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Title: LGBT Oral History: Sabrina Valente

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Contact:

Archives & Special Collections
Waidner-Spahr Library
Dickinson College
P.O. Box 1773
Carlisle, PA 17013

717-245-1399

archives@dickinson.edu

Interviewee: Sabrina Valente

Interviewer: Shirley Tennenbaum (?)

Date: April 9, 2016

Place: Narrator's Home (?)

Transcriber: Ashley Tucewicz

Proofreader: Amanda Donoghue

Abstract:

Sabrina Valente was born in Baltimore, MD and lived most of her childhood and adolescence in Littlestown, PA in Adams County. She attended Eastern University for an undergraduate degree in Biblical Studies and Wagner College for a Master's degree in forensic psychology. Sabrina has spent all of her career in the mental health field, working in various organizations to help people with behavioral problems or crisis management. She is currently working for the non-profit organization TrueNorth Wellness as a clinical supervisor. In this interview, Sabrina discusses the how her liberal arts education helped to lead her to the LGBT community and her struggle with balancing religious beliefs and her identity. Sabrina emphasizes the importance of being open to change and fluidity in one's sexuality and lifestyle.

ST: This oral history recording is part of the LGBT Center of Central Pennsylvania's oral history project. The narrator for this oral history will be Sabrina Valente. And the interviewer, will be Shirley Tennenbaum (?) and the audio-visual recording technician is Susan Swope (?). The date of this recording is April 9, 2016. Sabrina, at this point I'd like to be sure that we have your permission to record this history in its entirety.

SV: Yes.

ST: Ok. You will have a chance at the end of the recording to decide how the material will be preserved and used for future reference.

SV: Okay.

ST: So, let's just begin at the beginning and tell us about your family of origin, how and where you grew up, and your early development.

SV: So I was born in Glen Burnie - well, in Baltimore, Maryland, my family lived in Glen Burnie at the time, myself and my twin sister, Heather, we were a pair and a seven-pound baby boy, who the doctors told she was having, so there were all the supplies when two of us came, two weeks - six weeks early. And Heather and I were both quite ill and in our early years - particularly early on 'cause we were all so - all so premature. We spent a lot of time in the hospital and we lived in Glen Burnie, Maryland until about eight years old and then the middle of my fourth grade year we moved up to Littlestown, Pennsylvania and we stayed there until - I didn't stay the most of my childhood and adolescence there I didn't - you know, until I went to college. My parents kept living there until about three years ago. They moved, they built a dream home and retired north of the Poconos. So, that's, just me and my sister growing up, and then my mom and my dad, no other siblings. We lived in a kind of a - I mean it's Littlestown. It's Adams County, it's like a rural community. It was a quiet kind of upbringing.

ST: So you went to school – elementary, and high school, all at Littlestown?

SV: Yes, yes, so I started fourth grade in Littlestown Elementary which was Rolling Acres and then the middle school and then the high school there. I went to college. My undergraduate degree was right outside of Philadelphia at Eastern University, in St. Davids, Pennsylvania.

ST: Did your family practice any particular religion, did you – was that part of your family life?

SV: Not initially.

ST: Mhm.

SV: Before we moved here – before we moved to Littlestown we really didn't have any real memories of practicing religion. I know my father was raised Catholic, my mother, I don't really think was faced with any particular religious beliefs. When we moved, we moved to across the street from a church and began attending a church on a regular basis. And then later on, we – towards the end of middle school, beginning of high school years I became involved with a Fundamentalist group that was not a great experience so... My parents still go to church on a regular basis now. They call themselves Christians, and I would say that that's kind of the tradition that they hold most closely to – I don't particularly know that they're any denomination. I really disavowed myself from religion after college. I went to a Christian university. I was really considering going to a seminary and then, I think, things from the past just kinda caught up with me and I really had a – had a big moment three weeks before I graduated from college where I said that I don't believe in God anymore, I don't believe in Jesus, I want nothing to do with this. My parents were really great, and they said that's fine, just finish college 'cause you're three weeks away, [laughs] you can come home, and so I did and I starting working in the mental health field which was my undergraduate degree - my minor was in psychology - but that was the point at which I really – really turned away from the religious faith and I have not found my way back, nor do I really want to.

ST: Well you sort of moved into your education beyond secondary school, and so, you went to college.

