

Mara Keisling
Narrator

Andrea Jenkins
Interviewer

The Transgender Oral History Project
Tretter Collection in GLBT Studies
University of Minnesota

January 20, 2017



The Transgender Oral History Project of the Upper Midwest will empower individuals to tell their story, while providing students, historians, and the public with a more rich foundation of primary source material about the transgender community. The project is part of the Tretter Collection at the University of Minnesota. The archive provides a record of GLBT thought, knowledge and culture for current and future generations and is available to students, researchers and members of the public.

The Transgender Oral History Project will collect up to 400 hours of oral histories involving 200 to 300 individuals over the next three years. Major efforts will be the recruitment of individuals of all ages and experiences, and documenting the work of The Program in Human Sexuality. This project will be led by

Andrea Jenkins, poet, writer, and trans-activist. Andrea brings years of experience working in government, non-profits and LGBT organizations. If you are interested in being involved in this exciting project, please contact Andrea.

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1 Andrea Jenkins -AJ
2 Mara Keisling -MK
3
4

5 AJ: Good afternoon.

6 MK: Hey.

7 AJ: My name is Andrea Jenkins. I am the oral historian for the Transgender Oral History Project at
8 the Tretter Collection at the University of Minnesota. Today is January 20, 2017. I am at the
9 Creating Change Conference in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and I have the honor and the
10 pleasure today of speaking with Mara Keisling, president -

11 MK: Executive director.

12 AJ: Executive director of the National Center for Transgender Equality, or NCTE. Hello, Mara.

13 MK: Hey!

14 AJ: How are you?

15 MK: I'm good. It's so good to see you.

16 AJ: It's so good to see you. And I know that the "I am good" statement might be a bit of a stretch
17 today. As I noted, it's January 20th, and every four years, it's Inauguration Day in the United
18 States. And today -

19 MK: Donald Trump became president about a - about an hour ago.

20 AJ: We just installed a new president and it has put a bleak overcast over this movement and I
21 think, in my mind, the entire country. But - I'm thrilled to be here with you, Mara.

22 MK: Me too.

23 AJ: And - you know, I want to just start us off by you stating your name, how you spell it, state your
24 gender identity as you define it today, your gender identity assigned at birth, and your
25 pronouns.

26 MK: So I'm Mara Keisling. M-A-R-A K-E-I-S-L-I-N-G. And I identify as a transgender woman. I use
27 female pronouns.

28 AJ: Okay. And what was your gender assigned at birth?

29 MK: I was assigned male at birth.

30 AJ: Yeah. So Mara, can you tell me what is your earliest memory in life? Like, what's the first thing
31 you remember?

32 MK: You know, I - I don't think I have a particular one.

33 AJ: Okay.

- 1 MK: I have a lot of memories from when I was really little tiny person.
- 2 AJ: Sure.
- 3 MK: Like, being in the bathtub with my siblings. You know, I have vague memories of family
4 gatherings, and things like that. I - so I don't - I don't know exactly which I would - whether I
5 would say any were the first. I - I mean, I will tell you, you know, relevant to this conversation, is
6 from that time - from my earliest, earliest conscious - conscious times, I was thinking about my
7 gender.
- 8 AJ: Really?
- 9 MK: Oh, absolutely. Absolutely.
- 10 AJ: Three, four?
- 11 MK: Oh - oh, yeah yeah yeah. You know, we're gendered in - in our society - before we're even
12 named. You know, when somebody's pregnant, people - traditionally, the first question is "Do
13 you know what it is?"
- 14 AJ: Right.
- 15 MK: And they don't mean "Is it healthy," "Is it human." They mean, "Is it a boy or a girl?"
- 16 AJ: Right.
- 17 MK: And, you know, you're - you're - you're born into a world where you're taught pretty quickly
18 that everybody's divided into Mommy and Daddy, and brothers and sisters, and aunties and
19 uncles, and grandmas and grandpas, and boys and girls.
- 20 AJ: Yeah.
- 21 MK: And I - I've always been a really, really rational person, and I knew I was one of the boys. I had to
22 have the boy haircut -
- 23 AJ: Right.
- 24 MK: - that my dad gave us. I had a boy name. I was one of the brothers. You know, my earliest
25 memories of bedrooms, my sister got her own room, and I had to share a bedroom with my two
26 brothers. Because you divide everything by boys and girls.
- 27 AJ: Sure.
- 28 MK: And, you know, my parents didn't divide us into two in one bedroom and two in the other, it
29 was -
- 30 AJ: One.
- 31 MK: - one in one and three in the other. Because it was boys and girls and brothers and sisters.
- 32 AJ: Yeah.
- 33 MK: And from the very earliest time, I - I knew I was one of the brothers. I knew I was a boy. I was a
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1 pretty rational person, and the way it had been explained to me...it was clear. But I knew it was
2 wrong.

3 AJ: Right.

4 MK: I just knew -

5 AJ: It did not fit -

6 MK: It didn't fit.

7 AJ: For you.

8 MK: I - I didn't want to have the boy haircut. I didn't want to be one of the brothers. And, you know,
9 we didn't have words back then. I mean, I was born in 1959. We - the word transgender wasn't
10 even around. And so if I had had some deeply intellectual conversation about gender at the
11 time, which I didn't, I think I would have said, you know, "I'm a boy who wants to be a girl."

12 AJ: Wow. So you had three siblings?

13 MK: Well, at that time. I - eventually, my parents had seven children.

14 AJ: Oh, wow.

15 MK: So I have six siblings.

16 AJ: Okay. Where'd you grow up?

17 MK: Harrisburg, Pennsylvania.

18 AJ: Wow. So we're pretty close to your home -

19 MK: Oh, yeah.

20 AJ: - town.

21 MK: Oh yeah. I grew up about a hundred miles from here.

22 AJ: Is that right?

23 MK: Yep.

24 AJ: What was it like in Harrisburg? What was growing up like in Harrisburg, given the context that
25 you just sort of described, and that you rationally knew you were one of the boys, but you didn't
26 feel comfortable necessarily - what - what did that - how did that impact your childhood in
27 Harrisburg?

28 MK: Oh, tremendously. I mean, with the exception of my family, all of that in my head about gender
29 was probably the most significant part of my childhood.

30 AJ: Really?

31 MK: You know, Harrisburg's a great place. I - I'm still a huge Harrisburg fan. I'm so glad I'm from a big
32 family now. You know, it meant we didn't get to go on vacations like some people did.

- 1 AJ: Sure.
- 2 MK: You know, we had - we would crowd into one car, you know. And it was a small car. And, by the
3 way, it didn't have seatbelts, 'cause it was the 1960s, and they were just starting to do that.
- 4 AJ: Well, you didn't need seatbelts with nine people in the car!
- 5 MK: Yeah, we were - we were kind of jammed in. We were kind of pretty well jammed in there. But,
6 yeah, most of my - I was always in my own head. I'm an introvert. I'm - I'm actually socially
7 awkward. And I think a lot of that is - I was this kid who was really all alone. I couldn't be fully
8 myself. I had to perform being a little boy, because I had to. And, you know, I think folks who
9 might be...you know, looking at how we - how our society is today, might not understand that -
10 you know, apparently I went to my parents when I was three. I don't remember this. And I put
11 on my sister's Brownie uniform, and I announced that I was a girl, and...and I was just told no.
12 You're - you know, you're a boy and you're always going to be a boy. And that was not an
13 illogical thing for my folks to say. There was no internet. There was no way for them to seek
14 experts, 'cause there were no experts. There were no role models. There - there was just some
15 occasional sensationalist story in the tabloid. And there was - there was nothing, and - and I was
16 all alone, and I knew I was all alone, and when I look back on it now, a lot of - a lot of my
17 childhood was being alone in my own head, even though I had all of these brothers and sisters
18 running around, and - and I'm not - I don't regret it, or hold it against anybody. You know, my
19 parents have always, without exception, been one hundred percent supportive of me. Before
20 transition, before I came out to them, after transition.
- 21 AJ: Wow.
- 22 MK: And -
- 23 AJ: That's great.
- 24 MK: And - yeah. And I know they would have helped me if they could have. In fact, my mother's first
25 words when I came out to her were I - she was crying, and said "I wish you would have told me
26 when you were little so I could have helped." And my father's first words were "Wow. Well, how
27 can I help?"
- 28 AJ: Wow.
- 29 MK: But there was nothing for them to do -
- 30 AJ: That is not a typical reaction.
- 31 MK: No. I have been so incredibly fortunate. You know, I always joke that I didn't even lose the
32 family members I wanted to lose. That's not aimed at anybody in particular, it's just - it's just
33 kind of a funny throwaway line.
- 34 AJ: You're not going to name any names? No, I'm just kidding. I'm totally kid - I -
- 35 MK: You know who you are.
- 36 AJ: I don't need to know.

