

Interviewee: Veronica Waters (V)  
Interviewers: Tripthi Pillai (TP)  
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TP: Thinking about your own life, what would you say are some of your major milestones, challenges that you've overcome, challenges that you're still trying to overcome, but also accomplishments that you've had, Veronica? Like what would you say are the big things?

V: (00:46) Well, that's an interesting thing. Right now, I'm the facilitator of the local support group here, a transgender support group called "T time." We've had that since 2005. And then I've been on the board of South Carolina Equality, which is the statewide LGBTQ civil rights organization in the state, for the last eight years. [I've also been] on the Myrtle Beach Human Rights Commission for the last five years and we've managed to change the human rights resolution that the city had in effect and it now includes protections for people of all sexual orientations and gender identities, and I helped get them to change that, to update it.

TP: Yeah, that's a huge accomplishment. How did you come to be involved in these organizations? Did you find them? Did you found them?

V: (02:04) Well, the support group when I first decided to transition and come out in 2004 I met another trans woman here and we were going down to Charleston for a support group. The CATS support group down in Charleston. We went down there several months, about six months. And on the way back we talked one time well, we should have a meeting here. And so we contacted some people and we started forming it and that's how that went. My involvement with South Carolina Equality, a group here in Myrtle Beach tried to have a LGBT community center here and they had started that about the same time, about 2005. As being part of the transgender group, the head invited us to be represented on the board. And so I got involved with them and later on became the president of it. It was called the Center Project and it went for about five years, so about 2010, and then our funding just basically had dried up at that point because of the recession. So, we had to close that. But, I was approached by the staff of Carolina Equality at that time and asked to be on their board.

TP: Wow. What would you say were some of the challenges that you've encountered in organizing in a place like Myrtle Beach? Or has it always been supportive, or have there been difficulties?

V: (04:26) I found that a lot of the difficulties are can be kind of built up in your mind a little bit. Yes it's a conservative area and that, and so you couldn't be naturally kind of self-censoring in that respect. I found that you just have to try to

do it and you don't know until you knock whether the door will open or not. And so I have that kind of philosophy that you have to try and not just assume somebody's going to just say no to you, you know? Before you ask. That's been successful because I think that there's been kind of a sea change in the last 15 or 20 years towards LGBT people. Now we're getting kind of a push back on that in some areas. But, I think that's kind of the natural ebb and flow of things. I think the overall momentum is in our favor.

TP: Yeah. So, when you say this, I think to myself, Veronica is a hopeful person, an optimist. Have you always been that way or did you decide that because what you're doing is important to you, you must be hopeful?

V: (06:03) Well [inaudible] good and bad days, you know? Sometimes you get setbacks and things happen that you don't particularly agree with it. It's just a matter of being optimistic and moving forward.

TP: Could you talk about your background a little bit if you don't mind? Your childhood, what were some of your great influences? What are some of the memories that you have growing up that have perhaps influenced who you are today?

V: (06:58) Let me think. Well, I remember the first time I realized that there was a kind of a difference between boys and girls, I guess. Because we had a rather large backyard where I grew up in Charlotte. And I remember we had this play house, I guess it had been built for my sister, who was older. But, myself and some of the girls in the neighborhood, we had spent the day fixing it up, right? And these other boys in the neighborhood saw what was going on or something and they thought it would be a good idea to come and tear it up. It's the first time I realized; I guess how I'd put it now, kind of [the] positive energy and negative energy about the two groups that I was getting. You know, one was creative and cooperative and wanting to make the world prettier and better. And the other one was hateful and kind of wanting to destroy stuff. And that was kind of the first realization I had, I guess, of the difference, or what I sensed to be the difference. Now I can also remember when I must have been about eight years old and I remember for some reason I was watching TV. I've forgotten the circumstances of it, but there was one of those what we call a "talk show" today. And the guest was Christine Jorgensen and they were interviewing her. I just realized that that is what I thought, you know? Because my family was going [inaudible], you know, "what a freak" and everything else. I thought, "no, that's what I am." Well, I made the mistake of saying that to my sister who's like eight years older than I am and she was very upset of that. She like physically attacked me and said, "no, you're not this." And from that day forward, I learned that that was not the thing to say and to reveal to somebody. So I lived really the next probably 30 years of my life trying to live my life like in two realms. One that was the real me that I had to keep hidden, and one was a facade that I had to act like people expected me to act. And that led to a lot of kind of inner conflict in me as you could imagine and

