

Lee Levingston Perine  
Narrator

Andrea Jenkins  
Interviewer

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

December 22, 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](mailto:jenki120@umn.edu)  
(612) 625-4379

1    Andrea Jenkins            -AJ  
2    Lee Levingston Perine   -LLP  
3

4    AJ:        So, hello.

5    LLP:       Hello.

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 22, 2016.  
8               It's actually a beautiful winter day – the sun is shining and all of that good stuff. I'm here today  
9               with Lee Perine.

10   LLP:       Per-ene.

11   AJ:        Per-ene. Thank you. One of my questions, Lee, always, is to have our narrators state their  
12               name, how it's supposed to be pronounced, so thank you for correcting me. So, state your  
13               name, spell your name so we make sure we have the spelling correct, state your gender identity  
14               as you describe it today, and your gender assigned at birth, and then the pronouns that you use.

15   LLP:        OK. So, my name is Lee Levingston Perine. Lee, L-e-e, Levingston, L-e-v-i-n-g-s-t-o-n, and Perine  
16               is P-e-r-i-n-e. Pronouns are they/them/their. As of today, which is December 22<sup>nd</sup>, my identity  
17               is I identify as gender queer, and I was assigned female at birth.

18   AJ:        Wow, thank you, Lee. So, I know you've already indicated that you have a little bit of a  
19               challenge with this question, but I'm going to go ahead and ask it anyway. What is the first thing  
20               you remember in life?

21   LLP:        Yeah, I really struggle with that. I'm not sure what the first thing I remember in life is, but it  
22               probably has something to do with my twin sister because we were always together – pretty  
23               much every minute of the day, up until we went to college.

24   AJ:        Oh, wow.

25   LLP:        So, probably something with her.

26   AJ:        So, you have a twin?

27   LLP:        I do, Allison – yeah.

28   AJ:        OK, wow. Identical or . . . ?

29   LLP        Fraternal. We don't even look related.

30   AJ:        Is that right?

31   LLP:        Yeah, but she's my best friend and my biggest supporter.

32   AJ:        That's incredible. And the memory doesn't have to be at like age 18 months or something – just  
33               your first memory. It depends on the person – it could be when you were in 5<sup>th</sup> grade or  
34               whatever.

- 1    LLP:    Now that I've given it a little bit more thought, it's probably my first day of kindergarten.  
2            Actually, at that point, I was in one classroom and my sister was actually across the hall and our  
3            brother was in 5<sup>th</sup> grade at the same school. So, he walked us to our classrooms, introduced us  
4            to our teachers, made sure we got to our seats, and then he went on to his classroom. So, it  
5            was actually probably a moment with both of my siblings that comes to mind.
- 6    AJ:    OK, well that's a pretty detailed memory.
- 7    LLP:    Yeah, I remember that day.
- 8    AJ:    Where did you go to elementary school, kindergarten?
- 9    LLP:    So, I was born and raised in St. Louis, Missouri, and I went to an elementary school called  
10          Jackson Park.
- 11   AJ:    Jackson Park. What was it like there?
- 12   LLP:    Jackson Park, I think, was probably one of the best elementary schools in the country. Really  
13          outstanding teachers, diverse student body, really active parent-teacher organization. We had  
14          soccer and lots of activities for kids to participate in and so I really liked it there, I was happy.
- 15   AJ:    Yeah. Did you go there your whole . . . ?
- 16   LLP:    Yeah, so I grew up in the same house.
- 17   AJ:    Grade school?
- 18   LLP:    Grade school, yeah. I still have some of the same friends from kindergarten. All of my time was  
19          . . . so the school district was University City, so all of my time was spent in the University City  
20          school system.
- 21   AJ:    OK. Is that a neighborhood?
- 22   LLP:    Yeah, University City is a neighborhood in St. Louis and all of our streets are named after  
23          colleges and universities.
- 24   AJ:    Oh, OK. So it's not on a campus, it's not like the University of Missouri or anything like that?
- 25   LLP:    The neighborhood is actually adjacent to Washington University in St. Louis but I'm not sure that  
26          that is why they named the streets that way. So, yeah, I grew up on Cornell and my best friend  
27          was on Stanford.
- 28   AJ:    Oh, OK. You guys were at the Ivy League schools.
- 29   LLP:    Something like that. It was a great place to grow up.
- 30   AJ:    Nice. What was family life like?
- 31   LLP:    I had both of my parents until my dad died when I was 15.
- 32   AJ:    Oh, wow. I'm sorry to hear that but it's great that you grew up in a two-parent household.

- 1    LLP:    Yeah, two-parent household. My parents were very involved in the community of St. Louis,  
2            active members of their sorority and fraternity and other civic organizations. I have an older  
3            brother who I'm close to and I have a twin sister, who I'm very close to. So, a very close-knit  
4            family. We're super tight and supportive.
- 5    AJ:    Awesome. So, when you were in grade school at Jackson Park, were you ever sort of bullied or  
6            harassed? Were you at that point in time expressing, in any way, your gender identity? Or  
7            maybe a better question is, let me put it this way, when did you first realize that you were not  
8            the gender you were assigned at birth?
- 9    LLP:    Probably around seven or eight, I think that was the first time I just started to feel different. You  
10           know, tried to pee standing up, just felt different from my peers. I still had pigtails and luckily I  
11           didn't have to wear dresses a lot so that didn't challenge my identity, but I also knew I was a  
12           little different. I also fit in, right? I wasn't bullied – elementary school was actually a very  
13           pleasant experience. In 5<sup>th</sup> grade, I was student council vice president.
- 14   AJ:    Woo-hoo, politics.
- 15   LLP:    Yeah. My twin was student council president - that was the first time that siblings had both held  
16           those offices. So, it was actually pretty storybook.
- 17   AJ:    You were a popular kid.
- 18   LLP:    I was a popular kid, yeah definitely.
- 19   AJ:    So, you weren't necessarily expressing this outwardly in any way, this whole sort of feeling of  
20           being different.
- 21   LLP:    No.
- 22   AJ:    When did you start to express it?
- 23   LLP:    I would say probably middle school, moving into high school is where I definitely felt like more  
24           of a tomboy. I played field hockey; I was the goalie. I think . . . I didn't really wear dresses in  
25           high school; the only time I think I did was when I was a debutante. I did that for my mother.
- 26   AJ:    OK.
- 27   LLP:    I did wear like a big white dress my senior year of high school but then after that experience . . .  
28           I'm glad I did it, but then I was just like, "This definitely isn't who I am." After graduating from  
29           high school I was just like, "I'm pretty much done with dresses in any form."
- 30   AJ:    Feminine sort of type.
- 31   LLP:    Yeah, I didn't want to wear make-up, I had long straight hair which wasn't really a fit for me.  
32           But, at the same time it's just like I wasn't really ready to push too many envelopes and  
33           boundaries, so I did what I could given where I was.
- 34   AJ:    Sure. Where did you go to college?
- 35   LLP:    I went to Duke for undergrad, in North Carolina.