- 1 MK: Yeah. No, not at all. It - you know, my family's been really supportive, but there was no way for
2 their - them to support me in 1963. You know, I think the best - the - the - the most likely thing
3 to have happened if they had tried was, you know, my dad would have asked around the office
4 and someone would have said, "Oh, we're taking our child to this psychol - psychiatrist." And
5 then who knows what would have happened to me?
- 6 AJ: Yeah.
- 7 MK: What system I would have been put into?
- 8 AJ: Conversion therapy was a -
- 9 MK: Could have been conversion therapy.
- 10 AJ: - very real thing in 1963.
- 11 MK: Yeah. Yeah. I mean, they - it still is a very real thing.
- 12 AJ: What kind of office did your dad work in?
- 13 MK: So my dad was in public service in a lot of different ways. He had been the communications
14 director for the governor - that's my first recollection of him, from about '62 to '66, so until I
15 was about seven, that's what he was. And then he - he got into local public service doing
16 redevelopment and things like that, and -
- 17 AJ: So sort of a bureaucrat, maybe?
- 18 MK: Yeah...
- 19 AJ: Or no?
- 20 MK: Not - not really a bureaucrat. More of a political person.
- 21 AJ: Okay.
- 22 MK: Yeah. I - not that bureaucrats aren't political, but - he - he never had that kind of a government
23 job, that I would call him a bureaucrat, but -
- 24 AJ: Sure.
- 25 MK: And my mom was a stay at home mom until I was well into my teenage years.
- 26 AJ: So - I mean, your dad must have been pretty influential person, then, if he's working in political
27 life, and being appointed, and...
- 28 MK: You know, I think when you're small, everybody thinks your parents are influential?
- 29 AJ: Yeah.
- 30 MK: Maybe not, I - I - I don't know if that's true, but I did. I - I mean, I sure grew up thinking my dad
31 was influential, yeah.
- 32 AJ: Yeah. A kingmaker. Maybe, I don't know. Wow, that's really great to hear that, you know, you

- 1 grew up in an intact family and they still are supportive. Was school a supportive environment
2 for you? Did you - were you harassed, were you bullied, were you -
- 3 MK: No.
- 4 AJ: - did you have great friends, you, like, super popular?
- 5 MK: No. I was -
- 6 AJ: What was school like?
- 7 MK: I was actually very good at the performance. When I came out, you know, I was in my late
8 thirties and nobody really close to me said "I knew it."
- 9 AJ: Yeah.
- 10 MK: "I saw - " Nobody saw this coming.
- 11 AJ: Right.
- 12 MK: I...you know, very occasionally I would meet somebody in my twenties or thirties and they
13 would just clearly pick up on it and say something like "Oh, you're gay, aren't you?" Or, "You're
14 awfully feminine," but then everybody else would be like, "What do you mean?" You know?
15 "This person's not feminine."
- 16 AJ: Right.
- 17 MK: And then, you know, I would be terrified. I - I remember really clearly in sixth grade, we moved
18 from one school district to another. And a - a student was assigned to - to kind of be my buddy
19 the first day. And he and I were walking to school, and - in my elementary school - so I had been
20 in an elementary school in sixth grade, but the new school district's elementary school was - I'm
21 sorry, sixth grade was in middle school. So suddenly you had to carry books between classes,
22 and I had never done that before. And so I picked up my books to go between the first class, and
23 I held them, like, right here. And this person the principal had assigned to me was like, "No, you
24 can't do that! That's how girls carry them." And I was like, "Oh my god!"
- 25 AJ: Oh, wow.
- 26 MK: "And boys all carry them down here." I - I mean, again, something folks wouldn't realize is we
27 didn't do backpacks back then.
- 28 AJ: Right. Yeah.
- 29 MK: You know, we carried bookbags and we had a - an elastic - not elastic, but a -
- 30 AJ: Leather strap, or -
- 31 MK: Rubber. A rubber strap.
- 32 AJ: A rubber binder, or - yeah.
- 33 MK: Around the books, and the boys carried them by their side, and the girls carried them up here,

- 1 and that was not negotiable.
- 2 AJ: Yeah. I - I was actually there at that time.
- 3 MK: Yeah. Yeah, I think I'm a few years older than you.
- 4 AJ: Yeah. But I - I was a pre-backpack elementary school kid, and you're right.
- 5 MK: Yeah.
- 6 AJ: Like, the - the girls carried them close to their chest, and boys carried their books on their side,
7 and it was sort of a unwritten rule, but...
- 8 MK: Yeah. It's weird. You know, this backpack I have here, incidentally, is the first backpack I've ever
9 had in my life.
- 10 AJ: Is that right?
- 11 MK: Yeah.
- 12 AJ: Oh, wow.
- 13 MK: I - I'm having shoulder problems, and my physical therapist said I shouldn't have just one strap, I
14 should have two. I hate it.
- 15 AJ: Not even in college? You didn't do the backpack thing?
- 16 MK: No. No, I don't -
- 17 AJ: 'Cause you have a lot more books in college than you do in high school, but...
- 18 MK: Yeah. I'm pretty sure I've never had a backpack. I always had a one - I was a one-strapper, you
19 know?
- 20 AJ: Oh, okay. Yeah.
- 21 MK: Like a messenger bag.
- 22 AJ: Messenger bag, that kind of thing?
- 23 MK: Yeah. You can't get into a book bag. But that's beside the point.
- 24 AJ: Yeah.
- 25 MK: We'll carry on.
- 26 AJ: Well, you know, book bag - I mean, I don't know. I'm doing this whole project on bags, and I
27 have tons of them, so I actually think bags are kind of an interesting metaphor for life. But
28 you're right, we are veering off track here -
- 29 MK: That's my specialty.
- 30 AJ: - a little bit. But - so you - you know, you talked about coming out in your late thirties. And I'm
31 just curious, what had been some of the challenges that you have experienced since you've

- 1 come out?
- 2 MK: So I - I want to acknowledge first, I've been just so lucky. Or so fortunate. In - in so many ways. I
3 had a full career before I came out.
- 4 AJ: Okay.
- 5 MK: Which -
- 6 AJ: As...?
- 7 MK: I - basically in opinion research. I was a pollster for a while. I ran a survey research center at a
8 university. I was a consultant. And so I was able to come out middle class.
- 9 AJ: Yeah.
- 10 MK: And - and that matters a lot. And -
- 11 AJ: Sure.
- 12 MK: And that helps. And it - it allowed me to, you know, to dress a certain way, and to afford a little
13 bit of cosmetic surgery on my face.
- 14 AJ: Okay.
- 15 MK: I had an extremely - when I started getting electrolysis to remove my extremely thick beard, I -
16 the electrologists called me the Marlboro Man, apparently.
- 17 AJ: Why?
- 18 MK: Just because I had a very -
- 19 AJ: To your face, or you heard -
- 20 MK: No, they - they told me -
- 21 AJ: - secondhand afterwards?
- 22 MK: No, they told me themselves, but they didn't - they - they called me by my name, but they also
23 said that that's how they had referred to me initially. And it's not like I was, like, ruggedly
24 handsome or anything, it's that I - I had a very masculine face, with a cleft chin, and very thick -
25 you know, very thick whiskers. You know, when - I didn't have electrolysis, I had deforestation,
26 basically.
- 27 AJ: It sounds pretty ruggedly handsome to me, but...
- 28 MK: Well, I - I don't know about the handsome part, but I was pretty rugged. And, you know, I -
29 because I was able to afford that plastic surgery on my face, that saved me a lot of - of
30 harassment. Probably violence. What I was really worried about at the time was would I - would
31 I be able to keep my career.
- 32 AJ: Sure.

- 1 MK: And, you know, I - I wanted - I wanted to be - you know, a big part of my job at the time was
2 doing focus groups and being a focus group moderator.
- 3 AJ: Oh, wow.
- 4 MK: And bringing twelve strangers into the room, and, you know, my initial thought was "There is no
5 way a transgender person can do that." And, you know, my professional mentor, who was also
6 my client, was like, "Of course you're going to keep doing it. We're not going to stop, and..." She
7 kind of pushed me along, and I agreed to do it. But I felt like I had to do some of that stuff to
8 keep my profession. And then, you know, three years later, I turned in the profession anyway.
9 But I - so I was very lucky. So the - the challenges, you know, for me...you know, I certainly have
10 lived with the fear of rejection. And for the most part, I haven't been rejected. And I've lived
11 with - you know, the fear of violence. But, you know, I've avoided violence. You know, the
12 challenges...one of the big challenges for me was I - I had always had a pretty decent life. A
13 pretty decent time of things, I mean.
- 14 AJ: Sure.
- 15 MK: You know, I was middle class. You know, I - I was healthy. I got to go to college and grad school.
16 You know, I had a lot of -
- 17 AJ: I'm going to state the obvious. You're white.
- 18 MK: Yup. Yeah.
- 19 AJ: Right? Yeah.
- 20 MK: White. I...so I have a lot of privileges.
- 21 AJ: Which doesn't negate white people who have challenges.
- 22 MK: Oh, absolutely.
- 23 AJ: Poverty, and...
- 24 MK: Absolutely.
- 25 AJ: All kinds of issues.
- 26 MK: In fact - you know, so the surveys we've done at MCTE, including the recent US Trans Survey, in
27 fact do show that - that race is a compounding impact on the marginalization trans people face.
28 So, you know, all trans people are facing some stuff.
- 29 AJ: Right.
- 30 MK: Everybody loses something.
- 31 AJ: Yes.
- 32 MK: So many people lose everything. And it - so it is true that in general, trans people of color do
33 face a lot worse marginalization and violence, and etcetera, than -

