I was dating

[name redacted] and she just loved you. You know, and she was sort of my plug to the faculty and literature.

[00:48:00] I never really thought I needed literature, because I literally lived a lot of the things that people read about, or try to understand. So she would tell me about Audre Lorde and her work, and what it meant, and I was like, okay, I didn't need to read that because I've lived that. (laughs)

MA: Mhmm.

SAP: So she was sort of my portal to the academic behind sexual identity, queerness, what that meant. Queerness is blackness and what that meant. And then once we started talking, then I started to recognize the faculty who were living their lives, who were out, who were happy. Kira Lawrence was another one. And it struck me just that the women were the ones leading, were the ones being. And it ties into, of course, the very toxic masculinity.

[00:49:00]

MA: Absolutely. The costs are so high with them that --

SAP: Costs are so high. So high. And it was refreshing for me because my mentors or my beacons have always been men, just by virtue of my profession, what I was studying.

MA: Yeah, engineering.

SAP: Of engineering -- how my own personality is and sort of a rigid, non-emotional type of person -- I've evolved. I'm a little bit more, you know --

MA: If you say so. (laughter) You know you best. I'm like, she's -- okay.

SAP: Yeah, I know. So that was really powerful for me, to -- I didn't realize, obviously at the time, but whenever I think back, I'm like, wow -- seeing those relationships were so important. I remember the first person I met was Diorio. Dean Diorio [Annette Diorio]. She was great friends with my [00:50:00] friendship partner, Kari Fazio. And Kari probably knew I was gay, but I was so closeted, so she never mentioned it. So she introduced me to Annette and she's like, oh, this is Annette and her partner and I was like wait, so this can go past this stage? You know, so everything really important to have faculty and staff representation. Because I just didn't think it was possible. Every other representation I had was reading. I would read online stories --

MA: Abstract?

SAP: Right, right. That people would make up about characters in the media and stuff like that. So having real life -- not past a certain age was really powerful. Because I just

didn't think it happened. I didn't think it was possible.

So that was --

MA: Wow. It's a role model thing again.

SAP: It's a role model thing.

MA: In a lot of ways. Right. Why it's important to be out, but to be out when you're ready. [00:51:00] Yeah, powerful, wow. (laughter) I'm sorry. I have to say, because I'm a lesbian myself, I want to say I appreciate the energy it takes to go back and walk through these experiences. This is a gift to the college, when you talk about these things, because there wasn't a picnic. And those feelings don't go away. And those things really mattered and they shape your life. They're not just like events. They're the shape of your life. And it really is not a small thing to go back and think about them --

SAP: No.

MA: I want to tell you how cognizant I am on that, because you know, I mean people give these interviews -- for a lot of people college is memory lane. You know? Not for the LGBTQ community. It's really something else. [00:52:00]

SAP: Yeah. It's more like hellfire. (laughter) Don't step on something or they'll blow up and send me away -- weeks into the future

MA: Absolutely. Oh my gosh, so scary. Other things like Greek life or clubs you were in or organizations or anything like that? Or these were mostly your connections. It sounds like you were involved in a lot.

SAP: Mm-hmm. And one thing I was also really happy for is -- engineering took up a lot of my time. So I just didn't have time to be affected by some of the things that other closeted students are affected by. So my exposure to (laughs) Greek life was not particularly welcoming. So I just stayed away. So I was welcomed into -- I don't know how to explain this -- so when I first came to campus [00:53:00] I thought, okay, I was middle class. You know, that's what I thought. And then a crisis happened; my family went into a financial spiral. But when I came here and I recognized middle class meant nothing -- like middle class Caribbean was literally not the same as US middle class. So immediately, you know, as soon as I stepped on campus, I was allowed that sort of acknowledgement that I am not in the same class as these people. So once that happened, I no longer felt as though I needed to fit in. Because I just knew I didn't. I had a friend, and why I mentioned this, I'll tie it in, I promise -- that I had a friend who she thought she was middle class. Another black woman, she was on my hall, but she thought she was middle

class by West Coast standards and by what the usual middle class standard. Middle class standard here at Lafayette is not [00:54:00] American middle class. Middle class here at Lafayette is upper, upper, upper -- (laughs)

MA: Yeah, that's the middle.

SAP: Yes. That's where that, that level, that bar just moves from US to here.

MA: Well said. Yeah, yeah.

