

EJ Olson
Narrator

Andrea Jenkins
Interviewer

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

December 16, 2016



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.

Andrea Jenkins
jenki120@umn.edu
(612) 625-4379

1 Andrea Jenkins -AJ
2 EJ Olson -EJO
3

4 AJ: Good morning.

5 EJO: Hi.

6 AJ: My name is Andrea Jenkins and I am the oral historian for the Transgender Oral History Project
7 at the Tretter Collection at the University of Minnesota Libraries. Today is December 16, 2016. I
8 am in the fair city of St. Paul and at Family Tree Clinic, and today I am talking with EJ Olson. How
9 you doing, EJ?

10 EJO: I am good, I am so glad you're here. Thanks, Andrea.

11 AJ: I am so glad to be here, I am so glad that you are willing to participate in this project. EJ, before
12 we get started, can you just state your name and how you spell it? I know it's a very simple
13 spelling, but I have had some EJ's who go E-j-a-y.

14 AJ: Yeah, absolutely.

15 AJ: I just want to make sure we have it all spelled correctly. So, state your name, spell it, your
16 gender identity assigned at birth, your gender as you identify it today, as well as your gender
17 pronouns that you use.

18 EJO: Sure. So, my name is EJ Olson and I spell that E-j O-l-s-o-n. My sex assigned at birth was female
19 and I identify as gender queer, gender non-conforming, gender fluid – it depends on the day and
20 how I'm feeling, who I'm around. My pronouns are they/them.

21 AJ: Cool. Do people have a hard time with they and them?

22 EJO: Yes.

23 AJ: Do you want to talk about that a little bit?

24 EJO: Sure. Some work that I did actually, I worked on campaigns for trans equity in a few different
25 states, so that's always interesting, right? Being kind of the forefront and talking to people.

26 AJ: So, in the media?

27 EJO: Yeah. There's definitely mis-gendering by the media, but I think we live in a society where the
28 construct is binary, really with so much – right and wrong, man/woman.

29 AJ: Night and day, black and white.

30 EJO: Exactly. And so I think that I've learned over time with the confidence in myself to not hold it,
31 but I've also, in doing that, I've been able to see that people know what they know, they know
32 what they've experienced – so yeah, people mess it up every day, all the time. Even people who
33 know you well.

34 AJ: Does it get frustrating? Infuriating? Or have you come to a place in life where now you're just
35 sort of rolling with it?

- 1 EJO: I think it really depends on the space I'm in and kind of what role I'm holding. If it's a
2 professional role, I try to give the people around me a little more room, but I can say that
3 personally, especially if I know people really well or I have an expectation of them to meet a
4 certain ability to be inclusive to all people, it definitely hurts. So, it's not so much a frustration
5 but you feel unseen.
- 6 AJ: Yeah, invisible.
- 7 EJO: Yeah.
- 8 AJ: Wow.
- 9 EJO: Like who you are is not real, for sure.
- 10 AJ: EJ, tell me what is your first memory in life? What is the first thing you remember? It does not
11 need to absolutely be around your gender identity, though if it is, that's perfectly fine. Just
12 what's your first memory in life?
- 13 EJO: It's interesting because I think about this all the time, especially being a writer. I don't have very
14 good memories of being a child, of being a younger person. It's really hard for me to find them,
15 but the one that I think about often, I was probably like 11 and my dad and I . . . I was the oldest
16 of four kids, and my dad and I – I'm from a town of 400 people, so we went to this Lion's Club
17 auction and I really needed a bike. I didn't have a bicycle and all the kids rode their bikes around
18 town. There was this kind of old beat-up blue BMX bike and I really wanted it. My family didn't
19 have much money but I remember, and my dad usually didn't have access to it – my mom made
20 a lot of those decisions, so us being together there and remembering him fighting for it, making
21 sure that I got it at that auction.
- 22 AJ: Nice, even though he wasn't the decision maker.
- 23 EJO: Yeah, that was a really good memory. And I think that I have then repeated memories of where
24 that bike took me.
- 25 AJ: So, you got the bike?
- 26 EJO: Yeah, I got the bike.
- 27 AJ: And it opened a whole sort of new world for you in terms of being able to . . .
- 28 EJO: I rode my bike to the barber, I got my first mullet. Amazing.
- 29 AJ: Wow. So, you grew up in a town of 400 people, where is this?
- 30 EJO: Empire, Michigan. So, northern Michigan, a few hours south of the bridge in a national park.
31 It's a tourist destination a lot of the time in the summer. And then the people who live there
32 and stay there are usually out of work in the winter because there's not much else going on. It's
33 definitely an interesting place to grow up.
- 34 AJ: So, it's a resort town? A summer resort?

- 1 EJO: It's really interesting – there's a lot of . . . since it's on Lake Michigan, a lot of people that have
2 their third or ninth homes, I'm assuming, I don't know them well. And so there's really just no
3 one there in the winter, but they come on vacation or rent out their homes.
- 4 AJ: So, it's like going up to Brainerd or to . . . ?
- 5 EJO: Yeah, I would say it's a little like Brainerd.
- 6 AJ: Wow, Empire, Michigan. I think I had 495 people in my high school graduating class.
- 7 EJO: Yeah.
- 8 AJ: What's it like growing up in a small town?
- 9 EJO: I mean I left as soon as I could, being a queer person there.
- 10 AJ: So you were out in your town?
- 11 EJO: I came out when I was 15.
- 12 AJ: Is that right?
- 13 EJO: My high school was . . . my school was K-12, one building, and I was with the same 48 people
14 from kindergarten until I graduated.
- 15 AJ: Is that right?
- 16 EJO: Yeah, so it was pretty interesting being an out queer person in that environment – yes. And the
17 only one that was out. People are now . . . you find out on Facebook.
- 18 AJ: You used the word interesting – I mean, I can imagine traumatic. Was there any bullying? Was
19 there teasing? Harassment?
- 20 EJO: I think that's part of my personality and also part of the work I do. I try hard not to remember
21 sometimes the trauma or the hurt places so that I can continue to do work and be there for
22 other people's trauma. But you're right, it wasn't really interesting. It was rough, it hurt most of
23 the time. I always really just felt different, or like on the outside.
- 24 AJ: Yeah.
- 25 EJO: It was hard for me to make close friends and those intimate connections with other human
26 beings would get confusing – like what do they mean? Who am I in these connections? So,
27 yeah, the trauma – it was rough.
- 28 AJ: What was family life like?
- 29 EJO: Hmm. Hmm. I was the oldest of four and I was 15 when I did come out and I was big into my
30 church at the time. So, the church in a tiny town like that was not happy. The thing that still
31 probably echoes deeply in my mind is, "Love the sinner, hate the sin." And people really would
32 say that to your face.
- 33 AJ: That phrase, yeah.

