

Vanessa Sheridan  
Narrator

Andrea Jenkins  
Interviewer

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

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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    Vanessa Sheridan        -VS  
3
- 4    AJ:        Hello, my name is Andrea Jenkins. I am the oral historian for the Transgender Oral History  
5               Project at the University of Minnesota Tretter Collection. Today is July 12, 2016, and I am in  
6               Chicago, Illinois, at the famed Center on Halsted, and I'm here today with a very dear and long-  
7               time friend, Vanessa Sheridan. How are you, Vanessa?
- 8    VS:        I'm well, it's wonderful to see you, Andrea. Thank you for coming.
- 9    AJ:        Yeah, it's good to see you too.
- 10   VS:        It's good to be with you.
- 11   AJ:        It's been a while.
- 12   VS:        It has.
- 13   AJ:        So, Vanessa, what I'm going to ask you to do, to just get us started, is state your name and how  
14               you spell it, as well as your gender identity today and your gender assigned at birth, and the  
15               pronouns that you use.
- 16   VS:        My name is Vanessa Sheridan. That's spelled V-a-n-e-s-s-a S-h-e-r-i-d-a-n. I identify as  
17               transgender, my birth gender was male, and the pronouns I use are she/her/hers.
- 18   AJ:        Thank you. One of the things that I use to try to get people just to start remembering and  
19               reminiscing and thinking about this arc of time is to have people share with me their first  
20               memory in life. So, what's the first thing you remember, Vanessa.
- 21   VS:        Breakfast this morning.
- 22   AJ:        That's a good one, I haven't heard that.
- 23   VS:        I can remember as a very, very young child . . . I knew I was different when I was two or three.
- 24   AJ:        Is that right?
- 25   VS:        Yeah, I can remember that – feeling different. I didn't really understand what that difference  
26               meant because I had no perspective for it.
- 27   AJ:        Sure, absolutely.
- 28   VS:        I had no framework of understanding or reference for it. But, I remember feeling different. I  
29               was born a biological male but I knew that something was not typical for me and I couldn't really  
30               put my finger on it. I didn't have a vocabulary, obviously, to discuss it or talk about it or share it.  
31               And, as I grew older, I learned very quickly that being trans was not something that you  
32               discussed in a fundamentalist Southern Baptist home like mine was.
- 33   AJ:        OK.

- 1 VS: So, those are some early memories of just feeling different and trying to figure out what that  
2 meant, as an individual. So, it was a unique experience, I guess.
- 3 AJ: So, you say fundamental Southern Baptist. Were you born in the south?
- 4 VS: I was, in Asheville, North Carolina.
- 5 AJ: Is that right?
- 6 VS: That's correct.
- 7 AJ: Wow, Asheville, North Carolina. We might have to get back to that a little bit.
- 8 VS: Yes, it's breaking my heart to see what's happening in North Carolina.
- 9 AJ: They have some pretty heart breaking stuff going on down there right now.
- 10 VS: They do.
- 11 AJ: What was it like growing up in Asheville?
- 12 VS: Well, I didn't really grow up in Asheville, per se. I was born there and I lived there for the first  
13 two or three years of my life, but I think when we were about five, my family moved to Bristol,  
14 Tennessee, which is right on the Virginia-Tennessee line. And, I went to . . .
- 15 AJ: Bristol . . . B-r-i-s . . .
- 16 VS: B-r-i-s-t-o-l.
- 17 AJ: OK.
- 18 VS: And, I went to elementary school there through the 6<sup>th</sup> grade. So, we lived there until I was 11  
19 or 12, I guess, and then we moved to Orlando, Florida.
- 20 AJ: Oh, wow. OK.
- 21 VS: My father got a job in the aerospace industry down in Orlando, which was booming at the time  
22 – the industry was, Orlando wasn't booming. Orlando was just a sleepy little . . .
- 23 AJ: A sleepy little southern Florida town.
- 24 VS: Yeah, with orange groves and cows. That all changed when Disney came in later on in the  
25 1970s, but at this particular point in time it was maybe 100,000 people there so it wasn't a great  
26 metropolis or anything. But, I went to junior high and high school in Orlando, graduated from  
27 high school in Orlando. And, then went away to college after that.
- 28 AJ: Wow, you have some really deep connections to all of these . . . I'm feeling like I can't wait until  
29 the end of the interview to . . . you have some really strong connections to a lot of these sort of  
30 pulse-points, if you will, to use the name of the nightclub in Orlando where all the shootings  
31 happened.
- 32 VS: The Pulse, yes.

- 1 AJ: And then you were born in North Carolina and raised in the Deep South. How, as a transgender-  
2 identified person, how are these things impacting you or affecting you? So, what I'm talking  
3 about specifically is the House Bill 2, or HB2 as it's known, which effectively excludes  
4 transgender people from using a restroom without displaying a birth certificate in the state of  
5 North Carolina. And then, of course, in Orlando, 49 LGBT people of color were just recently shot  
6 and murdered in the past . . . what, three or four weeks now it's been?
- 7 VS: Well, my heart is broken in a lot of ways because of what I see happening in terms of pushback  
8 against the trans community. In North Carolina, for example, the HB2 bill is just an unfortunate  
9 thing that is intentionally targeting the trans community. I think that's just a terrible thing and  
10 my hope is that bill will be found unconstitutional and rendered irrelevant as soon as possible.
- 11 AJ: Yeah, I think it has to be – it's just completely . . . it can't be constitutional to make a law against  
12 one group of people. That's the first thing in the constitution – you can't do that.
- 13 VS: Exactly, right. And so, again, my hope is that it will be found unconstitutional and therefore  
14 rendered invalid. In the meantime, our transgender sisters and brothers are suffering down in  
15 North Carolina and that breaks my heart because it's a beautiful state, there are many  
16 wonderful people in North Carolina who are adamantly against this bill and who are working to  
17 try to get it overturned. In the meantime, we have to deal with the realities of the situation and  
18 it's not just, it's not fair, it's not right. One of the things I think we are seeing, however, as a  
19 result of this bill's passage is, in my opinion, an amazing paradigm shift within the American  
20 culture. People don't necessarily know everything about being transgender, but they do  
21 recognize inequality and injustice when they see it. And because of that, I think we're seeing a  
22 pendulum swing in the direction of greater acceptance for the trans community because people  
23 are seeing the injustice that is being, you know, placed upon us and they're responding to that.
- 24 AJ: Right.
- 25 VS: And going, "That's not American, that's not right, that's not how we operate as a country." And  
26 so, I think in the long run this may actually do us some good; in the short run, it's hurting like  
27 crazy. But, you know, I think long term we're going to actually gain more advocates for our side  
28 than we might have otherwise gained. So, we'll see what happens. It's just no fun to have to go  
29 through the difficulties right now.
- 30 AJ: Yeah.
- 31 VS: And then, of course, there's Pulse in Orlando. Having grown up in Orlando, I can totally  
32 empathize with that community. We had a remarkable vigil here at Center on Halsted where I  
33 work.
- 34 AJ: Is that right.
- 35 VS: We had it downstairs in the lobby, which you have been in, Andrea, and the lobby was  
36 completely packed and the overflow crowd spilled out into the street. They blocked the street  
37 off, there were so many people here.
- 38 AJ: OK.