- 1 AJ: Is that right?
- 2 LLP: Yeah.
- 3 AJ: That's a pretty decent school.
- 4 LLP: Yeah, it's a really good school. It was rough though, it was a little rough the first year.
- 5 AJ: What was the challenge? What was going on?
- 6 LLP: So, my high school was 90% Black. I got to Duke, which is not 90% Black.
- 7 AJ: To say the least.
- 8 LLP: To say the least. It was just a lot of very privileged people who I was just not used to being  
9 around, very different ideas of reality, and it was just a really tough place to be and I wanted to  
10 transfer. But I ended up staying and luckily I found people I connected with. I think, also . . . I  
11 mean, it was only 6000 undergrads at that time, but I think that that was even too big for what I  
12 needed in terms of a college experience.
- 13 AJ: Wow, yeah. But you made it through.
- 14 LLP: I made it – I graduated early. I made it through. I came out when I was 19, so that all happened  
15 while I was at Duke.
- 16 AJ: What was that like? You're in this sort of privileged PWI, I think the phrase is – predominantly  
17 white institution, and you're coming out as gender queer.
- 18 LLP: That was . . . wow, 1998. So in 1998, gender queer, at least, was not a term I knew. I had  
19 actually talked to my sister and a couple of friends about it so at that point I was identifying as  
20 gay. I never really associated with the term lesbian, so I would just tell people that I was gay. It  
21 was when I was 19 that I told my mother, so, for me, that was the moment that felt like coming  
22 out because . . . yeah, that was probably the hardest person I had to tell, was telling her.
- 23 AJ: How did that go? What did you . . . do you remember what you said?
- 24 LLP: Oh, yeah – I remember. Oh, yeah. I had flown into Little Rock, I had come home for spring  
25 break and she had picked me up because we had to go from Little Rock to Memphis, that's  
26 where she lives. We were driving and she was like, "Oh, how's your spring break been?" I was  
27 actually in New York visiting this woman who I was completely crushed out on and it didn't go so  
28 well. And my mom was like, "How was your spring break?" And I was like, "Ahhh, I think I'm  
29 heartbroken." My mom said, "Well, what's his name?" I was like, "Dana." She was like, "Oh, so  
30 it's official." I'm like, "Yeah, it's official." So, she had known the entire time. My aunt had told  
31 her . . .
- 32 AJ: Oh, so she knew about Dana.
- 33 LLP: She didn't know about Dana, but she already knew I was gay at that point. When I was like 15, I  
34 think, my aunt told her . . . so my name was Elisa when I was born.
- 35 AJ: Oh, OK.

- 1    LLP:    My aunt was like, “Oh, Elisa is gay if you don’t already know, she carries a wallet.” At that point  
2            my mom was like . . .
- 3    AJ:    With a chain? Like what?
- 4    LLP:    No, just a wallet.
- 5    AJ:    A wallet doesn’t mean you’re gay.
- 6    LLP:    For my aunt it did, but I guess . . . like from looking at pictures and stuff, I’m like, “Oh, OK. It  
7            kind of makes sense.” But I think one of the reasons I was hesitant to tell my mom was because  
8            my father was a closeted gay man and I think all the feelings around that, I really didn’t want to  
9            trigger any of that.
- 10   AJ:    Sort of . . .
- 11   LLP:    So, I think that’s why I was a little reluctant to tell her, and then eventually I did. She had a  
12            tough time with it, it was not easy. We’ve had a lot of conversations about it, she’s processed it  
13            with friends and family, so she is doing a lot better with it. She walked me down the aisle at my  
14            wedding so . . . you know, she’s pretty awesome.
- 15   AJ:    So, you’re married?
- 16   LLP:    I was married. I was married for four years – yeah.
- 17   AJ:    To . . .?
- 18   LLP:    To a woman.
- 19   AJ:    To a woman, wow.
- 20   LLP:    Yeah.
- 21   AJ:    I want to get back to that a little bit later. I’m just kind of interested in how your self-identify  
22            has sort of morphed over time. So, you came out initially at 19 as gay, right?
- 23   LLP:    Yeah.
- 24   AJ:    And then . . .
- 25   LLP:    I probably identified as gay until I was . . . so, I’m 38 now and I probably identified as gay until I  
26            was 33 or 34. I distinctly remember I was hanging out with one of my really good friends, I call  
27            him, “my son” although he’s 35 now. He’s trans identified and we were in a parking lot of this  
28            organic grocery store and I was like, “I’m tired of being gay, I’m queer.” And he was like, “OK,  
29            that works – whatever.” So, it was at that point that I started to re-think my identity and when I  
30            really wanted to express myself differently and being in DC and being around so many different  
31            types of people, I really started to explore the idea of having my top surgery and then it was like  
32            in 2015 that I changed my name – well, not legally but starting going by Lee and started doing  
33            things that were going to make me more comfortable as I moved through the world.
- 34   AJ:    So, you’ve had top surgery?

