

NEW YORK CITY TRANS ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

CECILIA GENTILI

Interviewer: Michelle Esther O'Brien

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Transcribed by Colette Arrand

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Michelle Esther O'Brien: Hello, my name is Michelle O'Brien and I will be having a conversation with Cecilia Gentili for the New York City Trans Oral History Project in collaboration with the New York Public Library's Community Oral History Project. This is an oral history project centered on the experiences of trans identifying people. It is June 9, 2017, and this is being recorded in the offices of Gay Men's Health Crisis. Hello.

Cecilia Gentili: Hi, how are you?

O'Brien: I'm doing very well. Now are you feeling today?

Gentili: A little tired, but good. I'm excited about doing this, and I think it's a great project.

O'Brien: Tell me about your job here.

Gentili: Well, I'm the Director of Policy here at GMHC, so I do everything that has to do with making sure that changes in policy or implementation of policies in a city level or in a state level, and at a national level are the best policies for what we believe is the right of different communities like the HIV community, women, immigrants, trans people, people that use drugs, sex workers—those are, all the good things we believe in, we just make sure that everything that has to do with policy is relevant to what we believe is right. So that's kind of what I do.

O'Brien: I'm going to ask you some questions about your life up to this point, and if we can get to it I'd love to hear a lot more about your job.

Gentili: Alright.

O'Brien: So where did you grow up?

Gentili: I grew up in the city of Gálvez, in the state of Santa Fe in the nation of Argentina. The Republic of Argentina.

O'Brien: And when were you born?

Gentili: I was born on January 31, of 1972, which was a very hot summer, sweaty day. And I celebrate it now here usually with snow to my knees, which it doesn't make sense to me yet. After so many years living here, I still can't put my birthday with the cold.

O'Brien: What was your family like? What kind of work did they do?

Gentili: My family, I had a father that was a butcher—

O'Brien: Did he own a shop or was he an employee?

Gentili: He owned a shop. He owned a shop, so he sold meat, and he also had a small farm, and in that farm, he would have cows that he would then send to be slaughtered, and sold the meat. That was my father. And my mother, until I was about seven years old, was a cook in a men's school where the people who go, these young men would go to school from other cities, and they would live in quarters and my mom was a cook for all of them. And I think that was until I was seven or eight. And then she was a cleaning lady in a school, in a music school. And she also was a cleaning lady in, uh, shoot—she seems to excel at ironing, so she would iron for some rich folks that needed somebody to iron clothes.

O'Brien: What was your first memory?

Gentili: I'm forgetting my brother. I have a brother who is seven years older than me, and he still lives in Argentina. My first memory was at my grandmother's house, where I would spend weekends and holidays, and my first memory is a tangerine tree.

O'Brien: Wow.

Gentili: It's me playing under a tangerine tree and going up the tangerine tree and eating tangerines and everything that was around that tangerine tree. That's my first memory.

O'Brien: Did it smell?

Gentili: Like nothing else in the world. It is my favorite smell. Tangerines and orange, also. Kind of like citrus is my favorite smell. It may have something to do with that. the tangerine tree was an amazing place to play and have fun as a child.

O'Brien: What were you like as a child?

Gentili: I was terrible, and I was lonely. I was a child that really enjoyed playing by herself, and I think it had to do with the fact that I kind of realized at a very early age that other children didn't want to play with me because my gender issues, I guess? So, I made a clear decision that I would play by myself. I would always be playing by myself, and getting into some kind of trouble all the time. I was very—I always found ways to be happy. You know, all those times, you know, kind of picturing a child playing by themselves may be a little bit—like the picture sounds kind of sad, but I was a very happy child all the time, just playing by myself. I don't know if many children do this, but I was known for eating dirt. I would eat dirt all the time. And that wasn't a good thing for my mom and my grandmother. Everybody kind of freaked out because I would be eating dirt.

O'Brien: They got mad at you?

Gentili: They would get really mad at me, and at the time it was the 70s. You know? There wasn't so many directions about what was okay to do. So, I would get spanked a lot for eating dirt, and other things.

O'Brien: How—do you think your parents were happy when you were growing up?

Gentili: There were very specific interactions in-between them that they may not have been the happiest situations because of those interactions. My father was known for having many mistresses and specifically having one favorite, and my mom knew about it, and I guess she chose not to do anything about it and to just live with that reality, and that was her choice. I always respected that choice. For me as a child, it was weird, like, at this point in my life, I kind of realized that people love somebody, and sometimes they have sex with other people, and that's very good. But as a child, you kind of want to see your parents being totally devoted to each other, so that wasn't my case. So that was a little bit confusing to me. And I remember telling my mom, you know, mom, dad, you know, as lovers. And she would look at me and she would say yes. And I would be like why are you with him? And she said, because I love him, and I don't know that he's having sex with other people. So, at the time, it was hard for me to understand. Now I think, like, it's so cool that she kind of didn't care about who he was having sex with, and she kind of focused on the love that she had for him. But for me as a child it was difficult to understand. I also learned that when my father died, that during the last 25 years, which it will be—when my father died, I was 26, so a year after I was born, they didn't have sex anymore. My parents weren't sexual. My parents weren't sexual. My mom told me, which I also asked why they didn't—why did you continue a relationship without sex? And she said that she didn't need it, that she loved him, and that she just wanted to be with him, but sex wasn't part of the relationship. Which is a lot, right? To deal with. To kind of digest for me. Although you know, at a time when I had this conversation with my mother, I was kind of an adult. But I always knew as a child that my father had lovers and one mistress, and I knew her, and we had a relationship, which is weird to have a relationship with your father's mistress when your father lives with your mother in your house. But we had a relationship with—I had a relationship with my father's mistress, and she wasn't bad at all. She was just fucking my father. And she also entertained all of my gender issues. Which I don't know if she really wanted or understood. Sometimes I think that she just wanted me to not dislike her, so that's why she entertained all of that. That is a funny detail of my relationship with her. She delivered the paper and the magazines to most of the city, because it was a very small city, so she would go everyday and get the papers from the big city and she would bring it to people's houses, and the magazines, and when I was five years old she—we would get from her this children's magazine, and one time she went to give me the children's magazine, and I saw this magazine that was covered by a black plastic bag. Sealed. And I asked her, what is that? And she said, that's not for children, that is for adults. And I said, I want that magazine. I don't want the children's magazine. And she said I can't give you that. And I said, well, there's many things that we could talk about right now, meaning her sleeping with my father. So I said, I hope you understand that I really want that magazine and that you would give it—

O'Brien: You were so manipulative!

