

RUTGERS, THE STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW JERSEY

NEW BRUNSWICK

AN INTERVIEW WITH ZANETA RAGO-CRAFT

FOR THE

RUTGERS ORAL HISTORY ARCHIVES

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED BY

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and

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TRANSCRIPT BY

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Elaine Milan: This begins an oral history interview with Dr. Zaneta Rago-Craft, on April 12, 2021. My name is Elaine Milan.

Shaun Illingworth: My name is Shaun Illingworth.

Zaneta Rago-Craft: My name is Dr. Zaneta Rago-Craft.

SI: Great. Where are you joining us from today, Doctor?

ZRC: I am currently joining you all from Long Branch, New Jersey.

SI: Okay, great. Go ahead, Elaine.

EM: Okay. Thank you, Dr. Rago-Craft, for joining us today. If it's okay with you, I'd like to start with some questions about your early childhood. When and where were you born?

ZRC: I was born in Trenton, New Jersey, January 6, 1988.

EM: Is that where you grew up?

ZRC: No. I primarily grew up in Long Branch, New Jersey.

EM: What was it like growing up in Long Branch?

ZRC: It's a special kind of place. I think New Jersey is fairly segregated around race and economics. I think Long Branch, at the time that I was growing up, for the most part, was fairly integrated. We had a lot of racial diversity, and I think part of that was because it was a working class to middle-class town. I went to public school for most of my childhood in the Long Branch School System, and I feel like I got to meet a lot of different people, which you don't always get to do in New Jersey.

EM: What was it like, the public education system at Long Branch? What were your experiences?

ZRC: Well, looking back on it, I see a lot of inequity. I think as a child, though, I really enjoyed it. We had a lot of resources. We had gifted programs and different academic areas within the elementary school system. But, at the time, you really got kind of categorized into different paths from a very young age, and that's, as an adult, what I realized was inequitable about it. If you were in the "Gifted and Talented," is what they called it, classes, you would pretty much be tracked to be in the AP [Advanced Placement] classes and honors classes in high school. We had three different elementary schools, and you ended up being with the same folks in middle school and high school, even though there was only one of those institutions in town. I think there was a lot of academic tracking and sorting that I didn't realize as a kid, but as an adult, I can see.

I also had access to a lot of extracurricular activities, particularly music was really important to me, personally, growing up. I did band from third grade on, all different kinds of bands, all brass instruments though. [laughter] I think marching band, specifically in high school, it helped me to build community in a lot of different ways and craft a sense of leadership.

SI: Are there any teachers on the elementary level, maybe starting there and high school next, that really had an impact on you or served as a mentor?

ZRC: I am sure there are some. I'm thinking back. [laughter] I know my preschool teacher, actually, so not even elementary, but I did Head Start as a kid because my family qualified for it based on income. Miss Anthony was her name, and she really looked out for a handful of the kids in the Head Start Program because we were all from disadvantaged economic backgrounds and helped us to feel like we belonged. I guess everyone got to do these things, but I guess she just looked out for us, but we got to do trips and all that jazz. So, she's somebody I remember somewhat.

Then, moving into elementary and middle school, I don't know that I can specifically point out one particular teacher. I'm thinking my history teachers have kind of always stood out, and that's probably why I ended up majoring in history in college. In middle school, I think about Mr. Macalino who was not necessarily--I don't know that I can say I had a teacher-mentor growing up, but I certainly had really good teachers, so Mr. Macalino in middle school taught history. Then, in high school, quite a handful of really great teachers, but I would say, I guess, a mentor-teacher would be the band teacher, Mr. Robert Clark.

Funnily enough, because nobody plays French horn, I got to do high school marching band as a middle schooler, and so I actually got to meet him before I even got into high school. So, I did five years of high school marching band. [laughter] I would say I was probably with him, under his tutelage, the longest. Then, I did theater and all that stuff as well, theater and choir, but more as extracurriculars, not as classes. Oh, my Italian teacher--oh, goodness--Mrs. [Angela] Borelli, she was wonderful, and her husband, who passed actually when I was in high school, Mr. [Vincent] Borelli, was the theater director, too. I would say both of the Borellis were really strong teachers, mentors.

EM: Can you talk a little bit about what your neighborhood was like growing up in Long Branch?

ZRC: Yes. I think it depends on where you grew up. Like I said, it was a very diverse town. My family, I primarily grew up--I lived with my aunts and my mom for a specific period of time, and my grandparents, actually, but let me stay focused. I tell stories very non-linearly, so I apologize.

SI: Oh, that's fine. Jump around as much as you want.

ZRC: Okay, great. Primarily, I lived in Long Branch with either my aunts or my mom, and we grew up working class and below the poverty level. When I lived with my mom, it was my mom and my brother and I, and we grew up in low income or income-based housing. It's government

housing. I grew up on Section 8 and with--it was called food stamps at the time, and now it's called SNAP [Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program]. We grew up on a lot of government assistance. I don't look back on the times of struggling economically as a difficult childhood necessarily; I look at it more as one that builds resilience and builds character and builds also a sense of independence. I would say I grew up with a lot of independence and also a lot of reality of what folks have to fight for to survive, growing up low income. Yes, I loved growing up here, actually, and it's fun being back here. Also, the beach is three blocks away. I think I had a lot of outdoor entertainment, if you will, engagement. I also understood and witnessed poverty, and I also witnessed what it meant to survive through that. I very much enjoyed growing up here.

EM: You mentioned you had a brother. What is his name? What was your relationship with him like?

ZRC: His name is Dimitri; he's my little, younger brother. [laughter] He's not little; he's much taller than me. I think we grew up together most of our lives--hold on. Can we pause for a moment?

[RECORDING PAUSED]

ZRC: I have one younger brother, Dimitri, and we grew up together for most of our lives, not all of our lives because--I didn't share this before--my mother was actually incarcerated for a lot of our childhood, and so during that time, some of that time we were together, but then at a certain point, we also lived separately with our respective grandparents, who were not in the same town. So, I would say we are very close now because we have each other. We grew up separate but also close as well.

SI: Go ahead, Elaine.

EM: Did you want to ask a question?

SI: You have this question on your list, and maybe it's a good time to ask it now, about working, if you had to go out and work at an early age.

ZRC: Oh, is that the question? Yes, I definitely worked. I don't remember the exact age of when I started working, but I remember I had to get working papers and get my mom's permission. I worked as a busgirl and a waitress at a local pizza shop, Attilio's, for many years through high school, every year actually, through high school. I would work on the nights and weekends, and then in the summer, I would work during weekdays as well. I loved that job. Well, nothing builds character like customer-service work [laughter], and waitressing is very much customer-service work. I think if you can handle somebody who's really angry about a pizza order, you can handle anything going beyond the direct customer service working world. I also worked, when I was a senior in high school, I took on another job at Bed Bath & Beyond, mostly so I could get a discount on all my college bedding and dorm décor. So, I took that job strategically, also doing customer-service work.

