

Brian Jones

2020-07-09

LIZ BRADBURY: -- also, I'm recording on the computer and I can see that's going. I'm going to start the audio recording now, too, and that's good. So, I'm going to read you this stuff. This is the same stuff that I sent you in an email and it's -- oh, turn off my phone. (laughs)

BRIAN JONES: [Well, my?] phone's on silent.

LB: Okay, that's smart. I have to turn mine off because I'm still -- I don't like to turn it off until I get you, in case you have to call me. So, there you go. And I'm going to pin you. So, let's see, how do we do that pinning thing? Wait a minute.

BJ: Think you --

LB: Yeah, that's what I'm going to do and I'm going to pin the video on you. So, that's good, and so that every time I talk and I go "uh-huh" it doesn't flash back to me because that would be bad. (laughter) So, now we're on record, that's good, and we're on the audio, record, so that's terrific. So, this - with this [00:01:00] project, the Bradbury-Sullivan LGBT Community Center and the Trexler Library at Muhlenberg College will collaborate on forty years of public health experiences in the Lehigh Valley LGBT community, collecting and curating local LGBT health

experiences from HIV/AIDS to COVID-19. And, let's see, I did all the stuff I'm supposed to do. My name is Liz Bradbury and I'm here with Brian Jones to talk about his experiences in the Lehigh Valley community during this time of the COVID pandemic as part of the Lehigh Valley LGBT Community Archives. Our project was funded from the Lehigh Valley Engaged Humanities Consortium. We are meeting on Zoom and this date is Thursday, July 9th, 2020. Thank you so much for your willingness to speak with us today, Brian. And to start, can I please ask you to state your full name and spell it for me?

BJ: My name is Brian Jones, spelled B-R-I-[00:02:00]-A-N
J-O-N-E-S.

LB: Great. And what is your birth date?

BJ: June 5th, 1984.

LB: Okay, and I also want to ask you: so, you're in Bethlehem now, I can tell by the background.

BJ: Mm-hmm, that's (inaudible)

LB: Is that correct. I'm just going to write that in. Okay, that's good, because we have to put that in the metadata. Okay, so now, this is the consent part. Do you consent to this interview today?

BJ: I do, yes.

LB: Okay, wait a minute. Do you consent to having this

interview being transcribed, digitized, and made publicly available online in searchable formats?

BJ: Yes.

LB: Do you consent to the LGBT Archive using your interview for educational purposes in other formats including films, archives, websites, presentations, and other formats?

BJ: Yes.

LB: Yes. Do you understand that you [00:03:00] will have thirty days after the electronic delivery of the transcript, which means delivery to you, to review your interview and identify parts you would like to delete or change or withdraw your whole interview? You think, oh, I hate this, I'm going to -- but please don't do that -- withdraw it from the project.

BJ: I -- yes, I do.

LB: Okay.

BJ: Yeah.

LB: And, okay, so now -- we have some demographic questions on this. So, what we do want to do is ask people how they identify themselves in the LGBT community. So, do you identify as a gay man or a trans person or a bi person or what do you think? Anything you want to say.

BJ: I identify as a cisgender gay man.

LB: Okay. Okay, what's your ZIP code?

BJ: My home ZIP code?

LB: Well, yeah, where you live.

BJ: Where I work? Oh, I never know that.

LB: No, where you live.

BJ: Oh, where I live -- [00:04:00]

LB: Where you --

BJ: -- 18052.

LB: Okay. And how old are you?

BJ: I'm thirty-six.

LB: Okay, and I've known you a long time, Brian.

BJ: Yeah, since I was at least fifteen. (laughs)

LB: Yeah. How do you identify with the -- oh, I already asked you that. Okay. And so, in general, what -- so, I don't have to write that. Oh, I see why that's going -- this is my first COVID interview, so that's why I'm going slow here.

BJ: Okay.

LB: So, we're going to ask a bunch of questions. And frankly, I've got all these prompts. I sent you all of that information. I don't have to ask you these things individually. And, in fact, I think it's a little confusing. So, I think you should just talk about how you feel about it and what you think. So, like, you know, have you been -- it looks like you're at work, so you're

working, so why don't you talk a little bit about work?

BJ: Okay. Well, I work for Metropolitan Community Church of the Lehigh Valley in Bethlehem. [00:05:00] And it's a congregation that primarily serves the LGBT community here in the Lehigh Valley. And I think, like a lot of - a lot of organizations, non-profits, everybody, (laughs) we're doing the best that we can with the situation.

LB: Yeah.

BJ: It has been very interesting, difficult, disconcerting when your job is about community, when your whole - everything that you do revolves around a community of people gathering and being able to support each other through the gatherings, whether it be during a Sunday morning service or a program that's after -- throughout the week or whatever [00:06:00] it might be. When that is what you do, primarily, when you lose that, your communal identity suffers and goes through changes. You as a professional who is responsible for helping to create community, you kind of go through a -- what's your purpose, what am I doing, how do I do this kind of thing? So, it has been, work has been quite interesting for me, personally, at MCC Lehigh Valley, trying to maintain the ship, trying to keep things moving and going, but also mourning the loss of that connectivity, of those things you look for, too, throughout the week.

LB: Right.

BJ: It has been very -- [00:07:00] it's been more isolating for me than I thought it was going to be. I am - at heart, I am extreme introvert. (laughs) So, I'm used to -- I'm very, very comfortable being alone. I'm very comfortable being in isolation. But this is a whole 'nother ball game. (laughs)

LB: Yeah. I'll say. So, in terms of this stuff -- oh, wait a minute. That's not what I want to do. In terms of this stuff, what are you doing at -- because we sort of imagined these interviews as somebody looking at this 30 years from now and they're saying what was it like during the COVID stuff? So, what are you doing there at the church? Is everything via virtual -- are people coming in at all?

[00:08:00]

BJ: We --

LB: Are you starting to see anybody there?

BJ: We are -- so, when we were in the red phase and the yellow phase, we were primarily doing everything online. And we are still doing almost absolutely everything online. Our worship services, we actually added another service in the week that we do online, on a Thursday. And all of our educational stuff is online. Since we've moved into the green phase, we have opened up the worship service to an extremely limited number of people. So, we only allow

twenty-five people into the space and they must maintain social distancing. They don't come in until fifteen minutes before the service begins and as soon as it's over, they are out [00:09:00] the door. And they are spread out throughout the sanctuary. That is the only real time that we have numbers of people come into the space.

LB: They're wearing masks and stuff?

BJ: Yeah, they're all masked. So, they're only in one Sunday, one day a week, on Sundays. And, you know, we did all the measurements and stuff in the sanctuary and we pretty much came to the conclusion that to give six foot radius around a person or a couple or, you know, whatever it might be, we really can only fit, max, max thirty people into this space. It's a large room but when you count in twelve feet around somebody, it's a completely different ballgame. So, we -- they're masked, they come in, they sit, [00:10:00] they're assigned seats, so that we, you know, we put them, we put the people where they can maintain social distancing. They're not able to get up and just go do what -- you know, it's a massive cultural shift, specifically for this community, which -- you know, the LGBT community is a close community. When you get in your pockets, you become really close to people.

LB: Sure.

BJ: And it's quite interesting to watch everybody have -- people who are - who look at each other as family having to maintain that distance. You know, and in the Christian church context of things and how we handle worship, I'm the worship director, the musical workshop director here. And it's very - it's weird, [00:11:00] you know? Music and singing and whatnot is very important to the Christian experience and act of worship and they're not allowed to sing. So, it's very, very weird to have people in a sanctuary when you are -- I've been doing this since I was a kid. I mean, we've known each other since I was a teenager.

LB: Right.

BJ: And I was doing it before I met you and I think I met you when I was fifteen.

LB: Yes.

BJ: So, I've been doing this for a long time and I have never led worship in a sanctuary with people in a room where they weren't singing back at me.

LB: Yeah.

BJ: Or they weren't doing the liturgy or anything like that. So, they're prohibited from doing that. I'm the only person in the room, when we're singing, who's singing.

LB: Yeah, yeah.

BJ: So, [00:12:00] it's very interesting. It's a very weird experience. It has - It's changed a lot and, you know, the process that we're trying to figure out right now is how do we maintain - how do we maintain a sense of community with one another? And, you know, we're trying to get there, we're struggling, just like everybody else is.

LB: Yeah, yeah.

BJ: You know? And the options for people in a church setting, the options for people have quadrupled because they're all at home. So, you can, if you want to watch a worship experience, you know, places that were -- you know, we don't like using the words competition but we're, you know, it's a reality. And places that were never competition for us before are now competition for us. So, we're [00:13:00] dealing with all that stuff.

LB: I don't know that people in the future will understand what you mean by that but you're talking about, like, there's television church things that people can watch.

BJ: Yep, and there's television church, there's, like, you know, professional televangelist kind of church stuff. But, at the same time, the church around the corner from us, you know, who was not online four months ago is online now.

LB: Yeah, that's a good point --

BJ: So, you know, every church that is still trying to maintain

has all -- every church has become a broadcast church. So, you know, people and places and things you had never seen before, you now can see and you're dealing with that. So, the need to improve your content, the need to -- it's conversations we have never had before, [00:14:00] the need to improve your content, improve your quality, to improve, you know, what it looks like, what it sounds like, what it feels like are real conversations that we're having at the local church level --

LB: Right.