SV: I did. Yeah, I went to Eastern University which is a liberal arts school outside of Philadelphia. That was overall a pretty good experience for me. It was a Christian college – American Baptist – but fairly liberal in the practices. We were not required to go to chapel. We had to take like, an Old Testament and a New Testament class but compared to some of these other Christian colleges though, rules and regulations were really not as strict as a lot of the other ones. Well, I thought it was a great - academically-speaking – fantastic school. I think it was very strong academically and gave me a really good basis in a lot of different kind of areas. I studied – I was a biblical studies major at the time. I graduated with a biblical studies degree, and I had really great teachers. I think what I loved most about Eastern was that Eastern gave me the opportunity to really think critically about things in a way that I hadn't been able to do so before. And so, I vividly remember being in my – you know, my classes, my Old Testament and my New Testament classes and thinking – you know, being told, you know there's three major ways of looking at this in, you know, in religion, and most biblical scholars hold on to this one viewpoint but you can think about it this way, or you could think about it this way and there's an offshoot of people that think about it this other way and we really want to present you with all

the options and let you decide for yourself what feels right, and so that was a really powerful experience for me because up until that point I still remained pretty heavily in the first two years of high school and leaning towards the end of it while I was pretty heavily involved with that Fundamentalist group at that point in time and so it was a very... This is what the Bible says, this is what you think, this is – you know, there was no chance for questioning, and I wasn't allowed the formal opportunity to do that, and Eastern gave me the opportunity to look at things a little bit different and really, like I said, critically think about issues. Eastern also gave me the opportunity to – and I would say it was the first chance that I really had to explore some of the feminist beliefs that I held. I had a really great professor there who I, like, stalked [laughs] and I think I took every single class that he offered 'cause he was fantastic. And he was really the first feminist influence that I had in my life and he believed very heavily that all women could have a place in the church despite, kind of what I've been told previously, and so I did a lot of work with women in the Bible in my undergraduate years, and I think it was in large part due to Dr. Mars (?) and his influence. So overall, Eastern was a good experience. Eastern also was particular I think relevant in this context is that Eastern was the first opportunity in which I started exploring the LGBT community and I started thinking about what it meant to be gay and to be Christian 'cause at the time I would identify as Christian. So my freshman year, there was a production of the Laramie Project about Matthew Shepard and I vividly remember going to that and, if you've ever seen it, it's a three act play and I remember walking out at the end of Act One for intermission sobbing, and I remember calling my mom and saying I don't think I can go back in there and watch the rest of this but I have to. And the Laramie Project was not met with a positive response as Eastern, despite the fact that it was a liberal Christian arts college there was still a large number of people who felt that you couldn't not be gay and be Christian, and so it was really met with a lot of protests. The student newspaper office was broken into, because they had published, you know, about this piece. People were not happy that we were talking about – having conversations about this issue, and that was my first kind of exposure to the hate that goes along with being gay at times, in particular if you have a knowledge of faith that goes along with it. And then my senior year, it was interesting 'cause it was kind of like the bookends. So my senior year we had a group called *The Equality Writers* come to Eastern and they were a group of LGBT Christians who were traveling to Christian colleges and talking – having conversations about what it meant to be gay and to be Christian. And so my senior year, I actually came out as a straight ally. I hadn't really – I knew I had some same-sex kind of feelings but I hadn't really identified them yet fully, and hadn't really, like, figured out what it meant for me but I knew that in my heart of hearts that if you were gay and you were Christian that was ok, and God loved you anyway. And so I came out as a straight ally, and that was also met with some backlash with my friends. People that I had standing lunch dates with for years suddenly stopped showing up, my roommate didn't talk to me for an entire – this was right before I got – and this was what led me to be like, I don't believe in God anymore – part of it at least. My roommate stopped talking to me for three weeks 'cause it was right before graduation. I found a – we just started a safe space group called *Refuge and Compass* and so I began heavily involved with that very quickly. And so I met other LGBT people at Eastern who I hadn't known and we became friends very quickly for those three weeks 'cause I think we needed each other. And then those friendships kind of naturally dissolved because we didn't really have anything to hold on to so... So overall I look at Eastern as a really positive experience because it did allow me the opportunity to think things through and to have real conversations but... I think the end kind of tainted some of that, you know. My friends were not happy with me when I said that you could be gay and God still