- 1 AJ: Because of racism.
- 2 MK: Because of racism compounding the transphobia. But that doesn't mean that there aren't white
3 people who are really struggling.
- 4 AJ: Right.
- 5 MK: Who are really facing tragedies. And - and I would - I would hate to imply otherwise. But it - it is
6 an advantage. Or at - at most, a lack of disadvantage. I -
- 7 AJ: Yeah.
- 8 MK: You know, I don't know. I consider it to have been one of the privileges that - that have really
9 helped me along. So - you know, that all being said, I did - turn my life upside down. You know,
10 I'm still, fifteen years later, not making as much money as I was.
- 11 AJ: Yeah.
- 12 MK: Back then. I'm - I'm doing fine. I'm doing better than most trans people.
- 13 AJ: Sure.
- 14 MK: I get that.
- 15 AJ: Yeah.
- 16 MK: But -
- 17 AJ: But there was some opportunity cost that -
- 18 MK: Oh, huge opportunity cost.
- 19 AJ: Yeah.
- 20 MK: Huge opportunity costs. And - and you know, when I - when I left my career and started MCTE, I
21 didn't take a salary for a few years.
- 22 AJ: Oh, wow.
- 23 MK: Went through all the savings, and - gladly. I don't want to whine about that. But - but you know,
24 my challenges - my challenges again were mostly in my head. I don't mean they were imaginary.
25 They - they weren't at all. But I - I become - I've become a believer that - one of the unfortunate
26 things we do in our society is think of default people. You know, we think a - the - the best
27 example is this horrible instance on the news in 2008, the night of the Pennsylvania primary,
28 when Hillary Clinton beat Barack Obama. And one of the people on the news channel I was
29 watching said it was because Hillary Clinton - Barack Obama got ninety-whatever percent of the
30 Black vote, but only forty-something percent of the "regular" vote. Now, that - that's just so
31 horrible, and you just know how many people in America were just like, "What?" But the truth is
32 that we all know is that our society does that. You know, white people in America are thought of
33 as a default, in a way. You hear people saying "This is a Christian country."
- 34 AJ: Right.

- 1 MK: So Christians are the default. It - you know, I - I reject that, to be clear, but it - it is true. But what
2 I thought about after that instance watching the news in 2008, and the person who said it was
3 this middle-aged or older white man. And I - I had been thinking a lot about identity, and I
4 realized, I might not have thought about identity before I came out as a trans person to myself.
- 5 AJ: Yeah. I'm -
- 6 MK: 'Cause when you're in middle class -
- 7 AJ: That's a real reality, right? Yeah.
- 8 MK: You're a healthy, middle class, educated white person? You don't have to think about - you can -
9 I don't mean that - I think you should think about it, but you can get -
- 10 AJ: You don't have to, though.
- 11 MK: You can get by.
- 12 AJ: Yeah.
- 13 MK: Without ever thinking about identity, because everybody just thinks you're cool.
- 14 AJ: Yeah.
- 15 MK: You - you know what I mean.
- 16 AJ: I get it.
- 17 MK: And it was a real struggle for me to say "Huh." And, you know, I have been knocked down a
18 notch in terms of my physical safety. Right? Both because I was trans, and because I was a
19 woman.
- 20 AJ: Sure.
- 21 MK: And, by the way, because I'm a six foot tall - six - over - I'm about 6'2" - tall woman. Which
22 draws attention to me, both as a trans person, as a woman. So I get that - that I was knocked
23 down a couple pegs in the privilege ladder, but I'm still pretty far up on the privilege ladder.
- 24 AJ: Yeah.
- 25 MK: And - and I really get that, and I try to remind myself of that every day, but the truth is, that was
26 a real struggle for me to get. I had to really go there and think through that and - and - and - and
27 work on it. 'Cause I had never had to before. Never had to.
- 28 AJ: Yeah. Wow. You - you actually answered some of the question, but I'm just going to pose it and -
29 and if you don't feel comfortable sharing more, that's absolutely fine. But, you know, relative to
30 your sort of facial feminization surgeries, and that kind of thing, have you done any other
31 medical interventions on your path to womanhood?
- 32 MK: Yeah, I'm going to - I'm going to take a pass on that.
- 33 AJ: Sure.

1 MK: But I'm going to explain why.

2 AJ: Yes, please.

3 MK: So we are talking today about me and I get that. One of the things I've tried really hard to do is
4 try not to talk too much about me. And -

5 AJ: And I'm going to try really hard -

6 MK: I know, and I'll - I'll talk with you!

7 AJ: - to talk about you.

8 MK: But I'm going to - I'm going to put some limits on it.

9 AJ: Sure.

10 MK: I'm not a personal - I mean, a private person at all, really. I am an introvert, but I'm not a private
11 person. But I get to have my voice. I get to use my voice so much.

12 AJ: Yeah.

13 MK: You know, particularly reporters. If they ask me personal questions, I'm like, you know, "I'm
14 sorry, I'm not here to answer personal questions."

15 AJ: Sure.

16 MK: It isn't 'cause I don't want to answer the personal questions, or I'm private. It's that I get to have
17 voice all the time, and my personal story isn't any better than anybody else's. I -

18 AJ: True.

19 MK: My voice - I - I think it has a particular place -

20 AJ: But it is no less valuable than anyone else's.

21 MK: I agree. I - I agree. But there's so many people can tell their personal stories. But one of the
22 things that I think has held us back as trans people is - is the - the conversation about medical
23 interventions -

24 AJ: Sure.

25 MK: - for transition. For so many of us, surgeries are so important. For even more of us, they're out
26 of reach.

27 AJ: Yes.

28 MK: And for a lot of people, they aren't important for lots of reasons. Medical contraindication, or a
29 religious prohibition, or they just don't want it.

30 AJ: Right.

31 MK: Just doesn't do anything - it doesn't sound like something they need to do. And...and America
32 has so fixated on surgery as defining trans people. There are just lots of times I - so I'm glad

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- 1 trans people talk with each other.
- 2 AJ: Yes.
- 3 MK: About surgery. So that we can learn how to get there if we feel like we have to get there.
- 4 AJ: That's a thing we need.
- 5 MK: But I never want to be defined by that.
- 6 AJ: Got it.
- 7 MK: You know, being trans is only a tiny part of who I am. What medical interventions I've had are a
8 teeny tiny part of my transness.
- 9 AJ: Yeah.
- 10 MK: And so I'm going to bow out on that one with a long winded explanation.
- 11 AJ: Well, I appreciate the explanation.
- 12 MK: Sure.
- 13 AJ: So you said that your current relationship with your family is still pretty positive?
- 14 MK: Mmhmm.
- 15 AJ: How did you come out to your family?
- 16 MK: So, like a nerd. I - I guess I would say that. I - I struggled for almost three years. I wrote a - get
17 ready for it - twenty-seven page document.
- 18 AJ: Oh, wow.
- 19 MK: That explained everything. So another advantage I had coming out was that I was in my late
20 thirties. I had always been a very rational person. I was not - you know, when you have seven
21 siblings, you have lots of different kinds of people in the family. And I was never the wild one. I
22 was never the irresponsible one. I - I'm not saying any of them are particularly that.
- 23 AJ: Okay.
- 24 MK: But I was - I was -
- 25 AJ: You were less wild and irresponsible than -
- 26 MK: I was among - on -
- 27 AJ: - some of the others.
- 28 MK: - the lesser wild and lesser irresponsible side. Or at least, that my parents knew.
- 29 AJ: Okay.
- 30 MK: And that my siblings knew. I had been a peacekeeper in our family, and - etcetera. And -

- 1 AJ: What -
- 2 MK: So a lot of them have risen to that. But I needed - I felt I needed to show my family that this was
3 a rational thing. This was not me saying, "You know what?" Because we were - this is before the
4 turn of the century, where - this was still out there, right? And - and there's a lot of places and a
5 lot of families where this is still a shocking thing, and I don't mean that. But - but -
- 6 AJ: Yeah. It is.
- 7 MK: But this - you know, back -
- 8 AJ: When you say out there, you mean, like way out for...
- 9 MK: Yeah. This is - this was an atypical occurrence in society.
- 10 AJ: Yes. Absolutely.
- 11 MK: You know, we used to - you know, in support groups in the late nineties still, people were saying
12 "You're going to lose your job. You're going to lose your family. You're going to lose your home.
13 And if you keep any of those, count your blessings."
- 14 AJ: Yeah.
- 15 MK: And it was just starting to change around the turn of the century, and - you know, I - I really
16 lucked out, and - and I know that. But I - I did everything I could to not just luck out, and I was
17 super nice to everybody.
- 18 AJ: Yeah.
- 19 MK: I had this twenty page document. I bought a - there was a book called "True Selves," that this -
- 20 AJ: Yeah.
- 21 MK: - therapist had written that I - had meant a lot to me when I read it.
- 22 AJ: Sure.
- 23 MK: And I thought, "Well, this will help everybody." I bought, like, thirty copies of it.
- 24 AJ: Oh, my goodness.
- 25 MK: At - at like, a huge expense to me. But I'm like, this is my life now, and if I - if I come out wrong,
26 it's going to haunt me forever, so -
- 27 AJ: Sure.
- 28 MK: I just - oh - I - I thought out carefully who I was going to tell in what order.
- 29 AJ: Oh, boy.
- 30 MK: And I -
- 31 AJ: Okay.