Gentili: So manipulative, like a horrible child.

O'Brien: Blackmailing her into giving you porn.

Gentili: Absolutely manipulation. Horrible, horrible. And she gave me a Playboy when I was five, and she knew that she was going to keep giving it to me until I decided to, because I had the leverage, right? That you're fucking my dad. Which is a horrible thing for a five-year-old to do, right?

O'Brien: Yeah, that you realized it and acted on it, yeah.

Gentili: Yeah, yeah, yeah. Totally.

O'Brien: Wow.

Gentili: Totally.

O'Brien: Wow. So, you mentioned that other children didn't like you because of your gender.

Gentili: Yes.

O'Brien: What was your gender like at that time? How did it come out?

Gentili: Well, another part of my first memory is that when I was talking about my grandma's house and the tangerine tree, I think I was around four years old. Another memory about the same time was being kicked out of the girl's bathroom. One day I went to school and then they told me, don't come to class. You have to go to the principal's office. And even if you're five, you know, you know that the principal's office is some shit that's going down and that you did something wrong. So, I was very scared, and I have a clear memory of walking towards this kind of gallery, like a long gallery with columns, and I was walking there thinking like, what happened? Why am I going to the principal's office? And I remember being little and reaching for the doorknob and opening it, and the door was like a thick wooden door, and having to make an effort to just push it and open it, and I saw the principal, my teacher, my mother, and these two women on each side that after the fact I learned that they were a psychologist and a psychiatrist. And we had a meeting where they showed me pictures of what I know now was genitalia of female and male genitalia.

O'Brien: How old were you?

Gentili: I was five.

O'Brien: Oh my god.

Gentili: They showed me big pictures of genitalia and they asked me which one was mine. And I kind of chose the one that was a penis, because that was the one that kind of looked like my genitalia. And they explained to me that penises were what boys have, and that's why it was a boy's bathroom to go to, and that's the bathroom that I should go to, and that I shouldn't go to the girl's bathroom anymore. And I thought they were crazy. I thought like they were absolutely

crazy. They were absolutely crazy. And there's also other parts of this story, the area that I lived as a child in Argentina was known as an area where there was UFO activities. People would find, you know, in the corn fields you would find those marks and things like that. So, I remember jumping on my bike and going, trying to find, you know, if there was any UFO activities or things like that. and one time, driving to my grandmother's house with my brother in a very dark night, we went through a railroad, and my brother told me, I have something to tell you. And I said what is it? And he said okay, but you have to promise me that you're not going to tell mom or dad about this because they don't like to talk about this. And I said what happened? He said, did you see that railroad that we just passed? And I said yes. And he said, that's where we found you five years ago. And I said what do you mean you found me, you were there? And I'm like, but how? And he said, well, you were a baby. And I'd say, was I in a basket? And he said no, no basket. I said was I wrapped in a blanket? And he said no, you were there naked. And I started crying. He said don't cry, but you know, I just want you to know that you're not our family, that you were found. So I, during the rest of the trip to my grandma's house, I put two and two together and I thought, this is an area with a lot of UFO activities. I am a girl with a fucking dick. And I was found there? I know what happened here, I was left by mistake by a UFO, and I thought that somewhere there would be a planet where all girls could have penises like me. And for me it was kind of—I think I always found magical ways to deal with reality. And I told that to my grandmother, who totally entertained the idea, and we waited for a couple of nights to see if any UFO would come back to get me. And she was ready to let me go back there, and she waited with me until late at night and helped me prepare a little backpack in case they would come to rescue me. And I thought that was so cool that she did that.

O'Brien: That's very sweet. Were you ever able to confirm if your brother was telling the truth or not?

Gentili: Well, my mom said that that is not, and she also tells stories about how difficult it was to be in labor in a hot, hot January summer, and being in labor with me for like, two days. Her story is very consistent on, she gave birth to me. So, I think that he was just being a horrible older brother, which that's what people do, right? That's what older brothers do. And I don't know because I don't have a younger sibling, but I will never know what the experience of being an older brother is, but my brother was just awful like that, which I think is so funny right now. But at the time it was horrible.

O'Brien: What was the political context in Argentina like at the time?

Gentili: Terrible.

O'Brien: I've heard a bit about it.

Gentili: It was a terrible moment. It was one of the worst dictatorships. My family, parts of my family, were more involved in politics. And because of that, that was a conversation that was always on the table. But most of the people didn't really know what was happening, didn't really know that people were being kidnapped and killed and that pregnant people were being

kidnapped and their children were stolen from them and then they were killed, and those children were sold, and everything that was not totally in line with the dictators and dictatorship that was going on was simply eliminated. There was no way to kind of work with them. You were against the dictatorship, you were going to be killed, you were going to disappear and be killed. Most people didn't even know or didn't want to know, which I'm not saying this in any kind of judgmental way—many people don't want to know, or they don't want to talk about these kind of things because it's a way to deal with the problem. My family did talk about it, because many members of my family were very political.

O'Brien: Were they on the left or connected to the government?

Gentili: Most of my family members were on the right, but also at the same time it was this confrontation in-between parties. My mom's family, who were the poor ones—I don't know why they were conservatives. And my dad's family that were more—they weren't rich, but they had more resources, they were liberals. So, it was an issue between families. And in my mom's family, my aunt was married to a person that was very politically involved, and they were always hiding, like there were periods of time that we didn't see them and we didn't know if they were alive or not because they had to hide. Very traumatic times. Very, very traumatic times, and it took me a long time to understand that a lot of my family members, they weren't just against my persona, they were just very scared of what could happen and what happened to people like me that didn't conform to gender or sexuality or, you know, had a big mouth, like I was known for having. It was very problematic. It was a very horrible time. People are still being found nowadays. Last year one of these children that were conceived under the dictatorship, which the mother is still missing and most likely is to be dead because she was killed, and this child was sold or given to a family, to a movement that is called Madres de Plaza de Mayo, they're still looking for their grandchildren. Last year they found one, and it was a big event in Argentina. So, the political climate in the country was horrible. Was horrible. It was very conflicting until 1984, which I was 12 years old when we found a way to go back to democracy. I always say to people, you know, sometimes I feel like say—the fact that Argentina found democracy in 1984 didn't really affect me much in a way that people kind of perceive it. I think that democracy was just a name that was dropped into a nation that was mentally living in a dictatorship, right? It's not like just, democracy comes, and everybody changes their ways and way of thinking and understand what democracy is. It is still people in Argentina today that live in a dictatorship mentality, right? Sometimes they're like oh, most of your life, you live in a democracy. Yeah, you know? Since 1984 I live in a democracy around people with dictatorship mentality. That is as bad as living in a dictatorship. Does that make sense?