loved you and you were not damned to this eternal life in Hell. I was encouraged to just really read and pray the – you know, pray and really read the Bible and really seek God’s guidance and I’m like, I’ve literally been doing that for four years, like, this started when I was a freshman, you know. So – so yeah, it was an interesting experience. It’s coming up, 10 years now, I’m going back this October for my 10th year anniversary. I know, I can’t believe it’s been 10 years since I’ve graduated from college. And, Eastern continues to struggle with this issue and continues to wrestle with it and... I’ve really made a stand that until Eastern changes its policies on LGBT students, that I will not donate money to them, so I’m interested to see kind of what happens when I go back. I haven’t been back in a while. But it was a great, you know, like, I feel like I can’t just leave it entirely, even though I don’t believe in God anymore. So much of who I am came out of that, you know. I don’t think I would be the feminist that I am today if I hadn’t had those experiences at Eastern. I don’t think I would critically think about things and examine issues the way I do today if I hadn’t had those Eastern experiences, so I can’t just let it go. So that was my undergraduate, and then I did my graduate degree at Argosy University, which is a master’s of arts in forensic psychology. And I don’t really have a lot to talk about with Argosy, ‘cause it was a – I did the program entirely online, so I really don’t have any experiences other than it was a lot of me, like, sitting my computer ‘till three o’clock in the morning typing and doing homework [laughs]. I completed that in 2011, and then I briefly did a – I did a year of – a second master’s at Wagner University in human sexualities and then I quit that about a year ago - it just wasn’t a great – it wasn’t the right fit for me program-wise, and I already had one master’s and I was kind of like, why am I doing this again? [laughs] Wagner was a good experience too because it was really focused on the sexuality piece, which is a lot of what I enjoy talking about and I enjoy working with, but I also just kind of came to a place where I was like, I’m really happy in my career right now, you know, I’ve been working in the mental health field for 10 years. And, I didn’t necessarily know that I wanted to make a move. And, Wagner was a really great program in a lot of aspects but there were some aspects that I just – didn’t quite fit with me. It was a lot of like, let’s sit and talk about your feelings, which is good, but for me, I’m paying you \$20,000 a year, [laughs] I would like you to teach me something worthy of that, and so I understood some of these like intro-level classes, like let’s sit and talk about your feelings about these issues is really – needs to happen – really experiential learning, but when I got into some of the higher classes I was just like, let’s – you teach me something please. So yeah, so I left Wagner and that’s been my educational experience. And who knows, maybe one day I’ll go back and like, complete a second master’s, or I’ve thought of perhaps pursuing a Ph.D. or a Psy.D. but that’s – that’s a ways down the road now, let’s pay off the student debt I have right now [laughs].

ST: Could you talk about how you got into the work that you did, I mean, it’s almost like somewhere in there, you found a calling.

SV: Yeah.

ST: Ok.

SV: So the work that I’m doing now in mental health?

ST: Yes.

SV: Yes. So, yes, it’s interesting. I started working in the behavioral health field – behavioral health, mental health immediately after college, ‘cause again, my parents were really great and

they were like, you can come home, you don't have to go to seminary, that's fine, but get a job. Get a job, [laughs] you have to pay rent, you're an adult now, get a job. And I had 16 credits in behavioral health for my psychology minor and I – that was all I really needed for an entry-level position, and so I started working as a therapeutic support staff with kids with behavioral problems in the school system for a community mental health agency. And I did that for about a year and a half, and then got a promotion and became a family-based therapist, so working with kids. It all comes full circle 'cause I'm doing family-based now, but this was a while ago. So, working with kids who were at risk for out-of-home placement. So I did that for about a year, and liked it, didn't love it. And, so with family-based you work with a team you were co-therapists so I was working with a master's level therapist and she left. She moved back to her home state of Washington and it just seemed like a good time for me to transition, and so I took a job working at Adams County prison as a treatment specialist. And I really liked doing that and that's how I started my graduate degree – I was working in the prison system at the time... Really thought that I wanted to do kind of correctional psychology the rest of my life and so I started this forensic psychology program. And that was really good up to a point. The prison system is really rough to work in, and I'm a bleeding heart, and so you really have to harden yourself because you're seeing people in and out all the time, and you're really unfortunately not making a lot of progress oftentimes. I think the inmates often pay you lip service, you know. I was – I was sexually harassed there frequently, which was a big concern of mine. I did not feel safe as I was – as towards the end of my year long – just over a year long-ish tenure there, the sexual harassment really picked up from inmates, from other officers who were there. I would file a complaint, and the complaints would be... I was, you know, they would not be addressed. I was told that, this is corrections honey, suck it up, so... I ended up losing my job, the director of treatment resigned, and he had brought me and the rest of the treatment on, and the department on, and he and the warden kind of clashed heads. So anyway, so they fired all the treatment department staff, which turned out to be the best thing that ever happened to me 'cause my sister was like, you were kind of a bitch towards the end there and I didn't realize just how bitter it was really making me. So I moved from that into crisis intervention, and I did crisis intervention work at the agency I'm working for now, *Truenorth Wellness Services* for five and a half years. I started as a crisis worker and gradually worked my way up. I got a promotion to shift supervisor and then I spent the last two years as a clinical supervisor in their department. I loved doing crisis work. I really felt like I was helping people - you know - I was helping people who were suicidal, who were homicidal, really just making an impact on people's lives. But I fell in love with the agency more than anything. *Truenorth Wellness* is an amazing agency to work for. They really value their employees, it's a not-for-profit agency, they really want to see you succeed... and I just really loved the agency. And then, this position with family-based opened up as family-based program manager, and a friend of mine was working in the program at the time and really encouraged me to apply, and I said no for several months, and finally applied just to shut him up, 'cause he wouldn't shut up about it, and then I got offered the position so, I've been with family-based for about six months now, coming up seven. I manage the entire program, so it was a promotion – a pretty big promotion, 'cause I moved from clinical supervisor to program manager, so I'm managing the entire program, I have a team of six there – I have six employees that work for me, doing all the kind of managerial – it's a middle management position so I'm doing all of the managerial tasks that go along with that, so... And I love it, I truly, truly love it. I love working with families, working with kids who are struggling, working with families who are struggling. What I really like about the program is we don't see behaviors - and behaviors