- 1 EJO: I wanted to be a minister when I was young, so that was also a hard space to exist. That
2 separation between what you thought you were called to do and what people tell you you're
3 allowed to do. Yeah. So, my family kind of followed what the church told them to say.
- 4 AJ: The church doctrine.
- 5 EJO: My dad told me I was going to hell – that's what I recall, my first memory after him finding out. I
6 wrote my mom a long letter and I don't think I understood at that time, either, the difference or
7 the complexity of gender identity and sexual orientation and kind of what that meant at the
8 time. I've always felt exactly like me; I just don't think I've always had words for what that
9 means. But yeah, I wrote my mom a letter and gave it to her when she dropped us off to school.
10 I remember I had to go to my counselor that day because I couldn't get through school, I
11 couldn't get through the day – my stomach was in knots, I was so worried about what would
12 happen when I came home. My mom said, "Well, I love you no matter what." But then she kind
13 of fell into the teachings of the church or she would search out answers from other folks and
14 they would tell her to pray for me, that it wasn't right – that I could be fixed. They sent me to
15 some Christian counseling to try to make me realize that I wasn't queer. So, yeah, those things
16 were definitely traumatic at that time, but there was something inside of me that was like,
17 "Well, this is all bull – this is ridiculous." There was something that gave me the strength to
18 know that I am exactly who I am and I don't need to be changed. I can't say that it didn't still sit
19 with me and hurt and make me question kind of all relationships of people and focus back on
20 myself. Like – you have to love yourself first and I think that that's what I kind of held tight to
21 because that's what I knew I could trust.
- 22 AJ: How about your siblings? Your younger siblings?
- 23 EJO: Hmmm, yeah, it was so rough for them because once . . . they would get picked on and I'd come
24 home from school and my mom would say, "Can you just keep it quiet? If you could just not talk
25 about it, think about what's happening to them." There was never concern for how does that
26 feel for you, how is this feeling? It was like, "Just stop being you," basically.
- 27 AJ: Wow.
- 28 EJO: As they grew up though, I mean I also think about how amazing they've turned out. I think that
29 being in a small town like that where everyone does the same thing – like lemmings.
- 30 AJ: Right.
- 31 EJO: To have that adversity, which there really isn't much of, there for them – they've become
32 champions and advocates. The ways that they showed up for me as they got old enough to
33 really understand, or as they had friends who were trans or gay or queer. It's amazing to me.
- 34 AJ: Wow.
- 35 EJO: Yeah.
- 36 AJ: They're all adults now.
- 37 EJO: Yes, I'm 37; my sister, Sarah, is 35; my sister, Andrea, is 33; and my brother, Adam is 30.

- 1 AJ: You have a sister named Andrea, she must be pretty cool.
- 2 EJO: I do, she's awesome. You'd like each other.
- 3 AJ: Great. We're namesakes so we've got that going for us. You came out at 15. What's some of
4 the language that you used to describe yourself then and has it changed over time?
- 5 EJO: Yeah. When I initially came out it was really like an understanding of sexual orientation, that's
6 what people were talking about. I had gone to my school counselor because I was so confused
7 and I really didn't find language for it, I just knew that there was a difference. So, you know, I
8 think at that time it was language 1994, 1995 – it was like gay or lesbian. I didn't really use the
9 word lesbian, I don't think I really ever felt too connected to that. I think there was a time when
10 I thought dyke was a good word because it just felt a little stronger to me, a little . . .
- 11 AJ: Closer to who you were?
- 12 EJO: Yeah, at least at that time. It felt a little bit more like resistance, it felt like reclaiming and it felt
13 like in people's face, I would say. And that felt like a little more what I needed to be, I needed
14 those words – whatever they were. So, I think that over time the more that I would learn a
15 word that felt closer to me, I would use it. There was a long time in-between, I would say in my
16 20s, where I really was kind of anti- any labels. I didn't want terms, I just wanted people to use
17 my name. I did a lot of performance art at that time around gender and would talk about what
18 it felt like to be the human that I am with all the multiple layers and pieces of my identity
19 instead of it being about . . . I think that that was still because I didn't feel like it fit and I didn't
20 have language for being gender queer, I didn't have language that wasn't about binary or
21 language that incorporated my sexuality and my gender identity well enough. I think . . . I would
22 say probably the last 9-10 years, I've definitely used trans and gender queer and queer as my
23 main terms if I have to pick one and share it.
- 24 AJ: Queer, what does queer mean to you?
- 25 EJO: Yeah, so for me personally, not how I would define it for anyone else, but definitely for me . . . I
26 think the best thing about it is that it's a word that was definitely used to hurt me and so it's a
27 word that I get to use to own my own identity. But it's also a word without a definition, it's a
28 word that . . .
- 29 AJ: Which is why I ask what it means to you because it's just so fluid and so amorphous for so many
30 people.
- 31 EJO: And I think that that's exactly why I like it, because it doesn't give someone this term, it doesn't
32 give anyone a definition – they don't get to hear my word, queer, and go home and look it up
33 and know exactly what I mean.
- 34 AJ: Right.
- 35 EJO: Because it's none of their business anyway, and because I am fluid and the more that I learn and
36 grow and feel comfortable in my skin and relate to more human beings, the more that I exist.
37 And so, the word . . . it doesn't matter as much to me except that it really matters.

