

Ian Wagner

2020-07-09

LIZ BRADBURY: -- record on this computer. I'm also going to do an audio recording because I did one last week for the HIV/AIDS ones that we're doing for people who were around during the AIDS epidemic, and I did ten people, and one of the people I was doing didn't record it right. She had stopped it, I had to stop it because we lost a connection for her. And I pressed resume but on Zoom resume does not mean resume. It means you resume to the opportunity to record again. (laughs) So, then you have to press record again. So, luckily I had an audio recording of her. And her camera, her video recording camera was really bad anyways, so I felt ever more exonerated because I didn't mess it up. Can you hear me okay?

IAN WAGNER: Yes, I can, how about me?

LB: You sound great. [00:01:00] We are recording and I'm going to read you the stuff here. And it says -- let's see, turn off phone. I think my phone is already off. Yes, it is. And I'm recording, I've got the audio, I've got the video, okay. I have to pin you. Wait a minute. I have to do the pin thing. Whoops, no, I want to pin video on you. That's not right.

IW: Don't you love when you have technical difficulties?

LB: I think I may have messed up the whole thing before. Who am I seeing now? I want to pin it on you. Unpinned. No, you're

pinned. Okay, you're good. Wait, unpin video. Pin you, pin video on you. Yes, good, okay, that's right. [00:02:00] So, now, you're pinned. Okay, I've got it. Now I've got to read you this stuff. With this project Bradbury-Sullivan LGBT Community Center at 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. My name is Liz Bradbury and I'm here with Ian Wagner to talk about his experiences in the Lehigh Valley LGBT community during this time of the COVID-19 pandemic as part of the Lehigh Valley LGBT Community Archive. Thank you so much for your willingness to speak with us. Oh, I was supposed to give the date of this interview. The date is Thursday July 9th, 2020. Thank you so much for your willingness to speak with us today. To start, can you please state your full name [00:03:00] and spell it for me?

IW: Ian Wagner, Ian, I-A-N as in Nancy, Wagner, W-A-G-N-E-R.

LB: Great. And can you please share your birth date?

IW: June 29th, 1988.

LB: Great. And what town are you in?

IW: New Tripoli.

LB: Okay, because we have to put that. Now this is the consent part, so, do you consent to this video for us to -- no, do you consent to this interview today?

IW: I do.

LB: Do you consent to having this interview being transcribed, digitized, and made available publicly online in digital formats?

IW: Yes, I do.

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

IW: Yes, I do.

LB: Do you understand [00:04:00] that you will have 30 days after the electronic delivery of this transcript to review your interview and identify any parts you would like to delete and/or withdraw from the -- or you could actually withdraw the entire interview, if you choose, from the project?

IW: I do.

LB: Good. Okay, so we're going to start out by just a couple of things. What is your zip code where you live?

IW: 18066.

LB: And what is your age?

IW: thirty-two.

LB: How do you identify within the LGBT community? Sexual orientation, gender, identity, anything you want to say with regard to that.

IW: I am a gay cis male.

LB: Here are some things -- so, this is about the different things. And, you know, there's a lot of different questions on here, I hope you had a chance to look at those. But we don't have to hit every one of those things, so it's just general stuff. Let me ask you first, [00:05:00] in the place -- well, so, you're working now? You're working online? We'll just talk about that.

IW: Yes, I am. I actually just obtained my master's degree in clinical counseling. So, I was in my internship when all of this started back in March. I actually finished school during COVID. And I did my internship and practicum with Pinebrook Family Answers where I still am today. I'm actually in the middle of transferring from there to Holcomb, I just obtained a position as a counselor with them.

LB: Great. And you're doing that from home now?

IW: Yes.

LB: That is counseling people and it's sort of on Zoom stuff.

IW: Yeah, we use a special Microsoft Teams because it's HIPAA compliant.

LB: I see. Normally, if you were not, if it wasn't the COVID-19 circumstance, would you be seeing these people in person?

[00:06:00]

IW: Yes, I would be going to the Pinebrook office and have the sessions there.

LB: And how's it working out to have these sessions on Zoom?
What do you think about that?

IW: They work for some people and they don't work for, my caseload, most people. Yeah, just because one, I have a couple of kids, so, it's hard to keep them focused when they're not in a room with you and getting to actually participate with them. They have toys around them in their home, they have other distractions, so it's hard to get them to really participate in the counseling session. Some adults have issues with anxiety, so no matter how much I explain that Microsoft Teams is HIPAA compliant, they just don't feel comfortable discussing personal things over the phone or even over the app. So, I find in person [00:07:00] counseling to be best. And I hope to get back there one day.

LB: Yeah. Have you had anybody that liked it better?

IW: I do. I have one person and that's because they live in Wind Gap, so it avoids the travel for them. So, this has actually been beneficial for that client.

