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Interviewee: Sophie Kandler

Interviewer: Liam Fuller

Date: September 28, 2017

Place: Phoenixville, PA

Transcriber: Emily Scheiber

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Abstract: Sophie Kandler was born in Spring City, Pennsylvania in 1966. After being bullied at home and at school, Sophie finally graduated from high school. After graduating and applying to colleges, Sophie decided to attend Drexel University. After attending Drexel for two years, Sophie transferred to Penn State and graduated from there in 1989 with a degree in secondary education, English, and History. Nevertheless, Sophie's attempt to receive a job in any of these fields has been a struggle. In this interview, Sophie discusses the privileges and oppressions of growing up as a man while identifying as a woman. Growing up in a family that idealized hegemonic masculinity, Sophie learned to not outwardly express that she is transgender. She discusses the challenges she faced as a result of transphobia in the workplace and common public spaces, in addition to the challenges she witnessed her friends face due to trans discrimination. Sophie elaborates upon the importance of community and empathy in her life and other trans folks, and gives various spiritual and political meanings to how trans people are regarded in American society. In this interview, Sophie also touches on her experiences in parenting during and after transitioning.

Liam Fuller: Okay so we're on. I'm just going to say a few little things that will help out the transcriber so they have all of the general information. Hello my name is Liam Fuller I'm here with Sophie and we are interviewing in Phoenixville, Pennsylvania. This is for the LG-- Central PA (Pennsylvania) LGBT History Project. For -- through the Central Pennsylvania LGBTQ Center and today's date, today is the twenty--?

Sophie Kandler: 28th.

LF: Yes today is the twenty-eighth of July 2017. So can we-- oh first, do I have your permission to conduct this interview?

Sophie Kandler: Oh I don't know I'd have to speak to my attorney.

LF: [laughs]

SK: Just kidding of course you do. Yes.

LF: Okay. And then can you say your name for me?

SK: Full name?

LF: Yeah.

SK: Sophia Kandler. Although my nom de plume is Sophie Lynn.

LF: [chuckles] Okay. And then can you spell that for me? Your full name.

SK: It's S-o-p-h-i-e. L-i-s-a. K-a-n-d-l-e-r and Sophie Lynne, L-y-n-n-e.

LF: Okay awesome. Thank you.

SK: Should I be looking at you or the camera?

LF: Doesn't matter, either way, whichever one you prefer.

SK: Okay.

LF: So we are going to start from the very beginning, a very good place to start...

SK: Mmkay. First the Earth cooled, then the dinosaurs came--

LF: [laughs]

SK: Sorry.

LF: So why don't you start with your sort of family origin and where you grew up, sort of what year, where. And then take me through your early childhood development.

SK: I was born in 1966 to a military family. My dad was Army. My mother is an immigrant from Scotland. She came over because she married my father [chuckles]. I grew up in Spring City, which is in Chester County here in Pennsylvania. At the time, it was a dying, industrial town. It had one industry and it was a foundry.

LF: Mhm.

SK: And almost everybody—every male in that town--they ended up working in either the factory or across the river at Diamond Glass.

LF: Mhm.

SK: It was your stereotypical Bruce Springsteen song. “No one here gets out of here alive”—oh wait that is The Doors. But anyway, it was... on my street, I grew up on Hall Street. There were mostly boys and just a couple girls. Most of the kids were just a little older than me and they were my brother's age. I have one older brother. He is 18 months older than me. I am the youngest of two. Growing up in Spring City, I knew from very early on that I was different. I knew from when I was four that I preferred playing with the girls. And which is of course, on my street in the late sixties through the seventies, you know- impartible sin, but it all was an impartible sin for my father. He was not raising any ‘sissies,’ his word. So he beat it out of me. I remember that distinctly although he doesn't. I do not see why I would, but I remember distinctly

so I hid who I truly was. I swallowed it. Being different... I was a skinny, little kid. Being different, I got picked on a lot. My brother got picked on a lot too, but that is beside the point. So we played all of the st—the ga—the games that people of the area played. We had a church across the street from me, which had a very large macadam parking lot. So we would play baseball. We would play tackle football on the parking lot. Funny how I always caught the ball playing that one. You know we played army, all of the typical stuff and all the typical bullying as well. My brother was my first bully.

LF: Mhm.

SK: He picked on me all the time because I was smaller than him and everybody picked on him and being one of the youngest kids in the street, he picked on me. So, through the years, I learned to keep to myself. I was pretty much a loner because if I saw the kids on the street, they tended to pick on me or beat me up. And any time I was alone with my brother, he would try to pick a fight. And then of course, it is similar to the NFL [National Football League], whoever throws the first punch gets away with it. He got away with it all the time and I always got punished.

LF: Yeah.

SK: When I was about 12, I saw something on the local news and that was—it was called the transsexual dilemma and it—I had a name for it. I was like ‘oh my god, these people are just like me.’ It was the seventies and it was-- it was early and they only had a few transgender people and they were doing their best to be respectful, but of course they weren’t. And they weren’t doing a little sensational, but I was like ‘only I got a name for this now, I know what it is.’ But I didn’t dare to look it up or anything and we didn’t have an internet, so this was way long ago. When I was around 13, I started dressing.

LF: Mhm.

SK: I started with once or twice with my mom’s clothes but they were too big on me and there around that time I had a paper route so I used that money in order from the Sears Catalog. You’re probably too young to remember the Sears catalog, but you got it twice a year and it was really thick and what you did was you mail ordered from it. I was used to the first one home from school. Both my parents worked. My dad worked swing shift. And My mom worked as a day nurse for elderly people, so it was usually me coming home first. My brother during the fall was on the football team, so that is when I order anything so that way I could intercept all the packages coming. I hid them in various places in the house, never the same place twice. I would rotate around and whenever I had even the slightest opportunity, I would dress. I would use water balloons for boobs [laughs].

LF: [chuckles quietly]

SK: Of course like almost everyone else used socks for a while, but you know I graduated to water balloons. And I continued dressing through the years. Eventually I started experimenting with makeup and that sort of thing. And one day my brother caught me. He had come in. I did not know where he was supposed to be, but it wasn’t where he was supposed to be. He came

charging into the house and we only had one bathroom and I was in it you know I had just finished putting on my makeup-- badly of course. He came charging in and went right into the bathroom and started pounding on the door. I am trapped. I did manage to get all of the clothes off and I put them in the bathtub—you know, the shower--and I walked out the door; holding my head down with my face covered, pretending like I was sneezing. But he took one look at me and just started laughing and said 'I am telling mom and dad.' He blackmailed me. I had-he...I had to bribe him with-- at that point, I was working at Burger King. I had to give him a full weeks' pay. But he did never did tell. So, good on him.

When I was 16, I decided that I was not willing to do this anymore. I was a freak. I was-- you know there was, no one in the world like me, even though I did see there were people in the world like me. That men do not do this so I—while my parents were away, they had a house in Delaware. I took my all my clothes and everything out to the burn barrel out back and burned it. That was in August 1993. A week later, our dog died. So I had to have been bam on the depression scale and I fell into a very deep depression. Not understanding the why of it really, you know I didn't realize how deep this was in me. But I managed to—overtime, I tamp it down to the point where I did not even consistently think about it anymore. But I became angry, I learned martial arts so I could defend myself. And I did my best to be the manliest man I could be. My role model for this was my father who drank a lot, yelled all the time, and was generally just not a nice person. So—and that's what I was.

Didn't have many friends. I had an active imaginary life. I played Dungeons and Dragons and that sort of thing and since I was alone a lot, I would take walks, I would ride my bike and think about you know I would create worlds in my mind, in which I could be female. But I—I never even breathed the word of it to anyone.

LF: Yeah.

SK: Through college, I started drinking heavily and again, the idea being that I could now outdrink anyone. With German Scotts-Irish roots, I had the genetics to drink a lot and did I had the genetic predisposition for alcoholism as well. And I got into a lot of fights. Again, I am going to prove that I am a better man than anyone. As you can see, that worked. I did two years at Drexel University, transferred to Penn State. I was in a fraternity, Phi Kappa Sigma. And my membership—I joined at Drexel and transferred to Penn State. At Drexel, we were the new house. At Penn State, they were the number one fraternity on campus. They were the jocks, they were the rich kids, they were the ones that sororities wanted to party with. And then there was me.

I was an outcast and they never let me forget it [clears throat]. I did find some acceptance there, some friends. I graduated high-- college in 1989. I graduated high school in 1984, but since I transferred colleges, I lost a year. Spring (name of school) was a very hick school at the time...now it's huge, but then it was very hick. We had 275 graduates. Penn State I graduated in '89 with a degree in education. Secondary education—English and History, right into the first Bush's recession. There were no jobs. I managed to secure a job, but it did not last long. Eventually, I ended up bartending and waiting tables. Did that for several years until I met wife. I

got a real job in the gaming industry for game distributor and then eventually for a game manufacturer called Games Workshop.

It was right around 1999 that the feminine part was beginning to poke back through, I was drinking heavily. I was looking for a website about publishing my writing because I was writing a lot and I crept over Fiction Mania, which I thought was a regular website, but it turned out to be transgender related. And I started reading it and I was like ‘this is you know, wonderful’. You know what I mean, this is—‘cause it’s the internet and everything.