- 1 AJ: Right.
- 2 EJO: It's hard to really personally define because it's a feeling, it's still that "in your face," that need
3 to . . . if you need to know, I'm going to tell you – and I'm not going to tell you. I don't know, it's
4 really hard to get to the heart of it. It's like . . . it also feels like it encompasses my sexual
5 orientation and gender identity at the same time.
- 6 AJ: Yeah, I know – that's what I love about it.
- 7 EJO: Yeah.
- 8 AJ: So, you came out at 15, but when did you first realize that you were different from this gender
9 that you were assigned at birth?
- 10 EJO: Yeah, I always knew. I really do – like in my memory, which a lot of times for me are like I've
11 seen this picture of myself, and so I have a memory. I think maybe I've even partly created it . . .
- 12 AJ: Make up a story around it.
- 13 EJO: Yeah. There's a picture of me with my grandfather and he had gotten us a swing set for the
14 back yard. I'm hanging on it like this, big smile on my face – huge smile on his face. My short
15 red hair and my black hoodie, and I was probably five and that photo really just resonates with
16 me because when I see myself . . . I was me then – just carefree, ready to . . . always open to
17 whatever came next. And yet, in that tiny town, there would be . . . the boys would be friends
18 with the boys and the girls were friends with the girls and if they ever intermingled, it was like
19 who thought who was cute.
- 20 AJ: Right.
- 21 EJO: It always, to me, felt like there was more depth than that – there was something else. It was like
22 neither place was where I belonged and I liked them for different reasons. It seemed like the
23 boys were willing to go on adventures, so we'd go into the woods and build forts and the girls
24 wanted to usually play house and I always had to be the dad. I don't think I minded but . . .
- 25 AJ: Really?
- 26 EJO: I was always the dad. So, yeah.
- 27 AJ: And you played with the boys a lot. I guess in a town of 400, there were what? Maybe 130 kids
28 or something.
- 29 EJO: Yeah, I don't even know if there were that many.
- 30 AJ: Everybody played with everybody, I guess is what I'm just kind of saying.
- 31 EJO: Yeah, kind of.
- 32 AJ: Or were you more with the boys?
- 33 EJO: Yeah, I think that the adventure has always been real for me, so whoever was willing to do that
34 is who I was around. At that time, it did feel like, as a younger person, it was the boys. But I
35 definitely remember, like in kindergarten, being in love with my kindergarten teacher. I

- 1 remember taking the doll home, there would be this doll you could sign out and take home, and
2 I literally remember thinking about, “Well, I’m the dad and my teacher is the mom.” That was
3 what I . . . it was not a thought I played with or talked out loud about, but I just remember
4 having it – like, “Oh, that’s my fantasy place,” and I was five. So, I think there’s always been
5 those thoughts that have been over time – like guilt and shame and don’t be you, that I think
6 were free-flowing and there, even as a young person.
- 7 AJ: Sure. Where did you go to college, EJ?
- 8 EJO: Well, as soon as I was 18, I got out of that town – that tiny town. I went to Chatham College in
9 Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. It was an all-women’s college.
- 10 AJ: So, a big city?
- 11 EJO: Five hundred people.
- 12 AJ: Big city, small school.
- 13 EJO: Yes, and a lot of queers and trans folks.
- 14 AJ: Really?
- 15 EJO: But since it was a women’s college and it was 1997, they only . . . only trans dudes or gender
16 queer folks. But it was pretty great. I don’t know if my life would be anything like it is if I hadn’t
17 left that tiny town, went to a city and experienced riot-girl feminism in 1997.
- 18 AJ: Riot-girl feminism? Is that what you said?
- 19 EJO: Yeah, that’s what in my recollection . . .
- 20 AJ: Is that like post-third wave or pre-third wave?
- 21 EJO: I think it’s college-age, let’s make it up as we go. But tons of queer folks and punk bands and . . .
22 yeah.
- 23 AJ: Were you in a band?
- 24 EJO: No, but most of my friends were.
- 25 AJ: But you’re a performance artist?
- 26 EJO: Yeah.
- 27 AJ: Did that start in college?
- 28 EJO: Well, I got a theater scholarship and so when I went to college . . .
- 29 AJ: So that started in high school?
- 30 EJO: Yeah, in high school. My senior project was a monologue presentation with a set that I built.
31 But yeah, in college I did a lot of theatre. I wasn’t yet doing performance art because I had three
32 jobs most of the time, so if I wasn’t in school I was working. So, my senior year of college, I
33 actually got . . . I had to leave because I didn’t have the money to finish my senior year.

- 1 AJ: Oh, boy.
- 2 EJO: And there wasn't a way to find the money, so that last semester I didn't get to finish. It took me
3 about a decade to pay that off and be able to go finish school again. And then, right after that I
4 went back and got a masters – just a few years ago.
- 5 AJ: Oh, good for you.
- 6 EJO: But when I had to leave college, I ended up at this . . . I mean, this vegetarian coffee house that
7 was also a music venue and kind of . . . unfortunately it was kind of in this gentrifying
8 neighborhood with artists down the street and a glass-blowing studio. But that also . . .
- 9 AJ: You owned this place?
- 10 EJO: No, I lived with the owner. Someone had told me about it. I walked in, I met this guy – he
11 looked tired and I said, "I think you need someone to work for you, you look tired." He wrote
12 me a schedule and I started the next day, and then he let me move into his house because I was
13 kicked out . . . you know, I couldn't be in school.
- 14 AJ: Right.
- 15 EJO: But I knew I needed to stay in that city. And that was an intense, amazing experience, I would
16 say.
- 17 AJ: So you were running the coffee shop?
- 18 EJO: That's when I started performance poetry. I started hosting open-mics for queer folks. It ended
19 up kind of becoming a little hub for queer artists. It was called, "The Quiet Storm."
- 20 AJ: The Quiet Storm.
- 21 EJO: Lots of interesting and amazing and challenging folks that I met by being there. But that was
22 where I did my first gender expression kind of identity exploring performance art for sure.
- 23 AJ: Yeah. So, EJ, to the extent that you feel comfortable, and you can tell me to fuck off or
24 whatever if you want to, but what sort of medical interventions have you pursued in sort of
25 expressing yourself more fully as who you are? Or do you have any plans or goals for any sort of
26 medical interventions?
- 27 EJO: Yeah, so in 2008 or so, I started going to therapy to be able to get a letter for transition. At the
28 time, I was feeling really connected to being able to present more masculine. I think during
29 some more work, and literally being out in the world as a gender queer person, having changed
30 my name – at least socially, there was new, "Oh, it's OK to be here." I would go to therapists, I
31 would try out new folks, I had moved around a lot. And I ended up at this, with a trans man
32 therapist who was at Whitman-Walker in DC when I lived there. And the thing he said to me
33 when I was talking about transitioning and not really knowing for sure what I needed or wanted,
34 and he's like, "Well, everybody transitions sooner or later because the world's just too hard to
35 exist in the in-between." And I think that him saying that made me realize, "Well, screw that.
36 It's society's problem if they don't get me, it's not my . . . I don't have to conform to their desire
37 to be able to understand."

