

5-1-2014

Lehigh University Queer Voices: Stories from a College Community

Zz Riford
Lehigh University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://preserve.lehigh.edu/undergrad-scholarship-eckardt>



Part of the [Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Riford, Zz, "Lehigh University Queer Voices: Stories from a College Community" (2014). *Eckardt Scholars Projects*. 22.
<https://preserve.lehigh.edu/undergrad-scholarship-eckardt/22>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Undergraduate scholarship at Lehigh Preserve. It has been accepted for inclusion in Eckardt Scholars Projects by an authorized administrator of Lehigh Preserve. For more information, please contact preserve@lehigh.edu.

Lehigh University

Queer Voices

Stories from a College Community

L. S. Riford

Eckardt Senior Thesis, 2014

Table of Contents

Acknowledgments.....	3
Introduction.....	4
My Story	6
Out and Proud: Emily.....	9
Out and Proud: Susie.....	14
Simply Out: Amelia	21
Simply Out: Matt.....	26
In the Closet: Carlos.....	31
The Allies: Michelle.....	37
The Allies: Maria	42
Lessons Learned.....	48
Final Thoughts	51
Further Reading.....	52
Appendix A: Consent Form	53

Acknowledgments

I would like to express my deepest thanks to my advisor, Professor Chava Weissler for being so patient and encouraging from start to finish.

I would also like to thank all the unnamed interviewees who volunteered to put themselves out there for others' sakes, the LGBTQIA services and Eckardt Scholars staff for supporting me, and my parents for going above and beyond to accept me as I am.

Introduction

Story telling is an age-old tradition, used to pass on history and continue traditions, entertain, and spread information to others. In Hawaiian culture, “talk story” time is a way to bring together communities and generations to share stories from the past and present, as well as hopes for the future. Even today, when oral traditions have been replaced with books and online databases, stories still hold a fundamental power to bring a family, community, and total strangers together. Individuals at these gatherings develop a bond with the others there, through merely sharing experiences and hearing about the lives of others. Though I am not of Hawaiian birth, I grew up in this culture, and the power of storytelling has stuck with me all the way to Lehigh University in Pennsylvania. It is this relaxed attitude of acceptance and a desire to hear and experience the lives of other people that I want to share with the Lehigh community.

There is a certain attitude that pervades Lehigh and much of the East Coast, one that differs from any other culture I’ve experienced. It’s an attitude that favors sameness and stifles any attempt at being different. I’ve met students that are remarkable in some odd way, yet they blend themselves in with the “Lehigh Stereotype” so well that no one around them ever discovers their amazing qualities. I myself have found it hard to stick out too far, even though I found a group of strays who flourish far from the mold. The pull to fit in and ignore what makes us special is a strong one. This attitude is strongest in fraternity and sorority culture, which offers so much for its members, but only favors a certain type of person. Standing out in any way can prevent you from access to such a large part of the college experience here at Lehigh.

When I first arrived here four years ago, I very quickly attached myself to the Rainbow Room family at Lehigh, the group of students and staff who hang out in the LGBT center on campus. What attracted me were the students and staff’s commitments to being truly and entirely themselves, despite the outside pressure to give up and fall in line. Coming into Lehigh, I was only just starting to question my sexuality. I struggled to find a place I could explore myself and, most importantly, be wrong about my identity in the process of finding who I am. The Rainbow Room community helped me do just that, and it has led me to dig much deeper than I ever imagined.

With my project, the website Queer Voices, I hope to bring some of that mold-defying attitude that has aided me so much to the rest of Lehigh. I hope to spread the message that being who you are is never something to be avoided, but instead celebrated. I believe I can do this with the power of storytelling.

Through my travels and explorations I've met people from all walks of life, and they are all much more similar than anyone would think. A conservative Christian mother that I had the opportunity to meet had a lot in common with a polyamorous activist I met at an LGBT conference. A full blood Hawaiian tutu (grandmother) in Hawaii and I, a young white weirdo, should have nothing in common. We listen to each other's stories, though, and find that anyone growing up in the islands is connected by a very deep bond of similar experiences. Though two people may differ in many obvious ways, there is always a common ground somewhere. Through stories, that connection can be found and any differences that might have set a barrier before are added to our collective life experiences. This is the power of storytelling I grew up with.

My website will be an ongoing collection of first person stories from queer people and allies. I am starting here on Lehigh's campus with members of our queer community, but I plan to expand the collection once I leave for graduate school and wherever else I go in life. A wider and wider range of backgrounds and stories will further increase the potential impact of the website.

I have made an attempt to keep anonymous the faces behind these stories. I've done this by changing details such as names, ages, and birth places. This serves two purposes. First, it protects the individuals who are either unwilling or unable to come out at this time. Second, it allows even a reader who might know the person to come into the story with a more open mind. Having an idea of who a person is before learning their story overlays excess stereotypes from visible identities on your understanding of the story. Whether this is purposeful or simply the human need to categorize people, it takes away from the power in a story.

I hope that by sharing these stories, Lehigh's queer community will be empowered to be who they are, and more of the rest of campus will be there to support and do the same. If you aren't you, who are you?

My Story

I was born in Honolulu, Hawaii. Yes, it is paradise. No, I can't surf. I had an idyllic childhood; loving parents, a great education, and I always had a few friends around. It wasn't completely peaches, though. I always struggled to fit in. Part of that came from being white in an area where that makes me a minority, and a disliked minority, due to Hawaii's missionary history. But it was more than that. Something was off about me, but I figured that was just who I was. Weird, awkward, and as my least favorite teacher said, "Book smart, not street smart".

Luckily, there are always a few kids that also have some sort of social awkwardness, and they tend to gravitate towards each other. I found my group of misfits no matter where I went. In elementary school, I befriended a short boy named Mason who wore only tank tops and a girl who had cancer. I was the only friend of the middle school bully because I was the only one who was ever nice to him. My friend group from seventh grade through high school included a partial albino and a group of seven guys who went by "the Cove". Everyone either had some social defect, or fully accepted those who did. I never had a reason to worry about being myself, but I never bothered to look below my own surface to see the real "me".

During my senior year in high school, after breaking up with my first boyfriend, I finally began to wonder, *Who am I really?*

I've always found people of any gender attractive. In middle school, I was more attracted to the girls talking about guys as I was to the guys they were talking about, but I only ever really "fell" for guys, so I never questioned it. After high school I began to open up to the idea of being bisexual, but I've still never found a girl I'd like to date. Whether that's because I'm always in the wrong place or I different romantic and sexual attractions, I'm not sure yet. I've found calling myself bisexual to be much, much easier than figuring out labels and explaining to other people the intricacies of my attractions. It's not something the average person cares about, anyway.

I'm not one for strong opinions, and I never did feel strongly about the label bisexual, so when I came out, I did so without conviction. To most people, especially my parents, my bisexuality was "only a phase" for several years because I was so unsure of it myself. As soon as I could say it confidently, everyone believed me. It became a non-issue. I'm very lucky to have friends and family who supported me, no matter what my orientation might be. Without that constant support, I doubt I ever would have made it through the identity labyrinth.

The feelings of confusion about who I was were most easily suppressed by focusing on school and extracurriculars (video games) when I was growing up. I never developed any close friendships or the subsequent drama, so through high school I could focus on studying and doing well in my one sport, riflery. I caught an interest in Japanese and AP Physics and made it into Lehigh University with a scholarship to study both of them further.

I am quite unique among Lehigh students now that I've broken out of my shell, but I started out rather plain. I could have fit in anywhere, except my personality showed I wasn't fully there yet, and I needed a group that could help me get fully there. I once again found my group of misfits that would accept me no matter how strange I was or how often my personality flipped. None of us have any joining factor, we all simply don't quite fit anywhere else; not in Greek, or band, or sports. I also found my fabulous family in the Rainbow Room, the LGBT center on campus, where I knew I had the best chance of figuring myself out. It was through them that I was finally able to see who I really was.

Not only did I accept my identity as bisexual through my time in the Rainbow Room, I also began to look deeper, at my gender.

"Tom boy" was the closest term to describe me growing up. My parents were fantastic about it, allowing me to play with what society considers "boy's toys". The Legos, Hot Wheels, and science kits I asked for went along side the Barbies and easy-bake ovens I didn't request, but they felt obligated to get me. My room was decked out with dinosaurs and pictures of Alice Cooper, and only one small, useless mirror. If a relative gave me anything pink and frilly, no one said anything when it was hidden away or even trashed. My family was not nearly as surprised as they could have been when I came out as transgender two months before graduating from Lehigh, nearly a year since I first admitted it to myself.

For most of my life, I've automatically tried to fit into norms. It wasn't because it looked easier or I was scared, I just figured there was no way I was special enough to be anything but normal. Before college, I accepted without questioning that I was a straight, cisgender, average looking female. After coming out as bisexual, I actually became more closed in; trying to fit all the stereotypes to prove to myself the label fit me. I dressed feminine and enjoyed the attention and approval that brought me, but in the back of my mind, I knew something was still off.

It finally started to click when I found I had to force myself to dress in feminine business clothing at a summer internship my junior year. Dressing in skirts and dresses at work was giving me minor panic attacks. I only calmed down on days I wore jeans and flannel shirts. On sort of a whim, more of an experiment, I watched the movie *Boys Don't Cry* on Netflix one night. My visceral connection to the main character, a trans guy, was the kick I needed to admit to myself that, yeah, I'm not a girl, and I should really stop pretending to be.

There were many other signs; I've never related to other girls, hanging out with guys always felt more natural, it never felt comfortable using a women's restroom, and being "mistaken" and called "sir" always gave me a rush of excitement. I was doing so many things against my will just because that was what I was supposed to do. Now I'm finally starting to do something about it, and it's been fantastic. Simply wearing men's clothes and cutting my hair short has caused exponential increases in my confidence.

Next year I'll be heading to the University of Wisconsin to pursue a PhD in Nuclear Engineering. I'm well on my way towards my dream of solving the world's energy crisis. I also plan to start my transition more seriously, with counseling and hormones, to realize my newer dream of being seen how I already see myself. I'm still not sure how far in transition I'd like to go. I have no qualms with my body, thanks to growing up in an environment of healthy body images. It's a common misconception that all transgender people go through surgery; that is definitely not the case, and I may be one of those who chooses not to.

A supportive community helped me through all my gender and sexuality questioning, but it was stories that really brought me out of my deep dark closet. I started by hearing stories from Spectrum members, opened up to meeting interesting people at queer conferences, and recently, began chatting with random strangers at pride parades and even bus stops. Hearing each person's wildly different life slowly opened my eyes to the diversity in others, and the diversity within me. I was able to connect with others who have similar experiences to my own, and develop empathy with those who come from very different backgrounds. I also noticed, both in myself and others, the empowerment and validation that comes from sharing your story. Conveying that opening and strengthening power to others is a goal that has moved me in a way nothing else has. I cannot wait to see what this project can do.

Out and Proud: Emily

Emily is a junior at Lehigh University who identifies as a lesbian. She is very involved in campus activities and is in the challenging business school at Lehigh University. It was difficult to find time to schedule an interview with her around all her activities and studies.

I don't have that interesting a story. I was born in New York. I was there my whole life before coming Lehigh. I had a choice between Lehigh and New York University, my two top choices. I wanted to go to NYU, as anyone would, for the liberal city life and all the great stuff that comes with that. Then I visited Lehigh and I saw the Rainbow Room. I thought wow, this is a gorgeous campus and they care about diversity". I decided to come here; now I know they don't care about anything except their money (laughs).

I was in a relationship for a year in high school before college. It was a really bad relationship. We broke up in January of 2013, before the second semester of my first year at Lehigh. That semester I met my current girlfriend and we've been together ever since. For Valentine's Day she gave me a promise ring from the Human Rights Campaign. It has an equal sign on it (smiles).