- 1    LLP:    Yeah, December of 2015 – so like a year ago.
- 2    AJ:    Are there other sort of medical interventions that you have undergone or have planned?
- 3    LLP:    No, I haven't yet. I'm still figuring that out. I think that's one of the . . . being up here in  
4           Minnesota helps where I have kind of the freedom and the space to think about what's next or  
5           what's not next and figuring out what that timeline is.
- 6    AJ:    You mentioned that you lived in DC and then you sort of transitioned to Minneapolis. You  
7           identify as gender queer but people in the world . . . I think people see you as a young Black  
8           man.
- 9    LLP:    Yes – yes, they do. Which I was not prepared for. In some ways, I've had to process a lot of that  
10          because people treat you very differently when you are perceived as a young Black man. I'm a  
11          pretty happy-go-lucky, jovial person and I'll get on an elevator and nobody wants to talk to me.
- 12   AJ:    Right.
- 13   LLP:    Or people are threatened – like when you get followed in stores. I had this woman . . . I was  
14          buying stuff for a work project and she followed me out to my car to ask me about what I had  
15          purchased and wouldn't leave until I showed the receipt.
- 16   AJ:    Is that right?
- 17   LLP:    I never had those experiences until I cut my hair and had top surgery. Also, I know my energy  
18          has shifted and the clothes I chose to wear – so a lot of things have changed about . . .
- 19   AJ:    Was that in Minneapolis or was that in DC?
- 20   LLP:    This is all in DC, all in DC. I know that when I look at myself from a few years ago and look at  
21          myself now, there's been a huge shift and the way I get treated, there's also been a huge shift.
- 22   AJ:    How? How so? Are you treated better? Are you treated worse?
- 23   LLP:    Worse, the world is not as pleasant.
- 24   AJ:    To Black men.
- 25   LLP:    To Black men. I mean, there was probably stuff I was experiencing as a Black woman but as a  
26          Black man, I do feel a bit more threatened and I'm more cautious of how I move about and how  
27          I take up space and realizing that people just have these ridiculous ideas and I don't know if I'm  
28          in a position to change them so I just make sure that I'm as safe as I can be.
- 29   AJ:    Wow. Do you ever think about . . . you know, the idea has existed or the action has existed  
30          since the beginning of human history, but we have now labeled the actions toxic masculinity.  
31          Do you think about that? How do you deal with that as now being sort of a masculine-of-center  
32          person?
- 33   LLP:    I think about it all the time. So, when I was in DC, I actually had a group of friends and we called  
34          ourselves The Brothers. It's a group of masculine-of-center folks but I think we were really  
35          committed to re-defining masculinity and there are a lot of positive things about being



- 1 masculine-of-center but I don't need to be misogynist, I don't need to necessarily prescribe to  
2 certain gender roles. There are certain ways that I have to be conscious of how I take up space.  
3 In the work that I do, I actually make sure I'm centering Black women and so I think that I have  
4 the space and opportunity to re-define masculinity and not just do it the way it's been done  
5 before. I don't necessarily like the way it's been done before, but recognizing that I can . . . that  
6 there can be a shift.
- 7 AJ: Wow. Yeah, no that's a huge thing. As we talk about the shift, sort of this physical shift and  
8 how you're perceived in society, and being identified as a Black male certainly has its challenges,  
9 as you've named some, there is also some male privilege that comes too, right?
- 10 LLP: Yeah, there's definitely male privilege. I'm not sure how much I've experienced it because I  
11 think . . . at least because I'm not on testosterone yet, or that's still something I'm deciding, but I  
12 think what happens is when people look at me, they perceive me as a Black man. So, if they see  
13 me in the elevator, they may feel threatened and they get off the elevator and that's our  
14 exchange. But when people talk to me or are in a social setting with me, then they realize that I  
15 was probably assigned female at birth and so then the dynamic shifts again. So, I'm not  
16 continuously read as a Black man. So, it's kind of . . . yeah.
- 17 AJ: Wow, do you disclose that you were assigned female at birth?
- 18 LLP: It depends on the setting. If I'm in Uber and they're like, "Hey, what's up dude?" I'm like,  
19 "Hey," and then I just go with it. We're going to be in the car together for 10-20 minutes so  
20 there's no . . .
- 21 AJ: Yeah, there's no reason to disclose that to the lady at the cupcake shop.
- 22 LLP: Yeah, so then I'll be like . . . I'll just go with it. But, if I'm in a social setting – like if I'm at a party  
23 or meeting people, then I'll typically tell them. I don't necessarily tell them I was assigned  
24 female at birth, but then they'll be like . . . I think they pick up on the fact and they'll be like,  
25 "Oh, sir/ma'am . . ." And I'm like, "I'm both," and then they just kind of let it go at that point.
- 26 AJ: How does that feel?
- 27 LLP: It used to feel better, I think now it's starting to feel less authentic in terms of saying that I'm  
28 both because I'm not necessarily sure I'm both anymore – trying to figure out what all that  
29 means.
- 30 AJ: And I was thinking more . . . you're coming from an internal space, I was thinking externally.  
31 How does it feel that people will sort of . . . I don't know, just kind of blow it off? Sir? Ma'am?  
32 Whatever?
- 33 LLP: I get that probably a few times a week – like sort of, "Ma'am, ma'am, sir, I'm sorry, I'm sorry." I  
34 think . . . I used to get really bothered by it and would try to correct people and then I would just  
35 go with it. And now it's just like the only people I really make a conscious effort to correct are  
36 my family and friends, because those people I deal with on a regular basis. But if these are . . .  
37 you know . . .
- 38 AJ: Somebody in a restaurant or . . .

