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Title: LGBT Oral History: Michelle Probulus

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Interviewee: Michelle Probulus

Interviewer: Mary Merriman

Date of Interview: Sep. 4, 2013

Location of Interview: Michelle Probulus's home in Lancaster, PA

Transcriber: Katie McCauley

Abstract:

Michelle Probulus, 43, describes her experience with realizing that she is a lesbian at age 40, while married to a man with whom she had two young sons. She discusses the complications of figuring out her sexuality and coming to the realization she was a lesbian and the subsequent difficulty of coming out to her husband, her children, her family, and her friends. After getting a divorce, she began getting involved in Lancaster's LGBT community, and she describes her experiences in meeting people and working for greater LGBT acceptance, including starting her own oral history project to collect some of the experiences of women who realized they were lesbians later in life. She discusses how coming out has affected the way she raises her sons as well as her career choices, specifically her new sense of purpose as a guidance counselor in being an advocate and a support system for young people coming out.

MM: Okay, we're going, and this is Mary Merriman, and I am interviewing Michelle for the oral history project, and I'm going to invite Michelle to just give your name, birthdate, place, that kind of thing. Just go from there. Hi, Michelle!

MP: Hi Mary. I'm Michelle Probulus. My b—I was born 1970, July 13th, and I was born in Baltimore, Maryland, and...you want me to tell you about my family?

MM: Sure. Yeah.

MP: [chuckles] So I have two younger sisters, I'm the oldest of three, and I guess when I was seven, we moved out of Baltimore into Westminster, Maryland, and that's where I grew up the rest of my years, until I went to college. I went back to Baltimore for college.

MM: Okay. What college did you go to in Baltimore?

MP: I went to College of Notre Dame of Maryland.

MM: Okay.

MP: An all-women's Catholic college. And I didn't figure it out then. [shakes head and laughs]

MM: [chuckles] Okay. Can you tell me a little bit about your parents? What were their names and where did they grow up, what kind of work did they do?

MP: [talking at the same time] All right, so my dad—my dad was Donald Bancard(ph), and my mom was Mary Jo Bancard(ph). My dad grew up in Westminster, Maryland, where we later moved when I was about seven. My mom—she grew up—she was born in New York City, and her dad was a retail manager for retail stores, and so they moved up and down the Eastern

seaboard, so she was one of eight—second of eight children, and so I think each of her siblings was born, almost, in a different state, each of them, and my dad was one of six. So he—he lived in Westminster his whole life, but my mom moved around a lot.

MM: Okay, all right. And your siblings—where are they living at now?

MP: They're both in Maryland.

MM: Okay, so they're all kind of close by, a little bit.

MP: My parents now live in North Carolina.

MM: Oh, okay.

MP: They moved there...maybe 2000.

MM: Okay. What kind of—what was growing up like? In your household. Your parents, like—was your family, like, really structured, or...?

MP: Both my parents worked full-time. My mom is a nurse, and my dad—he worked a lot of different jobs. He was a retail manager for a tractor supply company, and he also had been a firefighter before that, and then he did—he does—he's kind of like a jack-of-all-trades, where he can—he built the home that we grew up in, and then he can do a lot with building, so he's worked in, you know, in phone companies, putting in lines under—you know, power lines underground, and—and when they moved to North Carolina, they're still both working there. He started a business doing services where he could build a deck for somebody—they live on a lake—so he would, you know, build jet-ski ramps and boat lifts and things like that.

MM: Okay. People do all kinds of stuff. Did they—were they—they went through high school, any college?

MP: My dad got an A.A. degree in firefighting, or—I'm not sure exactly what the name of that is—and—

MM: Fire science, or something?

MP: Yeah, and my mom—she went to nursing school. Back in the '60s—you didn't—I don't think you have to have—

MM: [talking at the same time] You didn't need to have a degree.

MP: [talking at the same time] She was an R—she got an R—she was a registered nurse, and later, it was actually when I was finishing high school and starting college that she had gone back to school to get her bachelor's in nursing, even though she had already been an R.N. for several years—

MM: [talking at the same time] Yeah.

MP: So she went back at that point to do that, so she has a bachelor's degree, and they're both—they're—my mom just turned 66, my dad is 65, and they're both still working. So...I grew up Catholic. My mom was—my mom's family was Catholic, my dad just agreed with my mom to raise us Catholic and we went to Cath—my sisters and I went to Catholic school up through eighth grade—it was a, like, first to eighth grade school—

MM: [talking at the same time] Yeah.

MP: And then we all went to the public high school, which was much larger, and then—then I returned to a Catholic college, but at that point I already knew I wasn't personally Catholic, but I just liked the small school feeling—

MM: [talking at the same time] Kind of a structure...

MP: [talking at the same time] 'Cause it felt like the small elementary/middle school that I had gone to, more community-oriented. And my sisters—my middle sister went to college—she went to community college and then she did a—she went to a one-year photography business school to become a photographer, and—and then my younger sister took several years to get her bachelor's degree, did that in elementary education, and then later went and got her master's for teaching English as a second language. And my—my middle sister has been married for 18 years, and she has a boy and a girl—my niece and nephew are 16 and almost 14.

MM: Okay.

MP: And then my youngest sister has a two-year-old boy, and she's been married for five years, and she's pregnant with her second, due in October.

MM: Okay. So no brothers?

MP: No brothers.

MM: No brothers. Okay. Do you have any children?

MP: Yes.

MM: Are you married? Have been married? Talk about that a little.

MP: Yes, I was married for 10 years—I guess technically, it was over 11, but when I was in my coming out process—it happened right around the time I had just celebrated a 10-year anniversary of marriage. And I have two children, two boys. My older son, Zachary(ph), is 10, and Henry(ph) is eight, and—and they're both—they just started third grade and fifth grade.

MM: Okay. And you're currently working? Your degree is in...?

MP: So, I—after I went to college, I got a degree in—in Baltimore, I got my bachelor’s degree in psychology, and soon after that I went back to school for my master’s, and I went to Arcadia University in Philadelph—outside of Philadelphia, and there I got my master’s in counseling—

MM: Okay—

MP: And so for a few years I worked in nonprofit agencies doing counseling, and then I decided to go into the Peace Corps, and so in '98—I was 28 years old—I went into the Peace Corps for two years in Grenada, and that is where I met my husband, and—my ex-husband—and so we came back in 2000, got married, and—and then more recently, when we were going through the separation and divorce and my coming out process, I decided to go back to school to get certified as a school counselor. So I went to Millersville and finished that program last December, and then since that time I’ve been looking for work. So far unsuccessfully. [both laugh]

MM: Okay. You weren’t in the military or anything like that?

MP: No.

MM: Okay.

MP: I was in the Peace Corps, Mary. [laughs]

MM: Okay. Oh well, some people do both.

MP: I guess.

MM: Yeah. Any other community organizations that you’ve been involved with, or anything?

MP: So for—in the last several years, I’ve been involved off-and-on with the Sierra Club, and—and when my ex-husband and I got married, we—I—I knew I wasn’t Catholic or didn’t feel any connection to being Ca—continually in the Catholic Church, so when he and I got married, we decided we wanted to find a church that we could take our children to, and that—something—we weren’t super religious or anything, but we wanted to have some kind of basis for spirituality—

MM: [speaking at the same time] Yeah. Some structure.