SAP: So she was very much caught up in trying to maintain that status. So she would very much try to fit into those Greek spaces -- those very wealthy spaces. So I had that privilege of knowing that I just was not going to fit into that (laughs) space. So I didn't have a problem with Greek life or just not being a part of it. But you know, as a group -- individually I had friends who I worked with in other spaces and who respected me in those other spaces. So an investment club, when I decided to transition to finance -- in engineering -- in public speaking, you know, [00:55:00] in my leadership roles. So I had those relationships with those individuals who were a part of Greek life, a part of the upper crust. It just didn't exist outside of that. And I had that grounding factor of -- I'm never going to fit in where I am now, so I don't need to try. And I don't need to worry about it. And I

was really happy for that. You know, looking back, because I would have also have drowned in terms of feeling out of place -- thinking that I belonged but didn't really -- or trying to belong and failing.

MA: Yep. One more marginalization.

SAP: One more marginalization. And I saw people who dressed -- especially in the black community, who tried really hard. And they failed. But only external people could see that failure. And so that was one of the issues that I was able to [00:56:00] avoid by just accepting that I just did not belong (laughs) in that.

MA: You just skirted that one.

SAP: It's just -- I skirted that one.

MA: It was just not that meaningful for you to want. You didn't need to, yeah.

SAP: Right. I didn't have to, and that was something that I really -- that really got me through is sort of my own independence -- people called me Grandmother because people would come to me and no one would ever know about me, because I would just keep it to me.

MA: That's a tough role.

SAP: That is a very tough role. And I've now come to start to sort of try to break those down. But that's what got me through, is just knowing that -- okay, if I don't belong,

that's fine. I'm okay being an outsider. In those respects. And that also helped with me coming to terms with this identity that will also put me on another level of outside -- (laughs)

MA: Independence is important, right, for coming to that point. Because if you are always in terms of others, then it's really hard to come to yourself --

SAP: You're always trying to seek that, that approval.

MA: Yeah. So you knew these folks, [00:57:00] but in other contexts in which you were their equal -- in engineering, as opposed to --

SAP: Mm-hmm. Exactly, exactly. And they weren't as --

MA: Yeah. Not some structural dominance that was built into the situation.

SAP: Right. And I didn't feel that I needed to enter that space. And if I didn't enter it, it didn't bother me.

MA: (laughter) Yea, is what I say. (laughter) Like oh my god

SAP: Yeah, one win, one win. One win.

MA: -- hey, we'll take the wins we can get, for sure.

SAP: Take the wins where you can get them.

MA: So I want to ask -- this has made me think of, when you said "a win" too -- the public moments -- were there any big public moments? So in a funny way, Behind Closed Doors, as the ultimate non-public moment, is an important

moment for the history of Lafayette College, so there's that. But were there rallies? Were there speakers? Were there classes that got taught? Were there any big moments where you thought, okay, so I'm not alone?

SAP: Mm-hmm. [00:58:00]

MA: Or some terrible speaker that came and was homophobic. Because that happens, too. (laughter) You know.

SAP: Public moments, definitely. Any event that Quest had. Those were powerful. Because -- I could walk by. I could sit down far away, but still keep my eye on, oh, what are they saying now? Oh, look at them. You know, because those are the people I was sitting with. Oh, look at them. But at the same time that I was taking part in this snide, sort of disparaging, taking down of them, I was also -- "oh, my community" -- like I'm so glad you're there; I can't wait until I'm over there.

MA: Wow, powerful.

SAP: It's so powerful. I'm holding onto this chair and --

MA: You're like, oh my God, (laughter) like I'm the person (overlapping dialogue; inaudible) --

SAP: I know. (laughs) Yes, I know.

MA: It's a terrible space -- in a familiar one -- such a familiar one. [00:59:00]

SAP: So familiar. So familiar. But they were powerful. And as derisive as I was, and as my friends were, it was so powerful for me. And I know other persons saw it as powerful. And that's why we decided to have an end of year rally, for BCD. Because I knew that even though people were going to by us, just the fact that we were there meant so much to so many people and that's why Leah came out. That's when she first came out publicly.

MA: That was the BCD Rally.

SAP: That was the BCD Rally.

MA: Was that associated with the Equity Rally?

SAP: Yeah. Yeah, yeah, yeah. So the Equity Rally happened and then we had an open mike with BCD and Quest. So these rallies, even though people walked by them and I was one of those persons who would constantly walk by them or make a snide remark because that's what was expected and that was how I protected [01:00:00] my straightness. It meant so much. It meant so much. So all of those Quest events -- that event that woman from *Orange is the New Black* --

MA: Oh, she came to speak.

SAP: Lea DeLaria. Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah.