Also at that time, I discovered Vanity Club, which I am now a member and I discovered Linda Lewis, among others. And it is from these websites and several others, of course; Donna Rose, specifically hers, that I began to learn about what it means to be trans. Who are these people? I denied it to myself still, but I was just like ‘well these are people I want to learn about, you know I am fascinated by this.’ I moved back up to Pennsylvania in 2004 after separating from Games Workshop. And my wife and I lived with my mother-in-law here in Phoenixville. I was drinking heavily—more and more heavily and I was basically not a very good person, at all.

Then in ha—in 2007, you know Halloween was my favorite holiday and it still is. In 2007, my wife and I did Clark Kent and Louis Lane. My Clark Kent was a Superman shirt with a white oxford over it with a half-one tied tie and a spit curl. At this point, I got my Master’s Degree in education from Penn State. The next year my wife suggested we do the same thing except this time I’d would be Louis. She asked—she told me this a week before Halloween, not even a week, 6 days before for Halloween. And I was like ‘I can’t do this, I can’t do this, but how can I not? I’ve permission.’ So I had—I’d enlisted the help of a co-worker; bought a cheap wig, she helped me pick out clothes. I went to Lane Bryant. They helped me with the bra fitting. All kinds of stuff. And so I was going to go out—I was going to go out as Louis Lane. My wife had forgotten her suggestion to for—forget how we were going to dress. And we had our-our daughter was born in 2007, so she was about a year old at this point. So you can imagine just why she forgot.

So Halloween night, I get all dressed up and I show up, ‘here I am ta-da we are going that party’ and I will never forget the wife—the look my wife gave me. It was just total revulsion.

LF: Mm.

SK: I said ‘remember you were going to be Clark Kent?’ And she said ‘oh...yeah.’ We went to the party. I had a friend there who helped—who was a professional and she did my makeup. I still looked horrible. And then from there, we were at the party for a while and I went over to where I worked at the bookstore. Fooled a few people and then a bunch of us from work went out, as well. Stayed out until about one [a.m.] and I am on my way back to where I was living and I pulled over to the side of the road and I looked at myself. I was like ‘I am—I am sitting there—I had the—this bra full of bird seed—panty hose and bird seed, drag queen trick. I looked at myself and said ‘what have I done?’ and I mean I cannot believe I am doing this. I went out dressed as a woman. I mean it may be Halloween, but I mean this is what I have been suppressing. The dam burst. Let me know you know when I need to stop talking [laughs].

LF: No, you can continue.

SK: So I did some research online, some more research and I found places that did makeup—you—you know, transformation makeup and I chose one on Long Island, Femme Fever. And I went there in early December of 2008 and I decided if that person, her name was Karen, could make me look feminine, then this is something I will continue and pursue. But if I cannot look—even the slightest look, feminine, I am just going to forget it all happened.

At the time, I was calling myself Lisa or Lori (sp?) or Linda or yeah anything with an L, my dad's name started with an L. So I went up and she said—she was doing my makeup. I told her I did not want to see myself, you know, I want to be surprised.

LF: Mhm.

SK: She was getting near the end and she had put the wig on, she was styling the wig, and she said “so what was the name you decided on?” I said, “Well I am currently going by Lisa, but I am open to suggestion” and she took a step back and she looked at me like this [gestures] for what seemed like an eternity. But, it was probably like 5 seconds. she said “I have a strong feeling that your name is Sophie”

And I said “Sophie?”. Then she turned me around in the chair to face a wall full of mirrors, and she said “say hello to Sophie” and I couldn't believe what I was seeing.

LF: Mhm.

SK: I couldn't see the old me at all and I was just flabbergasted. It was within a couple minutes that we started taking pictures and I just couldn't believe it. I was so happy. I felt free. A couple weeks later I'd found a renaissance, which is Southeast Pennsylvania Renaissance, which is a transgender support group. I went there for the first time...with no makeup on and they welcomed me with open arms. I met a lot of people who have become some of my dearest friends and afterwards I went to a party, was Angela's Laptop Lounge, which is a monthly thing third Fri--weekend of the third Saturday of every month, just like [Southeast Pennsylvania] Renaissance. It's a transgender party and I met a lot more people. I mean before this night, I had never met a transgender person in my life that I knew of, suddenly I'm surrounded by them. A very dear friend of mine I met that night was Jennifer Layman and she was talking to me. I mean, I looked horrible, no makeup, I mean I was a mess. She was—she and a couple others who were talking to me and they said—and I said “You know, yes my real first time out as myself” and she and her friend looked at each other and said “Pandora's box is open” and she was right and that is how Sophie began. So...

LF: Okay, so dialing back a little bit...

SK: Okay yeah, sorry I'm...

LF: Totally fine. So back when you were experiencing these feelings in your childhood, and you could tell like you were not the majority of the—of the people around you. When your brother would sort of, you know, act in a malignant way towards you--

SK: Mhm.

LF: -- and your parents would react and punish you; what sort of messages did that send you as a child?

SK: It sent me the message that I was worthless, that—I learned loud and clear that I was not wanted. I had been told several times that I was not wanted, that I was a mistake, I was an accident. My parents do not remember saying this but that is the sort of thing you do not forget.

LF: Mhm.

SF: I remember it just like it had just happened now. So I grew up feeling completely worthless. Like—I didn't even feel like a human being. To them, I was just a piece of meat. I was somebody to do chores, I was my brother's punching bag. My dad would come home—the few times I would see him, and I was scared to death of him because seeing my dad usually meant punishment of some kind. I eventually told him that not too long ago. So—so yeah it was definitely—it was not the way a child should be raised to just feel completely unwanted and like a second-class citizen. My brother was the darling, strong as an ox, almost as smart, very good with his hands. He worked with wood, just like my father. He played football, just like my father. I did not do either of those things. So, I was the misfit and I knew it.

LF: Yeah, sometimes parents have a very selective memory. So can you go a little more in depth into your education, walk me through that. Sort of your middle school, high school experience—what sort of student you were.

SK: I was an A student going through—all the way through junior high. Because if I learned anything from my dad, aside from all the punishment and everything, it was work hard because he worked hard. He busted his butt to put food on the table. So and my dad did not accept second best when it came to work and when it came...he knew I was physically not going to be a worker. But I had a flare for art and for—I was reading way above level, so I was a great student. And they—we used to get paid for our report cards starting around third grade; you get this much for an A, this much for a B, and if I got a B, I got punished. My brother, if he got an A, he got a party. That is a bit of an exaggeration, but you get the idea. So I felt that I was held to a different standard even though I mean wait a second, I'm the bad one here? And yet, I am supposed to be the smart one.

Junior high was when puberty hit for most people. I was a late bloomer. But yeah just like the standard, it is almost like cliché, oh my god the girls were becoming women and I am not.

LF: Yeah.

SK: You know they are becoming you know—they get the blessing of becoming women and meanwhile, I am left behind. You know, I used to dream of it. I used to dream of like—you know this is a big mistake; like maybe tomorrow I will grow—I will wake up and I will be a girl. Of course that never happened. I never really had a girlfriend until my senior year in high school because since I was a late bloomer, I looked like a kid and no...you know when in the early eighties, this is your Rambo and it is Reagan and it is—men had to be strong. Of course they were going to go for the guys that had lantern jaw, shaved three times a day, and you know-- football players and they are not going to look at some bookworm.

When I got to high school by then I was working at Burger King, as well as a paper route and so my studies began to suffer. And when I turned 16, the depression—this was the summer before my senior year—the depression really, really hit. I was doing my best to be a good student and in fact, at the time going into senior year, I was fifth in my class. When I got accepted to Drexel, I stopped caring. I stopped doing my homework, except for English and History. I just simply didn't care. I mean--I was working almost every night at Burger King, until about 11 o'clock at night and then I'd go home and of course you cannot go right to sleep. I had to be up at six o'clock in the morning to get ready for work.

So, again I withdrew within myself and eventually graduated. I graduated number 24 in the class so I was in the top ten percent, but I could give a damn about my schoolwork at that point and then I went to Drexel. But the entire time, junior high and senior high, I kept thinking how unfair it was you know. The girls had become women and they have gotten curves; they have gotten boobs. They are—they had—they got to wear the dress to prom...all of that. They get to go to the mall and walk around with their friends and giggle and enjoy themselves. And boys, again with the cliché, you had to be a man. You know, you did not show any emotion except for anger. Everyone else, you know you never showed emotion at all, you didn't ask for help.

I don't have to you know—everyone knows this—and of course you do not show any sign of femininity, especially in the early '80s. In my school, there was—there were two people in my class that had been suspected of being gay and they got beaten up a lot. Since I was small and slight, they would have picked on me; but at that point, I had been studying martial arts. So, I made an example of one person and that was the end of that. So that was my early education.

I used to do a lot of writing and I used to do a lot of cartooning, and that was my escape, you know from the small town. Again, with the fantasy life, playing Dungeons and Dragons, just withdrawing into myself. I would watch MTV [Music Television] for hours when after it debuted and lose myself in the videos, wish I were the women in the videos.

