

BeroDanielle_240306

MARY ARMSTRONG: It's March 6, 2024. This is Mary Armstrong. I'm Professor of Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies and English and Chair of WGSS at Lafayette College, and I'm sitting here in Pardee Hall with the fabulous Danielle Bero, class of '07, who is generous and kind enough to give an oral history interview for the Lafayette College Queer Archives Project today. Danielle, thank you so much for being here with me.

DANIELLE BERO: Thank you for having me.

MA: Absolutely. It's --

DB: Excited. (laughs)

MA: It's great. It's great. We're excited to have you. So, I'll start out with some basic, formulaic questions that we use. We ask every participant -- this is sort of the taxes and tags sold separately part of the interview -- to state their name and to confirm their participation is voluntary. They have given their informed consent. If you wouldn't mind doing that.

DB: Yeah. Danielle Lisa Bero, and I graduated 2007, and, yeah, I'm volunteering my time, and [00:01:00] I'm excited to be a part of the archives.

MA: It's absolutely wonderful to have you. So, this reminder is that it's your story, and we're interested in your story the way you want to tell it. Tell it how you wish and the ways you want to wish it. The questions are just prompts to jog your memory. Anything you don't wish to address, you just decline to speak to it. If it's not appropriate or doesn't apply to you, we'll just wave it away. The main thing is to feel free to elaborate on questions that I ask or go down side roads because, for us, they're not side roads. If they're important for you, they're the main roads.

DB: Gotcha.

MA: And so, any additional thoughts you have about your time at Lafayette or beyond, we want to hear. And any additional comments or information, and the interview comes to an end later, you think you'd like to add something, we're happy -- send us an email. We're happy to -- it's not like it's over when it's over. The idea is to collect your thoughts. So, personal pronouns and name you prefer to be used?

DB: [00:02:00] I go by she/her. Yeah, Danielle. Yeah.

MA: Wonderful. And your relation to the Lafayette community is basically as an alum.

DB: Yup.

MA: And the class you're in, major. The major was...?

DB: I was 2007, and my major was self-designed creative media and social justice.

MA: Wow. How marvelous.

DB: Yeah. I got really lucky with that. (laughs)

MA: That's fantastic. I'm going to be interested to learn more about that. And how do you identify as a member of the LGBTQ community?

DB: So, I identify as lesbian, but I'm finding that that is becoming less and less of the norm, so I don't know if I'm, like, a dinosaur breed, but, yeah, I still go by lesbian. I don't know. I don't know if that's good or bad, but... (laughs)

MA: You know, it's good because it's what you identify as.

DB: Right on.

MA: And so, that is good. And it's very interesting how terminology changes over time.

DB: That's the shifts. That's correct.

MA: And that's been my experience as well. How do you professionally describe yourself? And this can be employment, work, your life vocation, all of those, [00:03:00] wherever that takes you.

DB: Yeah. It's interesting because I'm kind of straddling two completely different worlds, and so I'm kind of figuring out how to bridge those two together, but my full-time work

is in education. So, I came up as a teacher, and then I was a principal for a while, and now I oversee the bottom five percent of the failing schools in New York State. So, that's what I do with the majority of my time. And then, on the side of that, I do poetry, and I just started working in films as well. So, there's the arts piece, and then there's the education piece, so I like to kind of bridge those two together, so -- but to say arts education is not accurate because I'm not teaching art. You know what I mean? So, it's like education arts. I don't know. I don't know how to bridge those, but those are the two worlds that I live in, so that's how I like to define myself, as just a creative educator. Yeah.

MA: Wow, that's fantastic, and a multi-talent, clearly, as well, making those things touch without sort of invoking the traditional arts education model, but something different.

DB: Exactly. Yup, yup, yup. They're completely divorced of each other, but I bring them in.

MA: Yeah. Nice. Oh, that's beautiful. [00:04:00] Anything to add? Just how you describe yourself?

DB: I tend to lean towards the urban. I find that that's kind of where my body naturally finds itself, so I always kind of lead with the urban, and then the schools that I've

worked in, by and large, have been Title 1 as well, and that's what my background is in, so I like to make sure that that's a distinction that I make because there's very different schools as you move across, right? Rural schools and rural poverty's very different than urban poverty, so I just like to make it known that Title 1 urban education is usually where I find myself.

MA: Right, that's your space, and it's its own space. It's particular, yeah, and it's shaping who you are, what you do. And you're there because of who you are --

DB: Exactly.

MA: -- it sounds like. Yeah. Fantastic. Okay. We'll start with some really general questions. So, I'll give the game away by saying Danielle is a keynote speaker for the Women's History Month sponsored by our wonderful colleagues in the Office of Intercultural Development. She's giving the keynote later today and just had lunch at [00:05:00] Lavender Lane. And so, there's an interesting framework for this question, which is just to describe how the general situation on campus was for queer people, community members. You can talk about it -- was it visible? Was it safe? Were people out? Just sort of, during your time as a student here, how would you describe it really generically?

DB: Yeah. I knew I was gay for a very long time. I knew probably before I even started school, I knew I was gay, or I didn't know what gay was, but I knew that I was. And I never came out as a high school student, with my family, and I had a serious partner. We were together for the majority of my high school time, and I just never came out, primarily because I didn't feel necessary, right? I didn't feel like -- if straight people were coming out, then I'd be like, okay, yeah, I can come out too, but if straight people aren't coming out, then I didn't feel the need. And when I got to Lafayette, I think that that allowed [00:06:00] me to hide myself, right? Under the same stipulation that I had when I came from New York City, was, like, I don't have to come out because, I mean, I am. When I got to Lafayette, it was like, oh, I don't have to come out because maybe it's not safe, right? And so, it was the same lens but a very different sentiment behind the lens. And I didn't feel safe because there weren't a lot of folks that were out, and the folks that were out were male, which I thought was interesting too because, usually, I find that men have a much harder time coming out in machismo or patriarchal spaces. So, I thought that that was an interesting way, too, to enter into the space. And then, what I found as soon as I got here was that there was an

outpouring of professors that connected with me that were queer and maybe weren't out on campus but definitely wanted me to know that I wasn't alone. And I think that that actually is what made me feel welcome and safe here, was just the very few -- it was only a handful, maybe three or four [00:07:00] folks, but, you know, putting a letter in my mailbox or recommending a book to me, and those were the moments where I felt seen because I didn't have to say anything. They saw me, knowing already what their experience was. They'd already know who I was coming in. And I think that that's what made me feel comfortable enough to then -- I think my sophomore year -- really be like, oh, well. If you got a problem with it, you got a problem with it. And then, my sophomore year is when I really kind of came into my own and was like, I don't really care. I don't think I actually really cared freshman year either, but I think that I was so young and naive that I didn't know that I didn't care. (laughs) You know what I mean? And then, as I got more aware of myself, I think I became more intentional about what I was saying and why I was saying it, but before that, I didn't really know why.