Since I've been in college I realized what I'm studying really sucks. I want to work with LGBT organizations and fight for marriage equality, immigration reform, and all the things that matter to me. I know that getting a degree in business will help me be more credible in doing those things, so that's what I'm striving to do right now, and that's where I plan to go after school.

My coming out story is a little different than other people. The way I realized I was gay wasn't based on a real person. I was obsessed with the series *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*. I saw the first one at home on DVD and I didn't think anything of it. I thought, *oh, she's so unconventionally pretty. Kind of like Winona Ryder in Girl Interrupted*. Then I saw the second movie and I scared myself with how attracted I was to the character. My parents, sister, and my best friend at the time went to see it together. We were driving back home and for the entire hour I was freaking myself out because I knew that I had some kind of attraction toward this girl. It was an attraction I never had, or never really thought I had, until that point. Then I realized that I had feelings for women, or could at least have an attraction for women.

I remember the dates perfectly. The movie was in September of 2010 and then in October I told my sister and my best friend. I came out to my parents on November 3rd, once I realized I was gay and not bisexual. I just knew that I was gay. It was very tumultuous process but it only lasted two months. Most

people struggle with that for years while I figured the entire thing out in three months. I move very fast, I don't let anything bother me. It took my dad about a couple minutes to process but it took my mom a couple of years. That was a little rough.

Soon after I came out I met a girl, whose brother I had known for years, who identified as a butch lesbian. We started getting into a relationship. It was interesting, because the girl actually started identifying as male and began transitioning to become male. Even though that was happening, I don't think I was aware enough to realize the implications that had on people's perceptions of my sexuality. My feelings never wavered. I identified as lesbian, that never changed my opinion.

Once I came out in high school I was so excited. For the first time I felt like I knew who I was. I actually made a list of everyone who I told and it racked up to a hundred at one point because I didn't know that many people. It was a scary time, but it was also really exciting because I knew that my safety was never in jeopardy. My mental health rarely fell because I had a really strong support system outside of my home. In my home it was almost like a non-issue. Had it happened later and I had been further along in my life I am almost scared to see how it would have turned out. I knew I would just have shut everyone out immediately if they didn't take it the way it was.

I think that experience turned me into the person I am now. I shut people down when they don't accept me because I'm upset that I didn't act that fast in the past, or maybe that rejection from those years kind of followed me here. But my parents are accepting now and they love my girlfriend and they know that we're going to get married, so everything worked out. Either the way it was supposed to or just the way it did, I just got really lucky.

I think I'm unique at Lehigh because I have empathy. I think that is something that Lehigh students lack. Whether it's because they came here with empathy and the environment around them made them lose it or Lehigh just attracts people who don't have empathy to begin with, I don't know. That's something that I have and something that I'll always have and that's what makes me who I am. It's what drives me to do the things that I do and help LGBT communities. It also makes me want to get involved in other under-represented minorities, whether it's ethnicity, class, gender, or others.

I also think being gay makes me somewhat unique. Not just being it but being really out about it. There are a lot of gay people at Lehigh but not everyone is as out or proud as I am. There are people who are out but only to selective people. I'm out to everyone and I do it as kind of a preface. As in, I'm just going to tell you right now so if you don't want to be friends with me, I don't really want to be friends with you, so let me know now rather than later type of thing. That's a really subconscious thing that I've started to realize I do.

I think the fact that I have a lot of compassion and I don't just care about the identities I associate with makes me unique. Even within the communities at Lehigh, and the underrepresented communities at Lehigh, that's something that sort of still doesn't happen. There's a lot of self interest. I have it to some degree but I'm also a lot more advanced than a lot of other people here in that I do care about other identities other than myself and actively work and give as much time as I'm allotted to other underrepresented identities.

I think 100% someone's story can have a powerful impact on their empathy. I think that it's difficult; I think you have to have a really damn good story. Last semester at Lehigh proves that **(referencing FBR and the Umoja house incident)**. Even with all of the stories that were going around, mostly related to racial injustice, there were still people saying this is overreaction, this is being blown out of proportion, this didn't really happen, and things like that. I wouldn't say that was the vast majority, but it was a loud enough minority that it took away from the actual messages being sent. I'm sure there were people whose minds were changed, but to me, empathy and doing something with empathy are two different things. I think just being empathetic isn't enough. There are four stages, there's "Boo hoo, so sad!", said sarcastically, there's, "Wow, that's actually really sad.", then there's, "That's really sad, what can I do to help?", and then there's actually helping. I think people at Lehigh are between the, "Boo hoo, so sad!" and, "That's actually sad" phases. I don't think there are many people at "That's so sad, what can I do to help?"

Feminists might hate me for saying this, though I identify as feminist. A lot of my joy, in fact most of my joy, comes from my relationship. I know I wouldn't be as happy if I wasn't in a committed, monogamous relationship. My girlfriend is just the most amazing and inspirational person, she makes me so happy every day. A lot of my joy comes from waking up with her every morning, seeing her between classes, getting lunch with her, and just hearing about her day.

Even though I am really open about my sexuality, there is always a pause moment when I come out to someone. It's not a pause to think *should I do this?*, it's more of a stomach jolt. Like a physiological duress that happens on my body that I can't control. I take note of it every time I'm in a new group of people. Not so much social settings, but in staff meetings or in an academic setting. I don't really have to come out unless someone directly looks at me and says "your boyfriend", then I'll correct them saying "don't assume everyone is straight". It's really tough when I'm in meetings and people ask me to tell them something about myself. I was in a meeting last week and someone asked what I was doing this time last year on Valentine's Day (the meeting was on Valentine's day), and I said I went out to dinner with my girlfriend. I got that stomach pain that I always get before coming out. It's something

that hurts because I wonder why it happens. It could be just this situation or it could be the environment that I'm in, because it doesn't happen all the time. It's something that I can't control, so it's something I struggle with.

There are also struggles in classes where professors are being heteronormative or sexist. Even though it's not directed towards me, I just don't like being in an environment where heterosexuality is assumed. I prefer to assume everyone is gay until they prove me otherwise (laughs).

If I could change anything here on Lehigh's campus, I would like to change attitudes. I'm more realistic than that though and I know what needs to change in order to change attitudes. I would get rid of the Greek system at Lehigh and I'll tell you why.

I think that Greek life inherently in its existence is classist, sexist, racist and homophobic. That conjoins with all of the other mechanisms by which it exists at Lehigh, including its geographic location on campus, the rights that people in Greek life have, the segregation between us and them. I think that creates a culture of an addition to sexism, heteronormativity, white supremacy, and other things. I think it creates a big barrier between us and them and I'm a firm believer that the only people that can solve an us and them mentality is the people in power. The people who aren't in power, they're the ones who see it's us and them. They've been trying to do something about it and they can't.

I also think what the Greek system exists to achieve, it doesn't achieve those things at Lehigh. Philanthropy is not looked at as a top priority. If ever, it's looked at for accreditation in the 11th hour. At Lehigh it exists for social life. I'm all for partying and socializing and having a good time, but when that becomes a group think mentality and two women aren't allowed to dance or kiss and express their sexuality how they choose to, how they are, when that turns into sexual harassment, that's not ok. And when the Umoja house gets those awful words spray painted on it, that's not ok. And when all of these underprivileged people are telling you this is what's wrong with Lehigh, and people who are in power are saying, no it's not, that's not ok because that's not right. The school is only as strong as your weakest link. If the people at the bottom of the totem pole say this is what's wrong, this is what's wrong. They're not making it up, it's just as simple as that.

That's what I would get rid of, and I think subsequently, getting rid of Greek life would leave for a lot more intellectual conversations at this school. People at this school are not stupid. But something about Lehigh makes people stupid and apathetic, and mean. Just downright mean. People don't care unless they're in your sorority or fraternity or you want to hook up with someone. So I think that getting rid of that would change the culture slowly, but definitely surely.

It's possible that just getting rid of the houses would do it, because that would be the best test. Once the houses are gone you could really see if the Greek organizations can stand without them. The

answer that everyone is going to give you is no, they can't, which is why they don't want them down, they just know. They just wouldn't survive without them. For them to hide behind their houses with chandeliers and chefs, that is definitely not ok.

Out and Proud: Susie

Susie is a student affairs staff member who often helps out Spectrum and the Rainbow Room. She's in her mid thirties, has a second full time job, and identifies as queer and genderqueer, meaning her sexuality and gender fall somewhere outside the norm. She explains:

I would say identify as queer and probably genderqueer, so I'm queer across the board because I don't fit into nice tidy little boxes. I kind of like it that way. In the past I would have probably checked off the little box a little more readily into lesbian or gay but the older I get the more I'm like, no. I'm queer. Queer is much more me, in all sense of the word, I am queer.

I was always the tom boy, I always had the boy best friend, I was always I guess a little awkward. That was always just the way it was. I always felt it was fine, I can just be that person. I went toward the, well, no one told me that it was OK to like girls so I just like boys, that's what I'm supposed to do, right?

In high school there wasn't a whole lot about being gay, I just didn't know anything. Until I was older, there was nobody that was gay in my high school, which is really weird. Looking back on it, I know some people who've come out now. How was there no one gay in my high school? I'm not fifty, I'm thirty-five!

My friend Mary is two years younger than me, and when I met her she said she had a GSA at her school, and we were rival high schools. It blew my mind when she told me they have gay people in their high school. Are you kidding me? How is that even possible? Things have changed so much just in two years that it was unbelievable.

My biggest problem was I didn't conform. I mean, I really don't conform now when it comes to clothing and gender presentation, but even then I didn't necessarily conform much. I stood out a little bit, I wasn't the standard girl. So when I was young people would ask if I was a boy or a girl, which was always fun. I played soccer and I had a jacket with my name on it and we were going into a convenience store and someone asked, "Why are you wearing a coat with a girl's name on it?" I replied, "Cause I'm a girl!" They just said, "Oh. Sorry." I would get that all the time. What? I'm just dressing the way I want to dress, leave me alone! That's stuff I would run into, because I didn't fit into what society thought I should. I don't fit into their boxes. Now I'm like, haha! Boxes! (Crushing noise).

As far as sexuality part of it all. That wasn't something that came up for me before I left high school. It was one of those things, I don't want to say it wasn't an option. A lot of our family friends were gay. It was definitely presented as around me. As far as my own age group, there were no examples of it

happening. I don't know where I thought gay people came from. Like how they got from kids to adults. Apparently they just sprinkled down from the sky as magical fairy dust. I don't know if I ever put it together as this is how you get there. I don't know why, it just didn't appear as a valid option for me? It was not like I was thinking I can't be gay. I think society pushes so hard that that's what you see, samples of heterosexuality. So you assume that's what there is. It just didn't occur to me that I might be not that until my brain was pretty much like (slap noise), asshole, this is what you want. I basically had to be slapped in the face with my own wants to figure out what I wanted.

Then that kind of went that way until I got to college, went to Moravian. You get to college and things can be different. I thought, *oh, ok, well maybe I can do something different.*

I came home the first summer and worked three jobs because that's what I do, I work a lot. I worked at an office and that was the first time I ever met a girl that I was-- in the past I had liked girls but it was, I just want to be their best friend. I want to be their best friend, real bad. This was the first time that I didn't want to be somebody's best friend; I really want to kiss her. And then the light bulb kind of went off. Oh, in middle school when I really wanted to be that girl's best friend, I didn't want to be that girl's best friend, I wanted to be that girl's girlfriend. So everything started to make sense then. Oh, right, got it, now I understand. So I had some work and things to do with my brain, I had to work that shit out.