- 1    LLP:    Somebody in a restaurant, like super transactional, then I'm just going to let it go because I just  
2            don't have that much energy to expend and so I've just got to keep it pushing, so that's what I  
3            try to do.
- 4    AJ:    Sure. Yeah, I'm wondering what's the difference in being perceived being a Black male in DC  
5            versus in Minneapolis? Have you had a chance to sort of analyze or process that at all?
- 6    LLP:    I haven't analyzed it yet, but just Minneapolis, in general, coming to a city that is predominantly  
7            white is a shock to the system. It's definitely not DC. In DC, all of my friends were Black and so  
8            now coming to Minneapolis and as I'm trying to build community with Black people and other  
9            POCs, but right now my base is a lot of white folks and white gay men. It's just . . . it's just a lot  
10          different experience than anything I've ever had.
- 11   AJ:    I'm sorry . . . I'm sorry for laughing, I'm sorry that you're experiencing that too.
- 12   LLP:    Yeah, I know. Because sometimes laughter is the only way to make it through because it's like  
13            you need to be around people, you don't want to isolate. At that same time, you don't have a  
14            shared experience because being gay is not always enough. So, yeah, working through that. And  
15            then also I don't know how much time they've actually spent around Black people or other  
16            people of color, like the people I know in Minneapolis . . . it's a very different life than what I had  
17            in DC.
- 18   AJ:    What are some of the challenges of the LGB community versus the trans gender non-conforming  
19            community, in your . . . ?
- 20   LLP:    What are some of the challenges?
- 21   AJ:    Yeah.
- 22   LLP:    What I've noticed hanging out with a lot of LGB folks is . . . I think this assumed understanding or  
23            like, "I don't need to be educated." Because I identify as a lesbian, gay or bisexual, then I must  
24            understand, automatically, the trans experience or gender non-conforming experience and I  
25            don't have to take the time to be educated to learn about the importance of pronouns and  
26            understand that people's identities are on a spectrum. I think people have this false sense of  
27            solidarity and, in fact, it does a huge disservice, I think, to trans folks and gender non-  
28            conforming folks.
- 29   AJ:    Yeah, that also translates to race. I'm gay so I'm . . .
- 30   LLP:    There's no way I can be racist.
- 31   AJ:    . . . and Black, I can't be a racist because I'm gay.
- 32   LLP:    Yeah.
- 33   AJ:    What's your thoughts on that?
- 34   LLP:    I've met plenty of racist gay white men.
- 35   AJ:    No shit.

- 1    LLP:    Yeah, it's been quite an experience which is why I've chosen to primarily hang out with Black  
2            queers and other POCs because those are the spaces where I feel safe and comfortable and can  
3            express who I truly am.
- 4    AJ:    What's your sexual orientation?
- 5    LLP:    Right now, I think I identify as queer. I don't know. I think since getting divorced, since having  
6            top surgery, and giving myself the freedom to explore the world, I think I'm just open to energy  
7            at this point in my life and don't really label it.
- 8    AJ:    How long have you been divorced?
- 9    LLP:    Two years in February.
- 10   AJ:    Was your gender identity in any way related to your separation or break-up?
- 11   LLP:    No, I think my partner would . . . and we actually talked about me having top surgery. I think  
12            she would have been supportive of that, I just felt that I needed space and to be on my own to  
13            really figure out who I am because it is . . . I don't know if it's necessarily a selfish process, but  
14            you really have to go inward and sometimes you don't have the energy or ability to focus on a  
15            relationship. Now that I'm on my own, I just really make decisions that are best for me and I  
16            think will ultimately make me a better partner because . . . yeah, I'm figuring out who I am and  
17            what I want and not in the context of someone else and worrying about how I'm impacting their  
18            life, because that's what a partnership is.
- 19   AJ:    So, for a while you were very much into female body or female-identified humans.
- 20   LLP:    Yes, yes – and I still am. But I think that now that I'm more masculine and more male identified,  
21            but not necessarily identifying as male, if you're masculine-of-center and you're attracted to  
22            other masculine-of-center people, there's also a bit of a taboo and stigma around that.
- 23   AJ:    Really?
- 24   LLP:    Oh yeah.
- 25   AJ:    Like what? I'm serious.
- 26   LLP:    If you see two people in DC, they call them doms and stuff and all that kind of stuff, people will  
27            be like, "That's so gay," and I'm like, "Well, we're all gay – we're all queers, I don't understand  
28            how this works." So, it's OK for butch femme dynamics, femme femme dynamics but the  
29            minute it's like butch butch, at least for Black folks is what I've experienced, people lose their  
30            minds. And so, I think there is . . . and even some of my friends who were masculine-of-center,  
31            for the most part we're a very affectionate group of people – but to a point where it's like,  
32            "Well, you know, I don't want people to think . . ." And I'm just like, "OK."
- 33   AJ:    So do they . . . they stop short of saying no homo, right?
- 34   LLP:    Yeah, but that's what people are thinking because they're so worried about what people think. I  
35            think it's fine if two masculine-of-center people want to date each other or share space  
36            together, whatever that is but it's not as accepted.