O'Brien: Absolutely.

Gentili: It was hard. It was hard. I was 12, I was a very queer person, we found this idea of democracy and I learned what gay people was and things like that because people started talking about it. But the ideas were incomprehensible. It was just more information around, but the ideas were very, very oppressive. Yeah.

O'Brien: Did you encounter any trans people or gender non-conforming people when you were growing up?

Gentili: No. I had no idea what it was. And I always thought like I was crazy. So I try not to think about that, because I thought that was some kind of mental illness and every time I tried to talk about that, that was how it was addressed. As, no, you are crazy. That's what it is. But, I knew that I was a girl. I always knew. I just felt like I shouldn't talk about that. At age 12, with all of these—and I was attracted to boys at the time. And so, around age 10, 12, I came across the idea of being gay. And I felt like oh, this is closer, right? If they say that I'm not a girl, maybe I am a boy, and there's some boys that like boys. This is closer to, you know, to how I feel. And I was sexually active with boys and everything, but at age 12 I came out to my mom and said like, I was a gay boy. She had a hard time with it, which doesn't make sense. You had a meeting when your child was five because your child was going to the girl's bathroom. Is it really surprising that at age 12 that child comes out as something? Yeah. It was many things, like, you know, my mother would say, for example, this is one of my mother's phrases that I cannot get out of my head. She would say like, we're going to your aunt today. Please don't ask for anything to eat, unless you are extremely thirsty, don't ask for anything to drink. Unless you really, really need to use the bathroom, don't ask to go to the bathroom. And please, please, when you talk, hold your hands together. And I said why? And she said because when you talk, you move them too much, like in a very flamboyant, feminine way, and I hate it. So like, you know, with all these signs, I don't know why she had a hard time when I came out as gay. Again, I came to understand now that the people that had a hard time with my—at the time, my sexuality or coming out as gay, they really didn't have an issue with me. They were just scared because gay people were just killed. There was no rights or anything. So, I think it wasn't just that they were against me, they were just very scared about it. I came out as gay at age 12. And then when I moved to a big city called Rosario at age 17, I met the first trans person there, and it was this realization of, like, somebody else is like me in the world.

O'Brien: What were they like?

Gentili: Gorgeous. She was gorgeous, and she's still gorgeous. Although my ideas of beauty have changed dramatically through the years, at the time I thought she was the most beautiful woman ever.

O'Brien: Where did you meet her?

Gentili: I met her in a bar. She had long, blond hair, big breasts, big hips and ass, and a small nose. Very kind of Barbie-like kind of beauty, which now I kind of like, ugh, but at the time it was like, she was everything that I thought was beautiful. And I told her that I wanted to be like her. And she looked at me and she said, okay. But you know how this life is? And I said no. She said well, if you want to be like me, you need to know that you're going to be a whore, you're going to get high, and you're going to die young. And I said where do I sign? This is what I want. This is what I want. And at the same time, I met with this older person who was so advanced into gender because she would leave as a very feminine man I guess? It was some transness, but it wasn't

totally focused on the feminine spectrum. It was what you would call somebody, gender bender or genderfluid person, and she helped me in ways that not many people have helped me in my life, and also had me in her house and taught me a lot and showed compassion and became what was my first family of choice, I guess.

O'Brien: How did she help you?

Gentili: Well, we would do shows in bars. I wasn't really gifted with being talented at dancing or lip synching or singing. I was kind of funny. And for some reason, people liked me. It was this idea that I was—I'm not going to say pretty, but I was like, very well put-together. So, we started making a lot of money working in clubs and in bars. Not only gay clubs, but in straight clubs, like, you know, I'd work at the door or I would work, just doing some kind of dancing, but as I said I wasn't really talented. So, they were basically paying me to be there, right? Which was really cool. I made a lot of money and I made my living by doing that for many years. And all of this is because of her and because she had this great taste for fashion in a very kind of Avant-garde kind of fashion that was visually very—it had a strong impact on people. It wasn't just that we were trans, we were wearing this crazy stuff that she would make with her hands. And when the time came when I didn't have a place to live, she took me with her and I lived with her, and she helped me through many situations that weren't the happiest situations. And she showed me a lot of love. She was also a person that was dealing with a lot of issues, I guess mental health issues and things like that. But I guess that gave me a lot of understanding of what it is to live with somebody that has mental health diagnosis, untreated mental health diagnosis, and how hard that is. But it showed me that it is possible to have lives around people that may be dealing with mental health diagnosis, and to have them as part of our lives, and have a normal life. Like, it gave me a better understanding of those issues, and it was hard at times. It was hard. But I guess it was so much love there and so much beauty in that relationship—and I wasn't the only one. There was a lot of trans people living with her. Not just trans people, gender variant people, and we were all living together with her.

O'Brien: What was that community like? Was there a broader network that you were part of, or a scene?

Gentili: Well, we were part of the trans community, you know? I always like, was involved in many communities at the same time. That was the most artistic part of the community, but at the same time I was part of the sex workers' community because I started doing sex work. And at the same time I was going to school until I started to transition more and more and more, and the school wasn't a welcoming environment for me anymore, but you know, I had my school friends and I had my artist friends, and I had my sex worker friends, and I interacted in all, just difficult—

O'Brien: So very socially connected?

Gentili: Yes, yes. I was. I was always very social. And again, for some reason people liked me always, so I had a lot of friends. I didn't have friends, but I knew a lot of people and I was welcome in places. I was welcome in bars and clubs where trans people weren't welcome, and they would

not just welcome me, but they would give me work, you know? To work at the door, until of course I started asking myself like, why do they have me working here at the door and they don't let my friends in? And I thought, like, this is not okay. So, I lost many jobs because of that, because I said you know, I can't work here if you don't let my friends in, what kind of shit is this? So they said okay, if you don't want to work here, don't. And I pretend I needed the money, but I was doing sex work and I also was working in hair salons. Yeah.

O'Brien: Were the other trans people you knew, did they do similar kind of jobs? Sex work, clubs, and hair salons?