So... Pete Townson once wrote, "It is amazing how you look back on times of great adversity with the sense of nostalgia and longing". And it is true. I hated my teen years, I hated my junior high--high school years. But yet there were some fun times. I made a few friends. As I said,

sometimes I just think about them. I went to my high school reunion--my 30th reunion as Sophie, surprised the living hell out of a lot of people [laughs]. I mean my friends knew, they knew because I was—I had transitioned once before. But that surprised the hell out of people. By then, several other people had come out as gay; they had moved away though--out of the area, they weren't stupid. And I was not the first trans person in my class. Someone transitioned in 1989 and went stealth. I was the second and for the most part, I would say about half of them embraced me at the... I was flavor of the month. 'Ooh wow look, this one is different, ooh.' The other half just did not talk to me, but those--that half never talked to me anyway. I mean these were the people that--there was one guy who was the star receiver in high school; he once made a spectacular diving catch for a touchdown that won a game, one of the two wins that we had that year. You know what he talked about at the thirty-year reunion? That catch. It was all he had his whole life. And yet here, I mean, I'd done a lot by them. Go figure, so...

LF: Yeah, so then can you talk a little bit about undergrad?

SK: I did two years at Drexel University. My dad wanted me to be an engineer.

LF: Mhm.

SK: And I wanted to go to art school. I wanted to write and draw comic books, but my dad talked me into being an engineer. He said "be an engineer, make the money, then go back to art school." He wanted me to you know use my brain and make money. And I listened to him. I said "okay yeah I will got to Drexel" I had one friend from high school who went there. I had also applied to Penn State and I got into the Altoona Campus. In April of '84, I had already said yes to Drexel and sent money in. I got a letter from Penn State saying "oops mistake, you should have been sent to the main campus. Do you want to go there?" And my dad said "you should go to Penn State."

I was like "no, I already committed to Drexel. I made a commitment and my word is my bond it is all I have, is my word."

He said, "No, you really could go to Penn State you know"

I was like "No, I will go to Drexel."

I was there for civil engineering and I hated it. I thought growing up in a small town that I would love Philadelphia, West Philly. Not realizing I was in Powelton Village. This is the era of MOVE. MOVE was...long story short, they were the ones that got bombed by--had a bomb dropped on them by the city of Philadelphia. They were a radical group. I got mugged four times at Drexel, first time on my first day. I absolutely hated it. I hated every minute of it. It was all...the city was just concrete and there was no green, no grass and I did not realize how much I missed that.

My first year, I visited my friend--my best friend Dave up at Penn State and I was like "oh my god, this is..." I had never been there. "This is what a college should be. I mean this is gorgeous, this is amazing and look at all these women and wow everyone is having parties. This is great." So the next year, my grades were beginning to slip and I just didn't want to be an engineer. I had

done a co-op, I hated it, it was boring. And I decided I should be a teacher, teach English and History. So I transferred to Penn State. For me, that was a giant leap. I was...for me to change anything back then, I was too scared. Even though I had been a paramedic, I was a volunteer paramedic, running into burning buildings, but that's different. That is not changing my life, it is risking it and a part of me hoped that I would die by hero's death, but I transferred to Penn State. At the time, that was the biggest decision I had ever made in my life and it was the best decision I made in my life.

At Penn State, I had studied education. I learned—I mean I became a member of the best fraternity on campus. I met so many wonderful people. You know, it was a golden time in my life. You know, I actually had girlfriends, adult relationships, not just this hand-holding, giggle giggle. I became who I thought I should be, but unfortunately, that person was not a very good person. I graduated in 1989 with a Bachelor's in education—secondary education after doing my student teaching, so...

LF: Can you talk about your experience in Greek life?

SK: I pledged Phi Kappa Sigma in spring of 1985 at Drexel. Phi Kappa Sigma, at that time at Drexel, didn't have a house. So pledging meant running from brother's apartment, to brother's apartment to brother's apartment and doing chores. We had to answer tr--questions. We had to learn all of the things you had to learn. We had to learn how to do the Greek alphabet forward and backwards before a match would burn down and burn our fingers, and we all did it. Thirty-something years later, I can't do it. I can do it forward [laughs], but... I joined because they asked me. I was like "oh my god, someone wants me to join something?" You know, all that I knew about fraternities was Animal House and I remember the one line that...you know "they can't do that to our pledges, only we can do that to the-- our pledges". And that sounded great, someone is going to be defending me, not really, it's the other half of that.

I figured "Okay, men join a fraternity. I will be a man. I will be a manly man. I will be a frat boy". And there were some great guys in that house, but I hated Drexel so much that I had to get out of there. And I remember one of the brothers saying to me, "I cannot believe you are leaving. You're among the people who love you." And this is a big, strong, like you know weight lifting type dude saying this; I was like "wow." But it didn't stop me, I transferred up.

When I first got to Penn State, I stood out like a sore thumb. I did not know how to play it cool at all, I was a dork among the popular people--these were all of the popular kids. I quickly adapted and I quickly learned to stay in the background, but I was active. So if there was something that needed doing, I would volunteer. If there was a crazy band for homecoming, I was in it. Something that needed to be done around the house, I was there because I figured if I did all of these things, maybe they would see that I am serious about this Phi Kappa Sigma thing and it worked. The following year, I was living in the house as an officer. Eventually, I became officer of the year, the first one. I was in charge of the scrapbook. I was house photographer. My nickname was Lens.

There I saw a different model of manhood. As I said these were the popular guys. We had our parties on Thursday nights and Saturday nights and socials on Fridays with our top sororities.

Now, of course, they would not even look at me—those girls. I mean they were looking for the big, buff guys who were formal football players and you know, the one guy—his dad owned a Kentucky Derby winner and owned a Sparkomatic car stereo, which was a very lucrative brand back then. So we are all talking about the rich kids here. But I saw—these people actually comported themselves—yeah they were young—they were boys and you know they are teens and 20s. But, when it came to representing the letters, they took that very seriously. You did not reflect badly on Phi Kappa Sigma. They were very serious about that. And through the fact that I was devoted to the fraternity, that is how I gained acceptance; and also, because I could drink so much. I mean I could outdrink 99.9% of them and I was a scrawny, little kid.

A lot of them treated me like dirt because I was a transfer. I was not a ‘true skull.’ Our symbol is a skull. But eventually, I made some very dear friends, who I am still in touch with to this very day. I am only in touch with one of my pledge brothers from Drexel. I could not even tell you where half of them are. But some of my brothers at Penn State, some of them I am very close to.

In fact, yesterday I got an email from the Executive Director of the National Fraternity. They are going to amend the bylaws about transgender members. They asked me to be on the committee, the Bylaw Committee. Apparently, there are three of us within the entire fraternity who are trans and including one of the Executive Director’s pledge brothers. He’d found out about me because of my blog talking about the 125th anniversary of my house, which I attended as Sophie. ‘

So I’d say in the end, although it caused a lot of scarring because being picked on so mercilessly; in the end, being a member of Phi Kappa Sigma was a very positive experience and continues to be now. When I went to the 125th anniversary, all but three people embraced me, were saying ‘great, awesome. Let’s drink’. And that was that. So...

LF: Okay. Let me see what I want to ask you now [background noise of coughing].

SK: [picks up drinking can] Product placement [chuckles, takes a sip].

LF: Can you talk about your—pursuing your Master’s? What that was like?

SK: When I was working at a company called Games Workshop, I worked there from 1994 to 2003. I did a lot of training, I trained people and I helped write the Sales Training Manual. Why? Because I was the only person with an education degree at first. Eventually, we hired a few more people with education degrees. I got interested in Instructional Design and I was like, “you know what? Maybe this is something I could pursue.” So I started looking into it and when we moved—when my wife and I moved to Pennsylvania, we moved in with her mother. And her mother said ‘yeah if you move in...’ Her—back up. Before we moved up to Pennsylvania, my wife’s father died of cancer. So her mother did not want to be alone, so she invited us up to stay with her. “Rent-free” and she would pay for my Master’s degree. How can I say no to that? Especially, since I was losing my job. Of course, it wasn’t rent-free and I did have to pay for my own Master’s degree. But I decided I was going to pursue the Master’s degree and through that, get a really nice paying job in Instructional Design; which when I started my Master’s degree, there was a great demand for it. When I finished my Master’s degree, we were in the second Bush recession and demand for instructional designers was gone. If you—instructional

designers—if a company wanted an instructional designer, they would hire a contractor. There were no permanent positions anymore. So I graduated into that, it was great. So I had a lot of contract jobs that which didn't pay well. And when I transitioned, those jobs dried right up. I have not got a call since I transitioned. So that is three years—three and half years.

LF: You touched on it already, but can you sort of talk a little bit about your occupational history?

SK: I am sorry, again?

LF: Your occupational history, your jobs you held and stuff like that.

SK: My first job was delivering papers.

LF: Mhm.

SK: The Evening Phoenix, which was cool. I did my brother's football route during football season. I was 13 and I would do all of the work and he would pay me five dollars. He would do all of the collecting and he would make a couple \$100 and I would get five dollars for doing all of the work. Yeah that pissed me off. So eventually I got my own paper route and parents were like "well you have to do his." [sucks teeth] No, I don't. I'm doing mine. If he does—if he wants to do a paper route, he could not play football so of course he quit—not football, he quit the paper route. I worked the paper route until I was 15 at which time I got a job at Burger King.