- 1 VS: And, all the news media were here. It was really kind of a big deal. We had . . . the mayor was  
2 here . . . a lot of people. It was a remarkable tribute to . . .
- 3 AJ: Right on that Sunday, the day . . .
- 4 VS: Like two days after it happened.
- 5 AJ: OK.
- 6 VS: So, yeah, it was a remarkable tribute to the folks who had been killed. On a personal level, I was  
7 devastated. The fact that all these innocent people had been brought down just out of sheer  
8 hatred just got to me and I was in tears several times. I needed to be around community and  
9 that vigil here at Center on Halsted helped me to work through that to some degree anyway and  
10 provided that sense of support and community that I think is so important at times like that.  
11 And, the struggle goes on, the heartache goes on. It hasn't diminished. We, as a community,  
12 have to come together and resolve to try to make sure that something like that never happens  
13 again.
- 14 AJ: Wow. Well, thank you for sharing those perspectives. I appreciate it.
- 15 VS: Sure, I'm happy to.
- 16 AJ: So, you guys . . . you were growing up in Orlando and your dad was an aerospace engineer.
- 17 VS: Yes – he was working in that industry, yes.
- 18 AJ: So, you grew up pretty middle class, I would assume.
- 19 VS: Middle class, I guess, is a good way to put it. We weren't rich by any means, but we weren't  
20 poor either. We were solidly middle class.
- 21 AJ: Yeah. Did you have siblings?
- 22 VS: I'm the oldest of four. I have two sisters and a brother, all of whom still live in central Florida, by  
23 the way.
- 24 AJ: Is that right.
- 25 VS: That's right. I'm the only one that lives in the north – my brother thinks I live on a glacier or  
26 something. But, I love where I live now and I'm very happy with my situation.
- 27 AJ: How did you guys get along as children? So, you kind of have this sense from one of your  
28 earliest memories was being different. Did your family, your brothers and sisters pick up on  
29 that? Your classmates, do you think? Or, you did a good job of hiding it?
- 30 VS: I did a pretty good job of hiding it, but my mother, I think, had it figured out. She knew  
31 something was going on and that was later verified when I did finally come out to her formally.  
32 She said, "That explains an awful lot of things that I've been thinking for years." So, I think my  
33 mom kind of had it figured out. But, the rest of my family, I've never discussed it with, never  
34 talked about it with them. They are, for the most part, fairly still right-wing religious folks.
- 35 AJ: Yeah.

- 1 VS: And, I don't see any sense in starting a fight about that and creating problems if we don't need  
2 to.
- 3 AJ: Sure.
- 4 VS: So, I just don't go there with them.
- 5 AJ: Yeah. When you were a kid, though, did they pick on you or bully you? Or, your gender identity  
6 was not an issue.
- 7 VS: No, we all got along pretty well. We had the usual sibling disagreements and fights from time to  
8 time, but for the most part we all got along OK and we're still close today. That's a good thing.
- 9 AJ: School was good?
- 10 VS: School was good, I did well in school, I enjoyed school. I had a lot of friends, I was involved in a  
11 lot of activities.
- 12 AJ: Did you play any sports at all?
- 13 VS: I was on the swim team and I loved sports, still do – although I wasn't very big. I wanted to be a  
14 football player, but in my school you had to be like eight feet tall and 400 pounds.
- 15 AJ: Well, in central Florida, that's the home of football.
- 16 VS: It's a hotbed of football and our team was second in the state my senior year. So, you had to be  
17 pretty good to be on that team. But, yeah, sports has always been an enjoyable thing for me –  
18 and I still enjoy it, along with many other activities as well. I was doing a lot of music when I was  
19 in school – and still do music. I've been playing a guitar and singing and writing and stuff in  
20 bands all my life.
- 21 AJ: Is that right?
- 22 VS: Yeah, moving to Chicago just a few months ago, I haven't really had a chance to do much music  
23 here yet, but hopefully in time that will happen as well.
- 24 AJ: So, do you play in different clubs and venues and that kind of stuff?
- 25 VS: Oh, I toured the country with a rock band for several years back in the 1970s.
- 26 AJ: Really? Which band?
- 27 VS: A band called Easy. We were doing the nightclub circuit around the country and it was fun. I  
28 was single at the time and I was just having a great time out doing the rock-n-roll thing.
- 29 AJ: Wow.
- 30 VS: It was a unique experience. I recommend everybody should have a chance to try it at least  
31 once. But, it was an interesting way to make a living – we'll put it that way.
- 32 AJ: Yeah. I just interviewed another trans woman who makes a living as a rock star, Laura Jane  
33 Grace.

- 1 VS: Oh, yes, yes – Laura Jane Grace from Against Me!.
- 2 AJ: Yeah. So, that was a quite a fascinating interview.
- 3 VS: I bet.
- 4 AJ: But, I had no idea about this and it would be wonderful if you had sort of mementos or some  
5 things from that era of your life that you would . . .
- 6 VS: I've got some incriminating pictures.
- 7 AJ: . . . that you might want to share and keep for posterity at the . . .
- 8 VS: Well, you know, I've got lots of marketing materials and things like that from the old days –  
9 pictures and flyers and just promotional materials.
- 10 AJ: Promotional materials, yeah.
- 11 VS: But, music has always been a part of my life. I love to sing. I play about a half a dozen  
12 instruments. I actually worked for a documentary film company for a while and I wrote the  
13 score and recorded the score for two documentary films, which was really fun.
- 14 AJ: Wonderful.
- 15 VS: I enjoy music a lot. I'm a rock-n-roller at heart, I guess, and always will be. It's still fun to get out  
16 and play. For a while, I was the lead singer with a 10-piece horn band in Minneapolis and had a  
17 great time doing that.
- 18 AJ: Which band?
- 19 VS: Well, we never gave ourselves a name, which is kind of weird. We did Chicago, Blood, Sweat  
20 and Tears, and stuff like that. It was a lot of fun, great musicians, and I got to be the lead singer.  
21 It was just a really great time. So, again, music has been important to me and something I've  
22 always done and I really enjoyed it.
- 23 AJ: That's awesome. I know you're an accomplished writer and author as well.
- 24 VS: Well, I do the best I can. You're pretty good yourself.
- 25 AJ: How many books do you have?
- 26 VS: I've written three. I'm currently working on a new book on the concept of gender authenticity.
- 27 AJ: Gender authenticity.
- 28 VS: And that's a really unique concept that I've been sharing with corporate audiences, primarily,  
29 for the last year or two. I just think it's a very interesting paradigm that people seem to really  
30 relate to.
- 31 AJ: Can you share a little bit of that theory here with us?
- 32 VS: Here's the definition of gender authenticity. It's the right to express one's identity and/or  
33 intention without fear of coercion to conform to gender stereotypes. So, in other words, it



- 1 removes the burden of having to comply with the gender binary. It also helps remove the  
2 categorization that we get from the alphabet soup of LGBTQAIXYZ because when people are  
3 simply allowed to be authentic and permitted to be their authentic selves, we don't have to put  
4 people into boxes anymore.
- 5 AJ: Wow.
- 6 VS: We can remove those categories and people can simply live their lives in a way that works for  
7 them. And the beauty of the concept is that it is universal. It applies to everybody. I don't care  
8 who you are – you can be a soccer mom, you can be a politician, you can be a ditch digger, it  
9 doesn't matter who you are, the key is to live your life with authenticity because that is the key  
10 to integrity, personal integrity. And integrity is the key to happiness and fulfillment in life.
- 11 AJ: Absolutely.
- 12 VS: So, I really like the concept and it's been fun to share it with people. Usually the light goes on in  
13 their eyes when I start to explain it and they go, "Wow, I can do that too." And, so that's what . .  
14 .
- 15 AJ: Because we all have a gender identity, right?
- 16 VS: Of course, yeah, but it can vary widely from person to person and that's OK. The trick is to live  
17 your life in a way that is authentic for you – whatever that means. So, you get to decide, and  
18 that's what I'm writing my book about.
- 19 AJ: Wow, that's beautiful.
- 20 VS: Thanks.
- 21 AJ: Good luck. I can't wait until the book becomes available.
- 22 VS: Me too. It will be fun – and my hope is that it will help a lot of folks.
- 23 AJ: You also do a lot of training and traveling and speaking.
- 24 VS: I do. I've been very fortunate to have opportunities to do that over the years. I've been doing it  
25 for quite a while now, working with a lot of major corporations and government agencies across  
26 the country, providing information on trans awareness and the transgender community and  
27 what that means to . . . whether it be industry or to the government or whatever – to society.  
28 People . . . I found that people often don't know that much about the trans phenomenon, and  
29 often what they do know, or think they know, is perhaps inaccurate, maybe misinformed. And  
30 sometimes it just gets skewed or unduly influenced by the sensationalism of the media.
- 31 AJ: Sure.
- 32 VS: The *Jerry Springer* shows of the world.
- 33 AJ: The Jerry Spring effect.
- 34 VS: Yeah, because a lot of folks get their idea of who transgender people are from watching shows  
35 like *Maury Povich* or something. It's important, I think, to provide people with the facts rather