EM: What was it like doing so many demanding jobs while also being a student and doing all the extracurriculars you were doing?

ZRC: I don't know how I did it. Now, looking back on it, I'm like, "Who were you?" I certainly had a lot of responsibility outside of school. I worked because I knew my mom couldn't--really to help support her and to get some independence, in some ways, so I didn't have to drain her, in a way, because she was low income and working also as a waitress at the same restaurant, by the way. So, we worked together, which was kind of fun. I did that because I didn't want to be a burden, I guess.

At the same time, it's not like my academics really struggled. I don't think I scored below a B-plus in high school. I graduated second in my class, so the academic side never really suffered. I actually think the academic side was probably even strengthened by some of my extracurricular activities, because it taught me the importance of things like scheduling and prioritizing and endurance. I think building some of those strengths in my extracurriculars and in my work outside of school actually helped in terms of my academics. Yes, looking back on it now, I could never keep that kind of schedule as an adult, but as a kid, it was pretty normal.

EM: If it's okay with you, I kind of wanted to move into what you know about your family history, starting from your mother's side.

ZRC: Yes, this is the part where I'm not going to be able to answer as much because I don't know a whole lot, so just fair warning. [laughter]

EM: What do you know about your mother's side, her background, her experiences?

ZRC: My mother primarily also grew up in Long Branch. She lost her mother at a very young age. She lost her mother, I believe, when she was nine to addiction. She lived with her grandmother, so my great-grandmother, for a good chunk, a good portion of her childhood. She definitely struggled with authority and all of that, as troubled youth with a lot of trauma do. She was pretty much out on her own pretty young, fairly young. She didn't necessarily have a lot of resources and support and tools to get through her life, which is what I had mentioned before. She definitely turned to different things but turned to partially my father for support, who at the time was a bit older than her, and got caught up in drugs and her own addictions as well.

EM: Your mother's experiences, how do you feel that impacted how she brought you up and how you thought about the world as you were growing up?

ZRC: You know what I always saw from my mother, though, I think at least that I can remember, she spent a lot of--I would say from when I was three years old to when I was in the last year of elementary school, she was incarcerated or in different programs--what I always saw from her was a fight to get back to my brother and I. Whether that was through her own counseling, her own treatment, her own exploring of different government support resources, after she got a hold of her own addiction, she was always fighting to get us back. That taught me at least that no matter what you struggle with, there's a way to get back to what you really care

about, as long as you have love and support and resources around you. I guess that's probably what that experience taught me the most.

SI: The grandparents and aunts you were growing up with who were raising you at least part of the time, were they your father's relatives, your mother's relatives, or a mix?

ZRC: They were my mother's relatives. I don't really know my father's relatives that well, with the exception of my grandma. Okay, this is complicated. I don't know if you're going to follow. If I could draw a chart for you, I would. So, the aunt that I lived with primarily while my mom was away was my mother's uncle's wife, so my Aunt Kathy. Technically, she was my aunt-in-law, but I always called her aunt. Technically, she was my mother's aunt rather, but I always called her aunt. Then, her kids, who were significantly older, my two--technically, they were also my cousins, but I also called them my aunts and I still call them my aunts, so she had two kids of her own. My brother and I lived with her and her two kids, my two aunts, and her husband at the time, before they were divorced, who was my mom's uncle.

EM: What do you know about your father's side of the family then, his family history or his background?

ZRC: Yes, not much. [laughter] I know that my father was one of five sons of my grandma, and she came over from Jamaica. She emigrated from Jamaica to the States with five sons. I'll be a hundred percent honest; I didn't have a super close relationship with my father. I actually engaged with my grandmother much more than I did my father because he was also dealing with his own addictions as well. When my mother was arrested, they were arrested together, but because he was an immigrant to the country with green-card status, when you commit a felony, you actually get deported. He was out of the country from when I was pretty young, three or four. So, I didn't really get a good sense of engagement with him. I knew my grandmother much more, but, honestly, she moved to Florida when I was younger, so I don't remember much either. We kind of lost touch in that time. I don't know much about my uncles. I know that they're here, and I know that my father's in Jamaica, and my grandma's in Florida, so I don't really have too many details on that.

EM: Did you have any family traditions growing up, cultural traditions or maybe regional traditions, that you engaged in?

ZRC: The only [ones] I can think of or recall are just regular holiday traditions, Christmas, Thanksgiving, Easter. My family definitely was--not my mom, but my aunts who we spent a lot of our time with growing up were certainly into church and all of the religious holidays, the Baptist Church specifically, and I grew up in that tradition. But, yes, I can't say there's a whole lot of cultural traditions outside of religious ones.

SI: What got you interested in music?

ZRC: It was something to do. [laughter] My older aunts that I shared that I lived with, who were a bit older--my one aunt is six years older [and] her sister is twelve years older--they both did band. My older aunt did flute; my younger aunt did clarinet. It was something that I just

kind of had a knack for, I guess. The first instrument I ever played was bugle. I was able to start on the trumpet pretty early on in third grade, and I just never put it down. Well, I put down the trumpet and explored other instruments. It was always consistent. Regardless of what school I was in, I was always able to play music, and I enjoyed it. I enjoyed the culture around music. I enjoyed the discipline around practicing and learning something and honing a craft. I don't know that I would have used all those words as a kid, but I enjoyed playing music.

EM: I think you mentioned that you used to do choir, right?

ZRC: Yes, musical theater, so it's not full-on choir. I did church choir but not in a school context.

EM: Was this the same church that you mentioned before? You went to a Baptist Church with your family, you said.

ZRC: First Baptist in Long Branch.

EM: Are you still affiliated with the Baptist Church or that church specifically right now?

ZRC: I am not, no. I don't really identify too much as a religious person anymore, more so spiritual.

SI: Well, you obviously excelled in school, and I would assume you were interested in college all the way through high school. Was that your goal all the way through?

ZRC: Yes, I think I saw college--as much as this pains me to say now, as I understand how problematic this is--as a kid, I definitely saw college as an out, as a way to interrupt cyclical poverty, as a way to get a job, as a way to succeed, and as a way to not struggle financially in the same way that I had struggled or my family had struggled when I was growing up. I definitely saw college as a necessary path or step in my journey. But I was also very, very practical about it. I was like, "Well, I'm going to go to college to be a teacher because I know what teachers are, I know that they are employed, and they seem to have cool jobs." [laughter] I definitely saw college as a means to an end, in terms of just financial security.

EM: Can you talk a little bit about the college application process and how that was for you? What were you thinking? Which colleges were you thinking about, and why were you choosing to go in that direction with those colleges?

ZRC: Yes, my college application journey was very short. I applied to one college, the college I ended up going to, Ramapo College of New Jersey. I did instant decision day. Instant decision day, you would go, you would turn in your application, you would take a tour of the campus, you would hear a bunch of panelists, and then when you came back from the tour, they would tell you if you got in and how much scholarship you got. It was very fast. I did that because I wanted to know that I could go to college for free, and if I couldn't go for free, it wasn't going to be an option. At the end of the day, I saw no financial way around going to college unless it was

a hundred percent free. So, I applied to that school, I got in, I got the full ride, and I said, "Okay, great. I'm going here," and I applied to no other schools.