- 1 MK: I wanted to make sure that once I told somebody, they had somebody to talk to. So actually told
2 - came out to my friend Mark first. But I did it with him and his wife Cathy, who is also my
3 dearest, dearest friend.
- 4 AJ: Right.
- 5 MK: But I wanted them to be able to have somebody to talk to. Then I came out to my mother, and
6 said "By the way, Cathy knows. Why don't you talk to Cathy," and I asked Cathy if she would
7 check in on my mother. Then I came out to my dad, and told him "Mark knows. Hey Mark,
8 would you talk to my dad?"
- 9 AJ: Oh, wow.
- 10 MK: And then I just kept sort of -
- 11 AJ: So you set up this sort of -
- 12 MK: I did.
- 13 AJ: I don't know, triage, or...
- 14 MK: Yeah, but I got about -
- 15 AJ: Network, or something?
- 16 MK: I got about ten people into it and then I'm just like "Blah."
- 17 AJ: Oh, wow.
- 18 MK: And then I just started -
- 19 AJ: They pretty much all knew then.
- 20 MK: Yeah.
- 21 AJ: You dropped your mic.
- 22 MK: Oh, goodness. Okay.
- 23 AJ: So you kind of came out in a formal way. The letter and -
- 24 MK: I did.
- 25 AJ: - the book.
- 26 MK: I did. Because I - I had been growing my hair out, and I had also - I - I've been athletic most of my
27 life.
- 28 AJ: Sure.
- 29 MK: And I had been in the gym every day through my twenties and thirties basically. And I cut back
30 on weightlifting a little - I - I was not a weightlifter. I was never big.
- 31 AJ: Right. But you had -

- 1 MK: But I did lose a little -
- 2 AJ: Strength in your body. Yeah.
- 3 MK: I had lost a little muscle mass. And I was growing my hair out. And it was a - a typical thing to
4 some trans people get told "Oh, I thought you were sick."
- 5 AJ: Yeah.
- 6 MK: And there were a couple people who were like, "Oh, I thought you were somehow getting sick
7 or something." Which I hadn't thought of. So when I first said that "Hey, there's something
8 important I have to talk to you," some of the people thought "Oh, my gosh."
- 9 AJ: Cancer, or...
- 10 MK: You know, cancer, or HIV, or something.
- 11 AJ: Right.
- 12 MK: And yeah. It - it was an exhausting process and everybody was amazing.
- A13 Wow.
- 14 MK: I - you know, I lost a couple clients. Yeah. I lost a couple clients, but the people in my life were
15 amazing. And I learned that in a situation like that, people really act like themselves, you know?
16 My - my parents are smart, amazing, open-minded, kind people who love their children. And
17 that's how they acted.
- 18 AJ: Wow.
- 19 MK: You know? And couple people in my life were jerks. They acted like jerks. So I recommend to
20 people that they have good people in their life.
- 21 AJ: Yeah. That's a good recommendation.
- 22 MK: Yeah.
- 23 AJ: Has it - was there, like, a specific moment or organization or person that helped you come to
24 this realization that you were not the gender you were assigned at birth?
- 25 MK: To answer your question directly -
- 26 AJ: Or -
- 27 MK: No.
- 28 AJ: Okay.
- 29 MK: Because I always knew.
- 30 AJ: Right.
- 31 MK: But the moment that it happened - I - I know the moment when I knew I had to transition.

- 1 AJ: Yeah. Which was - is more of the question -
- 2 MK: Yeah.
- 3 AJ: - that I'm trying to get at.
- 4 MK: Yeah yeah yeah.
- 5 AJ: Yeah.
- 6 MK: So I - so there was a magazine called Tapestry. That IFGE put out.
- 7 AJ: I know it very well. Yeah.
- 8 MK: That - you know, back when I first started getting it, you could only buy it in porn shops.
- 9 AJ: Right.
- 10 MK: So in the - you know, the mid-eighties -
- 11 AJ: Or you could get it mail order too.
- 12 MK: You could get it mail order, but oh, my god, there was no way I was doing that.
- 13 AJ: Right.
- 14 MK: That - that could backfire really badly. But, you know, in the 1980s, people might have seen me
15 going into a porn shop occasionally, but actually for me it was so I could buy this totally non-
16 pornographic -
- 17 AJ: Right. Exactly.
- 18 MK: - magazine. And it - it was an amazing magazine because it listed all the support groups they
19 knew about in the country.
- 20 AJ: Yeah.
- 21 MK: There were stories about real people. They talked about a couple conferences that existed. And
22 it was just this whole world that I wanted to be in that was not a realistic world for me to ever
23 be in.
- 24 AJ: Yeah.
- 25 MK: Finally in 1996 - so I would have been thirty seven - I got the nerve - barely the nerve - but I - I
26 drove myself up to Provincetown, Massachussetts, to the Fantasia Fair conference.
- 27 AJ: Wow.
- 28 MK: Which is this weeklong conference, but - it's a very small conference with like a hundred,
29 hundred and fifty people, in Provincetown, which is like this sleepy little port town. Af - after the
30 season, the vacation season over, so it's dead. Most of the restaurants are closed.
- 31 AJ: Right.

- 1 MK: But trans people were safe there.
- 2 AJ: Yes.
- 3 MK: Because it's a very gay-friendly place.
- 4 AJ: Yeah.
- 5 MK: And...it was a weeklong thing, but I went up on Friday, and I was terrified. I can still taste the
6 fear.
- 7 AJ: Wow.
- 8 MK: I - I have this thing I do in my life. Whenever I feel a really intense emotion, I try to take a breath
9 and think about that emotion and really kind of catalog it. So I remember a handful of times
10 where I was just terrified because I was trans. Because I - I dressed up as a woman, and at the
11 time, that's what it felt like. It felt like I was dressing up.
- 12 AJ: Right.
- 13 MK: And I had the - the nerve to go out. I - 'cause in the - the problem with Fantasia Fair, is you
14 actually have to go out in the street.
- 15 AJ: Right.
- 16 MK: You're not locked away in a hotel. But there's nobody on the street, 'cause it's after season.
- 17 AJ: Sure.
- 18 MK: And I met some amazing people who were just like me. And it doesn't matter what I mean by
19 just like me. For whoever you are, when you meet somebody who's just like you, you know,
20 "Oh, this is a person just like me."
- 21 AJ: Right. Exactly. Yeah, you just know it.
- 22 MK: And in - and in this instance, I particularly met this person who I don't remember their name.
23 And I feel really bad about that. But at the time, I was teaching college, and this was a college
24 professor. And she was 6'2" like me. And she was trans - she had transitioned and she was
25 about to - to have surgery.
- 26 AJ: Oh, wow.
- 27 MK: And - it was - that was the moment where I was like, "I can transition. People like me can
28 transition."
- 29 AJ: Sure.
- 30 MK: And I had been on the - I had been very active on the internet for maybe five or six years by that
31 point, but that was the moment for me. And I - I'll always remember something. I - I went to a
32 newcomers reception, and, you know -
- 33 AJ: At the Fantasia Fair.