MP: [speaking at the same time] Or some place for our children to develop their spirit—spirituality. So we went to a bunch of different churches and finally found Unitarian Universalist Church, and—he was in medical school when we met in Grenada, in—while I was in the Peace Corps, he was there in medical school, so when we finished there and came back to the States, we had to move around a lot for finishing medical school, and then he did a residency. We moved to North Carolina for three years for him to do family practice residency. Then we moved to San Diego for a year to do his fellowship in hospice/evaluative care. And then we moved here, to Lancaster, so there was a lot of moving, and in all the moves, we had found the U.U. Church wherever we went, and either became members or attended services, and then when we moved to Lancaster—we’ve been here seven years—we put our boys into the—they had a

preschool at the church here, and have been attending services since then. So through that church, I was involved with—I was on the preschool—it's a cooperative preschool, so the parents are involved, and I was on the—a member of the board for a year, and then, with our church, they have children's, you know, programming for Sunday school-type things, and adult classes, too. So I co-facilitated some discussion groups for adults, and they mostly had—sort of environmental themes or simplicity themes, there's a north—Northwest Institute that does discussion courses, and you get a book, and—so a lot of those had to do with just different environmental themes, sustainability and simplicity, and then—and then our church started a green sanctuary group to make the church itself more sustainable and green and environmentally efficient, and so I've done things with the church with that organization too.

MM: Okay.

MP: And then I had—I also, when the boys started school, kindergarten, first, second grade, before I went back to Millersville to do my certification program, I was in their schools volunteering in the classrooms, and they did a literacy core in my older son's school, where it was going in and reading and working with students on their—improving their reading skills.

MM: Okay. Tell me a little bit—anything else in your background that you'd like to share? Anything else in particular that you think kind of helps to paint who you are?

MP: I've always—well, growing up and even more recently, I've always been involved in playing sports. I grew up playing soccer, softball, basketball, but soccer is the sport that kind of stuck with me into adulthood, and I played in high school and college soccer, and then as I became an adult, I found some women's leagues and played soccer depending on where I was living, and when we moved here, I hadn't played in a number of years with moving around and having young kids, and I started playing again when we moved here for a few years, off and on, and about three years ago I started running, so I've been pretty consistently running and now I have been involved in—trying to do, like, monthly 5k's...races.

MM: Very good. That's good. Now, the—the—I guess part of this—this history project is talking about coming out as lesbian or gay. How do you identify for yourself? How do you identify yourself? What terms, I guess.

MP: So, I identify as a lesbian.

MM: Okay.

MP: And—so it was almost three years ago that—I had turned 40 three years ago, I'm 43 now, and it was soon after I turned 40, my husband and I—my ex-husband and I celebrated our 10-year anniversary, and it was—it was around that time that my youngest son had gone to kindergarten, so I had been—and the other thing was I had been a stay-at-home mom for—they're 10 and eight now, so besides going back to school for my certification, I had primarily been a stay-at-home mom for them. My hus—ex-husband and I got divorced—the divorce was final about a year and a half ago, but I've been living in this house—renting this house for the last two years. So the whole process started about three years ago, but I think it—it started when

I—my youngest son went to kindergarten, and I had been with them every minute of their lives, pretty much, and so he went to kindergarten, and I thought, “Do I go back to work? Do I start branching out into like, really getting fully into doing volunteer work, and what do I really want to do with my life?” kind of—now that the kids are launched a little bit into school, I have more time to think. So I started running, and then I—with the running I’m thinking, and then... [laughs] Having time for myself, just things were coming up for me, and I—there was—there was a person that—a woman that I felt strongly attracted to, and—I guess—I guess it got to be such a strong feeling, where I was having, you know—I don’t want to say obsessing, but, you know, I was having trouble sleeping and eating, and I started journaling, and I had done, you know, writing and journaling throughout, you know, my life, but it was—I guess to the point where I was feeling so strong that I didn’t want to push it down anymore, and I wanted to bring it up and let it—let myself acknowledge it and feel what I was feeling and see what that led to and allow myself to really explore that and—so I guess—I don’t remember in high school, really, in high school, I don’t really re—I think, you know, I thought I was interested in boys, and—and dating boys. I didn’t really date though, much in high school. It was toward the end of high school, into college that I really started dating boys. Men. Whatever. And I think, you know, when I look back, I think maybe in college there were a few women that maybe I was attracted to or I was very close friends with, and I didn’t really think of it at the time. Since I went to a Catholic women’s college, there were a number of women there that were coming out or were identifying as lesbians, and I had a few close friends that were coming out or, you know, going through some exploration at that time. And I just remember being very happy for them and thinking that was really great, and I was very supportive, and this was late ‘80s, early ‘90s, so in—in the culture—in our culture, you know, at this time, it didn’t seem like there was a lot of safety or support in people doing that. And...it didn’t seem to apply to me, though. You know, it seemed like I was very excited and happy for them, because that seemed to be what was making them happy, and I knew that those people weren’t getting a lot of support, either from their family or other friends, and I wanted to be accepting and supportive of them. But it didn’t really dawn on me that that was—had anything to do with me, and if I had any kinds of attractions, it wasn’t—I guess it was so much under the surface that I wasn’t acknowledging or aware of it on that level. And probably right after college, I think the first job I had after college—I think I was aware of a woman that I worked with that I knew was a lesbian. Like, I just knew she was, and I never talked to her about it, but I think I feel this keen interest in her. You know, like, I don’t know if it was that I was attracted to her—I just was interested in this person, because I knew that she was a lesbian, and I—and so, from that point on, throughout my 20s, I think there were people that I had an interest in—women—but it wasn’t necessarily people that I was close friends with. It might be a colleague at work or an acquaintance. But at the same time, I’m—you know, I’m dating men, and I had never dated women or been, you know, been with a woman physically, or anything like that. So at that time—I guess sometime into my 20s, I—I felt inside that maybe I’m bisexual. So I don’t tell anybody, because I don’t think—you know, I’m just dating men, so I don’t think, “Who needs to know this?” because if I started dating women, and I’m dating men, then I should tell people, “Oh, this is who I am.” And—and I’m not, I’m just dating men, so I just keep that under wraps. And then I meet my now ex-husband, and, you know, we get engaged, and I say to him, “I feel this is something I should tell you,” and so I tell him that I feel that I identify as being bisexual, and he seemed—and I was nervous and scared about that, because I hadn’t really shared it with anybody else, but if I’m gonna marry this person, I feel like I should tell him. So he seemed okay with that, and he just

said as long as I would be faithful to him, you know, and monogamous in our relationship, and I was like, “Of course, I’m choosing to marry you and that is what I’m, you know, I’m choosing.” So—so he seemed to accept that, and—still, never felt like it was something I had to tell family or friends, because now I’m marrying a man. And—and I guess, throughout our marriage, I guess the sexual relationship wasn’t—it was okay, you know, it was fine, but it was—[hesitates] long periods of time between [chuckles]—so I didn’t—I thought—I think I thought of myself as more of a sexual being, and I guess I just—I think it took it—I projected—I projected what I was feeling onto him, I think, and I thought, “Maybe he’s not attracted to me, because he’s not initiating sex,” and so—but, you know, looking back, I thought, “Well, I am a sexual being, and I want to be sexual,” but maybe it was that I did not want to initiate. And I like to, you know, it feels good, and I enjoy it, but it was not something I want to initiate with him, or maybe a man. So that—trying to think of—now—getting stuck.

MM: So did that—so did that cause you to start thinking, “Well, maybe there is something else going on,” or...?