Burger King had just opened in Spring City and this was a major big deal. 'Oh my god, fast food in Spring City.' You know, this was the premiere job for a teenager to have too and I somehow got in—a friend of mine was in there and he got me in. I worked there through high school and got very good at it and made some good friends, as good as they got at high school. And a lot of the popular people worked there too. After graduating high school, I left—I quit Burger King because—and got a job at a sewage plant. I lasted a week. I hated it. It's the stereotypical crap job, sewage plant. And then eventually I worked at an old age home and went to Drexel. I worked a work study there and then I did an internship, which was at (____???) Standards and Thomas (?) where I did surveying. Hated it. Then I went to Penn State. While I was at Penn State, my first year, I worked at Burger King at Penn State because those were the only skills I had. And through that Burger King, I met two women who would become my first girlfriends at Penn State. That summer I was--took bartending training--and from then on in from college, I was a bartender. After graduation, I bartended and I waited tables. Eventually—I got a job—a couple jobs freelancing, including for bowling. But I pretty much, except for the exception of here and there, I was bartending and waiting tables until 1991 when I got a lucky break and got into the gaming industry working for chess games distributors. I worked there for a few years and then I quit because the situation had become intolerable. I was overworked—severely overworked and underpaid. And the owner was pretty much—played favorites and I was not the favorite, far from in fact. So I got a job with Games Workshop, which is at the time, the leading manufacturer for toy soldiers in the world. It is a UK [United Kingdom]-based company. Their

US [United States] office was in Baltimore so I moved down there. Eventually my wife moved down there too. She works in the financial industry. And I worked there for nine years. I would still be working there today if it were not for...the way things fell out. My job was eliminated. I moved back up here, got a job with the bookstore, it was the first thing I could find.

While working at the bookstore, I found another job. I worked for Vanguard, which is financial services. You know, that is pretty much it. I would then get some contracts—you know, get some instructional design jobs while still working at the bookstore. I worked full time at the bookstore in 2013 as head cashier and in early 2014, I transitioned on the job with their full support. I am still with the bookstore. I have been looking for another job for over ten years...nothing, nothing at all. I cannot even get in at Wegman's, it is grocery stores. So I worked for below poverty level wages. The only reason I can afford this small apartment is because of my roomie—I have a roommate, and my wife occasionally will help out.

LF: Yeah

SK: She and I are separated, so...

LF: And—you—do you think that the reason you have had trouble finding employment is because of your transition?

SK: I have no doubt in my mind.

LF: Yeah.

SK: None.

LF: Yeah, because there are no protections in--

SK: Not in Pennsylvania.

LF: It's checkerboard. Depends on municipalities.

SK: Mhm.

LF: Depends on municipalities.

SK: Let's face it. There is—all you have to do is a quick internet search and they find out I am trans, even without looking at me.

LF: Yeah.

SK: I went to one interview a couple summers ago, in which I sat down and they said “so, tell me about being transgender” and I was like “excuse me”. So, that was the end of that.

LF: Yep [laughs]. So was there any sort of religious presence growing up in your family?

SK: No, my family were not religious at all. Religion is very private to me. I am a Christian and I strongly believe that religion should be a private thing. Christ said on a sermon in the mouth that you should pray privately, you should not make a big show of being—of following God, something the Southern Baptists could learn from. I am still a Christian and Christ was a liberal. He preached “love everyone.” There were not any exceptions to that. “Help everyone.” There were not any exceptions to that. Republican Jesus is not Christ. If you don’t mind, that is all I will say on that topic.

LF: Okay. Would you mind answering whether or not you practice publically or you are a member of a congregation or anything like that?

SK: I have not been a member of a congregation since college.

LF: Okay—

SK: I prefer to think I have a personal relationship with God. I do pray every night. I would dare say I can quote scripture better than any Southern Baptist, so... I have a dear friend, Ally, who used to be a Pentecostal preacher and she is now an Atheist because the way the church treated her when she came out

LF: Oh okay.

SK: And it is fun watching fundamentalists try to debate her online and she just runs circles around them because they expect you know, we are the devil so there is no way we could know scripture.

LF: Yeah. And so, there wasn’t any sort of affiliation for you at the military? You never sought that out?

SK: I am an Army brat. When I was in my teens, I wanted to join the Marine Corps. My father would not let me [background coughing]. I really do not want to go into that

LF: Okay

SK: So I did not join and it was one of the biggest regrets of my life. I wanted to serve my country. So instead of serving in the military, I became a volunteer paramedic and that is how I served. I have nothing but respect for people who have served. I think that they have gotten a raw deal, specifically from Republican presidents who keep cutting their funding and then of course, we all know what happened a couple of days ago. Many of my friends are military. One of my dearest friends is a Major in the Marine Corps and works for the Pentagon now.

When I was getting therapy for depression before I transitioned, back before I even reawakened, one of my therapists said it was a good thing I did not join the military because with the way the depression was hitting me, that if I had seen action, I would have probably snapped. I would have probably—you know PTSD [Post Traumatic Stress Disorder] would have crushed me. I

have a little bit of PTSD because of my paramedic work and because of things that happened when I grew up. But as I said, it was one of my greatest regrets, not serving. So...

LF: And then... Can you walk me through your coming out process?

SK: Ooh [pauses, takes a breath]. When I first started dressing again in 2008, I figured I was just a crossdresser and that I could do this just once a month. So, I lied to my wife. I said I was going to play Dungeons and Dragons once a month—third weekend—third Saturday of every month, I am going to play Dungeons and Dragons. I am going to go out with the guys, which was true but I did not tell her how the guys were dressed [smiles]. Dungeons and Dragons was a complete lie.

I would get a motel room at the Motel 6 and I would go to Amanda Richard's with True Colors Makeup, who is an absolute genius in makeup. I get made up there in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania; then drive all the way back down here, go to the Renaissance meeting, go to Angela's, drink my face off until 1:30 in the morning and then go back to the motel room, shower, clean as thoroughly as I can, and then go home because my wife did not know.

Overtime, the lies became too much. I hate lies. I hate being lied to. I hate lying. I am blunt to the point of—I mean I am truthful to the point of blunt, character flaw. So the idea of lying to the woman who I said I would devote my life to was crushing me. In fact, I even got—I write for Transgender Form, T.G. Form, and my first brief for writing for them was “okay, you are the one who is going to talk about how you can hide things from your wife” and I was like “writing opportunity, I'll take it.” But as time went on, I changed that because I was tired of lying and I was tired of teaching other people how to lie.

I came out to my wife in 2012. Her mother was away, it was just the two of us and my daughter. My daughter was asleep when I sat down and I told my wife everything. I told her I had been lying to her. I told her I was a crossdresser, that I was transgender. I had been doing a lot of research, so I was able—yeah I got a lot of help from my therapist and from friends saying you know—saying what not to say, not to overdo it you know. I fully expected her to throw me out, but she didn't. She hugged me and said ‘okay well that explains a lot of things that I had questions about.’ She said ‘as long as I don't see it, you've got your one weekend a month, it is not a problem.’

And so that continued, but I need more. I kept needing more. So I kept asking permission to go out maybe a second time during the month. And I met people—I met the person who would change my life. Her name was Lisa Empanada and she taught me so much about being a woman and about being a human being. So many trans people loved her. And on August 3rd of 2013, she held her coming out party in Baltimore. She is from Baltimore. Her wife accepted her completely, her children accepted her completely, and her family threw her this party. It was her fifty-second birthday, but it was also her coming out day and she glowed. She—it was like she was angelic. And I was like “I want this.” I saw how happy she was and it was a happiness that I did not have except when I was Sophie. More and more, I was miserable being a guy and the only time I really, truly lived was being a woman.

I was like ‘okay, I am going to do this. I am going to do this. I am going to do this,’ but I was like ‘I can’t do this. I can’t do this. I can’t do this.’ Because my wife told me if I ever transitioned, she would divorce me.

On September 17th, 19—Sorry 2013, I received word from Lisa’s wife that she had gone missing. She went missing the day before and at 2:20 that afternoon, I received a text saying that she had been found dead. She committed suicide. She had attempted two other times and I had attempted once already in 1990 and we bonded on that. We talked about it. We—she attempted in April of 2013 and I did my best to talk her back. I called her therapist, you know everything and she survived it, and she said ‘I would not be alive if it weren’t for you’ and she said this, she said ‘we are going to transition sisters. We are going to go through everything together. All of it. You know—you and me together we’re gonna do this.’ And she was my closest friend, and then she’s dead. And I was going to follow her.

In fact, in December of 2013, I had a plan. I was going to go to Penn State and blow my head off behind a (____???) with a shot gun. That was in early December of 2013. Even though I’d promised Lisa that I would transition for us both, at her funeral, looking down at her body dressed like a man. I never met Tom, who was her man—or boy name. I said “I can’t do this. I cannot do this. I cannot live as a man and I can’t transition,” so I decided I was just going to blow my head off

LF: Mhm.