It was funny, because I'm still friends with that person, we're still best friends. Wow, I've known Mary forever. She was about sixteen when I met her, and I was nineteen. It's been a while. We still joke about that summer. I had a crush on her, she had a crush on me and it just didn't work in time. That's probably better. Now she is married and all that.

You know, it was one of those things where it just kind of, light bulb came on. Then I went back to Moravian. That fall is when Mathew Sheppard was killed, so my coming out is kind of intertwined with that. That made for a really awkward time to come out. There was so much upheaval. It was just a not great time to come out.

The sense I had on campus, everyone was scared. Up until then you were scared, I mean, you're scared to come out no matter what, but that layered a whole thing on top of it. You thought, wow, this could really happen. Before then you knew bad things could happen, but it was kind of off in the distance. This just made it so much worse.

That fall I got my first girlfriend. I remember walking around town and us being almost defiant. We would hold each other's hand as, well, we're out, and OK. Let's hope that nobody throws something at us or anything like that. Even though that probably wouldn't have happened. There was an embedded fear. It was an interesting time to come out.

I really wanted to get a job in higher education because I love the energy. I actually wanted to go back to school because I wanted to learn. That's not really possible when I work seventy hours a week.

It's nice because this area has like six different colleges. I looked for jobs in higher education for a while and I saw this post and I was like, this is awesome. They were looking for someone who had some knowledge about multicultural issues. I'd been the president of my GSA. They were looking for someone with graphics experience to work on the website and I got that, that's what my degree is in. They were looking for somebody that could handle budgets and stuff like that. I had been an office manager. So I said, let's give it a try.

I applied, and then the students liked me, which was my one worry. I had to interview the students and I was thinking oh my god. I wasn't worried about acing the interview with my boss; I was worried about the students. They are just going to pick me apart; it's going to be horrible. It went fine and I got the job and I haven't been able to go back to school. But it's ok, I really like what I do.

I learn about stuff all the time, I get to educate students, I get to educate peers. I have more knowledge and I can educate people at my other job. It's really much more than a job. It also allows me to be more me. I'm learning so much about myself by doing this job.

Before I was here in this role, I hadn't settled in on myself as much as maybe I could have. So I was still kind of trying to fit in people's boxes. So I don't know if I would have identified as strongly as queer or genderqueer before I was in this job. I still felt a lot of society's pressure to be something that they wanted. I'm much more comfortable in my own skin because of people around, because I get to work with multiculturalism all day, you know?

It allows me a little bit of freedom. I know that I can present my gender however I want and I'm not going to get fired. So it does give me a little bit of freedom to explore my gender, explore my sexual orientation-ish. To learn those things in ways another job might not.

It makes me a little belligerent in my other job though. Like when I push up against those walls that everyone pushes up against in their daily lives, it really bothers me more than I think I realize. I've talked about being forced to wear pants that are feminine. I really almost quit my job when I thought I would have to wear clothes that I wasn't going to be comfortable in. A lot of people would look at that and say, but it's just clothes. But it's not. It's not just clothes. You're asking me to do something I'm completely not comfortable with. It's not just clothes, it's wrong. I was this close to quitting. That's the first time that it really pushed up on me that it's something that I haven't necessarily had to deal with.

I've been very fortunate to present how I want to wear what I want and not face a lot of that because of the jobs I've picked, because of the places I go. I pick jobs that have uniforms that aren't gendered. I would have never chosen to work at a place that has a uniform or requires me to wear clothes that would make me feel like that. I'm very lucky that I do that. It really pushed some buttons for me. It

made me realize some things that I hadn't realized before. Some things about boundaries and stuff like that. Sometimes that's good for you, and sometimes it can be a little rough.

I don't have any plans to leave my job here. I really love working with the students. You guys are my family. It's one of those things; do I not want to work two jobs? Yes. Have I applied to jobs across Lehigh from time to time? Yes. But there would have to be a really good offer to leave the position. That's what I always come up with. Yeah, I could take this job, but I would have to leave the students. It would have to be really good for me to leave. The trade off, what I would be leaving isn't necessarily work related. Am I able to only work one job, well, that's great, but how much am I going to dislike what I'm doing? Because right now, working here doesn't necessarily feel like work. So to leave a position where it doesn't really feel like work, for a position where it feels like hell, or it just feels like work all the time.

I'd like to go back to school one day. But my problem is I just want to learn everything. I like to learn. There's no point in taking a class just to take a class. It would make me ungodly busy and I'd probably get stressed out, so I'd rather take a class and know where I'm going and have a plan than to just take it to take it. But I would like to work one job at some point, and have a family, and have some free time, and those kinds of things. But we're now going on five years with two full time jobs, so.

The amount of things that I keep learning about the LGBT community is a daily joy to me. The way that we all end up being family. Not all of us, there's still people that I'm like, no, we are never talking. But the bonds that happen across the LGBT community just because we're L, G, B, and Ts. And the number of different personalities, I really enjoy the family that happens, and the support system that happens. That's through my friends, that's through students here. I really enjoy that. I enjoy all the stuff that I keep learning about this vast community. The fact that it goes from let's learn more about lesbians and gay men to let's learn all the sub groups. Let's learn about intersex people, let's learn about how people identify in their gender, there's so much to learn and it's so interesting. People can choose to learn nothing and people can choose to learn everything.

A lot of my daily struggles are not related to my sexual orientation, a lot are related to my gender expression. Not to curse, but I hate that shit. I hate getting pulled out of a bathroom because they think I'm a dude. I just want to pee. It's just a bathroom, what do you think I want to do? I want to pee! I hate that.

I hate having to be the voice of every LGBT person. I also enjoy providing knowledge about the community, so it's a double edged sword. When I work at my other job I am the gay person. People ask, well, what is this, and what is that? I say, Google it. What does queer mean? Well, I can't tell you what it means for everyone, I can tell you what it means to me. I don't understand. OK. Or when I have to explain

why gender neutral bathrooms are important. Or when I post something about transgender issues on my Facebook and somebody from my past says "I don't get it, why do you need special language?" I just want to say blah. I don't have the energy to explain to you why being a nice person is important and you're being an ass.

The struggle of always advocating and always having to try to be patient with people when I just want to say you're being an asshole. That can be a struggle.

And boobs. I just want them to go away. That's a struggle. That can also be a joy. When they're not mine, they're a joy. When they're mine, I would like them to go away. If I could give them away I would. I've offered to give them away, many times. So most of my struggles are related to gender expression or gender identity, not sexual orientation. People are so over that at this point. You like chicks? Cool, whatever, yeah. Awesome.

My dad died when I was young. I was thirteen. So it's just my mom and I. I love my mom, but I'm kind of a push over, so I kind of just do what she wants. It's hard when a parent dies; you want to keep the other one happy. After I came out, my mom was a little uncomfortable. She didn't really know how to talk about it; she didn't know how to handle it. She just didn't know what to do.

My mom and I used to talk like every day. I got a girlfriend and when you get a girlfriend that becomes an important part of your life, you're going to want to talk about it. So in the smattering of things we talked about I'd try to talk about my girlfriend and my mom would change the subject. That didn't really fly. So I tried for a while. It got to the point where I said, "Look, this is how things are going to go. Either you're going to accept me and we're going to talk about what's going on in my life, which includes my girlfriend, or we're not and you're not going to talk to me, and we're not going to talk. You let me know what you want."

It was really hard for me. It's hard for me to stand up to my mom, because she's all I got. So it's weird to say that's a triumph, but for me it was about standing up for myself and about saying this is important, you're going to accept me for who I am, and you're going to see that this is important to me. I would say that's a triumph because it was my first step to standing up for myself and my own identity. Without letting her squash it and decide we're not going to talk about it. It wasn't fun, but it had to happen.

She choose talking. She thought, *shit, either I talk about the girlfriend, or I don't talk to Susie*. It took her a couple days, but she did.

If I had a magic wand, I think I would make all the really hateful people live as an LGBT person for a day. If you're over a certain threshold of hateful, boom, you're suddenly a LGBT person for a day and you have to live like an LGBT person. You would see that you don't go preying on children, you go

to the grocery store, you go to the bathroom, people are mean to you. There's nothing you can do about it. Your gay agenda is the grocery list, feeding your cat, and paying bills. That's what I would do.

I think it's hard for people to fathom what it's like, a lot of people don't even think about what someone else's experience is like. I was trying to explain gender neutral bathrooms to my coworkers. I think I was talking about Creating Change (**the largest annual LGBT conference**), why my favorite part of Creating change was the gender neutral bathrooms. They were surprised, "Bathrooms? That's your favorite part of the conference?" Well let me explain to you why.

I explained it to them, I've gotten taken out of bathrooms, I've had women send their husbands in and tell me to get out because the women are too scared to come in because they think I'm a dude, I've had someone grab me by the collar and pull me out of a bathroom, I've had a group of girls in the bathroom go, "Boy, get out of the bathroom." So I've had people say lots of stuff, and all I want to do is pee. That's all.

So there's a lot of anxiety that can sometimes happen when I go into a bathroom. You know what? I never really noticed it until I didn't have to worry about it. So the greatest part about gender neutral bathrooms is that I don't have anxiety, and it's just peeing. I go, "Hey!" and I go to the bathroom. I don't get people looking at me funny, or looking at the door to make sure they're in the right bathroom or getting startled because they think I'm a dude. I can just go to the bathroom and I don't have to apologize for who I am.

My coworkers looked at me and said, "Oh, I guess I never really thought about it, how awkward that would be." "Yeah, it's really horrible, It's not fun." And they get it, "Oh, huh. I can see why that's really important." But if you can't explain, until you put somebody in your shoes and they start to see it from your point of view, they don't really understand why things are important.

So I think hearing other people's stories and being able to talk about your experience to someone, friends acquaintances, other people's friends, when you can tell your story and tell what you've been through, it really can be powerful. It gets people to see what someone else's life is like. We can post stories in the newspaper as much as we want but I think there's something just really ingrained in us in that history of oral story telling. That's who we are. We've had stories passed down for centuries, from people to people. I think that sitting in a group of people and saying this happened to me, or I had this experience is one of the ways you bond with other people. It's a way you create friendship. To be able to just share those stories is one of the ways we make a lot of changes.

I think any time you start to put people's words and experiences out there it will have its own life. Certainly I think the most powerful is when it's from the mouth. But to read something and know that

there was a person behind that shape. There's a reason why you read biographies, because you know that's a person's story. I think knowing that someone went through something, there's an actual person that happened to, that can have a lot of power.

Simply Out: Amelia

Amelia is a 20 year old engineering major on the track team at Lehigh University. She currently identifies as white, gay, and female, but she is not as out as some of the other people I interviewed. Her role on the track team here at Lehigh plays a big part in her story and daily life.

I grew up in Nebraska. I lived in the one of the only liberal counties there until I was about seven, when we moved to a smaller town. It had about 5000 people. I lived there, went to high school, and graduated, and it was very non-diverse. I think there were two black kids at my school, and they were mixed. It was very, very white, and very straight.

I knew from like a very early age that I was gay. I was always a tomboy; I refused to wear dresses until 8th grade prom. Even then I was thinking *ugh, I guess I have to*, so I just did it. Everyone is kind of a tomboy at a young age, so my parents didn't really care.

It wasn't as easy. Now, because I've known for so long, I've become more accepting of it. There is still some internalized homophobia and stuff. That's there in sports and just being from Nebraska. I remember one time, it was seventh grade. It was the year girls decide they're going to start talking about everyone. I don't know if they really want to or they just see it in the media and think, *Mean Girls* does this so we have to start doing this. Someone started a rumor that I was gay. I was like, shit, I thought I was doing such a good job hiding this, and now they're all talking about it. I was so mad. It was the worst thing ever. So obviously I lied about it. I remember from then on I just didn't want to talk about it. They didn't actually know, but they had some really good seventh grade gaydars.