don't happen in a vacuum, and I think so oftentimes, you know – especially with outpatients, like you go and you walk in with the kid, that's great, but then you like, plopping them back into the home situation and the home's in chaos. And if you don't fix the – and change the dynamics and the patterns that are happening in the home, you're never going to change that child, and, you know, the child can only change so much, so... So we're a family therapy program and we work with the entire family, and that's what I love about it. I really love changing kind of these patterns that have been ingrained for a number of years and helping families realize that they can be successful. And I'm just really grateful for the agency that they, like, gave me this opportunity to grow, you know, I think it's not every day that you, you know... I think it would have been every easy for the agency to hire someone from the outside who had, you know, five years working in family-based experience to come in and run this program and, instead they picked someone who was in their own agency and had done it eight years ago for one year, you know [laughs] so... So yeah, I'm just a big fan of my agency. I can't speak highly enough about it, so... So that's what I do now, so yeah, I was kind of a – kind of along the way, I think you're right, I found out that like, the behavioral health field, the mental health field was where I wanted to be and where I wanted to devote my life. I have every intention of retiring with this agency. I really do. I just really hope that... I'd kind of like to continue to grow with it, 'cause it's a great agency and we're making differences in people's lives and I think that's what's most important – for me, that's what's important, you know.

ST: And I believe you also said you do – have done some really important volunteer –

SV: Yes!

ST: - work.

SV: Yes. So I spent two years – two amazing years volunteering with the [undecipherable] at *Planned Parenthood*.

ST: Uh-huh.

SV: And that was fantastic. I was there – gosh, how long ago was it? I want to say it's about two years now. So working with the LGBT youth group and that's been a really, really powerful and moving experience. I wish I could have devoted more time to it. It was something that... you don't realize how much you're giving these kids, you know, like, my role was to come and to help set up tables and chairs and check people in and just kind of hang out, you know. I didn't really do much of the leading groups. I felt like a lot of it was just, you know, be there as an extra support, you know. But when it came time to leave it was really emotional and hearing from the youth how much of an impact I've had on their lives when I was like, all I've done for two years is like, set up some chairs and tables and been like hi, how's it going, do you need anything, I'm here if you do, you know. I mean a couple kids here and there would come and talk to me, and I made some – you know, some really good connections out of that. But I think that the most powerful part of volunteering is that you just – you just don't know – you don't know the impact that you're having on someone's life until it's all set and done. So that was a... something that I look back on with a lot of pride, and I would love to get back into volunteering 'cause it's... I think it's so important, especially for our youth in this community who feel isolated and feel alone and... I know, you know, we know that LGBT youth are at such a high risk for suicide anyway –

ST: Yes.

SV: - that to really just be there for someone is an amazing – an amazing thing. So yeah, I miss those kids. I do.

ST: So you – you identify as an ally?

SV: That's a very good question.

ST: Oh. [laughs]

SV: That's an excellent question. I currently identify as queer.

ST: Ok.