BJ: -- you know, that megachurches would have. But at the local church level, when you have a congregation of maybe 100 people, you're not really having that conversation. But now, you are, so --

LB: Right, it's pretty interesting. It's a different thing. Of course, megachurches are now in that circumstance where they were broadcasting and then everybody's broadcasting --

BJ: Yeah, yeah.

LB: -- so I wonder if that's influencing them, too --

BJ: Yeah.

LB: -- some ways.

BJ: Yeah.

LB: It's a whole different story.

BJ: But the other thing is that what it has done for us, though

-- I mean, we've had our online presence for a while.

LB: Right.

BJ: We were well-positioned to make this change, to [00:15:00] be able to facilitate this change, and to facilitate it at a level, a quality level that other churches our size really couldn't do and a lot of them still aren't able to do it. But we can do multiple cameras and, you know, all that different kind of -- so, we have that going for us. But what it has done -- you know, our focus had been so much on the Lehigh Valley but we now have people who are engaging with us and worshipping with us who are in Poland and who are in Germany and who are in Canada and who are -- you know, so we're getting people from all over the place who are engaging with MCC Lehigh Valley.

LB: Yeah, so do you think that might continue after you're vaccinated and not a danger, perhaps, maybe, you know?

BJ: I hope so. I'm a firm believer - I'm a firm believer that the model, [00:16:00] the church model that most churches have been following for the last one hundred years, this twentieth century model of how you do church, hasn't been working for forty years.

LB: Sure.

BJ: And it became this -- not to get political but it became this capitalist kind of numbers game and that's what the

value was, and how many people you'd get through the door, not, you know, how -- that's what it became. And when it becomes about that, it actually stops becoming about people and it actually stops becoming about what you're supposed to be doing. So, I think what has happened with COVID is that it has peeled back layers of institutionalism and systems that are [00:17:00] about, about power and things like that. It's pulled back those layers of things and it's exposed you for who you actually are and what you actually can do. And it's making you, as a -- it's making us, as a community and as -- the church as a universal -- have to really step back and reexamine how we do what we do.

LB: Yeah.

BJ: And I think for the better. I think for the better.

LB: Yeah. How 'bout you pers-- well, okay, so let's segue into this. I know a lot of people -- and this is not true for me but I know a lot of people who don't know anybody that was sick from coronavirus-19. Have there been people -- and I don't want you to HIPAA them, you know? But have - I would guess that because [00:18:00] the community in the church has a lot of outreach and personal relationships that there have been people who --

BJ: There have been. I personally have lost three people in my family --

LB: Really?

BJ: -- to COVID, yeah.

LB: Oh, my gosh.

BJ: The realities for minority communities --

LB: Yeah.

BJ: (inaudible) Black communities, you know, those numbers that were coming out from the Black community about the spread of COVID, they weren't false statistics. The Black community has been hit really hard by COVID.

[Section redacted]

LB: So, are you, in your own household, are you by yourself in your household, do you have other people in your household? What's --

BJ: It's just me, my husband, and my dog.

LB: Okay. (laughter) Okay.

BJ: Yes.

LB: So, the two of you -- does he have to work, too? because you have to go out --

BJ: Yeah, we're both essential employees. So, I'm essential by nature of the [00:23:00] church work. But I can work -- I can satellite from home more often than I can't. He works in warehouse work.

LB: Oh.

BJ: So, he goes in every day. My husband is the hardest working

guy I know. Goes in every single day. And he was working for another company in the Lehigh Valley that he actually was a higher-up in. He was in, like, a management level. And when COVID first hit, the company didn't seem to be taking it seriously. And, you know, they were starting to get cases in the warehouse but they weren't reporting them, they weren't telling the employees that they were getting the cases. But then, the [00:24:00] employees all knew because they all know each other. So, they would all -- like, somebody would get test, would be tested positive. And, you know, they would send a Facebook message to folks, "Listen, I tested positive for this. I'm going to be gone for a while." But nobody in the higher-ups would say anything. So, he and his department, a person in his department, tested positive -- that he was running. So, it was his department of, like, six or seven people. This person tested positive, had been close to all of them, and called out -- the company did not tell them but they knew because the person told them. So, they all quarantined themselves and [00:25:00] they -- only two of them went back. My husband decided he's not -- they're not taking it seriously.

LB: Did you say that your husband tested positive or he was tested?

BJ: He was tested and he was negative but he stayed in quarantine because the person who had contracted it -- so, you know, he decided he just -- he wasn't going back there. He wasn't staying there. So, he moved to another warehouse where he is not a higher-up anymore. He's just a grunt at this point. But, you know, this place where he's at now, they're taking everything seriously, they have all the PPE, they have all the cleaning, the sanitizing stations and all that different kind of stuff. So, yeah, so we've - we have -- it's just us and, you know, we both [00:26:00] realize that because we both have to go out for work, him more than me, you know, he realizes that he's exposed, even with all the protection that they can give. But we've developed a whole system at home on how to come into the house and how to, you know, sanitize yourself and, you know, before you come in and get your clothes off and all that different kind of stuff, so --

LB: Right, yeah.

BJ: -- just become a way of the world, I guess. (laughs)

LB: Right, it has. We hardly go out at all. But if we bring things in -- I mean, once in a while, I have to - I have to go to the Center, I have to -- we had to go to a doctor's appointment or something like that. We come in and we take off all our clothes, wash all our clothes.

BJ: Yeah.

LB: It's -- you have to do that and --

BJ: What we do, like, we try to order as much into the house as we possibly can [00:27:00] and try to avoid going out any more than we absolutely have to.

LB: Yeah.

BJ: You know?

LB: Yeah. So, do you have other people in your family that you have to sort of help to take care of or is it not that kind of circumstance?

BJ: No, it's not really that. Everybody is pretty much in clusters, so, you know, my mom and my stepfather and my sister and her kids, they all live in the same house. And, you know, my brother and his family are altogether. And my grandmother who lives with my other cousin. And so, everybody is all together. The weird thing is that everybody, my mom, my sister, they're all essential employees. So, my mom works for [00:28:00] -- she's a care worker and my sister is, also. And my brother is a warehouse worker, at my grandmother's, where my cousin, she's a nurse. So, everybody, we're -- everybody's out. And we're not just out but they're out in places where they can very well be exposed, so --

LB: Golly, that's really --

BJ: Yeah. (laughs)

LB: I guess you're the perfect first interview to have.

(laughter) I was afraid, you know, people, like, "Well, yeah, I'm not really going out" and --

BJ: (laughs) No.

LB: (laughs) So, are you using, like, video technology with your family, too, like other people?

BJ: Not really. We've been doing -- we've been mostly text and phone.

LB: Yeah.

BJ: You know, if we see each other, you know, my mom will come over to the [00:29:00] apart-- to where we live but won't come in. So, we'll, like, we'll sit out in our yard and just chat. Or my brother and his kids will come over and the kids'll just run around the yard and we'll all sit out and grill or whatever. But we're trying to, like, maintain that - maintain those familial relationships but also -- you know, it's weird to not be able to give my mom a kiss.

LB: I know.

BJ: (laughs) It's so weird. That's - I think that might be the hardest part of it. Like, there are two people in the world who I -- when I see them, I must absolutely embrace them.

LB: Yeah.

BJ: And it's my mom and my husband and it's been [00:30:00] so,

like, so weird to not be able to do that.

LB: Yeah, yeah.

BJ: Yeah.

LB: Yeah, I think, actually, if you can -- I think about people who are living alone --

BJ: Yeah.

LB: -- all the time and how must -- how that's just so hard.

BJ: We, at MCC Lehigh Valley, one of the main reasons we decided that we had to at least open up the worship experience to a select -- a small number of people -- because there are so many people in the LGBT community who are, even in the best of times, isolated.

LB: Yeah.

BJ: And to be completely isolated from everything must be very difficult. I was talking to my guitar player here and -- [00:31:00] single guy, lives alone, and I was asking him, you know, "How is this? How's it been?" He was, like, "It's been extremely hard." And he's someone with -- who does not have any emotional circumstances or anything like that and he's, like, "This is really hard on your mentality. It's really, really hard." So, I can't imagine. I really can't imagine going through it without anybody.

LB: Yeah, I can't either. It's so hard. I mean, I have a sister who -- I taught her how to use Zoom so that I could talk to

her. And I became aware, I said to my -- to Trish, "I have to talk to her more" because she's by herself and she's --

BJ: Yeah.

LB: -- so much older than [00:32:00] I am, so she's really by herself.

BJ: Yeah.

LB: She does have friends where she is and she can go to their yard and stuff like that. But, yeah, it's tough.

BJ: It's tough.

LB: Yeah.

BJ: It's tough.

LB: Yeah. So, we have all these questions on this list about, you know, like, do you -- are you still finding queer community and stuff. Again, you're not having any trouble with that. You're always around all that.

BJ: (laughs) No, I'm not -- but I see it. I can see it in the people who walk through the door, partially because the queer community, for so many of our folks, is their family.

LB: Right.