SK: By that time, though, I had started—I had met—started corresponding and met one of my heroes, Linda Louis (sp?). I met her at the Southern Comfort Conference in 2013, which was actually also the last time I saw Lisa alive--was there. Linda had been going through some problems. I won’t detail them, but she needed a place to live. So, I decided I couldn’t do it—I couldn’t blow my head off because I kept thinking about my daughter and I thought about the promise that I had made to Lisa. So in late December, at that point, I had been thrown out of the house. I was thrown out in late August of 2013. My mother-in-law had found out about me being trans and I was given 48 hours to pack up and get out. I was living with the charity of a friend in a house that she owned. She was a rich woman, but she gives all of her time and money to Autism causes. I had worked with her at the bookstore for a while. Linda needed a place to live for a couple of weeks because she was going to move to Florida and I asked my landlord—my friend, if Linda could stay with us for a couple of weeks and she said “sure” because y’know, she doesn’t turn away strays. So in late December of 2013, I went up to Penn State and I met Linda Louise and she lived in the basement and I lived in the second floor.

At that point, I started planning for my transition. I contacted HR [Human Resources] for both jobs I had at the time, which was at Penn State and at the bookstore. And eventually, by the end of December, I had left the job at Penn State because I got the full-time job at the bookstore. So, with HR, I planned everything about the transition. In late December, I came out—I also came out to my parents. I decided I would transition in late February, on the first day of the Keystone Conference—you know the day before that would be my last day as a boy, and then it ended up being February 25th of 2014. I came out to my dearest friends—hope—preferably in person if they were in the area, otherwise they got a video—a YouTube video. I had one for the dearest

friends and I had one for the just—the friends. I reported for work for the first day on March 30th, 2014, my first time at work as Sophie.

That June, we were told that the house was going to be sold. You know, so we had to move out. So Linda and I moved out and we got an apartment with someone else named Zoey. We lived there for a year and then Zoey went back to Iowa to take care of her mother, and then Linda and I moved here. I would not be alive today if it were not for Linda Louise, flat out. Period. I have been through some dark times since then. I was going to commit suicide last September [inhales] because of everything.

LF: Mhm.

SK: I planned that meticulously and then just didn't have the nerve; but, I kept thinking about—you know when I was getting ready to do it, I kept thinking about Lisa. I was like 'okay Lisa, I'm comin'. I'm comin'. [Exhales] but when it came time to actually do it, I thought if I do this, Linda is screwed. She is going to need another roommate. She, at the time, was not making enough to even you know... I would have screwed her over big time and I don't do that to someone who is my best friend. Beside from my wife, Linda will never be Lisa, but Lisa was never Linda. So it has been a rough road since transitioning at the bookstore. I got misgendered a lot, even by staff. As time went on, the more and more I won people over. A lot of trans people come to the bookstore now because I am there. I even had an article written on me in the Daily—by the Daily News--

LF: Mmm.

SK: —the Philadelphia Daily News, which is hanging [points to her left] over there. My wife supports me, but she cannot live with a woman. That is why she stayed living with her mother. She is still there with our daughter. I came out to my daughter two weeks before I went full-time. My daughter—I am trying to explain to her. She is like “you—oh so you”--She was in kindergarten at the time—“are like a butterfly”. “You have been in a cocoon so you are going to become a butterfly.” And I was like, exactly. She has been one of my biggest supporters

LF: Mmm.

SK: My wife has been a big supporter and she has helped financially as well. Otherwise, we would have lost this apartment long ago. I've had a mentor—I have had a lot of mentors, but my biggest mentor has been—her name is Mel, and she kept saying the same thing: “transition has to be the last resort. It has to be.” Because you lose everything—you stand to lose everything, and I did. I was lucky to keep my job. I was lucky to keep some friends. Fortunately, I had a lot of trans friends who were my family. My parents embraced me at first, but not currently.

LF: Mhm.

SK: I have not seen my parents in over a year. My brother, when I told him in December of 2013, he laughed at me and started insulting me. So, I just--you know this is at a restaurant, so I paid the bill and left. And I think I have said maybe three or four words to him since. He then, of

course, lied to my parents saying “oh, I did not do that,” well yes he did, so...He met his sister at the following Christmas 2014, and I think that is when we have passed those two to three words. His wife, his family, they are all really cool; and Linda met them and Linda dazzled them. My parents loved Linda. Linda and I are best friends. A lot of people ask if we are dating. No I am married. Linda is just my best friend

LF: Mhm.

SK: and I could not have transitioned without her so, she taught me a lot about makeup. She is a Hollywood-trained makeup artist. So...Yeah. There you go.

LF: So...

SK: Actually, one more thing.

LF: Mhm.

SK: I was talking to a colleague tonight at work; she is 22 and knows I am trans. I don't go advertising it anymore, because I used to and I have trained everybody now at the bookstore. And it used to just be to get it out of the way: “okay I am trans, get over it so you don't have to keep guessing.”

LF: [chuckles quietly]

SK: But, I don't do that anymore. And she said—you know, we were talking about the Executive Order the other day and how it seems to have given the Trumpees [Trump supporters] extra license to just be mean to trans people because it has been happening. I have seen it on Facebook and [laughs] it must be true; it is on Facebook. But... people who's word I trust them in telling me; and people are just a little colder at the store too-- customers. And I've been getting a lot of heat from customers anyway. A lot of people insult me. This girl says to me that, “it must be really hard. People expect you to be the good trans person. You have to be the example. You have to keep smiling. You have to be strong. You cannot just be you. You have to be the example because you have got a public facing job.”

So all of these cisgender people are like, you know “oh look how brave [bent arm and fist swinging motion] she is.” And I looked at her and I said, “yeah you are right. I cannot—when I am here, I represent the community”

LF: Mhm.

SK: For good or for ill, whether I want to or not, I do.' It is kind of like in college when I represented Phi Kappa Sigma. I represent Penn State. I represent the entire trans community.

LF: Mhm.

SK: And I do my best [laughs]. I am no Jenny Boyle (sp?) and I am no Donna Rose, but I—or or a Mara Keisling but I try to get by.

LF: Mhm.

SK: [Sighs]. It sucks that we have to be—it is just not fair. We were born this way and we are persecuted because of it [shakes head]. So...

LF: Yup [sighs]. So, sort of dialing back a bit, what was the name of your friend? Lisa?

SK: I am sorry. Again?

LF: What was the name of your friend? Lisa?

SK: Lisa Empanada was her trans name. [takes a sip of soda].

LF: I just wanted to make sure so when the person's--

SK: Her actual name was Lisa Ann Marie Newell (ph). [coughing in background].

LF: Okay. I wanted to make sure that the transcriber can jot that down. And then can you go into...

SK: [Shows photograph to camera] Lisa Empanada. This is my little Lisa shrine that I am destroying. Stay.

LF: [chuckles]

SK: I have no Linda shrine. [background talking]. Okay.

LF: And so what was Linda doing before you met her?

SK: Linda has training as an Aircraft Mechanic.

LF: Mhm.

SK: She worked in airports for a while. She then went to Hollywood, trained as a Makeup Artist—transformation makeup, under Jim Bridges who is a very, very much in demand makeup artist in Hollywood. Linda moved back from Hollywood back to Michigan, and was working temp jobs, I believe you were working at Del Corny [Background: Mmhmm] Worked at Del Corny and then suffered a spontaneous collapsed lung

LF: Mhm.

SK: So, that put her out of work, so when I met her she was out of work. She now works retail.

LF: Yeah. And then what job did you have at Penn State that you mentioned earlier?

SK: I was a bartender.

LF: You were a bartender, okay.

SK: And I also worked at Burger King for a while.

LF: And you also worked at where?

SK: Burger King.

LF: Burger King, okay yes, you mentioned that.

SK: Mhm.

LF: Okay, so then you mentioned Renaissance and then also the Keystone Conference

SK: Mhm.

LF: I just interviewed someone who was one of the people who organizes Keystone, yesterday.

SK: Mhm. Tammy.

LF: Yeah, Katie. Katie Ward.

SK: Katie, sorry not Tammy, Katie. Katie Ward. Yeah. Mhm. Okay, a dear friend.

LF: Yeah, no she--

SK: She's amazing.

LF: She seemed really nice. She's pretty.

SK: Oh my god.

LF: [Laughs]

SK: She's gorgeous. Navy veteran.

LF: Yes, yes.

SK: Yes, she is phenomenal. Don't tell her I said that. She will get a swelled head

LF: [Laughs]. So yeah, can you talk about your involvement in the Renaissance and the Keystone Conference?

SK: I have been going to Keystone every year. I have never missed one. All nine.

LF: [chuckles quietly]

SK: Next year will be 10. For those nine, I have spoken at eight of them.

LF: Mhm.

SK: I've given seminars at eight.

LF: Mhm.

SK: Seven were about writing transgender fiction. The last one was about writing your coming out letter.

LF: Mhm.

SK: And next year, it will be again, writing your coming out letter. The first few times going to Keystone, it was "oh my god, several days as myself. Yes!" And I told my wife I was going to an educational conference, which was true. I just did not tell her what the education was about or how I dressed [laughs].

LF: Yeah.

SK: Keystone has become the premier transgender conference in America

LF: Mhm.

SK: Social conference. Not counting the medical conferences now. Southern Comfort imploded, and I understand that coming back, but Keystone is now the biggest. I have been to many difference conferences and Keystone is still the best. It is run by TransCentral Pennsylvania and I can't say enough about the job that they do at that. I don't need conferences anymore. I have transitioned. I don't need a full week as myself, just you know to be myself sort of thing. I go to mentor others now and to meet friends from across the country that I do not see any other time.