MA: Yeah, Lea DeLaria, yeah.

SAP: She came. That was another big event, because she was just so unapologetically lesbian, (laughter) like she was just -
-

MA: Yeah. She's so old school. Like -- (laughs)

SAP: So old school and one of the issues that I also struggled with, once I did come to grips was -- then where I fell within the lesbian sort of spectrum. And especially in the black community, I wasn't masculine enough to be a stud. And I wasn't feminine enough to be a femme. So I was one of those in-betweeners who loved both sides of the spectrum, but the both sides of the spectrum don't know what to do with me. [01:01:00] (laughter) And so this dyke comes in and it's just so masculine and so proud and didn't give --

MA: Yeah. She's so butch, yeah.

SAP: Didn't give two shits about what anyone thought about it. In fact, she made fun of it. That was powerful for me. And I still struggle with that in terms of where I fall on that spectrum. But it meant so much to have people acknowledge that that is a struggle, even within the bloody community. How do we battle outside and also have to battle inside? (laughter) You know?

MA: You have to fight the butch/femme fight today. You can't fight homophobia because -- you make a great point, right,

that within our communities, different identities and it's a struggle about where you fall. That's no small thing.

SAP: Yeah. So those events were really, really powerful. Even when I wasn't associating [01:02:00] with them, externally, they were powerful to be there. Because as you said, role models. And Gene would always laugh because he had a lot of battles from alumni, from parents, from the religious front and he didn't care. He really pushed the envelope. And I really love him for that, regardless of, you know, he's a human, so he had a lot of faults, but that was one of the things that --

MA: Made a real difference.

SAP: Made a real difference to a lot of kids. We were kids.

MA: Agreed.

SAP: You know, he was just gay. He was dean. He didn't care. He was a dean of -- he was supposed to be, hmm, hmm, masculine and he just, he didn't. And he also represented the sort of, the body [01:03:00] issue -- he was very comfortable with his size and he always spoke about it and what it meant and the acknowledgement. And so he just represented a lot of identities that needed to be spoken about. So he was one of my more favorite white gay male -- (laughs) because he got it. And he got the race thing, too. So he was able to sort of speak, reach across

different barriers. So all those events that he had that pushed the envelope -- even Condom Bingo was something that was powerful for me. I never had the courage to go to it. You know, people would tell me about it, I would ask questions -- how did it go? What did you win? You know, tell me about it. And then my final year I finally went like, this is amazing. The normalization of people's identities.

MA: Yeah, the behaviors and desires. Yeah, yeah. [01:040:00]

SAP: Right. It's so powerful. So it really started to tear down my own walls that I've built for decades and that's what I've been building since I was a little kid, being baptized and being taught my roles were, and what I needed to do. So it took some time and it's still ongoing, but this was sort of a big catalyst. So events were very important. And where I thought you were going with that was -- was there any public space that I had to come out and -- thinking back now, BCD for Berger and I -- just getting that program started made us more comfortable with ourselves. Because one of the first things Gene asked was, well, are you guys okay with having your email [01:05:00] on that flier?

MA: Absolutely. Famously so.

SAP: That was another (laughs) crisis for me, because --

MA: That's big.

SAP: That meant I was coming out to the whole community.

MA: Absolutely.

SAP: And even though I was comfortable with myself, I just wasn't telling anyone. I wasn't out. I wasn't out to my friends. I wasn't out to my professors. I wasn't out to anyone on campus. And that forced me to tell my friends. And tell my professors. And when questions came up and they were like, so you're running this thing with the rainbow color on it -- what does that mean? Well, it means what you think it means.

MA: (laughter) You've done the fight.

SAP: Right. (laughs) (inaudible) Right? And that publicly was my first --

MA: That's big, that's big.

SAP: Coming out to --

MA: That's big. I remember seeing that flier for [01:06:00] the first time and that it had your emails on it, you and Kristen. And I looked at it and I was like, wow.

(laughter) Two student emails, wow. Like I still remember what that flier looked like. It blew me away.

SAP: We debated that for a very long time.

MA: That you did.

SAP: You know, the options were making a new Lafayette email --

MA: That you didn't amazed and impressed me so much.

SAP: Because we thought about it. If we had seen a generic e,
we wouldn't have reached out. The fact that it was two,
(laughs) like if I had seen two students -- I would have
reached out. And we --

MA: Yeah, you did it. I think that was the --

SAP: It was powerful. It was powerful. And we asked people.
Once we started to get a core group we said, well, if we
had put -- they said, no.