- 1 MK: Yeah. Yeah, Fantasia Fair. And Holly Boswell, who became a really good friend, and has just been
2 a movement elder for decades, I remember Holly saying "When you leave here, you're going to
3 kind of have a crash, and you're going to cry." I - I was not a crier. And I had to pull over several
4 times driving down Cape Cod going home.
- 5 AJ: Wow.
- 6 MK: Just bawling. Because I had had an epiphany, and - and that's when it was for me. And I then
7 targeted May of 2009 for when I would transition. So three years later, I had particular family
8 and financial reasons for picking that time, and I set about doing things slowly, I - I had a huge
9 trachea ex - exposed, and I - I had the - I - I got the nerve to sneak out to California to have that
10 fixed.
- 11 AJ: Wow.
- 12 MK: And nobody ever noticed. I had a little scar here for a little while, and everybody just assumed I
13 cut myself. Nobody ever said, "Hey, your trachea's gone!"
- 14 AJ: Right.
- 15 MK: And - and I started getting electrolysis, and...nobody noticed that, really.
- 16 AJ: Wow.
- 17 MK: And...I - I just - that was - that was it. And then the other pivotal moment I just want to mention
18 was 1998. I went to the Southern Comfort Conference in Atlanta. And I was just on Facebook
19 the other day - somebody had posted something about that night. They had found some
20 mention in their journal about this one night. It would have been September of '98, at the
21 Southern Comfort Conference. It was the first night of the conference, and there was a first-
22 timers reception. And - and I really am an introvert. That's hard for people to understand. And I
23 had really been hiding this shame of being transgender for decades.
- 24 AJ: Yeah.
- 25 MK: My whole life. And here I was, going to, you know, dress as a woman, and go out among all
26 these people. And I was most certainly going to lose my career and die. Like, instantaneously.
- 27 AJ: Right. Yeah.
- 28 MK: I was so scared. And - so I made it - I - I didn't want to just be a wallflower. I was going to try to
29 do something really brave and sit and talk to people. So I met this wonderful person named
30 Kelly who was a first-timer, who's become a good friend, lives in Alabama. And then there was
31 this table of people having fun. And they were so at ease, and they were having fun, and I like
32 fun. Now what's really important to know about this particular reception is there was an open
33 bar.
- 34 AJ: Okay.
- 35 MK: With free booze.

- 1 AJ: That helps.
- 2 MK: When you're an introvert in your nightmare scenario, which is "Dressed as a woman at a
3 transgender conference with a crowd of people..."
- 4 AJ: Right.
- 5 MK: Don't drink. I drank. I don't have any idea - I don't know if I had one drink or a million.
- 6 AJ: Yeah.
- 7 MK: But I got up the nerve to go sit with them. And - oh, another funny part about this is I didn't
8 have a name.
- 9 AJ: Oh, yeah. There's that.
- 10 MK: I had no name. And I had gone to Southern Comfort. I'm like, "Well, someone's going to ask me
11 my name."
- 12 AJ: Yeah.
- 13 MK: And I had been going through names, and there - you know, I - I - there were a couple names I
14 really liked, but there were people close to me in my life who had those names, and I - I just was
15 afraid they'd think it was creepy -
- 16 AJ: Didn't want to co-opt that, yeah.
- 17 MK: Yeah. So I didn't do that. So I had ten names written on a little piece of paper. So I was drunk. I
18 just was. Sat down with the people - "Can I sit with you? You look like you're having fun!" which
19 was not like me until about that point. And they were like, "What's your name?" I - you know, I
20 talked to them for a while, and they said "What's your name?" and I was like, "I don't actually
21 have one," and I pulled out my piece of paper and I was like, "I have ten choices." And among
22 these people were Marisa Richmond, who you know.
- 23 AJ: Yes, I do.
- 24 MK: Who was sitting at the table. One of the -
- 25 AJ: From Tennessee?
- 26 MK: Tennessee. In Nashville. One of the best and longest-serving activists in our - in our community.
27 Marisa said, "Let's vote!"
- 28 AJ: So this group of people at the table voted on your name?
- 29 MK: They voted on my name. Now, they didn't vote on Mara. My parents actually gave me this
30 name. That's how lucky I am. My parents named me.
- 31 AJ: Wow.
- 32 MK: I don't know any other trans people who that was the case for. There are some people who -
- 33 AJ: I've had a couple people in -
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- 1 MK: Oh, good.
- 2 AJ: - my stories that have said their parents have been very much a part of their naming.
- 3 MK: Oh, that's great. That's really good.
- 4 AJ: Yeah.
- 5 MK: But at this time, they picked - so for, like - for like two years, in trans circles, my name was
6 Emma.
- 7 AJ: Emma.
- 8 MK: Yeah. Now - now going back to that thing in Provincetown several years earlier, when they
9 asked me my name, I was just like, "Michelle!"
- 10 AJ: Oh, wow.
- 11 MK: I just totally pulled a name out of a hat, and still as late as, like, two years ago, every now and
12 then someone would come up to me and say, "Hey, aren't you Michelle?" And I was like, "No."
13 And they say, "Oh, I thought I met you at Fantasia Fair," and I'm like, "Oh."
- 14 AJ: Oh yeah. That.
- 15 MK: Oh yeah. That was my name for that day.
- 16 AJ: Right.
- 17 MK: Or those two days. But those were - those were really super pivotal trans moments in my life,
18 when I realized that's my family. But what's important about that table, by the way, and what
19 we were talking about on Facebook - not you and I, but the - the folks who - some of the folks
20 who were at that table -
- 21 AJ: Yeah.
- 22 MK: Was - I had no idea of really what an activist was. I - I was not there intending to be a trans
23 activist, let alone a trans leader.
- 24 AJ: Right.
- 25 MK: But they made me feel so comfortable, and they told me what Southern Comfort was, which
26 was really just a way to save people's lives, in a way. Just a way to reach out to people and say
27 "You're not alone," and -
- 28 AJ: Wow.
- 29 MK: - come be with us. This is a place you're safe, at least for a while. You know, there is still to this
30 day people who go to some of those conferences. It's the one time of year they can be
31 themselves. And then they have to pack it all away, and go home to their families, and pretend
32 that they're not trans.
- 33 AJ: Right.

1 MK: And these people who run these conferences, some have helped so many people, just tens or
2 hundreds of thousands of people, whose lives have been changed and lives have been saved.
3 And those folks were - were activists. You know, somebody like Marisa, that - that there's a
4 policy component to being transgender. There's a direct service component to being
5 transgender, to - and - and that these people serve transgender people who I was really quickly
6 growing to - to really love, and to not understand why people weren't cutting them a break,
7 'cause they were so spectacular.

8 AJ: Right. Right. Wow. So, wow. Those were - those were some pivotal - pivotable moments. And
9 this group, like, literally helped you to select your name. So do you still use that name?

10 MK: No.

11 AJ: In any form at all? Or...?

12 MK: No, that wasn't actually a good name for me.

13 AJ: Emma?

14 MK: It - it didn't feel like it fit. It felt too young for me. And - and also, by the way, around - before
15 the turn of the century, Emma was a very uncommon name. Right now - there - there have been
16 several years since where Emma's, like, the most popular baby name ever.

17 AJ: Yeah.

18 MK: And so you see a lot more Emmas -

19 AJ: My grandmother was named Emma.

20 MK: Yeah. Well, yeah. When I was coming up, Emma was an old lady name.

21 AJ: Yeah. Exactly.

22 MK: You know, like - and - and now all those old lady names are back.

23 AJ: Right.

24 MK: You know, even - like, even Sarah. There weren't that many Sarahs. And Emilys, and Abigails -

25 AJ: Sure.

26 MK: And Claras.

27 AJ: Yeah.

28 MK: Those were - those were old lady names.

29 AJ: Yeah. They - they have returned.

30 MK: Yeah.

31 AJ: Yeah.

32 MK: And it just - Emma just wasn't for me. And my parents came to me and said they wanted to

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- 1 name me.
- 2 AJ: Wow.
- 3 MK: Yup.
- 4 AJ: They did it the first time, and they wanted to do it the second time.
- 5 MK: That is - what they said was they believed that it was their right and responsibility to name me.
- 6 AJ: Wow.
- 7 MK: Which I was so - so honored about. I did reserve veto power.
- 8 AJ: Yeah.
- 9 MK: My mother had been talking about a couple names that just were not okay.
- 10 AJ: Okay.
- 11 MK: Yeah.
- 12 AJ: So that was a bit of a group process too, then.
- 13 MK: Yeah, it was - it was them. And, you know, they picked a name - I'm not somebody who's
14 ashamed of my old name, by the way. It was Mark.
- 15 AJ: Oh, okay.
- 16 MK: I - I - it is a big part of who I am.
- 17 AJ: Sure. Absolutely.
- 18 MK: You know, two thirds of my life I was Mark. And I - I wanted to keep my initials, that I - 'cause my
19 whole life I've just signed things MRK. And so that was the one - the two parameters I gave my
20 parents were it has to start with M and I get veto rights -
- 21 AJ: Right.
- 22 MK: - if you pick something I don't like. And - and that was fine.
- 23 AJ: Wow.
- 24 MK: But interestingly my middle name is "R," because I couldn't think of a better replacement -
- 25 AJ: Yeah.
- 26 MK: - that fit with Mara Keisling. So it's just Mara R. Keisling.
- 27 AJ: Wow. That's fascinating. I - so Mara, you are the director - we started this out - of the -
- 28 MK: May I ask a question?
- 29 AJ: Sure.