- 1 than stereotypes and the sensationalism and so that's really what I try to do is talk about the  
2 confluence of sexual orientation and gender identity and gender expression and this gender  
3 authenticity piece and how all those work together to create the transgender phenomenon.
- 4 AJ: Wow.
- 5 VS: So, I've been doing a lot of that over the last several years and I've been very fortunate to have a  
6 lot of opportunities to do it.
- 7 AJ: So, is that a part of your role here at the Center on Halsted?
- 8 VS: Very much so, yes.
- 9 AJ: And, can you just tell us a little bit about the Center on Halsted and then your specific role in this  
10 organization?
- 11 VS: Yeah. Center on Halsted is the largest LGBT community organization in the Midwest and it's my  
12 understanding it's the third largest in the country, after New York and LA. And, we serve over  
13 1,000 people a day here at Center on Halsted, we're located in the Lakeview area of Chicago,  
14 and we have programming for all kinds of folks across the LGBT spectrum – from young people  
15 to seniors to . . . we have HIV prevention, anti-violence prevention programs. We have GED  
16 programs for people that need to get their high school diplomas.
- 17 AJ: I just saw like 30 kids coming out of the elevator.
- 18 VS: Yes, we have . . . we do a daycare camp here in the summer for little kids who are out of school  
19 and that sort of thing, younger kids. It really cuts across the entire spectrum of the community,  
20 and it serves . . . we are an LGBT community center and so that's our primary focus is to move  
21 the LGBT community forward in whatever ways that we can and we're constantly creating new  
22 events, new programming, new opportunities to bring the community together, and provide  
23 resources for them. So, it's really an amazing place to work and I love being here. My role, my  
24 job title, is Director of Transgender Relations and Community Engagement. So, that's a long title  
25 that means a lot of different things, depending on who you're talking to. But, so far, my focus . .  
26 . I've been here since February, and my focus is to not only get out into the community and put  
27 a face on Center on Halsted for different community groups and that sort of thing, but also to  
28 provide a training and speaking and presentations and that sort of thing, on the transgender  
29 phenomenon itself, as a representative of Center on Halsted. So, it's a multi-faceted role. I'm  
30 involved in creating new programs and helping to organize events and put them together. In  
31 fact, I just spent several hours recently just putting our calendar together for the coming fiscal  
32 year of all the trans events that we're planning to produce here. So, it's a multi-faceted role and  
33 it's something that I really, really love and I'm just embracing it and getting out, as I said, just  
34 meeting all kinds of people in the community, lots of politicians, lots of community activists and  
35 advocates – it's just . . .
- 36 AJ: Business leaders, I assume.
- 37 VS: Yeah, exactly, working with major corporations here in Chicago. I just did a thing at  
38 PricewaterhouseCoopers, I just did a training last week with the leadership of the Chicagoland

- 1           YMCA. So, I just have a lot of different opportunities to interact with the community in different  
2           ways and in different capacities, and that's really enjoyable for me.
- 3   AJ:     Oh, wow. Congratulations on this new job.
- 4   VS:     It's wonderful to be here and to have this opportunity.
- 5   AJ:     So, you knew early on that you were kind of different, but you didn't really have language for it.  
6           When did you come to realize, "I am not the gender I was assigned at birth."
- 7   VS:     That was a process, not an event, and it took place over a period of years. I do remember trying  
8           on my sister's things when I was pretty young, at home . . . that's a pretty typical thing, I think,  
9           for a lot of trans people.
- 10   AJ:    Which usually doesn't involve, "I know this is who I am," right? It's usually just like an  
11           exploration . . .
- 12   VS:    Yeah, exploration and experimentation – just to see what it was like and whether or not it  
13           worked for me – and it did. But, I was also very careful not to let anybody know. We never  
14           talked about it, I never discussed it with anybody, and frankly I grew up thinking I was probably  
15           the only one in the world that was crazy enough to be that way. I know, now, that wasn't the  
16           case but at the time, this was pre-internet stuff, and the only role models out there were fairly  
17           undesirable ones that I couldn't relate to.
- 18   AJ:    Sure.
- 19   VS:    And so, it was very much an isolating kind of experience. Again, I felt like I was the only one in  
20           the world. And, I struggled with what that meant in the context of my life. Does it mean I'm  
21           gay? Does it mean I'm a drag queen? What does it mean?
- 22   AJ:    Right, yeah.
- 23   VS:    I didn't know. Again, all the role models and images I had were fairly negative. So, it was just a  
24           process, as I said, of exploration and experimentation and trying to figure out what it meant.  
25           And then, put it into context in terms of who I am as a human being.
- 26   AJ:    Yeah.
- 27   VS:    So, that journey or that sort of process of becoming . . . and I understand that it's really never  
28           ending, but when did you begin to really publicly express your true gender identity?
- 29   AJ:    In 1987, actually. I came out to my spouse. We had long talks about that.
- 30   VS:    Your current spouse?
- 31   AJ:    My current spouse, we've been married for almost 40 years now. It will be 40 years next June.
- 32   VS:    And, we struggled with it. Fortunately, we got some good counseling, we worked through that.  
33           It took us a while to reach a comfort level to where my gender situation could exist within the  
34           context of our relationship.
- 35   AJ:    Sure.

- 1 VS: Like any relationships, it has its ups and downs and you struggle – sometimes you win,  
2 sometimes you lose, sometimes you take two steps forward and a couple steps back, and that  
3 continues to this day because we're constantly changing and evolving and growing.
- 4 AJ: You're humans is what you're telling me.
- 5 VS: We're humans. The dynamic continues to shift all the time. It's a learning curve and we're  
6 certainly on that curve. So, that was just sort of a beginning of when I began to go public with it.  
7 I joined an organization in Minneapolis called the City of Lakes Crossgender Community.
- 8 AJ: Is that right?
- 9 VS: Which still exists.
- 10 AJ: Yes.
- 11 VS: And, this was back in the very early days of that organization – 1987. I mean, we're going way  
12 back.
- 13 AJ: CLCC.
- 14 VS: CLCC. I will never forget the first time I went out of my house crossdressed. Actually, my wife  
15 and I had had an argument. She was going to go with me to the CLCC meeting and we'd had an  
16 argument and she decided, "I'm not going." So, she stayed home and I said, "Well, I'm  
17 committed to this, I'm going." So, I got in my car and it was the first time I'd ever been out of  
18 my house and my knees were shaking – I was terrified.
- 19 AJ: Heart pounding.
- 20 VS: Oh, I was probably driving 20 miles an hour all the way to the meeting because I was afraid to  
21 get picked up by the police.
- 22 AJ: Right.
- 23 VS: At the time, the gatherings were fairly small – they were so small we could usually have them at  
24 somebody's house. So, I had the address of where this meeting was going to be and I drove to  
25 that address. I think I drove around the block about a half-a-dozen times just trying to get up  
26 the nerve to stop and get out of the car.
- 27 AJ: Wow.
- 28 VS: But, I finally did. I parked on the street, I believe, right out in front of the house. I got out; there  
29 were some other cars there so I knew . . . I was pretty sure it was the right place.
- 30 AJ: Yeah.
- 31 VS: I got out of the car and I'm quite sure they heard my knees knocking from a couple blocks away.  
32 But, I went up to the front door and rang the doorbell and somebody opened the door and they  
33 said, "Hi, come on in." And, I did . . . I walked in and for the first time in my life I got to  
34 experience what it was like to be in a roomful of other trans people.
- 35 AJ: Wow. What was that like?