some self-destructive behavior because I've come to realize that I'm an alcoholic. And just the cycle of hiding myself and then at certain times allowing me to express that, but in kind of hidden ways. I'd go out to other cities and that for like a weekend or something and then dress and be myself. But then the shame of that, having to switch back and forth. That was just emotionally taxing and all of it was fueled by alcohol. It got to a point where it nearly killed me. Fortunately, I went into treatment and I've been in AA for 16 years now. They've been very supportive of me. They have a tradition of acceptance of LGBTQ people. And so that saved my life. And as part of the 12 step process, you have to examine your life and be honest with yourself. As part of that, I had to realize the elephant in my room that was kind of the root cause of all of this behavior. I knew that if I didn't deal with it, that I'd go back eventually to drinking and that downward spiral. So as part of the 12 step process, you talk over your past with another person. That's when I revealed myself to be transgender. I came out to him. Although, I was a little bit surprised though, because in the back of my mind, I thought well okay, I'm going to be the first transgender person in Myrtle Beach, you know? In the program, in AA. Imagine my surprise when he said, "oh, well, you're just like such and such who was here five years ago." Because when I was growing up I thought that I was the only trans person anywhere close to me. I mean, I would hear about people in New York or Paris or something, but that was kind of a universe away from growing up.

TP: You know, that it's something which we're thinking of and many of the people I've spoken with have brought up, how growing up in the South gave them a very unique sense of who they are. Sometimes thinking perhaps that they're the only one in this universe, in the South, in Myrtle Beach, in another area. What do you think the South has meant for you growing up, but also in the present, what has the South meant symbolically? What has it meant in terms of your identity?

V: (14:26) Oh, well, growing up I guess I got indoctrinated the typical kind of Southern things. I've always considered myself a little bit different because I don't really have any kind of family here and people that are Southern, they have large families and that. My father was from Pennsylvania and all of my family on that side was a good bit older. Then my mother is from New Zealand and so I have a large family, but it's all down there. So, I didn't grow up with a large, or really any kind of Southern family. I'm Southern, but I'm not kind of a stereotypical [Southerner], that you think about.

TP: Would you think that being a transgender person in the South is or can be a different challenge because of the South's own cultural uniqueness?

V: (16:08) I think so, or it seems that way. But then, I know there are many other places that are supposedly liberal open places and yet you hear about transgender people being killed there and discriminated against. I think the religious fervor here is stronger than some other places and I think that seems to be being used as an excuse to be bigoted. [Not just] about transgender people, but immigrants and

a whole range of people, which is to me and from what I know is counter to what Jesus talked about. I mean most people don't know that Jesus never really talked about gay and lesbian people. He does mention the gender variant people in the bible. I think it's Matthew 19:11 and 12. He talks about eunuchs. First of all, he says there are eunuchs in the world. Some of them were born that way, which I take it to be what we call it intersex people today. And then some that were made by men and some are for religious reasons. And then he says those that can accept it, should. So to me he's saying, accept the fact that there are people in the world that are different. I think that's neglected in a lot of biblical teaching about the issue.

TP: Yeah. Do you find support in your understanding of Christianity? Would you call yourself supported? Would you, would you say you are supported and loved as you understand Christianity? What brings this up is you were talking about how so many of people's perceptions of Christianity are different or of religion are different, and how the Bible talks about it or how Christ talks about it, Jesus talks about it, is different. Has religion been a support to you in understanding yourself and accepting yourself and in claiming yourself? Or do you feel differently about it?