- 1 AJ: I have a trans couple, two trans friends who are married – they’re both masculine identified and  
2 ...
- 3 LLP: I’ve seen when it’s trans men . . . I’ve seen less of a pushback but when I . . . women who may  
4 identify as lesbian and they’re masculine-of-center, so two butch lesbians together who are  
5 Black, it’s like . . .
- 6 AJ: No, I totally get it and I believe it and I’ve also experienced it as a bisexual transgender Black  
7 woman myself, whose partner is female-identified cis gender. So, yeah, that struggle is real.
- 8 LLP: I also had to unpack a lot of my own crap around it too. There was a time . . . I’m trans  
9 identified, but there was a time I was probably a very transphobic person because thinking you  
10 could hate it away, but you can’t hate yourself away. And then you come to terms with who  
11 you are and then as you get older you’re just like, I don’t know how much time I have on this  
12 planet so I just need to do what’s me and it’s just going to have to work for people and if it  
13 doesn’t, I don’t really care. And so, it’s proven to be a lot easier.
- 14 AJ: So you’ve worked through some transphobia?
- 15 LLP: Yeah, oh yeah.
- 16 AJ: I think if all of us were honest we would probably say we’ve had to . . . and I don’t know, it’s a  
17 continuous struggle, I think. Is it ever really over?
- 18 LLP: Right. I think sometimes I just don’t want to . . . it’s just exhausting, right? Because . . . luckily  
19 we’re in Minneapolis, which is, in some ways, more progressive than obviously other places in  
20 the country, but that doesn’t mean everyone gets it, right? But you don’t want to be everyone’s  
21 educator.
- 22 AJ: Right.
- 23 LLP: Sometimes you just want to go to dinner or sometimes you just want to go to the park. Or  
24 people will say to me, I just don’t understand. I’m like, “Google it, there are plenty of  
25 resources.” When I was in college I didn’t want to your insight into Black America, because this  
26 is just my perspective, right? I don’t want to be your trans representative and so, yeah.
- 27 AJ: Or they can come to the Transgender Oral History Project and . . .
- 28 LLP: There are so many resources, so many more resources. When I came out 20 years ago, of course  
29 I’ve appreciated all of the journey, but maybe it would have been different if I had other  
30 resources and knew that there were other identities that reflected me.
- 31 AJ: Yeah, and that you could be successful and respected in the world by being yourself.
- 32 LLP: Yeah.
- 33 AJ: What have been some of the challenges you’ve faced since you’ve come out as a masculine-of-  
34 center, gender-queer person?
- 35 LLP: Challenges? I think I have a lot of challenges moving through the world in terms of . . . like if I’m  
36 out at a restaurant, if I’m on an elevator – those things, but I actually didn’t have any issues at

- 1 my job when I came out and had my surgery. They were extremely supportive. My side  
2 business is working with queer people, so I'm in spaces that are for my identity. I'm in DC,  
3 which is one of the queerest places in this country, and now I'm in Minneapolis . . .
- 4 AJ: Really?
- 5 LLP: Oh, yeah – DC is super queer, or very queer, or at least I found all the places to go. But even like  
6 . . . I never really felt threatened going to restaurants or anything . . . like coffee shops. I always  
7 felt respected and so I actually haven't had the most . . . there have been times where I've felt  
8 unease but for the most part I would say that life has been OK. It's more of my process than  
9 anything else.
- 10 AJ: Sure, internal.
- 11 LLP: Internal stuff, yeah.
- 12 AJ: Yeah, what have been some of the positive aspects?
- 13 LLP: Positive? I think since . . . like, owning and accepting my authentic self, I think I'm a lot lighter.  
14 I'm a lot happier, it's easier for me to interact with people, and I think it just . . . when I have joy  
15 then it also brings . . . I feel like joy is infectious. So, if you're who you are then people around  
16 you will be like, "Oh, OK – they're happy because they're doing . . ." I think it can actually inspire  
17 people to do the things they want to do and express themselves the way they want to. So,  
18 yeah.
- 19 AJ: So, opening up space for other people.
- 20 LLP: Yeah.
- 21 AJ: Yeah. What were some of the pivotal moments that really, I guess, led to your gender  
22 awakening? I know you mentioned you were sitting in a parking lot at an organic food store and  
23 you kind of had this epiphany. Were there other sort of seminal or pivotal moments?
- 24 LLP: Yeah, I would say on my 34<sup>th</sup> birthday I had this really big birthday party and I had done this  
25 crowd funding campaign for my business, so in a lot of ways it seemed like I was extremely  
26 happy and OK with the world, but on the inside I was really torn up and actually extremely  
27 depressed. It was about that time that . . . and after a suicide attempt, I actually had to have a  
28 conversation with myself and with my family as to how did I get to this point and I think a lot of  
29 it was because I was afraid to express who I was and had just gotten so used to performing that  
30 you get tired of performing at some point. So, having a real conversation with them about who I  
31 was and how I needed to present in the world, and getting their support. So, from then on they  
32 were just like, "However you need to live is how we're going to support you." And so, yeah. So,  
33 I thank my family for that because a lot of people don't have that support.
- 34 AJ: No, not at all. And we know that statistics show that 81% of transgender people who have  
35 family support do better in terms of employment, housing – all of those things. When you have  
36 family support you can just be more productive, I think.
- 37 LLP: Yeah.

- 1 AJ: And not necessarily caught up in those negative cycles that tend to happen for many trans  
2 people, particularly transgender people of color. We talked a little bit about love and  
3 relationships – you were married for four years.
- 4 LLP: I was, yeah.
- 5 AJ: Are you in a relationship now?
- 6 LLP: No, I'm very single – very, very single.
- 7 AJ: And you would be open to dating trans men, cis gender women, cis men. Have you ever . . . ?
- 8 LLP: Mmm . . . I think I'm open to everyone except cis men right now. Just . . . no, no. No. But if  
9 you'd have asked me a few years ago, I only dated . . . I didn't date trans women, I didn't date  
10 trans men, my idea of who I would date was very limited, and that's changed. So, if you ask me  
11 in a year it could be very different. I don't know.
- 12 AJ: I have to just keep it open because I mean, there are a lot of trans men who are into cis gender  
13 men.
- 14 LLP: My son is one of those people, yeah.
- 15 AJ: Scruffy . . . Isn't there an app called Scruffy or something?
- 16 LLP: See I don't even know about it, I'll have to look it up. But I don't know.
- 17 AJ: Sort of for trans men who are interested in cis men and vice versa. I've never been on it.
- 18 LLP: I may take a look.
- 19 AJ: OK, yeah. It doesn't quite fit my criteria. Have you had any challenges or discrimination or  
20 harassment dealing with the criminal justice system or the academic institutions or medical  
21 institutions or some of these big institutions that sort of dominant our culture and society?
- 22 LLP: You know, I'm really fortunate I haven't had . . .
- 23 AJ: That's awesome.
- 24 LLP: But I also think that's probably because when I went through . . .
- 25 AJ: I'm doing golf claps because that's incredible.
- 26 LLP: That's also because when I went to college and grad school, at that point I identified as a  
27 woman. And so, I haven't had . . . I didn't go through the educational system as a gender-queer  
28 person so I don't know . . . if I decide to go back and get a Ph.D., I don't know what that would  
29 be like. Even when it comes to medical professionals, I've actually had very pleasant  
30 experiences. There are lots of doctors in DC that are used to working with trans folks and are  
31 very competent.
- 32 AJ: No problems there.