Gentili: Yes, yes. That was what we did, right? That was what we did. That was our occupations. You were either a hair stylist, you were an artist, or you were a sex worker. I did three of those things, and I was very happy. Again, I always found ways to—like you know when I was telling you as a child that I was isolated, but I found ways to be happy? I was very happy. Working in hair was okay. Working in clubs is hard because you find people that either adore you or hate you, so it was hard working at night also, and working as a sex worker, it is a beautiful community, but the work is very taxing though. As somebody who, you know, I'm a victim of sexual abuse as a child. Like, sex work wasn't really the best job with that kind of history, because there was a lot going on there. It was hard, you know. I just don't want to vilify sex work, but it was hard because dealing with tricks and police and other sex workers sometimes. It's not easy. It has its beauty though. It has its beauty. But it wasn't the easiest job to have.

O'Brien: What city was this again?

Gentili: Rosario.

O'Brien: Rosario, and how big was Rosario?

Gentili: Rosario, Argentina. Well, it's a big city. Think of it as something like Chicago, something like that, if you needed to do a comparison?

O'Brien: What years were you living there?

Gentili: I moved there on 1989, when I finished high school.

O'Brien: How long did you live there?

Gentili: I lived there until 1999, I think, or 2000.

O'Brien: Oh, so quite some time.

Gentili: Yeah, when I came to the United States in 1999.

O'Brien: So, you were doing sex work, you were doing some hair styling, some club stuff.

Gentili: Yeah, it was my life, and I was doing a lot of drugs. A lot of drugs. You know, I did what she told me, you know, and I kept that. I kept—you know, she told me.

O'Brien: You didn't die young though.

Gentili: Yeah, I didn't die young. Well I see can die today, but I never thought I would make it to age 45. I always thought, like, 32. 32 is a good age. 32 is a good age.

O'Brien: 32 is a good age. Jesus lived to 32.

Gentili: 33, right? And then to 35, maybe. And I also, in a very ageist kind of way, I didn't want to be old. It's like, you know, I never saw a trans—an old trans woman.

O'Brien: How old were the trans women you knew?

Gentili: The oldest, at the time? Like now I know older trans people and trans women, but at the time nobody was older than 40. And we always look at them as oh, those old hos, right? But I never thought we, again, as she told me, you're going to be a whore, you're going to get high, and you're going to die young. And everything was like that, you know? I was a whore, I was getting high, and I didn't know people older than 40, trans women older than 40, so I thought like, this is what it is. So in my mind I was going to live until age 32 or 35 at the most. That was my idea.

O'Brien: What kind of drugs did you do?

Gentili: All of them. In Argentina, I did cocaine. Just cocaine. But I did a lot of it. A lot of it. Lots of cocaine. Lots, tons and tons of cocaine. It became my natural state, if I wasn't asleep, which for me it's always been hard to fall asleep on cocaine, but I guess sometimes my body would just shut down and fall asleep. But if I wasn't sleeping, I was high on coke for many years. For many, many years.

O'Brien: What were relationships like for you and other trans women with non trans women in the same jobs, in sex work and hair dressing?

Gentili: Um—

O'Brien: Like were you—when you say the sex work community, were you in a community of both non trans and trans women?

Gentili: No, no, no.

O'Brien: So it's really centered around trans sex work.

Gentili: We were trans sex workers. We were very isolated. It was a lot, there was a couple of cisgender women that were extremely open-minded and trans friendly. But at the time it wasn't like sex workers were united, and it's cis and trans. It was, you know, we had zones, like this is the trans zone and this is the cis zone, without the terminology, right? At the time we used wording that was like, real woman, so on, and transvestites. We use the word transvestite and it's not derogatory in my country. It's like trans people, transgender women call themselves transvestite. I'm very aware that here in the United States that's not what it is, but for us it's not an issue with that word, so I feel the need to say it.

O'Brien: Would people medically transition?

Gentili: Yes. Yes. Some people did medical transition, and we would do hormones from the black market. And also, then, you know, I learned—I don't know how people got hormones, but you'd just go and just buy hormones. But then I found out that you could buy them in the pharmacy because you didn't need a prescription, you just needed to have a friend pharmacist. And they would send it, they would give it to you, it was a specific plastic surgeon that do plastic surgeries to us. I got my first plastic surgery around 21 I guess, or something like that. The first one of a series of plastic—for many years I thought I found a solution for my life through plastic surgery and I don't—I still think that plastic surgeries can be very affirming sometimes, but for a long time it was just my only way of thinking that transition could be possible. And some trans women would have SRS, and most of them would do the reassignment in Chile. There was this known doctor that did surgeries there, you know, women would save their money to do that.

O'Brien: Would they continue working as sex workers after surgery?

Gentili: Yes, yes, yes. I used to think it was funny, they wouldn't go to work with cis women. They'd still work in the trans area. I always thought, you know, men are looking for trans sex workers because of the genitalia, right?

O'Brien: That's what I would have thought.

Gentili: So one time I asked her, why don't you go and work with cis women, right? Again, I wasn't using this vocabulary, you know, I was using all the vocabulary that may come across as transphobic nowadays. I don't want to repeat it, but I said why don't you go work with cis women, and she said like, no, why would I, you know, lose all these clients? They don't know what I have. When the time comes and find out, they already gave me the money. And if they want me to fuck them, I have dildos. If they want to fuck me, they can fuck me—I have an asshole and I have a pussy, and most of the time they don't even want that. I do more business working in the trans area, she said. And I'm like, that sounds right.

O'Brien: And you were saying that some people were more genderfluid?

Gentili: Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. For many years, I didn't fully transition, I guess, and I'm quoting this. I work in a hair salon as a very feminine boy, you know? I was always using my more

masculine, I guess my birth name, which was associated with masculinity. But I was very feminine, like super feminine. I had long hair, and I would just wax my face or tweeze my face, I never had hair, you know? I had little tits, you know, hormone tits. People could see it, you know? It wasn't just like nobody notices and says oh, this man is going to come and do my hair. It was like, you know—which was kind of like an advantage for me, because I fell like women could relate better with me I guess? I don't know. And then at night I would be like full femme bombshell, working in a club or just working the street trying to turn a trick. So you know, for many years it was kind of like genderfluid bender. I didn't do the masculine part with conviction, I did it more as a survival, right? But you know, it was that kind of fluidity in there. And it was fun. And I miss that. A lot. Like all this idea of femininity, I don't think it's going to be, unless I die today, but I don't think it's going to be the end of my life as clothes, as the feminine spectrum, as I was and somehow I think that it's not the end of my gender odyssey. I think there's more to come.

O'Brien: Excellent. Were there terms to distinguish between trans women who were more gender bending or trans women who had SRS or trans women who—was it all the same word?