V: (19:41) The process of becoming sober, part of it too is acknowledging that you're a spiritual being and that you need to develop your own concept of God or a higher power or whatever. Being spiritual is something that I need to accept and nourish in me. I've found denominations that are supportive and welcoming to me. I'm a member of the Unitarian Universalist church here, but there was also another congregation, Unity Church here in town, which is very good they're down in Surfside. I've been to a Meher Baba center on occasion, and they're very accepting of that. There's the MCC church, there's not one here, there's one in Wilmington and down in Charleston, and they're very welcoming.

TP: That's very good to know, because one of the things that has struck me is that when a lot of individuals talk about their identity and living in the South, religion plays a very important part. Either in terms of a sense of shame in who they are growing up or in terms of a support that they really have harnessed, that they found strength through finding community and in religion. So to hear you talk about varying denominations that have been open and welcoming is really wonderful.

V: (21:42 ) I know some denominations are trying to progress to acceptance but they're running into a lot of opposition and it's caused schisms in their churches like the Episcopal church and I was reading about the Methodists. Some Methodists don't agree with welcoming LGBT people. Then there's other people thinking, well, we'll accept you, but we're going to have to fix you. That's where the conversion therapy comes in. I've thought that my family might do that at one

point, because they were questioning me whether I was gay or not. I was about 12, 13, 14 years old or something like that. We were having a conversation, but I knew enough at the time that I was transgender so I knew I wasn't gay [laughing]. So, I could honestly say "no, I'm not gay." But to them, gay was kind of a wide label of everything. I probably would have gotten sent to some psychologist or something to try to fix me if I expressed that. It just made me more secretive, and I felt I had to be.

TP: Yeah, so to return to the family for a second, and again, if you don't want to talk about, we can not talk about it, what are their perceptions of you now? Of who you are? Or do you know?

V: (23:32) Well, I don't really know. My father died when I was eleven. He had numerous health problems, heart attacks and a stroke when I was growing up. He finally succumbed when I was eleven. My mother passed away in '93. Like I said, my sister's a bit older. There was a good bit of animosity between my sister and myself over my mother's estate. She, at one point, went around and was trying to do a land swap with some land that she had that was in my mother's estate and she was presenting herself as my mother. So, I had to get an administrator to handle the estate. Fortunately, I'd been sober for about two years when all this was going on. She actually didn't know because I never had a conversation with her about being sober, but I was just acting rationally and involved where I hadn't before because I'd been drinking. So, now she was trying to push buttons on me that didn't work anymore, and she didn't like that. She had wrote me a letter and it basically said that because of all this, that she didn't feel like she had a sibling anymore. That I was not her brother because she didn't know about what was going on with me and not to contact her anymore. First, I was taken aback by that, but it came at a time when I was debating whether to proceed with transitioning or whether to kind of be like I had been going. But I knew I couldn't really do that, and the one fear I had was her reaction to it. So, in a way, her letter freed me to be who I was, because I didn't have to consider her opinion anymore. I've granted her her wish and I've never contacted her. That was 14 years ago.

TP: I think how you, how you understand it, it's really not just right, but important and that it is a liberation. From the very beginning you talked about how some of the difficulties and challenges are self sensory, so that this liberation, how you understand it, it's really I think beautiful and true.

V: (27:38 ) Yes. I remember when I was in treatment one of the counselors there gave us an analogy that I've kept. A lot of times we can think we're locked in the dungeon in the cells of a place and that the door's locked and there's guards out there. But, in reality, we've never tried the door to see if it's locked and gone out to see if there's any guards. And most of the time there's not. It's all in our head. We restrict ourselves just by, kind of fear. A lot of it is fear of change because sometimes we can put up with stuff, we get used to the way it is, but if something changes, there's fear in that. You know, that's what I think too is politically what's

happening too, that people are scared of change and that's why there's this kind of backlash against things, that they're looking for some reason why it's happening, and they're being told that it is because of these people, which is another old political tactic.