- 1    LLP:    No. I think sometimes I'll look at forms and I'm like, "Oh, they probably should have edited this  
2               form," that kind of thing. But besides that when I meet with the actual doctor or the nurse, it's  
3               been pretty positive.
- 4    AJ:    Wow, that's incredible.
- 5    LLP:    Yeah.
- 6    AJ:    Where did you go to graduate school? You mentioned graduate school.
- 7    LLP:    I went to the University of Texas at Austin. I spent two years down there.
- 8    AJ:    UTA?
- 9    LLP:    Or just University of Texas, because it's the main campus. So, yeah. I'm a Longhorn as well as a  
10            Blue Devil.
- 11   AJ:    Oh, my goodness - you poor thing.
- 12   LLP:    Yeah, I went to very sports-oriented schools. Yeah.
- 13   AJ:    Were you an athlete or a fan? What was the deal?
- 14   LLP:    I was an athlete in high school, I played field hockey and soccer and all that kind of stuff.
- 15   AJ:    OK.
- 16   LLP:    Full disclosure, I applied to Duke because of the basketball team, because they'd won national  
17            championships in 1991, 1992. So, yeah – that's what drew me to the school and I went there. It  
18            was also a really good school and I did get a great education.
- 19   AJ:    You could have went to the University of North Carolina – the Tarheels.
- 20   LLP:    I could have, but my mom also had her . . .
- 21   AJ:    If it was about basketball.
- 22   LLP:    That's true, and I did visit the campus of UNC, but my mom also had a good friend who worked  
23            at Duke and so it was just like, "OK, if you're going to go away, then at least I know there's  
24            somebody who can look out for you." So, all those things combined.
- 25   AJ:    So, it was a little more than just the basketball program?
- 26   LLP:    I would say that it was a strong part of it.
- 27   AJ:    We won't tell MJ about your decision.
- 28   LLP:    Yeah, and then Texas was . . . it was actually a family decision. My brother got re-located for  
29            work to San Antonio and he has two kids who I'm very close to and I was like, "I want to be  
30            around my niece and nephew." And so, I got into grad school at Austin and I got a fellowship so  
31            I was like, "Well, if they're willing to pay for it, of course I'm going to go."
- 32   AJ:    Yeah, exactly.

- 1    LLP:    So, I moved to Austin.
- 2    AJ:    Wow, nice. At least you were in some of the more progressive cities in those respective states.
- 3    LLP:    Yeah, I moved a lot but I always moved to progressive places.
- 4    AJ:    Austin, Raleigh . . . or Durham. Raleigh-Durham, they're like Minneapolis and St. Paul.
- 5    LLP:    Yeah, DC, Seattle – every place I've lived. Portland, have all been . . . Philadelphia. Those are  
6        pretty progressive places.
- 7    AJ:    So you're pretty conscious around putting yourself in . . .
- 8    LLP:    I will only live in places where I . . . like you cannot guarantee your safety anywhere.
- 9    AJ:    Right.
- 10   LLP:    But, yeah, bigger metropolitan areas that have strong queer communities, then that's where  
11        you're going to find me.
- 12   AJ:    Yeah, that makes sense. What do you think the agenda should be for the trans community  
13        going forward? And, I'm going to put it in this context – going forward in the context of this new  
14        world order that we are living in?
- 15   LLP:    So, can you just repeat that one more time? What should the agenda be? Or what should the . .  
16        .?
- 17   AJ:    Yeah, what do you think? Is there an agenda? Should there be an agenda and, if so, what?
- 18   LLP:    I definitely think there should be an agenda, I'm not sure what it should be. But I do know a big  
19        part of it should be make sure folks have access to basic human rights – like housing, food,  
20        opportunities to work; being able to change documentation without a lot of money and a lot of  
21        fuss; just the things that folks need to honestly just survive. I know we've made a lot of strides  
22        but it's also easier if you have resources – so how do we make it possible for everyone to be  
23        able to do that. Those are the things that come to the top of my mind, I'm sure there's a lot  
24        more, but that's what I think of first. I also recognize that I'm in a very privileged position when  
25        it comes to being a gender-queer person. I know there's a lot of folks, especially like trans folks  
26        of color who just have a lot more obstacles to face than I've had in my process.
- 27   AJ:    How so? You've sort of . . . gender-queer is sort of an ambiguous identity to a lot of people. So  
28        you think you just kind of slide under the radar or . . .?
- 29   LLP:    Even like living in a place like DC, not that every trans person wants to pursue medical  
30        procedures but DC passed legislation that insurance companies had to cover that. When I had  
31        my top surgery, I didn't pay for anything. But if you live in Iowa, you don't have that  
32        opportunity and for me, that was life affirming surgery and has made me feel a whole lot better  
33        about myself. You shouldn't have to just live in big cities to have that opportunity to live your  
34        authentic self, so how do we make sure that everyone has that? My sister is a lawyer, so if I  
35        ever had any problems, she would be at the door yelling at people and sending papers and filing  
36        lawsuits, so there are a lot of things – a lot of resources and protections that I have from family