MA: Yeah, that thought process with, like, why am I thinking what I'm thinking --

DB: Exactly.

MA: -- or feeling what I'm feeling you get as you get older and develop, yeah. That was really interesting. If we could just for a second -- so, there were out people on campus as gay men, and it's really interesting because Lafayette is such a traditionally hypermasculine space, so that's a bit of a [00:08:00] surprise when you describe it that way. But was it a handful of student leaders, and they --?

DB: Yeah, it was QuEST. It was the guys that were running QuEST. So, at the time, it was Daniel Reynolds. There's another gentleman. He didn't actually end up graduating with us, but there was like three or four gentlemen at the time that were running QuEST, and I remember going to the activities fair and being like, "Rainbow flag, what are you guys about?" Right? And I had no idea what QuEST even was because I was like, "What does that mean?" Later found out it stood for Questioning Established Sexual Taboos. They actually kind of ran their course up until 2020. And so, now, OUT replaced them in about 2021, is what I just heard from Lavender Lane. So, that's how I got into understanding that there was a gay space on campus, was through QuEST, so I went through the activities fair, saw QuEST. I started with ALF -- student's Association of Lafayette Feminists, Students for Social Justice. I was a

member of Association of Black Collegians, NIA. So, I was doing all of that work, and then I would go to QuEST too, and QuEST felt like a little bit of a dirty secret because our QuEST meetings were super [00:09:00] late at night. It was like eight or nine o'clock at night in Farinon, and we were the only ones in there because dinner had already finished at that point. And I remember we used to make little runs out to Stonewall in -- I don't know if Stonewall still even exists anymore. It was in Bethlehem.

MA: I've heard --

DB: No, Allentown. Allentown. It was in Allentown.

MA: I've heard there was a place in Allentown --

DB: And so, we used to --

MA: -- called Stonewall.

DB: Couple of folks would wrangle up their cars, and we would all hop in those cars, and we would drive out and go to Stonewall once a week with QuEST. And that was, like, our own little secret society. Nobody really knew about us, and we didn't really talk about it. But I remember a lot of the boys talking about a lot of their relationships with being on the down-low men, so they were out and very flamboyant, but the guys that they were dating were very much so closeted and very much so on the down-low. So, we would hear a lot of that insight, so I would get a lot of

the background knowledge of which frat boys were on the down-low and who was kind of doing that. But there wasn't a lot of gossip or culture around women, and I don't know if that's because women's sexuality was just a little bit more fluid, especially because, at [00:10:00] Lafayette, there was a lot more, I think -- especially in sorority life, women-on women-stuff, even if it was just to please the people surrounding, but I saw a lot of those interactions, so I thought maybe the campus was just a little bit more friendly towards that. But I realized that, when it came to traditional relationships, they actually were not as friendly as I thought they were when it came to women to women. And then, my senior year, I started dating a girl that was in Alpha Phi. No, that's not right. Not Alpha Phi. DG? No, not DG. What was the other one? There was another one. It was Alpha Phi, DG, and then there was one more. Anyway, she was in that sorority. And so, we started dating, and then I graduated, and it became a huge deal on campus because she was one of the first sorority girls that had been in a serious relationship. And then, when we broke up, she ended up dating another girl that was in a sorority too, and it was a big thing, right? And I remember people -- I was living in Indonesia at the time, and I didn't really have internet

or a phone, [00:11:00] and people were messaging me things like, "Hey, I don't know if you've heard, but there's this lesbian couple on campus." Little did they know that that was actually my ex-girlfriend. But it got big after that, right? And then, I remember my other close friend, Amanda Pisetzner, who was a freshman when I was a senior, she also came out on campus too. And then, there was a little -- like a wave, I feel like, that happened in the late 2010s, early 2010s-ish. And then, from there, I came back to campus a couple of times with Posse, and I just saw, like, there's such a difference, right? When I was here it was very segregated racially, and when I came back, there was more integration and diversity. And then, I saw -- so, there has just been layers that have kind of been peeled back a little bit of what the tradition was, but I saw that happen probably 2009, 2010 era, where it was like people were really just kind of like, "Whatever. I'm out, and I don't really care how you feel about it."

MA: Wow. That's a big --

DB: And it was beautiful.

MA: -- period of change, then, just as -- and it --

DB: Oh, yeah.

MA: -- sounds almost like there were these leaders, like Daniel Reynolds, and there was sort of a gay male moment, and

then, following that, [00:12:00] there was this -- and you saw it up close and personal -- this very funny lesbian story. "Little did they know it was my ex-girlfriend."

DB: Right. Exactly right.

MA: Who --

DB: And I remember they did a pinning ceremony, which was a big deal because pinning, back in the day, used to mean, like, we're going to get married, right? And so, when they had a pinning ceremony for these two girls, it was the first time ever. It was a big deal. Yeah.

MA: That is amazing. We'll have to think about what sorority that -- but it --

DB: It wasn't Delta Gamma.

MA: Was it Tri Delta?

DB: No, it wasn't.

MA: I don't know sororities myself, so...

DB: Yeah, it'll come to me.

MA: Okay, it'll come to you.

DB: As we chat, it'll come to me.

MA: But, in any case, it's an amazing story. So, what you're really describing is the emergence, right, around -- towards the end of your Lafayette career going forward of a presence of lesbian people out as lesbians, dating other women, and there was just -- like, that's the moment at

Lafayette in a lot of ways where that goes forward. Well, that's a fascinating moment of change and QuEST being a big part of that. And you describe your being here [00:13:00] when you were a first-year and a sophomore that -- this really caught my ear -- that faculty saw you, and they became the people who enabled you. So, can you tell me a little more about that?