Gentili: Yeah, we all knew everybody's business. We always knew everybody's business, and it was this idea of like, oh, she's a real woman, right? She got the surgery. And all the girls that, you know, had surgeries, and they had breast implants, they were closer to that idea of real, right? And then there were like people like me that were like, oh yeah, she's pretty, but you know, she's not full-time. But I never gave a shit about it. You know? I was always very secure about myself, and I hung out with the pretty girls and the girls that were done, right? And they were my friends and they always welcome me and welcomed me. It wasn't like oh, these are the gender benders. It was just a community of people, and we all were together. The only problem was business, right? It's like, don't fuck with my money, you know? I work here, you know?

O'Brien: So real women and transvestites were the two terms that people used a lot.

Gentili: Yes, yes, yes.

O'Brien: Interesting. Did you all engage much with social service providers or political people or religious people, like outsiders that would try to talk with you all?

Gentili: No. It was no one outside the trans community. I was going to school and I was kind of political, so I kind of took part and marched and things like that. I didn't think it was much of political views, it was just being part of a revolution and changing this idea of a dictatorship mentality and what interests me. So, I did have some interactions with that.

O'Brien: With liberal or students or the left?

Gentili: Yeah, whether it be student centers and anti-colonization. Like, you know, Argentina was a Spaniard colony for many years, so we have all this devotion for everything European and white, and like, I was from the very beginning very into, like, the rights of indigenous and the development of an Argentinian way of living that didn't have to be European, right? But at the

same time, I was transitioning, and the idea of womanhood was the idea of a white, Nordic, European woman, right? That was the idea of what we saw as womanhood. And at the same time these conflicting feelings of saying like, fuck that, right? Fuck the idea of beauty as it looked, when it is a white woman. And at the same time wanting to be, because that was the pressure to be, right? To have long, blond hair and big tits and a big ass. Yeah, it was conflicting, from like, hating and wanting to be at the same time this white woman that somehow accomplished and liked and hate, you know? Of my body. Kind of like, oh, I did this like, you know, high cheekbones to look like Catherine Deneuve, that was the idea, right? And then at the same time I was like, fuck Catherine Deneuve and all the European views that conquer us, you know? So, I wanted to look like her, but I hated the idea. It's conflicting. It's very conflicting. So, you know, I did things to my body to look like something that goes with an idea that I do not share, and that has its complications on its own. If that makes sense.

O'Brien: Absolutely. It definitely does, yeah. Are there more stories about life in Argentina that you want to share before I ask you how you ended up moving?

Gentili: There's many stories, but basically that's what I wanted to tell you, just that, you know, like family, my father's family was very Italian and we had long dinners, like an hour—actually lunch on Sunday, where we all get together. My grandmother's family, we lived in a very small town close by, and my grandmother was amazing. She was the most affirming person.

O'Brien: What was her name?

Gentili: Maria Caldrinos Tachia (?? 1:01:37).

O'Brien: What did you call her?

Gentili: Abuella. Abu, my abu. Yeah. My middle name is Maria, because of her. She was amazing. My mom was awesome too, but you know, she had her issues. You know? With me—she fought to be okay with me. My father was always going to be a question because he never acknowledged or addressed me and my gender.

O'Brien: Did you ever meet—we will continue going.

Gentili: Yeah, so—

O'Brien: I checked it 10 minutes ago, I think.

Gentili: I was, at the time I was also advertising in—no, it wasn't the Miami Herald, I don't remember—I had a quarter page with a picture of me, Shemale Valerie—Valerie, that was my name. (Inaudible 1:02:59) Valerie. I'm making a lot of money with that, with Eros. But she found me there on—

O'Brien: It looks like I need to change the battery. I have another battery, so my apologies for the interruption. So you had moved to Miami and were traveling around and doing a lot of different drugs, and you were doing some online—

Gentili: I'm not doing hair anymore, I'm not doing shows and clubs anymore. Just sex work.

O'Brien: And getting online contacts?

Gentili: Yeah. And I'm in a relationship with this man who had a wife that was—

O'Brien: And you felt in love with him?

Gentili: Yeah, I fell in love with him, and she—I mean, she wasn't going to take it, so she hit me in the street. She found my number, she started calling me. She started sending men as clients because she knew, she saw my ad, threatening me. One time she ended up going to my house, she followed me to the supermarket and attacked me with cans of beans and celery, which is really funny. But then she did something that really scared me. She said I'm going to call immigration on you. And she told me, I'm an American white woman, I can get you out of here in a minute. I remember, I sat in the steps of my apartment on 16 and Euclid in South Beach with my friend Bianca—we just walked by the same place last week when I went to visit, and we had these memories. And she looked at me and she said, you know, we became really good friends, my friend Bianca, three years that I lived with Bianca. And she said I love you, and I hate to tell you this, but you need to go. You need to leave this place. This is not good for you. She's not going to stop, this guy doesn't love you. Go. So, she made some calls and got me a job with this girl in San Francisco to work in her house. I went to San Francisco and I started working at her house—

O'Brien: Like doing cleaning?

Gentili: No, sex work with her. So, you go, I work with her, in her place, and give her a percentage.

O'Brien: So she was a sex worker and you worked out of her home?

Gentili: Yes, and I gave her a percentage of the money, right? For kind of renting the place to live and work there. But I also started going out and smoking a lot of crystal meth, and I got really scared because crystal meth always scared me for some reason. So, I went back to Miami and I talked to my friend Bianca and I said I don't know, something is not right in San Francisco. And she said okay, let me try with my friend in New York. She contacted her friend in New York, and I came to New York to work here. And the first person I met in New York, her name is Nina, and I fell in love when I saw her. When I saw her, the first time, when I opened the door and I saw her, I fell in love with her. And I couldn't think of how that can happen to me. And it was totally foreign feeling of loving somebody that wasn't a man. And it took me some time to understand but we started a relationship the same day. We basically went out and came back, very high on coke. And we had sex, and we fell asleep holding each other, and we wake up the morning after,