- 1 AJ: Right, to this binary ideal of gender, right?
- 2 EJO: Yeah. And so for me at that time, it solidified like I am who I am, but yes . . . so I had a
3 hysterectomy, that made life a lot better. I was able to do that through pursuing what I knew
4 medically providers needed to hear to make sure that I got it covered by my insurance.
- 5 AJ: Right, right.
- 6 EJO: Without it having to be about gender identity. And then I did the same thing to get an incredibly
7 drastic reduction covered by my insurance. And, yeah – I had to kind of convince the surgeon
8 too – that yes . . . like no, I don't want feminizing . . . whatever happens here, I don't need perky
9 at the end.
- 10 AJ: Exactly.
- 11 EJO: That was a hard conversation – it took a lot of . . . OK, let me try to find a photo – there's no
12 photos of not feminine, but not flat chested. I don't know. So, it was really difficult to explain
13 what I was looking for – but yeah. And that has also been a really huge . . . I don't know, just
14 confidence. There's something about having pieces of my body that are objectified and
15 feminized by society, like at least having that reduced helps me not focus on the things that I
16 think . . . they were a bit dysphoric for me, I guess, and mainly because they were the things that
17 folks latch on in our society.
- 18 AJ: Wow, thanks for sharing. Any hormonal therapy at all?
- 19 EJO: No, that doesn't . . . I don't think that's a thing at this particular moment. I definitely think
20 about it. I think that's the hardest thing with being a person who identifies as non-binary, at
21 least for me in that identity, is really that . . . the changes that that would make feel like it would
22 push me more towards the binary and people's ideas of how they see me. But I also, the fluidity
23 of how I feel my gender is, I don't . . . even though it's something I think about sometimes, it's
24 also being really happy just the way I am. Those days are more than the other days, so . . . yeah.
- 25 AJ: Speaking of which, what has been some of the joys that you've experienced since you have
26 really sort of figured out your most comfortable gender identity?
- 27 EJO: Yeah, just that. Just figuring it out and loving exactly who I am. I think that's something about . .
28 . being able to do that also opens up a connection to other people. I think that being able to . . .
29 there was so long I was angry and hurting and not able to love myself, so I also wasn't attuned
30 or awake or able to connect to people around me, and folks who needed me to. And so, I feel
31 like that's a difference now too is that I can be a leader, a voice; I can listen, I can hear and . . .
32 you know, working where I work at Family Tree, there's a lot of trans folks who work here and
33 lots of patients who identify as trans and so there's this other piece where I really get to be
34 seen, at least in this space.
- 35 AJ: Sure.
- 36 E: And so, I think that's another amazing thing – to be able to do work, to design programs for
37 trans folks with other trans folks, to listen to community and make sure that we're giving what

- 1 we need to be and always working towards doing it better. And so I think that's also really
2 helpful and foundational and being able to maintain my own love for my identity.
- 3 AJ: Wow. What have been some of the less positive experiences or challenges as it were?
- 4 EJO: I mean, we kind of started off with it – I think sometimes pronouns, they seem so small to so
5 many people because maybe . . . but it's huge. People just don't remember – literally anyone,
6 any relationship, you know – family, people you work with – when they don't remember, that's
7 a little harder, when they make a mistake – it's a little bit harder, especially when you see
8 yourself so clearly and you're like, "Well, damn it." But when it's out in public, it's funny
9 because I'm so great at advocating for all the people around me. But man, in public when
10 someone makes a mistake – like you said earlier and we kind of talked about, it just makes me
11 feel invisible. And so then I just remember, "Oh, I don't really exist as my whole self here, this
12 person really doesn't see me." I think a human can't help but internalize that and so that
13 creates so much more work and emotional work, but then I know that there are so many folks
14 who aren't seen in more ways than I'm not and then I remember and I think, "OK, there's a lot
15 of work to do." And it helps me to know what community I need to build and where I'm safe
16 and how to re-fuel myself and that I need to do it because people are not all going to see me.
- 17 AJ: What do you do here at Family Tree?
- 18 EJO: I'm the Clinical Operations Director here at Family Tree, so I support the providers, the nurses,
19 the medical assistants, and currently I'm managing the Trans Hormone Care program.
- 20 AJ: Trans . . . ?
- 21 EJO: Hormone Care program.
- 22 AJ: Trans Hormone Care program, wow. That's a pretty intense job.
- 23 EJO: It's awesome.
- 24 AJ: Yeah?
- 25 EJO: And I would say it's intense, but it's awesome.
- 26 AJ: How many people do you think get hormonal therapy here at Family Tree? Do you have an
27 idea?
- 28 EJO: Yeah, I think somewhere around 190.
- 29 AJ: Wow.
- 30 EJO: It's been about a year and a half since we started the program and we have three providers total
31 if you count all the hours that folks are providing care.
- 32 AJ: Wow, that just gives you a sense of the breadth of the community. I mean, you guys are just
33 one clinic with 190 patients and I know that there are many, many other opportunities for
34 people to access that kind of transgender-specific health care throughout the Twin Cities. Do
35 you know of those places?