SV: I've gone through a kind of a variety of labels throughout the years. I started – when I first came out I came out as a – as a straight ally, 'cause I felt like that was the safest thing for me to do. I also did not know that the term bisexual existed. It was not something that was ever discussed, so I knew, like, gay and lesbian was a thing and straight was a thing but this middle ground... No one had ever talked to me about that, so – so I started – and when I first came out, I came out as a straight ally and then... how old was I, I want to say about 24, so a couple years after college I came across the term bisexual and I was like - Ah! Here it is! [laughs] This fits me! And so I identified as bisexual for a number of years. I guess I'm currently using the label queer just because I don't know that bisexual is the right fit for me anymore. I'm – I went through this period of time when I was sexually and romantically attracted to men and women and now that's kind of shifted – shifted for a little while, until, like, mostly sexual attraction for men but romantic attraction for women, and now it's kind of like shifting again to mostly sexual and romantic attraction to men, but I still recognize that at some point in my life I had romantic and sexual attractions to females so, I think, like, sexuality's a very fluid and moving thing, and so for me I use queer just as a way to identify that I'm a part of this community without necessarily having to explain, like, that whole history. So that's where I'm at now.

ST: Uh-huh. And have you formed a family or relationships – have you ever been married?

SV: No, I've never been married. That is on the to-do list at some point in time [laughs]. So no, never been married, no children. I've been... I don't want to say single – I've not been in a long-term relationship for a number - for actually since college. I dated on and off throughout that timeframe. I've dated men, I've briefly dated some women, but nothing that has ever really... I haven't – I just haven't met the right person to settle down with. I think I've also been – especially these past five years – I've been extremely career-focused. I knew that once I really found my niche in crisis and I got that, like, first promotion to shift supervisor, I knew that I wanted to continue to grow myself professionally, and so I was very focused on how to do that. I was spending a lot of time at work. When you work in crisis, I mean I was on call, like, all the time, and it just didn't give me a lot of opportunity to really find someone. I was working overnight shift, then I was working night shift, then I was back in school for a brief period of time, and so there just wasn't a lot of... Plus, it's like – I don't know, I live in Hanover and, like – finding, like, fellow liberal feminist men or women who, you know, are democrats and who believe the same thing that I believe in, is very difficult to do in this area. I don't really like to go to the bar to meet people. I tend to – I've been told on numerous occasions that I wear my, like,

liberal feminist democratic bleeding heart on my sleeve [laughs], so – which is fine with me, I’m like – Great! You know who I am from the get-go! But it’s difficult, I’ve found, to find people who are like-minded in this area, so... And I think sometimes I also just don’t let myself – you know, like I have like a zone, I’m like – anything over, like, an hour away, I’m like – I’m not looking to move, I don’t – I don’t want to change jobs, I’m very happy here, and so sometimes, if people from farther away I’m like – Well, unless you’re gonna move here, I don’t know what the point is. So I think some of it is my own just, like, comfort zone that I should probably get over [laughs].

ST: So, aside from your very absorbing work, are you involved in any organizations – feminist organizations or political or civic organizations... Your running club?

SV: I run. [laughs] Yes, so I’m not involved in any feminist organizations yet. I would really like to be, but I haven’t found anything kind of locally that I can join up with yet. I did – I did some campaigning for Barack Obama on his second – his second election. That was my only kind of dive into the political field, but I really liked that, and I have been obsessively watching *The West Wing* on Netflix lately, so I would really like to get more involved in the political field, just because I think, like, it’s really important. So no, but I do run, yes, I’m part of the Hogwarts running club, ‘cause I’m a Harry Potter geek, like, massive Harry Potter geek. [laughs] So we’re a group of – we do virtual runs – we do six virtual runs a year, so you sign up for them and you can run them, wherever you are, and then all the money goes to charity, which is really great. So, we have a saying, changing the Muggle world, one mile at a time. So, we run with this app called ‘Charity Miles’, and it – for every mile that you run or walk, it donates 25 cents to the charity of your choice, and there’s a whole list of charities you choose from. So you just choose one at the beginning and then you run. And so yesterday, I went to the treadmill, and I ran four miles on the treadmill at the gym, and then I donated like – donated a dollar to this - empowering girls worldwide organizations, so that’s fun. That’s been taking up my time lately. It’s a really great stress reliever, and Harry Potter will get me off the couch, if nothing else will. [laughs] And yeah, I’m trying to – I’d like to train – my sister is much better at running than I am. She’s training for a half-marathon. The four miles on the treadmill yesterday nearly killed me, [laughs] like, I got out of bed this morning and I was like, I’m really hot and I’m dying [laughs]. So I would like to train for a 10k. I can do the 5k – 10k is my next goal but that’s a little ways off yet, so... What else – I don’t think that there’s anything else that I really do with my life, sadly. That’s about it.