- 1           and friends and things like that, that a lot of people don't have. I often think about, as we sit  
2           here in Minneapolis, what do people in rural communities do when they need support because  
3           I've had a ton of support. It's great that you can find stuff online but sometimes you need  
4           people, more than just online community.
- 5   AJ:     You need some physical . . . yeah. Speaking of that, was there ever a . . . is there any one person  
6           that impacted your decision to live your life more authentically? And, if so, who is that person?  
7           And then just to add a third part to that question, to make it more difficult for you to answer,  
8           who are some of your heroes and she-roes in the transgender, queer community?
- 9   LLP:    So, I think my dad, who I mentioned earlier, he died when I was 15. He was a closeted gay man.  
10          I think that . . . he was an amazing father, right? Knowing more about him and what he had to  
11          experience – being a gay man in the Midwest in the 1970s and 1980s and early 1990s, in a lot of  
12          ways was just very . . . it could have been a very hellish experience and it's not like you were  
13          supported or respected or affirmed. So, having to live this secret life – and so I think that's one  
14          of the reasons I came out at 19 is because I knew that we'd made enough progress that I could  
15          come out and it would be safer. There was a way that I wanted to live life and I think me living  
16          my life authentically is a testament to him because that's something that he wasn't able to do. I  
17          think that one of the reasons . . . there's a lot of reasons why I admire my father, but when I was  
18          like 13-years-old, I was at a Best Buy, we were at a Best Buy in St. Louis, and his friend Sharee  
19          came up and he was like, "I want you to meet my friend Sharee." I met Sharee and then we  
20          went home and he was like, "Go get my wedding album." I was like, "OK." And we go through  
21          his wedding album and he's like, "Sharee used to be Eddie." I was like, "What? What are you  
22          talking about?" I was 13-years-old, I didn't know what he was talking about. So, I think my dad  
23          always knew who I was and so he wanted to make sure I knew that it was OK. And so, he made  
24          it a point to make sure I knew I had just met a trans person when I was 13-years-old.
- 25   AJ:     That is fascinating, because many parents of a 13-year-old, would never even introduce their  
26           child to someone who was trans and probably would grab their kids hand and run in the other  
27           direction.
- 28   LLP:    Oh, no, he made it a point that we met Sharee and then I remember at my father's funeral,  
29           there was Sharee at my dad's funeral because she knew that she could be there because we  
30           weren't . . . it wasn't going to be like, "You can't be here."
- 31   AJ:     Right.
- 32   LLP:    She had just as much right to be there as everybody else – at the church.
- 33   AJ:     Wow, that's a great story.
- 34   LLP:    So, I think that's why I just . . . I haven't dealt with a lot of stuff, but I've dealt with enough to be  
35           like . . . not every day being queer is an easy day, but I remember one day with him and we were  
36           coming from dinner and somebody walked by him and was like, "You fucking faggot."
- 37   AJ:     Oh, no.

- 1    LLP:    Things like that. So, he put up with a lot of shit and so I don't have to put up with as much so it's  
2            important that I be who I'm supposed to be because he didn't always have a chance to be who  
3            he was.
- 4    AJ:    Wow.
- 5    LLP:    Oh, and heroes and she-roles? There's people I love – of course, I love like Janet Mock and  
6            Laverne Cox and Tiq Milan. But then I also just love everyday folks going through what they go  
7            through. I think everybody is a hero – getting up every day.
- 8    AJ:    As a trans or gender non-conforming person, it is a revolutionary act.
- 9    LLP:    It is, it definitely is.
- 10   AJ:    Wow, well those are some of my heroes and she-roles too. I know them all and they're pretty  
11            amazing people. I think there was a third part to that.
- 12   LLP:    What was the third part? Oh wait – who do I admire?
- 13   AJ:    Who was a pivotal person?
- 14   LLP:    Yeah, so my dad.
- 15   AJ:    Heroes and she-roles?
- 16   LLP:    Heroes and she-roles, what was the third part?
- 17   AJ:    I don't know . . . maybe that was it.
- 18   LLP:    Oh, OK.
- 19   AJ:    Have you ever worked or volunteered for any trans or gender non-conforming, LGBT  
20            organizations?
- 21   LLP:    I have volunteered before, I don't actually . . . I like to lead organizations. I don't always do the  
22            best just kind of fitting in, so in 2014, I started this company called Makers Lab and we create  
23            space for queer people, especially queer people of color. So, that's pretty much been my  
24            passion project, volunteer effort, for queer folks. We've done film screenings, body-positive  
25            workout classes, dance parties. We did an Audre Lorde birthday celebration; we co-produce a  
26            music festival. So, to me, creating space for queer people through Makers Lab has kind of been  
27            my volunteer effort.
- 28   AJ:    And so that brings you in contact with a lot of queer and trans-identified people?
- 29   LLP:    Oh, yeah.
- 30   AJ:    Was that . . . you call it volunteer, was it a money earning?
- 31   LLP:    We did a crowd funding campaign which funded the first year of operations, but pretty much  
32            the dance parties fund the community-based work, so at the end of the day it all pretty much  
33            ends up breaking even – like none of us get a salary or any kind of stipend. We make sure the  
34            artists we work with get paid . . .