- 1 EJO: Yeah, I know of a few other places. Are you asking me . . . ?
- 2 AJ: I guess now that . . . I was posing the question, but you know, I'm just thinking boy do we out
3 those places given the political climate that we're in right now? I have concern and love for my
4 people and don't want to see people get hurt?
- 5 EJO: Yeah, same.
- 6 AJ: So, maybe you don't have to answer that question, but let's leave it to say that there is a large
7 and broad transgender community here in the Twin Cities.
- 8 EJO: Yes, there is. We have a wait list and that is a part of the work that I'm trying to do to make sure
9 that we can see everyone who needs care. And I think that the thing that I can say about Family
10 Tree that I feel fine putting this out there, because we do absolutely advocate and everyone can
11 know – and we will continue to work to keep people safe, is that creating . . . just offering
12 hormones to folks is not what all people need.
- 13 AJ: Yeah.
- 14 EJO: Creating this inclusive space where each human gets to show up exactly like they are, exactly
15 who they are, and name and own the care that they want and get it, that's one of our priorities
16 and I think that that's why people are willing to wait on a list even though they know they could
17 potentially go to some other places – and there are some places doing an amazing job. But I
18 think that speaking for Family Tree specifically, I know that that is a priority that we maintain
19 and it makes me proud to be here.
- 20 AJ: And there are other services beyond just that, right?
- 21 EJO: Yeah, yeah – we do sexual health, reproductive health for all identities.
- 22 AJ: Wow, that's incredible. How long have you been working here?
- 23 EJO: Nine months, so I started in March, 2016, and it's pretty amazing. I have been in a lot of jobs,
24 especially as a queer and trans person, there are just moments where you know it's time to go
25 and where you know you can do better somewhere. And so, that's happened a lot and being
26 here, it feels like every day I'm motivated to do more and that I'm challenged and surrounded
27 by people with passion that want to do the work. I'm grateful for that and I can't really imagine
28 being anywhere else. It's only been nine months but . . .
- 29 AJ: Wow, that's incredible. Has there been a specific person or organization that has had a
30 significant impact on your . . . or that's related to your gender identity? Like you met Chaz Bono
31 or . . . ?
- 32 EJO: Nice. I would say that LGBT Task Force, it used to be the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force. A
33 small town I was living in in Michigan, in southern Michigan, for a little while back in like 2008
34 and 2009, I volunteered for a campaign because I got called up by some folks because I was
35 leading a trans support group there, and they had asked me to be part of this power summit,
36 which they do often in cities right before whatever kind of queer campaign it's going to be. And
37 so, I joined up with that and I really learned how to harness the power of the movement and

- 1 there's good and bad about what happens during campaigns for LGBTQ communities, but I still
2 think that the learning that I did . . . it was paramount to me being able to really own and live
3 into who I am.
- 4 AJ: Hmmm, wow. So, the task force – no individuals though, huh?
- 5 EJO: I mean I have a list of individuals, we could go on for a long time. I really think that human
6 connection is the thing that helps me see myself, when I can see and be present with other
7 people. I mean, my list - it would be forever long. Any human who has touched my heart and
8 my spirit has contributed to how I get to show up in the world.
- 9 AJ: Oh, my goodness – OK.
- 10 EJO: So, it's a big list.
- 11 AJ: A big list, that's awesome. Why don't we take just a quick pause and then get right back to our
12 interview? Is that OK?
- 13 EJO: Sounds good.
- 14 AJ: And we are back. So, we were just talking about all of these amazing people who have sort of
15 impacted your gender journey.
- 16 EJO: I wish I had the ability to flash their photos? Have you ever seen those videos?
- 17 AJ: I know, that would be amazing.
- 18 EJO: I'm just seeing all the faces, the smiles, the hugs, the moments when things weren't so great –
19 the stranger on the street on the day that you're just feeling broken. Those, sometimes it's the
20 smallest moments.
- 21 AJ: So, is Family Tree considered to be a queer and trans-specific clinic? Or is it more broadly to the
22 broader community?
- 23 EJO: Right. I would say Family Tree is absolutely open to any human being who would walk in the
24 door needing services. But in 2009, there was a strategic plan and a . . . I wasn't here then so
25 I'm trying to remember. Oh, an LGBTQ health access initiative, so that was about seven years
26 ago that that was made a priority by the board and by the staff. And so they worked for a few
27 years to try to get the Hormone Care Program started and they finally got funding through the
28 Bush Foundation in 2014 so that it could begin in 2015. So, I mean with that work, now the
29 population . . . like the patient population is around 50% LGBTQ-identified, so there are some
30 trans folks who don't identify as trans.
- 31 AJ: Sure.
- 32 EJO: So, it could be a little bit higher. But yeah, it's around 50% of the patient population. I think it
33 was maybe like 12% and because we're a sexual health clinic, and it's always been really sex
34 positive, there's always been some queer folks here.

- 1 AJ: Sure. So, you mentioned the Task Force as one organization that you worked with or
2 volunteered, have you worked in other LGBT-specific organizations either around health care or
3 political advocacy?
- 4 EJO: Yeah.
- 5 AJ: Or social engagement?
- 6 EJO: I worked at Callen-Lorde in New York City.
- 7 AJ: New York City, wow. C-a-l-l-e-n hyphen L-o-
8 EJO: L-o-r-d-e.
- 9 AJ: Callen-Lorde.
- 10 EJO: Michael Callen and Audra Lorde is who it's named after.
- 11 AJ: Yeah.
- 12 EJO: That was also pretty amazing. It was coming off of working on a few campaigns and I was living
13 in Brooklyn. I had been working at Garden State Equality . . .
- 14 AJ: Oh, wow.
- 15 EJO: That was right after Chris Christie got elected and they were trying to pass marriage equality in
16 the state. They already had trans-inclusive laws but they didn't have marriage equality.
- 17 AJ: But that was in New Jersey.
- 18 EJO: New Jersey, but I was living in . . .
- 19 AJ: But you were living in Brooklyn.
- 20 EJO: Yeah, and driving. It's 11 miles, it takes an hour but . . .
- 21 AJ: That's because of the traffic – did you take a ferry?
- 22 EJO: No, because it was Montclair so I just drove and I had to drive around the state.
- 23 AJ: Oh, so you were just in Brooklyn and you could just go over the bridge – yeah.
- 24 EJO: Yes. And then working at Callen-Lorde, that was like 2009. Then, my partner and I moved to
25 Washington, DC and I worked at the LGBTQ Center there in DC managing the HIV Programs. I
26 worked a little bit with Whitman-Walker, did a lot of volunteer training and community
27 advocacy and support. Yeah, so after that I worked on homelessness for a while and then when
28 I graduated with my masters, I had been working with the Task Force just to kind of learn . . .
29 creating training for homeless services for trans-inclusion in homeless services. Then I applied
30 for a bunch of jobs and moved here to Minnesota because I got offered the opportunity to
31 create and do education for providers in the health care system around LGBTQ inclusion with
32 Rainbow Health Initiative. So, I drove across the country, showed up and said, "Let's do this."
- 33 AJ: Wow, you have pretty much made a career of queer identity.