My older aunt that I had referenced before went the Ivy League route. She was trying to help me at that time, being like, "You can go anywhere," and I'm like, "No, no, I'm going to go here. It's free. It's fine." She really very much wanted me to apply to Ivy League schools or more competitive schools. I wouldn't have the same language for it, but at the time, I was like, "I don't think I'd fit in, in those places," was kind of my go-to, even though I didn't have the language to talk about why. Also, I didn't know that financially they would have been free, too, because of the way they scholarship low-income students. But we laugh about it now because I was really stubborn, quite stubborn about it. I really did enjoy my four years at Ramapo. Even though I went into it thinking it would be more of a transactional experience, it was much more of a transformational one.

EM: What did you study at Ramapo specifically?

ZRC: I was on track to be a high school history teacher, so my major was history. I was doing my educational certification along route. I ended up picking up a women and gender studies minor, after getting involved with student organizations there and learning about the word feminism and getting acquainted with the Women's Center that was on campus. I picked up a women and gender studies minor, and it was through that field of study actually and student involvement that I ended up getting tapped to work at the Women's Center. That's where I came into my own self and identity. Actually, I think I skipped over this when we were talking about childhood, but I had been out of the closet, if you will, since middle school, so I had a pretty good sense of self, actually, going into college. But I definitely, in seeking out community through student involvement, also ended up finding a field, which was student affairs, and working as a student employee in a campus-based identity center.

EM: What were some of the organizations that you were involved in while you were there?

ZRC: I was most heavily involved with Ramapo Pride. Unlike Rutgers, Ramapo only has one LGBTQIA [Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, and Asexual] student organization. [laughter] I also was involved with the Black Student Union and Ebony Women for Social Change and then the Women's Center, which technically wasn't a student organization but was a student-facing center that had a lot of programming that you could be involved in as well. I was involved because the clubs that I mentioned were loosely affiliated with the center, and so that's how I gained entry into employment there as well.

SI: What kind of activities would you do with Pride, for example?

ZRC: For Pride, we did a lot of celebratory activities. We always celebrated LGBT History Month. As a student volunteer for it, we would have bi-weekly meetings. We always had pizza, and it was really just specific to community-building. We'd do icebreakers, sometimes bring in guest speakers, sometimes have an educational lecture from a faculty member. It was just a way for us to, again, build community but also build our own knowledge as well on campus. I will

say, as a student volunteer or leader in the organization, it was different than being a student employee at the Women's Center.

At the Women's Center, I took on the role as queer peer services coordinator, and we got a budget. I mean, we got a very big budget, so we did things around Coming Out Day. We had a big stage in the middle of campus, and we would have people literally come out, whoever wanted to, and just talk about who they are and their identities and hold pride in it while we all cheered. We talked about civil rights, about human rights and different legal issues that were happening. We talked about marriage equity a lot. We were able to host programs around World AIDS Day, pretty much what professionally-staffed centers do at other college campuses. We didn't have that; it was a student job within the Women's Center.

As a queer peer services coordinator, I also helped to coordinate or run/facilitate weekly--what were they called? Oh, my goodness, I don't remember what they were called, but it was a weekly peer-to-peer listening group. That space was really important, too, because we ended up working with a lot of students who were closeted or struggling with their identity or out but struggling with acceptance around them. That was a cool space to facilitate, again, as a student. Looking back on it now, I'm not sure that students should be trusted with that much responsibility [laughter], but I'm sure glad I was because it helped me craft my future career trajectory.

EM: How do you feel that the wider culture at Ramapo reacted to all these student organizations and events you were a part of?

ZRC: I feel like, for the most part, it was fine. I think we had a critical mass. I guess our critical mass, there was a lot of folks who were interested, a lot of people who were involved. I think that critical mass sometimes shields you from explicit pushback about the work. There were definitely a few incidents I can't recall the specifics of with like bulletin boards being defaced or verbal things being said. I just don't recall all the specifics, but I will say, for the most part, it very much felt like a powerful community and one that helped us, certainly helped me, to make it through my college experience.

EM: I want to ask you about identity. How do you feel that you found yourself in this position where you wanted to be very active in on-campus activism? Was it because of your personal identity, or was it because of a different trigger?

ZRC: I would say identity had a lot to do with it. What I didn't mention, as part of the scholarship program that I mentioned before, part of that is you got to live with the other scholarship recipients, and you were apart from the rest of the first-year students because you got a larger residence hall and all that. It wasn't as diverse as the rest of the incoming class and it felt fairly isolating, so I think my struggles as a first-year/first-semester student trying to find a place or a space that reflected some of my own identities back to me was certainly what helped to motivate creating more organized and more visible work and spaces, so that incoming students wouldn't then also struggle to find a place that fit for them on campus. I do think that identity had a lot to do with it and the sense of cultivating and crafting resources that were proactive so that students didn't struggle to find them.

I don't think it was just identity. I also think working, like I said, in the Women's Center and also being a history student helped me to understand the power of organizing and social change and what that has looked like. I don't think I was just involved on campus. I certainly was involved in the community a bit as well, and a lot of it in my mind was building a bridge. Some of my role was about building a bridge between the on-campus issues and the issues in the world around us. I think that was probably more so attributed to my own academic study.

EM: It was a very self-driven experience, as I'm understanding. Was there anybody at your time there who was particularly influential or encouraging for you, like a staff member or a professor or even a speaker at the college?

ZRC: I would say my peers. My older peers were really influential, and I think that's part of probably why I wanted to be that for someone else. I will say the director of the Women's Center was a really great mentor in different ways, Kat McGee, shout out. She's great. I certainly had different faculty along the way whose classes really helped me to think through my own journey as a scholar. I can't really recall everyone's name. Memory is not my forte. But I definitely had mentors. How do I say this? No mentors at Ramapo necessarily fully reflected everything that I was going through, though, if that makes sense. So, I had feminist mentors, I had queer mentors, and I had mentors who were women of color, but I didn't necessarily have all of those things in one person. I didn't have a go-to, so I was kind of bouncing around a bit when I was dealing with different issues and trying to find support for them.

SI: This sounds like the issues of intersectionality we talked about in your class; where they cross is where you may miss things. I was curious, outside of college, had you found any kind of community or network, maybe earlier in the Monmouth County area, or just in general, maybe a larger community of college students when you were at Ramapo?

ZRC: We networked a bit with other student organizations on different college campuses, and we did some cross-programming. I wouldn't necessarily say we built a super strong, tight knit or tightly-woven community from that. I will say, right around Prop 8--what year was that, 2008? Wasn't it? I think Prop 8 was 2008. I don't remember the date. But I do remember it being very powerful and palpable in my life. It was Obama's first election. [Editor's Note: On November 4, 2008, California voters approved Proposition 8, a ballot initiative and state constitutional amendment banning same-sex marriage. It was deemed unconstitutional in federal court in 2010, but the decision was not enacted until 2013.]