- 1 AJ: Oh, wonderful.
- 2 LLP: Yeah, everyone gets paid that we work with. I have a commitment to pay artists, I don't do like,  
3 "Oh, let me do this favor exchange." That's not my philosophy, but as an organizer of these  
4 events it's just more about wanting . . . if I don't see a space, then I'm going to create it as  
5 opposed to complaining about it or that it doesn't exist.
- 6 AJ: Are you an artist yourself?
- 7 LLP: I have started to call myself an artist. One of my friends told me that I'm a people artist and so I  
8 bring folks together so I create experiences. So, yeah, I'm an artist.
- 9 AJ: OK. Create experiences – that's an artform.
- 10 LLP: Yeah, because I think I do it pretty well. Some people don't, I've been to some pretty crappy  
11 events and so-called experiences. So, yeah.
- 12 AJ: Wow. What's your relationship like with your family today, since you've come out?
- 13 LLP: My family is awesome. Since I've come out again as trans. So, the first time I came out, I  
14 remember when my mom was struggling and my siblings said to my mom, "Well, if you disown,  
15 at that point Elisa, you disown us." So, we were a package deal.
- 16 AJ: Wow.
- 17 LLP: And it was kind of the same thing around me being trans. I know she struggles with it but she's  
18 actively trying to work through her feelings about it. I told my brother I was considering taking  
19 testosterone and he's like, "You won't be as cute as me, but I support it." I said to my twin,  
20 "How would you feel if you had a twin brother?" She was like, "I don't care, I just want you to be  
21 you." My mom is . . . she's also a huge supporter of mine and a big fan, so I couldn't ask for a  
22 better family. I'm just really thankful that I have their love and support and that when it comes  
23 to their children, their children call me Uncle Lee because . . .
- 24 AJ: Oh, wow – nice.
- 25 LLP: So, yeah – just that level of understanding and wanting to . . . and sometimes they don't  
26 understand everything that is happening with me, but that's not important to them – they just  
27 know their job is to love and my job is to love them and we've got to get through this thing  
28 called life as a unit and that's what we do.
- 29 AJ: Wow, get through this thing called life. That's a line from a song from a Prince song.
- 30 LLP: Another reason I'm in Minneapolis – no.
- 31 AJ: Are you a fan?
- 32 LLP: Huge – huge fan. I saw him three times, because my mom, growing up, was a huge Prince fan  
33 and we had Prince posters in the house and all these other kinds of things.
- 34 AJ: Wow. Where were you the day Prince died?

- 1    LLP:    I was at work and my phone started ringing, it was friends checking on me because they knew I  
2            would be upset, and then I immediately had to call my mother to make sure she was OK.
- 3    AJ:    Oh, wow – so it had a big impact on you guys? He had a big impact.
- 4    LLP:    I was able, before I left my job – I had planned this outdoor moving series, so I was able to get  
5            additional funding, so we did a special screening of Purple Rain on his birthday and I brought in  
6            DJs to play all Prince before the movie and we got these purple glow sticks so people would  
7            have them – so it was this sea of purple and you could see it from the Metro. Yeah, I know – it  
8            was a huge loss.
- 9    AJ:    I was a huge Prince fan too. What do you think in terms of Prince’s impact on gender fluidity?
- 10   LLP:    So, we actually posted this article on our Makers Lab Facebook page about that because, to me,  
11            Prince . . . well, I’ll actually take it back to Sylvester. I love Sylvester.
- 12   AJ:    Yeah, you want to make a Sylvester national holiday or . . .?
- 13   LLP:    Well, I try to convince people that Sylvester is the greatest artist of all time just because . . .
- 14   AJ:    “You make me feel . . .”
- 15   LLP:    All the envelopes and boundaries he was pushing in the 1970s made it possible for artists, like  
16            Prince, and for Prince to be a lot more mainstream than Sylvester ever was, but to embrace  
17            femininity and still be loved by so many different types of people. I don’t know if people  
18            actively . . . I’m sure they maybe questioned some things about him but he was still able to have  
19            this mass appeal.
- 20   AJ:    Prince?
- 21   LLP:    Yeah, Prince – not Sylvester.
- 22   AJ:    Oh, yeah – yeah.
- 23   LLP:    Sylvester – my heart. But yeah, I think Sylvester paved the way for Prince.
- 24   AJ:    Yeah, I would have to say Prince’s appeal was beyond mass appeal.
- 25   LLP:    Yeah.
- 26   AJ:    It was like national superstardom, he was there – he was up there.
- 27   LLP:    His death made 2016 one of the crappiest years ever, I think. His death alone is what made 2016  
28            so crappy.
- 29   AJ:    Right, I agree – not even counting the Donald Trump factor.
- 30   LLP:    Right, yeah – that little hiccup.
- 31   AJ:    Yeah, wow. I’m really glad to hear that you’re still in relationship with your family and all of  
32            that. Are you going to be able to spend some time over the holidays with family and all?

- 1    LLP:    My family is actually . . . we don't do a lot around Christmas, we're a big Thanksgiving family.  
2            We were all together and so we all kind of go off and do our different things during Christmas.  
3            We'll probably come together in the spring or summer or something like that. Yeah.
- 4    AJ:    Awesome. Well, you know, I am deeply appreciative of you being willing to be a part of this  
5            conversation. I guess maybe one last question, what do you see as the future of the trans  
6            community or where will the trans community be in 50 years from now?
- 7    LLP:    Fifty years? I don't know. I mean, I'm assuming we're going to be in a better place than where  
8            we are now and that folks will get to be themselves, not just in big cities but across the country,  
9            and that there will be legislation and policy that will make it easier for trans folks to be their  
10           authentic selves and to have access to resources and medically competent doctors and just . . .  
11           yeah, where it's kind of like . . . it's just kind of a . . . it's not a novelty in our culture that folks are  
12           trans. I think it's exciting that the cover of *National Geographic* is trans folks this month, or  
13           maybe it's this month.
- 14   AJ:    Where? No, speak about that.
- 15   LLP:    I think that's very exciting and to be able to tell my friends and everybody to go pick up a copy.  
16           But when you get to the point where . . . I don't want to say words like normalized but the idea  
17           of gender identities, that's just . . .
- 18   AJ:    It's non-sensational.
- 19   LLP:    Yeah, this is who folks are and people kind of don't bat an eye. And then people, at an early age  
20           – or even whenever it is, you feel like you have the space and the freedom to explore that. So,  
21           yeah.
- 22   AJ:    So, Lee, I've asked a lot of questions. Is there anything that you would like to share that maybe I  
23           didn't quite pull out or dig out.
- 24   LLP:    No, I think I told you a whole lot. No, I think that's it.
- 25   AJ:    Yeah. Well, all right. Thank you so much. It's been a pleasure to sit down and chat with you  
26           and document some of the key elements of your life. Until we meet again, my friend.
- 27   LLP:    Awesome, thank you.
- 28   AJ:    Peace.