- 1 EJO: I am doing my best.
- 2 AJ: Yeah, that's awesome though. Twenty years ago, I don't think that . . . like a person could
3 maybe have one job in a queer, but to have options and to be able to create a livable income
4 and . . .
- 5 EJO: They call it gay for pay.
- 6 AJ: Right, exactly. And it's not a pejorative, I want to be clear. I'm not identifying as that in any
7 way. I think it's, in fact, fascinating that that can be your reality.
- 8 EJO: It is, and it also took moving around a lot of places and seeking it out – knowing that my best self
9 gets to show up in those places. And when my best self shows up, I can do more to help people.
10 It's unfortunate that we need separate organizations and places for queer and trans people to
11 be their whole selves.
- 12 AJ: Yeah, yeah – that's true.
- 13 EJO: But it is awesome.
- 14 AJ: It's great that those spaces exist and I think as we continue to move forward we can begin to
15 integrate that more into sort of more traditional spaces.
- 16 EJO: Yeah.
- 17 AJ: You have this powerhouse partner.
- 18 EJO: Hmm, that is true.
- 19 AJ: Do you want to talk about them?
- 20 EJO: Yeah, I mean . . .
- 21 AJ: Or, if not, just talk about relationships generally and who you date, what's your sexual
22 orientation. I know you talked about queer as being sort of a placeholder for that.
- 23 EJO: I really have only dated people who identify as female. I think, you know, I met my partner
24 working on campaigns and she worked at the Task Force. I actually worked with them before I
25 met her, on campaigns. So, I mean that's a pretty empowering environment – to have folks just
26 all around being able to run out into public and talking about being gay or queer or trans, so that
27 was a pretty awesome way to first be able to see a human being, being able to lead folks during
28 really hard conversations and help them really own and see their own identities and be able to
29 utilize that for strength. So, anyway, that's how we met and that was about seven and a half
30 years ago. We've been married for four years, lived in six different states, and we've been here
31 almost two years. We have a house and I'm hoping to stay here. I would say . . . yeah, my
32 identity . . . who I'm attracted to hasn't change a lot in my life, although I do really believe in
33 multiple layers of attraction. I think that our society really hones in on sexual attraction and that
34 that is the only intense relationship that a human being has.
- 35 AJ: Sure.

- 1 EJO: Yeah.
- 2 AJ: Well, what are some other ways though that you're attracted to folks?
- 3 EJO: So, I'm really . . . I'm just really attracted to people's story, their depth, like what they feel. I
4 think we focus so much of our energy and attention on what everyone does well – the shining
5 moments and we pick those out and that's either what we hear about or we hear about
6 people's absolute worse thing they've ever done, that one mistake that they've made that we all
7 hold forever.
- 8 AJ: Sure.
- 9 EJO: I think there are certain people that are just willing to show up as exactly who they are,
10 regardless of everything that they have faced. I have a deep love and connection for those folks
11 – the numerous folks, I think, that I meet. And so I, as a human being, really crave those
12 connections and being able to be in the spaces where I know people are willing to do whatever
13 it takes to make sure that the folks who need it most are being fought for. I don't know how to
14 name that, there's not like a definition or a term for it, but it's definitely part of what fuels my
15 heart and my spirit, which I see as a huge part of my orientation – all the many layers that I think
16 is made up of that besides just the sexual part.
- 17 AJ: Sure. So, you've been working in all these queer spaces, you went to a sort of very queer-
18 friendly college. As a gender-queer person, it sounds like dating hasn't really been a big
19 challenge for you – or has it?
- 20 EJO: Yeah, I would say dating . . .
- 21 AJ: I'm making some broad assumptions here.
- 22 EJO: OK, so meeting people to date, I don't think was that difficult. Understanding what I wanted
23 from dating, or relationships, was difficult.
- 24 AJ: OK, which is what most of us experience, right?
- 25 EJO: Probably.
- 26 AJ: Sometimes I just hear trans people saying that they don't even have the opportunity to see who
27 they want to date – like they exist in spaces where there is no, in their mind, real available pool
28 of potential partners.
- 29 EJO: Yeah, I think that's hard . . .
- 30 AJ: So, that's maybe what I was trying to say, but the actually dating, I'm pretty sure, is . . .
- 31 EJO: Similar for all.
- 32 AJ: Yes, exactly.
- 33 EJO: Yeah. And that's interesting too. I think that that's like then examining whether you're willing
34 to date someone who sees you fully or whether you are not. I think that especially as a gender-
35 queer person before I had language for it or really understood what that was meaning, some of

- 1 that missing space was often not being seen. And I couldn't name it, right? So, that was
2 definitely a conflict in a relationship because I couldn't own my identity, I didn't have the
3 language for it. And if you aren't showing up as your whole full self in a relationship, you can't
4 really expect the other person to see it. So, I think there was both happening, probably. Kind of
5 accepting love because it was there and also it wasn't completely there.
- 6 AJ: Feeling a little empty because you just know you're bringing your fullest self.
- 7 EJO: Yeah.
- 8 AJ: Well, I'm happy that you have found a way to be on that path now.
- 9 EJO: Yeah.
- 10 AJ: I know your partner and they're amazing.
- 11 EJO: Thank you, yeah.
- 12 AJ: Talk to me a little bit about your experiences in dealing with institutions – like the criminal
13 justice system or the medical institution or the educational institutions and dealing with
14 insurance companies and all of these kinds of things. Have you experienced any barriers or
15 challenges and maybe you have the other experience of sort of white male privilege and what
16 does that mean? How does that play a role into your . . . ?
- 17 EJO: Yeah, it's interesting because . . . actually I get called a lady almost every day. And it doesn't
18 really matter what institution we're talking about – usually, especially if I'm with my partner . . . I
19 think it's people's internalized assumption of like, "Oh, this must be . . ." If they're trying to be
20 nice, they're like, "Oh, the gays. I'm going to not pretend I don't notice." So, they're trying to
21 be nice instead of being like, "Oh, my God," is how it kind of feels inside. But yeah, so health
22 care – every time. I'm changing my name this month, but I hadn't so . . .
- 23 AJ: Is that in response to this political landscape we're in?
- 24 EJO: Yeah. I've thought about it for a long time – long time, and I just never did it. I help other
25 people do it but I've just never done it myself and now I'm like, "Oh, I better do that now." It
26 was definitely inspired and there are so many folks showing up and being like, "OK, we're all
27 going to help each other now. So, it's also like, "All right," and then I have three people to go
28 with because everyone is doing it at the same time.
- 29 AJ: Yay.
- 30 EJO: So, in that way – yeah, that's going to be helpful because I think one of the worst parts is just
31 being dead named and . . .
- 32 AJ: Yeah, when you present your ID.
- 33 EJO: Every time. I hate flying, I hate getting pat down – there's just all the pieces that end up feeling
34 like one more layer that someone can take power away or take part of you away. I could have a
35 blind spot to whether I have while male privilege, I definitely have white privilege. But because
36 I'm lady'd all the time, I don't know if I do.