MP: Okay, so—I guess throughout the ten years of being married—you know, you get to know—you have friends, and you have acquaintances, and you work with different people, and—I don’t think I ever really had any other, like, physical attractions to other men during that time. I might, you know, like a man or one of my friends’ husbands or think that they’re a nice person, but I’m not, like—have any physical attraction or feel like I want to be with that person. But there were times during my marriage that if I was attracted to somebody or would think about that person again later, it was women. And—and so—I think—and another part of my marriage was—I didn’t—I didn’t feel an emotional intimacy at a level—like a deeper level—so I guess in some ways I felt like we were on this—maybe a superficial friendship level, where there was the physical intimacy and the emotional intimacy didn’t have the depth that I was expecting or wanting.

MM: Did you have the kids by then?

MP: [pauses] By—by which point?

MM: At—at that point in your relationship with your ex-husband. You were talking about seeing the relationship as more superficial, but I’m wondering if you had the kids and you were raising them, that that was part of the glue in the relationship by then, or...?

MP: They came—we—we got married in 2000, and then our first son was born in 2003.

MM: Okay.

MP: So we’d been married about two and a half years—

MM: Okay.

MP: —And then my other son was born two years after that. Part of during our marriage—he was—well, first, when we met—the first two years before we got married, he was in medical

school, so there was a lot of intense focus on studying, and—and working 80-plus hours a week, and then residency was very intense, probably 80 hours a week. I think during his residency they capped it, because there used to be no upper limit of how many hours you could work in a week, so they did it during his residency, where 80 hours was the maximum, which is two full time jobs that you're working in a week. And so I think a lot of the relat—a lot of our marriage and time we were together was a lot of intense focus on his career and school and training and his job, and so—I think the number of hours he put into that, there wasn't a lot of extra for the actual relationship-building. He was exhausted most of the time, and then when the—and then we moved a lot for his jobs, and, you know, at the time I wanted to support him and help him, but I felt—I felt alone a lot, I think. I just felt—and then when the—when our boys came, and then we moved soon after our second son came—he finished residency, we were—we were in North Carolina for three years during his residency, and during that three-year period of time, during his residency where he was working probably—you know—mostly 80 hours a week—those three years was when I got pregnant with both boys and had both boys. And so you're pregnant, and then you're having children, and he's not home most of the time. And when he was home, he had to sleep, or else bad things could happen to patients. So our younger son was about four months old when we moved to San Diego, and about a month—about a month after moving to San Diego, my older son, my two-year-old, was diagnosed with type 1 diabetes. We were in San Diego for a year, and the majority of that year was coping with realizing that he has this chronic disease, so I had a two-year-old and an infant, and my husband wasn't home very much. So—and we're in a city and a town that we're not familiar with, and no family, so. So it got better when we moved here, to Lancaster, but—we were closer to family, our family's all on the East Coast, and his hours got better, and his salary got better, so he had more time to be at home and to be with us, but still, I think—I don't—I always would say, “I don't like to—to argue, but I like to—you know, in a relationship—to say that I'm angry or say that I'm upset or not happy with something, and then to have, like, a back-and-forth and, you know, like, a communication.” I felt like there was a wall that—there was a shutting down on his end, where—and that was part of the—me feeling that the emotional intimacy was superficial. So. I think...you said something before, and I don't know if I—

MM: Well, I guess, again, was coming into identifying as a lesbian and wondering how that connected in the relationship changing, or becoming aware that it—it wasn't—it sounds like it wasn't meeting your needs, that—that it didn't have the emotional intensity or depth and that sort of thing that you were looking for. So how did that segue into—how did that come into self-identifying, or...?

MP: So, okay, so then, you know, I've been the stay-at-home mother for all these years with my boys, and we're supporting my ex's career, and—so, in that sense, I had the luxury to be at home and be a stay-at-home mom with my boys and raise them, and then with my older son having diabetes, it made it a little bit better that I was able to do most of that care, and with him being a physician, you know, we both could manage that together, but it wasn't—we just didn't have a lot of extra support outside of that with his care. So—but then when they both entered school and were in school full time and I'm like, “Well, here, I have these degrees, and I worked in the past, but now what do I do with that?” And just having all that time to think about what my next step is, and I guess for the first time in—probably at that point, seven or eight years, like—what do I want in my life, and where's my life going, and—and I think I just, with feeling this

attraction to this one woman coming up really strongly, and thinking, “You know, this has happened before in my past—maybe not this strongly, but I think I should let myself feel this.”

MM: Start paying attention to it, yeah.

MP: Pay attention to it, let myself acknowledge it, let it come up, let myself feel—don’t, like, say, “Oh, it’ll go away” and push it down, just ignore it, it’ll go away, because in the past, it hadn’t. It was, you know, I’ve heard about a lot of people who—they said they fell in love with a woman, and they had no idea that was going to happen to them—I mean, I had ideas of other people I had been attracted to, but I also, at the same time, felt that I was attracted to men. And I guess I got to the point where I—when I was digging deeply inside of myself, I thought—I guess I thought, you know, I never—I never—I never went beyond the superficial of, “Okay, a man—I can be attracted to a man and think a man is handsome or attractive or like certain qualities that that person has, and that’s attractive.” But I think I never went deeper into “Who do I want to be physically intimate with, and what—what is attractive to me about that? Who do I want to touch or to be with, physically, and who do I—who do I want to be emotionally intimate with?” And my whole life—all of my emotionally intimate relationships had been with women. I mean, I guess—I know a lot of lesbian women that have very close male friends, but I just never really had a lot of close male friends. I had men—you know, that I liked or, you know, could be friendly with, but I never was very close friends with a man, and I think, growing up, my mom had, you know, there was eight children in her family, and there were six sisters, and most of my cousins were female, you know, I had a ton of cousins. So it just felt like a very—a lot of women growing up—aunts, cousins, and my sisters, my mom—growing up very female-centric. And—so that—those were all—a lot of the—but a lot of the very close friends that I had were women—I don’t—I didn’t feel that they were people that I was, like, physically and sexually attracted to. I just felt like I was very close emotionally to them. And so then when I finally—finally said, “Let me dig deeper and see”—I think—I think because I didn’t let myself ever feel those things or think that because I grew up Catholic, and this is what the Catholics say about homosexuality, and this is what my culture says, and I knew from my early 20s I wanted to have children, and I wanted to have a family, and I didn’t see any models of two women getting married and having children. My dad—my dad and my mom each have a sister who were lesbian. My dad has a sister—she’s been with her partner for at least 30 years, they moved from house to house together, always came to all the family functions, but it has never been spoken in the family. It’s just been, “Here they are, they’re together.” It’s not acknowledged, but it’s not—it’s just, “Here they are, they’re together.” But—you know, as I’ve come out myself, I think how—how sad, that nobody’s ever rejected them, but they’ve never really acknowledged or accepted them either. So—not in the same sense as my dad and his brothers and their wives have been acknowledged as in a relationship.

MM: [speaking at the same time] So there’s a difference in the way they’re regarded.

MP: Yeah. And then my mom’s youngest sister had dated men all through her 20s and into her early 30s, and then she met a woman and started dating the woman, brought all of her siblings, all eight of them, together for dinner and said, “I’m gay, I’m with this woman,” and she just kind of pooled everybody at once, so it was kind of—you know, spoken and, you know, put out there. And then she was with that person for a few years, and then—now she’s been with her partner

for the last 13 years and raised that partner's children with her, because she had been married to a man before. And—but yet, my aunt and her partner are—both say that they're identifying as bisexual—maybe because her partner had been married to a man and because she had dated men in the past, and—so—but when I came out, the two of them were my biggest supporters and very protective of me, because my parents were not at all. [shakes head emphatically] Not at all, so—

MM: They weren't?