TP: Does it work with you when someone says, "well, I'm afraid of you, I don't understand who you are and therefore I cannot accept you into my life." How do you respond to that?

V: (29:35) That's rare for somebody to say, to be that forthright about it. I found that most times discrimination is kind of done behind your back or expressed for other reasons. You have to kind of read the subtext of sometimes what people say, what their motivations may be. Because I've worked for various people, I have different clients and that, and there's been a couple of occasions where me being who I am has become a problem for them. They've ceased to have a business relationship with me because of some other stated reason. Like, "we don't need you to do that anymore" usually. There was one case recently where a gentleman that I was working for, because I'll have to do like maintenance work, so I have different clients. And there was one gentleman that I had started to work for about four or five months and everything was fine. He liked what I was doing and everything. And then he got remarried to a Jehovah's Witness and shortly thereafter I went over there and helped him and gave me a Jehovah's Witness pamphlet and said, "I'd like you to read this if you have any questions." And I was kind of familiar with Jehovah's Witnesses because I remember when I was a kid they used to give out "Watch Towers" on the street. Then when I called him when it was time to come over, he said, "Oh, I don't need you right now. I'll call you when I need you to again." And that's been like eight months ago. I just assume it was because of his newfound religion, I guess. That they disapproved of my, they would probably say "lifestyle," but that doesn't [laughing].

TP: Would you want to say something to somebody like him if they think it is a "lifestyle" that you have chosen? How do you respond to that?

V: (32:43) Well, first of all, I don't really like the term "lifestyle" because I think it's become kind of a pejorative meaning. I mean some, rightwing people use it to indicate that, "Oh, this is something you're just doing, you decided one day to be this way, just come out of the blue with that." So, it kind of invalidates the truth of the matter. In a way, yes, I wish, we could have talked about it perhaps. I don't know if it would have changed anything or not. It's just one of those things. There's enough people that don't do that, it doesn't matter.

TP: Yeah. Could you talk about people who have supported you, who, say, continue to work with you? Who have embraced your identity and have welcomed you into the world? Tell me a little bit about how your support group, your friends, your work space has been a positive experience for you.

V: (34:09) Okay. Well, just helping other people with a support group and that. I think that's just been beneficial for me. I mean, one of the reasons I've kept it going for so long because it does help people come to terms with who they are and that, so that's a good positive outcome. And then, like the Human Rights Commission and South Carolina Equality, there's a broad community out there that needs the protection. So, if I can do any little small thing for that I'm welcome to do that. The AA community and the recovery community really, and at my church and that they're very supportive of me and so I'm grateful for that.

TP: The reason I ask is one of the persons I spoke with a few weeks back, I had mentioned how, she's also from the South, when she first moved to Myrtle Beach, she felt completely alone, and she felt afraid because she was alone. She, her family wasn't very supportive of her. As you were saying, the idea that who she is was a "lifestyle" was very painful for her. So, she moved away from there. But what she is working through now is finding community. She's kind of immersed herself in her work and one of the things that I would hope our project can do is share the truth that there is a community in this area that is LGBTQ friendly, but it is also LGBTQ, right? That there is a community that is non-cis that is here. So, to hearing you talk about your community I think is very helpful in that sense. But have you ever felt alone or lonely? Did you, when you first moved here, and first first broke away from your past?

V: (37:17) Well, a little bit. Although, I mean, when I first moved here, I was married and I was very I guess closeted in a sense. So, I wouldn't have gone out and reached out to people. Because I mean, when I was growing up, really the only place where you could find other gay people were either like at a gay bar or a bookstore or something like that. Those were kind of the two places, the two options. I remember there used to be a very good magazine that came out by the International Gender Foundation that talked about trans issues and that. I found it in a book shop, and the refreshing thing about that is it was not porn, you know, it was talking about serious issues and that, and that was enlightening. That was back in the 80's before the internet. That was here in Myrtle Beach. Well no, that magazine, it was published out of Boston. But I could find it here. That was kind of the first awakening I had of a wider community. [I've been to] conventions too. In the 90s, people started having conventions. That was helpful, just knowing that that was going on. I didn't attend one until after I decided to transition. I went to several of those early in my transition. But really probably the internet is the biggest change as far as connecting people. There's numerous transgender sites around and we operate several Facebook sites and pages, Twitter.