- 1 MK: Could we pause for a second? For me to use the restroom?
- 2 AJ: Yeah.
- 3 MK: Thank you.
- 4 AJ: No problem.
- 5 AJ: And we are back. So, as I was saying, Mara, you're the director of the National Center for
6 Transgender Equality. Today is Inauguration Day, as we already noted. What are your concerns
7 about this incoming administration and its impact on the work that you've been doing as the
8 leader of the National Center for Transgender Equality for the past twelve years. And - and
9 maybe even help define what the Center for - the National Center for Transgender Equality is.
- 10 MK: Sure. So the National Center for Transgender Equality is a - an advocacy organization primarily in
11 - in Washington, D.C. We work on policy and public education to advance the lives of trans
12 people.
- 13 AJ: Yes.
- 14 MK: And we're about fourteen years old. Fourteen years and three weeks old. And I'm one of the
15 founders. Was the first executive director. We - we were founded around the turn of the
16 century. I keep talking about the turn of the century and apparently most people don't think of
17 it as the turn of the century, but in fact it was the turn of the century.
- 18 AJ: And - and in fact it is! Absolutely it is.
- 19 MK: It just is.
- 20 AJ: Yeah.
- 21 MK: But in the '90s, trans people were totally cut out of policy - of federal policy, state policy, and in
22 most cases local policy, though there were some clusters of big cities where - you know, in
23 Minneapolis, for instance, where -
- 24 AJ: The - the city and the state that I live in -
- 25 MK: Yeah.
- 26 AJ: - has had protections for transgender people since 1975 -
- 27 MK: Yeah.
- 28 AJ: - on the city level, and 1993 on a state level, but not -
- 29 MK: Yep.
- 30 AJ: - very many other states at all.
- 31 MK: And - you know, so Jane Fee in - in Minnesota was doing some amazing work with other people
32 too.
- 33 AJ: Right, exactly.

- 1 MK: Yesterday I was talking to Marsha Botzer, who started the Ingersoll Gender Center in Seattle -
- 2 AJ: In Seattle, yeah.
- 3 MK: Forty years ago this year.
- 4 AJ: Wow. That's incredible.
- 5 MK: So that's what, '76? Or '86? No, '76. '77.
- 6 AJ: Yeah. I haven't seen Marsha, but I would love to -
- 7 MK: Oh, yeah.
- 8 AJ: - to see her.
- 9 MK: She's - she's here. But so we were cut out of policy, and, you know, in 1990, the Americans with
10 Disabilities Rights Act passed with a lot of bad trans stuff in it, because weren't able to speak up,
11 and nobody was speaking for us.
- 12 AJ: Right.
- 13 MK: And as the gay rights movement was getting power, and getting active, they were being asked
14 to represent us and talk for us. And they frankly weren't doing it responsibly. They often refused
15 to do it, or they did it in an awkward way, or they did it in a straight-up bad way.
- 16 AJ: Right.
- 17 MK: So trans people around the country were coming forward and saying "We've got to be in this."
18 And - so a lot of people were doing that, just all over the place, and it was more of a virtual
19 movement at that point.
- 20 AJ: Yeah.
- 21 MK: And at some point, we all realized we had to have a Washington, D.C. based, professionalized
22 organization that could be up on the Hill and talk to actual members of Congress, that could be
23 in the bureaucracy and talking to policymakers. And we started - we started MCTE. I had the
24 number one qualification, which is I was available.
- 25 AJ: Yeah.
- 26 MK: I had - my - in my consulting practice, I lost my largest client. Just in the course of a contract
27 running up -
- 28 AJ: Right.
- 29 MK: It wasn't - it wasn't an anti-trans thing at all. It was the Pennsylvania Department of Health. And
30 I just decided to take the leap, and, you know, there - there was not, as far as we know, prior to
31 2001, any attorney in the country who was working only on transgender rights. You know, there
32 were some great attorneys doing work like Phyllis Frye, in Houston -
- 33 AJ: Yup.

- 1 MK: - and Shannon Minter, and Jennifer Levi, and...
- 2 AJ: Right.
- 3 MK: I just - I shouldn't have started naming any of them, because I know I'll forget some.
- 4 AJ: Yeah.
- 5 MK: And - and some general - or some local practitioners around the country in certain places. But
6 there was nobody doing trans rights full time. You know, even folks like Shannon were doing
7 LGBT rights, including trans.
- 8 AJ: Including trans -
- 9 MK: I mean -
- 10 AJ: - rights within that.
- 11 MK: Like, you know, Shannon forever -
- 12 AJ: 'Cause they worked for the National Center for Lesbian Rights, right?
- 13 MK: Right.
- 14 AJ: Yeah.
- 15 MK: Shannon's the legal director there still. And Jennifer Levi's the trans dire - trans project director
16 at GLAD, Gay and Lesbian Advocates and Defenders in Boston.
- 17 AJ: Okay.
- 18 MK: You know, they've been working on trans rights long before 19 - or, sorry, 2001. But in 2001,
19 Lisa Mottet, who's now our deputy executive director, started the trans rights program at the
20 National Gay and Lesbian Task Force. And then sometime - almost right around that time, just a
21 little bit later that year or the next year, Transgender Law Center was founded.
- 22 AJ: Sure.
- 23 MK: And then the Sylvia Rivera Law Project was founded in New York, and then Transgender Legal of
24 Defense and Education Fund was founded in New York, and then NCTE was founded in DC. And
25 that was a real pivotal whoof for the policy part of the movement.
- 26 AJ: Yeah.
- 27 MK: Right? The - the trans movement is a funky kind of thing to talk about, 'cause there's really a
28 million movements.
- 29 AJ: Yes.
- 30 MK: Lots of vibrant local movement. There's arts movements, there's all sorts of thing. My part of
31 the movement is, like, the policy movement.
- 32 AJ: Yeah.

- 1 MK: That's - I mean, me personally. NCTE does more than just policy, but when I talk about the
2 movement, I - I'm usually talking about my part of the movement where I am.
- 3 AJ: Right.
- 4 MK: Which, you know, you've certainly been in. You know, because we're all in multiple movements,
5 really.
- 6 AJ: Absolutely.
- 7 MK: But we -
- 8 AJ: Yeah. I do want to just acknowledge the serve - there's a service component to the movement
9 as well.
- 10 MK: Yeah.
- 11 AJ: Places not enough, but I mean -
- 12 MK: Absolutely.
- 13 AJ: Places like Casa Ruby, and -
- 14 MK: Yeah.
- 15 AJ: The Trans House in Chicago -
- 16 MK: There's so many of them.
- 17 AJ: Yeah. Exactly.
- 18 MK: There's just so many of them. I met a wonderful person named Jada yesterday who's - who has
19 an organization called Transitions in New Orleans.
- 20 AJ: Oh yeah. Yeah, yeah, yeah.
- 21 MK: And it's, you know, it's just amazing. And there's youth movements, and - and now, we're at a
22 pivotal point where who knows what's about to happen.
- 23 AJ: Right.
- 24 MK: A - and that's really super exciting. But we started NCTE - really, we started it to do federal
25 policy. And we - well, to do two things. One is federal policy, and the other is to make the LGBT
26 movement more responsible about advocating for trans people.
- 27 AJ: Sure.
- 28 MK: And we've succeeded in that pretty well. You know, I - I don't think anybody would say the LGBT
29 movement is perfect. But -
- 30 AJ: Yeah. Not me. I wouldn't say that.
- 31 MK: No?

- 1 AJ: Yeah.
- 2 MK: But - but they're doing some good trans work. And they're doing a lot of trans work.
- 3 AJ: Yeah. Absolutely.
- 4 MK: Not always the way I'd like. Not always where I'd like. But, you know, they're doing good work.
- 5 AJ: Yeah.
- 6 MK: But the federal policy has also been really successful. And that's - so what I'm going to pivot now
7 - or transition into the Trump administration now. And we're in the Trump administration.
- 8 AJ: We are in it.
- 9 MK: And -
- 10 AJ: Three hours, but...
- 11 MK: Yeah. Not even full three hours into it yet. So it's a little dangerous to talk about it, because, I
12 mean, I suppose there is some chance, greater than zero, that he will be a decent president.
- 13 AJ: Yeah.
- 14 MK: As I've been saying all year, as people were saying "You don't think he really has a chance?" I've
15 been saying, "He has a greater than zero percent chance to win." And - and there you go.
- 16 AJ: And you were right.
- 17 MK: You know? When - when the pundits were -
- 18 AJ: So hopefully you'll be right on his -
- 19 MK: Well, no. I'm not predicting that. I am definitely not predicting that he is going to be a great
20 president. But there's a chance. And, you know, talking now three hours in, is almost unfair.
21 However, it is true that the people he has named in his cabinet are putrid, from a trans rights
22 point of view. They are -
- 23 AJ: From a human rights...
- 24 MK: From a human rights point of view. Yeah, absolutely. They are hostile to human rights, they are
25 hostile to civil rights, they are hostile to decency, they are hostile to poverty - or, not to poverty,
26 to poor people. And - and it looks really -
- 27 AJ: Women's rights.
- 28 MK: Women's rights. It looks really scary from where we are right now. What I know - what is getting
29 me by these last two months since the election - what will get me by further - is knowing certain
30 things. I know unequivocally, that we as trans people have come too far to come only this far.
- 31 AJ: Right.
- 32 MK: We're going. We're still moving. We're going to do it. Second of all, we now know how to do

1 this.