MP: So—that would—I felt very blessed that I had them to sort of stand up for me and be protective, because I felt very vulnerable at that time. So...

MM: How long ago was this, Michelle? How long ago since you came out to them?

MP: So—so I started the process November of 2010—inside myself and then telling my ex-husband. And then—we went to marriage counseling, and then I started my own individual counseling, so that was November 2010, it all started, and then by January—so between November and January I'm doing all this internal processing—I'm journaling, I'm in counseling, I'm in therapy—and by January—'cause I'm—I'm still—"Am I bisexual, am I a lesbian?"—I'm trying to figure it out, how I identify, and do I have to identify as anything, do I have to label myself—and by early January, I'm like, "Yeah, I'm a lesbian." And it felt so right to say that. It felt like—there—I—I was—I felt so joyful and so alive, and I felt like these puzzle pieces had just like—just come together, and like, "Oh my god, everything's clicking into place for me, and this just feels so right." I never felt like, when I was identifying to myself that I was bisexual, I never felt that I wanted to share it! I never wanted to share it with anybody or tell anybody that's how I identified, because I didn't think anybody needed to know, but now that I was sitting with that and processing and thinking for myself, "Do I need to identify?" and when I thought, "I want to, I want to say 'This is who I am,' and it feels right, and it feels authentic, it feels natural," I—I was so happy and so—felt so alive and joyous, and I wanted to tell everybody. I wanted to walk down the street [laughs] and tell strangers! I did not want to tell my parents, but I wanted to tell everybody else. So that was January—I tell my ex that, you know, "This is who I am, I've figured it out." So—

MM: Was he surprised? 'Cause you sort of laid a little bit of groundwork earlier.

MP: [nods] I think—I think he was? He knew from before we got married that I told him I was bisexual, but, you know, that's supposed to be under the table now that I'm married to him, and I felt like that previous summer, that I had started being attracted to that one woman, and it was bothering me, and it was in my head, and I remember lying in bed one night and trying to bring it up to him and approach it, saying I was feeling this attraction and I didn't know what to do about it, and he didn't really respond, and that was kind of a typical [chuckles] reaction where he didn't really respond to me, and I thought, "Is he processing? Is he thinking about it, or he doesn't know what to say at this time?" And then a few months later, in November, when this comes out full force and I—and the first day I—the first night I sat down with him, and I was, like, so scared, and I thought, "I have to talk to him about this," and I brought up that I had mentioned it to him over the summer—he had no knowledge of that, and I was like, "Oh my god, was he actually sleeping?" [both laugh] "And does he not remember?" But then I also went back and

remembered there were lots of conversations that we had about things that I know we had conversations about and he says he doesn't remember, so I think there were—at a certain level, he—

MM: Certain blocks on things? Yeah.

MP: Yeah, like he would just—it would be blocked out, and he would not remember it because it was uncomfortable or something he didn't want to think about. So I think it was surprising to him, and I think he was in denial for a while, because his initial response—I was so scared, and—I didn't—I was so scared to hurt him—and knew how painful it would be to—“What's the next step with that, and where do we go with this?” [coughs] What did that mean for our relationship, for our family? [coughs] Excuse me. So... [takes a drink from a glass of water] Initially, he was so supportive and so loving and so kind that it just made me feel very guilty, and I thought, “I want him to be angry at me! I want him to yell at me! I want him to just be enraged and angry and yell at me,” because that's—would be an acceptable response to, like, “Who are you, why are you doing this to our—,” you know. And he wasn't—he was just so supportive and kind and, like, understanding this was a difficult process for me, and I'm like, [laughs] “No, you need to be really—get mad at me, because that doesn't feel good for me, for you to be supportive and loving and kind!” So it took a while—so after, when I, you know, figured out in January that [nods] I think this is who I am, I had this one part of me that's joyous and feeling alive, and “This is who I am, and I can't believe it took me this long in my life to figure this out, but now this is who I need to be. How do I... How do I do this to him? How do I do this to my kids? How do I separate our family?” So the other half of me was devastated and guilty and did not want to destroy our family and didn't know how I would ever get through what I was doing to them and how I would go through with it. You know, how I would—but also what was going on in my mind, too, and I felt very guilty about, were these horrible, horrible thoughts of, “How can I—how can I ever leave my husband? How could I not be with him? It's gonna be my fault. It's gonna be my fault if our family gets divorced, if our children do not live with both their parents.” My parents are still married, his parents are still married—I did not want my children to ever grow up in a divorced household. And I thought, “If he died, that would be the only way I could leave.” And I was like, “But I don't want him to die!”

MM: [laughs] A lot of conflicted feelings.

MP: “He's a good person! He's a good person! He's a good man! He's a wonderful person. He's a good dad, and my children deserve to have a dad growing up.” And I was like, “I don't want him to die,” but I didn't know what other way—that it would be okay for me to not be in that relationship or that marriage anymore, and I was like, “That's a horrible thought!” And—and then I also thought, “I don't want to be 85 years old and look back at my life and say, ‘I've never been with a woman, and I've never been in a relationship and lived having a woman as my partner,’ and I do not want to be 85 and look back and think that.” And I thought, you know, with all the spirituality and religious background that I—you know, I grew up Catholic, and I like a lot of aspects of different religions, and I was like, “I like the idea of reincarnation, but I really don't believe it, so I don't really think that I could have another life later, that then I could be a lesbian in that life, ‘cause—“ [both laugh] “I think—I think this is my only life that I get to live.” So—at that time I was 40, and I was like, “I—I want the next—if I have the—you know—

if I am lucky enough to have another 40 or 50 years—I want to be who I really am, and—and—and have that opportunity and live that life and be with a woman, and that’s who I think I need to be with.” And I was so scared, too, because I thought, “I can leave this marriage, and I can have my children grow up with two parents that don’t live together and are divorced and that’s horrible for them, I don’t want them to have to live that, and I could do all that and I could make our family separate and come apart. And I might never meet anyone.” Because I’m leaving this—in my mind I’m doing this because I figured out that I’m a lesbian, not because I have fallen in love with this specific woman, because the woman that I was attracted to—she already had a partner, and I had no intention of doing anything to, you know, get in the middle of that relationship. It was just that that person who I really was attracted to, and she was an acquaintance, or like, social, you know—we were in a social circle where we’d get together with them sometimes. So I knew that was not—that I was not going to be with that person, it was just that person who was—I called my catalyst. So it wasn’t like I had fallen in love and I know I’m gonna go and be with that person and that there’s a future with me with that person. It was—I figured out this about myself, I need to go and live that life, but I might be alone for the rest of my life. Because here I am, living in Lancaster, and I’m living in a very straight world with, you know, husbands and wives and children, and that’s my circle. All my friends are married to husbands—you know, they have husbands, they have children, this is where I’m—you know—with the preschool and elementary school and the—I don’t—I don’t have gay friends here. I don’t know people that—I don’t know if there are lesbians in Lancaster. There may be no lesbians, Mary, in Lancaster! [both laugh] There just—

MM: Now you were at the Unitarian Church, right?