DB: For sure. Yeah. I remember, when I got to Lafayette too as a Posse scholar, it was the second Posse group. And so, there was a lot of stereotypes about what Posse was and why we were here. And some of it was perpetuated by some of the professors, but there was a handful of professors who were really on the frontlines of being progressive and just kind of seeing people and taking care of people. And so, that was the first wave of folks that I got, right? The Carpenters that came in, Liz and Gary McMahon. So, I had those folks that were like, "You're Posse. You belong here. We got you." So, there was that lens, and that was beautiful. But then, there was this secret lens, right? Of the other folks that knew that I was queer, and I [00:14:00] knew when I came in in 2003 that Lafayette was a more conservative campus, but I will say that I did not get that experience from my professors, and it could have been because of the disciplines that I was a part of, but my

professors, by and large, were extraordinarily liberal in the sense that they blew my mind open with a lot of things. Like, I remember I took Susan Basow's Body Politics. That changed my entire perspective. I didn't really know what trans was. Definitely didn't know what intersex was. She changed my whole perspective of even understanding what it meant to be queer, right? I didn't even realize how many levels of queerness there were, and that was all from the professors, yeah. So, I felt like -- and a lot of professors would take me under their wing and be like, "Hey, I see you. Do you want to do this work?" Right? Like, I remember -- Shuble's not here anymore, but she was taking a group of folks to the Bahamas for a geology trip, and she knew that I was having a really hard time. I was taking biology with Reynolds, and Reynolds was like, "I love you, kid, but I don't think you're ready for this." And Shuble was like, "Come with me. I'm going to go to the Bahamas, and we're going to swim, and we're going to see rocks, and you're going to have the [00:15:00] best time of your life." And I did it, and it was incredible.

MA: That's amazing. What's --?

DB: But I had these little touchpoints. Yeah, it was --

MA: I'm sorry to interrupt you. Is the name Shuble?

DB: Shuble, yeah. She was up for tenure in 2006, 2005. She didn't get it, though, so she ended up leaving. But she was just one of many professors that I came in touch with. The Carpenters, who also ended up moving to California -- but before they left, he was helping me build out my self-designed major, and before he left, he was like, "I got somebody for you, and I know that you guys are going to hit it off immediately," and he introduced me to Debbie Byrd, and to this day, still, thick as thieves with Debbie Byrd. I mean, she not only is one of the greatest cheerleaders of all time, but she's so incredibly intelligent that she taught me so much. I remember steering clear of English because I'm like, I don't know grammar that well. I went to New York City public school. I am not this guy. And she was like, "Dude, let go of all of your baggage, and just do what you do well, and trust me." And then, I taught English for 15 years.

MA: That's so beautiful. That's, like, the essence of a liberal arts professor who sees past your [00:16:00] circumstances to all the potential that's inside you.

DB: Yeah, and there were so many, I feel like, touchpoints of those profe-- I had so many incredible professors. I think Tara Gilligan too. I saw her name up on the board, and I was like, "She's still here. Thank God." I had her for

philosophy, and I remember being like, I don't know if philosophy's really going to be my thing, but I knew I wanted to take the logic class for my math class, so I was like, I got to get up there. And I took one class with her, and we watched a snippet of *The Matrix*, and I have literally taught that same snippet that she taught me in 2003 to every class that I taught for the last 15 years. Middle school, high school. So, there's just been so many formative moments for me here with the professors. Yeah.

MA: That's great. That's --

DB: It's been really beautiful.

MA: That's beautiful. Professor Gilligan is now a lecturer in Women's, Gender, and Sexuality studies. She's a --

DB: She belongs.

MA: -- mainstay of our program, my valued colleague, still leading the course in prison with the Inside/Outside program. Really important community-based -- so, yeah, she's a gem, and --

DB: She was pregnant --

MA: -- she's fantastic.

DB: -- my sophomore year, and I was like, "Is it a boy or a girl?" And she was like, "Well, now, [00:17:00] we don't ask those kinds of questions, do we?" And then, that brought me down the rabbit hole, right? And now, when I

see all these gender reveal parties, I'm like, oh, if they only knew.

MA: Wow. Wow. If they knew.

DB: If they only knew. (laughter)

MA: Man, that's amazing. It's so exciting to hear that you had so many wonderful professors. I mean, I don't know all the names, but, for example, Liz McMahon and Gary Gordon as mainstays of Posse, changing the campus through bringing in Posse scholars, everything they brought to queer students, being allies. You know, just incredible folks. It goes to show the community that has come from them being the amazing people, and it's exciting to hear that they were the folks who -- somebody left you a letter?

DB: Yeah, I had a letter in my mailbox, basically just like, "I see you. You're not alone, kid."

MA: That's beautiful.

DB: It was beautiful. And then, I also got -- another faculty member put a Ross Gay book in my mailbox.

MA: Is that right?

DB: He was a fellow one of us. Yeah, and then I went down the [00:18:00] rabbit hole with Ross Gay, and then I had a couple of Lee Upton classes where she brought him in a few times, so me and him have been able to cross paths, and he is so incredible as well.

MA: Ross Gay is --

DB: Wow.

MA: -- like yourself, so many alums to be proud of. He's absolutely one of them. Wow. It's amazing to hear the -- you were saying, when you got here, there was no sort of place to go. There was no place in Farinon. It was total silence. And it sounds like you were in a time of transition. Like, you came in. No one was paying attention to LGBTQ issues. And, over the course of your years, there was a shift?

DB: Yeah, for sure. There was a huge shift. I would say probably my senior year, I came back. I studied abroad in Namibia, and when I came back, there was just a very different vibe on campus, and I don't know if it's because, for so long, I was so aggressive to the point, right? Like, where I feel like people -- I either broke them in, or they finally were like, "We don't care anymore." Right? I don't know which of which, and maybe just spending so much time away from campus for that semester, but when I came back my [00:19:00] senior year, I remember being like, this is a breath of fresh air in a direction I did not expect. And so, kids that I had gotten into huge, heated arguments with my freshman, sophomore year, who I would bring to the PossePlus Retreats just so that we could