- 1 VS: It was like . . . you know, in the movie *The Wizard of Oz* and everything changes from black and  
2 white to color?
- 3 AJ: Yes.
- 4 VS: That's exactly what it felt like for me.
- 5 AJ: Wow.
- 6 VS: It was like the color came on. I was terrified when I walked in the door and within two minutes,  
7 I think I was floating six inches off the floor the rest of the night.
- 8 AJ: Wow.
- 9 VS: I felt like, "These are my people. I have come home and I'm in . . ." It was the first time I'd ever  
10 been in a supportive environment where everyone shared this trans experience to a greater or  
11 lesser degree. I was talking with everybody and listening to stories and learning from them and  
12 talking just a little bit about myself, although I didn't have a whole lot to say. But, it was so  
13 liberating to me to be in the company of others who shared that experience. And, that was the  
14 beginning, for me, of realizing that I can do this. Now . . .
- 15 AJ: It was that first little step.
- 16 VS: Yeah, it was that first step. Stepping out into that support group environment that gave me the  
17 courage and the encouragement to be my authentic self in a new way that I had never  
18 experienced before. And, I was accepted, I was befriended, I was supported, I was encouraged, I  
19 was just really beside myself with excitement and the realization that here was something I had  
20 wanted for my entire life, but was only now finding. I've never really gotten over that; I still feel  
21 that way when I get around community – it's like coming home.
- 22 AJ: Wow.
- 23 VS: That was a major, major incident for me. I continued to be part of CLCC for several more years.  
24 In 1991, I took a major step and decided that I could maybe do some public outreach and I did  
25 my very first speaking engagement in 1991. That was 25 years ago and I spoke up at United  
26 Theological Seminary in New Brighton. I spoke to a theology class up there. It went well and  
27 that led to a few other opportunities that just continued to build over the years. In 1996, five  
28 years later, I actually attended my first convention, or conference, for transgender folks. It was  
29 the IFGE Conference. It was held in Minneapolis that year.
- 30 AJ: In Minneapolis – I was there.
- 31 VS: Yeah.
- 32 AJ: I think Virginia Prince was there.
- 33 VS: Yes, I met Virginia Prince there.
- 34 AJ: I met her as well.
- 35 VS: Allison Lange and some other folks.

- 1 AJ: Phyllis Frye.
- 2 VS: Yes. And, that was the first time I had ever been in a room . . . I remember the gala on the last  
3 night of the conference, there were probably a couple hundred people there and it was the first  
4 time I'd ever been in a room with that many trans people all at once. I was overwhelmed; it was  
5 so moving to me because I'm looking around the room going, "There are hundreds of people  
6 here and they all have these amazing stories about their journeys." I felt like I'm in the middle  
7 of family, I'm in the middle of community – it was very moving for me. I cried a couple of times  
8 that night, I remember – just because I was so overwhelmed emotionally at that experience. It  
9 made a huge impact on me and I've never forgotten it. That was 20 years ago and I still  
10 remember it vividly. So, that was a major stepping stone for me. I also gave a couple of  
11 presentations at that conference too. In any case, I continued to do outreach, public outreach,  
12 at any place somebody would have me come and speak and most of the time it was for free and  
13 every now and then they'd give me some small honorarium or something like that. But, that  
14 was the beginning of my involvement with the public and coming out and developing a public  
15 persona that continues to this day. It was good training ground, I guess, for me because it was  
16 very much unplanned. There was no master plan or strategy – it was just like take whatever  
17 comes along.
- 18 AJ: You didn't have a publicist?
- 19 VS: No, no, no – it was all just me.
- 20 AJ: Or agent?
- 21 VS: No, there was no agent, no publicist, no nothing – it was just me. I was a one-person shop. I  
22 was working fulltime at a straight job, but I was going out and doing these other things in my  
23 spare time and that gradually just sort of started to build up and that's when I started to do a lot  
24 of writing. My first book came out in 2001 and in 2002, that book was . . .
- 25 AJ: What was the title?
- 26 VS: The title was *Crossing Over* and the subtitle is *Liberating the Transgendered Christian* because I  
27 was really concerned with theological perspectives on this, spirituality has always been a big  
28 part of my life. I wanted to create a resource for the community as well as for myself, really,  
29 that provided some insights and hopefully some tools and resources for people who were  
30 struggling with their spirituality in the context of being trans. So, in 2002, that book became a  
31 finalist for a Lambda Literary Award, which was gratifying.
- 32 AJ: Nice, very nice.
- 33 VS: The following year I began working on another book with an another author named Virginia  
34 Ramey Mollenkott. We wrote a book together called *Transgender Journeys*, which, in many  
35 ways, was sort of a continuation of my first book – just further fleshing out, really, of the  
36 theological concepts that I'd started in that first book. In 2004, that book became a finalist for a  
37 Lambda Literary Award as well.
- 38 AJ: So, help me with Virginia's name.

- 1 VS: Virginia Ramey R-a-m-e-y Mollenkott M-o-l-l-e-n-k-o-t-t.
- 2 AJ: OK.
- 3 VS: And I'll tell you what I think is a funny story about that. She was a retired college professor and  
4 when we originally got in touch . . .
- 5 AJ: Trans-identified?
- 6 VS: Well, at the time, she identified as a lesbian.
- 7 AJ: OK.
- 8 VS: Later on in the process she identified as trans.
- 9 AJ: OK.
- 10 VS: Now, she was in her 70s at that time. And, when we started our project together, she said,  
11 "Now, you need to be aware of this. I don't use a computer." I said, "So, how do you write?"  
12 She'd written 13 books; she said, "I write everything out in longhand." I said, "OK, you go ahead  
13 and write out what you want in longhand, you can mail it to me, and I'll type it all up and I'll add  
14 my piece to it and we'll go back and forth." It took us nine months to write that book because  
15 she didn't use a computer, she didn't use email – none of that. Everything was done through  
16 snail mail.
- 17 AJ: Wow.
- 18 VS: So, she would write her stuff out in longhand, send me pages and pages and pages of writing in  
19 the mail and I would get it, type it into my computer, and then we put this book together. So, it  
20 was a unique way to write a book and quite a process, but we got it done.
- 21 AJ: Well, that's kind of the way people used to write books all the time.
- 22 VS: Sure, absolutely – before the advent of electronics, sure.
- 23 AJ: I just want to point that out.
- 24 VS: Yes, I know – at least we weren't using quills and ink and that kind of thing. But, so – yeah, it  
25 was a unique way to write a book, particularly to collaborate, I think, because one of us was  
26 using a computer and one of us wasn't. So, we made the best of the situation and got through  
27 the book and it came out. Those two books have helped a lot of people and I'm very grateful for  
28 that.
- 29 AJ: Yeah, and they got a lot of attention and they were nominated for . . .
- 30 VS: Yeah, and it kind of got me known a little bit out there, not only in the literary community but in  
31 the spiritual community as well. However, after having done that, I began to think to myself,  
32 "OK, how can I broaden my reach? How can I expand the scope of what I'm doing and get in  
33 touch with more people and share this message of trans inclusion?"
- 34 AJ: Sure.