I dated one guy when I was sixteen, but literally, I think we held hands. I knew, but I was thinking, *maybe if I date this guy...*

In high school, I didn't date, I just said that I was too busy with things, so my parents would think, *Yeah, she's too busy. All right, cool.* They often said, "We always love you." I knew that, but I didn't come out in high school because I wanted to wait until college and experience things before I did. I also had a feeling that if I'm perfect in school and the best athlete, then they'll be cool with it. So that was what I went for, and I was. Perfect grades, never lied, was pretty much the perfect child, but obviously I was lying to them a lot about this. But they didn't know that.

I knew I wanted to go to school far away. There are things I like about Nebraska, but at the time I thought, this isn't where I want to be. I'm not experiencing any of the things I want to. I didn't really care

where I went. I figured, all right, east coast, anywhere will be more diverse than Nebraska. So I came to Lehigh.

It was not quite the diversity I had expected. It was still more diverse, at least racially, than Nebraska. But as far as LGBT, it wasn't there. I noticed that the people are more accepting. The east coast mentality is cooler with diversity, there are more open allies. I thought the percentage of openly LGBT people would be higher. That, in my opinion, isn't true.

My coming out story to my mom wasn't really on my terms.

After my freshman year of college, I came back to work at a pool in the summer. So I was literally doing nothing but working out, working at the pool, and getting super tan. My mom and I were going to our community garden, which is very Nebraska of us. We were driving back and we stop at a stop sign. It was only two miles from the garden to our house. It wasn't a long drive. So I asked, "Why are we at this stop sign for so long?" She just asked, "Is there anything you want to tell me?" I totally knew what she was talking about, I could just tell, this is it. I just said no, and she asked, "Are you sure?" "Yeah, positive." "Are you gay?" "Yeah." "Wait, what?"

Wait, you just asked! You don't want to know? I thought. Oh my goodness. "Oh," she said, "Are you sure?" We got home and were still talking about it because it was such a short drive. Then we talked about it in the house. The way we deal with things is very active; we can't sit there and talk about things for very long or we emotionally can't process it. So, we took the dog for a walk and kept talking about it while walking around the tiny town. I'm pretty sure my dog got about three walks that day. He was thinking, *I don't understand what happened, but this is great!*

I don't think someone told her I was gay. Whenever my parents would ask if I had a boyfriend in college or if I was dating anyone, I said no. They'd ask why not and I would say I don't want one. My attitude towards coming out was that I don't actually care, I'm just not going to say anything. I wasn't interested in guys, and they knew that. It wasn't the least obvious thing. I'm sure my parents knew for so much longer. C'mon, my Halloween costume choices? As soon as I was able to pick my own costumes I was almost always a boy. I was the joker one year, a pirate with a beard and everything another year, and a baseball player.

The most awkward coming out story I have I still feel bad about. I should have done this so much better.

Freshman year, I was matched up to be a roommate with someone on my track team, Marissa. We're both in the same event group, so we should have had a lot in common, and now we were living together. We hated each other for the first semester. We were not friends. I can say that, we're best friends

now. So when I told everyone on my hall that I was gay, she wasn't there. So my whole hall knew I was gay, but I didn't tell her, because we didn't like each other like, at all. I didn't want that be the thing that made us switch roommates. I got really good at pretending she wasn't ever in the room, when she was, all the time. We had recruits visit, and we wouldn't talk, and they're like, "Yeah, that was really weird, when we visited, and you guys didn't talk." "Uh yeah, we were really good at ignoring each other."

There was one day when we just became best friends, sometime before second semester. Still, everyone knew I was gay, but she didn't. Well, it's awkward now, like we lived together for half a year, what am I supposed to say?

Then sophomore year we didn't live together, because we decided housing before we liked each other, but I still spent a lot of time in her room. Her roommate Julie knew and a few other people. I'm not the most out person, I want to be more, but, as far as my teammates, I'm not that out. It's a huge team. Fast forward through that whole year of it never really coming up. She still didn't know at the end of sophomore year, and now, junior year, we live together.

I have people over sometimes. My room is connected to Julie's room, so she'd comment, "Oh, who'd you have over last night". "Shhhhh". She would say things that I'm sure Marissa overheard. I guess Julie never said gender or pronouns that would give it away. I'd talk to Julie about how it's so awkward, what am I supposed to say now, it's been two years. I should have done this before we signed the lease. Something like, "Oh, before we sign this lease, just so you know..." I should have done something, and I didn't.

We came back from practice one day, and I had a date. Usually we come back and are in sweats and we'll either change to pajamas or stay in our sweats. Instead I showered and got changed. Marissa asked, "Is there a reason why you got dressed up again after practice?" "Actually yeah, I have a date." "Oh really?" And then I said, "Her name is--" and that was it. She was going upstairs, I'm on the couch, and all she said was, "Oh! Cool" and walked upstairs. Julie was sitting on another couch and burst out laughing, "That's the best thing ever!" She still laughs about it, how I came out. After not coming out for two years, I do it in the most awkward way possible.

I always thought it would be so cool if you could just tell, if the intuitive gaydar wasn't needed. As in, there was literally a red dot or something that would show up, and everyone would see it. You would never have to come out again. Yup, I want people to be marginalized by something *laugh*. If you could just tell, more people would be out and open, because you couldn't not be. In other words, I wish invisible identities were visible.

As for the future, my parents are always asking me if I'm going to start looking for jobs in Nebraska when I graduate. I don't know, maybe? I'm not going to try really hard. My roommates are going to go back to where they grew up and work. I'll go anywhere. I have an internship this summer in Maryland. My field is really broad. You can do a lot of things with it. I thought that I wanted to do business, but I only got internships in the more engineering side. So I'll see, if I like that, I can go down that path. And if I don't like it, then I can figure something else out. I don't have a clear path. I feel like if you make plans too concrete, they will likely get messed up. I go into it more open.

Something that makes me unique is that I'm a very emotional person, in sports and other things. Anything that I'm doing, I'm going to be emotionally invested in. Why would I be doing it if I wasn't? In high school people would always say I'm too emotional. I'm not one of those people who can let it go. I'm working on that now. College has really mellowed me down. I think being passionate and having strong emotions is important, but you have to channel them in a way that's helpful. I'm working on being able to control emotions in a way that makes me seem more confident and less crazy.

I have some daily struggles with being gay. In the team aspect, it's hard to tell where you are. Like is someone a friend or a teammate. I wasn't out to my best friend for two years. I struggle with that in general, being more open and being more out. But in the team setting, I really don't know if someone is my friend because we spend every day together at practice, or if we would be friends if I wasn't on the team and I was gay.

So it's a struggle, thinking that my team would be accepting, but really would some of them be? It's such a huge team, but also an individual sport. In a smaller team, you need the other people to succeed, so you're going to be closer and more accepting of that. But when it's an individual sport, you have conflicting opinions about things, and as long as the coaches don't yell at you for it, you're fine. I think now being an upperclassman helps. Freshman year, I don't know if I would have denied if anyone brought it up, but I definitely wouldn't consider being out, but now some people know. Being an upperclassman changes things I guess, especially on a team.

I also have a daily joy. Whenever my teammates complained about the hookup scene, or complain about guys at parties, I say, "Oh, that sucks" (laughs). I love not needing to deal with that.

I think there's power in both sides of these stories. Even people who do identify as LGBT can benefit. Coming from Nebraska, I didn't know anyone who's out. So I found online websites and other things. Just having that community and that kind of thing to read was helpful. I think that on this campus, where we can feel like there's no one else, to read a list of all of these stories, you can see you're clearly

not the only one. And then on the other side, other people who don't identify as LGBT can read these and get a better idea of what people are going through. I think that's true of anything. Racial minorities say things and we think, 'Oh, I've never thought about that because I'm white and it doesn't affect me.' I think everyone gets that with race. I think these stories can be used in the same way.

Simply Out: Matt

Matt graduated from Lehigh's theatre program in 2013. He now attends the Yale School of Drama for graduate school. He self-identifies as bisexual, demisexual (sexual attraction only after emotional connection), and heteroromantic (romantic attraction to opposite sex); identities he's found through a long process of self-discovery. His talk about his work shows his deep understanding of the power of storytelling, and the various meanings that can be taken from a story.

I think one of the most important things to start with is that I am the youngest of six kids. Growing up I always had a lot of siblings around and we all always had different opinions. So we were a very open house. One of the big things was always being new and different from everyone else.

During all of High School I considered myself straight. There were moments I questioned my sexuality, mostly due to the gay best friend I had for many years who I loved dearly. But I didn't think I was gay necessarily, but then, I hadn't really discovered the idea of bisexuality. Then college came. During the summer before college and when college started is when I really started questioning my sexuality. About two months into college is when I came out.

One funny story about my coming out; when I finally told my freshman dorm, I told the entire floor in one night in the spring. They admitted that they had been having a bet running as to what my sexuality was. They were all really sad and they thought it was done when I had a girlfriend in the first month of college. So they laughed and the entire floor bonded over the fact that they all got my sexuality wrong because not a single one of them thought about bisexuality.

They assumed because of some reason or another that I may have been gay or I may have been straight, because the way I act and how much pink I wear. I wear a lot of pink. Because of that there was a running bet for two, three weeks. Then it became public knowledge that there was a girl on our floor I was sleeping with and then dating and they thought it was all done. I came out to them about a month after that. After I came out we played a fun game; how many people in the room I was sexually attracted to. There were twenty five people in the room and the answer was like twenty three.

During college I explored a lot and had a lot of fun. College was me finding myself. I changed majors four different times over the four years. I started as an electrical engineer and then hated that and moved to computer engineering. Then I met Professor Best, who is awesome, and joined the IDEAS program, with a focus on computer engineering and theatre. Then I hit some of the harder engineering courses, which made my brain hurt. I failed them repeatedly. So I dropped the engineering and switched to just theatre and that's what I graduated with and that's what I'm in grad school for.

For the next three years I'm doing grad school, and after that I hope to become a freelance designer for five to ten years. Right now I'm thinking San Francisco as a base, but I'll probably move back to New York at some point because that's where my parents currently live and because that's where Broadway is, and I eventually want to work on Broadway as a designer.

Grad school is fun. Grad school for me has been a lot about finding who I am as an artist, how I relate to other artists, and how I need to go and change in order to become professional and master the work. It's been very busy and very hard, but it's what I love, so it's what I want to do.

My favorite coming out story was when I came out to my best friend from High School, the gay man. He just kind of looked at me and said, "Duh, of course you're bi".

I haven't technically come out to my parents yet, but there was one day when my mom just sat me down and said, "So, you know, if you bring home a boyfriend or a girlfriend, that would be really OK with us. We just want you to bring them home more." It was adorable. I haven't specifically come out to my parents yet because I just don't want to talk about my sex life that way to them. My mom is a sex-ed teacher, so it adds extra awkwardness. She would go into all the clinical questions; I just don't want to do that. It's not that I'm afraid of it; I just don't want to have that conversation.

One unique thing about me is that I always try to have fun. While you can be always be professional and mature and a huge adult, when I don't have to be I make silly jokes, I run around, I do cartwheels out of nowhere, and I wear ridiculous amounts of pink. I try to make everyone's day a little more fun. Also, another thing that makes me unique is the fact that I just never stop working. In grad school we do twenty five shows a year as a department and I've done eight of them. Which makes me the person that's done the second most shows of the department, but that's because they won't let me do every show *grin*. The other girl is similar to me in that she does a lot of shows, but she's an undergrad and the only sound designer, which is important, so they need her for everything.