BJ: I mean, for so many of our folks. And I don't think we still -- I think we like to think, a lot of the times, be in this -- in 2020 that people are -- [00:33:00] that things are somehow better than they were 20 or 30 years ago. And in many, many, many ways they are. They absolutely

are. But people still lose their families, people still lose friends and, you know, all that different kind of stuff by affirming who they really are. And the need for the LGBT community to be community is still a primary need. It's still a primary need for us to be family for each other. So, that loss of not being able to go to Stonewall or not being able to go to, you know -- it's a big loss.

LB: Yeah, right, right. [00:34:00]

BJ: It's a big loss.

LB: Yeah. Yeah, it really is. So, are you doing anything that's -- besides, you know, your behavior is different, are you doing different things? You're thinking, like, let's start a new hobby because we can't go out and do these things. Seems like you've got a lot of stuff that you do, so I would guess that that's not something that you're doing, I don't know.

BJ: I'm just getting better at trying to, well, trying to get better at the things I already know how to do. So, like the broadcasting -- creating content and broadcasting stuff and learning how to use all of those different softwares and things like that. I'm just trying to dig into that because I think it's going to be a vital part of where we go for the next couple years, you know? And so, that's what I'm doing. But I did, because we did just [00:35:00] move to

Whitehall and we have a little spot at our place that has a little garden nook. So, I decided, well, I got some time and let's get dirty. So, I started a little garden there. So, that's something new for me that I never did before.

(laughs)

LB: Do you find, like, right now, there -- I think the world is also divided into two sets of people and it's people who are working way less and then working actually more.

BJ: Yeah.

LB: You think you fall into either of those categories?

BJ: I've been doing this at MCC for fifteen years now and I've worked really hard.

LB: Yeah.

BJ: I've never worked harder than I am working right now.

LB: Yeah, yeah.

BJ: I've never [00:36:00] put in as much time as I'm putting in now. I've always done more hours and more time than what I'm supposed to do in a week. But the need is so high right now and, like I said before, my work has been to keep the ship running and keep us online and keep the content coming and all the different kind of stuff. So, it's just from one service to the next service, it's just trying to produce the next thing and produce the next thing. I mean, we're literally producing right now what amounts to

two-and-a-half hours of television. (laughs)

LB: Yeah.

BJ: And that doesn't sound like a lot but that's a lot.

(laughs) That's a lot. You know, there are people whose full time job is just to do one hour of something. (laughs)

LB: Sure, half hour.

BJ: Yeah.

LB: (inaudible) (laughter) absolutely. [00:37:00] And so, (coughs) and wait a minute, let me cough a little bit here. (laughter) So, do you think that, I mean, you're talking about how this has affected you and how -- you're talking about content that you're doing and doing more outreach to people. What could you describe as, like, the one thing that's totally different that you're doing before that turns out that it works pretty well? I mean, you're talking a lot about outreach but you were already kind of doing that at MCC through Zoom or whatever you were using as a visual platform. What do you think about that?

BJ: What is new that we're doing that is working well?

LB: So, I'm, like -- so, like, at some point, you might be going, like, let's try to do it this way and it turns out, wow, that turned out to be great! (laughter) Let's do that! Let's do more of that! Because we're finding that at the Center. We're finding certain [00:38:00] things that we

didn't -- like, we didn't think we'd be able to do any arts and cultural things. It turns out that that's been huge. The book club has gone from, like, six people to fifteen people.

BJ: Oh, wow.

LB: So, we've added all these other, like, author reading events and we have a poetry club now and, you know, where people talk about reading poetry books because they've been very, very successful. It's turned out to be very successful to do that. We have so many things we can't fit them into all of our social media platforms --

BJ: Okay.

LB: -- which is interesting.

BJ: Oh, that's - I wish there was more that we were doing in that way. I mean, we have shifted most of the things that we were already doing as far as people connecting to each other to Zoom or to online, our Sunday schools, our education -- all of that stuff is online. We are - I think we're surprised that that's working, [00:39:00] just by the -- like, our bible study stuff, just by the nature of what it is it kind of feels like it's better to be in the room to be able to do it. But it seems to be working. I mean, we got our first Zoom bomb last week on bible study. So, somebody knows about it. (laughs)

LB: So, tell about that because people --

BJ: I was not part of it. I was not there. I got the email after the fact. But we got what a lot of minority communities are getting with these Zoom bombs. So, we got some - we got at least -- I think it was some -- I think Gaudi said something like ten people --

LB: Wow!

BJ: -- chimed into the Zoom and they were writing, on the screens, anti-LGBT sentiments.

LB: (inaudible) and this is in bible study? [00:40:00]

BJ: This was during our bible study.

LB: Oh, gracious.

BJ: So, what happened was they closed the Zoom meeting down and then they started it up again and created a waiting room so that nobody could just come in. And, you know, we did a check in with everybody who was there to make sure that, you know, they were okay --

LB: Yeah.

BJ: -- and spent some time decompressing from that and then went back to bible study. You know, again, this new reality, people have really figured out how to be shitty.
(laughs)

LB: No kidding. No kidding. And, you know, just to put this in context, because I appreciate you talking about this, but,

I mean, this is the sanctuary. This is the church. This is where people are supposed to go and feel totally supported [00:41:00] and accepted and safe. And then, somebody does this in the bible study, for heaven's sakes. I mean, it's like a joke, you know? Like, if it wasn't so horribly serious and terrible, it could be like this joke. Guess what happened in bible study today? (laughter) You know?

BJ: It is - You know, Liz, the thing that -- I have seen people act their absolute best during this. I've seen humanity at its, like, okay, okay, here we go. And then, I've seen, like, just absolute depth of evilness through all of this.

LB: Yeah, yeah.

BJ: So, yeah, nothing really surprises me anymore.

LB: Yeah.

BJ: In fact, I -- this could be part of the conversation because I -- part of what I think COVID has done is also desensitized some of us to some of this stuff [00:42:00] because there's such an onslaught of it that you just, oh, okay, just another day --

LB: Another crazy thing, yeah.

BJ: Yeah. You know, a year ago, something like that had happened at MCC Lehigh Valley, the alarm bells would have gone off and, you know, all the wagons would have circled and all that. And right now, yeah, like, there was no --

there was, I think because so many of us are exhausted,
(laughs) there was no, like, real -- there was a response,
we dealt with it, we did what we had to do, we kept moving
on. But normally, we would have, like, an outcry.

LB: Yeah.

BJ: And --

LB: So, did you think that that happened because you had posted
the Zoom connection, the Zoom link in a public place and
then people just got through it? Or --

BJ: I think so. [00:43:00]

LB: -- somebody that you send it out to actually leak it or
somebody, like, in their household or something leak it?

BJ: It could have been a bunch of things. You know, this
happened -- when did we do -- we had Susan Wild --

LB: Oh, yeah, that was just last week.

BJ: Just this past week.

LB: Yeah.

BJ: So, Susan Wild, congresswoman for this area, what I kind of
think happened was we posted that and we sent that out to a
bunch of places.

LB: Yeah.

BJ: And I believe that Susan Wild's offices sent that out, as
well. So, I think that got our Zoom account out to a bunch
of places. (laughs)

LB: Got you on the radar.

BJ: Yeah, got us on the radar of people.

LB: All over the country, really --

BJ: Yeah.

LB: -- which is a very significant -- [00:44:00]

BJ: Yeah.

LB: -- yeah.

BJ: And you never, I mean, people who like you are on your mailing list and the people who want to see you gone are on your mailing list, you know?

LB: Right.

BJ: So, everybody gets everything. So, it could have been a number of things.

LB: Yeah. What a shock. I didn't even know that happened, you know?

BJ: Yeah.

LB: That's what I'm saying, because, like, you're right, if this had happened, like, two years ago, we would have been all coming out and doing (laughter) if somebody had come into the church and done a -- well, I've done that!

BJ: Yeah.

LB: Trish and John are like -- "What is -- Liz and Trish doing in the church?" Said, "Well, you guys got, you know" --

BJ: Yeah.

LB: -- "got the anti-people out there," so we're there, you know?

BJ: Yeah.

LB: That's what we'll do. And now, we're, ah, what the heck, it's happening.

BJ: (laughs) Yeah, you know?

LB: Gosh. I guess --

BJ: How things have changed, yeah. (laughs)

LB: Yeah, there are times when -- and, I don't know, I guess we have to realize that this kind of discrimination happens to people all the time. And the older you are, the more you know -- [00:45:00] if this -- where it's happened.

BJ: Yeah.

LB: And that's definitely the case. So, yeah. So, for you, personally, you think this is a -- and you're sort of expressing this, that this is influencing your mental health, I would guess. It's certainly doing mine.

BJ: Oh, absolutely. You know, when this first started -- I'm a fairly even-keeled person. I'm well put together, I've -- you know, everybody has their issues but I can deal with a lot of stuff. And I have - I do not have a history of panic attacks or anxiety attacks or anything like that. When this first started for, like, the first month, I was not sleeping and part of it was -- I mean, every time I would

[00:46:00] try to doze off, I could feel my heart start racing and everything started, like -- and just anxiety to fall asleep because, like, if I fall asleep and I -- if I fall asleep, it's going to get me. (laughs) You know, it's that kind of thing.