2 AJ: Yeah.

3 MK: We know the federal government now. We know how to work in Congress. Right now we have
4 an incredibly hostile Congress, also.

5 AJ: Yeah.

6 MK: And I'm not expecting to get all sorts of -

7 AJ: Well, thirty seven state legislatures -

8 MK: Yeah.

9 AJ: - are pretty hostile as well.

10 MK: Yeah. It's really good. But, you know what, I - this is going to be weird doing with my hand - but
11 civil rights and human rights advancement isn't like this.

12 AJ: Right.

13 MK: And it's not like this. And it's also not like this, it doesn't go up and then it's over and it goes
14 down.

15 AJ: Sure.

16 MK: It goes like this. But it always goes up.

17 AJ: Yeah.

18 MK: It goes up with bumps. And this is a big bump. I don't want to deny that. I think there's going to
19 be a lot of people hurt. You know, we're hearing about some of the first things he does, they're
20 just going to hurt lots of good people. But that being said, we're not going to stop. We as - as -
21 well, me personally -

22 AJ: Yes.

23 MK: - or NCTE, or trans people.

24 AJ: Yes.

25 MK: This President Obama, the outgoing president, has shown us we belong in - in the high seats.

26 AJ: Yeah.

27 MK: I don't remember the exact quote, but Frances Perkins, who was the first woman cabinet
28 secretary - she was the secretary of labor under Franklin Roosevelt, and is still the longest-
29 serving labor secretary -

30 AJ: Wow.

31 MK: She said "I felt it was my responsibility to take the seat offered, so that women far away and
32 years from now will know they belong in the high seats." I - I'm paraphrasing, so I probably got a

1 little bit of that wrong. Trans people belong in the high seats now. We've had over a dozen
2 people appointed to positions -

3 AJ: Absolutely.

4 MK: - by - by a President of the United States. We have been invited to the White House to have -

5 AJ: Including one of your former employees, Rafi...

6 MK: Rafi Freeman Gurspan -

7 AJ: Yeah.

8 MK: - was the first trans person - out trans person to work in the - in the White House itself.

9 AJ: Yes.

10 MK: And, by the way, last week, President Obama appointed her to the Holocaust Memorial
11 Commission, which is essentially the Holocaust Museum's Board of Directors.

12 AJ: Right.

13 MK: She has a five year term.

14 AJ: Beautiful.

15 MK: So that's a nice little Easter egg present from President Obama on the way out.

16 AJ: Sweet. Yeah.

17 MK: To - to trans people. And -

18 AJ: And to keep us in these high seats.

19 MK: Absolutely. And - but - you know, if this president doesn't appoint trans people - which, by the
20 way, is going to be really hard for him, because there's just not a lot of trans people hoping to
21 work for President Trump -

22 AJ: Yeah.

23 MK: Yet. But maybe -

24 AJ: Who knows.

25 MK: Again -

26 AJ: Yeah.

27 MK: You know, who knows. Maybe things will change. But we belong in the high seats. You know, we
28 still don't have a lot of people in public office. We've had some city councilpeople around the -
29 the country.

30 AJ: Sure.

- 1 MK: We still haven't had an out - an open and out trans person in a state legislature. This year - I
2 don't know if you knew this, but this year, there are at least two really great candidates running
3 for big city city council.
- 4 AJ: Is that right?
- 5 MK: It - it is right. I've heard.
- 6 AJ: What city?
- 7 MK: It's Minneapolis, Minnesota.
- 8 AJ: Oh, my goodness. Wow. Minneapolis is -
- 9 MK: Minneapolis is -
- 10 AJ: - a very progressive town.
- 11 MK: Yeah.
- 12 AJ: I happen to live there.
- 13 MK: Do you?
- 14 AJ: Yeah.
- 15 MK: Oh, you happen to be one of the two candidates whose running for city council?
- 16 AJ: Actually, I am one of those candidates, as well as Phillippe Cunningham, who I am deeply, deeply
17 honored and grateful to stand up and - and say "We deserve to be - have a seat in high places,"
18 so.
- 19 MK: And - and - but here's the cool thing. You guys don't even have to run as trans people.
- 20 AJ: No.
- 21 MK: You get to - you get to run as, you know, smart, caring progressives who care about your
22 neighborhoods.
- 23 AJ: Absolutely.
- 24 MK: And care about your districts, and I -
- 25 AJ: And that has been a shift over time -
- 26 MK: Oh, yeah.
- 27 AJ: Based on the policy work that I think has been -
- 28 MK: Yeah. Yeah.
- 29 AJ: I mean, at the federal level, and certainly through organizations like NCTE. Are -
- 30 MK: So I'm excited about that.

- 1 AJ: No, that's great, go ahead.
- 2 MK: So - well - and so just the last thing about the Trump administration is - is - we - we also have to
3 remember - we - so we don't have complete information yet. I'm not trying to be fair. I mean, I -
- 4 AJ: Yeah.
- 5 MK: I guess I'm trying to be fair. But I - I don't have high hopes for the Trump administration. Don't
6 get me wrong. But even if he is every bit as bad as some people are afraid he'll be, we have to
7 remember, we're every bit as good as we know we are.
- 8 AJ: Absolutely.
- 9 MK: We are righteous. We are strong. We are - we are creative, and lean, and our movement and
10 our people are resilient, and we're going to figure this out. I - I - I do think a lot of people are
11 going to get hurt in a lot of bad ways. But - but we're going to figure it out. And there are going
12 to be blue skies and - there's going to be blue skies again.
- 13 AJ: Yeah.
- 14 MK: And when that happens, we're going right for the high seats.
- 15 AJ: Yes. Wow. Yeah, thank you for bringing some optimism and some - some hope, and, I mean,
16 that's what lives in resistance, right? And I think that what we have to have in - in these dark
17 times, in these sort of moments of despair that so many people - beyond the trans community,
18 even -
- 19 MK: Yeah.
- 20 AJ: - well beyond the trans community - are feeling and experiencing. But - and just in that line of
21 hopefulness, and you talked about Rafi being appointed to the Holocaust Museum board, you
22 mentioned earlier that there were five victories that were gained in the last week or so. Can you
23 talk about those at all, or...?
- 24 MK: I can do it vaguely.
- 25 AJ: Okay.
- 26 MK: And the reason I say that is we don't know exactly how hostile this incoming administration is,
27 and if we go bragging about things that happened yesterday, they might not be there tomorrow.
- 28 AJ: Right.
- 29 MK: So let me just say that eight - for eight years we've been sprinting at NCTE. We've been working
30 with maybe hundreds, but definitely dozens of federal agencies -
- 31 AJ: Sure.
- 32 MK: To win victory after victory after victory. We have won well over a hundred policy victories for
33 trans people. We meaning collectively -
- 34 AJ: Sure.

- 1 MK: - not just NCTE. But NCTE has been right in the middle of it. This year - or, sorry, all of last year,
2 2016, our policy director, Harper Jean Tobin, has been looking at what was left. We still have an
3 eighty-five point federal agenda. We're not done.
- 4 AJ: Right.
- 5 MK: And what was in the works - what seemed believe - possible before President Obama left - and
6 we picked a handful of things and we've been working on them. And in fact, yesterday, the last
7 five of them were released. We're not talking about them. We're not going to let - we're not
8 going to announce it.
- 9 AJ: Sure.
- 10 MK: We are going to protect them by not bragging.
- 11 AJ: Okay.
- 12 MK: So...they were in general, with the exception of one, very technical fixes. In this case - not
13 everything we win is technical fixes, but most of them were small enough that we're confident
14 no one's really going to notice them.
- 15 AJ: Sure.
- 16 MK: But one of them is bigger and more important, and we're just going to shut up about it.
- 17 AJ: Okay. Can't even give us a hint?
- 18 MK: No - not a single hint. I will tell you it's federal government.
- 19 AJ: Okay.
- 20 MK: But we've actually had twelve victories since election day.
- 21 AJ: Wow.
- 22 MK: Twelve more policy advancements at the federal government.
- 23 AJ: Speaking of a - a victory, in a symbolic victory and a humanitarian victory, Chelsea Manning was
24 commuted - sentence was commuted. A transgender former military operative. How do you feel
25 about that -
- 26 MK: Yeah.
- 27 AJ: - what's NCTE's -
- 28 MK: I'm -
- 29 AJ: - statement on that?
- 30 MK: Yeah. I'm really happy, as the organization, that President Obama commuted her sentence.
31 We're happy for two reasons. One, mercy is good.
- 32 AJ: Yes.