1 VS: So, I started to think to myself, “Well, where are all the people during the daytime – they’re all  
2 at work.” So, I started doing research on the workplace and I was working really hard to do that  
3 and took a lot of notes and found quite a bit of research . . . or resources, I’m sorry. And,  
4 starting working on another book that eventually became a book called, *The Complete Guide to*  
5 *Transgender in the Workplace*. And that book was published in 2009. It was the first full-length  
6 hardcover book on that particular topic ever to be released by a mainstream publisher. It has  
7 helped a lot of people, not only in this country, but around the world. I’ve been very fortunate  
8 in that regard. I think one of the nicest things that happened was I got an email from a trans  
9 person in Madrid, Spain, who sent me an email that said, “I just wanted you to know, I work for  
10 the telephone company in Madrid and I recently just transitioned on the job and I used your  
11 book as one of my primary resources to do that. So, I’m just writing to say thank you.” That was  
12 just really gratifying – very humbling. I got to be a small part of somebody’s journey half way  
13 around the world – and I’ve never met them.

14 AJ: Never met them.

15 VS: Never met them, probably never will. But, I got to be a part of their journey and you can’t put a  
16 price tag on something like that. It’s just so rewarding for me to know that I had a small role to  
17 play in that person’s journey. And, that’s why I wrote the book – was to help people and make a  
18 difference – and for that person, we did. So, I’m grateful for that and humbled by it.

19 AJ: Awesome.

20 VS: And, so, the book’s publication led to opportunities for me to get out and start doing a lot of  
21 speaking and presenting and training in the corporate sphere. And, that led to opportunities to  
22 work with Fortune 500 companies. I’ve worked with EcoLab and W.W. Grainger, Best Buy and  
23 HSBC . . . major corporations like that around the country, in different locations. I also got the  
24 opportunity to work with federal agencies like the EEOC. I did quite a bit of work for them a  
25 couple of years ago, actually, at different conferences around the country doing presentations  
26 on trans issues. I’ve been very fortunate in that regard and have had a lot of different venues to  
27 be able to share that message in.

28 AJ: Wow, that’s incredible. What have been some of the more challenging aspects of coming out as  
29 transgender – that you’ve experienced?

30 VS: Well, there’s always a struggle with, I think, yourself, really – self-acceptance has been a  
31 struggle. When you grow up and all the negatives . . . all the images and messages that you here  
32 about being trans are negative, it’s pretty hard to turn that around and develop a positive sense  
33 of self-esteem and a positive self-image. I’ve had to work really hard at that over the years.  
34 Self-acceptance is a big, big deal for trans people because the culture is set up to work against  
35 you in that regard.

36 AJ: To extinguish you almost.

37 VS: Exactly. And, in some cases, to legislate you out of existence, which is what they’re trying to do  
38 in North Carolina and other places. So, when that is going on, it’s a struggle to be who you are  
39 and to be authentic and be legitimate and honest and live with integrity – and that’s a struggle, I  
40 think, for everybody to some degree. But, for trans people, in particular, there’s this added



- 1 layer of complexity that goes along with your gender identity and it makes it something of a  
2 struggle to live a healthy, happy, fulfilled life. I'm more fortunate than most – I freely admit that  
3 and I recognize that and I'm humbled and grateful for it. I have never gone hungry, I've never  
4 been homeless, I've never had to do sex work. And, unfortunately, a lot of folks in our  
5 community have had those problems and have had to deal with those struggles. And so, I know  
6 how fortunate I am to have not been in that position and I don't take it lightly. But, that doesn't  
7 mean that there haven't been struggles; it just means that they haven't been of that type.
- 8 AJ: Sure.
- 9 VS: I feel like I've spent 25 years working to get to where I am right now – in many ways, kind of like  
10 you, Andrea. You've spent a lot of time working to get to the position you're in right now.
- 11 AJ: You're absolutely right.
- 12 VS: I can relate to that; it didn't happen overnight. It didn't happen overnight and we did a lot of  
13 groundwork to make it possible for these things to happen in our lives. I feel a tremendous  
14 responsibility to the trans community, to do the very best I can to educate people about the  
15 realities of being trans. And, here's my thought on that. I think education is the real key to  
16 public acceptance and to public respect because education raises awareness. When people  
17 have the facts, their awareness level goes up and once the awareness level goes up, that's when  
18 progress can begin to occur. I am really invested in the movement to achieve both legal equality  
19 for the trans community as well as lived equality. Because I think we need both.
- 20 AJ: Right.
- 21 VS: Legal equality will provide the legal framework in which we can operate, but lived equality is just  
22 as important because that's about the freedom to buy a car and buy a house and go to the  
23 grocery store and live our lives openly and authentically as the people that we are without fear  
24 of retribution or retaliation or harassment or discrimination.
- 25 AJ: Or violence.
- 26 VS: Or violence, exactly, which so many African-American trans women, in particular, have to deal  
27 with on a daily basis. We see so many people in our community, particularly trans women of  
28 color, who have been murdered just simply because of who they are. It's sad; it breaks my  
29 heart. We have a lot of educating to do to get the public to understand that trans people pose  
30 no threat to anybody. We're just out here trying to live our lives . . .
- 31 AJ: Not because of our trans-ness anyway, right?
- 32 VS: Exactly. Trans is not a disease, it's not an illness, it's certainly nothing to be afraid of. It's just a  
33 variation on the human condition and we are who we are and we pose no threat to anybody.  
34 That's my hope is that we can begin to get the general public to understand that – and to be fair,  
35 I think we've seen a tremendous increase in public awareness of trans people over the last two  
36 or three years.
- 37 AJ: Oh, absolutely.

- 1 VS: And particularly because of some of the celebrities who have come out. Caitlyn Jenner's  
2 visibility, Chaz Bono – people like that. RuPaul . . .
- 3 AJ: I just saw Laverne Cox on *The Tonight Show* last night.
- 4 VS: Yeah, she's been on . . . Janet Mock, people like that. So, the visibility quotient is increasing and  
5 because that's increasing, so is public awareness. Now, again, a lot of people are still very mis-  
6 informed about what it means to be trans and that's where the education piece comes in. But,  
7 we are seeing a greater overall awareness of the trans community and I think that's a good  
8 thing, that's a healthy thing. What we have a responsibility to do is to educate people as to  
9 what that means and why we are an asset to society as opposed to a detriment to society. We  
10 are contributors. Trans people are some of the smartest, most talented, most capable people  
11 on the planet – all we need is the opportunity to prove that. And, people like you, Andrea, are  
12 doing the work and you're proving that trans people make strong contributions to the world.
- 13 AJ: Absolutely.
- 14 VS: There are a lot of us – unfortunately, as we have learned from studies around the country, the  
15 unemployment rate for trans people is generally twice the national average and for trans people  
16 of color, it's four times the national average. That's a lot of talent going to waste and we, as a  
17 society, need to do better. We've got to create ways to get people employed so that they can  
18 make those contributions and be the assets to society that we're capable of being.
- 19 AJ: Powerful.
- 20 VS: Well, it's true. It's not me, it's the truth. I feel a distinct responsibility to play whatever role that  
21 I possibly can to raise that awareness on the part of the public to create opportunities for the  
22 trans community so that we can achieve social equality. But, I don't think you can have social  
23 equality until you first get financial equality – and you only get financial equality through  
24 employment. So, we've got to create these conduits for trans talent to get jobs and to get into  
25 the mainstream, make a living wage so that we can function as contributing members of society.
- 26 AJ: Absolutely. So, to the extent that you feel comfortable discussing this, Vanessa, please tell me  
27 about any medical interventions you have undergone or are considering as a part of your gender  
28 identity.
- 29 VS: I'll be honest with you. I identify as transgender but I have not had any medical interventions.  
30 That may surprise some folks, but I've never claimed to have had any. A lot of people think I  
31 have and they just assume that I have, but that is not the case. I've never taken hormones, I've  
32 never had any surgeries. I have the equipment I started out with and I intend to keep it that  
33 way. I've never had a desire to physically change my body to any great degree. That does not,  
34 however, in any way, lessen or mitigate my identification as trans. I feel very strongly about  
35 that and I express myself that way. I work full-time as Vanessa, I am known throughout this city  
36 and community as Vanessa and that's fine with me, that's how I intend to continue to live.
- 37 AJ: Wow, well thank you for your honesty and willingness to answer that question, but also for  
38 dispelling this notion that our identity is somehow tied to our genitalia.