For me, grad school is one of my greatest triumphs. I didn't always think I was going to be a great artist, I didn't even think I was going to be an artist for years. Going into senior year of college I thought, oh shit, I have to do grad school, I have to do all this work, I have to do all this stuff. For example, my interviews, I did a really structured interview process. It was an eight hour day of interviews, spread across forty-eight different schools. I sat there and did fifteen interviews back-to-back. It was the most stressful day of my life, but it was so much fun because I got to talk to all these different professors who are artists in my field, hear about their work, my work, talk about the program, talk about myself. It was

very stressful but it was very fun. Having survived that, getting into grad school and finding a program that I love and that teaches me more about myself and my work on a daily basis is just awesome.

Being bisexual, demisexual, and heteroromantic, there are lots of gay men who I find very attractive that I would love to do things with. But since I am not romantically interested in them, I can't physically do things with them. But they're there and sometimes there are gay men who are really trying to get me to do things with them and I just sit there awkwardly not being interested. There were times when I wish I was a little less demisexual and could be a little freer.

I love it when I have wonderful conversations with people about sexuality and talk about myself and where I've gone. I always feel very proud that I managed to find out who I am and find labels that make sense for myself and the people around me, that's really fun.

Having been around the queer community a lot, and been around the straight community, I think bisexuality is usually ignored or confused or considered something that is a phase or a stepping stone to something else. I wish people would be more willing to understand it and not just think, oh that person is bisexual because they just want to sleep with everyone. They want all the men and all the women; they should just stick to one gender. But that's not how people are. I don't want to sleep with all the people, I generally am very monogamous, I like relationships. I wish people would be more willing to understand and accept that fact.

I think the power in peoples' stories is the connections. Being in theatre, being an artist, the biggest thing I always face is getting people to connect to stories. If you can find part of yourself in someone else when you hear their story or read their story, then you can connect with them and you can learn and grow and change from it. I think hearing about people's daily lives will really influence people because they'll know why you are who you are or what you do and then you're just another human being to them. If you remove all the label differences and all of the philosophical differences, you just see oh, this person gets up, brushes their teeth, showers, eats breakfast, you know, does all the things I do every day. Are they really different just because they have sex with men instead of women or whatever? I think the power in the story comes from that connection, that visceral emotional bond that you form with someone because you hear their story.

The idea in theatre is that the actors and the roles work in such a way that everyone in the audience has a different experience. One of the things I try and do is make sure in general you know what the audience is going to leave with. You structure it towards most of the audience leaving with, say, the idea that war is terrible and that running out and killing people for money, for profit, things like that, is

bad, that's what the play is about. Your goal is to touch everyone with that idea in some way so they understand what's going on. In the end someone may go see that show and think, oh, they completely screwed up Vietnam, that's not how the Vietnam War was, they're obviously terrible story tellers. No matter what you try, everyone gets what they want from it, so some people may get the idea-- I keep talking about war and Vietnam because I just did a class project about a woman who goes around Germany during the thirty year war back in the sixteen hundreds and exists by selling things she's stolen off the battle fields to the armies. War profiteering. Also the play was written in nineteen thirty nine in Germany by a German nationalist playwright who's saying Fuck Hitler. He was trying to warn the world and warn Germany of war. That play is particularly strong because it was written in such a good time and was written by such a good playwright.

Then there are other shows, such as last spring, I did the Laramie Project. That is a show that really addresses a lot of hot topic issues. It's Mathew's Sheppard's story, a gay man in Laramie, WY, who was killed in November of 1998. The story isn't about him being killed, the story is about the town around him and how they respond to his death, the trial of his murderers, and how a small town in America deals with those issues being brought to the forefront.

The most powerful speech in it to me is the father's testimony at court when he was asked about the death penalty. This is a man whose son was brutally beaten and left for dead, tied to a fence post in the middle of nowhere. He sits there and goes on and on about how he loves his son and he loves life and all that, and he ends it by saying, "I want you to think about this everyday for the rest of your life." In this moment where it would be perfectly reasonable to want death upon this person, he wishes life. He gives the gift of life to these two young men in a way that was beautiful.

The play takes his story and word for word just puts it on stage. The idea of the play was not to give a message, the idea of the play was to say this is life, this is what was happening there, watch it, and take what you want from it. The play also includes speeches by Fred Phelps from the Westboro Baptist church. People may watch this show and take away Fred Phelps's message or they may take away Dennis Sheppard's message. Theatre is open to interpretation.

Theatre is also open in that the people who are usually around theatre are more open. Theatre is a collaborative art form. So in the end it's never just one person's message. It's what the playwright has to say, what the director has to say, what the designer, the actors, the technicians. Because there are always so many people involved in every piece of theatre, it really opens communication. It's a dialogue between the stage and the audience.

There are some people who go into theatre who want the whole thing to be about them and the whole story to be about them. Then the art of theatre and the people around them will-- you kind of get

forced to be open, you get forced to tell your story, and you become comfortable because everyone around you is doing it and everyone is supporting it. In theatre you become a family.

In the Closet: Carlos

Carlos is a 21 year old business major from New York. He is known to most as a straight ally, but recently came out as more than that. He explains:

As far as sexual and gender identity, I've spent so much time trying to come up with something. It honestly causes me too much stress figuring this shit out, so I haven't come up with a term. I am the edgy, angsty teenager who says fuck labels. I don't want to spend my time trying to come up with any, so I don't try. In terms of my public persona, I'm straight and male.

Carlos also debates his racial identity.

I don't know if I identify as Latino, I have been so Americanized. There are two kinds of Latinos here at Lehigh. You have the ones who have been raised in a very Hispanic setting where there are Hispanic stereotypes all around. And then you have people like me who were born here or came here at a much younger age, and the parents didn't really... it's not that they didn't care, but they're just too busy with everything else, they didn't really want to spend time giving us the experience of back where they came from.

I've kind of always assumed I was different from other guys. I didn't really act up on it, but there were things that show something was going on. I remember even as a kid, small things. I would get out of the shower and my dad would scold me for wearing my towel up to my chest instead of down there. If I really wanted to, I would probably enjoy sewing and making dresses and shit. Just because of the whole creativity thing, I enjoy that stuff. I also enjoy re-arranged my room. I've done that three times in the past eight months because I just love rearranging stuff to make it better. Like one of those home model thingies. Home remodelers. That would be fun, I would enjoy doing that.

It's easy for me to talk to people in general, if we're doing projects or something, but it's more difficult if I become interested in them outside of generic, damn that girls hot. I'm not interested in sex. I would probably enjoy having sex, I mean, I'm sure I would enjoy it. But I probably would not enjoy it without someone I can find an intellectual connection with, just because it would probably feel like I'm... I don't enjoy having non-relationship related sex I guess. I'm not interested in actively pursuing a simply sexual relationship. It's just not me. That's why, if I'm interested in someone, I'll get to know them before hand, and then ask them out. I've done that a few times. But outside of that, getting into a relationship is

not on the top of my mind. It's probably because my sense of self really doesn't want to be controlled, and we all know that the woman holds the shit in the relationship. If I really liked her, I'd really have to change and I'd be like, *this is the end. This is the end. It's no fun from here on out.* (laughs)

From my childhood, there is a moment I can still remember to this day, just because of how weird it was. It happened when I was eight or something. I was being babysat and this girl... I guess she had seen her parents having sex or something, but didn't know it, so she took me to the bedroom and got on top and just kind of did something. I was thinking, *ok, what's going on?* That was pretty funny.

I also remember another time, I can't remember if it was first grade or second grade. Writing stories has always been an avenue for me to just be anyone who I want. So in general my stories are kind of different. For one thing, I try to do female leads because, you know, perhaps that's something I kind of want to be. It's my way of being one but not being one. I try to not make them the generic romance novel girls, because that's not me. They'll have issues, who doesn't have issues, let's be honest. I also enjoy bringing in different stories from other things, like movies and TV series, and combing them into a single thing. So one time I wrote a story, it was from some TV show about Zeus or something. I ended up writing about a boy escaping a zoo and going to... I have no idea. At some point, the teacher called my parents or me and asked, "What is this?" I said, "I don't know." I don't remember this clearly but there was some kind of issue with this story. I believe they were thinking *what kind of kid came up with this?* I had mentioned the specific name of the zoo and other things so they were probably thinking, *how does this kid know all this?* It also might have just been shitty writing and they were saying "This kid has horrible writing, OK? You're going to have to give him pointers or something."

So middle school. That's where I met my key best friends who I've known for a long time. There's around twenty to twenty-five elementary schools, three to seven middle schools, and three high schools. So usually if you all went to the same middle school, for the most part you all went to the same high school. So that's where I met a lot of my friends who I've been friends with for a long time.

I was always much weaker compared to the other guys. I didn't really like PE or anything. I did enjoy painting, I did enjoy theatre. I didn't enjoy PE, I didn't really get aggressive with anyone. I stayed back and did my thing and tried to survive outside of whatever else was going on. That's also when I started to recognize women. That was a fun time because girls didn't really know how to be proper, so they showed a bit too much sometimes.

All throughout this time it's always been at the back of my head; *I don't feel like a guy, but I am one.* So I just assumed I didn't really fit in.

High school begins, I didn't really like it. I did go to the first homecoming with a chick, it didn't really work out. Homecoming was fun, it didn't really work out with her. Also in this time period is when I met the girl I started playing World of Warcraft (WoW) because of. Then I thought *I don't like this bitch, I like this game more*. WoW is where I met a lot of what I'd call my best friends, who I talk to on Skype a lot. I've met most of them, probably nine or ten of them. They are all awesome people. They're all kind of like me, cynical and shit. I just love them all; it's so fun to be with them.

I've always had an interesting relationship with different groups. In high school, even though I wasn't really a popular person or part of the popular group, I feel like everyone kind of knew me. I always joked about this group of three or four Hispanic people. They were in school not caring and they were probably going to just flounder when graduation hits. But they were always really nice to me. If I ever saw them they'd be like "Hey" and I'd be like "hey". It was really funny how I just didn't have people I hated in high school. Now I hate my roommates. Nah, I don't hate them. They're just, interesting.

It's hard for me to really get a connection with Hispanics. Being with other Hispanics, it just doesn't feel like I'm one of them, it comes from how I've been raised.

It helps to know that, at my high school there were at last count fifty countries represented, from all around the world. So I already experienced a lot of diversity in terms of backgrounds, ethnic backgrounds, and just backgrounds in general. For example, one of my best friends, he's from Bengali. In 2008, in the midst of the Iraq and Afghani war, I was already comfortable, because there were lots of people at our school who wore Hijabs. So I knew they were cool people, it's not like they're evil or something like that. So that gives me the ability to see people for who they are.

Coming to college was probably one of the better things to have happened, because it allowed me to experiment. For example, I dyed my hair a couples times, that was fun. I've let my hair grow longer and I love my hair. I could kind of just do my own thing. Probably the most difficult thing in college, though, is that there's a very heavy macho attitude on campus. It's really hard for me to tell people I've never had sex on this campus. People say, "What are you doing, you're on campus, girls are easy." "I'm just not interested?" It's as if you can't say that because you're instantly put down on this campus.

I don't really talk to people outside my comfort zone so if I didn't know you and I saw you at a party I would not at all come up to you. I don't like parties where I don't know a lot of the people already, or I'm not comfortable enough to know I'll probably be related to them somehow.

College also gave me the opportunity to figure out what I wanted in life. I see all these hot girls and I think, *well, awesome, I guess*. Would I say I'm interested in guys? I don't know, I'm not sure on that. You'll have to ask me in like five years, and by then I'll probably know.