TP: At the end of the interview would you give me some of that information if you don't mind so we can share it?

V: (40:26) Sure, absolutely. Yeah.

TP: Oh, that's wonderful. Thank you. So, I will start wrapping up because I know it's getting dark outside (laughing)--

V: (40:38) Oh, okay (laughing).

TP: --and you have to head back. What do you think the community can do to further people's understanding about different identities? And not just the LGBT community, but what can people do in the community to further each other's understanding of differences?

V: (40:59) Oh, well, I think visibility is important. Because a lot of people don't know any transgender people, so when they're talked about, they don't connect it with an actual person. I think we can take a page out of the gay handbook about becoming more visible because that was the key to the greater acceptance that people have of gay people now. That, "oh yes, I know somebody that's gay." Or you know, a family member or business associate or somebody is gay. But that only happened because they were willing to become visible because there's a term in the trans community about stealth. And that's where, and I think this is true particularly with early transgender people, that you're kind of expected that once she had completed your transition that you kind of cut all ties with your past life and become a new person where nobody would know, that was kind of the goal. Maybe it was possible at one time, but I know that that has risks to it just psychologically. I met a trans woman who went to the Charleston group for awhile and she had been stealth for so long. She had transitioned early in life, when she was like 18 or something. She had gone by that model but she lived in fear. And the fear was that she'd be found out and be exposed. And due to that fear, whenever she thought that she was about to be exposed, then she would move away and start some place else until she got that feeling again. And she'd do that, and it was a cycle, and you know, she didn't have any kind of relationships with people and she basically lived in fear of somebody finding out, which is a horrible price to buy for being that way. I think just emotionally it's better to be honest. I mean certainly, depending on the circumstance, but as a general rule, I prefer to be open and honest and that way there's no secret that can hurt me, really.

TP: And you think this is what visibility's about? It brings awareness to the community, but it also enables honesty in everyone?

V: (44:48) Yes, yes. Hopefully being transgender at some point would just be a normal thing that some people go through, you know, other than some like spectacular secret kind of thing, you know? I think we're slowly getting maybe to that point.

TP: Yeah, I think so and I really do hope so. I think, yes, you're right, in that we are now, without wanting to sound too ahead of the reality, I think we are now beginning to understand that people are different and that's okay.



V: (45:41) Yeah.

TP: What you had mentioned earlier about being afraid. I think that that's the challenge I keep encountering, you know, how do we get past people's fears? I don't know.

V: (45:57) Yeah, it's easier said than done a lot of times. When it's your life it can be hard to overcome that, you know?

TP: Yeah. If you could offer insights or advice to younger people who are going up, thinking about their own identity, struggling to confront who they are wanting to hide, wanting to be stealth, what would you say to them?

V: (46:38) Well, first, to be honest with yourself. And I know that's easier said than done too. But there are people out there and you're not alone, you know? One thing that somebody told me one time that kind of stuck with me: if there's a name for what you are, then you're not the first person to go through it. So, if you are transgender or intersex or whatever, it's okay. You're not the first one to be this way.

TP: Yeah. What would you hope this project can accomplish? What would you envision a project such as this can do for the community?

V: (47:50) Hopefully [it] will enlighten some people and show them that here there are transgender people out there. There's probably more than you or I know, because people ask me a question, "oh, how many transgender people are there?"

TP: In Myrtle Beach, or?

V: (48:15) Well, in Myrtle Beach, in Horry County, in South Carolina, wherever. In the world, in the United States. And it's really impossible to know because it is such a spectrum of people, you know? Not everybody's comfortable coming out and acknowledging that. So, it's really kind of impossible with any accuracy to say how many there are.