- 1 VS: Exactly. Gender identity comes from the brain, not from the genitals. And, again, I knew as  
2 early as two or three that I was different and later on, that difference began to manifest itself  
3 much more clearly in terms of my own gender identity. I strongly identify as trans and have for  
4 many, many years and feel like I have made some contributions to the community, want to  
5 continue to try to make contributions, and have no qualms whatsoever about that.
- 6 AJ: So, how has your identity shifted over time?
- 7 VS: That's interesting.
- 8 AJ: And, was there labels that you kind of equated to those?
- 9 VS: Yeah, it has shifted, I think. Obviously, originally my identity was male because that's what  
10 everybody told me I was.
- 11 AJ: Yeah, "You're a guy".
- 12 VS: And there were parts of masculinity, and still are, that I appreciate and enjoy and love and am  
13 not interested, necessarily, in giving up.
- 14 AJ: Absolutely.
- 15 VS: On the other hand, I've always known that deep down there was a strong feminist component  
16 to my personality and when I first began actively confronting that, I said, "Well, I'm a  
17 crossdresser," because that was a description of the behavior that I was engaged in.
- 18 AJ: Yeah.
- 19 VS: And, I clung to that label for a long time. But, over the years, as I have become more  
20 comfortable in my own skin and in my own self-acceptance, I have begun to realize that it's  
21 deeper than just being a crossdresser – this is about my identification as a human being and as a  
22 member of the larger trans community. And so, the term transgender just seems to fit for me  
23 and I'm very comfortable with it even though some people may disagree with that – and that's  
24 fine, they have the right to disagree all they want. But, I have the right to self-identify, and I do.
- 25 AJ: That's what this whole movement is about in my mind.
- 26 VS: Absolutely it is, the right to self-identify. And, that's how I identify - as transgender. People who  
27 have problems with that, that's exactly what it is – their problem, not mine.
- 28 AJ: Wow. Looking back over your decision to express your true gender identity, what have been  
29 some pivotal moments that have defined your new life? And, would you have done anything  
30 different.
- 31 VS: Oh, goodness – pivotal moments. Well, I think we all have things we might have done  
32 differently. I think you'd be a rare person if you wouldn't go back and change a few things if you  
33 could. I would have . . . if I could go back and do it all over again, knowing what I know now, in  
34 particular, I would have come out at a much earlier age than I did. But, again, you have to  
35 remember that when I came out back in 1987, there weren't a lot of support groups, there was  
36 no internet, there weren't many books – there just weren't a lot of resources available to

1 provide support for someone who wanted to express their gender identity in some different  
2 ways. You're a product of your time, I think, and your era. I certainly am, and was, and will  
3 continue to be to a certain degree. I am very happy for young people today because the  
4 resources available to them are significantly greater than what they were when I was 20. I'm  
5 happy for that and I think that's a wonderful thing. We want to try to create more resources.  
6 One of the things that thrills me is the fact that there are beginning to be transgender medical  
7 programs for young trans kids across the country in major cities – LA, New York, Chicago, Dallas.  
8 There are clinics and facilities that provide . . .

9 AJ: Minneapolis.

10 VS: Yeah . . . treatment for young trans kids and help for their families too. Here in Chicago, we  
11 have Lurie Children's Hospital that has a very strong gender and sexuality program and they  
12 work with really young kids. They do a fabulous job. A couple of years ago I had a conference in  
13 Asheville, North Carolina and I met Dr. Johanna Olson from Los Angeles Children's Hospital who  
14 works kids age 3-18 and their families. I wish something like that had been available when I was  
15 young because I would have certainly wanted to check it out and hopefully taken advantage of  
16 it. So, that's encouraging to me and I find that to be a remarkable turn of events, and it bodes  
17 well for the future of the transgender community, I think, and for our young children.

18 AJ: Yeah, and the struggle that people face in their early years – sort of, this confusion, gender  
19 confusion, that I know I experienced as a young person and I'm sure that people have these  
20 ideations around gender and they're experiencing that same level of discomfort too and they  
21 can be alleviated through these programs. You're absolutely right.

22 VS: It's just so encouraging to see that happening because you don't have to feel like you're the only  
23 one in the world, you are taken seriously as a human being, and your gender identity is not  
24 rejected or laughed off or dismissed, but it is treated with the respect and dignity that it  
25 deserves. That is a tremendous leap in terms of helping people cope with the complexities of  
26 gender.

27 AJ: Have there been times, Vanessa, when people have either been really helpful to you as it relates  
28 to your gender identity? And/or really insensitive and hostile and discriminatory? For example,  
29 I'm thinking about the medical industry, public safety realm, and that kind of stuff – the police  
30 department.

31 VS: I have been very fortunate for the most part in my life. I have not experienced a whole lot of  
32 discrimination. Now, let me walk that back just a little bit because, as I said earlier, I grew up in  
33 a fundamental Southern Baptist home, which was not the most promising environment for a  
34 young trans kid.

35 AJ: Sure.

36 VS: In fact, it was just not something you talked about or brought up, or even made known. My  
37 struggles with gender identity were pretty much just kept under the table and in the closet for a  
38 long, long time as a direct result of the environment in which I was raised. I will say that once I  
39 reached adulthood and I began exploring this, I did get a lot of support. I mentioned earlier  
40 about the experience I had when I went to my first CLCC meeting. I will never forget the

1 kindness of those people to me. They were so welcoming and so good to me. Nobody rejected  
2 me or criticized me or caused any problems or anything for me. All they were was supportive  
3 and encouraging and just genuinely good to me, and I will always be grateful for that because  
4 what that did, in turn, was it gave me courage to continue the exploration and the growth that I  
5 was experiencing. It encouraged me to maybe get out in public and do a little shopping, which I  
6 had never done before – as Vanessa. It encouraged me to make new friends, it encouraged me  
7 to go to events, it encouraged me to get outside my comfort zone a little bit because I knew that  
8 they had my back and they were there for me and I didn't have to be a lone ranger. I could call  
9 up a friend and say, "Hey, I'm struggling with this. What do you think?" And, then I could get  
10 honest feedback from somebody who understood.

11 AJ: Right.

12 VS: So, that was really pivotal for me. It helped shape and form my emerging gender identity. And  
13 then, I mentioned the time that I went to that first conference, that IFGE Conference in 1996,  
14 that was a pivotal moment for me in terms of seeing the larger trans community come together  
15 and celebrate itself. I had never even thought of celebrating being trans, that had never even  
16 crossed my radar screen. Why in the world would anyone do that? But, all of a sudden, here  
17 was a whole roomful of people that were celebrating being who they are and being together in  
18 community. And, it was a revelation. I never even knew it was possible to have transgender  
19 pride.

20 AJ: Yeah.

21 VS: If anything, all I'd ever felt was shame and guilt.

22 AJ: Shame and guilt, hide it any way I can.

23 VS: Isolation, trying to hide and be very ashamed of who and what I was. All of a sudden, now, I'm  
24 in the middle of a couple of hundred people who are proud, who are happy, who are celebrating  
25 their uniqueness, their gender identity, and a whole new world had opened up. I'm going, "Wait  
26 a minute? It's possible to be proud of this? My God." So, that was a pivotal thing for me, and it  
27 started me on a journey to explore what it meant to be proud to be trans – and that journey  
28 continues to this day, I'm still learning about that. I experienced my first Chicago Pride parade  
29 just a couple of weeks ago.

30 AJ: June 28<sup>th</sup>, I believe.

31 VS: Yeah, June 28. And, the beauty of it was, I had the opportunity to be part of the WCPT radio  
32 broadcast of the Pride parade. They did the broadcast from here, at Center on Halsted.