MP: I know! [both laugh] You know, and there’s people from time to time that you’re like, “I wonder if that person is. I don’t know! They don’t wear it on their—you know, they don’t have a big ‘L’ on their shirt, like Laverne from *Laverne & Shirley*. [both laugh] They’re not telling you, it’s not, you know, evident, so, you know, you might have suspicions, but you don’t know, and maybe that person already has a partner, and I thought, “I am coming out at the age of 40. Who is gonna be late 30s, early 40s, a lesbian, in Lancaster, and not already in a partnership or being with somebody, if there are lesbians?” Because at that point, I still don’t know where—and I’m also not going to be moving to Baltimore or to Maryland to be near my family, I’m not moving to Philadelphia or any bigger city, because this is where my children’s father is, and we’re keeping the kids together—you know, we’re keeping the family together, as far as we’re not gonna separate where I’m not gonna have them see their dad, and—so I’m just going into it blind, like, not knowing—I could be alone for the rest of my life, but I have to—I still have to live and be—be who I am, whether or not I’m alone or with somebody. So that was very scary.

MM: Yeah.

MP: But as soon as we got through that process and we started talking about divorce and how long we were gonna live in the house together and how we would ever tell the children because we never, ever, ever wanted to tell our kids, and that was horrible—you know, and you just have to work out financial things, and living, and how can we be comfortable living together if we know this is where our relationship is going, toward divorce, and working out all those things—I just got to the point where I was like, “I need to start finding—meeting women. And I need to

start dating,” and I’m, like, saying to my ex-husband, “How do you feel about this, because if we’re still living in this house for x number of months or years or we don’t know,” and he said, “Well, I’ve gone before for a couple of years without dating somebody or being with somebody, so I could do that again,” and I’m like, [laughs and shakes head] “No! I cannot do that! Because now that I’ve figured out who I am, I need to act on this quite—quite soon, as quickly as possible.” So...

MM: Were you aware of other organizations that—again, you were involved with the U.U.’s. Were there other organizations that you’re aware of where gay/lesbian people might be congregating or meeting other people?

MP: Oh, so that was my first—so—so—yes. So I was looking into that in Lancaster, trying to find where I could go for either support or just to meet people to make friends, and to, like, enter the gay and lesbian community, because I really—I had—I had great, wonderful heterosexual female friends. And as—it was probably January, February of 2011 that I started coming out to people, and I’m just very blessed, because I knew all of my friends were very open-minded, liberal—and I—I knew it would be kind of weird and scary to tell them that, number one, the first shock is “I’m getting a divorce. There’s something going on with my relationship with my husband.” And so I would tell them that first, and then—I’d get their reaction to that, and then I’m like, “Okay...and the reason is, and here’s the next part,” and then I’d explain—you know, then I’d come out to them. So it was always like, “Which—which—which part of this story do I tell first, which is—”

MM: Yeah, what’s the sequence... [chuckles]

MP: “Which is not going to be the shock...” You know, and I just—the telling over and over again of, like, two friends here, one friend there, calling somebody on the phone long-distance—it was—it was very—it was very cathartic in some ways, and I was blessed to have a lot of support and acceptance, but then it got so exhausting going through the entire story with people that I just was drained emotionally. You know, a lot of crying, a lot of—just telling the story over and over again. So I started—so it was a several-months process of, you know, “Who can I tell next? Okay, I’m gonna get this friend and that friend together and sit down with them for drinks or get together for dinner, or whatever, and—and come out.” So very luck—I mean, so friends were surprised or shocked at first, but then they were very accepting and loving and—and kind. It—but it just got to the point of then telling my parents that I knew was not gonna be easy, and it wasn’t, but at least knowing that I had so much other support from family members and friends was—was—was helpful. I think you said something else that I don’t think that... [laughs] You asked a different question that I don’t think I covered.

MM: I think—no, I think you’re doing fine.

MP: Okay. [laughs] I’m like, “I thought there was a piece in there that I didn’t get to.” So—oh, finding organizations. So I think my first issue was—you know, my ex, how is he doing through this? He did end up getting to the point where he could express some anger about our family splitting up—how could I do this, I was very selfish—and it was good, I was glad that he was finally expressing some of his feelings, and when he said that I was being very selfish, I—I

listened to him, and then I—I was like, “I am being very selfish.” And I was like, “I have not been selfish for 10 years.” Everything has been about him and it’s been about our children, and—and I was happy to be—you know, be the husband—be the husband. I was happy to be his wife, and I was happy to have our children and be their mom and be—stay-at-home, but I said, “I am being selfish, and I have not been selfish for the last 10 years,” and I said, “but I’m being selfish because,” I said, “my soul is dying. I don’t want—I don’t have a self. You know, I don’t have a part of who I am anymore that’s just—that’s me.” And I said, “I cannot be good to you or to our children if I don’t do what I need to do to be myself and to be happy.” I said—and I, you know, it was like when you get on the airplane and they say, “If there’s an emergency, take—put your oxygen mask on first, and then help children.” I said, “I have to help myself first. I can’t—I’m not gonna be—I’m gonna be a miserable person who—my soul is slowly dying. I can’t—and I have to be who I am.” So—so dealing with, you know, him and his pain and hurt, and then knowing that we eventually have to tell our children, and then the process of coming out to family, coming out to friends, and—and then at that point, I was like, “I need to reach out to—“ Because as—as accepting and loving as my friends were, and even my sisters, who—they were confused at first, because they thought, “We’re your sisters, we’ve known you your whole life—why did you never tell us this?” And I said, “I didn’t know! I didn’t—it wasn’t on the surface! It was, like, something down deep that was sort of, like, under—you know, like, under the iceberg. It was, like, under the surface that—if I wasn’t acknowledging it to myself, I couldn’t acknowledge it to anybody else, so as soon as I figured it out I told you. You know, I—I didn’t know—I wasn’t thinking that I was struggling with it, because it wasn’t something that I needed to talk to anybody about.” So—but then, since then, they’ve been supportive. So having all this support with my straight family members and my straight friends—there—it still wasn’t the same level of understanding that somebody who’s gay or lesbian in the gay community knows about whether you’re accepted by your family or your friends or not, and what that experience has been like for them, and that’s what I then started needing. And I was getting the support from my aunt and her partner, but they also were—they’re in Baltimore, so it wasn’t like I had something local, so that’s when I was looking. And the first thing [laughs]—the first thing that I found was, I think, that March, I was like, “I know that there’s this Lancaster Youth Pride bingo night at Carmen and David’s. I’m going to that.” [laughs] “I’m gonna meet some gay people.” And—and so the first night, I went there by myself, and I was so scared! I felt like I was going to high school and, like, looking for somebody to sit at lunch—you know, at a lunch table with, you know, with some friends—

MM: [laughs] Yeah, sit at the lunch table.

MP: I was like—I go in, I get my ice cream, and I—and I go and get a bingo card, and they’re like, “Welcome! Come on in!” And they’re doing the bingo game, and I see it’s just packed, you know, there’s like—all the seats are taken. It looks, you know, it’s very crowded. And I was like, “I don’t know where to sit!” And thank God for this woman Ruth, who became my good friend. She sees that I’m looking around, and she goes, “Look! We have a seat over here! Come sit with us!” So—I love her so much for the fact that she saw that I’m like, “I don’t know!” [both laugh] “I’m a freshman in high school, and I don’t know who to sit with at the lunch table!” So she welcomed me over, and we started talking, and from then, you know, we became friends, and then she introduced me to some other people that, you know, she knew that they would come to this bingo night with—she had a daughter who—I think her daughter was 12

at the time, so she had her 12-year-old daughter there—she had come out later in life also. So that was the beginning. And meeting her, and then, you know, meeting some other people there, and I think—I think at some point I went to a PFLAG meeting at...?