really stick it to each other. My senior year, I came back, and they were like, "So good to see you, Danielle," and I'm like, "Is that sarcasm?" like, "What is this?" You know, head of College Republicans. But there was just a lens that had turned. I don't know. I think it was, for so long, fighting so hard for just basic necessities here, and I think that, yeah, I feel like I finally wore them down my senior year. I don't know. And then, I remember, halfway through -- maybe it was my second semester or halfway through first semester. I don't remember when. The Pepper Prize came up, and I saw that I was nominated, and I was like, "That's ridiculous." I couldn't even believe it because I was like, the Lafayette ideal? (laughs) I didn't even have anybody to sit with the first two years that I went [00:20:00] here, and now I'm the ideal student? People were pissing in my shower caddy when I was an RA, and I'm like, now I'm the ideal? That's ridiculous. I remember calling my mom and being like, "You're never going to guess this." And she was like, "You're going to win." And I was like, "There's no way in hell I'm going to win, Mom. Do you know what I've been through these three years? Do you have any idea? And then, I got the call from Rosie Bukics and Karen Clemence. They were like, "We need you to come to the office." So, I

went down, and in my head, I'm thinking, I'm not graduating, right? Somebody said something, or I wore something, or something -- I did something. I'm not graduating. And I walk into the room, and they're, you know, the stone-faced. They're like, "Oh, we have to talk to you." And you know how Rosie can be, so I was like, no, what did I do? And I'm, like, Rolodexing in my mind. I'm like, what did I do? What did I do? What did I -- did I say something to somebody? I'm like, what did I do? And they were like, "You're gonna give the speech for graduation. You're the Pepper Prize winner." And I remember just sitting there, floored, and I was like, "We got to call my mom. She's never going to believe this." Right? And then, of course, we called my mom, and my mom was like, "No, I believe it because I told you it was going to happen."

MA: Yay, Mom.

DB: Yeah, right? But I remember, [00:21:00] freshman year, understanding what the Pepper Prize was, and I remember being like, wow, that's so cool. That'll never be me. Right? And then, to have four years pass and then have it be me -- it was almost like it was unreal. That moment was so unreal. And I remember thinking to myself, well, Ross Gay gave that speech too, so now, I got to figure out how

to really bring it. You know what I mean? (laughs) I can't sleep on this.

MA: (laughs) Absolutely. You decided to do your best.

DB: And I got so lucky too because Nathaniel Mass was in my class. His mom worked in -- I want to say -- I don't remember what office. I don't want to say the wrong office, but she worked here for a long time. Her husband was an NBA player. He ended up passing away. He had a heart attack. And so, me and Nathaniel were super tight because Ross had a relationship with his dad, so Ross was a part of his family for a long time. So, my senior year, when I got the Pepper Prize, Nathaniel was like, "Hey, you want to roll through your speech with me?" And I was like, "Yes, I do," because I knew that he knew that lens too of what I was trying to achieve. And so, me and Nathaniel Mass sat down, and I [00:22:00] practiced it with him over and over again, and, yeah, it was such a great moment because it was -- you know, we had Ross in the back burner of our subconscious, his father in the back burner of our subconscious. The book that I got from that professor that Ross had written was -- there was a poem in there for Nathaniel's father. So, it was just like all of these culminating moments. It felt -- everything was so

interconnected. It was like a really nice quilt. Yeah.

It was awesome.

MA: It's an amazing story. The moment where you're a first-year, saying, "Oh, there's a Pepper Prize. That'll never be me," and then -- it's like you're not just nominated. You are the Pepper Prize. You're the Lafayette ideal by the end of four years. It sounds like it was absolutely mind-blowing, and --

DB: It was.

MA: -- it was all your -- you became a figure on campus, right? And a respected figure on campus, and it sounds like you led in many ways, not just sort of being, but also being someone who was a leader. And now, what were you doing that made you --

DB: [00:23:00] I just wanted to --

MA: -- a figure?

DB: -- create space, and I think that that's what -- because, for me, coming from New York, I'm like, there are spaces for everybody in New York, and that's one of the things that I loved so much about New York, growing up in New York, was you could be anybody, and you could be somebody here. When I got to Lafayette, I was like, you got to be something to be somebody here, right? There is a particular way in which you have to show up to be able to

be noticed, and I was like, I don't believe that to be true. And so, I think, for me, where it really hit home was I had a buddy, Matt Grossman. His father also went to Lafayette as well, so he was a legacy. So, when I told him I got the Pepper Prize, he was like, "Man, when I went to school, girls weren't even allowed to be on campus. That's crazy." Right? So, it was like that was also two-fold. Also, another side note is that Nangula Shejavali was the Pepper Prize recipient before me, and she's from Namibia, and then I studied abroad in Namibia. And the Pepper Prize recipient before her was Oliver Bowen, and he was from South Africa. So, it was just this succession of -- yeah --

MA: Wow. [00:24:00] Pathbreaking --

DB: -- so, it was beautiful in that way.

MA: -- people. Speaks well of Lafayette's ability to --

DB: Those three years --

MA: -- recognize --

DB: -- back to back.

MA: -- positive change.

DB: Oh, right on. Yeah, yeah, yeah. But I just wanted to create those spaces. So, Matt Grossman, he connects with me freshman year. He was, at the time, I think a junior, and he was like, "You got to come down with me to KIC, Kids

in the Community. It's through Landis." And I was like, "Matt, I don't like kids, and I don't want to volunteer." Like, "What? I'm from a poor family. I'm not volunteering. I'm good. Thank you, though." So, we're at Farinon, and then, all his troops all head out, and they all go down to the hill, and they're doing their thing, and I didn't go. And then, couple of times, he keeps asking, and asking, and asking, and I'm like, "Matt, I'm not going." Right? And then, one of my friends, Simi, was like, "I'm going to head down the hill if you want to come with us," and I was like, "All right. Fine. I'll go with you because you're going." And so, we all go down together, and I ran through the program, and it was cool. We made bracelets and drank apple juice or whatever it was that we did. It wasn't anything crazy amazing, but I remember there being six or seven teenagers that were in the room with us that were very much so bored, and the [00:25:00] program was definitely not for them. And I said to Matt, "What's up with those teenagers?" He's like, "Yeah, they're bored. They have nowhere to go, so we just let them hang out with us." And I'm like, "Why don't we hang out for them? Like, why don't we do something specifically for them?" I'm like, "I wouldn't want to be a fifteen-year-old hanging out with a bunch of