33 AJ: Oh, wow. So, what's the parade route?

34 VS: It came right by our window here at Center on Halsted. This is ground zero for the parade.

35 AJ: OK.

36 VS: So, I got to enjoy it with a million of my closest friends here in Chicago. Not only that, but I had  
37 the great opportunity to help do radio commentary for the parade, which was fabulous. It was

- 1 just a lot of fun and it demonstrated to me, again . . . because it was so close on the heels of the  
2 Orlando shootings . . .
- 3 AJ: Yeah, it was a week.
- 4 VS: It was both incredibly moving and sobering and celebratory at the same time. We were  
5 mourning the deaths of our family members at the same time we were celebrating the life that  
6 they lived and that we are all living together in community. It was an incredibly moving  
7 experience on a lot of different levels for me. Now, I'd seen Pride parades before but this was  
8 my first one in Chicago. It was huge and it was colorful and it was over the top and it was  
9 glorious – I loved it. I can't wait until next year. So, that's been meaningful for me, I'm still  
10 processing that really. The fact that all of these people come together and celebrate being  
11 proud of being gender diverse, sexually diverse, of being different and unique and that's OK.  
12 Different is not bad, different is just different.
- 13 AJ: Yes.
- 14 VS: And sometimes it can be really, really good and I'm continuing to learn that and see it  
15 manifested in different ways in people's lives and expressions and appearances and that sort of  
16 thing. My work here at Center on Halstead continues to expose me to different groups of  
17 gender diverse people around the city and the area. I've been making it a point to get out and  
18 meet with local support groups and that sort of thing as much as possible so that I can gain  
19 some insight. I'm really working to get to know people in the community of color because I  
20 think that's important, not only for this organization but for me to try to learn more about what  
21 those experiences are like – not that I can identify with being African-American but at least I can  
22 hear the stories and I can begin to empathize to a certain degree anyway. I think that's  
23 important for all of us to try to do, particularly in these times of craziness and lots of shootings  
24 and that sort of thing.
- 25 AJ: Yeah, I just kind of wanted to bring that up a little bit because we're in the city of Chicago, which  
26 is a very large city, it has a long sort of troubled history around race relations, and I can say that  
27 because this is my hometown, this is where I grew up.
- 28 VS: Right, and as an African American woman you can say that.
- 29 AJ: Yeah, absolutely. And then certainly within the LGBT community, there is, as we know,  
30 transphobia exists.
- 31 VS: Yes, there is.
- 32 AJ: Racism exists. And so, part of what I see is the Center on Halsted doing what your position as  
33 Director of Transgender Relations and Community Engagement is really trying to make some  
34 attempts to reach out to the transgender community.
- 35 VS: And, we're doing that.
- 36 AJ: Yeah, but how . . . what is the Center doing in terms of communities of color and brown and  
37 black, Asian-Pacific Islander communities? Is there outreach, is there programming that is  
38 targeted towards creating more understanding around race?

- 1 VS: I don't think it's specifically focused on race, but by default we are actually attracting,  
2 particularly, a lot of young people of color into our programs, which I think is a wonderful thing.  
3 We have an amazing youth program here at Center on Halsted that serves hundreds of young  
4 people. A large percentage of those are young people of color.
- 5 AJ: And, I would suspect probably identify as transgender or somewhere along gender . . .
- 6 VS: Gender fluid, gender creative, gender diverse for sure. And some of these kids are just amazing.  
7 It's so great to see that happening here at Center on Halsted. We have never had a person in  
8 my position here before. I am the first Director of Transgender Relations. This is a new position  
9 that was created because the Center on Halsted has decided to emphasize transgender issues as  
10 part of their strategic plan going forward. I was hired specifically to help facilitate that and help  
11 make it come to fruition. And that's . . .
- 12 AJ: No pressure there.
- 13 VS: That's a significant responsibility and something that I take very seriously. But, as part of that  
14 overall process, I am definitely working to reach out to communities of color and to try to  
15 engage with them, to talk with them, to dialogue with them, to learn from them – not to  
16 necessarily talk to them, but to listen to them and to try to do what I can to ascertain how we  
17 can best, hopefully, meet some needs of those communities. So, that's the process I'm engaged  
18 in right now. Now, I've only been here for a few months, so it's still very much a learning curve  
19 for me, but we are dedicated and committed to working with those communities and to try to  
20 create opportunities for all of us so that the rising tide can lift all the boats – but that only works  
21 if you have a boat.
- 22 AJ: You've got to have a boat to get lifted.
- 23 VS: That's right, because when the tide comes in you're going to drown if you don't have a boat. So,  
24 we're trying to build some boats over here at Center on Halsted and include transgender  
25 communities of color as part of that process. And, it's a learning curve. We haven't done this  
26 before to any great degree so we're all learning together. I'm excited to be right in the middle  
27 of that. I think it's a great opportunity for me on a personal level and for Center on Halsted and  
28 for the Chicago community to try to create something new – together. And, right now it's taking  
29 the form of dialogue primarily, as we continue to talk to each other and ascertain what the  
30 needs are and how we can best meet them. It's a process.
- 31 AJ: Vanessa, as a sort of follow-up to that question, let's be real – the L, the G, and the B has had a  
32 continuous struggle with . . .
- 33 VS: The T.
- 34 AJ: The T. And, you just talked about the fact that transgender issues, transgender identity, has  
35 become a part of the Center on Halsted's strategic plan, but how do you personally see the  
36 relationship between the L, the G, B, and subsequently, the T? Should that remain an acronym  
37 that we continue to pursue or are the issues so very indifferent for transgender people that we  
38 maybe need to do our own organizing and pull away from the broader . . . I'm not trying to lead,  
39 but trying to sort of lay out . . . for example, HB2, the bill in North Carolina really only impacts

- 1 transgender people, or at least that's the way the media is portraying it. I personally know that it  
2 has a much broader impact on non-LGBT people, but it could be very easy for a man to say, "Oh,  
3 that's not my problem, who cares where transgender people use the bathroom."
- 4 VS: You're point is very well taken and certainly there are points of contention between the LGB  
5 communities and the trans community. For example, L, G, and B folks are dealing with issues of  
6 sexual orientation; trans people are dealing with issues of gender identity. Those are two very  
7 different sides of the same human coin. On the other hand, and this is where I tend to fall, I  
8 think that in the struggle for equality, we really all need to be in this together. I think we can  
9 create a lot more progress, more momentum, and get more done by coming together in  
10 community and in coalition so that we can combine our strengths and our resources to  
11 effectively counteract the negativity that is directed at the entire LGBT community.
- 12 AJ: Sure.
- 13 VS: So, I guess I'm a fan of saying we have more in common than we don't, therefore we need to  
14 come together and work together as a larger community. Now, I do see the distinctions  
15 between those various groups and I do understand that there are different motivations, there  
16 are different rationales for pursuing success for those different communities. But, at the same  
17 time, I just feel like the struggle for equality impacts everybody, the struggle for legal and lived  
18 equalities I mentioned earlier impacts everybody's life. And so, with that in mind, again, I think  
19 we can accomplish a great deal more if we chose to work together than if we choose to work  
20 apart. Benjamin Franklin said we must all hang together or all hang separately and that's kind of  
21 the way I feel about it. If we don't work together, I think our opponents can separate us and  
22 then pick us off one by one. So, we need the strength that comes from uniting in community to  
23 counteract those negative forces that are already against us. I hope that makes some sense but  
24 that's how I feel about it. Again, I do recognize the distinctions and the concerns that some  
25 people have. But, I think that LGBT needs to continue to be an acronym on its own and that we  
26 all need to work together to achieve full equality under the law and in our everyday lives.
- 27 AJ: So, keep the guacamole, lettuce, tomato, bacon sandwich together, huh?
- 28 VS: At least for now – and for the foreseeable future. Now, there may come a time when our civil  
29 rights have been fully achieved and we don't necessarily need to focus so much on creating a  
30 larger community. Maybe at that time, in the future somewhere, we would be better served by  
31 developing more distinct identities and separate communities. But, I can't see that happening  
32 anytime soon. I still feel like we have too much work to do. I have to be honest here too – I love  
33 my lesbian, gay and bi brothers and sisters. I work with some of the most amazing people I've  
34 ever met here at Center on Halsted – many LGB folks that I just respect, admire appreciate, and  
35 genuinely love as human beings.
- 36 AJ: Absolutely.
- 37 VS: And, they love me and respect me and appreciate me – there's not a day that goes by where  
38 somebody doesn't come to me and say, "I'm so glad you're here." And, that really makes me  
39 feel good – it makes me feel like I'm adding something to the mix.
- 40 AJ: Sure.