LB: Yeah, Wind Gap is really far.

IW: Yeah.

LB: You're working in this house in New Tripoli. And who else is in the house with you? You're not all by yourself?

IW: No, I'm with my roommate Rachel Zane and her daughter Sarah Zane.

LB: It's lucky that you have other people there because when you're with other people it's easier. Do you think it's easier?

IW: I do actually. The house is a decent size so we are able to not be on top of each other throughout this entire thing. We basically each kind of have our own floors because Sarah's [00:08:00] bedroom is on the first floor, Rachel's is on the third, and I'm actually in the basement with my own entrance and everything. So, it works out pretty good.

LB: Yeah, that does work out good. Would you think that it would be -- what do you think it would be like if you were all by yourself? Or would you like it better?

IW: No, I think I have the best of it right now. Because I think if I was alone I would eventually get lonely and then it's like ugh, who do I invite over because who have they been around, do I want to go outside. So, at least with them here I know where they've been and again, we don't really step on each other. So, if I want my alone time I just go to my room and that's fine.

LB: When you graduated right in the middle of this, were you afraid it would be hard to get a job?

IW: Not really. Just because I already had an offer from Pinebrook so, [00:09:00] at least I was okay there. And I do still work full-time as a support coordinator for service, access, and management, so thankfully as far as work that wasn't

a concern. And I realize I'm incredibly blessed because what I do with the social work and the counseling it's able to go virtual and I can still work full-time. Like I didn't get affected as far as employment. Which I know a lot of people were, so I consider myself lucky on that stance.

LB: Are the other people in the house, in your house sort of in that same situation? I kind of know the answer to this but, people who are watching this may not. And remember people may be watching this that are thirty years from now. So, it will be really an interesting time capsule to explain to people because some people might not understand the circumstances of what's really happening now.

IW: Yeah, for all I know, maybe tele-health will be the norm and they'll be like, he went to the office, why? [00:10:00]

LB: (laughs) Really? Rachel's a teacher and of course it's the summer.

IW: Yeah, so that worked out perfectly. Again, I mean obviously COVID-19 is horrible, but as far as when it occurred for us it happened in March, so she only had a couple of more months. So, she did teach online for a little bit, but now here we are in the summer so she would have been off anyway.

LB: Right.

IW: And Sarah is still in school. She goes to Northampton Community College. So, she's just taking classes online. Which

she doesn't like. She's a more -- just like me, I did not like online classes, I avoided them like the plague, I like to go to the class. So, it's a little difficult for her.

LB: Yeah. I mean, I don't even know if this is on the list but I'm fascinated because I'm sure you're all in the house considering this, that if Rachel has to go -- what do you think is going to happen? [00:11:00] Some states are requiring teachers to go back to work even though it's incredibly dangerous, particularly in Florida, for example.

IW: Yes. We've talked about that. Especially since I believe for my clients, some of them need to do the in person counseling. So, we've had that discussion like if they lift it and I'm able to go to the office, for some clients I would want to go to the office. So, basically all we can do, considering that we both work in basically a humanistic profession, her being a teacher, me being a counselor, that we would just have to do the best we can as far as obviously remembering to wash our hands, we have our own masks, I keep extra masks in the car just in case I walk out of the house and forget mine, and in case I come across someone who needs one I can give them one. And when I get home, if I -- because we have to go to the store and stuff like that, [00:12:00] so, on the rare occasions that happens, we come home, we immediately throw our clothes in the

washer, and we take a shower. So, we try to be as careful as we can.

LB: So, there's questions here about if you're doing communicating by phone or online for work, but what about socially? Are you doing that for socially? You have friends that you're talking to that way too, or what do you think?

IW: Yeah. I have used Facetime more than I probably ever have, and Zoom, and Skype. Something me and a couple of friends are doing is we enjoy Broadway, and of course, that's been closed down. So, there's this app, which I'm forgetting right now, but it's Broadway World, I don't know, I forget it. But we're using that to watch Broadway shows that have been previously recorded.

LB: Oh cool.

IW: What we do is we set up our laptops, [00:13:00] phones, whatever we're using, and we press play at the same time so we're watching the show at the same time together just in different houses. Yeah, it's been really nice. We still get to socialize and talk about it and still remain safe as far as social distancing.

LB: And then you're like on the phone talking about it while you're watching it.

IW: Yeah. So, like I set up my iPad so it will be facing me and I'm watching the TV, so I can look down and at them, and be like oh my god, did you see that.

LB: That's great. That's a great idea. That's really smart.

Trish and I have been watching opera at the Metropolitan Opera on a really big screen, we have a really big screen here.

IW: Yeah, I need to get a bigger screen.