LF: Yeah.

SK: But primarily to meet new people and to mentor them. I am a member of the Vanity Club so there's a lot of Vanity Club sisters that go. So, it is about the only time that I see them. With Renaissance, I used to live for that weekend, going to Renaissance and to Laptop Lounge. I was active as I could be, while still being closeted. I do not go as often as I used to now because I work a lot on Saturday nights

LF: Mhm.

SK: so I do not get a chance to go. Kristen King, who runs Renaissance is a dear friend. She does an amazing job with it. They get new people in there all the time. Renaissance was started by Joanne Roberts and Angela Gardner and a few others. Without Renaissance, I don't know where I would be today. Without a welcoming portal into the trans community, that is where I started meeting trans people, people like me, people that I did not have to explain myself to. I did not have to say, "look, this is how I feel" because they are the same. It was simply amazing and I had met some amazing people through Renaissance.

I don't go as often as I used to, in fact it has been a few months since I have gone, like once this year only [laughs]. But, I direct people there all of the time

LF: Yeah.

SK: I support them as I can. If Kristen ever asked me for anything, I will do it. So... we need—we, not just the community but I think the world needs groups like Renaissance, like TransCentral Pennsylvania, and all of the other groups throughout the country. We need to understand that we are not alone. I mean we have got Internet out there with thousands upon thousands of sites and everything, but still there is nothing like meeting someone face-to-face, seeing someone like you, experiencing that one-on-one. There is nothing like it. So... the internet has taken away a lot of it. So I think a lot of the conferences have gone away for that reason, because that used to be the only time that people could get together. Now, with the Internet, you can Skype and that sort of thing; but there is nothing like face-to-face, nothing like getting a hug.

LF: Mhm.

SK: From someone who understands. So...

LF: And then, can you talk a little bit more about your adult family life? Like forming your own personal family with your wife and your daughter. And then your relationship with your family now?

SK: I met my wife in 1991. I was—I did a shift waiting tables, and I waited on her and her grandmother. That was in...and then a week later, we went on our first date; and we have been inseparable ever since. On our second date, we started talking about children's names

LF: Mhm [laughs].

SK: And I did not want kids because I knew what was inside of me, and I was just not a good person. I was drinking heavily. I was fighting. My wife was a godsend. She did her best to steer me to the right. A year after we started dating, we got engaged. And a year after that, we got married. We got married on April 4, 1993. So next year's 25 [laughs].

LF: [Laughs].

SK: I am not an easy person to get along with and definitely not an easy person to live with. [Points to her right] nothing from the peanut gallery over there. My wife-- when I was at Games Workshop—it was like a family down there because everyone came from everywhere else, so everyone knew my wife. And they—at our tenth anniversary, they elevated her to sainthood; and at our fifteenth, she was elevated to godhood for putting up with me.

LF: Mhm.

SK: And as I said, she is one of my biggest supporters. She told me when I had to transition, that I did not have a choice, that it was either that or I was going to blow my head off. She said, “I love you too much to stop you. You know, I love you too much. I—you have to be you. I understand. I do not understand why you have to, you know, because I cannot comprehend it but I know that you are miserable and you have to do this.”

And she’s been--she supported me, but again she is Catholic--very Catholic and she does not want to live with a woman. Our daughter was born in 2007. I did not think we would be able to have kids, but surprise! [Laughs]. I was there—I was able to live with them for the first five years of her life.

LF: Mhm.

SK: And then I got thrown out. The day I got thrown out is still one of the hardest of my life.

“Where are you going daddy? What is happening?”

“Oh, I have got to go away for a while”

“Why?”

She still does not know the truth as to why I left. We told her it was because I needed to change, I needed to grow.

LF: Mhm.

SK: It was not because mommy and I did not love each other anymore, and it had absolutely nothing to do with her. But, I just—I needed—this was something that I needed to do. She still thinks that. The truth is, I was thrown out by her grandmother.

LF: Mhm.

SK: And my wife does not want her to know that yet. She’ll learn it eventually.

LF: Mhm.

SK: Probably after her grandmother passes, but her grandmother is healthy as a horse, so... I see my daughter about once a week, if that. She has fully accepted me as trans. She brags about me occasionally. "This is my transgender daddy." She still has a little problem with pronouns now and then

LF: Yeah.

SK: [Inhales] She has separation anxiety because I mean out of nowhere, daddy got up and left. So, that is going to be something through the years.

LF: Mhm.

SK: When I see her, I do my best to be a good parent. You know, when I was growing up, my dad never, ever, ever told me that he loved me. The first times I heard the words "I love you" out of his mouth were when I told him I was transitioning. I make sure to tell my daughter every time that I see her that I love her.

I think my being trans is going to be good for her because she can see you know, it is okay and you know, it is human. Her grandmother is a very prejudice person and a Trump voter [laughs] and I am doing my best to model better behavior.

LF: Mhm.

SK: You know, I am trying to be as good a parent as I can be given the situation. [background noise]. Her mother is an amazing woman and is pretty much raising her by herself. So I see her when I can

LF: Yeah

SK: It tears my heart out that I cannot see my daughter. I did not want kids, but yeah now I have one you know

LF: Mhm. Yeah.

SK: And she loves Miss Linda too.

LF: [chuckles] Is there anything about your relationship with your biological family that you would like to touch on? As an adult?

SK: [clears throat] With my mom being in Scotland.

LF: Mhm.

SK: Her side of the family I barely know. I have only visited Scotland once. She had an older brother and a younger sister. The younger sister has passed. She had two children. I don't even

remember their names. I only met them once. The older brother had two children, of which the elder was a daughter. Her name is Ann and she guessed that I was trans before I even told her

LF: Mhm.

SK: She is an amazing woman. She is a nurse in Scotland. She has five children, two of whom—the youngest two are twins and who are model gorgeous. I am serious they could be models. And they had been some of my biggest supporters. Here in the U.S. [United States], my father is one of six—he is third of six. His youngest brother is dead already--cancer. Every male in my family on my father's side has had cancer.

I have always been, among my cousins and everything, a bit of a black sheep. Again, I kept to myself. But, being quiet, being a runt, I always felt like the outcast. My cousins never treated me that way. My cousins were always very good to me. Some in particular were fantastic to me. I barely speak to them. The only cousin who has ever met her cousin Sophie is my cousin Brenda, and she lives down the Delaware, across the street from my parents pretty much. My parents retired to Delaware. A couple of my cousins do not speak to me because of my transition and because of politics. They are Trumpees. I do not know—actually I do know what the family in general thinks about it. I have been told that I am an embarrassment to the family name. So, I am guessing that is just from my father's generation. There are a lot of people from my father's generation who are not good people. They are racists. They are you know... but some of them are very good people. I would love to meet more of my cousins as my true self.

LF: Mhm.

SK: But I do not think I will ever have that opportunity, so... None of my uncles or aunts have met Sophie. And my parents, as I said, we do not talk.

LF: Yeah.

SK: So, my parents came up here a few weeks ago.

LF: Mhm.

SK: I thought I had to work and I just told them that I had to work, you know I emailed them saying that I had to work. So, they saw my wife and they saw their granddaughter, but they did not see me. My choice.

LF: Yeah

SK: So...

LF: And anything else about your immediate family's acceptance of you that you would like to touch on?

SK: [Clears throat] It is odd. I have gone through most of my life hating my parents.

LF: Mhm.

SK: Hating being told that I was you know, unwanted--the beatings, the psychological and all of that. And then they embraced me when I came out and I thought, 'oh my god, I have got parents' and I had hope. And that's changed.

LF: Yeah.

SK: My parents are getting up there in age and my dad's in poor health. I mean let us face it. It is only a matter of time. I mean what more to do...we're all mortal after all. I do not know how I will feel when they are gone. Does that make me a horrible person? I really don't know. You are supposed to love your parents: "honor thy father and thy mother" and I do honor them and I feel duty to them, but I don't like 'em.

LF: Yeah.

SK: They did their best--

LF: Mhm.

SK: with what they had to work with.

LF: Yeah.

SK: with the way that they were raised. So...

LF: We don't get to choose our biological family.

SK: I have a wonderful family now

LF: Yeah.

SK : My trans family, my friends... great people

LF: Yeah.

LF: And is there anything you would like to touch on in which your trans identity has touched on the other sort of spheres of influence in your life? So either your civic and political engagement, your social life, religious life, spirituality?

SK: I will go the (___?) on that one. God created me this way

LF: Mhm. I don't know why, but I was born this way; and if you are going to go with the fact that God created us, this is the way that God made me. And when a fundamentalist gets in my face, I am like "God made me this way to challenge your beliefs, to show—for you to show how Christ-like you can be, and you failed" to piss them off.

LF: Mmhmm].

SK: I am perfectly comfortable with the fact that God made me who I am. I was born this way. I do not know why. Was it an accident? Was it an oops? I don't know. But it does not matter does it? Because it is the facts.

LF: Yeah.