My future, let's do this as a time table. Within a couple months of graduation, I hope to have a job of some sort. Five years from now, I'm probably going to have a really good position in some sort of

consulting company. But I think from after five years to ten years, I want to move into the non-profit sector. I think helping people is one of my life goals, just because I've been helped so much throughout my childhood by different people. I've had multiple mentors who have helped me and so I kind of want to do that. I've never really been the ambitious type. I try to be ambitious, but I'll try to be ambitious on my own level. So I'll work for the government for a few years, and I can attempt to fix it in some sort of capacity. Then I really do want to work for a non-profit. Maybe one for inter-city youth.

What makes me unique is that I try and be very rational. I really don't go out and get into things. I don't like to do that, I don't like to spend money on stuff I'll never need. I'll spend money, but if I don't need something, I see no need to get it. I also try to be nice to everyone when I first meet them. I say all this of course and there are those instances where I haven't because I'm human. But I try to be nice to people.

I think what also makes me unique is the fact that I can sit back and gage a situation. I'm not going to go into an argument face first, I'm going to see, what is this person saying, what is that person saying. Then I'll try to come in with something in the middle that both sides can try to agree on.

I think a lot of energy is exerted on trying to get stuff to change from zero to sixty, and in reality, stuff should be going from zero to fifteen, fifteen to thirty, thirty to forty-five. In this country especially, just because of how big it is, you have to understand that things are not going to change at all for two or three generations. Even the past generation has revealed just how massive this country is in terms of the differences and ideologies. For example, you have the north. The reason the east coast is heavily liberal is because you have a lot of people moved there and are younger, thus those are the ones who want the change. The ones that stayed back in their small towns are more in the southern and mid-west area, so that's why they're very in tune with their home views. It's pretty hard to reach those people when you're trying to use tactics that are only effective in large cities.

One struggle I have; sometimes when I tell people I'm straight it's like I'm actively lying to them. I think one of the big things that really gets me is the fact that if someone like me would come out, in Hispanic culture it's a big no-no. You have to really be the type of person to warrant the abuse you're going to get if you come out in Hispanic culture. That's not me. So I go out and I say yes, I'm straight. I like girls. Every time I say that, I'm lying to the person, and myself.

The more difficult thing is that I don't want to explain it. You tell someone I'm this, and now you have to give a ten minute explanation on why. I'm not interested in giving you an explanation honestly. If you're someone I know, yeah, I guess I can give you some sort of explanation. After some point I don't want to. So there's that.

I don't feel like I really fit in anywhere. At Creating Change (**the largest annual LGBT conference**), both years I went I've never really felt in a group of any sort. I didn't really feel comfortable in any of those groups. It probably doesn't help that they're all activists and I really don't like the ones who are very, I don't want to say out, then it would imply that I don't like people who are out, but people who are very forceful, I'd say. You know who I'm referencing, those kind of people. I don't really like those people. I went to the different sessions and such, I just didn't really feel comfortable in any of them. It almost feels like even the LGBT community has come up with a generic look you need to have to be a part of a group. Let's talk about that, you have the gay community. You have to be a white, hot, six pack looking guy with blonde hair, blonde cut hair. That's your guide. If you're not like that, you're not gay, let's be honest. Then lesbians, it's short hair, looking like a slut (laughs). Bisexuals I guess are even bigger sluts, that's the generic look for that one. Then everyone else, they're like, eh, we don't care about you guys, we aren't going to make any generic stereotypes yet. I have an issue with coming out and telling people I'm this and this, because if I were to say, and I still don't know, if I were to say I'm trans, I would need an even bigger explanation.

If I were to come out it would instantly put me in a category. People say "I know these types of people, I've seen them on Tumblr, that must mean it's you, is that how you are?" "Eh, kind of?" And I'm going to be honest, I enjoy being a guy. I enjoy being able to dress like this (**motions at his T-shirt and basketball shorts**), I enjoy being able to do whatever.

Sometimes I kind of want to be a girl. I've always imagined what it would be like if we could just trade. Let's shake hands and just trade. I would probably enjoy it for a day and then I'd come back saying, "No, you have too many problems. God damn it, can we switch back, I'm sick and tired of this."

That reminds me of when I was doing psychology at a community college over the summer. A professor told me I was the first guy to ever say I would enjoy trading places and being a female. There were a couple other girls she said, but it was her seventh year of asking and I was the only guy to ever say it.

I asked Carlos if it would be a problem to come out now that he's known as a straight ally.

I just don't want to, I guess. I don't like being the center of attention. The other big thing is, and honestly I've seen this happen to many gay guys, you become the gay best friend. I really don't want that to happen to me. I understand some problems, I get it, everyone has problems. But at some point, please, shut up. Just shut up.

I already have three years of history and it would instantly just negate all those three years of what I've done. I would also have to explain it to every single one of them, yeah, I'm this way I guess. I feel like it would also instantly have people making me feel guilty. "Why aren't you doing more then? About this and this." As a straight ally, it absolves me of having to be the activist that other people are.

I love talking. I almost never talk about myself.

I think the power in stories comes from being able to be witness to a different story line than your own. If you just follow your own story, you have one story, yourself. I think this is one of the big things people do that really grinds my gears in arguments, using examples from real life, "This happened to X, so Y is bad." If you've only had to witness X in Y life that is yours, you really haven't been witness to W and Z yet. I think stories give more information about life that someone perhaps would not have known. I think it also gives support to those who are confused about themselves. "Hey, this person is feeling this way and I'm kind of feeling this way and this person is kind of like me, so everything is all right in the world I guess." It gives me that happy feeling inside.

If I had a magic wand that could change one thing, I would make it mandatory for girls to wear skirts. That's not really my answer.

If I could use my magic wand to fix one thing on this fucking campus, it would be to ban alcohol. Yes, because let's be honest, that's where most of our fucking issues come from. As much as it pains me to say that, you don't know how painful it is on the inside, I'm graduating so I don't have to suffer that. But I think it's one of those things, it's the elephant in the room. Alcohol does not fix anything on this campus, it exacerbates issues. At the end of the day, life has to make its tough choices, but in the process, hopefully weed will be legalized. Hey, you know what, there's your replacement drug. Everyone is going to be happy and cheery, Wendy's will make a shit ton of money.

The Allies: Michelle

Michelle graduated from Lehigh's counseling psychology Ph.D program several years ago. She identifies as white, cisgender (opposite of transgender), female, and mostly heterosexual. She is originally from Pennsylvania and now works as a mental health counselor in New Jersey.

This must be sort of like being a counselor for you in some ways (laughs).

She seems to think of everything from the viewpoint of a psychologist. I guess that makes sense.

The thing that stands out to me as starting my interest in gender stuff and LGBT stuff or at least the first thing that kind of stands out to me; my mom made me get a haircut to be really short when I was in Kindergarten. She didn't like my hair and she made me cut it really short. People started identifying me as a boy and I was totally cool with that. You look at my pictures when I was in elementary school, I look like a little boy. My friends kind of teased me, but that's what I looked like. People thought I was a boy and addressed me as a boy a lot of the time, and I really felt pretty comfortable with that identity. I think I was too young to really understand it, but I knew I didn't like girl things and most of my friends were boys and I was cool being identified as a boy.

People were mostly supportive, so I don't think I really thought anything of it. I wasn't embarrassed. There were some bullies in my elementary school who called me "he-she". But that was when I was really little, in first grade, and they were fifth graders. I didn't really know what that meant, I didn't know they were making fun of me. I just thought it was a nick name for me.

When I got to middle school, in sixth grade, I was immediately ostracized and made fun of. I was the weird kid I guess. I wanted to fit in, so my immediate reaction was to go the opposite way. I grew out my hair long for the first time since Kindergarten and started wearing girl things. I used to wear baggy T-shirts and boyish things like sports bras. Then suddenly I was wearing tank-tops in the winter and stuff because I wanted to show I was a girl. I was already kind of in ostracized camp, I was already in the forever nerd camp.

The primary thing that launched me to where I am now is-- I don't know if you know this about me, but I'm a birth parent. I got pregnant when I was in high school, at the end of my sophomore year. I was pulled out of high school half way through my junior year. I was very much

ostracized again. My family told me not to tell anyone, it's this big secret. I was shipped to Texas to live with family there so I could hide it, essentially. I wasn't allowed to tell any of my friends or anything like that. That's a really common experience for LGBT teenagers. Come out to their parents, get rejected, be sent to a family member until they're "cured" or whatever. And then they're brought back and they aren't allowed to tell anyone, it's a big shameful family thing. That really connected me to LGBT populations even though I do consider myself to identify as cisgender and primarily heterosexual. I feel an identity with the community because of this weird experience I had when I was a teenager.

My parents didn't go to college, my mom got up to her associate's degree. I also have attention deficit, I thought I was the dumb kid. I thought I wasn't going to go to college, so I really never intended to do that. After my pregnancy, my grades got a lot better; I just got better at school I guess. So I thought, ok, I guess I'm going to college. It's not that I really cared, it's more that my parents wanted me to go than anything.

I started off with trying to do elementary education, which included a master's program. You start the masters program in your senior year and you do it along side your work and during your sophomore, junior, senior, and fifth year. So you have to pick the major immediately to start getting your credits out of the way, you can't really dick around. So I picked psychology because people told me to, essentially. It was an easy thing. At the time I was really not liking working in elementary schools anymore, so I ended up getting into the masters program then not fulfilling it and continuing with psychology.

My senior year I had this professor who, I guess he was kind of a bigot. He didn't really think that being gay was bad, but he did believe that being gay was a created identity. Parents did something to make kids gay. In the future we'd find out what that is and address it, and then there would be no more gay people. He was elderly. I would debate in the class with him. I would sit there and say, "You realize that's not true." I was the only person. It was me in a classroom with people and I was the only voice of reason. Other people knew, they would come up to me after class and be glad that I said something, but no one else said anything.

It got to the time before I was going to be writing my senior thesis. I felt really passionate because of that class, because of my interactions. I felt really passionate about learning more and being able to write about it. What I ended up doing for my senior thesis, it was called lesbian and gay parenting and its effects on children. Essentially there was no effect, blah blah blah. If anything, gay parents do a better job at raising their kids because they're more conscious of things, essentially.

No one in my school was doing anything related to social justice. When I was a freshman it was voted the second most politically apathetic school in the country. Students just didn't care. I was the only person doing anything. So I had a really awesome advisor who told me I'm really good at this. He nominated my paper for an award and he advised me to keep going with this.

I originally wanted to focus on trans stuff when I went on to a Ph.D because I saw that as being, in the spectrum, the least helped identity. It's the identity that had the least number of resources and needed the most allies and advocates, and people to be doing that work. As time went on it just got more and more focused to doing LGB stuff, because it's kind of hard to research when there's no research out there. It's easier to do research when there's at least some basis. It's true, that's how it works. I don't know, maybe because there weren't a lot of out trans kids at Lehigh. So when I was doing my work in the Rainbow Room and stuff like that, I was not meeting a lot of people with those identities, so I was more connected to LGB populations at that point. Now my dissertation looks at Greek life. As in, fraternity members and their attitudes towards lesbians and gay men.

I'm going one of two ways with my career, either student affairs or counseling. In student affairs, having a counseling and multicultural background is really unique because a lot of people going into student affairs have a student affairs job, like a masters in student affairs. I'll have a degree in counseling psychology, which is a totally different approach.

I'm very torn between counseling and student affairs. I know ten years from now I want to be a dean of students or something else in that administrative position. I would love to do that. The route of getting there I'm not sure of. I feel like I'm not qualified to be a mental health counselor, but I'm over-qualified for a lot of student affairs positions. So I'm just going to try to find work where I kind of fit somewhere.

In the LGBT field, I think it's unique that I'm an ally. There are a lot of allies, but not a lot of allies that have the knowledge at the level I have, which is not to say I'm the smartest person ever, but if you look at a spectrum of people, allies kind of stop somewhere in gaining knowledge. In the field, being an LGBT specialist, there are not a lot of people, I don't know, I thought more people knew about multicultural stuff, but as I'm getting out in the world I'm realizing that not as many people are trained that way.