TP: Right.

V: (48:56) But, given that, like I said before, it's important that people get to know transgender people and it's just not some fad or whatever because there's always been transgender people. The difference is how society treats us. And hopefully that's changing.

TP: I hope our project can contribute to that.

V: (49:29) I hope so too.

TP: Finally, the organizations that you lead, that you are a community leader in, could you tell me a little bit about them and how they are contributing to that conversation in changing people's understanding and educating them, bringing awareness to them?

V: (49:55) Okay, well. Our support group, we meet once a month and, it's just a way for people to come together and talk about whatever issues they have or concerns or joys or whatever else they want to express and to become friends and know other people that are going through similar things. So that's been very helpful. We also take road trips, go to the other support groups nearby. There's one in Wilmington, there's one in Charleston, there's two in Columbia.

TP: That's wonderful.

V: (50:39) It's good to connect with them. Well, in South Carolina Equality, we do a bunch of work at the State House and at different things once the legislature's in session. We have a lobbyist so we can be in the State House and hopefully we've been successful in turning away any anti-LGBT legislation, like a bathroom bill, and that kind of thing. So, we're kind of doing that.

TP: That's really a great accomplishment.

V: (51:33) Yes, yes. Because in other states, of course, North Carolina, we have that example. So, we did a lot of good work with that. And then the Human Rights Commission, like I said, we managed to change the city resolution that they had had since like 1991. So, we updated that and we're hoping to change it into an ordinance so it can have more teeth to it, more enforcement. Because right now it's more of a question of persuading somebody to go along with it.

TP: What is it right now, and what are you trying to--

V: (52:26) Right now exist as a resolution, which basically says the city would like you to respect all these people based on age, sex, nationality, sexual orientation and gender identity. But we're moving to try to make it an ordinance. So, it will be a more binding thing to businesses primarily. Yeah.

TP: That's wonderful. I wish you great luck with that. Yeah. Do you have any suggestions or questions you think I should have asked that I haven't asked you? Any suggestions or advice for me? Any thoughts?

V: (53:15) Well, no, I'm, I'm just glad that you asked me to be participate in this and that I was able to. It's good that you're bringing these speakers over I'm looking forward to meeting them and hearing them.

TP: Yeah, I am too. I'm really hoping that the project will give us the opportunity to share your insights, among other peoples' with, with the larger community so that the conversation about this is an honest and open one. That is my hope that.

V: (53:53) Oh, I hope so. Yeah. And it's good to hear from other people in other areas because it gives you ideas about what you can do here. Because I can remember I was invited by somebody I knew from one of these conventions to a Transgender Day of Remembrance in New York in 2006 and I didn't kind of know what to expect and I got there and it was very moving and everything. And so we started having one here in Myrtle Beach the next year in '07, and at that time we were the only one in the whole state of South Carolina. And now they're ones, besides here, there's one in Charleston, one in Colombia, one in Greenville, one in Beaufort.

TP: Wow. It's burgeoning.

V: (54:51) Yes, expanding.

TP: That's really wonderful.

V: (54:59) Yes.

TP: If I were to contact you for, say, help connecting me with other networks or other individuals who might be able to contribute to the project, who might be interested in participating, would you consider that?

V: (55:18) Oh, sure.

TP: Yeah. If you can think of anything else that you would like to add to the conversation that you would like to add by way of your insights, just please let me know.

V: (55:35) Okay. Well, I hope we can do something around the Transgender Day of Visibility.

TP: Yes.

V: (55:42) Which is at the end of March.

TP: Yes, I would, I would very much think we should.

V: (55:46) Okay.

TP: Yeah, that would be really wonderful.

V: (55:49) Yeah, that would. We've done it in past years, but not recently. Yeah. I don't know, three or four years.

TP: I think that would be a very important thing to do.

V: (55:58 ) Okay.

TP: Yeah. Yes, well I'm sure I'm going to contact you before then (laughing).

V: (56:03) Okay.

TP: Thank you very much.