seven-year-olds making bracelets. What can we do for them?" And he was like, "I don't know. We can't do anything for them. This is the program. It's for the kids. This is what we're here for." And I was like, "What if I made the program for them? What if I did a teen program?" And he was like, "Let's pitch it." So, I went to Bonnie Winfield, and I was like, "Hey, I'm thinking about doing a spin-off of kick called TIC, Teens in the Community," and she was like, "Go for it." And they had just built the youth center down there too, so we were kind of moonlighting a little bit there, but I brought those kids up to campus quite a bit. That was the beginning markings of when I realized, like, this is what I do. Right? What I do is I create a space for people to exist as they are, and then we just exist as they are. And I can help them build capacity if there's things that they want to grow in, but ultimately, just create the space. And I did that as many times [00:26:00] as I could, you know, with my Posse friends, with -- if I was running a program. We started WORDS, me and Alberto Luna. We started Writing Organization Reaching Dynamic Students because we were like, "We're poets, but we want to connect with other artists that are not necessarily poets and create collaborations." So, we had, like, Abra Berkowitz on the

sax. We had Trey tap dancing, Alberto reading a poem, Amanda Pisetzner doing stand-up. So, we had all of these, and then we would just bring everybody together and be like, "Okay, for our show, how do we want to pair each other up? What do we want to do? How do we want to...?" So, come as you are, and then collaborate with somebody else and maybe learn something new but, like, as you are. But TIC is really, I think, the thing that changed me as a person because I was like, not only can I do the programming and create the curriculum, but I can make connections with these kids, so maybe there's something in here for me. So then, I was like, maybe I should be an education major, and then [it hit me?] was like, of course Lafayette didn't have -- you know. Everything that I loved. I'm like, "Creative writing." They're like, "No." "Education." "No." "Film." "No." Now, they have all [00:27:00] of these things, which is beautiful, but at the time, no, so that's why we did the self-designed major. She was like, "Do the things that you want to do how you want to do them, and then we'll figure out how to make it work."

MA: Yeah. That's fantastic. So, you found yourself, and you helped other people be themselves by creating spaces where

they could just be. You've found a key secret to human thriving, which is you don't go in and change people.

DB: No agenda.

MA: You get out of their way, and you let them be themselves.

DB: Exactly.

MA: And that's how they grow --

DB: Let them be the agenda.

MA: -- and develop and find themselves. Yeah. That's amazing and inspiring, and clearly you were built to do exactly what you do, which is really marvelous to see. So, I'm thinking about all the things you're saying about the way your leadership and your involvement helped change Lafayette and how your years really coincide with a time of tremendous change. And sometimes, we think about the social scene, right? To sort of think about -- you dated someone. You were in a same-sex relationship on campus. You might be, of the interviews I've done so far, [00:28:00] the first person to report -- like, the earliest time frame to report that. What was that like? I mean, was it possible to date? Was it just on the down-low? Was it...?

DB: A couple of my immediate friends were privy to the situation, but my girlfriend at the time was Black, and she

was on the swim team. And so, she was already getting a lot of hate just for being who she was here.

MA: Just racism --

DB: Just racism.

MA: -- in its pure Lafayette form.

DB: Yeah, and also because swim teams, by and large, historically speaking, thinking about the history of African Americans in this country, by and large, have not had a place. So, it was two-fold, right? It was like, you're a swimmer. That's not a thing. And you're Black at Lafayette. That's -- it is a thing, but, you know, it's a difficult thing. So, she had those two things going against her, so I don't think we ever had a conversation about being like, "We should just keep this--" I think we just naturally knew, safety-wise, we just are going to be chill. And so, that's kind of naturally how it played out. She graduated much earlier than I did, [00:29:00] so I was kind of left here by myself when she graduated. And then, I realized at that point, like, who cares? If somebody's going to do something to me or say something to me, I've heard it before. So, I think that's part of where that senior year of, like, I'm here, and I don't care kind of came about, was just recognizing that, okay, I don't have protection. That's okay. I don't need it. And I feel

like I've made so many connections with people and seeing them for who they were that if there were going to be outliers that had something to say, there probably would be other people that would say something to them before I had to get to them. You know what I mean? I felt like there were layers between, but freshman year, I would have never felt comfortable with just coming out the gates like that. No. Not here. Yeah.

MA: Yeah. A time of incredible change, where you really -- and four years seems like forty years where you come from.

Yeah. (inaudible) --

DB: Especially coming from New York too. I was silly in my naivety of -- I didn't realize that places like this existed because I thought everything was like New York. And then, I got out of there, [00:30:00] and I was like, oh, wait, New York is an anomaly. It's not the average. So, that's when I started to realize too, I have to adapt to this space because I'm not going to find many other New Yorks.

MA: Right. Right. So, New York has everything and a space for everybody, as you said, but there are very few places like New York. So, mostly, it's a way of -- it's like adapting, managing. Like what you describe about -- "I was dating someone, but we just understood you wouldn't be out. We

would just sort of be ourselves in a way that would work with the institution and lean into it." But it is what it is at Lafayette. And then, over time, you become, like, "I'm going to be Danielle Bero, and everybody's going to have to just figure that out."

DB: Yeah. [Just?], like, my Posse knew. Gary and Liz knew because they were my Posse mentors. So, the people that were the closest to me, they already knew, and people that were smart also already knew. (laughter)

MA: (overlapping dialogue; inaudible).

DB: If you were aware and had eyes, you also knew.

MA: It is amazing how people can remain -- their willed [00:31:00] ignorance. I do not see this. And it's like, wow, you must be trying really hard not to see me, which is pretty amazing sometimes. Thinking about -- as part of sort of the social makeup of everything, there's Greek life, which you did intersect with. I was thinking about athletics as well as sort of main aspects of those. So, Greek life. You were independent, but you had some connections through personal relationships, but...