Lehigh's program is half focused on psychology, half focused on multicultural stuff. So you're expected to have an area of specialization, and for almost everyone in my program, it's a

multicultural thing. Then you take classes on multicultural issues and it's discussed in all of your work and all of your issues. It's really integrated into the work in a way that it's not in other Ph.D or similar programs. Mountain top campus is like this weird, multicultural zen area. At least my section of Mountain Top is.

Another reason I identify with the LGBT communities is because I do consider telling people about my background of being a birth parent as being a coming out story. Because people don't talk about it. People talk about abortion and adoption from the other side, but nowhere anywhere does anyone talk about the parent side of it. What happens to the girl who has this kid? Especially being told from early on, don't talk about it.

In high school I had a couple friends who knew, that was it. Then I told my freshman roommates in college.

This was so traumatizing at the time, but it was a great experience in the end. I had a friend in Australia when I studied abroad who I told. Then two weeks later he had his first bipolar episode. I don't know if you know anything about bipolar disorder. He was in a manic episode. We lived on the sixth floor of our building, our dorm was on the sixth floor and there was a balcony. The world was amazing, he wanted to make everyone on our floor get together to talk and bond. He had a chest cavity that he was really embarrassed about, so he was never shirtless, and he was walking around the dorm with his shirt off. He was standing on the balcony, people were afraid he would jump. Everyone got together in our common area to listen to whatever he had to say and I was saying, "You should not be doing this, you should be calling mental health services. You should not be making a side show out of this right now. I'm not going." So I didn't go.

Apparently what he did in that time is he outed me to everyone on my floor as part of his rant, this totally manic rant that he went on. He was hospitalized right after that. I was so panicked, everyone knows, oh my god, what would happen. The end result of that is that everyone was so supportive. There was a girl who had had several abortions and had felt very ashamed of that and her life. I didn't know that about her, and she wrote me this amazing letter. People were just awesome and supportive.

I would tell boyfriends and very close friends and some people were cool and some people weren't. Mostly people who weren't cool just didn't know how to handle it; it was just too heavy for them I guess. Fuck them.

There was that suicide prevention event at Lehigh a couple years ago. The march in the fall, where people go up and tell their stories. I remember no one was really going up and I wanted to

contribute. I didn't know what to say, so I decided to go up and just tell my story. That was the first time I told an audience of people. I don't think anyone in the room knew. That was the first time I chose to tell a room full of people, and that was really amazing and powerful. I've just been more comfortable with it since then. It doesn't come up in every day conversation, so I don't just tell people. But when I was applying for my internship, I wrote it in my essays, so all the sites I applied to know I have that identity. Several of my friends down here know. I guess that's my long winded coming out story.

I think of my daily struggles so diagnostically just because I'm doing mental health counseling. As I said before, I'm attention deficit, so that's fun. Just trying to navigate that. I wouldn't change it because it's a big part of my personality, but it's still, it's not as easy for me to get stuff done as it is for other people. I have a little bit of anxiety which I think comes from being a first generation college student, and then a first generation grad student. No one ever told me how to do grad school and that was very hard for me.

I default to being a pretty happy person, so I'm lucky for that. I like cooking and exercising, I like my job and my friends. On a day-to-day basis my disposition skews towards being happy. I find happiness in a lot of things. I feel lucky for whatever chemical imbalance leads to that.

If I could, I would wipe away the Lehigh undergrad's multicultural baggage that everyone comes in with. Not their identities, but there are so many kids who have all this privilege and all this baggage that they're not aware of and it takes so much time to strip away of that stuff and give people who have those identities good multicultural education that gets them to understand shit. Being able to somehow start off at multicultural square one, which is impossible, but I think that would be amazing at Lehigh.

Stories help us relate to other people and understand on a human level. When you look at statistics, they don't speak to you the same way that hearing someone's story does. I saw a client the other day who had an unbelievably tragic thing happen in their past. When you see things on the news or look at statistics you can create distance from that, but I think hearing people's stories you can find ways you identify with that person and relate, and you can learn more from that.

The Allies: Maria

Maria is a 19 year old sophomore from New York studying psychology. She's everywhere on campus, including the Rainbow Room when she has time. She is very in tune with multiculturalism, and has a knack for being very open to new ideas, making her one of the greatest allies I've ever met.

I identify as a Peruvian female from New York. In terms of strict distinctions, that's as far as I go. Other than that, I'm a carefree outgoing person, I like theatre and binge watching Netflix, and I love animals and cupcakes.

My childhood was pretty good. I got the addition of a sister when I was about six. The seven year age difference is very interesting, but I love my sister to death, although she needs to stop watching things on Netflix for like fifteen minutes and then logging out.

Really nice childhood. Growing up, my parents were really into the whole freedom of expression thing. So I was a total TV movie buff, totally into reading, big puzzle person, so I kind of gravitated toward any type of activity. School, I loved school, I love learning. My favorite subjects still to this day are history and English, and obviously now psychology. I've always had a fascination with learning and gaining new perspectives.

When I went to high school, went to college, that's where you can see real world issues and be able to form your own opinions on them, based on what your actual opinions are as an individual, it definitely made me want to be educated on everything.

Although I did kind of grow into my outgoing personality, I didn't start off that way. I mean, I was a carefree kid, but going into middle school I had a little rough and tumble with feeling different. There were some girls that saw me and thought, *she's vulnerable*. But I learned from those experiences.

High school was definitely one of the highlights of my life. I picked a great high school, I met so many amazing people there, I got to do so many amazing things. One of them, I got to introduce chief justice Sonia Sotomayor at an event. She's super nice. Met a justice of the supreme court, check. I got to do so many different things. While keeping in with academics, I did musical theatre all four years, I was involved in tutoring. High school really opened my eyes to things I really enjoyed and things I really wanted to pursue.

Then getting into college. College was an interesting experience as well. I definitely love Lehigh, I love the campus. I was a D-Life participant, so coming in and meeting everyone, it was a really nice experience and I vibed with the school really well.

My freshman year was not the typical freshman experience, in my opinion at least. I came in thinking full blown, I want to be a biology major. I'm going to be a dentist, no big deal. Then intro to chemistry and survey of calc said maybe not.

I struggled because it was the first time I was away from home, coming to Pennsylvania. Two hours doesn't seem like that much, but it can be really far away sometimes. It was me being on my own, me finally making decisions for myself, and me really coming to grips with what I actually want to do. What do I actually want to pursue? I've always been a firm believer in waking up every morning and loving the job I'm doing. The more and more that I tried to make biology work, the more I thought, *I'm going to die every day, I'm not going to be happy at all*. It wasn't a struggle for my parents to understand. They definitely were pushing, "This is just a phase, you can get through it!" By the end they admitted, "Yeah, you're right, maybe you should do something else. We want you to be happy too, Maria." I know you do, but before, you kind of sounded like you didn't (laugh).

My transition took a long time. It was a lot of Netflix, a lot of deep thinking. But really, my first semester I tried to wholeheartedly, 110%. Try to make chemistry work, try to make math work, go to tutoring, read the text book, do practice problems, try to figure it out. By second semester I was like, you know, take a back burner, take some other elective courses. I knew I needed to round out my humanities and my social sciences, so I was like, OK, let's take an art history class, because I was always interested in that in high school. And then let's take a psychology class because I always liked those mind-bender things. I relate psychology to my love for puzzles and psychological thrillers. I'm really into Dateline and 48 Hours mysteries, going into the minds of how people think and all of that. So I thought that might be a good fit for me. As soon as I took that class I opened my mind to change.

That's one thing that people in any transition and I had a tough time with, the idea that change is possible. I'm a very organized person, I plan everything, map out everything. To have it totally flipped upside-down was a big thing for me. Now I understand, this is life, plans do change, your interests do get turned in different directions, and most times it is for the better. I feel I'm a better person, I definitely love what I'm studying now, taking psychology, and the direction my life is taking. I'm starting to enjoy all that college has to offer.

Besides that transition freshman year, it was a really great experience. I got to meet a lot of great people. I got to experience a lot of things on campus. I was involved in the vagina monologues, I learned about the Rainbow Room and multicultural affairs. I'm a liaison in admissions. I work there,

I tour guide there, I'm involved in admissions ambassadors. I found my niches here and there. I like having things to do.

All in all, my journey through Lehigh has been really interesting. Bumps in the road, but they made me the individual I am today, and I wouldn't be here without them. Being on this college campus, I have come to face some issues. I go to discussions at the women's center and talking about gender violence. I actually wrote a paper in high school, a short story about gender violence. My religion teacher liked it so much she actually got it published in a journal anonymously. But talking about that more and getting more information on that. Then also talking about ideas on race and ethnicity.

Coming to campus, especially this year with things happened at the Umoja house, some of the animosity that has come up on campus, and the group of individuals that are trying to promote change, definitely resonated with me. I am a Peruvian female, so I got both sides of the coin, gender and race. It definitely opened my perspective to some things that are still out there in the world that we're still trying to fight and get equality for.

In the future I would like to pursue a career in clinical psychology. I've already made it my catchphrase, I'm a psychiatrist. I don't give medication, but I got you. I've always found it interesting, people who are going through these tough mental challenges and they need someone to confide in and someone to help them get through their struggles. I'm always a big believer in wanting to help people. That would be something I would like to pursue.

My little fantasy dream, I'm a huge theatre person, you know, acting or musicals and things like that. So, maybe sometime down the road I'll randomly audition for something and see what happens and where it goes.

At Lehigh I've done the Vagina Monologues performances. I've done them freshman and sophomore year, and will do it next year. Next year I'm definitely going to do a couple of productions through the theatre here. Freshman year was such a whirlwind, sophomore year was a time to get more bearings on what I'm doing and I was kind of busy with school. But definitely for the next two years I'll get involved with theatre here as well. To get in touch with my roots again.

When I wrote that sexual assault essay talking about domestic violence, my teacher had another student of hers talk to her about a friend that she knew was in an abusive relationship. My teacher was talking to her and didn't know how to help her. So she gave her my essay to read. I knew about it, I knew the girl too, we were in theatre together. She didn't know the essay was mine. When she found out, she came up to me and gave me the biggest hug and said, "You saved my best friend,

thank you so much." In that moment it made me come out and think, *wow, this is a calling, I want to help people*. Subliminally, it was foreshadowing my career that I want to pursue now, clinical psychology, and helping people. Whether it's domestic violence victims or people with mental disorders, or just kids going through temper tantrums that just need the facts of life, like you need to get it together. Any situations like that I wholeheartedly would feel joy in helping people get through those things.

My greatest triumph was in high school. We have this big award at graduation. It's for the student who, you know, the typical your student that represents both academically and extracurricularly the values of this school. I was really involved and I was really academic, but I thought *I'm not going to get that award, it doesn't matter anyway*. It was no big deal, it was graduation.

Then we had our convocation mass before graduation and afterward they went through the awards so people knew what to do during graduation. They went through the awards and they didn't call my name yet, I was getting really nervous. I started to think, *no, I didn't get anything, ugh, this sucks. After everything I did for this school, this sucks!*

Then they got to the big award and they said our valedictorian's name, a guy, and they said my name, and my heart dropped. For me it was two-fold, it was not only the fact that I got the award, but it was the fact that when I went up to receive the award, all of our teachers and staff were sitting in the back of our auditorium, and my friend told me that behind me, all the teachers stood up when my name was called and clapped. I had tunnel vision, I was thinking, just go, take the picture, and remember to get the award tomorrow. I said something like, "What?! That is awesome!"