SI: Yes, 2008.

ZRC: It was 2008, although I think Prop 8 had been passed in 2007. I remember feeling--this is to your point about intersectionality--I remember feeling so much joy about Obama being elected. I think I was a junior in college. That was the first presidential election I was legally able to vote in, and I also remember just feeling completely heartbroken at the same time. There was all this joy and jubilation around this incredible presidential election and I didn't not share that jubilation, but I also saw what was happening in California, what passed on the ballot. I

think that actually got me much more in tune with community organizing and community-based organizations beyond the campus.

Right after Prop 8, I started volunteering for Garden State Equality; I was doing phone banks. I had gone to a few protests or marches, organized marches and rallies. Garden State Equality, at the time, was located in Montclair. Then, also, the big national March for Equality in--what year was that?--2009, the one down in D.C., I had helped organize a busload of students to be able to go from our campus. That drew thousands and thousands and thousands of people, and it was a really powerful experience to be there and hear from Cleve Jones and mega changemakers. A lot of it was around Prop 8 and the legal battles that were continuing, regardless of who was elected president, and continue now. Again, I wouldn't necessarily call that a tightly-knit community, but certainly a community of advocates outside of campus that was important for me to develop. [Editor's Note: The National Equality March took place on October 11, 2009 in Washington, D.C. Cleve Jones, an AIDS and LGBTQ+ activist, served as the march's co-chairperson.]

EM: Did you continue your activism or your connection with all of these different organizations and networks in the state after you left college?

ZRC: After I left Ramapo, I actually ended up going right into a master's program at NYU [New York University]. Actually, I feel like my horizons really expanded in different ways, too. I wasn't as involved with Garden State Equality, but NYU, just by the very nature of the type of campus that it is, is always much more closely aligned with community-based organizations and the community, working with, again, always from the entry point of being sort of a bridge for students on campus, thinking about like the LGBT Center of New York, [which] was an organization that I wouldn't say I necessarily volunteered a lot for, but certainly, I had gone to programs, and the Lesbian Herstory Archives, again, not volunteering but being sort of connected to, in addition to all the wonderful people that you just meet in New York and changemakers in their respective areas.

SI: What got you interested in the NYU program?

ZRC: Coming out of Ramapo, I decided that I was going to go into student affairs and higher education administration. I didn't quite take the same approach of "this program needs to be free." Actually, going back to the point I had mentioned earlier, I went with the approach of, "I need to find mentors that reflect more interconnectedness of my own identities and who also thrive and navigate in higher education as advocates. I need to craft what that looks like as a professional and not just as a student activist." So, I applied to a few programs, and I had gotten into UMass Amherst and NYU. I chose UMass Amherst for social justice education. But I chose NYU because the professional staff within the center that I got an internship with were queer people of color, both of them. I was like, "Well, this is an opportunity that I'm not going to get in Massachusetts, and I want to understand what it's like to run a cool center." They were also running a center that didn't exist at my undergraduate campus. It was a student position within a much larger, broader center. I was like, "Oh, so there's centers for this, and these folks are really well respected in the field, and they look like me; I want to go here." So, I chose NYU to get that tutelage, if you will, but also to craft my professional understanding of what it meant to be an advocate in an identity-based center in higher education. Again, I probably wouldn't use

any of that language going into the program, but I was just like, "I think they can really be my mentors, and I think they can really show me how to do this work." That is probably language I would have used. I definitely chose right; it was a wonderful graduate experience.

EM: Did you find yourself at the end of your graduate experience where you felt that you needed to be and wanted to be in your career?

ZRC: Yes. My graduate experience really opened up a lot of different things. I came to understand that, again, higher education and student affairs was a professional and academic field, along with national organizations and practitioners across the country, really the world, but the country, specifically, especially for LGBTQIA campus-based work. I got involved with the Consortium of Higher Education LGBT Resource Professionals through my graduate assistantship, which I didn't even know was an organization until I got to grad school. They held gatherings at a big national conference every year, and so I got to meet practitioners around the country. I think at the time, there were only 250, and maybe even a little less than that, LGBT campus-based centers out of the thousands of colleges that exist in the country, and so it was actually a fairly small field compared to just sort of general student affairs in higher education. I definitely learned a lot and met so many people, and I felt like I got a better sense of what was facing the field, like common pushback that practitioners received or what it meant to do this kind of work in states without statewide protections for gender identity and sexual orientation discrimination, and heard from folks what it felt like to do this work with institutions, governments who were constantly trying to diminish it or defund it. I think I definitely just gained a much broader understanding and a much clearer sort of trajectory or understanding of where I could go after grad school.

At NYU, I also was able to do a year-long field internship at the Center for Multicultural Education and Programs there, so it was a great way to do intersecting work or work focused on multiple identities in different campus-based centers. Yes, I definitely felt much more prepared to be a professional in the field after NYU. That is also partially because, as all identity-based centers will tell you across the country, they are often underfunded/under-resourced on the personnel side. As a graduate assistant, I was doing a ton of work [laughter] in programming, educational training, marketing, co-curricular work with first-year students and service learning. I just got to do a little bit of everything because it was a really ambitious center with a very small staff, and so I definitely felt ready to work full time after leaving that internship.

EM: With that really in depth and wide range of experiences, where did you find yourself in your first job afterward?

ZRC: I found myself at Rutgers, which was so funny. Going into student affairs, the advice I always give is you either have to be focused on your functional area or focused on area of the country that you're willing to work in, and it's very rare that you get to have both. Sorry, hold on one second. That's my wife coming home.

[RECORDING PAUSED]

SI: What year would that be when you came to Rutgers?

ZRC: I came to Rutgers in 2012, and it was as the Assistant Director for the Center for Social Justice Education and LGBT Communities. What I loved particularly about the role is that it was multifaceted. The center itself didn't just do queer and trans campus work; it also looked at the sort of intersecting and multiple social justice issues and really tried to create a more holistic campus space through education. It was a great fit for me, and I really enjoyed the fact that it was in my home state. I didn't expect to be back in New Jersey. I was ready to go anywhere. As I was saying before, I was ready to go anywhere if it meant I got to work in a campus-based center that was identity-focused, and I just happened to end up in New Jersey and at a center that was one of the oldest LGBT campus-based centers in the country, and who also worked alongside--and this is also what I really liked--worked alongside three partner cultural centers, who were each sort of identity-focused, but we worked together in different ways. It was just a diverse institution, one of the most diverse in the country as well, and a lot of income diversity and a lot of first-generation students. It felt like a great place to be for both my life experiences but also my passion for LGBT work. [Editor's Note: The Center for Social Justice Education and LGBT Communities was founded in 1992 as the Office of Diverse Community Affairs and Lesbian and Gay Concerns, under the direction of Dr. Cheryl Clarke. Dr. Clarke's oral history interview resides in the collection of the Rutgers Oral History Archives. The Paul Robeson Cultural Center, the Center for Latino Arts and Culture, the Center for Social Justice Education & LGBT Communities, and the Asian American Cultural Center compose the Cultural Center Collaborative at Rutgers.]