LB: Well, it's the screen -- we don't have TV, but it's the screen I use at the community center and then I project it with my projector through my computer. So, it's an enormous thing [00:14:00] that was really interesting. What's your biggest concern? In terms of the whole world and what's happening, what's the stuff that's really concerning you most with regard to this virus?

IW: In regards to COVID-19?

LB: Yeah.

IW: I am concerned that we're going to be in green too soon, we're already in green. And people being home for so long are going to let their guards down and go to places like the beach, the park, and wearing a mask is uncomfortable. At least I find it uncomfortable. So, they may like put it down so their nose is out or something. And I just -- without a vaccination or proper treatment yet, I think it's really dangerous for people to still come together in large groups.

LB: Do you know people who are doing that?

IW: Not personally, but I see it online and stuff like that.

[00:15:00]

LB: It's funny that I really don't know anybody that's doing it, but I do see it online. And I'm glad that I don't have to yell at my own friends.

IW: Exactly.

LB: Do you know anybody who's had it?

IW: Not really. There was a classmate of mine from high school who I've lost touch with since high school, but unfortunately he did pass away due to COVID-19. Which was really a hit to home for me because this guy was my age, perfect health, was an athlete back in high school, and he got sick and unfortunately passed away. So, it was that thing where I knew it didn't really matter my age, but that was a yeah, it doesn't matter, this is someone you know, and --

LB: Was he in the area?

IW: Yeah.

LB: Wow. Was he doing something like [00:16:00] in an essential services situation? Was he a healthcare worker? Because a lot of healthcare workers --

IW: No, not to my knowledge. Again, we lost track.

LB: Yeah. So, we really would love to know, one of the things that I think we're all concerned about, or at least people you and I know, are very concerned about the lack of federal leadership, let's put it that way. (laughs)

IW: Okay, let's put it that way.

LB: But one of the things that we have in common is that we have some pretty great leadership in the state. And Dr. Rachel Levine has been really for me a mainstay, I've felt a lot of comfort. How do you feel about when you see her? Have you seen her when she's talking about stuff? (overlapping dialogue; inaudible)

IW: Sorry?

LB: The Secretary of Health, for peoples' edification.

IW: Yeah. Fortunately I was able to meet her at one point, so that was really nice. [00:17:00] And I am always watching her when she's on TV or I search for the article if I miss something on TV. I think she's a real leader in so many ways, and I'm incredibly thankful that we have her. She's taking this pandemic seriously and is trying to protect us all and help us all as much as she can.

LB: There are fears in terms of -- that you have about that kind of stuff too. Because -- what do you think would happen if you got it?

IW: I have thought about that. I don't know. I mean, just hope and pray that the treatment they give me in a hospital would work and I would pull through. For my loved ones, I would hope I would find out as soon as possible so I can either be isolated or put into a hospital where I can't affect my loved ones.

[00:18:00] Honestly that's probably my biggest fear is not so

much me getting it. Like, I obviously don't want it, but getting it and affecting those around me.

LB: Yeah. No kidding. I mean, I think that we all have people who are at risk around us and it's very frightening, I think. I mean, to think that you could hurt someone else.

IW: Especially someone you care for.

LB: Yeah. It's hard to not be angry at people. It's hard to not feel anger. Anger. Have you been having a feeling -- I have a lot of feeling like that.

IW: More frustration and confusion on how these people are not taking it seriously and how some people believe that it's a hoax, that it's not really happening. And quoting things like oh, more people die from the flu every year, but it's like that doesn't [00:19:00] mitigate what's happening here right now.

LB: When you're working with the people that you're seeing online, they probably, I would guess that some of them are very scared. Does that happen?

IW: Yeah, some of the kids don't understand so, it's a matter of helping them to understand and seeing where they are. And some of the adults are just downright frustrated. They want to go out, some are not used to not being able to do what they want to do because they're older adults, so they haven't had to answer to anyone in a really long time. And now it's like it's

almost like you're punished, like go in your room and don't come out, like you can't come out of your house.

LB: It is like that. We have some things on this list of questions and one of them is, are you using any queer dating sites or hookup apps? [00:20:00]

IW: You know what? No, right now no. I don't understand why anyone would be because then you would want to go meet that person, again, you don't know who they've been around. So I see it -- I don't understand.

LB: (inaudible) online dates.

IW: Yeah, people are doing like Zoom dates and stuff like that. I haven't thought about it. And honestly, I haven't dated so long because of school it's not really different for me. What I do find funny was I was telling myself before all this like you graduate this coming year, after you graduate you're going to get back out there. And then COVID and it's like nope, you're staying right here, no dating for you. So, I was like okay.

LB: That's true. The whole universe is stacked up against you.

IW: Ian's going to be alone.

LB: You're in a situation where you never have to worry about being out [00:21:00] because you're as out as can be and you live with people who are totally comfortable with you being out, they've always known that you are gay. But are you coming in contact with people, particularly young people since you are

working with young people who are really at risk because they can't be out to anyone because they're at home, have you had anybody like that?