MM: Maybe First Reformed?

MP: U.C.C.—I think the U.C.C. Church out New Allen Pike, past Route 30.

MM: Okay, maybe Grace.

MP: They—they had—yes, Grace. So I went to their PFLAG meeting one night—I was the only gay person there. There was—maybe two parents that had two sons that were gay, and then a mom and a sister who had a brother-slash-son who was gay, so—it was a small, little group. I only went there the one time, but it felt nice, you know, they were supportive and accepting and, you know, we all talked and shared things. But after that—I think—I think then that summer, I went to go to Pride—we had actually gone to Pride the year before, my ex and my children and I, and—my ex was open-minded, and was, you know, I just said, “Let’s go to Pride, let’s see what that is like,” the year before I came out. So we went as a family the year before. Well, the—2011, I really want to go to Pride [both laugh] in Lancaster, and I really want to go by myself, and he says, “Oh, we’ll come with you!” And I was thinking, “No, no, no! No, no! I want to be gay! I want to be there, and I want to meet other gay people, and I just want to be gay there!” And I decided that if I sign up to volunteer at a booth that that would give me some time to myself and have me able to talk to some other gay people, so I said, “How about we all go together, and we walk around the festival, and then when you guys get tired or want to go home, I’ve signed up for this two hour shift at this booth.” And so that’s what happened. So I was there part of the time with them, they left, I signed up, and then I got to, you know, get to know some people and introduce, and—and then—I guess just over the course of months I just started meeting this gay person and that gay person and just getting involved with different things, and—and I was like, “My Lord, there are a lot of gay people in Lancaster! Where were they all before?” [both laugh] You know, I just did not realize, because I was living in a different—I had a different lifestyle, different, you know, set of people I was hanging out with, and I just did not know, and I think that summer, too, was when—I still—I still wasn’t sure what the dating scene was like, or who I would meet as far as women, because I—then I was learning, I was meeting women, like my friend Ruth that I met at the bingo—ice cream bingo night—she had a partner, and, you know, had been with her partner for a few years, and, you know, so she’s telling me about people she might know, and—but most of the people she knew, you know, has—have a partner. I knew a few people, but, you know, they were with somebody. So I think, “I just would like to meet somebody naturally, but I don’t know what the chances are that I’m just gonna run into somebody and start dating them, because I still have children that I’m taking care of and raising, and I’m not going out to clubs at night, and I’m not hanging where all the lesbians might be hanging who are single or, you know, whatever—haven’t—haven’t had children.” So I go online to match.com and start dating, and that’s—that’s how I started really dating people. So that was my introduction. [laughs]

MM: Good for you. Okay. What about—now, what organizations are you involved with now? I know the history project, you somehow got into this one.

MP: Yeah, so this oral history project, I sa—I wanted to volunteer with that, because I thought that is a very—I think the reason—when I saw the history project advertised through the LGBT Center in Harrisburg, I thought, “This is fantastic, because I would like for my story to be told, but I also—I would like to volunteer to interview people, because—” During my coming out process, you know, I’m also going to bookstores, I’m looking online—I want to find books to read that have to do with me, that have to do with other women who came out later in life, because—it’s kind of—you know, I didn’t understand. I was like, “How come there are people that know when they’re teenagers, or how come there are people that know even before they’re teenagers, but how come there are people like me that didn’t? I don’t understand how there could be different—different ways of coming to this.” And so I wanted to find books of women who were 30s or 40s and maybe had been married to men, or whatever their process was. So I found some books, but I got to the point where I—I thought, “You know what, I would just love to meet women, and I would like to interview them, and maybe I could write a book, and I want to start this project on my own.” So I talked to my friend Ruth, and then she told me about somebody else, and as I started to know some people in the community here in Lancaster, I found some people, and then other people would say, “Oh, I know this person.” I think I even put out some flyers and got one or two people from putting flyers out—strangers that I didn’t know that said they would like to be interviewed. So I did that for a while, and—and I think when this oral history project came up, I thought, “Well, this is great, because it will also give me better experience to know, maybe, what kinds of questions to ask, and just good interviewing techniques, and—” It just—you know—I love to hear people’s stories, and wanting to have people’s stories told and heard, whether it’s in a book form or whether it’s videotaped and archived online. So I got involved with that, you know, I’ve volunteered with the Pride in Lancaster for the last couple of summers, when they’ve, you know, at a booth or helping out at the tables. That’s... [nods]

MM: Is—is—how about in your—your occupation? Do you sense that your orientation has anything to do with—any problems with work or anything like that? Any concerns?

MP: Well, Mary, as you know, I’m not working [laughs] but as soon as I came out—and I know I’ve always, you know, because of my background and working in counseling and working with children—way in my past, in one of my—

MM: [chuckles] Hang on one second. We’re gonna have to shift gears here a little bit. It’s just starting to—you’ll see a little flashing light in front of you?

MP: Yeah.

MM: That’s kind of the cue, so—

[Tape cuts off. On second tape:]

MM: So we’re back to interviewing with Michelle, and I’m gonna ask you to give your name again and birthdate for this second tape—it’s kind of authenticating, and—

MP: Okay, Michelle Probulus. July 13th, 1970, born in Baltimore, Maryland.

MM: Okay. Okay. And when we finished the last tape, we had just started talking about jobs, I guess. Yeah. You were just saying you're looking for employment?

MP: Yes.

MM: Okay.

MP: So I think at some point—over the summer I got a three-week temporary job and that was really good, but it was—it was a summer bridging program for kids with autism—transitioning from high school into college. And that was great, I loved it, but it was...

MM: Just short.

MP: Time-limited.

MM: Yeah.

MP: But—yeah, I think—I think with education—you know, our governor... [makes a face] Not giving a lot of money to education, and the few guidance counseling positions that are—that come up, there's a lot of people applying to them. So I've—I mean, I'm also applying to agencies and different organizations that are just—counseling in their agency, but primarily I've worked with children and adolescents in my—in my past. So, when I came out, the reaction—when—when I came out to my parents... it was not good, and I knew based on their belief system and religious background and culture and everything else that it would not be good, but I got a letter from my mom maybe a week after I came out, and... [sighs] It was—it was so devastating to me that—that day, the pain that I was in, I—I was like, "If this is how I can feel as a 40-year-old, and I don't live with my parents, and I have—they have no financial power over me, they don't live close to me—I have a relationship with them, but—and this is how I can feel, this much pain," I—I—I didn't know how do teenagers who are coming out, and they live with their parents who are not accepting—how, you know, all these children that are committing suicide, and it just kills me, and—that day, when I got that first letter—and I got a few more after that—I thought, "This is—I need to—I need to work with kids, and I need to work with kids coming out, either middle school, high school—teenage years—and I need to be an advocate for them. I need to support them." So, in—in my past, with counseling jobs, I'd always worked in nonprofit agencies, but would always go into school and do counseling, so I've always worked with, you know—pretty much—some elementary but mostly middle school- and high school-aged children. And I've—I've done a little bit in the lower, you know, a little bit into college-age. So, going through the divorce and deciding to go back to school, I wanted to get certified as a school counselor, because it would work with my—my children's schedule more, and working the hours that I could still be as much of being with them as a mom and being with them over the summers, but I wanted to really be in the school to get—when you—when you work in an agency and you go to a bunch of schools, you don't really get that relationship with the teachers and staff that it—or with the students as if you're there every day, and I really wanted to develop those kind of relationships with staff and students, so—and I thought, "If I can be that person, if I

can be that guidance counselor that is gonna be there for those kids that don't have support from their family, then I can be a safe zone, I can be—you know, I can do the after school program, working, you know, as an advisor for the Gay/Straight Alliance..."