- 1 VS: So, that tells me that we can work together, we do work together, and we need to keep working  
2 together so that we can all achieve the goal of full equality for everybody.
- 3 AJ: Wow, that's beautiful.
- 4 VS: Thank you.
- 5 AJ: Actually . . . it's so well stated, but I guess there's a couple of . . . what's your current  
6 relationship with your birth family? How is that?
- 7 VS: Well, my father and mom are both . . . they've both passed away. I never came out to my dad.  
8 He and I never got along real well anyway, we just never had a good relationship.
- 9 AJ: Sure.
- 10 VS: He never really warmed up to me and I guess that was his loss. My mom and I were always close  
11 and I had the opportunity to come out to her before she passed away. I remember she came up  
12 to visit me in Minneapolis one time and we sat on the couch, just the two of us, and we must  
13 have talked for three hours. I said, "I just want you to know who your child is and the journey  
14 that I'm on right now." She listened and . . . my first book had already come out and I was able  
15 to share that with her. Now this is my dear sweet Southern Baptist mother, so it was a bit of a  
16 culture shock for her but I will never forget what she said to me. We got through the  
17 conversation and we cried a little bit, we both did, and she finally looked at me and she said,  
18 "You are my child and there's nothing you can do to make me stop loving you." And, I was just a  
19 puddle on the floor – just a mass of protoplasm at that point, but that was the perfect thing for  
20 her to say. It just let me know that she loved me and that's . . . in the end, that's really all any of  
21 us really want is to love and be loved. I loved my mom and I miss her every day; she died about  
22 10 years ago. But, her affirmation of me and her love for me, I will carry to my grave because  
23 that meant so much to know that she just let her love supersede any reservation she might have  
24 had about my gender identity. She said, "Just please take care of yourself." And, I've tried to do  
25 that. So, I'm very grateful for that.
- 26 AJ: Children? Do you have children?
- 27 VS: I have a son. Unfortunately, he and I are estranged right now and that's primarily due to my  
28 gender identity. He lives in the south and is married and has decided that he doesn't want to  
29 have a relationship with somebody who is trans.
- 30 AJ: That's hard.
- 31 VS: It is hard. It's something I struggle with every day. I love my son dearly and I told him that. I  
32 said . . . but, we have to have a relationship that's based on mutual respect. You don't have to  
33 agree with me, you don't have to like what I do – I'm not demanding that. All I'm asking for is  
34 mutual respect and the right to self-autonomy, and he's struggling with that. My hope is that  
35 one day he'll come around and we'll be able to re-establish our relationship; I'd like that.
- 36 AJ: Well, I hope that happens.
- 37 VS: Thank you, I do too.

- 1 AJ: Where do you see the transgender community in 50 years, Vanessa?
- 2 VS: In 50 years?
- 3 AJ: Yes.
- 4 VS: Oh, my goodness. First of all, I hope I'm here to see it. I don't know if I will be, but I hope so. I  
5 don't know that I can see that far ahead. Here's what I think is going to happen. I think the next  
6 two, three, four years are going to be filled with lots of attempts by the trans community's  
7 opponents to legislate against us and to create lots of barriers and difficulties and complexities  
8 for the trans community. And, here's why I think that – a couple of reasons. One, the Supreme  
9 Court's ruling on same-sex marriage a year ago basically ended the struggle against the gay and  
10 lesbian communities – to a great degree.
- 11 AJ: You can still be fired for being gay at . . .
- 12 VS: Yes, that's very true. But, I think our opponents finally realize, you know what, we've lost this  
13 particular war and the target that we have been going after for so long has simply beaten us on  
14 this one. So, I think what they began to do was look around for another scapegoat and I think  
15 they have decided that the trans community is going to be that scapegoat. That's why you're  
16 beginning to see all these bathroom bills, that's why you're beginning to see all these states that  
17 are actively working against the Obama administration's trans school initiative, that sort of  
18 thing.
- 19 AJ: Yes.
- 20 VS: You're seeing a backlash and you're seeing the trans community targeted as it has never been  
21 targeted before. I think that's going to continue for the next two, three, four years. But, I think  
22 that over time you're going to see court rulings that are going to be in the trans community's  
23 favor, you're going to see a lot of these laws ruled unconstitutional, you're going to see  
24 legitimacy provided to the trans community, and, as a result, you're going to see the opposition  
25 weaken and lessen. As that happens, you're going to see the trans community become more  
26 and more mainstreamed into the rest of society. That's what I see happening over the next  
27 several years. Now, once that happens and we begin to reach sort of an equilibrium in that  
28 regard, in terms of social acceptance and awareness and this mainstreaming concept that I  
29 spoke of a moment ago . . . once that happens, I'm not sure where we're going to go or what's  
30 going to happen. There may not be as much of a need for community at that point because,  
31 right now, we're just doing it to survive.
- 32 AJ: Sure.
- 33 VS: But, once that survival necessity has abated somewhat, we may not have as strong a need for a  
34 "trans community" and it will be just more like, "OK, how do I fit into society, period." Now,  
35 that's not to say the trans community will ever go away – I don't think it will anytime soon  
36 because I think we do need each other.
- 37 AJ: Remember that feeling when you stepped into the CLCC.

- 1 VS: Exactly – but, now . . . you’re right about that, but let me just say this. If the need for a  
2 sheltering community is not as great, then maybe we won’t need that much of a community  
3 anymore. Do you see what I’m trying to say?
- 4 AJ: No, I understand.
- 5 VS: Because CLCC, for me, was like a haven from the negativity of the outside world. As the outside  
6 world becomes more accepting, then maybe those havens won’t be quite as necessary  
7 anymore.
- 8 AJ: Sure.
- 9 VS: We’ll see, we don’t know yet. Right now, they’re very important; right now, we need each  
10 other; we need to come together and create coalition and community and do all we can to  
11 support each other and affirm each other and help each other deal with the complexities of  
12 gender in a misunderstanding society. But, as society becomes more educated, as transgender  
13 people become more visible, as more of us come out, as our numbers continue to grow and  
14 increase and become more . . . and permeate throughout society, I think what you’re going to  
15 see is a lessening of the . . . I don’t know if persecution is the right word but oppression that has  
16 existed up until now and as that oppression diminishes, I think you’ll see the need for  
17 community also diminish to a certain degree. I don’t know that it will ever go away though. I  
18 mean, we tend to gravitate to people who are like us, that’s just a human thing. And so, from  
19 that perspective, I can see the trans community always being around in one form or another. I  
20 just don’t know what that form will look like in 50 years.
- 21 AJ: All right. Well, Vanessa, I just want to thank you so much for being willing to sit down and talk  
22 with me today about some deeply personal issues, some issues about our broader community,  
23 and the joy that I see in your eyes as you embark on this newest part of your journey as the  
24 Transgender . . . Director of Transgender Relations and Community Engagement. Thank you so  
25 much.
- 26 VS: My pleasure. You and I have been friends have been friends a long time. I’m grateful for this  
27 opportunity to share with you and with those who may be watching this video one day. Please  
28 know that there are those of us out here who really care and your life matters just as much as  
29 mine does. We’re going to do what we can to try to make sure it’s a good one. Thank you.
- 30 AJ: All right.