LB: Yeah.

BJ: I'm going to wake up tomorrow and things are going to be completely different. The first couple months were really hard. The number of times having to hold my husband to sleep at night because he's, you know, breaking down, you know? And I had my breakdown, too, my crying fit, mostly wrapped around our families because we're very close to our families and not being able to go see them was really difficult, and worrying about them. It did very much wear on [00:47:00] my mental health for a while. Now, I'm better. I think it's had time, the shock of it all has had time to settle in, and the reality that this is life for the time being has had time to settle in. The thing I think I'm struggling with right now that I'm trying to get under control for myself, just for my own personal day-to-day, is trying to get over being angry. because I don't know about you but --

LB: Oh, yeah, I'm furious.

BJ: -- I am --

LB: I'm angry all the time, yeah.

BJ: -- all the time.

LB: Yeah.

BJ: How in the hell did we get here?

LB: Right.

BJ: How did this happen and how do we have such ineptitude in our [00:48:00] systems and things that should be dealing with this stuff and the anger of the ignorance of people.

LB: Right.

BJ: Of the lack of empathy and compassion.

LB: Yeah.

BJ: You know? This is a time capsule, right? So, the number of people who during this pandemic that have just decided that selfishness is the way to go.

LB: Yeah, shocking.

BJ: That not being concerned about the other person is good, that -- you know, and I work in the church community. That, you know - And, you know, MCC Lehigh Valley is [00:49:00] a very progressive, inclusive congregation. But I can tell you that from -- in the church world, church universal not MCC Lehigh Valley but just church universal, you know, you got some wing bats. (laughs) You got a lot of them who, for some reason, they can't deal with science, they can't deal with just the realities of how the world works because it's

contrary to what a book says, which is not true in the first place but --

LB: Right.

BJ: -- (laughs) but they've convinced themselves of that. So, you know, if the doctor is not a spokesperson for God so I'm not going to listen to what the doctor says, you know? Are you -- what? (laughs)

LB: Yeah, yeah.

BJ: It's, like, what? [00:50:00]

LB: Yeah, what? Yeah.

BJ: It's, like, what?

LB: Yeah.

BJ: So, you know, a lot of this, I firmly believe that a lot of this insanity that we're dealing with -- my grandmother used to tell me that church folk are the worst folk.

(laughter) And I've worked and been in church all my life and I agree with her. So, so, a lot of what we're dealing with in this country, in this, in this Christian country --

LB: Yeah.

BJ: -- if we didn't have so many self-righteous religious folk, we might be in a better situation. (laughs)

LB: Yeah. It's interesting in that people don't always understand the concept of faith -- so, faith doesn't mean you just believe in things that aren't true just because

you want it to be that way. (laughter) You know?

BJ: Yeah.

LB: And I think -- now, one of -- things we're lucky about in our community and in our Lehigh [00:51:00] Valley and also in the whole state of Pennsylvania is we have a wonderful secretary of health in my opinion. And it's been positive and I think it's been positive for -- have you felt that way? I mean, to have Dr. Rachel Levine speaking as a trans woman but also speaking as the incredible voice of science and reason.

BJ: Yeah, for me it has been -- Dr. Levine has been just a voice of reason and of competence.

LB: Yeah.

BJ: And, for me, her being a trans woman is just icing on the cake for me. But I'm just happy that there is an adult in the room. (laughs) You know, I'm happy that our -- the governor has put someone in a position that [00:52:00] knows what they're talking about and is not going to be bent by needing to be liked or needing to meet some political agenda or anything like that, is just going to tell you, from what they know, from their expertise, what is real and what is not. And Dr. Levine has been that in Pennsylvania. And thank God for her because, you know, looking at some of these other places, some of these other

states who have just sheep (laughs) in leadership positions?

LB: I think that's a generous way of describing --

BJ: Yeah. (laughs) So, you know, Dr. Levine has been just competence. That's all I'm looking for right now: somebody who is competent.

LB: Yeah, I just read -- now [00:53:00] this is a little bit of -- partisan, but I can say that the candidate who is running against the President of the United States had -- and there's a meme that says, "I will read you my positions on all of these issues." And the response at the bottom is, "You had me at 'I will read.'" (laughter) So, you know, I mean, there is something to be said for somebody who is a leader, whether it's Governor Wolf here in Pennsylvania or Dr. Rachel Levine who gets up and, you know, "Where are the kits?" We're looking to somebody who'd come forward and say, "Okay, calm down."

BJ: Yeah.

LB: "These are the situations. Yes, this is hard." And if you look at the history of -- you know, the recent history of the last two hundred [00:54:00] years, when we have people who are in leadership and they can calm the people down, they can say, "We have to work hard" --

BJ: Yeah.

LB: -- "we have to work together."

BJ: Yeah.

LB: "And this is dangerous but we're going to deal with it."

BJ: That's just --

LB: "And I'm in it with you." That's what we want! That's all we want!

BJ: It's --

LB: And we're going to take that from either side of the aisle but we're not getting that.

BJ: It doesn't matter which side. No, I mean, the -- I was, when the pandemic first started, I would occasionally be going to MCC or from MCC. And where I was living before, I had to go by - I had to go by Bucky Boyle. And I would occasionally just go to Bucky Boyle and sit there and look at the river. And I remember, distinctly remember the day that former President Obama put out his [00:55:00] support for Biden, for the candidate, that I pulled over and he came on live.

LB: Yeah.

BJ: And he just looked at the camera and started talking. And he was talking about the pandemic, he was talking about all this different kind of stuff, and I distinctly remember my body changing. I distinctly remember my shoulders relaxing and my jaw stopped being tense and I'm, like, "oh!"

LB: Yeah.

BJ: "This is what a leader actually sounds like." This is what somebody -- this is how you tell people, you know, "this is going to suck but we can make it. This is how you do it." I'm, like, that's all we need -- I don't need to like you. (laughs) I just need you to tell me that we know what we're doing, you know? And we don't have that. We don't [00:56:00] have that right now.

LB: We're in the middle of a time, and we're coming to the end of this, but -- and, you know, we can go for a little bit longer. I actually have more time. It depends. But I know that you've got a lot of stuff to do.

BJ: I got a little time, yeah. (laughs)

LB: Okay, great. Well, I do want to talk about Black Lives Matter and I'd love to hear what you want to talk about because I think in the world, in the United States today, we've got political issues, we've got this terrible pandemic, and we also have some very significant race issues that people need to be talking about. And so, what do you want to say about that? I mean, people may not know that 30 years from now and they may not understand that, so let's talk about that.

BJ: So, this brother, George Floyd, is executed in the streets -- and long execution. They -- [00:57:00] not -- the people

who murdered him didn't even have the decency to end his life quickly.

LB: Yeah.

BJ: He had enough time to use his few last breaths to call out to his mother, to call out to his dead mother. And when I saw that part of it -- the reality for a Black man in this country is it doesn't matter where you are class-wise. None of that matters. I - George Floyd could easily have been me, very [00:58:00] easily, you know? And I don't know a Black person in this country who has not had a bad experience with law enforcement. I've had my share of them and most people who know me know my character and who I am and they would be surprised of how I personally have been treated by -- some of my experiences with the police. George Floyd is executed. We see it. We see the nonchalance of those who were involved in it, that this guy is just another number, is just, [00:59:00] is -- this is -- you could see in that, this is something y'all do on a regular basis, isn't it? This is the way you treat people on a regular basis. And I think part of the reality that we're facing right now is that the reaction to the execution of George Floyd is not simply about George Floyd. This is not about one man. He just happens to be the light for the gasoline, a light that we've lit a few times before. But we

-- let me be right back, because my computer's getting ready to [01:00:00] die. I'm at four percent, so -- and I want to finish this thought. Give me one second. (laughs)

LB: Okay. (pause)

BJ: Okay, there we go. Oh. (laughs) So, what we're seeing right now is all of it. I mean, what you're seeing right now -- [01:01:00] I've been Black all my life (laughs) and I have seen the Black community respond before. I've never seen anything like this. I've asked my grandmother, you know, "Has it been worse?" She's, "Yeah, it's been a lot worse." But she's never seen the Black community respond like this. And, you know, she lived through civil rights and Jim Crow and all that different kind of stuff. So, she's, like, "I've never seen the response on a community level." And I think part of it is COVID.

LB: Yeah.

BJ: Because we're all at home.

LB: Right.

BJ: So, we all have so much -- we have time [01:02:00] to sit with this stuff and decide whether we're going to sit with it.

LB: Right.

BJ: And, you know, I think we are in a -- I think we have reached a turning point. And I do firmly believe that this

system, this government, this way of living for the last 400 years of oppression and -- under oppression under white supremacy that very much still exists. I mean, very -- I mean, you can drive down Eighth Street in Allentown right now on the south side and there's a house over there that has a [01:03:00] flag hanging out of it with swastikas on it. You can -- right now, you can drive over there and see that. This is a reality. But I think that - I think the reckoning has arrived. I don't think there's a way around this. If you don't do it now, it's going to be a bigger problem. If we don't fix this now, it will get fixed one way or the other. And, you know, I have never seen my community respond like this. I've never seen parts of the white community respond like this, all over the place, you know? Everybody knows that this is a real thing.