EM: On a day-to-day basis, what was your work like at the center when you were assistant director, but also when you were director?

ZRC: I was assistant director for a year and change, a year and a few months. Essentially, what I was told by my supervisor at the time--Jenny Kurtz, who was amazing--was, "Do whatever you want. We need to grow. We need to grow programming. We need to grow education. We need to build and cultivate a space that would allow us to grow physically as well," meaning we needed to use our space well, so that we could show that there was a need for an even larger space.

I worked with a lot of the traditions that had already existed. There's such a long history of LGBT work at Rutgers that certainly predates the formalization of a professionally-staffed center that students really took the helm of. There were some traditions that we always have, or we've had for a long time, like GAYpril being in the month of April as a pride and heritage month, Rainbow Graduation as a way to recognize our LGBTQIA+ graduates, and some type of welcome reception were some of the traditions that kind of were already there.

At the time when I came in, we had a Safe Zone program, which was the educational arm of the center, and I shifted the name when I started to Safer Space as a way to show that work in terms of creating safer spaces on campus is never-ending. There's no space that's always going to be safe because we have so many different identities and issues, and so it's important in our work to always do better. So, I changed the name. I shifted some of the curriculum, grew the programming. Instead of a fall reception, we did a welcome week. We used to only recognize Trans Day of Remembrance, and I expanded that to Trans Awareness and Visibility within

November because it was important to celebrate and recognize trans folks in power and resilience and contribution, not just in memory. So, I expanded that week when I first got here. I feel like there were a lot of tries and trials and errors, if you will, of programming, but I definitely tried to fit our programming within thematic offerings across the months and weeks throughout the semester.

Training really, really increased. We weren't just doing Safer Space training; we were also doing social justice education training for different student leadership teams and staff teams, and even training professionals, not just students on campus. I would say I was allowed to just do: just create, cultivate the space. I tried really hard to work much more closely with all of our student organizations because Jenny and AnnMarie [Burg], who were both our professional staff at the same time, were two people, and when you have a community as large as Rutgers, you need more people to do the work that you really are passionate about. So, me coming onboard was a way to help spread that work out and then grow. When you have the capacity to grow, you can do more creative work.

EM: At the time, was it just the three of you there?

ZRC: At the time, it was the three of us as professionals, but we have always had--and this is what I really also loved about the center--we've always had a fairly robust student staff. We've had undergraduate student staff. We've had graduate assistants from the college student affairs program once that was created or field interns who are graduate students. We've always worked with student employees as a way to push the center forward but also as a way to stay in tune with what students need. The best people to tell you what student needs are are students. So, we tried to really grow the student staffing structure over the years that I was there as well.

EM: Back to all your efforts to try to expand the center and all the programs and projects that you've pursued, can you recall any of the kinds of conversations that were happening around LGBT+ issues, but also those programs themselves, with your colleagues or among students or on campus as a whole? I guess that also ties into the question of how the center itself was perceived at the time by the wider Rutgers community.

ZRC: What's important to remember is that I was coming in in 2012, which was two years after the tragedy of the Tyler Clementi incident. I think that when I came on to campus, there was already a very visible, tangible interest to do better, whatever that meant, or to raise the visibility of great work that had already happened and that maybe just folks didn't know about. At a place as big as Rutgers, it's really easy to do great work, and people don't know about it. So, I came into the university at a time where people were ready, able and willing to help. That was a great environment to start in, to be honest with you, and one that didn't feel like I faced a lot of resistance. If anything, it felt like I faced a lot more urgency and [was] asked to collaborate and create partnerships. There was some great work that Jenny had [done]; Jenny really led the university, particularly the New Brunswick campus, in many ways through the different shifts that needed to happen immediately after and things around housing safety, training, and mental health resources. I think there was some great work that was already done before I got there, and I was just able to build upon it. I can't say that I faced a whole lot of resistance. I came in at a

time where not only was I encouraged to grow the center, I received a lot of help and support to do that.

SI: You mentioned a lot of things. What did you see as the most immediate challenge or concern when you got here?

ZRC: I think the most immediate concern, in my mind, was around mental health and housing. Specifically, when I got there to Rutgers, the LGBT roommate matching or interest roommate matching system had been in place. There was a growing residential community specific to gender and sexuality that, of course, allies could live in as well, but the structures and programming were specific to gender and sexuality--Rainbow Perspectives. A lot of our mental health counselors or a good handful of our mental health counselors had developed or already had but were connected to students around their expertise around gender and sexuality as well, but there were still areas of growth. We didn't have a chosen name system for trans and non-binary students or just students in general who used a name different than their name assigned at birth, which I was able to develop. I think that was in 2014 or '15. We had all-gender restrooms on campus, but we didn't have a good way to find them. [laughter] One of the things I did--I think it was in year two or three--was work with my student staff to digitize a map of all the all-gender restrooms on campus, and I think that map is still used today.

On top of that, my last year, because I was there for seven years, we also worked to change over something really strange about building coding laws in New Jersey, that single-use restrooms have to be gender-specific for some reason or other to count towards capacity and occupancy rates, whatever. There's a way to go around that. We were able to work with facilities to shift the restroom signs for all the single-use restrooms to just be a restroom sign as opposed to gender specific. We were able to add those to the map.

The great thing about having a living-learning community is that it allows a university to centralize support staff, but ultimately, students should be able to access all-gender housing in every part of the campus, so it's not an either/or, it's a both/and. We were able, over the years, to work to expand that as well, so that students who were living in suites or apartments could live with folks of any gender as long as they requested it. There was definitely some growing work that needed to be done when I came on board, policy and practice-wise.

EM: I think another legacy from your time at Rutgers was the LGBTQA Student Emergency Fund, which we talk about a lot on campus. Would you be able to talk about developing that fund?

ZRC: Yes, absolutely. I mean, this one's really personal. Every single year that I worked at Rutgers, we always worked to support at least a handful of students who had come out at home and been completely rejected by their families. So, either they were kicked out of their home, or they were forced to stay in a home environment that was really unhealthy, and their parents or families were threatening to do things like not fill out the FAFSA [Free Application for Federal Student Aid] or not pay for health insurance if they thought that their child was going to get gender-affirming healthcare through that health insurance. So, there's all these financial pieces that are just even more layered because of the emotional burden of them. Every year, we had

students who would need things like an emergency residence hall for a semester, a few weeks, just to be able to be stable in their living situation. Luckily, our Residence Life Department worked with our Deans of Students Office and there was a system for that, for the housing piece, but there was more need than just housing. I just saw it as an opportunity to raise awareness around this issue. Twenty-five percent of LGBT youth on the day they come out is the day they are kicked out. I don't think a lot of folks know that. Our students are not immune to that experience.