and she said let's go for breakfast. And I remember she wanted to hold my hand in the street, and I thought that was so weird. And I didn't want to hold her hand in the street. And today, she still throws that in my face. She says you fucking bitch, you didn't hold my hand in the street, I'm always going to remember that, that you were ashamed of me. And I said I wasn't ashamed of you, it was so foreign feeling of, what the fuck, am I a lesbian now? And it wasn't like—you know, it was 2003, 2004, I guess. It wasn't like the—I'm not going to say the trans community, but the community that I was around, the trans community that I was around, it wasn't really a thing to be a lesbian. Most of the girls were straight. So I was like—how am I going to explain this to my friends, I thought. Right? And then I remember I call my mom and I say mom, I fell in love. And my mom said, oh my god, who is he? Is he cute? And I said, well, she's actually a she. And my mom said, you know, stop for a minute and she said, what do you mean? I had a son that was gay, became a woman, and now is a fucking lesbian? And I'm like, yeah, I think so. And she said oh my God, you're confusing me so much. But I loved her. It was this crazy feeling of not being able not to love her. It wasn't a question about it., I just loved her. And every time I see her, the feeling is still there. In different ways. Like, we're not sexual anymore because she doesn't want to, unfortunately, but the love is there. And holding her is still one of the best feelings that I could ever have. Even now that we are not together. I loved her. At the same time, she—and I just need to say this, I'm really not saying this with any kind of, trying to put any guilt on her, maybe if she listens to this some day. I don't want her to feel guilty about it. But she did introduce me with heroin. She didn't make me do it. I did heroin because it was another drug, and I loved drugs. But she's the one that taught me, like, oh, this is heroin. And I did heroin and I was not able to stop doing heroin for many years. And because of my addiction to heroin and to crack cocaine, I wasn't the best for her. I also wasn't the best for myself. I wasn't the best for anybody. So we broke up. When we broke up, I started seeing other people and still doing sex work. I had an apartment on fucking Mott Street, a very expensive place to live in (inaudible 1:12:42).

O'Brien: Where did she live when you first moved to New York?

Gentili: I lived there—I went there to my friend's house, who was renting the apartment across the hall from her.

O'Brien: What neighborhood was that?

Gentili: Nolita. And then the apartment, she gave it to me. I rented it, and yeah. I started dating people and I was dating this guy, and also was seeing this girl, this cis girl. Just sexually. And this guy found out and burnt my apartment down. I was fucking with this girl, and when I came back home—

O'Brien: He found out you were dating a girl?

Gentili: He found out I was dating this other girl.

O'Brien: And he became enraged?

Gentili: Yeah, and burned my apartment down. And I came back to my apartment, and it was a yellow thing on the door, and the apartment wasn't habitable. And I was doing drugs very, very hard. I basically became homeless. And I was just going from city to city doing sex work and having to find drugs in cities that are not yours is very problematic. Then I started staying with friends, but most of my friends didn't want to have me because I was shooting heroin, I guess, and they didn't want to deal with that. so nobody wanted to have me, and I went to Brooklyn and I ended up living with this man that was taking the money that I was making, giving me some drugs to survive, but it was a very difficult situation, and I kept being arrested all the time. I'd be arrested for drugs most of the time, and then they would raid his house, because he would only sell drugs and have me there doing sex work, but he would sell drugs to people, like crack, and he would charge people to smoke the crack inside the apartment. He would get me to have sex with them and make more money. During all of that process, I was also smoking crack, so I was okay I guess. But it was a very toxic interaction. And they raid the apartment with the police.

O'Brien: Where was the apartment?

Gentili: In Bedstuy—Bedford and Green. And the police would raid the apartment and I'd be arrested again. One of the times that I was arrested, they just said you have to go to jail. So he sentence me I think to two months. And they sent me to Rikers Island, and they put me with the men. And I was detoxing from heroin, and it was horrible. And half of the men wanted to fuck me and the other half wanted to kill me, and I wanted to die because detoxing from heroin is a very horrible, painful thing. I guess like, two weeks after I was there, I will never forget this. They called me, and the guards took me to the gymnasium, the gym, and it was night. It was this huge gym with a very small table with a chair and a light. And it was an ICE agent, which now sometimes I ask myself, why did they give this information to ICE? Isn't it like New York doesn't do that? Why did that happen to me? It happened. So the person from ICE told me that I was going to be deported, that I was going to be transferred to a deportation facility. So they sent me to the immigration jail I guess here, Varick. And they put me with the men and they attacked me, and the cis women didn't want me to be with them, which is fucked up. So they had to have me in isolation, which is a very, very horrible thing. And not because it was a horrible thing, but because it was expensive for them because one of those cells was supposed to have 20 people and they only had me. It was expensive for them. They let me out with an ankle bracelet. And with an ankle bracelet, I had to do and check with some kind of ICE parole officer or something. So when I came out of there, I had to go back to that place where I was living, and I was clean because my body detoxed from heroin and everything. But I went there and I started getting high again. And the immigration officer, this guy, he went why don't you get clean? I said what do you mean, get clean? He said, well, I'm going to send you to a hospital to do the detox. And I just did it. I went to a hospital, I didn't know what that was about. I didn't know what detox was. I went to the hospital, and I did seven days of detox, and from there they said (inaudible 1:20:32). So they sent me to a 28 days, and the 28 days, it felt like (inaudible 1:20:46). It seems like people are able to, after doing drugs for so long, are able not to do drugs. It seems like some people can do this, maybe I could do that too. So I started contemplating the idea of recovery, I guess.

O'Brien: What was your motivation?

Gentili: None. I don't know. There was no motivation. It just happened. And I was going to be deported. I had an ankle bracelet on all this time. And from there I went to long-term treatment, 17 months in this long-term treatment shit. And I did it with the men, too.

O'Brien: And those are very disciplined, yes?

Gentili: It's a horrible thing. I don't know how I feel about it. I think that's (inaudible 1:21:51) an alternative to incarceration. It is an alternative to incarceration.

O'Brien: Which program was it?

Gentili: Samaritan Village. It's very strict. But they did great things for me. They got me immigration status, right? They helped me get it. So you know, while I was there, I was given asylum in this country. And I came out of there and I've been clean and sober.

O'Brien: What year was that?

Gentili: I should know—I think it was 2010.

O'Brien: When you were doing heroin, where did you get needles?

Gentili: Drug people.

O'Brien: From dealers?

Gentili: Uh-huh.

O'Brien: Did you ever cross paths with social service workers at all?

Gentili: No.

O'Brien: Not at all?

Gentili: Not at all. But I remember when I was living with this guy in Bedstuy, he would go to get clean needles. I just never did, I never went. And we would share needles. He is or was, I don't know if he's alive, HIV positive, but somehow we would share needles and somehow I didn't contract it. I didn't get HIV, but I got Hep-C from him. So I've lived with Hep-C for many, many years. I just finished my treatment and I'm cured.

O'Brien: Congratulations.

Gentili: Thank you.