- 1 AJ: Sure, that's perfectly reasonable.
- 2 EJO: But it is an interesting internal conflict, like having that kind of combination of feeling like
3 incredible effeminate characteristics, or what society says are, coupled with masculine
4 characteristics, or at least what society says those are.
- 5 AJ: Sure.
- 6 EJO: And so, I don't know if . . . sometimes I feel like maybe the freedom that gives me is to
7 unsubscribe to some of those binaries.
- 8 AJ: Sure.
- 9 EJO: So then on the inside I kind of feel like, "Well . . ." I literally think that it's been so long that I
10 don't think about it unless someone reflects it to me.
- 11 AJ: Right.
- 12 EJO: And so then when that happens it feels like this huge slap in the face, those moments. Yeah . . .
13 yeah.
- 14 AJ: What do you think the relationship between the L, the G, the B and the T and I'm going to add
15 on to that GNC, because . . . and just the T, right?
- 16 EJO: Right.
- 17 AJ: Because there is intra-communal conversations that are happening around that.
- 18 EJO: Yeah. It's so interesting. Being 37, I feel like in the breadth of where I've lived and who I've
19 known and the work that I've done, I feel like I've been able to create community or kind of get
20 the people that are going to get it. But, I would say in the broad community there is such a . . . I
21 think that like being POC still impacts that. We can't just say LGBTQ because I see white gay
22 men everywhere – that's who gets lifted up to speak for the LGBTGNCAIQ communities and
23 literally with absolutely . . . unfortunately misogynistic and transphobic and a lot of those things.
- 24 AJ: And racist.
- 25 EJO: And racist.
- 26 AJ: Sorry to intrude on your interview.
- 27 EJO: No, please – add the –ist because I think that they continue to happen. That's been the hardest
28 part for me too is . . . you know, being objectified as a person whose sex assigned at birth was
29 female and where that puts you and that your body belongs to everyone else is a weird space to
30 live in because it sneaks in a lot sometimes from . . . especially the white gay male community –
31 more, I think, than, or in my experience maybe because I put myself in queer spaces more often,
32 than from heterosexual cis white men. But, broadly. Within the trans community, as a person
33 who feels like I am in the trans community as a gender non-conforming, gender-queer person.
- 34 AJ: Sure, I certainly include you there.

1 EJO: But what ends up happening, for sure, in my journey of understanding my identity or where I fit
 2 or where I am fine not fitting, it has a lot of times been some of my trans friends saying, “Well,
 3 you should transition, you’ll feel better – it will just be better when you do.” And that has
 4 happened a lot. We all have an experience that’s right for us and there’s a lot of struggle and I
 5 think, in part, I have to recognize that that has always been a human being caring for me and
 6 saying, “This solution made me feel better and I think it will make you feel better,” maybe
 7 without the awareness of being able to say that – but that also makes as a gender non-
 8 conforming person me feel a little bit invisible to my trans community and my cis community.
 9 And then, you know, if you’re trying to talk about the lesbian community, at least how that has
 10 felt for me, it’s complex because the people who I think end up being attracted to me fit along a
 11 straight, bi and lesbian continuum and so throughout my life exploring what does that really
 12 mean has . . . at least in their identities it’s been confusing because along each . . . if you think
 13 about the identities in relationship to who I am, that gets complicated and which pieces are
 14 seen based on where a person lives really strongly in their identity. So, someone who identifies
 15 as a lesbian most often to me is attracted to other women, that doesn’t mean they’re always
 16 attracted to cis women but still people who identify as women – so where does that leave me?
 17 It’s a pretty binary identity, or at least it feels that way to me – I’m sure it’s not for every lesbian.
 18 But, anyway – yeah. So, even within that community I think the people with the most privilege
 19 get lifted up to be the spokespeople and then folks suffering the most are the ones left without
 20 anyone to speak for them – and aren’t given room to speak. So, it’s like there’s still a majority of
 21 invisibility in the community, and a divisiveness often, because we aren’t one community –
 22 we’re many, many, many communities within every realm of life – jobs, school, age, identity,
 23 race. We’re all over the place, so I think unfortunately we do get put in this little category of . . .
 24 like we’re unified or something.

25 AJ: Yeah. Do you think we need that . . . need to maintain those connections or should these sort of
 26 disparate communities that you identified sort of go off on their own?

27 EJO: I don’t know if we’re ready for going off on our own. I think . . . the unifying that does happen in
 28 the face of . . . I mean, yeah, there is a purpose, I think, for building up and being separate – like
 29 if you’re talking about actual human beings in community and building each other up and
 30 making sure that all of the valuable intersecting identities that we have are visible and powerful,
 31 but when you think about our bigger society and their ability to actually see anyone that is
 32 queer – as we know after this last vote and who just got elected president, there is a lot of hate.
 33 So pulling the LGBTQNCIA, like pulling that all apart and separating us just divides us and I
 34 think that the more unified we can be, whether some folks are having a harder time listening
 35 and giving room and space for other folks, we’ve got to just keep . . . I think we’ve got to keep
 36 fighting for that and fighting together.

37 AJ: Yeah, I think I absolutely agree with that. What do you think the agenda should be for the
 38 transgender community going forward? And then I have this question that . . . like . . . no, just
 39 go with that.