We worked with students to do a digital crowdfunding campaign around the statistics and the issues and then worked to do small-source fundraising for that fund. I don't even remember what year this was in--2015, maybe, or '16--but because of the awareness-building that that did--we raised a little bit under, I think, ten thousand for the first crowdsourced fund--partially because of the awareness that really built, there were also major donors who were interested then in helping to move the fund forward even more. We got some major gifts to that fund.

Student basic needs are important across communities. It's just that the needs are even more complex and more exacerbated within marginalized communities, especially the LGBTQIA+ community. It's a fund that I'm so grateful we were able to get off the ground, because once it was off the ground, because people knew about it, it was even more utilized. I'm assuming that before folks even knew that that fund was a resource, there were still people struggling; they were just struggling in silence. It was a way to destigmatize the issue and a way to create a net of support around our students who were experiencing that.

Of course, it wasn't just related to parental rejection, just so we're clear. I mean, LGBTQA students face financial emergencies for many different reasons, including employment discrimination. It's multifaceted, but it certainly was an important resource that too many, and one is too many, students that I worked with struggled with. At the time, I think we were only one of two or three universities that had specific emergency funds for LGBTQA students, and it's grown since. There are many more centers who fundraise for this particular issue, and it's definitely [that] just basic needs, in general, are something that I think is a growing area of fundraising and support for institutions.

EM: Yes, Rutgers is definitely paving the way in terms of providing support for the students who really need it. I think you mentioned how the center was really connected to the other cultural centers on campus. Could you talk a little bit about that? You focus a lot on intersectionality. What are some of the ways in which you tried to increase equity or support LGBT+ students of color during your time on the Rutgers campus?

ZRC: Yes. Before we were even formally interconnected--right now, all four cultural centers are known as the Cultural Center Collaborative, and it's a formally recognized partnership across all four cultural centers. I was there when that started. They did things like annual joint programming around MLK [Martin Luther King, Jr.], and we did joint welcoming events. We also met regularly as a staff, so we could discuss the issues across our student communities so that we could be stronger and more informed advocates. We also worked to make sure that our student leaders developed together in their leadership retreats as opposed to separately. There

was a lot of great work that was done while I was there in partnership and is continuing to be done.

Before that, before that formalized partnership, our students who had these intersecting identities, or remember the kind of compartmentalizing that I described earlier, they were popping into one space for support around their racial identity and popping into our space for support around their gender and sexuality. I just felt as someone who had to do that, who had to compartmentalize when I was seeking out my own support, I just felt it was important to cultivate spaces across all the centers where students could be their whole selves, and it only made our centers better for it. I was really fortunate that the staff across the cultural centers also believed in that. So, we were able to do really creative and innovative programming before the formalized piece came together of the Cultural Center Collaborative. Sometimes, we would trade staffs to help train at our respective leadership retreats and do sessions with our student leaders, regardless of whether we worked at that specific center. We sometimes organized our big heritage month keynote openings together. We relied on each other to support our students in whatever space they frequented. Students knew that they could come to our center and not have to leave their racial identity or their struggles with racism at the door in the same way that we would hope that--and they did--queer students of color could go to a race-based cultural center and not leave their gender and sexuality at the door. So, I'm really grateful for that approach to the work. One of the best things about working at Rutgers was we all tried really hard to cultivate spaces for students to be their whole selves, in addition to the staff too, to be their whole selves.

SI: I always ask this question of people at Rutgers. Was there anything that you tried that didn't work out to your satisfaction or something you wanted to do but just never got off the ground or anything like that?

ZRC: I'll go back to that chosen-name system. [laughter] It's been many years in the works, and I know it's still in development. One of the things I've found out--and I always make this joke that when you work at a cultural-based center, an identity-based center, you end up having to do a little bit of everything. You end up having to work with IT [information technology] and with different faculty departments and sometimes facilities. I've described some of those partnerships over this interview. I'll say that at an institution as large and technologically expansive [as] Rutgers, although all universities have this, the technological systems make change into data entry and data utilization really difficult and not as easy as a one-size-fits [all]. For many years, on the chosen-name system, we were just using a Qualtrics form, and then I would forward it to four or five different offices who could get it in most of the systems that it needed to be in.

It's just a very clunky system, and that's because so many of our Rutgers systems, technological systems, IT systems, were home-grown or didn't necessarily pull from the same data fields. I don't speak that language; as you remember, I'm a history major. I was like, "That's fine. Let's just do what we have to do to get it done for our students." There were a lot of hiccups along the way. Sometimes, systems would update, and then the preferred name or the chosen name would just be gone and we wouldn't know about it until a student emailed us saying, "Hey, my name wasn't there, but it was yesterday." It was a journey, and I think it does continue to be a journey, although it's gotten better and a little bit more centralized.

There are some things like that that I just wish had been a little bit smoother of a transition because that's really a university-wide change and doesn't just impact students. That's one of those things that I wish didn't necessarily have to fall in our scope of responsibilities for many years and was sort of a Band-Aid solution that ended up just being a regular solution. I think that's shifted, but it was certainly a lot to do and wasn't always very seamless for our students, which is what I care about most.

EM: Can you talk about when and why you decided to depart from Rutgers and from your position at the center?

ZRC: Yes. I was completing my doctorate in my last three years at the center, so I was at the Rutgers Graduate School of Education and doing their Ed.D. program full time while also continuing in my employment full time. I was on that journey, and I completed my doctorate. I had been at Rutgers for many years, seven years going on eight. I felt like if I left at that point, it would be leaving the university in a place that was better than where I found it, and that's always where I'd want to leave. I felt like I had, along with incredible partners and collaborators and students, really helped to make a lot of serious and important shifts at the university. I'm just a firm believer that spaces like that need a turnover in leadership so that ideas and creativity grow from someone else's lens over time. I think stability is important, but I just think new ideas, new vision is important for those spaces to remain current and fresh and new.

With a different degree, I was ready to also explore campus-wide change work outside of being strictly within student affairs. The centers are within the Division of Student Affairs, but we were often tasked with doing a lot of university-wide work with faculty and other administration. In theory, that's not necessarily the specific description of student affairs, so I wanted to go find a role that would be university-wide on purpose because I just felt it would make some of that change process a little less clunky as well. I love Rutgers. Truly, I loved my experience there. I firmly believe in the mission of the centers, and I know they'll continue to do great work. Sometimes, you know it's just time to sort of move on, as long as you leave it in a place that's better than where you found it, as I said before.

SI: Can you tell us a little about your doctoral work, your dissertation, or how it may have affected your approach to your job and added value there?