LB: Right.

BJ: Even those who pretend like it's not.

LB: Yep.

BJ: You ask them, okay, [01:04:00] so, you talk about pulling yourselves up by your bootstraps and just getting over some things and -- because you did it. You were able to pull yourself up by your bootstraps in your life and do -- let me ask you this question. Would you want to still do everything you did through your life but be Black while

doing it, knowing the reality of this country?

LB: Yeah.

BJ: And I don't think those folks would answer in the affirmative, "Yeah, I'd happily be Black and still try to do what I'm gonna - what I did." So, I think there is a reckoning coming, you know? I was talking to a friend of mine here at the church who is a woman of color. She's Asian, woman of color. And [01:05:00], you know, she said, "We all deal with discrimination. We all deal with the oppression of living in a country that's modeled off of white supremacy. We all deal with it."

LB: Yeah.

BJ: But she said, "You know, the one thing that all of us other minorities know" and that they have conversations about is at least they're not Black. (laughter) Because they know full well that it would be a heck of a lot harder (laughs) if they were Black.

LB: Yeah.

BJ: You know? And they deal with their own stuff. But I think there's a change coming. I am heartened by the response of people. I'm not surprised by the outrage [01:06:00] of others. It's going to be what it's going to be but I am - I firmly believe that if we don't deal with this now, if we just don't deal with the ugliness of who we actually are as

a country now, it's going to get a heck of a lot worse.

LB: Right, right, right.

BJ: So, yeah, it's been rough. It's been -- you know, I had to take a week off shortly after the George Floyd incident happened because I hadn't -- you know, talking about being angry?

LB: Yeah.

BJ: I had not been that angry before. Like, I remember saying to Goudy that -- Goudy is the pastor [01:07:00] at MCC Lehigh Valley. And I remember saying to them, "I can't do this right now. I can't be here right now because I'm about to pop." (laughs)

LB: Yeah.

BJ: And nobody here has ever seen me pop. So, like, I -- and the reality for -- I am -- here is the line that I walk. I am an openly Black -- well, openly Black, yeah. I'm openly Black. (laughs) I'm an openly gay Black man in the Lehigh Valley.

LB: Right.

BJ: The Lehigh Valley, it's a really good experiment of what supremacy looks like, (laughs) in real time action, you know? There [01:08:00] is no Black community here. There are Black people. There's no Black community. And that's not by accident. You don't -- I still always wonder how we

are 45 miles from Philadelphia, one of the densest populated cities in the country in relation to Black folk with a huge Black populations and how there are very few Black folks, respectively, in the Lehigh Valley.

LB: Yeah.

BJ: You know? Those lines of delineation are really, really strong in the Lehigh Valley, you know, where urban life ends and rural life begins, it is clear as day. It's, you know, and there's no passing through it. So, my experience is that I'm an openly [01:09:00] gay Black man who works in a religious institution that is a predominantly white religious institution of people who belong to a minority group but also belong to the majority group who don't always understand how they benefit from their privilege simply because they belong to a minority group.

LB: Right.

BJ: But the difference is you can walk out of this place and be a white person and not be an LGBT person, you know what I'm saying? You can take those clothes off if you want to.

LB: Yeah.

BJ: I could walk down - I could walk through west end Allentown [01:10:00] in a rainbow thong and streamers out of my hair and sparklers going off and just Pride it out. And when they make the phone call, the phone call is going to be,

"There's a Black guy walking down the street, causing a ruckus."

LB: Right.

BJ: I doesn't mat-- I could be as -- as I want to be. And that's the reality. That's the reality for so many people in this area. And it's a rough one to be in. So, I had to walk away from the church for a week or so, you know, trying to manage my own stuff. Also, this is going to be a little weird, but trying to manage my own stuff but also trying to [01:11:00] -- how do I say this? The people that have been the hardest to deal with through this are not the -- your conservative --

LB: Right.

BJ: I know where they're at.

LB: Yeah.

BJ: For me, it has been the white liberal progressives who have been the hardest to deal with with this because they don't understand you may be white, liberal progressive but you're still white and you still benefit --

LB: It's still racist.

BJ: -- from the privilege, yeah. You still have all of that -- there's no way you don't.

LB: It's racism.

BJ: Yeah.

LB: It's impossible not to be a --

BJ: Impossible.

LB: -- racist in this country.

BJ: It's impossible and --

LB: It's impossible for anybody to not be a racist, no matter --

BJ: Yeah.

LB: -- what their race is because we're --

BJ: It's hard.

LB: -- constant-- there's so much societal racism.

BJ: And it's systemic.

LB: (inaudible)

BJ: It's been written into our -- the core [01:12:00] of who we are as a society to not trust each other and to not -- you know, in the back of our heads, it's always there. It's always there. You know, my biggest frustration, I think that first couple weeks after all of this happened was the number of people, the number of white folk who I had not talked to in maybe years who either texted me or called me to ask me if I'm okay and ask me what they can do -- and I'm, like, I know you mean well.

LB: Yes.

BJ: I know you mean well. But I'm not your personal Black man. Like, it's I'm not the guardian of the gates. If you really

want to help, there are plenty of places where you -- don't reach out to me for me to tell -- to do the work [01:13:00] to tell you how to do the work.

LB: Right.

BJ: Figure it out. (laughs) So, that was, like, my -- I said to a couple friends, said to my friend, Sirry, who is Sirry Alang, who is a professor over at Lehigh, "If one more person texts me, I'm going to lose my shit. I'm going to lose it." (laughs) They mean well but good Lord. (laughs)

LB: Yeah.

BJ: Oh!

LB: Yeah. (laughs) And unfortunately, in real life, it's harder to unfriend people.

BJ: Yeah. (laughs)

LB: I just want to --

BJ: (laughs) You know, I do think -- I hate social media. I despise it. You know, I say all the time it's where the devil goes to cry. But the [01:14:00] thing I do appreciate about it is that so many people have no filter when it comes to social media and they don't think that there are consequences to the things that they say or post or do. I am grateful for the number of people who have shown me who they are, you know? It's the same people who I can see on a -- or see in person who will smile in my face and tell me

that they care or love me or whatever. And I gotcha. Okay.

(laughs) Okay. You know, I'm grateful for that. (laughs)

LB: Yeah. (laughs) But we're back to reality and --

BJ: Yeah. (laughs)

LB: Yeah. Now what are you going to do? Yeah.

BJ: Yeah, yeah.

LB: I appreciate that. So, I guess that we're at the end here and, you know, if you want to go on, that's -- or I'll give you some more time to say whatever you want to say. But I did want to ask you, you know, sort of in the end

[01:15:00] thing: what's the thing, you know, what's giving you hope, what kind of hope and strength are you getting from anything now that we just talked about all the annoying people that -- (laughter) calling you up with their they're desperately hav-- I have to feel good because -- so, I'm going to talk to Brian, so -- (laughter)

BJ: I think that what I -- I said it earlier. I have seen the best of people throughout this, too. Seen the worst but I've seen the best come out of people. I've seen a generation of younger kids who I am excited about, you know, this -- eighteen, nineteen-year-olds, twenty-year-olds, twenty-one-year-olds, these kids are, like --

LB: Yeah.

BJ: -- they've got their stuff together. [01:16:00] And they have talked out a bunch of stuff with one another that my generation has not, your generation has not, and they've been frank with each other. And they have the ability to not be -- they have the ability to see that the king has no clothes on, you know what I'm saying? They have this -- they know that the stuff that they've been taught, that they -- in school is crap. (Laughs)

LB: Yeah.

BJ: They know this. They do a bunch of their own work. So, that in and of itself has given me some hope.

LB: Yeah.

BJ: And, you know, I'm not - I'm only in my late thirties at this point and I'm -- [01:17:00] I think these kids could take over. (laughter)

LB: Yeah.

BJ: Yeah, I'm happy to just go, "Hey, you can -- go ahead. You guys do what you want to do."

LB: Yes.

BJ: So, that has given me hope. That's absolutely given me hope.

LB: Yeah, yeah.

BJ: The closeness of my spouse has given me hope, as well. We've always been very close and always depended on each

other and always supported each other throughout all different kind of stuff but I'm very lucky. I'm a very lucky man to have met the man that I can [01:18:00] fully confide and leave stuff with, you know? And the line of work that we do, it's nice to have somebody in your corner who gets it, you know? Who gets it and who you can put stuff down with because people don't really comprehend how much we got to carry. And being able to have somebody who you can trust with you is nice. So, that gives me hope that I will actually be able to survive this (laughs) with some sense of completion, like I'm still put together. So, yeah.

LB: Yeah.

BJ: So, those two things, I don't know about -- I'm really excited about this [01:19:00] new crop of kids. Really excited about it.

LB: Right. Pretty great. It's a whole new world --

BJ: Yeah.

LB: -- and it's all through different -- in terms of how they deal with sexual orientation, gender identity, how they talk about things, how they understand things, how they write about things, how they talk about race and ethnic background and how they talk about everything, it's really very positive.

BJ: How they reason with each other.