MA: Interesting. And it makes a ton of sense.

SAP: It makes so much -- because you would have been submitting
your identity to a void -- who was going to see that email?

MA: The last thing you do.

SAP: Who was behind it? Like you know? [01:07:00]

MA: Is this going to my mother?

SAP: Right, right, right. Is this going to my file? Like, am I
(laughter) going to be blacklisted? The fact that it was
someone they knew or they could see -- Berger was softball,
I was all over campus. People knew. (laughs)

MA: Where I'm from they call it courage. (laughter) That's
what they call it.

SAP: Where we came, like we were just like, yeah -- yeah, we
told Gene just do it.

MA: Yeah, it's amazing.

SAP: We just do it.

MA: But look at the effect? I mean, that's why you're such trailblazers. Right? It's like I think in a way we have a growing trans community because of those first trailblazers. You know, and now people know there have been -- and what you've described over and over is that tiny little light. You just need one light -- the stories of Leah and the stories of Reid; it's like they are legend. The trans kids here know those stories now. They are those little lights in the darkness. They did it. I did it, and that's because of BCD. It's amazing. [01:08:00] It is a chain.

SAP: Yeah, it's a chain, it is.

MA: And it's so powerful. I'm so excited it's still going now. You know, and it's an amazing thing to see.

SAP: I'm really happy to hear that. I guess we just also never recognized how impactful it could be on the future trans community. You know, we were just thinking about -- for us it was just Leah and Reid. We just wanted to make sure they had a space. And when she came out, we were bawling.

MA: Oh, I would have been --

SAP: As much, as much as I can bawl, just as crack -- as much, you know, internally I was like -- because to us, she never planned to come out on this campus when she first came to

BCD. And afterwards she -- because I had gone up there and that was the first time speaking verbally about coming out and other Caribbean people were there -- I was like, you know what? I don't care -- and then she was like, you know what? I'm a trans woman. And she was masculine-presenting, saying that. And it was beautiful.

MA: Yeah, that's amazing. She was able to do that.

SAP: Beautiful. She was able -- and President Byerly was standing right there. [01:09:00] Yeah.

MA: Powerful. Well. (laughter) We've come a long way, when you think about it now. And Kristen and Athletes Allied, the change is going to happen and sort of thinking -- I mean, things have changed. How do you respond to that, coming back and you're sitting here giving an oral history interview two years later and what the college has done -- what it still needs to do -- what's in front of us?

SAP: Mm-hmm. You know, even though -- and this comes back to sort of the wider issue that the US and the world is facing, is those conversations where, with progress people make assumptions about grass level. Change in behavior. We still have those languages in dorms. We still have those languages in houses, on the Quad. [01:10:00] In the classroom. You know? So we have made institutional progress, for sure. And on the individual basis of people

in the community. But there's still a very conservative campus where -- it's blanketed. It's just assumed that everyone is accepting. But it doesn't matter if the majority is liberal phasing. If a member of the community hears one message, that's all it takes and you know, with progress comes this unfortunate by-product of assuming the whole community is being swept with progress, and that's not, that's not always the case. So in the future or what's next is ensuring that those conversations keep happening at a grass roots level, that everyone is hearing that conversation, not just preaching to the [01:11:00] choir type of thing. You know? I was really happy to hear sort of like RA programming or whatever their Commons now is, where they're talking about diversity and what it means to be living with X/Y/Z people, because then that gets conversations started. And I saw that -- I was only an RA for one year, but I was an RA for first-year students and when first-year students come in they don't know anything -- about you know, campus life or what the atmosphere is, so whatever they hear is what they're going to mimic. And I remember coming in and I was so out by that time, and there was a strain of covert homophobia. I had athletes, just really amazing kids, but no one would step out of their comfort zone to stop someone if they say, "Oh, that's

really gay," or [01:12:00] "Dude, don't do that. That's like, what are you?" And so I took upon myself to make my sort of floor really open and welcoming and challenging. So that's one of the things that really is going to come and it unfortunately falls on the shoulders of those who were in the community, which I know a lot of people, yeah, that's very -- teaching those who are not in oppressed communities-- it's very emotionally draining.

MA: Yep, and it's a tension, but it took -- it's a tension for a reason.