ST: And I – I’m making an assumption –

SV: That’s ok. Go ahead.

ST: - but I will ask. You were never in the military.

SV: I was not. No.

ST: Ok. I was pretty sure that that was the answer but just to make – make that clear.

SV: My father was, and both my grandfathers were, so I feel like I... It’s important to me, you know, the service. The way - I think that our country is really lacking in the way that we respond to our veterans, I think we could do a lot more for our veterans. And I’m really proud to say that, you know, like my father’s a Vietnam – like I’m the daughter of a Vietnam veteran, and I’m the

grandfather – the granddaughter of two World War II veterans. That’s really important to me. It’s a part of my identity that I take a lot of pride in.

ST: So would you speak to whether your queer identity and issues surrounding LGBTQ. Do they have any influence or effect on other aspects of your life, would you say?

SV: Such as...?

ST: Well, spiritual, you know, family, social...

SV: Ok. That’s a hard question. So, I think – when I think about my identity, I think actually, my parents were – like, they don’t know that I – they know that I identified as bisexual to them for a number of years, but they haven’t heard the queer label yet so they - that might be a new one for them. It’s – I’ve gotten to a point where I feel very comfortable in who I am, and talking about who I am, but it – it wasn’t necessarily always that way. I think particularly identifying – when I identified as bisexual, all the stereotypes that go along with that really play out in society, you know. And so, it was difficult because I would, you know, you go on a date – I’d go on a date with a man, and, like, at what point do you tell someone your bisexual is always, like, the question, you know. So, I tried to bring that up pretty early on, because I felt like, if you were not okay with this then I’m not going to waste my time on you, thank you for the free food, have a nice life. [laughs] So I would try to bring it up very early one, and I think that caused some problems in and of itself. I feel like the stereotype, you know, really plays out, like, guys – a number of guys who are like – Oh yeah, that’s – that’s great, I’m totally down with that, does that mean I can, you know, like... I mean, I had people ask – I had guys ask me for like – if I would make out with my sister, I was like – Oh, please no. I had a lot of the like – Oh, that means I can watch, right? And I’m like, nope! Not going to – no, it doesn’t. It’s like being – as a female being bisexual, or having sexual attractions to women is hot, up until the point that I choose a relationship with a women over man, like, then it’s no longer hot, you know, then I’m just like, the bitch. So that was tough. Telling people... My parents were great; they were very supportive... I mean, to a point. They’re not marching in pride parades, which I would love to get them to do but I don’t think I ever will, but they’re supportive. But telling my aunt and my uncle was, like, caused this huge family drama. I was out on Facebook, and so I assumed – like, my aunt and I are Facebook friends, and so I assumed that, like, she knew, but I really wanted to tell her in person, ‘cause I felt like it was important for her to know. And it caused a huge fight between me and my father. We were supposed to go out – all of us. My aunt was coming into town and we were gonna go out to dinner at this restaurant and he just was like – That’s not appropriate, it’s not appropriate dinner conversation – and I was like, I just... It’s who I am, like, why is this not appropriate, like, you wouldn’t stop me from telling Aunt Roe (?) that I was dating a guy, like why would you – why are you upset that I’m telling her that I’m bisexual, like, why would that be an issue. And he’s just like – It’s not appropriate conversation to have out in public - and I’m like – Who [said quietly] the fuck cares? And that caused a big argument that lasted a long time and never really got resolved the way that I wanted it to be resolved, I think my father ending up calling my aunt – or my mother did, and basically being like – You know, Sabrina’s bisexual – and my aunt was like, exactly what I – responded exactly how I thought she was going to, which was like – Yeah, it’s on Facebook. We love her. No big deal. But I think my father was very old-fashioned and laid back and doesn’t quite understand where I’m coming from, like, why I have to be so open about things all the time. Spiritually... I mean I think that... I don’t wanna blame all my, like, mass exodus from the religion as this core issue ‘cause that –