DB: So, it's interesting. When we first got to campus as a Posse, the first questions that people would ask anybody that was a person of color on campus -- which made me an anomaly within my Posse as well, but they would ask, "Do

you play a sport?" And they would say, "No." "Oh, are you in Posse?" And they would say, "No." And they would be like, "Well, then, why did you come to Lafayette?" So, that was always the line of questioning for any student that was of color. So, that was an interesting place to be in, right? Where Posse was just making a name for itself at that time. And then, there were kids that were coming in that weren't [00:32:00] Posse but also weren't playing a sport, and I felt really bad for those kids because I was like, "You don't really have a home. We'll take you in," and Posse was like, "We'll take all of you guys in." We had honorariums, right? But they didn't really have a home, and we recognized that very early on. That was my freshman year, where it was like, oh, yeah. There's this other, right? And I think it was probably the same for queer kids, although it was a lot easier to hide in some ways depending on who you were. I got pulled in my freshman year. I got into a very coveted class that no freshmen ever get into. It was Speech and Debate, which was a hot commodity for seniors. And so, I was literally the only freshman in the class, and everybody called me Freshy. And we had to be in groups of four, and I knew nobody, obviously, because everybody was seniors, and everybody was in Greek life. And so, there was a group of

three girls in Pi Phi -- Delta Gamma -- I don't remember which one. And they were like, "Do you want to be in our group?" And I was like, "Okay." And they were like, "For our presentation, we're going to wear pink shirts." I was [00:33:00] like, "Okay." And we did our presentation on in vitro, which I had never learned anything about, and then I'd learned it all about there. They didn't know that I'm learning about it from the queer perspective. They thought I was learning about it from the "I'm not fertile" perspective. So, I'm sitting there, taking vigorous -- I'm like, this is am-- I can't believe this. And so, we're going in, and it's great because I'm learning so much from these girls. And then, we do our presentation. We do our debate, and we kill it up there in our pink polos, and I didn't have a shirt, so they lent me one of their shirts-- it was, like, such a scene out of *Mean Girls*. And then, at the end of that year, they were like, "If you want to rush, we'll move you along the lines if you want to be a part." And I remember being like, "Feels a little Judas for where I'm coming from." I'm coming from the Posse side of things. I'm coming from the kids of color side of things. It does feel a little Judas-y. Also, I didn't feel like my relationship with Greek life was [00:34:00] a positive one just because I felt like Greek life had been the thing that

kind of made our social life a little bit more miserable here. So, there was a lot of reasons why I said no, but I thought it was very nice that they extended that offer considering who I was, and where I was coming from, and how very different that was from them. But that was my first interaction with a small group of folks who were not like the rest of the majority, that were like, "Come on. You got a seat at this table. Come hang out." And I realized that, if I found more of those spaces, that would be where I could chisel away and find my own, and that's what I started to do. Studying abroad, finding that little group of two or three, going to a meeting, finding my group of the little two or three, and then just collecting them like a bouquet, right? And then, I would have all of these folks from all different factions of campus, and I think that that -- my senior year is what made me feel really, really comfortable when I came back, was just, like, I knew everybody from a different walk of life. And so, I had an in somewhere everywhere, and it felt nice to finally arrive.

MA: It's really a wonderful description. It's like, instead of someone falling into a system [00:35:00] to find community, you reached out everywhere and built --

DB: Built, yeah.

MA: -- your own special crossroads of everybody. So, it would have been -- you describe it as almost tempting to fall into the Greek system. Automatic friends, automatic -- but the individuals obviously were very nice, but you questioned the system's effect .

DB: Sure. Oh, yeah.

MA: But being able to go around and talk to different groups allowed you to be the person that was the crossroads of -- you became the connector, essentially, as opposed to letting a system do the connecting for you.

DB: And I think I was intentional about that. I don't think, sophomore year, I realized that that was why I did it, but I think, in the back of my head, I had that subconscious. The older I got -- now, I can compartmentalize it and understand why, but at the time, I was like, there's just something in my gut that sa-- and I was very much so a gut person. I'm like, something in my gut says no, I'm going to go with that.

MA: It's a rare and special person who can do that because it takes a lot of energy and a lot of willingness [00:36:00] to put yourself out there. You were obviously shocked with the Pepper Prize. It doesn't surprise me, talking to you. How about athletics? Was that a connection of one of your bouquet flowers, or --?

DB: So, Lafayette's a Division 1 school, which I didn't know. I didn't know anything about divisions. I came from New York City public school. My school -- graduated 36th in my class, 200 in the high school. Super, super, super small. Needless to say that we played basketball, and we got blown out every game because, I mean, who are we pi-- we got 200 kids on campus. Of the 200, 100 of them are girls. Of the 100, 10 want to play. Of the 10, 4 are good. Right? So, it's like we're playing sheer numbers here, right? Like, it is what it is. So --

MA: The math is an issue.

DB: Yeah. Yeah.

MA: The math is against you.

DB: So, when I got to Lafayette and they were like, "It's a D1. It's D1. It's D1. You could walk on," I was like, "I ain't walking onto a D1 sport. Are you crazy?" We didn't even have a gym in my high school. We had to run to a middle school five blocks away to be able to practice, so I'm like, "This is not -- no." So, we ended up doing -- [00:37:00] what was it? It was like a junior varsity scrimmage kind of thing, and even that was too much for me because we had to go into the weight room, and I remember trying to lift up the bar, and I was like, "How much does this bar weigh?" And she's like, "Thirty-five." I'm -- "I

can't weight lift up 30--" So, I'm like, I'm out of my league here.

MA: Yeah, we're done..

DB: So, I played a couple games here and there, but then I went intramurals. What I ended up doing mostly for sports was bringing my KIC kids and my TIC kids up, and we would play up here, and I would scrimmage with them up here, or I would get a band of some of the local boys that were playing, like my Roof Riders or whoever, and I'd be like, "I got some kids that want to play." And my kids were like 14, 15 at the time, but I'm like, "I got these 20-year-olds. You're going to kill them." So, I'd bring them up. So, I was more orchestrating their games --

MA: Yeah, understood.

DB: -- and participating in their games, but in terms of actual -- the sports life, a lot of the football players took a lot of Posse kids in because the football team, I think, in general, was just huge. And so, they had a lot of time and space, and they were kind of well-connected too, so they kind of let us in. And then, there was just one-offs here and there, folks who would be like, "Hey, I play rugby. You want to come hang out with us or [00:38:00] come to one of these parties?" But I don't think sports ever really played a role. I think that those folks are so, so, so

interconnected because of their practice times. Their hours are different. I mean, the amount of energy and effort that they're putting in. It's just a completely different breed, so I feel like sports was kind of on a different spectrum for me.

MA: Yeah. Yeah. It sounds like -- and that makes perfect sense. So, you've mentioned faculty, and you've mentioned the amazing faculty, but a broader question to describe how the classroom or the courses you took -- the classroom climate. So, I guess there's two different questions, really. What it was like to be a queer person, over time more out -- right, so it's sort of a moving target -- in a classroom, and also academic content, like if there was queer content. And you built your own major, so you have a sort of a special relationship to academic content because it wasn't a fixed thing for you. So, how it felt to be sort of -- maybe not out in a classroom and sitting there. What did you hear? Did it feel like a safe space in the classroom, [00:39:00] and/or was there queer content that you could study at the point that you were a student here?