SAP: Right, right. And so that is definitely one of what need to continue happening, is forcing those spaces to be challenging. You know, those changes aren't going to be made overnight, but just ensuring that as the institutional progress is happening, we don't leave the grass roots process behind. You know, progress behind because if that [01:13:00] happens, then the same thing is going to happen, what's happening on a macro level, where there will be an underground -- sort of hostility against this progress. And then you never know who is in that space. So I remember, you'll have kids -- I remember Berger telling me like -- let's say her softball team, they would be talking like we have to wear XYZ because we don't want to be dykes. We don't anyone talking -- Berger was in that space. And

at that time, of course, athletics was saying, no, we don't tolerate XYZ, but you can't police private spaces. So if those conversations aren't happening on that personal level, then you will inevitably scar people who you thought [01:14:00] weren't part of any oppressed communities, but are in those underground spaces. So that's definitely something that just needs to not be forgotten. That those conversations really still have to happen. Like we can't reach a stage where, okay, well we have X number of out students, so we don't need any of this anymore. You know? So I really hope that that just continues because --

MA: That's such a valuable comment.

SAP: Because regardless of how far we come, there will always be -- the group that just doesn't ascribe to the same thing and that group still has power. Because you don't know who that group is reaching. So.

MA: Right. Absolutely. And I love that comment, I really thank you for it. I think in a way you've so powerfully articulated the difference between policy and culture. It's great to have policy in play. Structural protections for people are very, very important. But if we're not homophobic anymore -- saying that [01:15:00] formally does not mean in fact that we're not homophobic, racist or any of those things anymore.

SAP: Policy does not exist in vacuums.

MA: Right, right. So you know, you can have all the good intentions from the administration, but their powers are limited -- in a lot of ways. But having the sort of -- all the mid-level -- the faculty have to be working on this. The classes, the climate has to be --

SAP: The climate --

MA: Pro -- right, pro gay. It's not enough to like not say bad things about gay people. Right? It has to lift up these communities.

SAP: Climate. It's so important.

MA: It's a climate issue and not just a policy issue. And when you let climate go, you let the other stuff thrive and if we're not paying attention. That is wonderful. Do you have any other things you'd like to say or comments on?

SAP: No, I just need a lot of time to heal from this.

MA: (laughter) I think that so much of what you've done has helped others heal. And I think that these interviews will continue that work. And so the cost of going over all this, which I know is a real cost, [01:16:00] I hope you feel reassured is one that is thoughtfully and carefully done and done for the benefit of people who will hear this interview and work forward from these issues, that it's -- you're still working on these issues, when you give an

interview like this and that's excellent. I appreciate it so much and talking to someone like you makes me very proud to be a faculty member. So thank you.

SAP: Hmm, hmm. But I also wanted to thank you in the work that you're doing. I remember hearing about the people who made the difference, so my best friend, [section redacted by interviewee], it was professors who you know, it was -- (laughs), well, that was a tough time, but it was me. And professors. That was all she had. Like counseling --

MA: Coming through.

SAP: Counseling didn't know how to help her. There was no queer person in counseling that she could talk to. She didn't feel as though they understood what they were just telling her, okay, breathe. [01:17:00] (laughs) Just don't think about it. But those sort of things like -- I mean, it's amazing service, but for queer people who are distressed, having -- yes, focus groups and talk, that's great, but those are for people who are going. You know? So having that representation, for her it was you and Van Dyke [Lynn Van Dyke, Professor of English]. Where she was looking and saying, you know what? Maybe there is --

MA: Life --

SAP: Life after this.

MA: Hmm. That makes me glad.

SAP: And you wouldn't have known that story. And we don't know all the stories, where these kids are doing it. So we thank you for being out, being actively out. (laughter) You know, doing projects like this, sort of fighting for that recognition, that validation. Because that trickles [01:18:00] down to us. Especially --

MA: Makes me glad.

SAP: -- little gay babies who (laughter) don't yet, you know, aren't yet out.

MA: That makes me very happy.

SAP: Aren't yet.

MA: Very glad. Well, I have tenure and power and privilege and I believe it's my obligation. I will say, I went into this business to be what I needed when I was in college and I didn't have -- so you're what makes me-- I want to be the person I needed when I was a gay baby. (laughs)

SAP: Oh, so adorable. (laughs)

MA: So, and I know a lot of my colleagues do, too, so - Stacey-Ann Pearson, off to the Schwarzman's Scholarship, off to China -- (laughter) but is going to come back. And see us at Lafayette again some day.

SAP: Yes, I will.

MA: Because you've been such an important member of our community. Thank you for all you've done and thank you for this interview.

SAP: Thank you. Thank you.

END AUDIO FILE

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[2] Now Willow Wheelock and a participant in the QAP.

[3] Leah Wasacz, a participant in the QAP.