IW: I've had a client like that who couldn't come out specifically as transgender. So, that was difficult for him. And it's a matter of, at least for me, assisting them to make sure they're safe both physically and emotionally. And trying to give them as many tools as I can.

LB: It's tricky. This must be new in some ways for you as a therapist or a psychotherapist that somebody's got this set of problems and by the way, I also --

IW: Exactly.

LB: -- have all of this stuff. It's a new set of tools that you have to have to do something.

IW: Exactly. It's like you know you're in a home where you love your loved ones, but you can't be yourself around them. So, now you have to stay there 24/7. It's very difficult, I would imagine. Like you said, thankfully I'm not in that situation where I have to hide myself. I do feel for my client. And again, I try to help them as much as possible. I've told them about the Center, about the things we're offering online, trying to let them know that they're not alone.

LB: Can you get to do any kind of queer activities besides just hanging out with your pals?

IW: Just on the -- at the Center online we do some things. You recently gave (inaudible) talk, so I really enjoyed that.

[00:23:00] So, some things. I mean, other activities, no. I really am trying to stay inside as much as possible. Even now that we're in green, I just don't want to take any chances.

LB: It's still a huge risk. Just because we're in green. And in some ways people seem to be wearing masks way less. They certainly are in the city way less. And Trish says that the choice of green was a stupid thing to call it because it seems as though everybody is saying, just go, now you're fine, green. It's not red, it's not yellow, it's green, just go ahead.

IW: It definitely has that connotation. It's like go, you're free. And that's exactly how some people are acting like they were locked up and now they're free and they're running about. And it's like yes, we're allowed to be outside more, but it doesn't mean we're safe. [00:24:00]

LB: New Tripoli is north of Allentown up in north of Lehigh or sort of on the northern end of Lehigh Valley, and it's a little bit more rural. Are you finding that people are being more neighborly and more careful or less -- or more sort of independent or about the same as you would imagine?

IW: I would say about the same. Like we're so far from each other as far as like neighborly that we're on a hi, bye, kind of status, but we don't see each other unless you're driving by,

which a lot of us aren't because we're not going anywhere. I personally downloaded, and I know a couple people in the neighborhood have downloaded this app called Neighbor or Neighborhood, and it's basically around your area and you can post if you do need help or something like that. So, if a person who is [00:25:00] living alone and maybe not quite as healthy, especially physically, they can post like hey, I need some groceries. And if I feel up to it and I think, you know what, this is worth taking the risk, I can do their grocery shopping for them. It's a way for us to be exactly that, neighborly, without leaving our homes and helping out as best we can.

LB: Do you think that the stores, I mean, when you go to -- I haven't really been to stores. We have a young person in our life who was sick, and she was in college, and she got the virus, and she was quite sick, but now she's all better and she actually has a high level of antibodies. So, we don't even feel guilty about making her go to the store for us because not putting herself at risk and she's not carrying it to other people either. Which is a unique situation because we really don't, I mean, most people that we know well haven't gotten it because they've been so careful and they've been in and stuff. [00:26:00] But when you go to the store, do you feel confident in the store? Do you feel like the store --

IW: Honestly, no. Just because I go to the store and I see some people where they take their mask off as soon as they get in the store, or they have it like half on with their noses out, or even like completely down so the mask is covering their chin. And I know, at least I feel, like the employees are working as hard as they can. But realistically I just don't think -- you can't wipe down everything that everyone is touching. To me it's not possible. So, if I'm touching things I'm taking a risk. So, what I personally do and I look silly doing it, but it's worked so far, I put a glove on one hand, and that's my store glove. Like I use that to touch everything. And then my other hand I don't like accidentally [00:27:00] reach for something, it's in my pocket. And then when I get to the register, I use my clean hand to touch my wallet and all that, do my card, and the glove hand, punch in the numbers, and when I get outside I de-glove, put it in the garbage, go back to my car, I have some hand sanitizer in there. I also have this thing called CaviWipes, which we used to use at the hospital when I was a nursing assistant. So, it's really strong. I wipe down my steering wheel and my doorknob and everything like that. So, taking as many precautions as I can think of, at least.

LB: Do you know anybody that -- I mean, anybody in the neighborhood or any -- you've already mentioned somebody that you know that died from it, very serious. But do you know

anybody in the neighborhood that has gotten it, or people in the store? Of course, they're probably not telling. Because they're not going to tell you at the store that oh yeah, six people [00:28:00] got it in the last time they were in here.

IW: Exactly. Talk about bad for business.

LB: Really. Have there been any instances where you've had to go someplace, other places besides just getting essential food or something?