LB: Yeah, it's very --

BJ: Like, it's not just, you know, it's not just "I'm right, you're wrong." But they take time and invest in conversation with one another, with people who they have very differing views on -- you know, unlike us, who sit on Facebook and, you know, "Here's this article that I did not read and I think it" -- you know, (inaudible), you know? They're not like that. In fact, [01:20:00] that's enough hope for me right there. (laughs)

LB: That's great. Well, I, you know, I think of you as a very young person because I knew you when you were so young. (laughter) And did you go to Allen High School? You went to Allen High School.

BJ: I did, I did.

LB: Yeah.

BJ: I went to Allen.

LB: So, I'm remembering, and maybe I'm wrong about this, but you -- in the 2000 Pride festival, do you remember that? It was raining horrendously.

BJ: Oh, that -- oh, my God, I remember that, yeah. (laughs)

LB: You had that -- and you had a booth there because you --

BJ: I --

LB: -- talking about starting about starting a Gay-Straight Alliance, weren't you? At Allen High School?

BJ: Yes!

LB: Yeah.

BJ: I --

LB: because I -- for the booth --

BJ: -- yeah, I wanted to start a Gay-Straight Alliance at Allen. This was before --

LB: Rachel --

BJ: -- Rachel --

LB: -- Zane.

BJ: -- yeah, Rachel Zane. Rachel was there but Rachel was working at the school [01:21:00] at that time.

LB: Yeah, yeah.

BJ: But I didn't know Rachel and -- because I literally just had this conversation with Rachel, like, a year ago when Goudy and I went to the Gay-Straight Alliance there to do a presentation. And, you know, I said, "I tried to start a Gay-Straight Alliance back in, like, 2000, 2001."

LB: It was 2000 --

BJ: Yeah, some --

LB: -- 2000.

BJ: -- somewhere -- yeah, and got a bunch of pushback, so --

LB: Yeah, remember that.

BJ: So, I had the booth, I had all different kind of stuff going on, and --

LB: It was the hurricane. It was --

BJ: Yeah.

LB: -- during a hurricane.

BJ: Yeah, it was --

LB: And it rained horrendously, to the point where you didn't have a tent, so you're standing out there with a card table, which was mine, by the way, and I still have it. (laughter) And then, you ended up standing in our -- and I said we have to get this kid back over here, because you were in high school then. (laughter) And we come back over and we're just [01:22:00] standing in the tent. It's just torrentially raining and people are just -- you know, and Governor Rendell, he was running for office and he was on the stage. There were still 800 people there.

BJ: Yeah, while --

LB: But --

BJ: -- all the mud is getting deeper --

LB: -- right, the mud is -- like, sinking in the mud.

BJ: (inaudible)

LB: Crocs are just stuck in the mud in the middle of the field and --

BJ: That was back when we -- when Pride was in that --

LB: Yeah.

BJ: -- baller area on the other side of --

LB: We were in the other side.

BJ: -- [near Beech?], right?

LB: Yeah.

BJ: Yeah.

LB: That was the last time I think we had it there and --

BJ: Yeah.

LB: -- Allison Homm was the chair of Pride and she was trying to fix stuff. It might have been 2001. But we were -- she was, like, ordering people to bring hay in so that they could put it on the mud --

BJ: Yeah.

LB: -- because we couldn't get our cars out.

BJ: Yeah.

LB: And it was, yeah, so I --

BJ: It was (inaudible)

LB: -- always -- and I said -- you know, people say, well, so-and-so started the first Gay-Straight Alliance. I said, "I thought Brian Jones did." But I do remember there was a lot of [01:23:00] pushback. There was a lot of pushback --

BJ: Yeah.

LB: -- from the principal. We couldn't even --

BJ: I remember I -- so, this was back in 2000. Remember Borders books? And --

LB: Yeah, yeah.

BJ: -- Borders bookstore? Well, they have a LGBT section in Borders books and I'm -- my little gay self, I went into Borders books, went to the gay section and found a guide to being a LGBT person. (laughter) And I start all this different kind of stuff. And I pulled out this guide and I opened it up and looked at, you know, there was a section in there that said, "How to start a Gay-Straight Alliance."

LB: Yeah.

BJ: I went, okay, I can find that. I can find an advisor; I can find a room. I'm - I've always been a person who can galvanize people and get -- you know, it's what I've always done. So, I got a teacher who was able [01:24:00] to give me a room. I got -- and all the bylaws for the school said to start a group -- was that you needed an advisor, you needed a room, and the group had to be open to anybody.

LB: Right.

BJ: It couldn't be exclusive. So, I went to start it and next thing I know, I'm talking to a school counselor. Then the school counselor wants me to talk to the vice principal and then the vice principal wants me to talk to the principal. And the principal wants me to talk to the superintendent. And this went on for months. For months. And I remember calling you --

LB: Yeah.

BJ: -- and contact with you and --

LB: Mr. Ziminsky was the guy who told me to talk to you.

BJ: Yeah. Steve Ziminsky or Steve Libby?

LB: Yeah, Steve Ziminsky.

BJ: Okay --

LB: Because he (inaudible)

BJ: -- that makes sense.

LB: -- was the music teacher.

BJ: Yeah.

LB: Now, there's this guy, [01:25:00] he's a great musician and he's a kid and he's doing this great job and you need to work with him. And so, "We'll do that. [Call us?]."

BJ: And we tried.

LB: Yeah.

BJ: I mean, that went on for almost -- I want to say almost six months of getting the runaround. And then, by that time, I was -- so, by the time 2001 came around, I was becoming a senior in high school, getting ready for going to school, trying to finish my senior year, and I'm, like, ah! I, you know, (laughs) so I kind of just let it go.

LB: And I'm actually going to be interviewing Ian Wagner, and he was the one, with Rachel Zane, who actually made it go. But even after they finally got that to go, I remember this so clear because they called us in for this. They would

have the announcement that [01:26:00] the Gay-Straight Alliance was going to meet. And the person who was reading the morning announcements would say the GSA.

BJ: Yeah.

LB: They wouldn't say gay. They wouldn't say the word. And so, everybody thought it was the Girls Scouts of America.

(laughter) They just kept saying -- like, they have a Girl Scouts thing here? What the fuck is that, you know?

BJ: Like, the -- Ian was able -- I don't -- I think I know Ian --

LB: Yeah, he's on (inaudible)

BJ: I think we've met each other. I think I know him. But he -- they were able to get that started -- I think it was, like, the year after I left.

LB: I think it was the year after. But the thing about it was that Rachel was committed to starting it.

BJ: Yeah.

LB: So, if you can have a teacher who is -- in effect, it's the teacher that's doing it and the --

BJ: Yeah.

LB: -- kids are doing it. And I know that's so because I was a college teacher and, you know, you can have a kid who -- like, we had a lot of different situations where kids would come to [01:27:00] us and they'd say, "Well, I'm trying to

get this thing to happen and I have this petition," something like that. And I would say to them, this happened at Liberty High School, and I said, "Let me talk to them. Let me just talk to the principal first." So, then I would threaten the principal (laughter) like, "You can't say no to this kid."

BJ: Yeah.

LB: "It's the law!" I did that to Muhle- I did that to Moravian, too.

BJ: Yeah.

LB: And I screamed at the person who was the dean of students because they said that they had brought kids in telling them they had a Gay-Straight Alliance at Moravian and they didn't.

BJ: And they didn't.

LB: And then, the person says to me, "Well, he can start one." I said, "So, you're telling me that you want a freshman kid who is being harassed" --

BJ: Yeah.

LB: -- "publicly by their RA to start their own group after you told him, 'You should come here because there's a group'?"

BJ: Yeah.

LB: I mean, come on!

BJ: Oh!

LB: That's not okay! And every [01:28:00] time they say, you know, "Well, it's up to the kids to do it" -- it is very hard for the kids to do it.

BJ: Really hard!

LB: You have to have --

BJ: It's fucking --

LB: -- yeah.

BJ: I remember being --

LB: And you were so tenacious about it. I remember that so well.

BJ: I was on -- I was one of the few out gay kids in that -- I mean, and Allen is a school, even then, of three thousand, four thousand --

LB: Yes, it's in the thousands.

BJ: -- kids.

LB: Yeah.

BJ: And I was one of maybe five or six kids in the whole school who were out.

LB: Yeah.

BJ: You know? And I felt like, I always have felt like, okay, this is a part of my responsibility --

LB: Exactly, yeah.

BJ: -- as a, as who I, you know, who I am. So, I took on the responsibility.

LB: Yeah, that's right.

BJ: And the thing that they never said: they never said no.

[01:29:00]

LB: Right, they just --

BJ: They never said no.

LB: -- passed you on forever.

BJ: Yeah.

LB: "Well, we have to talk to the school board. We have to talk to the superintendent. Well, next month, we'll talk to the superintendent."

BJ: Yeah.

LB: "Next week, we'll have this. Let's, well" -- and then, all of a sudden, the facilitator doesn't want to do it anymore because --

BJ: Yeah.

LB: -- they've been threatened.

BJ: Yeah.

LB: And that happened at Pen Argyl High School, Adrian -- and that was a lot later but Pen Argyl High School, they ended up -- ultimately, the superintendent made -- and the school, the counselor -- the - we actually talked directly to the legal counsel for the whole school district, who told them they have to let it go because it's against the law to say no. And this superintendent came to the kids,

this is so fascinating. The superintendent comes to the kids, this is at Pen Argyl, and says to them, "You really, you're doing a great job. I support this one hundred-percent. And by the way, I'm [01:30:00] a lesbian." Superintendent says that. And then she gets fired.