O'Brien: Were you in a trans community in New York during this time that you were doing drugs? Was there anything like the community you were in in Argentina?

Gentili: I was very isolated though—I think it was harder for people to be around me because I was very into drugs. So I really didn't care about anybody. The most important thing for me was to get high. I really didn't care about being around people. And it's okay—you know, people weren't able to find a way to be friends with me when I was on drugs (inaudible 1:24:42). So yeah, I didn't have any friends. But then, you know, when I finished treatment I just—when I was in treatment I started going to an LGBT center and going to a trans group, and I thought that was the most wonderful thing in the world, a group of trans women in the same room, 50 of them. And some of them were sex workers but some of them were lawyers. And I'm like, what do you mean? They can be lawyers? Some of them, they work at Target. And I'm like what do you mean—and some of them would do sex work too, but it's now like, I can do other things but being a sex worker. And while I was in treatment, they gave me—I won an internship at the center. I have my feelings about internships for trans people because then we don't create real jobs for trans people, right? But at the same time, I have to say that that internship was the beginning of a career for me, right? So, I do have (inaudible 1:26:06) about internships for trans people. So, I did that internship and this amazing person told me you should do a resume. And I said what am I going to put in a resume? That I was a whore? And she said no, you were an entertainer. And I'm like what do you mean, I was a whore. She said, what did you do as a whore? Well, I took care of men. So, you entertained them, so why don't you name it entertainment? You don't have to say you were a whore. So, she found ways to put my experiences of sex work, a trans lady, in an actual resume, and mix it with the internship that I was doing there, and I got my first job as a Patient Navigator at APICHA. And six months after being a Patient Navigator, they offered me to be the Trans Health Coordinator at APICHA, and I worked there for four years. But then I kind of got tired of doing direct services and got the opportunity to come here to the pol department, that came about and I took it, and I've been here at GMHC for one year. A couple of years ago it's been one year that I was here doing that I've worked here doing policy and public affairs.

O'Brien: We're coming up on 5:00. I have a lot more questions to ask you.

Gentili: Yeah.

O'Brien: Do you need to wrap up now?

Gentili: I really need to go. I really need to go but I guess we can meet some other time.

O'Brien: That would be great. Thank you so much Cecilia.

Gentili: No problem. Thank you. Thank you for coming here.

O'Brien: Absolutely.

O'Brien: Hello, my name is Michelle O'Brien, and today I'm doing part two of an interview with Cecilia Gentili for the New York City Trans Oral History Project, in collaboration with the New York City Public Library's Community Oral History Project. It is July 14, 2017, and this is being recorded at Cecilia's office at Gay Men's Health Crisis on 33rd Street. Hello.

Gentili: Hi.

O'Brien: So in our last interview, you shared a lot about your experiences in Argentina, and growing up there and doing sex work, and then towards the end you talked about moving, the time you spent in Florida, and then a little bit of moving around. Then when we got to the very end of the interview, you rushed through everything that had happened in New York since you got here.

Gentili: Which was a lot.

O'Brien: Yes, so I think today really focusing on New York. Going back and telling me again the story of how you moved here, and we can dwell on it a little bit longer. And then the sequence of things that led you to GMHC and the work you're doing now, and what that work is and how you understand it.

Gentili: It's a lot, so I'm going to try to summarize it a little bit. And you tell me what you want me to expand on.

O'Brien: So what year did you move to New York?

Gentili: I moved to New York—and this is funny, it may sound funny, but it's something that I have to make myself clear somehow, and I'm going to have to look it up—I was high 24/7, so if you ask me, I don't know. I know that—I think it was in 2004.

O'Brien: Wow, that's when I moved here!

Gentili: I told—it was 2007. But the other day—

O'Brien: That's a big difference!

Gentili: But the other day I found some pictures of me with my girlfriend, and the date was in 2004. And I'm like, oh, I was in New York in 2004. It's been so much longer.

O'Brien: So those years were very blurry.

Gentili: They're very blurry though. I think it was 2004. I'm in Miami, I don't know if I told you that I was with this man in a relationship and his wife finds out, follows me to the supermarket, attacked me, and threatened me with sending immigration my way. And I got very scared. And my friend gave me a job in San Francisco, in—what would that be, like a warehouse, I guess.

And I went there, and I started working—I didn't do well. I didn't do well not because it wasn't enough work, it was because it was a lot of crystal meth in San Francisco, and I loved it. Most of my time in San Francisco I was high on meth, and I didn't do much money. So, I told my friend that I didn't want to be in San Francisco anymore, and she got me into coming here to work in a house here that there were also trans girls working there.

O'Brien: Where was that house?

Gentili: It was on Mott Street.

O'Brien: Okay, right. I remember this now.

Gentili: And here I came to New York City, and when I opened the door of the apartment on Mott Street, the person greeting me was Nina.

O'Brien: And you fell in love.

Gentili: And I fell in love with her. I fell in love with her, and it was a whole process to understand that I was a lesbian, and that I liked trans girls, I liked girls. Which I kind of knew from before, I just never thought about it. But since Nina didn't want it to just have sex, she wanted to have a relationship with me, it was kind of like saying okay, I'm in a relationship with this girl. Questions that I even have now, I even ask myself a question if I was a lesbian, but at the time it was like, am I a lesbian? Am I allowed to put myself in this category, which today it would be like, absolutely, why am I asking this? But at the time it was, the conversation was different, right? I remember one year when I was with her, we got kicked out of the dyke march.

O'Brien: Wow. What year—do you know when that was?

Gentili: Yeah, it must have been 2005, 2006. They let us know that we were not welcome there.

O'Brien: Did you know any dykes, and lesbians at all?

Gentili: No. No. I didn't know any lesbians, and I didn't know any trans lesbians. So, I thought like oh, maybe I'm not a lesbian then if lesbians don't want me there. So, I was with her for about two to three years, and we were very happy, and we were very miserable, too.

O'Brien: Were you still doing a lot of drugs at this time?

Gentili: Yes. When I moved here, I also moved to heroin. So, I started doing heroin. At the beginning, you know, living in Nolita, making a lot of money, the sex work industry at the time, it was very profitable for me. And I was making a lot of money and I was living in a wonderful apartment.

O'Brien: And you were still getting clients online, is that right?

Gentili: Yes. Yes, yes. Everything was online. And we ended up breaking up.

O'Brien: Why?

Gentili: We broke up because my addiction was taking over, and this is a little bit hard for me to you know—but I have to own it, you know? I was hostile towards her, and it's not an excuse. I have never done certain things that I did to her if I wasn't high. I think the fact that I was doing drugs play a big part. And I regret them. I regret them very much. And every time I see her, I hug her a lot and I—

O'Brien: It can bring out the worst in us.