MM: Yeah, GSAs and stuff, right?

MP: Yeah, the G—GSAs, the ally group, whatever...I want to—I want to be that person that's gonna be the one person that maybe is all these kid's—somebody that they might have as support in their lives. So that—that is really what I want to be able to—

MM: So that's kind of where you're heading.

MP: That's where I want to be. My kids—I think you asked—off-camera—

MM: Yeah, I was wondering how they're doing.

MP: When—when my ex and I told them that we were getting divorced, that was—that was—that was a bad day, 'cause we never wanted to have to—it sort of changes their lives. You know, it—it's—there's the day before, when they don't know that their lives are about to change, and then that day is when—"My parents are no longer gonna be married and living together, and my life is gonna change." We knew—we—we weren't sure whether, you know—what to tell them, because we knew they would—they were six and eight at the time. What are they gonna ask, and "Why are you getting divorced?" and "We don't know why you don't—why you can't be married anymore." They never saw us fight. We were always polite and kind and respectful to each other. In my perspective, there wasn't the depth in the relationship, the emotional depth and what I wanted in a partnership, but they didn't see anger and fighting and any kind of abusiveness. They just saw kindness and respectfulness. So that—that would be confusing to kids, so they—we knew they weren't gonna understand and they would ask why, so I was afraid—I wasn't sure if that was—that day, whether we should say what—where—where I was with my life, and that I had come out. He wanted to tell them, and I was afraid that telling them was going to end up them blaming me for the divorce, and that I was gonna be the reason. There were other—you know, that was the major—major part of it, but along the way of marriage counseling and everything else, I was realizing that me being a lesbian was not the only—that—

MM: It wasn't the only thing.

MP: Yeah, it wasn't the only thing. So—and I—and—I truly wanted him to be happy, you know, I wanted him to be with somebody that was gonna want him and desire him and love him in a way that I didn't feel like I could or did or had that capacity. There was a lot—there was a lot of times inside of myself that I thought, "He's a really good person, he's a good man, he has a lot of good qualities," and I—I thought there was something wrong with me. Like, "I don't know why I can't love him the way that I feel like somebody should love their husband. And I just thought, maybe—maybe I can't love that deeply, you know, maybe I don't have that capacity." So—anyway—when we come out and tell our children we're getting divorced and they want to know why, I told them, you know, "This is what I discovered about myself," and I—I'm like—I'm flying on a wing and a prayer, I don't know what you tell a six- and an eight-

year-old about this and how you explain that, because they each had, like, some friends in school that had two moms, so they knew that. They knew about my—my aunt and her partner, but from their perspective, those people had always been together, that had always been their family. It wasn't "These people are not together anymore, now she's gonna be with a woman," and that doesn't make sense—why wouldn't you have always known that? So at least three times that day, they asked again, "Why?" And I kept trying to explain, and I started going into the civil rights movement—

MM: [laughs]

MP: I started talking about—you know, we had talked—you know, they were six and eight, but we had talked a lot about Martin Luther King and read stories about Martin Luther King and the civil rights and Rosa Parks—we had already talked about a lot of those things, and I'm like, trying to explain, like, "Remember, you know, with black and white people, and—these were the laws back then and the rules, and this is what people believed, and then a lot of people started believing that that's not the way you treat people, and that's not fair, and they started slowly changing the laws." I was trying to, you know, bring it up as a human rights issue, as a civil rights issue, to them, and—not sure if they would put those two together and make it click, but somehow, you know, over the last couple of years, you know, I just tell them all of the laws that are changing around the country—that this state is, you know—now allows marriage equality, and two women or two men can get married in Maryland, the state that I grew up in, and—and—so whenever there's little bits of news or something happens, I tell them. Or there was—there was the thing back in March in Binns Park in Lancaster for—oh, when the Supreme Court was doing the hearings on—

MM: [speaking at the same time] Marriage equality, yeah.

MP: —DOMA [Defense of Marriage Act] and Prop. 8—I brought them to that, you know, and—and we've gone to Pride the last couple years, so I just—want—you know, I don't want to have them think that I'm not accepting of myself or that I'm ashamed at all, because I want them to feel like I completely accept myself, and that it's okay, and that this is how we should treat everybody—and—especially my younger son, is such a little same-sex marriage supporter, you know, he'll notice somebody's bumper sticker, he's like, "Mom, I like that bumper sticker, look what it says!" and so, I think they're—

MM: Coming around.

MP: They're com—you know, like, they seem very supportive and I think it's just that they love me, and I—I don't think that means that they're happy that we're not together anymore, but it's been, you know, in—in another week, it'll be exactly two years since I've moved here and that we haven't lived—I haven't lived with their dad. So they stay a week with me, and then they are with him for a week, so—but we each—their dad and I can go and visit at each other's houses during that time, so we still see the kids most days, even if it's just briefly, so... Yeah, so they—

MM: That's good!

MP: We talk about a lot, and they seem okay on that aspect, you know, I don't think it's ever something that kids want or—"Yeah, we're happy that our parents are not together"—I don't think that's the case, but I think they're—they've transitioned, and they're accepting, and—

MM: Yeah. That's great.

MP: Yeah.

MM: It's a very different world, to be able to talk to the kids—

MP: Yeah.

MM: And to—to work through things and stay open and not have to try to go too—around too many different directions.

MP: Yeah.

MM: Well, that's good. How about—what do you see here in Lancaster as—as you've been exploring your own coming out process, as you see the community around here? Did you find it difficult to meet other people? I know you said eventually you start seeing other people and realizing there's a bunch of folks...

MP: Yeah, I think—well, I mean, when you're in the city. This—I mean, I live just outside the city in the township, so I'm in the city a lot, and, you know, a lot of—you know, cultural things and things going on in the city, and then—on the weekends. I think the city—there's just a lot more open-mindedness, there's a lot more culture and arts and music scene, things going on, so it tends to be a lot of people that live—a lot more people that l—are living in the city, you know, are gonna be more open-minded, you know, I have a lot of connections that teach at Franklin & Marshall or at Millersville, so a lot of those people who are professors and work in the—in the universities also tend to be more open-minded, liberal, as far as the ones I've met. So—so those are the people that I've been meeting and hanging out with, and that's a very supportive community, and—and I mean, a lot of those people are straight that are just allies and supportive and know a lot of gay people and that are friends with them and have no problems with it, and I think it's because a lot of these people that are my age group—30s, 40s, 50s—that are short of a different generation that are kind of becoming more accepting as just, "Yeah, that's"—I know—I think it was last—last year or two years ago—no, I think it was last year. I'd been out about a year, and I'm reading in the newspaper—because Lancaster County's still very conservative, there's a lot of religious groups and very conservative people—so I'm reading in the letters to editor, and I know I need to just avoid them on the—in the Sunday paper, but I couldn't help myself, so I read them from time to time, and I occasionally see letters about people talking about God, the Bible, and gay people, and how it's, you know, against what the Bible says, and "Gay marriage is not acceptable," and—so I started getting really angry reading these letters, and I thought, "I can just be angry and read them and dismiss them and like, okay, these people just don't share my point of view and my perspective," but I thought, "You know what, there are kids that probably read this newspaper. There's probably teenagers that are reading this too, and I do not want these kids to only see that perspective. I don't want them to think that the people in this