IW: I did, actually I did just go to my office for the first time yesterday. Because, like I said, I'm switching jobs from Pinebrook Family Answers to Holcomb Behavioral Health, so there are some clients who I feel it's my ethical duty to see them in person during this termination time because it's difficult for some people. So, I went there, but I talked to them about it beforehand, we took temperatures, they were wearing a mask, we met in my conference room so we were at a big table far apart from one another, had them wash their hands when they came in, I did the same. [00:29:00] Again, took as many precautions as I could think of. I wiped down the table before they got there, I wiped it down after they left. Yeah, that's the only place I've been since that or this. And to my mailbox.

LB: Yeah, it's interesting that you recognize that you don't have to go many places. We've had to go to the doctor a few times and suddenly we realized that we had to register the car.

So, we went in order to do that, to get the mileage on the car, it's in the garage next to the Community Center, so we drove over there in our other car. And I went to get in to turn it on and it was dead. So, I went to look at the mileage, but because it was dead, the mileage wasn't -- I couldn't see the mileage. So, I said, eh, I'll just leave it here.

IW: Just leave it. Or guess.

LB: Yeah, [00:30:00] I mean, it's interesting. Do you think that you're spending more money because you're stuck away? Or you're spending less?

IW: Incredibly less.

LB: Yeah?

IW: Yeah, because living in New Tripoli the office is in Easton. And my other job as a social worker, I was going to peoples' homes. So, I was constantly driving. I'm not spending money on gas, I'm not eating out because I'm not out. And when I do grocery shopping I'm actually using the food. I will say unfortunately sometimes when I do grocery shopping before, I was out so much that some food would get spoiled, so it was a waste of food and money. Definitely not happening anymore. I'm cooking. It's definitely less money.

LB: Are people taking turns cooking in the house or are you always cooking?

IW: No, we kind of just cook when we want. And thankfully so far it's kind of balanced out. [00:31:00]

LB: That's good.

IW: And we cook so -- and we have leftovers, so it's really like you don't even need to cook every day. It's working out.

LB: Are there people that you think that you're actually in more contact with than you have been when you were working and you had to run around and stuff?

IW: Honestly, no. I still kind of keep my little close circle, so those are the people I'm still like well now I'm Skyping and Facetiming with, whereas before I would actually be with them in person. Well, actually, there is one cousin that I talk to more now. Being home more often gives me the chance of like, you know what, I haven't checked in with this person, let me do that.

LB: You don't realize how much time you take commuting. And I live really close to the Center, but I walk to the Center each day which is a good forty minutes a day, which I totally save. [00:32:00] And yet, it's harder to get exercise. Are you finding that's true for you? Can you go outside?

IW: I can go outside because thankfully our neighbors aren't really close, so walking around is definitely doable. I take my little dog for a walk. But even that it's not too far. So, yeah, exercise is definitely proving a challenge. Hopefully, maybe I'll get back to a gym someday, who knows.

LB: Would you normally have gone to a gym?

IW: Honestly no. (laughs) My exercise is going to my clients' houses and walking to and from and all that. And a lot of standing. I would stand when I was at the office, we had those desks that rise. So, I tried to do little things like that, but I'm not a gym person to be honest.

LB: I have a bicycle desk.

IW: Nice, I've heard of those.

LB: It's cool actually. So that like when you [00:33:00] were watching the Broadway shows with your friends, if you were watching on a laptop, for example, you could do that and then you could ride the bicycle desk.

IW: That's not a bad idea. I actually helped a client get -- it wasn't attached to a desk, but the same thing, it was on the floor and it was a bicycle. I didn't even think about that. That is the perfect idea.

LB: They're actually very quiet and they're not, they don't run by power, you power them.

IW: Exactly.

LB: They're easy to move around and they fold up too if you don't want it in the way. But I have to say that I've had bicycle desks for about six years. And I use them all the time. It's actually a very successful thing because you are sitting

around anyway. And if you have to read a lot of documents or you have to be in a really long boring meeting.

IW: Yes. [00:34:00]

LB: You know what I'm saying? I do it even if it's not boring, you can pay attention. So, with our staff meetings I always do it during our staff meetings because I can perfectly pay attention and stuff like that. But people see me going like this the whole time.

IW: They're like, what is she doing.

LB: Yeah.

IW: That's something that I'm able to do now with the counseling and when I'm calling my clients on the social work aspect, is if I'm talking to them on the phone and not be a Zoom or anything, I can actually walk around. Whereas of course in a counseling office I'm sitting there with them. But now it gives me the opportunity like I grab my cup of coffee, I have my headset on, and I'm walking around on the deck or walk around the garden.

LB: Well, there you go, you've got that going for you.

IW: Because sometimes you just want to get out and stop looking at the four walls.

LB: I think it's not a bad thing. It's almost like you're going for a walk with the person too, which is not necessarily a bad thing either. [00:35:00]

IW: Exactly.