that wasn't it, but I do think that the experiences that I had at Eastern towards the end and seeing the way in which LGBT people were treated, and continue to be treated by a lot of communities, you know, is – had a lot to do with why I don't have faith in – why I don't really wanna go back to that faith, you know. And I think that... I do a lot of LGBT workshops for my organization. I reach out to the public and talk about, like, culturally confident ways to work with LGBTQ people in the mental health field and the substance abuse field and this topic always comes up and I think that it's so... how do I wanna say this? No matter how progressive our society gets – and we've come a heck of a long ways – I mean, I never thought I would see marriage equality as the law of the land in a lifetime. I mean, I cried that day I stood in the – I stood in the Walmart and cried, like... But we still – we still have, like, the Westboro Baptist Churches of the world [laughs] that stand out with the 'God hates fags' signs and those voices are louder. Those voices drowned out the, you know, Unitarian universalists, and the open and reforming churches that exist and it's... I feel like there's always gonna be somebody out there that's gonna have a problem with this way of life and the identity that we hold and that's tough to reconcile, you know, it's tough knowing that we can have our – we can have marriage equality and certainly we have a long ways and a lot of work, I think, still to be done, but I don't know that we're ever going to get to a point where people are just gonna be like – every single person is just gonna be like – Yeah, it's great – you know. And so, knowing that there are people fundamentally disagreeing with who I am, the way I was created, whether that was by God, or by Adam's exposing, or whatever it was – I didn't necessarily choose this – choose who I was attracted to, you know. I think there's – that that's been tough for me to reconcile, just that idea that there's always gonna be someone who hates me.

ST: You're – You're pretty young. [laughs]

SV: I am, yes. [laughs]

ST: And so... but, would you identify any important events or turning points in your life?

SV: So, the moments – yeah, there was a couple of them. The moments that I think about when I think about, like, who – when did I know, you know, and everybody asks that.

ST: Yeah.

SV: When did you know - and for me, I think for a lot of people, people can identify at very young ages and think back to kindergarten and I didn't have that kind of experience. For me, in high school, I had a very close friend – Kat – who was, like, my BFF forever and we – we had this saying – we used to say that if we were – if neither one of us were married at 30 then we were just gonna become lesbian lovers and get it over with. But I think back to that and I didn't – I don't think that I could really identify at the time what I was feeling towards her, but looking back at it now, I... It was something beyond just friendship, like, there was an attraction that was underneath of all that. My defining “and, I'm bisexual” moment came at this – this same friend Kat's wedding, of all places. I'm going straight – I don't believe in Hell, but I'm going straight to Hell. At her wedding, I got very drunk. I was the maid of honor, and feelings had been brewing for a while, and I – she identifies kind of sort of as bisexual as well. She was drunk, and I was drunk, and she was talking to my parents, and I decided that it would be a good idea to go up and kiss her. So I did. So I just, went up to her and turned her around, and, like, yanked her towards me and kissed her. And, that felt really fantastic. [laughs] And I'd been, like, kind of sort

of playing around with the bisexual label, like – maybe, maybe not, and then I was like – Oh yes. I kissed a girl and I liked it. [laughs] Then I got lectured up by my parents about how inappropriate that was. But regardless – and she liked it too, I just would like to say, ‘cause we still talk about that. So that was a big one for me. I also remember really vividly in college, there was a... Freshman? Freshman year of college, there was a roommate that I had – Christine – and I remember going – it was my birthday, and we had went – and we like walked into town and went shopping and she took me out for dinner, and we spent the whole day together and I remember walking back to campus with her and I don’t even know what she was talking about ‘cause I wasn’t paying attention. I just remember staring at her and thinking – I could spend the rest of my life with you and be so incredibly happy. And I couldn’t – at that point in time, I didn’t really know what that meant or what that looked like, ‘cause I wasn’t necessarily sexually attracted to her, but I think that – that romantic attraction piece where I was like – Yeah, I could live with you – like, this would be amazing, I would be so happy if I would – if we just, you know, could be together. And so looking back at my experiences, those were kind of like the big points in which kind of along the way I went, like, something’s different, you know. And I don’t really know what that difference is. I think that bisexuality gets skipped a lot. I mean, first of all, schools do an absolutely atrocious job when it comes to sex education in the first place and there’s not queer sex education, but if the topic of, like, sexual orientation is even broached at all, it’s very much, like, gay or straight kind of dichotomy that exists. So – So yeah, so I didn’t know, like, that that’s what that attraction was for quite some time. But looking back at it know, I’m like – I kind of – to check it off, I’m like - yeah, that’s what – that’s what was happening, so... Those were the big moments for me. And they’re moments that I look back on with a lot of, you know, happiness. They were – they were great moments in my life.

ST: The interesting thing to me is that you’ve added feminism in and maybe that came first.

SV: Ah, that’s a good question. That’s a really good question. I didn’t start identifying as a feminist until – like, actively using the label to talk about myself – until a couple of years ago. Probably three-ish years ago? Three-four-ish years ago, maybe? And it’s funny – I don’t know that I can – that I can pick out one particular moment and say, like, that’s when I started calling myself a feminist. I don’t have that experience. I think that I started doing work in the feminist field and thinking about those topics in my undergraduate – you know, at Eastern. But I didn’t start calling myself a feminist until... It hasn’t been too long now, but I – man, did I embrace that label. [laughs]

ST: So, have – is there anything that we’ve missed or is there anything you’d like to tell us that’d you’d like to have in your oral history for students down there in the future someplace who might find some nugget that you’re offering?