ZRC: Yes. My dissertation was actually a part of my work. I was on the division's assessment working group. One of the things that the division had been tasked with leading was a campus climate assessment on the student experience. I was part of the working group to help push that agenda forward and roll out the campus climate assessment. This was really coming from, when I say, "tasked with," this was really coming from our students, our student organizers, our student demands, our student activists, who were saying, "We want you to hear what we're going through on campus and in the world." So, a campus climate study is one way to do that. It's one way to capture the experience en masse and look at inequities that are facing our students.

I was part of the larger one, and what I did for my dissertation was disaggregate and look specifically at the queer and trans student experience from that larger data set. It was a

quantitative dissertation and case study that looked specifically at queer and trans student experiences. So, I looked at queer and trans student experiences and outcomes related to the respondents to the survey and looked at the campus environment as a factor for things like LGBTQA student persistence. It was a wonderful way to look at the community's experience more broadly and not just through person-to-person storytelling, which I also really love and value. There's a real lack of big data sets around these particular populations. I think it was really useful to my work; it was very aligned with what we were trying to look at and to try to find trends and common issues that our students were experiencing in their campus environment. Even in a campus environment that has been sort of identified nationally as an LGBTQA-friendly one, there were still issues of inequity and bias and microaggressions and retention issues within our community on campus, and so it was a way to shed light on that.

SI: Another quick question about Rutgers. You talked about how it became a university-wide job, or maybe it already was, and you just realized it when you got into it. Does that mean Newark and Camden as well, or are you just talking about New Brunswick?

ZRC: Primarily New Brunswick, although because of our training, the centers--well, the staff at the centers--training and education expertise, we sometimes also did training on our Newark campus and some training and education at our Camden campus as well. Not very often, but it happened.

SI: Did they also have any professional staff, maybe not a center like this, but dedicated to LGBTQA issues?

ZRC: Yes. Actually, over time, they developed. Newark, I think, started their Intercultural Resource Center the same year that I joined the New Brunswick campus. Camden took a bit longer, but they have two staff within their Deans of Students Office that do this work, so not necessarily like a physical center. Both of the centers are multifaceted, so it's like the equivalent of all of the cultural centers in New Brunswick in one. So, they're more multicultural in their missions and a bit smaller, but they both have staff dedicated to this work now as well.

EM: If it's okay, we can move on to after Rutgers, your current working life. What position do you find yourself in right now? Where are you working?

ZRC: After Rutgers, I ended up taking the role of an inaugural Intercultural Center director at Monmouth University, which is quite literally the town right next door from where I grew up in West Long Branch, and it's definitely a different place. It's a private university. It's medium sized. What's really unique and probably what really attracted me to the role is that it's a brand-new office and a brand-new center, so it doesn't come with the same sort of institutional history and memory that the Rutgers positions did. I'm able to craft and build from the ground up, and that's a challenge and an exciting one. Also, within the last year and a half or so, I've been able to--or I was asked to, rather--also advise the president on diversity and inclusion more broadly. So, I'm still student-facing, which is the best part about any job in student affairs or in higher education, being able to interface and support students, but I'm also then asked and tasked with looking at university-wide policies, practices, structures around equity and inclusion. It's a wonderful day-to-day opportunity, and it's also one that I feel particularly excited about because

it's building a type of campus that a kid like me, going back to what I shared in the very beginning, could find themselves there and be supported and feel like they belong. It's a great job, and it's one that I'm really grateful for. [Editor's Note: Since 2019, Zaneta Rago-Craft has served as the Director of the Intercultural Center and Advisor to the President on Diversity and Inclusion at Monmouth University.]

EM: It sounds like these conversations at Monmouth about diversity and inclusion are still in their beginning stages. How do you feel about the political climate there right now?

ZRC: It's not quite at their beginning stages. Just like Rutgers, as I described before, there have been years and years of student organizers and faculty organizers and different advocates across the campus that have pushed forward different issues and agendas and organizing. I wouldn't say it was brand new. I would just say that what's brand new is the centralizing, the focusing of the resources, and the pinpoint, if you will, of collaboration. That is new. So, if anything, I've been able to really uplift and shed light on the work that has been done and the people who have been doing it and sort of amplify the student voice through that process. I would say, politically, it's like any other institution. I mean, institutions of education are historically slow to change. I think that change has felt a little bit more quick here than actually it did at Rutgers because we are smaller, so it's easier to call the person who needs to make the decision to get something done. I don't think it's new. I just think the center itself, the physical encapsulation of this work, is new, but it's certainly not new to many members of the campus.

SI: Obviously, the pandemic has been going on for much of your tenure there, and we're still pretty much up against the forest here. How have you seen it affect the students that you are trying to help?

ZRC: I was literally just on a panel about this. I think the pandemic has really affected us all, but where I see a lot of inequity is in things like health outcomes. We know that our lower income and communities of color have significantly worse health outcomes in regards to the pandemic. If you can sort of extrapolate that out, that means that our historically underrepresented students are also dealing with disproportionate amounts of loss and mourning. That loss and mourning is not just emotional or financial. It's also like you have to shift your role at home sometimes. So, responsibilities are then put on students at disproportionate rates that might not be put on students in the majority. I'm constantly worried about the wellness and connectedness of our students so that they know that they don't have to struggle on their own and that there are ways in which the university can support them through it.

In general, I feel like the students that I work with most closely have built a lot of resilience, and sometimes that resilience also means a resistance to ask for help when they need it or just not knowing who to ask for help because they've maybe asked for help in the past and haven't been met with a whole lot of support. We have to be a little bit--what's the word?--intrusive about our help [laughter], intrusive about our support. Yes, I'm definitely worried about mental health and health outcomes, in addition to just the financial outcomes of if somebody lost members of their family who were really supporting them through the university. Or, if they're at home, do they have access to things like stable internet and a quiet place to actually do the work? Which is different than just access to internet. There's a whole lot of things I'm worried about that I think

we're all probably worried about. There are ways to address it, like loaner computers and basic-need funding for things like internet and utilities. I just feel like when the moratorium ends on evictions, and folks who aren't already essential, which are many of our families, are forced to go back to work, childcare and things like that, it's a lot. It's a lot to manage, and the weight of the managing is not equitably distributed across all communities. I definitely worry about persistence and retention of our students, in addition to their overall wellbeing.

SI: I'm also curious, have you been active either in regional or national groups aimed at student affairs-related LGBTQA issues, or maybe more broadly such as human rights groups or anything like that, outside of the universities you've worked at?