SK: So, that is where the spirituality part of it goes. I have always been a liberal. I've always felt—I have always cheered for the underdog. I came up in my early years; it was the whole Watergate thing. And I remember watching my dad glued to the TV [television] for the hearings. And of course since there was only three channels and one TV, I was watching it too. My dad taught me to revere the President and then this was going down.

Like many people of my generation, I began to look at many politicians with a jaded eye. Then, the [Ronald] Reagan era hit. Reagan was a master at making people feel good, but Reaganomics was a complete and total failure. I knew it from the time. Then, there was that whole treason thing, you know, selling arms to Iran. But, right-wingers do not call it treason. They are like, “well you just do what you have to do.” No that is treason.

And you know the whole AIDS thing, he called it gay cancer, he completely ignored it. How many thousands died? I pro—I did a lot of protesting in college: South Africa...pretty much you name it, I protested it. And I stopped for a while, until W [George W. Bush] got into office. I will not say he was elected. Then, I became very political again, because this is a travesty.

LF: Mhm.

SK: This is-- you know, this is not going to end well for our country and it didn't. And then I stayed political all through the Obama years, watching the obstructionism, that sort of thing, hearing the racism, and now of course...I have gotten even more political since transitioning because I had to be

LF: Yeah

SK: I mean, the odds are stacked against us hardcore

LF: Mhm.

SK: And I firmly believe that unless we are active, unless we get our voices out there, I—a lot of people do not agree with my view on this. I really think that Trump and his minions will come for us. You know, that this ban, even though it was a distraction, is only the beginning. Right now, we are ‘not fit to serve in the military.’ What is next? We are not fit to hold jobs? We are not fit to be parents? Not fit to live in proper society? Does any of this sound familiar? Because it happened before. I am scared to death.

LF: Mhm.

SK: But I am not going to let them see it. So, that is how my politics have been affected by being trans. My social life is 99.9% with my trans friends

LF: Mhm.

SK: I have some friends who are not trans, but not many of them left. Most of them pledged support and then just backed away, as I was told to expect. Most of my social life is actually going out with my roommate and going to dinner or something like that--or going out with my wife and my daughter. Occasionally, I will see other people. I started playing Dungeons and Dragons again.

LF: [chuckles quietly]

SK: Being trans, [sighs] is only part of who Sophie is

LF: Mhm.

SK: But unfortunately, it is all... How do I phrase this? Being trans has become my life. My friends are trans, my politics are trans. I am seen at work through the lens of 'oh, she is trans.' I walk out the door, people look at me 'oh; she is trans' because I cannot hide. I am six foot one. I got aircraft carrier shoulders. I mean, I got lucky with the boobs. But I stand out, and I understand that. Thanks God. So as much as I would just like to be Sophie or any other woman in the world, that is never going to happen. I have made my peace with that, so... I have always needed to help people. That is why I was a volunteer paramedic. That is why I went into education instead of going into a job that makes money

LF: Mhm.

SK: I am part of a population now that needs all of the help it can get [smiles]

LF: Yeah.

SK: So... Being trans has become my life, and I fear that it will be until the day I die. I wish it were different.

LF: Mhm. Yeah. So can you—we kind of talked on this already, but can you talk more about how your trans identity has affected your employment?

SK: My employer supported me fully

LF: Mhm.

SK: In my transition. I went to Keystone and while I was away at Keystone, they sat every single employee of that store down and explained everything. And they were very clear to me that there were to be no problems; that when I came back from Keystone, that I was Sophie. Of course,

there were problems. People, you know, made mistakes with the pronouns, with the name, and that is to be expected. But as time went on, it lessened. I still hear it almost daily from customers and for a while, I was hearing it from management. And it actually got to the point where actually, I had to make some complaints. I had to be the squeaky wheel. That is not good for one's position.

I have applied for other jobs. I have got a Master's degree for God's sakes. But even if I got a phone interview, they would do a little research and find out I am trans. I mean, I am guessing, and that would be the end of that. We have no protections in this Commonwealth.

LF: Yeah.

SK: I have applied for positions with, like for example, Equality Pennsylvania, National Center for Transgender Equality. I guess I am not young and (____???) enough. I don't know. I have a blog. It gets a ton of hits a day. I have been published in the *New York Times* and international magazines. I have been asked to sit on a committee for my fraternity about trans issues. None of this apparently is good enough to get a job with one of the trans organizations. It is not even good enough to get a job stocking shelves at a grocery store. I am lucky that I have the job I have now because if I were to lose it, the only other thing I could do (?) is drive a lift or something. I have no illusions (____???) get fired (____???). Is that a defeatist attitude? I don't think so. I think it's just realistic. Who is going to hire a trans person who looks like me, in a customer-facing position? (____???). Corporations want to cut down to (____???).

LK: And so the video has cut out because we ran out of battery. No totally fine. We are going to continue, on a laptop continue recording. [SK: There is a plug right back there]. I hope we should be good, thank you though. What was that? I forgot to charge another battery, so [SK: Oops] cannot switch them out. [Laughs] Yeah so you can do whatever you want now. So we are going to start with the second half of the interview I guess. So, I am here with Sophie and what did I want to ask? [SK: This means I can sit here with my drink and (____???)] [Laughs] Yes totally. So can you tell me about how you think your—since you have this Master's in education, how do you think your trans identity has influenced any sort of (____???) into education?

SK: I have been speaking at universities [LF: Mmhmm]. I have spoken at Penn State. I have spoken at Villanova. I have spoken at (____???) School District. I have taken training on being a trans trainer. I am thinking about getting my doctorate in Women's Studies [LF: Mmhmm]. [Coughing]. I would love it if I could make teaching trans 101 that sort-of thing, trans issues a career. Some people have managed to do that. (____???). But I know how to teach. I know how to train. I am good at it. I am very good at it. And I do not say that because (____???). I say that because I have been told. So if I could do that and help the community, definitely I would be happy. If I got the doctorate, it would probably be from Penn State [LF: Yeah], at least make it sweet [LF: Laughs].

LF: And then, can you talk about the—what was I going to say? So the evolution of your political identity, sort of what it has been like. I would guess from like [President Bill] Clinton on.

SK: Well, as I said, I was not as political during the Clinton years. [Coughing]. I saw how the Republicans after 12 years of Republican rule, they wanted to punish the Democrats for winning. How dare they? You know, so they just started anything possible to talk crap about Clinton. Clinton, of course, was [laughing] a very flawed man. But, he still managed to work together with the Republicans because the crap political climate began in 1992 with (____???) , in which they began putting party over—the interests of their party over the interests of the United States. And it just kept getting worse and worse. The right-wing talk media just kept escalating, escalating; and I saw it. You could see it going through. And then W [George W Bush] hit and the right-wing just had a field day. They were raiding the treasury (____???) . There are some who will say that Bush caused 9/11 [referring to the September 11, 2001 Twin Towers Terrorist Attack], like he was behind it. You know, that whole (____???) that sort of thing. I am not saying I buy that, but I will sustain the argument because it was under that administration that I was found that—I mean with chain and outing spies, that is treason. It seemed like every week there was another outrage. Every week, I felt that they could not sink any lower. Any evil was not too low for them. (____???) shot a lawyer in the face while drunk, and the lawyer apologized. That is power. And then eventually President Obama was elected. And the Republicans decided instantly that they were going to party over country. You know, they are not going to let a Black man run this country, especially not a Democrat. We all know that. He was a friend of the LGBT, especially trans people. And then last November—I used to say that damage done by W was generational, so it took generations to fix and we are still working on it. Obama did miracles to keep the economy going. I really wonder how the United States is going to survive [President Donald] Trump and the Republican Party because they are all complicit. I really do not know. Have I then become more radical over the years? Yeah, because I had to. I still believe my politics are that everyone, every person in the world, not just in America, deserves basic human rights. And that we are in this together. That we—if someone has fallen, you help them up. That makes me a Liberal. I am Independent, I am not a Democrat. More and more, it seems that the philosophy of the opposition is to kick them down and keep them down, and then blame everyone else. Blame the transgender people for actually daring to be in the military. You get the idea. My politics will always be the politics of justice. If President Obama had done just one of the things that Trump has done, he would already be impeached and I would have been howling for his blood too because that is—it is against America and but he did not. A scandal-free presidency. And now we have Trump. I said it when he was elected, I literally do not believe that I will survive a Trump presidency. I literally believe that either one of his minions will be emboldened to cause violence against me or somebody will kick down that door. Is that bigotry? Probably. But that is how—nothing has changed in my opinion. [LF: Yeah] So that is my politics.

LF: And can you go into how your trans identity has emboldened, that sort of (____???) political interests?

SK: Being trans makes us the ultimate underdog. We are extremely marginalized. I am lucky. I am White. At least I have that going for me. Trans women of color—they are get far worse than I do because they have got the racism too. Yeah. To be part of that marginalized community, to be and still needing that justice, still fighting for that justice, that seems so elusive, especially today. Silence is complicity. We have to fight. It is not even a choice anymore. I have a voice. I have a blog. I have a very big mouth. I am opinionated. I know how to argue and I know how to agitate. I learned early on how to press people’s buttons; trying to get them to fight, make them to swing first. Unless we, I said this before, as a transgender community all fight together and not each

other, none of this ‘oh I am trannier than thou;’ ‘oh, you are just a cross-dresser.’ I still cannot comprehend that there are trans people who voted for Trump. One of them, a trans person that voted for Trump, said that—accused me of hating, of being a hateful person. I was like, [laughs] ‘I am sorry, what? You voted for Trump and all of that hate and I am a hateful person?’ But, I think the trans people that voted for Trump are learning. Even Caitlyn Jenner got it through her thick skull. [Ben] Franklin said, ‘we must hang together or, assuredly, we will all hang separately.’ That was about the Declaration [of Independence]. That is how I feel [LF: Mmhmm]. And if my voice added to all of those wonderful voices out there, it helped, (____???)