I was always making friends with teachers. Even at a young age, I gravitated toward talking to adults rather than my own peers, which I always thought was weird. It worked out though. I made friends with teachers that taught me, but also teachers that I didn't even have. That moment spoke to me. Wow, you believe so much in me, that's just icing on the cake, thank you.

I have a few every day joys. I'm a firm believer that laughter is always the best medicine. Especially with my sarcastic personality, I'm always popping jokes and saying things left and right. I'm always cracking jokes to try to lighten the mood but also to, life's better when you're happy so, just doing that all the time. A positive outlook is another joy I try to have every day. Sometimes you do have bad days. Sometimes you do trip in front of hot guys, or that envelope doesn't come in the

mail and you're think, *you know, I'm just going to have chocolate and cry, and that's OK.* But for the most part, I treat every day as a good experience and a good time to have.

The daily struggles that I have, one is growing up and becoming an adult and things like that. Just those insecurities that everyone has about some aspect of themselves. My family tells me constantly, I'm always talking about my weight. I'm always saying I need to lose weight, asking if I look skinny. They'll say, "Maria, you look fine the way you are, just shut up." "I love you too!" I'm always talking about that. To a point, I am serious about it. I want it all to go away and then I'll feel happy. But then to another point, you know, as I said, positive thinking, it's a gradual process, it's going to happen when it's going to happen. For now, I like the way I look, I'm just going to roll with that. Also, I'm highly sensitive. So I need that reassurance for whatever I'm doing. That I'm doing OK, it's correct, people are happy with me. Especially with my family. My mom says I made up my own thing where I thought I could disappoint my parents. "We could never be disappointed in anything you do, you can do whatever and we will support you 100%." But still sometimes I want to know, mom, are you really OK that I made that decision?

I always have a magic wand on hand. You know, fairy godmother status. I believe in magic. If I had a magic wand and I could make one thing change the world, my thing would be for there to be less global strife. I'm a firm believer in watching what's going on in Ukraine and stories of people struggling in Africa. I look at those global issues and all the other things going on and the weather, global warming coming into affect. If we could just ban together, help each other out, try to make the world a better place, then inevitably it would be a better place. We help out the kids and get them what they need so that they can grow up and be the bright future that we hope for them to be. We should just all be together. I feel like that's a song, but I'm not going to totally be sold on that. I didn't just do the miss congeniality thing.

Here on Lehigh's campus, It's not that it isn't present, but I feel like we need more openness. I feel to an extent that is present on campus. We have the Rainbow Room and we have the office of Multicultural Affairs and we have diversity recruitment in the admissions office and the Women's center. We have all these resources and many more that I'm probably not saying at the moment. But we need to get more people to be open to listening to these new ideas. We shouldn't need an event that happened at the U-House for everyone to buckle down and listen, it should just be, listen to a discussion or go to a meeting, or even just know that that idea is out there. People saying "You know what? I may not relate to that person, but they're doing a good job for what they're doing. I support them fighting the fight for what they believe in." I would personally enjoy more of that on campus.

More openness to what other people are doing, whether they be in Greek life or LGBTQ, or in multicultural affairs, a tour guide, or a regular god damn independent. Whatever you do. Just more of that openness.

I think on some level we all in some way or another relate to someone else's experience. Whether it be directly, like we've had the exact same experience, I know exactly what you're going through. Or just, I understand that situation, that's similar to something I've had. Also, I think we move toward it for inspiration factors. Sometimes we feel we're not going to be able to overcome some obstacles, or certain times we question who we are and what we really want in life. By looking up to other people's stories from those who are brave enough to share them and talk about their struggles, it opens that connection for people to say what one person can do, another person can do. You can do that, I can definitely do that. It opens up that discussion of everything is possible.

Lessons Learned

Though these interviews only make up a small fraction of the diversity of experiences even just here at Lehigh, they each paint a picture of one different life. Beyond being part of the same Lehigh community at this or a recent moment, they all have their own background, race, sexual orientation, gender identity, class, and affinity to certain deserts. They also all share common bonds beyond similar location. Many of these bonds I have found to be prevalent throughout the queer community.

The most obvious bond is the shared experience of coming out. Even allies often relate to the queer community through a hidden identity they have “come out” as, and the queer community has opened up to many groups due to this connection. The experience of being a birth parent, changing majors, or newer additions to the queer community, practicing polyamory (love of more than one person) or kink (sexual “play” beyond sexual norms), all put a person in a position of being partially invisible to others. Unless you come out as having had this experience, or identifying in this way, no one would ever assume it of you. The process of coming out about something can be a harrowing experience, proceeded by self-doubt and denial, but hopefully followed by acceptance and the freedom to be yourself. Nearly everyone shares this experience, yet the term coming out has been pinned solely to the GLBT community. Most people can relate to these stories if they see them as parallel to their own moments of coming out.

A very common theme in these stories and in many other queer groups is the vast desire to learn and evolve into something better and more inclusive. There is a play-like attitude towards identity labels and new language around gender and sexual identities. New information, ideas, and theories are always welcome. Analysis of these new thoughts happens in the form of open conversations purposefully free of judgment and solid prior notions. Because of this, the queer community often seems threatening to newcomers and “outsiders”. It takes a certain type of person to be able to take in new people and ideas so easily without judging them either good or bad, and not everyone in the community is perfect at it. But it’s a skill that can be learned, and the queer community fosters and encourages it.

I personally call this skill empathy; the ability to connect to another’s life experiences and bond with them through shared feelings. Without this, digging deep into the human experience would be nearly impossible; you could not see past your own mind. This is related to several of the goals of my project. Stories of the lives of minority individuals not only grow one’s ability to feel empathy, they provide further understanding of the vast diversity of experiences people can have. The more

stories you hear and connect with, the closer you come to understanding what it means to be human in our built society. This promise of knowledge appeals to my scientific nature, but it also proves very useful in any situation involving personal interactions with others. The more you can accept another person for whoever they are and understand them, the more productive your interaction. Empathy is a skill that is or should be required in nearly every field.

Although this has improved dramatically in recent years, many queer individuals suffer the effects of a lack of queer representation in the media and in their daily lives. Coming from a family or town that does not allow queer people to be publicly out creates a lot of strife in the mind of a queer child or teen. It is difficult to find answers to what you're feeling and experiencing if you cannot find another person around you or on TV who you know experiences the same feelings. You begin to feel as if you are the only one like this, a very intimidating and dangerous thought to have. Many queer people grow up without even the basic vocabulary to express who they are. Those who do figure it out often feel the need to lie to their parents and friends and others about who they are to protect themselves from harm and stigma. The more stories are put out there of real people going through the struggles and joys of coming out as queer, the less future generations will have to with the confusion, depression, and even suicidal thoughts and actions that come from not knowing or not accepting who you are.

All of the interviewees were asked their opinion on the power of a story. Many mentioned the connection aspect that I have repeated several times. Stories, especially those coming from the first person, have the ability to force the reader to feel what the teller felt or still feels. Statistics and news stories talk about the life of queer people, but until you hear the same stories from the mouth of the person who experienced it, it will not have nearly the same impact.

Several went deeper to the reason this connection is important. Without a connection, no growth or knowledge gain is possible. When you can bond and feel along with the story, you immediately gain a shard of experience to add to what you know about the world. The more experiences you have, the wiser and more mature you become. Storytelling is one of the few ways to expand your view of the world from your arm chair. Travelling to the far reaches of the world is another, but you sometimes can learn so much more simply looking at the same view from another's eyes.

Many interviewees also mentioned the inspiration a story can provide to someone with a similar life experience. Hearing about someone going through something close to what you're going through is a very uplifting experience, and can be a powerful tool for overcoming obstacles. The

story may contain advice or a new way of looking at a problem, or simply the comfort of knowing you aren't alone in the world.

Final Thoughts

This project is far from over. The interviews I have done showcase specific examples of life as a queer student, staff member, or alumni of Lehigh University, and they already form a diverse sample. They do not at all represent all the queer diversity that exists here, but that would take interviewing every single queer person. What they do is provide a basis for understanding that this type of diversity does exist on campus. It points to the invisible experiences of many others who are not included.

Just here at Lehigh, this could positively impact many different varieties of people. Those who are queer and new to the community instantly have a handle to grab onto so they know they are not alone. Those who are already here gain a perspective on how others have handled their time here. People who are not queer now have a resource to help them understand what it is like to be queer from those who share many of the same experiences and are thus much easier to relate to. For these reasons, and many others, I will be putting together the collection as it is now to be kept in the Rainbow Room on campus, where I and many of the interviewees found ourselves at home during our time here at Lehigh.

The collection has a significant importance on a college campus, beyond what it might in other communities. College is known as the time to explore yourself, figure out what you want to do, who you want to be, and who you are. Without figuring these things out, no one can reach their full potential. Someone who would otherwise be able to change the world with a cure for cancer or a new method of bringing safe water to impoverished communities may be hindered only by the inability to figure out or live comfortably as who they really are. Without the proper resources, students and their faculty and staff mentors are held back in a way others may not be able to see or understand. Awareness is the first step towards allowing all students to excel in all that they do and as all that they are.

I hope to expand the project further, beyond Lehigh's walls. I will be continuing to expand the collection, branching out to members of the community at the University of Wisconsin, where I will be for graduate school, and further out to other people I meet wherever I go. The wider the variety of stories I collect, the more likely they are to spark an insightful connection in a reader. That is my highest goal with this endeavor; to somehow spark change for the better in someone's life, as the stories of others have done for me.

Further Reading

Queer voices website: <http://zllurg.wix.com/queervoices>

Clarke, Victoria, Sonja J. Ellis, Elizabeth Peel, and Damien W. Riggs. *Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Queer Psychology: An Introduction*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2010.

D'Angelo, Anthony J. *Inspiration for LGBT Students & Their Allies: Encouragement, Humor & Motivation for LGBT Students & Their Allies by LGBT Students & Their Allies*. Easton, PA: Collegiate EmPowerment, 2002.

Howard, Kim, and Annie Stevens. *Out & about Campus: Personal Accounts by Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual & Transgendered College Students*. Los Angeles: Alyson, 2000.

Hubschman, Lynn. *Transsexuals: Life from Both Sides*. United States: Diane Pub., 1999.

Kessler, Suzanne J. *Lessons from the Intersexed*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP, 1998.

Schimel, Lawrence, and Richard Labonté. *Second Person Queer: Who You Are (so Far)*. Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp, 2009.

Appendix A: Consent Form

Legal Release

Queer Voices (“QV”) is a project directed by L. (“Zz”) Riford whose mission is to document the diversity of queer experience at Lehigh University and elsewhere. The purpose of this agreement is to allow me to utilize your audio recording and written transcription (collectively called “the Interview”) with altered names and details for academic, educational, and promotional uses. Please read the agreement carefully before you sign it and feel free to ask any questions you may have

By signing this form, I, _____, give L. Riford and QV copyright to the interview and permission to:

- Utilize the Interview in this project, both for this thesis at Lehigh University and ongoing interests.
- Archive and preserve the Interview on QV’s website and/or an appropriate public archive so that members of the public can learn from my stories and life experiences for personal purposes.
- Use the Interview in connection with making and distributing productions and formats possibly including but not limited to films, broadcast, community education programs, books, exhibits, promotional materials, and other technological forms yet to be created.
- Use, reproduce, exhibit, distribute, broadcast, and digitize my transcripts and any other contribution by me in the Interview, in whole or in part.

In signing this form, I understand that:

- I waive all claims for any compensation for such use.
- By granting L. Riford and QV a nonexclusive license, I do not give up any copyrights that I may hold in the interview nor obligate L. Riford and QV to use the rights granted.

I have read the above consent, grant, and release prior to its execution and am fully familiar with and understand the above terms.

Signature of interviewee

Date

Name of interviewee