DB: And this is where I think coming into who I am really made the difference because, then, I started taking classes that made sense for me, but my freshman, sophomore year, I had no idea what I was doing, and I thought I wanted to be a

Gov Law major, and so I took a lot of gov law classes, and majority of my classes were pretty fully stacked with all of the College Republicans, which -- I'm not opposed to having conversations with College Republicans, but were, these felt -- in the beginning, they didn't feel like conversations. They felt more of like a spotlight, right? Where it would be like we would have a debate. I'm thinking of -- what was it? US politics was one of the classes. We were having a debate about marriage equality. This was in 2003 or 4. And the conversation went -- it was a soccer player that was in -- they had a little fishbowl going on, and he said something along the lines of, "If we allow same-sex marriages, then we have to allow for bestiality because it's the same premise," right? Where you are taking something that doesn't exist and creating a [00:40:00] place where it's supposed to fit into something that doesn't fit. And I remember just sitting there and being like, so, now, we're making homosexuality akin to bestiality, and I'm waiting for the professor to go kill that. Never happened. So then, I'm sitting there. Now, I'm not in the fishbowl. I'm on the outside of the fishbowl, but I'm like, I have to -- I will say something. I'm not going to shut up. So, I raised my hand, and I say what I say. I don't really remember. I know I was

definitely heated in the moment, and I said something along the lines of, "If animals could consent, then maybe that could have half a brain of making sense." And I don't remember if I got asked to leave or if the conversation was so heated, but I remember being in the hallway at that point, and I remember being like, I don't think Gov Law is for me. I think this is my time to say -- because I can't be in a space where somebody makes that comment and they're not immediately responded to in any meaningful way. It shouldn't have had to have come from me, especially being on the outside, but definitely the fact that I was in a room of 40 plus people, and [00:41:00] nobody said anything. I was like, this is not for me.

MA: And people aren't taking that seriously, and they should.

DB: As a conversation, yeah, and they're really thinking about it. And I remember, later on in that same class, a conversation came up about welfare and how, you know, there was obviously -- a lot of the Republicans that I was arguing with at the time, they didn't believe in social programs. I get it. Understood. But then, there was this air of the bootstrap mentality and all this kind of stuff, and I was just like, how far off from the realm of logic are we right now? So I was like, I just -- I don't know how many of these conversations I can engage in without

losing my mind, right? I want to be respectful of the space because I want to make sure -- I knew that, if I was irate, it would be easy to write me off and be able to write the conversation off, so I was like, I have to be strategic about how I respond to this because anything that I say or do could be the rationale between them doubling down and calcifying these horrible beliefs. So, I had to be, sometimes, in some ways, too intentional, right? And I was like, as somebody that's really off the cuff and very candid, it was a very tough place for me to be in, [00:42:00] but that's when I sat down with Byrd, and I was like, "I need to figure out how to be in classes where I can say what I need to say in a space where I know that the professor's going to get it too." And that's when I took Body Politics with Basow, and it was one of the best classes, to this day, that I've ever taken. I took a bunch of classes with Gilligan. Once I first took that first class with Gilligan, I was like, she gets it. Going to continue to take classes with her. Liz McMahon, same thing, right? Once I found out that she converted to Judaism on her own accord because she was like, "I just wanted to do what I wanted to --" I'm like, yes. Right? So, I found these folks that -- I feel like they live their lives in ways not only that I respected but I valued in so

many meaningful ways that I'm like, these are the people that I want to follow behind. And so, I just continued to find and follow those classes and then, with Debbie's help, was able to also figure out a pattern of how to build up the crescendo so that I was getting to those higher-level classes, and majority of those I did through English. And so, my capstone was Single Motherhood in the US, which -- Debbie was piloting that my senior year that I was taking it as well, and there was, I think, six of us in the class. [00:43:00] Super intimate class. That's when we were working with the teen moms down the hill, so I was working with Third Street Alliance. I was working with the Easton area. At the time, Easton area had or was building out a day care, which they have recently gotten rid of. So, there was lots of things happening, and it all felt so important, and it felt feminist-y. It felt creative writing-y. It felt all of the things that were me, and I was like, if I can make this an extension to my career moving forward, then this all matters. It all makes sense. And so, that was the natural, yeah, build for it.

MA: It's really exciting to hear the ways that you sort of -- being the person interested in what you're interested in, being who you are, you were able, at Lafayette, to design your own classroom experience, so it was safe, and so it

made sense to you, and so it was meaningful. It got you forward towards the place you wanted to be after Lafayette, but it also was safe for you because, if you're in a class where you must defend your own sexual identity against bestiality, you're [00:44:00] in a class that isn't functioning in a humane and decent way. And if it becomes the students' job, which -- Lafayette likes to give students that job a good bit rather than take it on as an institution -- to make that argument, you're in the wrong place. And so, you found, it sounds like, the academic story is: you built a place where you could learn what you wanted to learn and be who you really are, hence the self-designed major. And sort of earlier, when you were talking and you said they didn't have this, they didn't have that -- it seems like the curriculum now might have accommodated --

DB: Oh, yeah.

MA: -- in a way that you wouldn't have had to -- but in 2006, preparing for 2007 and graduation, you had to build your own way.

DB: And that's why, every time I hear -- like, I had -- Joel Vargas was one of my Posse kiddos. He was like, "They have a film major now, and I'm going to be the first graduate of the film program." I'm like, "Yes." So, I keep hearing --

you know, when I heard Women's Studies was getting its own -- I'm like, "Yes." It's happening, you know what I mean? So, my major is becoming defunct now because the classes [00:45:00] exist. (laughs) You don't need to create them.

MA: Which is pretty amazing when you think about it, and it feels like progress. Even in a dark time, sometimes you have those moments. You just, I mean, thinking of a sort of a culmination, you just had lunch at Lavender Lane.

DB: Yeah. How cool is that? How cool? Yeah, I just still can't even believe that that exists. It's so amazing. Right?

MA: Yeah, and it must have felt like you were in a different college or at the place you'd long to be.