LF: Yeah. And I have been asking this for the last couple of interviews that I have done; but, can you—if there is anything you have not touched on, can you talk about what it is like being trans during the Trump presidency?

SK: It is fear. Being trans has always been about fear. Because to come out, as trans, to violate, in my case, the (____???); to become the worst possible thing that a man can be: a woman. It takes guts. Now, living in an environment where the President of the United States is doing his best to push us back in the closet, to marginalize us. Think about that. The President of the United States is doing his damndest to marginalize us. Even if it is just a smokescreen to prevent the Russian thing [Russian involvement in hacking voter systems in 2016 election], the fact is he has done it and his followers are—have declared open season. I am scared. I am more scared than I have been in my entire life. I have run into buildings that were on fire. I have crawled out of cars that were on fire. I have transitioned and I have never been as scared as I am now. Not just for me, if I died, great, that is just (____???). I only have (____???) and Malinda, Katie, Kimberly, Ally, my dearest friends. I would take a bullet for these people. And maybe someday, I will have to. But, I alone am nothing. (____???). In a way, I am glad that Lisa did not (____???). I cannot imagine if she had (____???). And she was a Conservative Republican until she saw what they were doing to trans people back in the (____???). I am just scared.

LF: And then, sort of switching gears, can you talk about sort of your experiences with journalism that you mentioned, the story done on you, and contributing to the *New York Times*? Can you talk about those experiences?

SK: I have been writing since I was a very young child. I wanted to write real comic books. I wrote a book. [Loud noise] it is right here. It is a memoir (____???) because I figured whatever it was that was driving me that was hurting me that was causing all of that anger and pain, had to have come up during college because that was when I felt alive. I finished writing the book in July of 2008 and October 2008. Oh now, that is what it is. So, the book has become superfluous, although it is (____???). I have written a lot of short stories. I have done a lot of freelance writing. I filled dozens of notebooks of just writing. I write every day. 99% of it, no one will ever see. But there is my blog, there is my column on TJ-Form. I have downloaded twice a month there. I was interviewed on KYW News radio at the trans health conference last year. (____???). A particular phrase I used, ‘trans people have always been here, years,’ you know we are Philadelphians we love cheesesteaks too. We care about the Phillies and the Eagles too. We have always been here, it is just we are now coming out. So, he decided he wanted to learn more. So, he did an interview for me—of me--with me [laughs]. (____???) and I got it framed. It was actually that article that ticked my family—my parents off because they did not want the publicity that they had a trans child like that. But, it also got a lot of haters coming towards me as far as Facebook. I have got a lot of personal messages recently from people, who are like, you know, ‘you are a freak,’ that sort of thing. I am trying to get--submit something to *Huffington*

Post. I am currently writing something that I hope to submit to *Curve Magazine*. I have been published in international magazines. None of that was trans-related though, but I have been published. *New York Times* a few years ago did some trans identities and they asked me to write a piece, so I did. So, I can now say that I was published by the *New York Times*. The Paper Library: that is another thing. If I could write for a living, I am there [LF: Yeah]. My dream was, for many years—I was going to write books, that sort of thing, teach, and stay on campus. That was the dream. My writing is not making a living. (____???) , so I have still got a few years left. **LF:** Yeah. Is there anything about like organizations that you have worked with that be it Renaissance or the Keystone Conference that we have no touched on that you would like to talk about?

SK: Well, as I said, Keystone is just amazing. TransCentral Pennsylvania is amazing. And as I said before, I would love to make a living working for one such organization; but, I guess that is not in the cards. It will be a (____???) . In looking at who—everyone that gets hired, they are all young and passable; and I understand that, more energy. These were kids who were in college and they had no jobs, so they had to agitate constantly. Yeah, I get that. NCTE (National Center for Transgender Equality) does amazing work. HRC [Human Rights Campaign]: jury is still out. A friend of mine, Donna Roseworth (sp?) that worked for (____???) , but she did not last long because of the wage and the way that they treated trans people. They have gotten better. I will give that to them. Equality of Pennsylvania is amazing. (____???) worked there for a while and she is just a dynamo. My sister is in Vanity Club. A lot of people thought and still think that the Vanity Club is just because they (____???) and just a bunch of cross-dressers taking pictures. No, it is a service sorority. So many sisters in Vanity Club go out and educate the public. Many of us have transitioned. That is what Vanity Club is all about and I am proud to be a member. You have to be invited to be a member of Vanity Club and I still cannot believe I was invited. (____???) [Laughs]. I now support Ladies of Vanity Club (____???) . And again, it was like when I was asked, I was like, ‘who, me?’ [LF: laughs].

LF: Yeah. [SK: ____???) . No, totally fine. And then, any important events or turning points in your life that you have not touched on that you would like to talk about?

SK: When I was an EMT [Emergency Medical Technician]—I became to be an EMT at 16, and eventually would become a paramedic when I was in college. When you are 16, you are supposed to be normal. You know, nothing can kill you when you are 16; but, I learned that in a hurry. People younger than me torn to pieces in car wrecks. People I know killed by drunk drivers. I know exactly the smell of a burning, dead body—human body. The last rescue call I was on, I got the (____???) . I still hear her screaming. (____???) . That was a turning point. I would say... Jenny Boylan (sp?) writes about turning points: your life before, then there is the event, and then your life after. It defines you. And if I had to name the biggest one, it would be Lisa’s death because it was my life before and (____???) . (____???) . Another major turning point was Linda Louis (sp?) coming into my life. As I said before, I would not be alive except for my daughter because then she will (____???) . It is—you feel responsible. I cannot explain what it means to be a parent. I am alive because I thought of her. You know, that is why I did not go blow my head off at Penn State, because I thought of my daughter. Every day is a turning point. I thoroughly believe that. A very wise man once said that every morning you wake up, you have a choice: you can either go forwards or you can go backwards, but you cannot stay where you are. That is not an option. You are going to go forwards or backwards. I try best to go forward. Joe (?) said that. Every day is a turning point. Every day I do my best to become better and not fall backwards. I do occasionally: suicidal feelings, darkness, still feel insane and always

will for the rest of my life. I know that. I have made peace with that. Usually at night, or in the morning, I am lying in bed and (____???) and I have got a sword in that closet, a real sharp sword. I could just end it right there. We used to have a lot of knives in this apartment, but not anymore. I got rid of them for that reason. But every morning, I choose to live. So every morning is a new day. A new day to go and get abused by the customers (____???)

LF: Yeah. And then sort of what-- over your lifetime, how do you see the growing acceptance and celebration of the LGBTQ community and what challenges do you think still remain?

SK: When I was in high school, to be gay meant a beating, or worse. And then, of course, it was (____???). And if you came out as gay, you lost everything; so, you had to be closeted. Through time, through people coming out and having their voices heard, eventually, I will guarantee you that almost every American knows someone who is gay. (____???), what is that name again? has written many times—said many times, that you cannot hate someone whose story you know. People know a gay person. There is no way gay marriage would have even gotten to the Supreme Court if there was not some level of acceptance. Yeah, yeah, yeah you always have got your Southern Baptists who are going to say you know, Leviticus this and that and the other thing because they feel threatened, or they are told to feel threatened. You have got to have that bug in you. We are the new Boogeyman, thank you Caitlyn [Jenner]. The more transgender people come out and say this is who I am, you know, talk to me, you know, learn, look I am human, (____???). Maybe someday through exposure to media (____???) the gay community, really. Maybe someday, people will say, well yeah I know a transgender person and that person is actually pretty nice; they are pretty cool. I have said many times that if through my work or through my struggle, if I manage to change one mind, and help one person coming up, that they do not have to go through what I went through, I will call that a good life. I will call my life a success. So, and maybe and just maybe, in my lifetime we will have some luck with (____???)

LF: And is there anything that we have not touched upon that you would like to bring up?

SK: We are born different. We are rare. We see life through eyes that most people cannot imagine. As a tranwoman, I lived most of my life as a man. I speak fluent guy. I lived a lie all of those years. The experience that we have as trans people should be celebrated. We see other things that other people cannot, do not, will not; and we really, someday maybe, will be celebrated. Native Americans celebrate their two spirits (____???). Our voices are important not just to America, not just to our cause, but to humanity-- to add to the miracle of humanity, to the (____???). We add our voices to that song of life. If we—all we have to do is raise our voices and sing along and maybe, somebody will listen. And yeah, that is all that I have.

LF: Okay. That is a wrap, I guess [laughs]. I can do whatever you want with that.

SK: [Singing: feelings, nothing more than feelings]

LF: Thank you so much for sharing your story with me [Background: Sorry if I am too...] [laughs] No, totally fine.