ZRC: I'm still fairly connected to the Consortium of LGBT Resource Professionals in Higher Education, although I need to renew my membership. I also am involved with NASPA [National Association of Student Personnel Administrators] and ACPA [American College Personnel Association]. Those are the professional higher ed student affairs research and practitioner groups. I definitely try to stay in the loop with national advocacy work, too. I think the consortium is really good at this, in particular, keeping track of different changes in state and federal laws around things like Title IX and trans exclusion within Title IX policies across the country. So, I try to stay in the loop on that. Particularly right now, there are so many state-specific laws that are trying really hard to exclude trans students from athletics. I think that's what gets picked up in the news, but beyond that, there's some really, really awful laws that are trying to be passed to try to ban trans-affirming or gender-affirming healthcare for anyone under twenty-one or eighteen, depending on the state. There's one particular law in Texas right now that's making its way up that would remove trans youth from their parent's home if their parents affirm their gender. There are some really awful, targeted laws that are happening across the country, and I think trying to stay in the loop on opportunities to bring those to light within the Office for Civil Rights [OCR] in the federal government are really important and signing on to letters and testifying if there's an opportunity to in some of those upcoming hearings would be really important for practitioners. Our schools are already hard enough. I'm not even just thinking about college. Beyond college, our schools are already hard enough for queer and trans kids, and these laws would really just codify making them even worse. I just think it's important for educators who really see the brunt of these environments on our students stand up now, if you haven't already, to be advocates and make sure that these laws don't pass or they're repealed.

EM: What is your exact role in these organizations? Do you ever provide any of those testimonies that you just mentioned?

ZRC: I was on the executive board for the consortium for a while, and I was--what was I?--editor or something around social media publications. So, I would often be the one to edit the letters and put them out or put out best practices documents or edit and publish best practices documents for different institutions. Also, if we were sending a national letter in support or condemnation of a specific law, then we would craft those together as an executive board. For the upcoming OCR hearings, those have just been announced and so I'm not part of a national organization that would be testifying, but I would certainly show up as an individual educator to testify. I also signed on to the letter as an individual educator.

EM: You were talking about your current work at Monmouth. I guess you're really engaging with the students. Is it the same level that you were engaging with students when you were at Rutgers?

ZRC: I think sans pandemic, yes. [laughter] With the pandemic, it's been a little bit tricky. Students aren't utilizing the center as a home base in the same way. But our programming is still primarily student-focused and student-facing, not entirely. I'm doing a lot more training and education and even some networking opportunities for faculty and staff and consultant work as well for different departments. But I would say the day-to-day work is still primarily student-facing.

SI: We've been going through your career. I'm curious if we went through anything too fast or we missed anything that you think is important to add.

ZRC: I don't think so. No, I think this was very thorough. [laughter] But if there's anything I've missed, if you come across anything and want more information, I'm happy to provide it. I just can't think of anything at the moment.

SI: Elaine, I know you had some more questions.

EM: Well, if it's okay, we can move away from your professional life and into your current personal life.

ZRC: Sure.

EM: You mentioned you have a partner; you have a wife. When and where did you meet your partner?

ZRC: I met my wife at a barbeque, a mutual friend's birthday, all the way back in 2013.

EM: When did you get married?

ZRC: We got married two years after that. We got married in 2015, and we have been married ever since. [laughter] She's from South Jersey, and she moved up towards Rutgers when we first got married. Now, we're both back in Long Branch, which is not her hometown but mine, for the Monmouth role. We've been together for seven going on eight years. Wait, is that math right? Yes, seven [going] on eight years. [laughter]

EM: Is she also involved in the same social justice activism-oriented organizations that you're involved in?

ZRC: No, I wouldn't say that. No, I wouldn't say as involved in national or even local organizations, but she's certainly passionate about the same things.

SI: I'm curious, interviewing other folks who came of age maybe up to forty years before you did, the importance of having an external community really comes through. For LGBT folks in

the New Jersey area, going to maybe the Village in New York was a transformative experience. You grew up next to Asbury Park at a time when its LGBT community was really coming into its own. Did that affect your life at all? Would you go there? Would you gain anything from being there?

ZRC: So, it's complicated. Asbury Park is definitely--I think that New Jersey Pride was the first Pride I ever went to as a baby gay. [laughter] Certainly, that one was it. I can't say that I necessarily have a huge community there, but I will say--well, I have some. Actually, I do now, but growing up, I certainly didn't necessarily develop that there specifically. I will say Asbury Park is one of those interesting places right now that was actually always LGBTQA-affirming, but it wasn't always gentrifying. Now, the Asbury Park that I grew up with is very different than the Asbury Park of today. So, it's still queer and trans-affirming, but it's also pushing out, in many ways, the low-income Black and Latinx communities to the extremities of the town. I certainly still see the rainbow flags, but I also see this extreme pushout, specifically around poverty and low-income communities. Yes, it was definitely a queer place, but I think it was queer before it was gentrified. Now, I think it also needs to grapple with that reality, and it's definitely tricky.

EM: Do you find yourself engaging with that kind of issue, questions of what exactly is queer identity and how is it connected to your class or to your environment, things like that?

ZRC: Yes, I personally think about that frequently. I think even about, something that I was super passionate about as a younger person was hate crime legislation or marriage equality as a national issue. But, as a slightly older person, I also realize the inequities even within those two narratives being at the forefront of agendas. The hate crime legislation, while, yes, hate crimes are awful and terrible and violent, the way those legislations operate, they also end up just giving more funding to already over-policed communities' police forces. I understand that they're supposed to act as a deterrent, but they also then go into overfunding policing, which, really, a lot of that funding could be going into social work and counseling if you're really thinking about ways to reduce violence. Even marriage equality just leaves so much out. Why is it that folks should only be able to access healthcare if they're married? Do you know what I mean? There are some basic issues that I think of differently now than I did when I was first coming into my identity. I think if we were to sort of center our most marginalized as a community, all of us would benefit. But, instead, I think it's sort of the opposite end sometimes, although I think I also see that shifting.

EM: In your current life in Long Branch and surrounding areas, do you find yourself connected to certain communities? Do these communities represent who you are or the people that you want to surround yourself with?

ZRC: I think I'm finding my way back home, if you will. It's been a little bit tricky to think about connecting to communities during COVID. I have friends and family still in the area, so I'm reconnecting with them, if I wasn't already connected with them. That's been where I'm focused on. But I think once the pandemic has truly ceased in whatever way that looks like, I would like to be more involved. When I was living in Highland Park, I would actually go to

town council meetings and talk about things like the use of force and organize around that. But I don't do that right now, and I would like to get back into it once I'm more able to.

SI: Do you have more questions, Elaine?

EM: Is there anything about your personal life that we just didn't get to go over or anything that you'd like to add?

ZRC: This is not about me, but because I know where this project is going to live, one thing that's really important to remember is that there's so much power in our communities and lessons learned from our past. Again, this is my history major coming out. I think Rutgers, in particular, has one of the most incredible journeys through gender and sexuality work, and it's just so powerful to read it and learn it and to engage with it and our current communities and our current changemakers. I think there's just so much wealth at the institution that sometimes gets forgotten or made invisible, and it's important to continue to bring that to light because I think there's a lot of good things in the past that can help us really craft and build power in our present and our future. That's all I want to add. I think it's a privilege to be in that environment and be a part of that history. It's one that I certainly wouldn't have changed.

SI: Well, thank you very much. We really appreciate you sharing your life and career with us. Like I said, we'll get you the transcript down the road. I'll conclude the recording if that's all right, Elaine.

EM: Yes.

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