DB: Because the time that I was here, I remember we got voted on *Princeton's* Top 10 most homophobic campuses, so we've definitely come a long way in those 20 years. Oh, yeah.

MA: And talking with the students must have been exhilarating --

DB: Yeah.

MA: -- at Lavender Lane.

DB: Especially because I think they understand that they're coming into a different time, and so I think that they want to understand and straddle from where they came, so they were asking a lot of questions too. And so, it felt good

to be able to provide them that purview, right? Where they're able to see how far because things, I'm sure, are not perfect, right? But look at how far [00:46:00] and look at how much you guys have carved out a space for yourself when there was not a space that was going to be given, right? We fought for that.

MA: Yes, absolutely.

DB: You know what I mean?

MA: Yes, we've all pushed to open the space that is Lavender Lane, and the Gender and Sexuality Resource Center, and all these places. It's taken years of pushing together over time, and, in fact, that's one of the whole premises behind the Queer Archives Project, is that, if the memories and the knowledge, the experience, the efforts, leadership of LGBTQ alums and faculty like yourself -- if they become a matter of record, then no one can ever come here, and be queer, and be alone because they'll always have the voices of people like yourself. Somebody was here. Somebody is here. You're not by yourself, and change is possible. And I think Lavender Lane is a beautiful example of that, and this interview also that you're so generously giving, that people tell their stories. [00:47:00] Then, other people feel they're part of a community, and they understand they have a history --

DB: Right on, man.

MA: -- and they're not just floating in space. So, it's really awesome. So, that's sort of the general sense of things I wanted to ask, but I did have one more question. Often, people think of moments when they were on campus, like -- I guess we could call it loosely "events." So-and-so came to speak. There was this debate, and it was really exciting. Were there events around LGBTQ life or queer life? Did that exist? Did that happen? Did you have a big moment?

DB: So --

MA: A speaker?

DB: -- I don't know if you've gotten a chance to talk to Daniel Reynolds yet.

MA: We have.

DB: You have? Beautiful. Okay, because I was going to say, if you haven't yet, please, please, please do, but Dan brought Gay? Fine by Me, and that was probably, as a queer person at Lafayette, that was probably single-handedly the most important queer moment of history because [00:48:00] it was everybody in these green shirts. Everybody. And these are the same everybodies that were not so nice to me my freshman year, but they were in those shirts. And it was visible, and it was a statement, and we were all on the frontlines of it. And so, yeah, he spearheaded that, and

we didn't really so much have any speakers that came, or we didn't really have -- you know, I remember Matthew Shepard's mom came, and that was a really, really important moment as well. Aside from her, I don't really remember much queer programming. I know Alix -- was it Alix Olson?

MA: Yes. Alix Olson --

DB: Folk singer?

MA: Yes, the folk singer. Absolutely.

DB: Yeah, she came to campus a couple of times too because I know she's local, or she was local at the time. She was from Pennsylvania originally. So, I do remember her, and I remember -- folk music is not my thing, but I'm like, "I'm going to support the shit out of you because you're here, and you're queer." And so, yeah, let's do that. But those, I think, were the big three that I can remember, was Alix, Matthew [00:49:00] Shepard's mom because I remember her conversation that she had with us because she met with QuEST separately, and I remember that, and I remember just being like, I don't know that I could do what she's doing. I don't know that I could make a journey of having this conversation over, and over, and over again. And I'm grateful she did, and I know it's important. I just don't know that I would have the heart to do that. But then, the Gay? Fine by Me was just, like, the capstone. The Gay?

Fine by Me was like the biggest middle finger in the middle of the quad, all of us in these green shirts. It was just a really beautiful moment, and I was so proud of him because it wasn't about any of us. We didn't have to stand up and say anything. We didn't have to stand up and be anywhere. It was everybody. So, it wasn't like, oh, there's the gay kids. It was everybody's in the same shirt. We don't know who the gay kids are. It was so cool.

MA: It's pretty brilliant, and I think it really does stand from the history that we've unearthed as one of the absolute epicenters of LGBTQ history moments at the college, without a doubt, and it puts the onus [00:50:00] on the community to be not homo-, trans-, queerphobic. It puts the onus on people who maybe, as you say, weren't nice to you your first year to put a shirt on by the time it's your senior year because guess whose job it is to fight homophobia. And that flips it for Lafayette because giving it -- the job -- to the students who have the identity or have the oppression is a common way to do it, so that was good on Dan and you for being part of that.

DB: Yeah, that was awesome.

MA: And that's a big moment for you.

DB: I had those shirts up until pretty recently too. They lived a long life.

MA: That's fantastic. That's fantastic. We have a picture of one on the site, so...

DB: Yeah. Oh, right on.

MA: Yeah, there's one in the archives.

DB: Yeah, I was going to say, if you guys haven't gotten a change to talk to him yet, for sure. I know he made my Lafayette career gay. He's the reason that I felt like there was any -- he was the one that created -- you know, he kept QuEST alive while I was here. He was the one that did the Stonewall trips. He was the one that did Gay? Fine by Me. Yeah, he was just the voice, and [00:51:00] being a man, like I said before, I don't know that I would have been as comfortable as he was, but he was happy to be the face, and we were happy to have him be the face because we were not so comfortable being the face.

MA: That is real leadership, putting yourself out there so other people can thrive, which you, yourself, obviously practice a great deal and are very successful at. That's about all my questions. Did you have anything else you'd like to add about the college, where we are now? About the Queer Archives Project? About anything at all about your time here?

DB: There was another gentleman that spearheaded QuEST before Dan. I remember his name now. It was Greg Blevins. He actually did not graduate with us. I know he ended up leaving I think his junior year. [redacted by a QAP reviewer], but he might be -- I don't know if anybody can get in touch with him, but he might be somebody to talk to. I think he was my year. He was '07. And the sorority was Pi Beta Phi. That was it.

MA: Look at you. You did it.

DB: Pi Beta Phi. Yeah, I remember it.

MA: You did it.

DB: I was like, I'm going to remember it by the end.

[00:52:00] Yeah. (laughter)

MA: You did it, and I had no doubt that you would. Excellent. Danielle Bero, 2007, community leader, pride of Lafayette, Pepper Prize winner, but so much more. So much more. It's such an honor to talk to you.

DB: Right on. Thank you.

MA: Thank you for the interview.

DB: Thank you. Appreciate it.

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