LB: That's an opportunity for you to do stuff that's a little bit different. That's something different that you do. Let's see, so we've been asking people about that. How worried are you about the future? What do you think about the future?

IW: Honestly, personally I'm worried that tele-health is going to become like the new norm. Because I'm not a fan. I want to go back to the office and see my clients in person. So, selfishly, that's the first thing that comes to mind for me is like oh, I hope this doesn't become the new norm. As far as the world? I don't know. I am nervous that all of this is going to affect our upcoming election, which makes me really nervous. Because obviously, or at least to me, our leadership is very important. [00:36:00] So, I'm nervous about the elections. I'm nervous about will we get proper treatment, will we discover anything about this really that will help it get us back to some semblance of normal. Kind of I guess the unknown is what I'm worried about.

LB: Yeah, I guess maybe the people who are watching this thirty years from now know the answer.

IW: Exactly.

LB: I always talk about the difference between watching a movie about WWII that was made after WWII or made during WWII. And when it was made during WWII the people who made it really

didn't know if we were going to win. And it was more propaganda but also really scary in a way. You could feel how it was scary, people are just trying to make people have hope. What gives you hope now? What gives you hope now?

IW: Good question. What gives me hope now is I tend to be an optimist. Kind of a glass half [00:37:00] full guy instead of half empty. Yes, I try to be realistic and look at the world and see what's going on, but my hope is looking at my friends and my family, and other people who are doing, in my opinion, the right thing as far as like remaining social distance and washing your hands and mask and everything. It shows me like okay, look, there are people out there who are doing the right thing and maybe we are putting a curb on this infection, on this disease. That gives me hope is people. And we tend to be resilient, which I really love. Especially in the LGBT+ community, for us this is not our first pandemic. So, we've bounced back and I feel like if -- I feel like we're not better prepared, but I feel like we are ahead of the game. [00:38:00]

LB: Well, explain that to the people in the future a little bit. Because I think that's true too. Explain that a little bit.

IW: Back in the eighties we had when HIV was in a huge rise, even before they knew it was HIV, I believe they called it Gay-Related Infectious Disease, GRID. So, we've been battling HIV/AIDS crisis for decades at this point. And we've gotten

through, we've gotten better treatments, people are smarter on how to avoid the infection, avoid the disease. And in my opinion at that time when it was brand new, that was a pandemic. You didn't know how was it spreading, do we have any treatment for it. Again they called it GRID because they didn't even know that heterosexuals could get it, they thought it was just LGBT, specifically gay men, I believe. And that's what I mean when I say we've been through that before, like [00:39:00] we've already had our pandemic. And we're lucky, at least my generation, because I was born '88, so, I feel like I'm lucky that not only the generation before me are still around to teach us and guide us, but they are willing to do so. Take yourself, for example, you're leading the teaching at the Center, you do all the trainings. And I think that's amazing for you to give your knowledge.

LB: Yeah, it's something that we can definitely do online. I've done a lot of trainings online already. I had a lot of trainings booked that ended up not being able to be given because everything was shut down. And at the time I said to people, you know, I can do these virtually for you and they said, no, no, that's okay. Now they're all getting back to me and saying, okay, let's do it online.

IW: I think because I don't know if it was foolishly [00:40:00] or hopeful, but I know myself included, I told some clients

okay, we don't have to meet until we get back into the office, thinking this wouldn't be long. And now here we are months later and I'm like, I know you don't like online, but we're going to have a couple of sessions. We have to embrace the norm that we're in right now.

LB: Yeah, we have to roll with it. It's what is happening and we can't pretend it's not.

IW: Yeah, we can no longer pause our lives. Because I feel like that's what we all did for a little bit. And now we're realizing all right, this isn't going away any time soon, so we have to press play and just be safe about it.

LB: Yeah, there's definitely that. Where did you get your graduate degree?

IW: Kutztown University.

LB: Did you have to go to Kutztown for that? Did you have to take classes online at the end?

IW: Online at the end, yes. Like we were in the middle of the semester when everything got -- when we got sent home and put on social distancing and everything. So, we just started doing things online. I actually, the week it happened was the week I had to do a presentation that was originally going to be in class. So, I had to redo it and get it ready to present online. That was interesting because I had no one to go off, I was the first one, so everyone was going to like follow my lead.

LB: No kidding. Yeah.

IW: That was fun.

LB: Yeah, all of these interviews that I've been doing, we got this grant to do twenty COVID interviews and ten HIV/AIDS interviews with people who had gone through that epidemic in the eighties and nineties. And because I'm the old fogey, I know those people, so it wasn't too hard, I've already done those ten interviews. But I [00:42:00] pointed out that we're also doing archived interviews of long-time LGBT activists that through Lehigh University, and that team of people have done about ten of those interviews and it took them about a year to do them. A little bit more than a year. And then Adrian came to me and he said, well, here's this grant to do this. And I look at the grant and I said, this is thirty interviews in two months. And these other people, it took them a year and a half to do ten people. And I had never used the Zoom, so it took me a couple of weeks to get used to doing that. Luckily, it's not too hard, but still, you've got to know how to do it and get used to it.