BJ: Oh!

LB: She gets -- so, what does that say to the kids?

BJ: Oh!

LB: I mean, here's this person who is that level and they come out in a perfectly normal thing, like, "I want you to know that it gets better, I'm a lesbian, I have a great relationship, don't worry about it, every -- you know, I support you." And then she gets fired. The superintendent gets fired.

BJ: Well --

LB: And then the teachers see that and they think holy crap, I'm not going to be the advisor for this group. They're going to fire me if I do this.

BJ: Well --

LB: It's -- that's how you keep people down, by doing that.

BJ: -- but you also keep people up by being visible --

LB: Yeah, you do.

BJ: -- and open. You take your - you take the lumps that you're going to get and you just keep on moving. I mean, it's --

and I would ask you a question. Do you know, do you and Trish understand -- [01:31:00] I know you do; it's just philosophical (laughs)– but I really think that what y'all do, what we do, what people like Steve Libby do, you know, what we do is life and death.

LB: Yeah.

BJ: Literal life and death.

LB: I do know that's true.

BJ: And, you know, if – we would not be having this conversation right now if -- and you don't know this, but if I had -- if people like you and Steve and Goudy hadn't walked into my life, I would be gone.

LB: Yeah. Well, I mean -- and that goes for the people that helped me and everything like that, too, and that we've got this whole relationship. And it's what you're talking about, that family of LGBT [01:32:00] people that -- and frankly, with regard to LGBT people, which is different than racial minorities -- racial minorities cannot hide their racial minority. But there's also the fact that most LGBT people don't have parents that are LGBT, so they don't really know -- and the one other group that's similar to that that I found when I do trainings and stuff is young people who have disabilities. And their parents don't always -- don't understand them because they don't have

those disabilities. And the relationship -- I actually did a training one time. It was a whole bunch of kids that happened to show up to it that all had mental and physical disabilities. Mostly mental disabilities. And when I was talking about that aspect -- because, you know, you never had to go home and say to your parents, "Mom, Dad, I've got something to tell you. I'm Black." They probably knew.

BJ: Yeah, they figured that out. (laughs)

LB: But they [01:33:00] probably figured it out. Now, it doesn't make it any easier because you're right --

BJ: Yeah.

LB: -- you're wearing a badge every minute that everybody can see and the ingrained racism of the United States is impossible to deny. But these kids, when I was saying it to these kids who had these disabilities, they were totally nodding their head. And I hadn't really thought about it and then I'm looking at them going, oh, yeah! They're in the same situation because Trish, who worked at a rehab hospital said, you know, "Kids who have --" they would get head injuries or something like that and it would change their demeanor or they'd be in a wheelchair, "their families would just give them up." And that's what happens to us, that's -- you know, to LGBT kids. And so, it's our responsibility, as part of the LGBT community, the adult

community, to take care of the younger generation. It's our responsibility. If we're not going to do it, we can't count on their own parents to do it.

BJ: Yeah, and --

LB: And in general, I think that's true for all kids. Kids can't always count on their parents to take [01:34:00] care of them. Other people have to help them.

BJ: Yeah.

LB: It's a part of the deal. And so --

BJ: And that need for, that wagon circling thing, that need for -- that familial thing that we have all -- that so many of us have lost, places like your organization have been that. We've tried our best to do that. And --

LB: Oh, you've done a great job at MCC. You know, I'm still recommending people to go to MCC. People will call me up and they'll say -- and they've done this for years, because I've been answering the info line for twenty-two years. People call up and they'll say, "I want to meet more people in the community." Or they, "I want a support group." Now, we have support groups sort of now but not for just -- and I say, "You really need a support group or you just need to meet more queer people? (laughter) Like, meet other lesbians, for example." And I'll say, "You know, how do you feel about church?" "Yeah, I don't have any problem with

that." "Okay, well, why don't you go to MCC?" "Because they have to be [01:35:00] nice to you there. It's work.

(laughter) And they'll shake your hand and then you can sit in the back." And also, it's every week. So, it's not like, well, if I don't have the nerve to do it this week --

BJ: Yeah.

LB: -- I can always think -- I can go --

BJ: There's going to be another one next week.

LB: -- I can do another one next -- not like monthly or we're having a dance and then we're not --

BJ: Yeah, yeah.

LB: -- having another one till next year. Or the Pride festivals: one gig and then there's not another one until next year. And I said, "MCC." And I remember one time, somebody -- I won't tell you who it is but it's somebody you know in the church who said -- I was doing something at MCC when we were -- when you were at the soap -- or whatever that factory place was on Fourth Street, when you're on Sixth Street. And we were working on a project and something and (inaudible) and she was a board member. And she said, "Do you realize that you said that to me?" (laughter) I called you for that reason? Like, I don't know anybody. Said, 'Why don't you go over to MCC?'" And she, like, you know, ended up with a whole career thing there.

[01:36:00] (laughter) And now she has a partner who she's married to and that was a long time ago. And I said, "I say that to a lot of people." (laughter) And I do because that -- and also, that people have, you know, spiritual violence to them all the time.

BJ: Yeah.

LB: And people who get a life from church can often have their church treat them like crap and that they need a church that really is going to support them. And I think that MCC -- I just referenced somebody. Somebody just called me. It was a therapist and the therapist said that the kid was very, very religious, from a very religious family, and they needed a religious community to support them. And I said, "Call Metropolitan." And she said, "I called this church. It was a United Church of Christ." Not yours but -- not the one there but in another part -- and the pastor who answered the phone said, "Yeah, the pastor that you really [01:37:00] should talk to is the other guy and he's on vacation. I'm not the one." In other words, "I hate gay people."

BJ: Yeah, yeah.

LB: You know, the other guy is tolerant of them, so -- and I said, "You don't need to call a church that is willing to allow queer people to be in the church. You need to call a

church who's going to understand exactly what this kid is talking about."

BJ: Yeah, and that is a big part of that -- see, it's an important context to have because there are a lot of churches in the area who are open and affirming, who are reconciling, who are -- and a lot of them get that as a badge of honor.

LB: Yeah.

BJ: That doesn't mean diddly-squat, you know? It doesn't mean --

LB: Oh, doesn't, no.

BJ: -- doesn't mean a thing. There are those -- I got to give -- there are those who -- where that means something --

LB: Yeah.

BJ: -- but they're fewer than, yeah, and fewer than you would think. [01:38:00]

LB: Yeah.

BJ: And, you know, so many people in our community who do - who have been raised in a faith tradition, who have been raised in a Christian tradition, who have never been told that they're loved by their Creator as they are.

LB: Yeah!

BJ: Is amazing to me and we see it -- I mean, you can see the visceral reaction of people when they hear that for the

first time.

LB: Right.

BJ: And it changes their lives. And a lot of times -- we have this conversation often because a lot of times, we get people who come to the door who might come to the door one time. They might come to the door one time and they'll sit in the sanctuary and they will just cry through the whole thing.

LB: Right.

BJ: And we won't see them again. And what we had to come to terms with was all this person needed in their life was to be told that what [01:39:00] they believe, how they believe they were created, is affirmed by the divine. (laughs) That's all they needed. And be okay with that.

LB: And they're not the only one that thinks so. There's this whole church of people that --

BJ: Whole community.

LB: Yeah.

BJ: Whole community.

LB: This church community looks just like my church community, so --

BJ: Yeah. And can I ask you a question?

LB: Sure.

BJ: I would love to get your perspective on this. Even before

COVID, had you been getting a sense that the LGBT community had -- I've kind of been getting the sense that the LGBT community had been coming -- disjointed. Not disjointed but -- that's not the word I want to use. Disconnected. So, long-time [01:40:00] institutions within our area closed over the last couple years. So, in cases like Diamonz and, like, 12th Street, what was it called? The bar on Twelfth Street.

LB: Candida's.

BJ: Candida's.

LB: Candida's. Yeah, except I know why both of those places changed. They closed and it wasn't because they didn't have business or anything like that. It was --

BJ: Yeah.

LB: -- Candida was, you know, in her late 70s and she wanted to retire. And, quite frankly, the person who ran Diamonz had some issues that got --

BJ: Yeah.

LB: -- didn't have anything to do with -- well, I think, for me, I'm not seeing that because we just --

BJ: No?

LB: -- got this -- I'm not seeing that because we had just started this community center and it's -- we've got 14 employees now. And, you know, when we started out, it was,

like, me and Adrian and [01:41:00] Trish and Adrian saying, "Let's try to do this." And before that, we ran it out of our house for years and years and years.

BJ: Yeah.

LB: And so, actually, I'm seeing this enormous amount of work we're doing. So, I guess I see what you mean. I think that there is -- and it's interesting that I'm doing a lot of historical stuff because I just interviewed all of these guys about HIV/AIDS and a couple of women and -- in the eighties. And there was an LGBT community center on Hamilton Street in the eighties --

BJ: Wow.

LB: -- that was called the Lambda Center. And then, because of AIDS, it became the AIDS Services Center --

BJ: Okay.