- 1 MK: And vindictiveness is bad. And number two, a trans woman was being mistreated in an - in an
2 incarceration situation, being kept in male prison, being denied health care, being denied the
3 ability to groom in - in a feminine way.
- 4 AJ: Sure.
- 5 MK: She was held in solitary confinement for months. They have, you know, really, really - I don't - I
6 don't know Chelsea Clint - Chelsea Manning. I've never met her. But they have, no doubt,
7 seriously damaged her mental health. And she needed to get out. She has served longer than
8 any leaker in American history.
- 9 AJ: Right.
- 10 MK: It's - she's very controversial people - person. Even for trans people.
- 11 AJ: Yeah.
- 12 MK: Some people think she's a hero, some people think she's a villain. I don't need to weigh in on
13 that to know that it's a good thing that she got released.
- 14 AJ: Sure.
- 15 MK: It's a good thing that President Obama has been showing mercy and granting clemency to
16 people who have served long sentences - longer than the sentences probably should have been.
- 17 AJ: Right.
- 18 MK: And the only reason - I don't have any idea. I - I've never really thought through how long should
19 somebody who leaks information serve.
- 20 AJ: Right.
- 21 MK: I - it's not something I think a lot about. But I do know, she got sentenced much longer than
22 anybody else does, and she served longer than anybody else does. And so it was just time to
23 save her life. Let her out.
- 24 AJ: Sure. Yeah. Wow. What is the future of the - as you've described it, multiple movements related
25 to transgender equality?
- 26 MK: So the - the - it's a - it's a really interesting thing that the trans move - the trans policy
27 movement came along when it did, because it came along - it came along at a point where there
28 was more awareness of intersectionality, and - so our - our movement is kind of grown up with
29 that.
- 30 AJ: Right.
- 31 MK: It - we, by the way, still don't do it right, you know? The - the trans movement doesn't, NCTE
32 doesn't, I don't. We're still not there.
- 33 AJ: I don't. I mean, let's be real.
- 34 MK: Yeah. Yeah. But - but we're all aware of it. And I think most movements that exist today started

- 1 before anybody was aware of it.
- 2 AJ: Sure.
- 3 MK: And so we've been fixing as we've been growing, for sure. But we didn't start off as messed up
4 as most movements, in terms of understanding the place of disability rights, or anti-racism work,
5 or anti-poverty work.
- 6 AJ: Right.
- 7 MK: But, you know, the - our surveys show, and just being a trans person and knowing so many trans
8 people, you just know you can't have a trans movement unless it's anti-racist, and pro-
9 immigrant.
- 10 AJ: Sure.
- 11 MK: And pro-worker, and pro-woman, and pro-disability rights. And anti-poverty.
- 12 AJ: Yeah.
- 13 MK: You know, we - our survey that we released showed that twenty three percent of our sample
14 didn't see a doctor last year when they needed it because they were afraid of being
15 disrespected for being trans. But thirty three percent didn't see a doctor last year when they
16 needed to because they couldn't afford it.
- 17 AJ: Right.
- 18 MK: It - you know - first - you know, I get asked, "What's the biggest issue for trans people?" And the
19 answer's really easy. It depends which trans person you ask.
- 20 AJ: Yeah.
- 21 MK: You know? If - for some trans people, the most important trans problem is racism.
- 22 AJ: Yeah.
- 23 MK: You know, or poverty. Or the way women are treated. Or disrespect they get because they're
24 trans. I - I talked recently to a college professor who is sixty-seven years old. Got fired when she
25 came out as trans. A judge her - her wife took her to court, got everything 'cause the wife said
26 she was a freak.
- 27 AJ: Right.
- 28 MK: Here she is, sixty-seven years old, no career, no savings, no family. And really no prospects.
29 Now, she said, "I don't have - I'm not go - where am I going to find a job teaching?" And the
30 truth is, she's facing trans discrimination now, but she's also facing age discrimination.
- 31 AJ: Yep.
- 32 MK: And she's facing how messed up we've made our economic system that we don't really hire
33 college professors anymore. We hire adjunct professors for almost no money.

- 1 AJ: Right.
- 2 MK: And - and is anybody going to hire a sixty-seven year old, you know, college professor, who's
3 transgender? You know, I - I was not this stark with her, and I -
- 4 AJ: Yeah?
- 5 MK: - actually hope she doesn't see this video, but -
- 6 AJ: Well, not for a while, anyway.
- 7 MK: But you know the intersectionality she's facing. You know, and - and to be a whole trans person,
8 you have to be the other things you are. You know?
- 9 AJ: Yes.
- 10 MK: You know, you are a Black trans woman.
- 11 AJ: Yes.
- 12 MK: You have to carry all that at once. You know? I am -
- 13 AJ: Yeah.
- 14 MK: - whatever it is I am.
- 15 AJ: There's no options I don't have.
- 16 MK: There - there just is no options. And if - and if you're - you know, if you have a disability, you're
17 carrying that with you.
- 18 AJ: Sure,
- 19 MK: And you've got to worry about that. And if I want to serve trans people, which I do, I've got to
20 understand that serving you means serving you.
- 21 AJ: Yeah.
- 22 MK: And - and I think that's exciting, that we get that. We ain't doing it right. I know it. And we'll - we
23 all got to get better all the time. But I am - I'm strangely optimistic. You might not find a lot of
24 trans leaders or progressive leaders today, January 20th, 2017, three hours - less than three
25 hours after Donald Trump has become the President of the United States, being optimistic -
- 26 AJ: Yeah.
- 27 MK: - but this is my country. This is our country.
- 28 AJ: This is our country.
- 29 MK: And we have a right to make this country the best we can be, and nobody, no matter the
30 President of the United States or not, can say this isn't our country. And I'm not done. I'm not
31 quitting. And I'm - I'm optimistic. But I do know there's going to be a bump.
- 32 AJ: Yeah.

- 1 MK: I - I'm - a bump. It's going to be rocky. We are sailing into really messed up waters right now. But
2 - but trans people aren't ordinary people. You know, we say that a lot, right? We're just -
- 3 AJ: Absolutely.
- 4 MK: We're just ordinary people.
- 5 AJ: Yeah. No.
- 6 MK: We aren't - we aren't ordinary people.
- 7 AJ: We aren't. We are not.
- 8 MK: Ordinary people don't really look at who they are, and then go about being who they really are,
9 knowing that they could lose everything: their health, their family, their life? That is
10 extraordinary.
- 11 AJ: Yeah.
- 12 MK: And you cannot stop us. We have not come this far to only come this far.
- 13 AJ: Wow. That is pretty damn amazing way to end an interview, Mara.
- 14 MK: I am so honored that you asked me to talk.
- 15 AJ: You know, I - I just want to just say, I really appreciate your - your opening - openness and
16 honesty and willingness to share. You know, at - one of the things that you said, and - and we're
17 going to wrap this up very quickly here, but - you said you, as a child, you were performing
18 gender. And, full circle, the cover of the January issue of the National Geographic magazine, has
19 on its cover, the word "gender."
- 20 MK: Yep.
- 21 AJ: And an image of a young woman. I think she's, like, fourteen years old, maybe, or...?
- 22 MK: No, like, she's eight, or seven.
- 23 AJ: Seven or eight?
- 24 MK: Yeah. Avery. Yeah, with the pink hair.
- 25 AJ: Yeah. Avery with pink hair. And her quote on the cover of that magazine, publication, in
26 response to what is the best thing about -
- 27 MK: Being a girl.
- 28 AJ: Being a girl, is that "I no longer have to perform being a boy."
- 29 MK: Yeah.
- 30 AJ: Or paraphrased in some way.
- 31 MK: Yeah.

- 1 AJ: And, you know, that - it struck me when you made that - that comment about your own
2 childhood, and - and now we have a young woman on the cover of a prominent publication
3 that's almost what you would call a staple -
- 4 MK: Yeah.
- 5 AJ: - in our cultural landscape, proclaiming gender is the - and not just transgender, but gender, in
6 and of itself, and - and it's very broad and inclusiveness of transgender, gender nonconforming,
7 gender nonbinary, identities within that whole concept, and... you know, so I'm just going to
8 concur with you that we are extraordinary people.
- 9 MK: Yep. And you ain't seen nothing yet.
- 10 AJ: Yeah.
- 11 MK: The - the - the thing about American society right now is the rules seem to be breaking down. I
12 don't know if they are, but the political rules are clearly breaking down.
- 13 AJ: Yeah.
- 14 MK: The - the - the beauty of that moment, when the rules are breaking down, is we get to make
15 rules.
- 16 AJ: We get to make rules.
- 17 MK: And -
- 18 AJ: New rules, right?
- 19 MK: New rules. And we're going to have to - we're going to have to come together as a country and
20 figure out what we're doing, 'cause all of us have messed up this country. We've messed it up
21 environmentally, we've messed it up politically, we've messed it up economically. And that's all
22 of us.
- 23 AJ: Yeah.
- 24 MK: And we've got to come together and figure out how to do that. And understanding the
25 possibilities that people see in themselves is a big part of that. So I'm - I'm ready to get to work.
- 26 AJ: All right. Let's get to work.
- 27 MK: Thanks, Andrea.
- 28 AJ: Thank you, Mara.