town—that is the belief system. I want them to know that there are other people that say, ‘No, I don’t believe that, I believe something else,’ so that they will know that there’s somebody out there that would support them if they’re gay or if they have family members or something that’s gay, that they can get, you know, that perspective.” So there were three different—I think it was January, March, and May of last year that—2012—that I wrote letters back, and I thought, “Hopefully they’ll get published, I don’t know if they’ll get published, but I would like to see those—my responses in print,” and they all got published, and I was like, “Good! I want—I want to know that, if there’s kids reading this, or maybe just young adults or anybody that says—there’s not just one perspective.” The third letter I wrote was—there were two women on the same—what, the same Sunday, that wrote similar stories about gays and the Bible and God, and I wrote to both of them, and I didn’t—you know, they didn’t know each other, I didn’t know them, and I responded to both of them, who had sent the letters, and I said, “If perhaps you’d like to meet a lesbian or gay person, I’d be happy to meet you for coffee or tea, and get to know me, and get to know—I’d like to get to know you,” and to not try to convince them that their perspective was wrong or that we would talk about God or the Bible at all, but just to get to know each other as people, and I said, “You can contact me through the paper or get in touch with me if you’re interested.” Both of them contacted me, and I had—and I got together with both of them. One woman I got together with twice. And both of them at some point got around to belief systems and God and the Bible a little bit, but I answered them honestly about what I thought, and I didn’t expect that I was gonna change their perspective, but I was just like, “How about we just get to know somebody else who is this person that you’re saying is...” You know. So that was—that was a good experience.

MM: That’s interesting.

MP: I liked—I liked doing that, and I just wanted to have it in the paper that there are people that are responding, and it’s not just that one opinion.

MM: Very good. What other changes do you think are the changes that need to occur in Lancaster, do you think, at this point, as far as you can see? Civil—from civil rights perspectives, or...

MP: Yes, well, I mean, I think Mayor Gray—he’s very supportive, and d—isn’t it during his office that he has, I think, is it all city employees that have same-sex benefits?

MM: Yeah. Yeah.

MP: So. And then I know Franklin & Marshall has supports...

MM: Yeah. Within the city, because they—they’ve had protected rights for 10, 13 years now, I guess. 20 years.

MP: So I think that’s very hopeful. As I’m looking for jobs, I—I—I—I feel kind of privileged in a way, in the last three years, since I’ve started coming out and have come out, that I know a lot of people that I’ve met that have been gay since they were, you know, teenagers, early 20s, that they’ve experienced a lot of—a lot more oppression and discrimination than I have,

because—20, 30 years ago, there wasn't as much acceptance, so they experienced discrimination or experienced feeling like they couldn't be themselves in certain situations. I came out with, like, a "eff you" attitude, like, I am not coming out at 40 and not being able to be completely who I am. I'm just not doing it. So in some ways that is naïve, because I will experience that at some point, but I feel like—I don't know if it's like being a teenager, where you feel a little invincible—

MM: Yeah.

MP: Like, "Nobody can hurt me, because this is who I am, I'm gonna stand up for this, and I'm gonna be this person, and too bad if you don't like it." But with looking for a job, I take, you know, a little bit of pause, like—I am gonna be out, I'm gonna be who I am, but I realize that if somebody does not like that, they could choose to fire me and would not have any...

MM: Within the county. Yeah.

MP: So—but I went to a marriage—marriage rights rally in Harrisburg a few months back with my friend Ruth. She and I went to this, and it was—it was sad, 'cause it was poorly attended, it was, like, 50, 60 people, but she and I ended up being interviewed, and I think a little clip of that might have been on the news that night, and so, I'm like, "Here I am on TV." [laughs] "If somebody sees that, they'll see that I'm there, that I'm saying what I'm saying, and that could be something that an employer would see." And I'm like, "I'm not gonna hide it, so...because I'm not gonna, you know, not talk about it where I work, and I'm not gonna—because I—I feel like, if I'm gonna be a guidance counselor, I'm gonna be a counselor, I'm gonna be some—some, like, mentor, or..." I don't know what—

MM: Like a role model?

MP: "A role model to—and if I want to work with kids, I need to be proud of who I am, and I need to say—"

MM: [speaking at the same time] Yeah, need to be comfortable with it.

MP: "This is who I am,' and be comfortable with it, and I—bad things could happen to me because of that, but I—I am there—I want to be there to support those kids and the kids that I work with, and I'm not gonna hide who I am because then they're gonna feel that they have to hide who they are." And—and that is why, with my own children, I'm the same way. I'm like, "I'm not gonna apologize, I'm not gonna say I'm sorry, I fi—what I'm sorry for is that I didn't figure out who I was sooner." You know, that's—that's—that's all I regret.

MM: Yeah. We've talked about a lot of stuff. [both laugh] Anything that we've—that we've missed, or anything else you want to talk about within the context of this interview, as you've thought about doing this, or...?

MP: [pauses, exhales] No, I just... I think that's what I feel... I guess in my frustration of not finding a job yet is that that is where I feel I'm called—I want to—I want to be called in—not

that, I mean, I have this—my background and my education is in counseling, and I feel like I'm very good with working with young—young people, and—but then I feel like this whole—my coming out process has—I don't know—shifted what I want my focus to be, where I feel that I can be the most helpful to kids—not that I don't want to help all the kids in schools where I'm working in any of the issues where they're struggling with, but I feel like that is where I might have the most effect or most power in being a support network or system and being an advocate, and I think I'm so—so it just—my frustration in that I can't do that yet.

MM: Yeah.

MP: You know, that I want to be in that role and being that person, because when I did my internship last fall, in a high school, my second day there, one of the counselors made a comment about a student and used the word “dyke,” or “dyke-y,” and it was only my second day, but—and I'm like, I'm only an intern, I'm not paid here, I don't know what, is it appropriate for me to say—but I'm not gonna sit here and not say something—

MM: Yeah.

MP: And this counselor had been there for 30 years and was—now just retired this past year. “I cannot sit back and not say something because he feels comfortable saying this to stu—to adults, what is he saying to his students?” And I knew there were other inappropriate things that people had said he said in general, not just about gays or lesbians. I was like, “No, no no no, I need to stand up for this and say that is not okay.” And I did, and I'm like, “I—I need to be that person.” And that's what I—so that's my—

MM: That's your thing.

MP: [laughs] That's what I want to do.

MM: Okay. Have you talked with people over at Alder Health at all?

MP: I have not.

MM: Okay, because—

MP: And I saw that there was a job app—a job opening there for something? And I saw that they're starting some Tree House?

MM: They just started the Tree House, it's a homeless—homeless youth project, so you might want to talk with those folks over there, even volunteering or whatever, just to kind of keep building your résumé. Yeah, so. There's a—there's a lot of things that have changed, I guess, over time. Interesting projects.

MP: Yeah.

MM: Okay! Anything else? Books?

MP: [shakes head] No, I think I'm... [chuckles]

MM: No? Okay, well, thank you very much for your time.

MP: Thank you, Mary.

MM: All right.