LB: -- which was in Bethlehem. And that ran for a long time, into the nineties until -- and then, it was absorbed by St. Luke's. But what happened was that things with regard to AIDS changed because of actual ways to save [01:42:00] people's lives and stuff like that. So, I've actually been looking at this, because I came to the Lehigh Valley in 1987, I've been looking at this continuum. And somebody in the community named Dixie White, I don't know if you know her, but she was a -- Dixie died a couple of --

BJ: Weeks ago.

LB: -- weeks ago, a few weeks ago, and she was a major activist in the seventies and I knew her quite well. And she gave me a lot of her papers and stuff about stuff that she did in the '70s and what they tried to do in the seventies. And so, I mean, that's really -- we're really talking about, you know, more than forty years ago and this continuum. And those things wax and wane.

BJ: Yeah.

LB: And a lot of it has to do with people who age out, you know? They get to a certain point where they're saying, okay, I can't -- this -- I have to say that for me and Trish, the fact that Adrian came along and said that he would run the Pride festival, and here's this guy in his thirties -- I mean, he didn't even - he wasn't even in his thirties. He was late twenty-something. I'm thinking thank God [01:43:00] he's doing this because who else would do this the way that we're doing it? We're not getting paid, we're putting a huge amount of our own money into it for the most part, we're doing all of this work. It's constant work and we can't do this forever.

BJ: Yeah.

LB: And then, somebody comes along and says, "I'll do it." So, I think it's not unlike that circumstance that happens in

schools frequently where there can be an enormously successful Gay-Straight Alliance because there's, like, two really active students and a facilitator that are so into it. When Adrian was at Muhlenberg College, the Gay-Straight Alliance had seven hundred members.

BJ: Wow.

LB: And when he left, there were forty-five members. And forty-five isn't anything to shake -- I mean, that's plenty.

BJ: Yeah, yeah.

LB: So, when -- but, you know, you have somebody who's really dynamic and they figure out ways to do it. And it waxes and wanes and I think that that happens. I think that there is a feeling or there has been a feeling since the last presidential election of [01:44:00] fear and despair, which is changing now. I think that people are saying we have to come together, we have to fight -- that sometimes people feel complacent after the continuation of marriage or, you know, after the legality of marriage equality and people are sort of thinking, okay, we've got this now.

BJ: Yeah.

LB: And then, you know, then all these other things happen. And so, we have to recognize that that -- and that happens, you know, that happened with -- in the civil rights movement

where desegregation happens and the end of, for the most part, the end of Jim Crow laws and you have the really significant civil rights movement with Martin Luther King and all of those things happen and then the signing of the Civil Rights Act in 1965. And then, white people starting to think, oh, well, that -- Black people aren't discriminated against anymore. One of the things that -- what I was thinking about when you were talking about people being so aware of the Black Lives Matter movement and the terrible things, the George Floyd stuff, the Breonna Taylor, all of those [01:45:00] different things is -- one of the things that's great about it is social media because people can whip out their phone and take a picture of it --

BJ: Yeah.

LB: -- so that somebody can say, "Well, oh, that doesn't really happen." But, like, yes it does! Here it's happening and six people took a picture, watched this happening, and had a picture of, you know, peaceful Black Lives Matters protesters being beaten up by police in riot gear for no reason at all.

BJ: Yeah.

LB: And you can't look at that and go, well, that wasn't really happening. And that actually happened during the civil

rights movement, too, where people were seeing on television, you know, peaceful people marching and then, you know, guys with dogs and, you know, police with dogs and with fire hoses really harming those people and saying, well, how can you justify that? This is real discrimination. And so, one of the good things now, I think, and it can be dangerous, but one of the good things now is that, I mean, we had a Supreme Court decision that was pretty [01:46:00] significant. I was able to -- Trish is famous for watching the SCOTUS blog. She watches that blog and the minute the stuff comes off -- this happened with the American -- Care Act. The real information, I put it on the internet as fast as possible (laughter) because I want to break the news before anybody else. So, we have the opportunity to do that kind of information when before we had to rely solely on the news and they often get it wrong or they got it -- it was tainted or -- we know that news isn't always honest now. And there's -- you know, Fox News has been around with their fake news for years and years. But so was the Hearst company in the 1930s.

BJ: Yeah, yeah.

LB: So, I mean, that's nothing new. But now we have an opportunity to share information. Some of it's wrong. Some of it's tainted. But we also have a way to share

information with each other in terms of saying, okay, you cannot argue that this thing that happened to George Floyd is [01:47:00] wrong.

BJ: Yeah.

LB: I mean, this happened. It was wrong. There is no justification for it. And you can turn back and say if you're trying to justify this, you are being -- or if you're trying to justify that transgender people shouldn't have healthcare, I don't want to be your friend anymore. You can't say you love me and then do this thing.

BJ: Yeah.

LB: And it is kind of -- it can be divisive and it can draw a line in the sand. But it also can make people aware that we can't just agree to disagree when it comes to inequality of - and racism and homophobia and transphobia. We can't just agree to disagree. That's not a legitimate thing to say. Only people of privilege will ever say that.

BJ: Yeah, yeah.

LB: And so, I think that, you know, I've been doing this gig a long time. And - A really long time. I was running the [01:48:00] Gay-Straight Alliance when I was in college and that was, oh, in the seventies. So, I see this. It's a roller coaster. And I think that people can be -- one's experience can be, oh, God, I can't get anybody to do

anything and why is this happening? I have seen that happen, go, you know, like a roller coaster for so many years that I expect it to be a roller coaster. So, I think, you know, it's unrealistic, and I know you know this, it's unrealistic to think it's always going to just get better and better and better and better.

BJ: Oh, yeah.

LB: It never happens.

BJ: Never works that way. Never works that way.

LB: And, you know, look at the history of MCC. It's been around for thirty years, more than thirty years.

BJ: Almost forty at this point. (laughs)

LB: Forty? Yeah.

BJ: Almost forty.

LB: And the, right, and all the incredible things that have happened and the successes that's happened. And then, you know, parts that were hard and parts there's disagreement, it's the way human beings are. I mean, that's, it's, yeah, but look at how MCC [01:49:00] has continued after all of this time, I think, and how many people have been positively supported and helped by MCC. It's extraordinary --

BJ: Yeah, it's --

LB: -- something to be really proud of.

BJ: -- it's, you know, I -- that need for the - that community thing, that need for the ability to do this, right?

(laughs) To do --

LB: Sure.

BJ: -- you know, and I wonder, in the future, how much of this kind of stuff is going to be important, even more so in building local community and building - keeping the stories together, keeping the history together, and being able to have conversations with each other that other people can see and be a part of.

LB: Right.

BJ: You know? It's going to be very [01:50:00] important. Very, very important. People are going to need to see folks who are in either a leadership position or just a part of the community engaging with each other and, you know, this is -- I think you're onto something here. (laughs)

LB: Oh, definitely, and this was a grant that we got and it was some -- Adrian and some of the people from the archives wrote this grant and then they said, "Now you have to do it." (laughter) And I said to these guys -- and I have to tell you, Brian, that we've been working on these archived interviews for a while and Lehigh is doing some from some of the older people who are the LGBT people in the community. And it took them about a year and a half to do

10 interviews. Then Adrian came to me -- and they have a team, too -- and then he comes to me and he goes, "Well, here's the grant," and something and I said, "This is [01:51:00] 30 interviews, (laughter) two months."

BJ: Oh, my gosh!

LB: I haven't even -- and I said, "And I don't even know how to use the Zoom yet!" (laughter) So, I said to him -- he said, "Can you get it done?" because it's parameters in the grant and I said, "Yeah, I can get it done." But for every -- but nobody else could do this because you got to know people to be able to do this and --

BJ: Yeah, yeah.

LB: -- so, anyway, it was -- been funny. But I did point out and I said there's a lot of paperwork with these things, too. We have to fill out forms and they have to be uploaded and stuff like that and it goes to the archives. So, I have to fill out forms to be sure that it's uploaded the right way. So, anyway, we've gone over the time but I loved talking to you! (laughter) And I'm so grateful that you've done this and it's been wonderful to walk down memory lane, back to twenty years ago when we were --

BJ: Twenty years ago!

LB: -- getting really wet and -- (laughter) that was a classic -- I think that was a really [01:52:00] classic --

BJ: That was, I -- that was horrible. (laughs)

LB: It was horrible!

BJ: That was still -- it was memorable, though. People still showed up. They still came out.

LB: And the hilarious thing about it is I remember Steve Black saying this from the stage, he said, "We're so -- we're in this terrible situation where we're" -- it was, the name of the hurricane was Alison, was Hurricane Alison.

BJ: Yeah, yeah.

LB: And we said, you know, the head of our -- the Pride festival was Alison. (laughter) She's our own hurricane. She's still around doing stuff, too.

BJ: Yeah, yeah!

LB: So, you know, I mean, I see posts from her every day and they're very, very progressive and interesting.

BJ: Yeah.

LB: So, anyway, it's been wonderful to talk to you. Thank you so much. They will send you this and I'm going to turn this off now, so --

BJ: Okay.

LB: -- there -- [01:52:52]

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