IW: Exactly.

LB: Was that hard to get used to doing?

IW: Other than like getting on there and being able to talk, like I can connect with someone but there's other [00:43:00] stuff that Zoom and other platforms like Skype and Microsoft Teams offer. So, it's like you need to learn those things, like

how to share your screen, for example. If I'm having -- if I'm in a staff meeting, sometimes I have to share my screen and it was like uh, how do I do that. So, I mean, again glass half full type of person, I think that's a good thing that came out of this is we're all learning new things. So, I don't know, do you feel like you would have learned about Zoom had it not been for COVID?

LB: And I actually like it. Because --

IW: See?

LB: Because videotaping people is hard. If you have a camera and to go to their place and with a camera and everything. But if you're doing it with Zoom it's really quite easy to do. You just press a button on it and it's done.

IW: Exactly.

LB: I don't have to go far away to meetings in Harrisburg and stuff like that. [00:44:00]

IW: Again, we're saving on that travel, no more gas.

LB: No kidding, it really matters because that would take me the whole day for like a two-hour meeting. And now since they say we don't have to break for lunch so we'll just make it an hour and a half meeting, I'm like I hated the lunch anyway.

(laughs)

IW: It's like no, yeah, let's work it in, let's just get out early.

LB: It's harder to network. So, it's harder to talk to people individually.

IW: Yeah, and I'm a face person, so there are some people who don't really like using video, and I'm like but I don't want to talk on the phone, can we at least Facetime so I can see your face. And things get lost in translation via text, so I'm like --

LB: Text is terribly hard, I think. Text is just to say yes or no. Yes, I can talk to you at ten. But it's dangerous to try to do business [00:45:00] on text, that's definitely the case.

IW: I definitely prefer video conference.

LB: What's the best thing out of this that you've done?

IW: Again I think learning new things. I led a very busy lifestyle before, again, with school, and I basically had two jobs between my internship and my full-time job. So, now, I was able to learn new things like I'm one of those people who probably in other interviews have said this, I've learned how to bake. I was one of those people baking bread those first couple of weeks. And like cake, and I would have never thought, I cannot cook, it does not work well for me. So, who would have thought I'd be able to bake, because I've heard like that's a lot harder, like it's more of a science. But baking I can do, cooking I cannot. That's my sister's job. But you need a cake, I'm on it.

LB: All right. Well, that's good to know. [00:46:00] (laughs)

IW: And I find it fun.

LB: Yeah. So, a lot of things have been happening and at the same time, certainly a lot of political things that we're all very concerned about, and the tangential things to those or the products of those that have to do with instances of discrimination, and rights, and for our community, and for all communities. And also, certainly, some very serious things with regard to Black Lives Matter, and the circumstance of racism, and the awareness of racism in the United States. Do you want to talk about that? How has that affected you?

IW: Honestly it affected me very personally. I'm a black male and I have had to look deep within myself on how I feel about the situation. Personally growing up I never really had to deal with racism. [00:47:00] Because although part of my family is Caucasian, they're my family like I was always accepted. And we're a very mixed family, like I'm not the only mixed child. Like basically my entire generation is mixed. So, I was always accepted there, everywhere we lived was usually [majorly?] in a Black or Hispanic area. Now, as an adult, with everything going on and looking, seeing these things happen online, it made me realize how lucky I was because not everyone had that. And I really had to sit back and reflect on it. And it's hard also being a counselor at this time, being a black counselor, in my

opinion, just because what we're taught is as far as a counselor my job is not to push my morals onto my client. And I'm supposed to be a safe [00:48:00] space for them. I do have some clients that disclosed to me like listen, I don't think black lives matter, I think this whole thing is foolish, and I've had one client tell me that they hate Black people because of this because they're causing these riots, and it's just for attention because they're looting and beating up on their own people, they don't really care. And as much as it kind of hurts me, and part of me wants to defend and discuss it, I know in that time and place it's not my place. Like I'm there as their counselor, their confidant, I'm not there to challenge them really. So, it's a really weird spot to be in.

LB: Yeah, that is weird. That must be very stressful.

IW: Yeah, because I have to definitely make sure I'm centered and remember my purpose in that moment. And I try to educate, but you can never just come out and be like, well, I think [00:49:00] you're wrong. Or even really challenge them completely. If it was my normal personal life, I would definitely get into it. But as a counselor that's not really my place.