SV: I think for me the biggest thing that I want people to know is... First of all, it’s okay to be different. It’s okay to experiment with labels, and I think sometimes you get wrapped up in labels and I think that the world really wants to, like, think about people like in boxes, you know, like, if you have a label we can put you in a box and we can know all the things about that box, you know. But, like, we don’t fit into boxes. And so, it’s okay to experiment and to change labels and to change the way that we identify, you know, like, my – my attractions have shifted over the years, I would say, not necessarily changed. I think there’s always been an underlying current of being – having some attraction to men and women. It’s shifted over the years, or whether it’s been more romantic, there’s been times when, like I said, it’s been more romantic attraction,

there's been times when it's more sexual attraction. But the – the kind of the undercurrents have always been there but I've changed the way in which I've labelled myself. And, I think society really discourages people from doing that. You know, maybe you wanna say that if you come out as gay or straight or, you know, whatever it is that like – that's how you have to be forever and I don't think that's the truth. I think it's okay to try on these different labels and to figure out whether or not they feel right for you and then to allow yourself the freedom to change throughout – throughout time and throughout your own personal growth experience in your own personal history. And I think that the world would just be a lot better place if we gave people permission to live authentically without having to defend themselves, you know. Watching people learn how to live authentically has been one of the – some of the things that have brought me the greatest joy, you know, in my work in mental health and particularly in my work with the *Kove(?)* when I was volunteering with them I think of a – there was a young student there who was transgender and the first time he walked in I remember him saying, like – Oh, you know, my name's Isaac, but you can call me Sierra if that makes you more comfortable – and I was like – No, like, this is – this is where you get to be Isaac. And I watched him really transform over a year and a half and really embraced who he was and really live authentically and openly, and that takes so much guts, so much courage, to do that at such a young age because the world is telling you that you shouldn't do this. The world is telling you that to be a feminist, you have to do these certain things, you know. To be bisexual, you have to date men and women equally and your attraction must be equal to men and women, you know. You have to be 50:50. And to, you know, to be a lesbian you can only have ever – you have to be the gold star lesbian, you can only have ever slept with other women, you know. I just think that – that you have to shut out what the world is telling you and find a way to reconcile all those pieces within yourself and then just say, like, this is who I am and this is how I got here, and if in three days or three hours or three years who I am has changed a little bit, then that's okay, 'cause part of life is change. And the person that I am today is very, very different than the person that I was a freshman in college. You would have done this interview with me when I was a freshman in college I would've quite frankly told you, you were both going to Hell, and I apologize for that, but that's where my mind was at, you know. So, part of life is inevitably thinking things through and changing your opinions about things and changing your opinions about yourself, you know. I'm not necessarily proud of the beliefs that I held when I was younger but regardless, those were my beliefs at the time, and so now it's a matter of how do I reconcile that and how do I move forward in a way that acknowledges who I was in the past but says, that's the past me and this is who I am now. So yeah, I think that's what I want people to know. To just – just be open, don't be afraid to be yourself, whoever that is 'cause I promise that there are people out there who are going to love you and embrace you and accept you for who you are. Like, I'm a 32-year old woman who I obsessed with Harry Potter. Like, Harry Potter is – I could talk to you for an hour and a half about Harry Potter. And I – and people might think I'm a little crazy but I found a whole running club of, like, seven hundred-some people, probably all over worldwide, of all ages and genders and orientations and religions who love Harry Potter as much as I do and I got, like, 35 birthday cards from them, you know. So, there's people out there who are gonna love you and embrace for who you are and those are the people that you wanna hold out hope for, you know. Don't – If someone gives you a bad feeling – if someone is not open and accepting of you, then you don't need them in your life. It's okay to get rid of people who are toxic and just believe that there is someone out there – whether that's a soulmate or just a good friend or... I mean, I've never met any of these running club buddies. I'm going to soon – there's a race in Lancaster and a bunch of

us are meeting up for that. But, there's people out there who love you and accept you and you just have to – you just have to find them. And then you're home. So find your home. That's my advice.

ST: Thank you. Thank you very much, Sabrina, for doing this this afternoon.

SV: Thank you guys for coming. This was wonderful. I'm really glad I did this.

ST: Great.