40 EJO: OK, we’ll go with that first. It’s really hard to say – people are literally being murdered, killing
 41 themselves, and can’t even . . . I don’t know if there’s one unified way to think about what the
 42 trans community should choose as a goal. It needs to be much more than just living and yet

1 we're still stuck there. The bigger work is like changing such . . . like many, many, many broken
2 systems. And so I guess the goal for trans folks is to love each other and keep calling out when
3 it's not all right. Unfortunately, I know we end up having to love each other and it is other
4 people's job to do some of this work – trans folks are tired and it isn't fair to not have the allies
5 and the advocates standing up when it's time to be making some of the changes – it shouldn't
6 be so complicated to change your name and it shouldn't be so complicated to get the health
7 care you need and it shouldn't be so complicated to call someone by the name they say they
8 use, to treat a person as the person they say they are. But when I think about it, I think there
9 are so many layers and there's so many different identities and there's human beings at the
10 heart of what should trans folks goals be.

11 AJ: Sure, yeah. Where do you use the bathroom, EJ? In public?

12 EJO: I look for single stall bathrooms. I try to make any event I ever go to or plan, have them and/or
13 just change the name. I don't care if there's a bunch of stalls just write on the sign what's inside
14 and let people choose where they want to go.

15 AJ: Right.

16 EJO: But I end up using the women's bathroom because I feel like I'm going to be safer there. I get
17 stared at and sometimes people say stuff.

18 AJ: Really? Like?

19 EJO: Like, "You're in the wrong bathroom." I've been chased into a bathroom by security at a theatre
20 – like, "You're in the wrong bathroom." Literally, chased me into the bathroom to tell me. I'm
21 like . . .

22 AJ: And they're trying to be helpful, right? I don't know.

23 EJO: Maybe. But it's intermission, don't you think I know what line I'm in.

24 AJ: Right, exactly.

25 EJO: It's weird, but that happens sometimes – especially in bigger places. I would say it happens a
26 little less in Minneapolis, it happened a little less in DC, but it definitely happens.

27 AJ: There are actually some pretty good bathroom policies in DC.

28 EJO: DC has been working on those laws for a really . . . I think it's been around eight years. Yeah.
29 It's written into their building code where you can't build a new building or bathroom, and if it's
30 single stall it cannot be gendered. That's pretty sweet.

31 AJ: Right, which we have implemented here in Minneapolis too, it's just that we're not here in
32 Minneapolis – we're in St. Paul.

33 EJO: Right – over the bridge the bathrooms are safe.

34 AJ: Yeah, exactly. There still needs to be an education component though. The sort of law is there
35 but the education for business owners hasn't quite caught up yet.

- 1 EJO: Right.
- 2 AJ: But, you know, I just know that that's a tough issue and it even . . . I think it gets complicated by
3 gender non-conforming people, which is the case for gender-neutral bathrooms, but I know that
4 a lot of people in the trans community are kind of like, "What are those guys doing? Why are
5 they making this hard?" Do you experience that? Or do you have an awareness around that at
6 all?
- 7 EJO: I mean, maybe it's because a lot of the trans folks who do identify more with the binary that I've
8 known have gone through transition and know what it's like to be in a place where people don't
9 know what or how to acknowledge you. And so, I haven't experienced as much of that. I think
10 I've probably heard it through the rumblings of Facebook, but I've heard more people get it that
11 there is that moment. But I think it's hard for someone who does identify with the binary too,
12 to be like, "Well, I worked really hard to identify with this identity and I want to be seen as
13 such." And sometimes it makes it hard in that struggle, I am guessing – through some
14 conversations I've had with friends, that you want to forget that part where people weren't sure
15 what to say to you. And so, yeah – I've definitely had differing experiences with folks.
- 16 AJ: Well, in my humble prediction, I think this whole binary system is on its way to extinction sooner
17 than later anyway.
- 18 EJO: Yeah.
- 19 AJ: Last question, where do you see the transgender community 50 years from now, EJ?
- 20 EJO: We're going to be the only people left – kind of like an apocalypse and then it will just be us.
- 21 AJ: The beautiful ones.
- 22 EJO: On the tops of mountains.
- 23 AJ: That's sort of some kind of dystopian . . .
- 24 EJO: Yeah, that's how my brain works.
- 25 AJ: What's the new show on HBO? Like *Divergent* or . . .?
- 26 EJO: Oh, yeah – I've seen the ads for that. Yeah, it's that. No, I mean the leaps and bounds, but
27 obviously we still have so much work to do and not everyone is experiencing . . . my POC,
28 especially POC trans women friends are . . . it's not the same experience as a white trans man.
- 29 AJ: It's very different.
- 30 EJO: And so where we are, or as a gender non-conforming person . . . 50 years from now, I mean
31 what I've seen in the last 10 years – people being able to say who they are in public, that's a big
32 difference. And not all public but . . . a lot more.
- 33 AJ: A lot more. I mean, you have 190 people coming here for trans-specific health care. That
34 wasn't happening 10 years ago.

- 1 EJO: Yeah, and people know that it's this place. If you even think about . . . think about where we
2 would go for even HIV tests 10 years ago. Think about that. If there was a sign or it was
3 advertised, that was different whether you were proud to say you were just there on Facebook.
4 We didn't have Facebook back then, but now people are like, "Just checked into the health care
5 clinic to get my hormones."
- 6 AJ: Right exactly – that's huge.
- 7 EJO: It's a different . . . and so knowing that that much change has happened in whatever way, 50
8 years . . . I guess I like to envision that everyone just gets to love themselves and be exactly who
9 they are and hopefully, like you said, the binary is done. The complexity that makes up
10 humanness gets to be experienced in whatever way a human being wants to express
11 themselves.
- 12 AJ: Well this has been an amazing conversation, EJ, and I'm so grateful.
- 13 EJO: Thank you.
- 14 AJ: Thank you very much.
- 15 EJO: Thank you.
- 16 AJ: Is there anything that I didn't ask you that you feel compelled to share?
- 17 EJO: No, I feel like we went into a lot of depth. But thank you very much for doing this, for collecting
18 stories.
- 19 AJ: You're very welcome. Wow, until we meet again, my friend.
- 20 EJO: Thank you.