LB: Yeah. On the info-line, people call the info-line and they ask questions. I had a guy recently ask me, he was very, very agitated and there's something really wrong with this person,

and he started to say he wanted to talk to PFLAG, and I said, well this isn't PFLAG. And he finally got the whole thing out and he was really, really angry. And finally it turned out that another LGBT organization in the greater Lehigh Valley had determined that this person was a racist, they said, "Because of things you've done, we see this as racism, and we don't want you to be associated with this organization." And he said, "This is ridiculous." And I said, "Well, what did you do?" (laughs)

IW: Yeah, before -- [00:50:00]

LB: He said, so, I did this thing. He didn't want to tell me. And then he finally said it and I said, "Well, I can see why they thought this was racist." And he said, "But it's not." And I said, "Well that's not really the issue. The issue is what they perceived and they did perceive that."

IW: Honestly that is a big thing that I've been discussing with people actually in counseling and outside of counseling is perception. Like right now they, you know, people are debating about this monument, about Abraham Lincoln, where he's standing and there is a black male there with the chains like this, but they're broken. If you know your history you know that Abraham Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation, that statue is to show that -- that he helped free the black people. But honestly, if you look at it from afar, it does look like a white man

standing [00:51:00] and a black man on his knees like he's less than the man. So, it's about perception.

LB: That's a good point, yeah. Yeah, I think that a lot of people are not comfortable in trying to take a different point of view other than one is narrow and sort of justifying how they were feeling in the past. And they still want to say, I don't want to change. And I think really this whole time that we're doing stuff is really about change. You have to change.

IW: And I think honestly that's a beautiful thing right now is that people are noticing there's a need for a change. And people are making things happen for that change. Like people are taking the steps. And yes, there are boulders in the way [00:52:00] and the path is not exactly smooth but marching along anyway.

LB: Yeah, that's a tricky thing. It's hard. So, we're coming to the end I think. So, I just want to ask you if there is anything else that you think someday somebody in the future is going to look at this and I think, I hope, that will be the case. And it might be in the near future, it might be many, many years, it might be decades, we might be all gone by then. We had another pandemic about one hundred and two years ago that was very, very serious, and if you came to any of my art history classes I happened to talk about it all the time because it's always in my (inaudible) if you talk to Rachel because she was in almost all my classes, I'm always talking about the flu epidemic of 1918.

And one of the reasons was it had such a profound impact on a lot of the areas of art that I've spoken about. [00:53:00] And it had an impact on my family because my grandmother died in that flu epidemic. But I think that we don't have any oral histories from that time, we don't have anybody talking about that. And in fact you weren't allowed to talk about that time because it was considered an act of sedition because it was during WWI, and the government had said you can't say anything negative about the country, including that we're all dying of this disease, or you'll go to prison. And so, that's one of the reasons why we don't have a lot of information. Now we do. And we all have the opportunity. They didn't even have recorders then, now we do. So, we have the opportunity to do that. And here's the chance for you to say something to somebody way in the future about what it was like right now, just in general. So, here you go, go ahead.

IW: Well, it's challenging, [00:54:00] and I think it's important to have hope. And to not be afraid to be a leader. Like there are going to be some people around that say oh, that's foolish, I don't believe in that. And it's important for a person to believe in their own beliefs and have the courage to stand up for them. And hopefully decades from now, hopefully even sooner, things are a lot more equal for us, and I hope that's the case. And if it isn't, I hope the individuals in the

future keep on fighting until we do reach equality because we all matter.

LB: Yeah, that's for sure.

IW: And I think that's something as far as Black Lives Matter that a lot of people are not getting is they think by saying Black Lives Matter is black people are better. No, it's just that there's a realization that we're not being treated equally. So, it's kind of like a black lives matters too, so we all just want to be on the same [00:55:00] playing field, the same level. Like LGBT, different people of color, men, women, like we all just want to be equal. And I think that's important. So, if there is a group of people in the future that are not being treated as equal, fight for them. Even if it's not your person.

LB: That's good. That's a good thing to tell the future. That's a great thing.

IW: Thank you.

LB: Thank you so much for this. I really am very, very grateful for this opportunity to talk to you. It's fun to talk to you. I love the room that you're in.

IW: Yeah, my new office while all this is happening.

LB: Now are those blue and red squares painted on the wall?

IW: Yeah. This isn't my room.

LB: I love it, I absolutely love it. And I have a master's degree in art, so feel free to have the person [00:56:00] who's room that is, tell them I think it's fabulous. It is fabulous.

IW: Rachel's daughter, Emily, she did this, this was her room.

LB: It's beautiful.

IW: I like specifically the chalk, the black squares are chalk, so I get to write on them.

LB: Yeah, that's a special kind of paint that you can write on with chalk. I think that's a very good idea. Good for you. I'm going to turn off the recording now.

END OF AUDIO FILE