Gentili: Yeah, and I tell her that I am sorry. But I can't put excuses here. I did things that I'm not proud of. And that happened, right? Until I own them, I can't move on. So I had to own them, and I did move on. I am not happy about it, but that happened.

O'Brien: That process of owning what you had done, was that when you were in recovery later?

Gentili: Yes.

O'Brien: Yeah, that's often when someone goes back to the—

Gentili: Yes, that came then, yeah.

O'Brien: Do I remember right that you were living in a recovery center—

Gentili: Yeah.

O'Brien: Was it over a year?

Gentili: 17 months.

O'Brien: Right. And those environments can be very, very disciplined.

Gentili: Well, I have (inaudible 1:37:11) feelings about treatment. Because it did work for me, you know? It's been seven years. So, it did work and helped me face a lot of these things. But I also don't agree with the way that treatment is addressed in treatment.

O'Brien: Tell us about that.

Gentili: I feel like treatment is somehow—what I understand as a very—and I hate to throw the word patriarchy in the middle, because—but it's very patriarchal, it's very like, you are sick and I'm going to fix you, right? Which is the idea—

O'Brien: Like control and domination.

Gentili: This idea of, I am right, you are wrong, and until you learn to change that. It's not space for conversation. It's not a space for debate, right? Like you know, in my case, I was placed with men. And there was no space for me to say, let me tell you why I shouldn't be with men. It was like, you need treatment, and if you really want it, you're going to do it with the men, right? That is not okay with me. Somehow, it ended up working with me. But I don't want to come across like I agree with the way that was done. But I also have to recognize that somehow it worked with me.

O'Brien: How did they relate to your gender when you were living there? Was it Good Samaritan?

Gentili: Samaritan Village. And I have great friends, you know? Like my counselor is now my very good friend, right? And we can talk about this, and I actually met with them, and we worked on a whole policy for trans people. I feel like I made an impact there, and I'm being part of the change. And I feel like, you know, whatever they did that I disagree with, they're making their business to change. But that doesn't take away the fact that there was many things that I went through that are not okay, right? So I got there, and how treatment works is—those kind of treatments, I'm not saying that every treatment facility is the same. But you have an orientation part, right? And then from orientation, you go to main treatment, and in main treatment you have kind of steps, right? So it's like first, kind of like tiers, right? First tier, second tier, third tier, and then it's the last part when you will go and walk outside and you come back just to sleep there, right? So when I got there, I was in orientation and I was put with the women, and very weirdly nobody spooked me, because I never pass. I think it will be one in 1000 times that I pass. I don't pass. I really don't care about passing. It doesn't really affect me. I know for many other people that affects them—it doesn't affect me. And I'm very clear that most of the time I don't pass. That's one of the cases where I passed. I was with the women and nobody knew, and I had a fucking big mouth and I told somebody. It's not because—I do have a fucking big mouth, but I was worried that having a body that includes a penis, you know, it's hard to hide.

O'Brien: That they would retaliate or find out.

Gentili: And it's hard to hide, right? All the women shower together.

O'Brien: There's not a lot of privacy.

Gentili: Yeah, they always sleep together in the same room. You know, there's no privacy. So it isn't like, I didn't want this to be found out by somebody. And I thought I should say it, right? And I did, and the woman complained. Since there was no guidance from city, state, or federal on how to work with trans people, they told me that they had to move me with the men. Which was, from the beginning, a very difficult transition because all these men that saw me at the women's, now they see me there, and it's the whole kind of revealing and you know—we're

talking about hundreds of people living under the same roof, and different reactions. And my feelings about being—going from the female dorm to the men’s dorm, including showers—

O’Brien: It sounds humiliating.

Gentili: It’s humiliating. It’s humiliating. It is a lot of domestic lifestyle, right? Getting dressed, right? Getting dressed was one thing in the women’s side, but on the men’s side, it was very uncomfortable. It was uncomfortable and terrifying. Yeah. It was very, very stressing. But you know, I don’t know if you know—when they talk about the idea of surrendering, I really grabbed into that idea and I surrendered. And in my mind I was like, I surrender. If they tell me that to do this, I will do it, right? And I dove into the whole fixing me part. So in my mind—

O’Brien: But does that include surrendering your gender?

Gentili: It should not include, but I didn’t know that. I understood surrendering as a total surrendering, everything, and let them create the new me somehow, or fix the old me.

O’Brien: And were they trying to create a man.

Gentili: No, no, no. They were not. They were just totally not sensitive to my transness. They were not. They were not. They were actually very affirming somehow. It was funny, because I was living with men but they would send me to women’s groups, right? I was living with men, but I didn’t get any activities for Mother’s Day because their understanding is that everybody that is a mother is a cisgender woman. I was in the group, so everybody was working for mothers day and I wasn’t. I was with the men. But I was living with them, so very weird, very, very weird. Very, very—kind of bizarre. Also seems like, at that time, in this quest for sexual orientation categories in my life, I felt like oh, at this point I’m bisexual because I like men and I like women. It was, I recall for some reason I got very horny. Very horny. I don’t know—they tried to explain to me, one person tried to explain to me it’s like, you’re body, since you’re not focusing on the drugs, one of the most natural things is focusing on your sexuality, I guess, or you get more active, but very horny. And it was hard to, you know, live with men who some of them I thought were hot, and the ones that I didn’t, they were able to see my body and they were able to make advances that they were unwanted. It wasn’t a terrible experience—they gave me wonderful results. But I don’t want to translate that because I got good results I justify the process. The process was wrong. And it wasn’t intentional from them. I don’t want to put them as a, you know, the villains here. They weren’t intentional, there was just no guidance. They didn’t know what to do with me. They just did what they thought was best. Also, I think these places are terrified of lawsuits and things like that, and I think that for them I was some kind of liability. My situation was very—but they were also doing some charity with me, because I didn’t even have Medicaid. I was undocumented. So nobody was paying for me, and those places live from your benefits basically, right? And I didn’t have any benefits. Nobody was paying for me. I was going through all that with this extreme gratitude to them, which is so weird to have so different and counter feelings about something, right? Sometimes I feel like I’m jumping from I love them to I hate them, and I think I did both.

O'Brien: Right, I mean, I would imagine it's hard to hold both.

Gentili: Yeah.

O'Brien: And that there'd be a real impulse to fall into one side or another, to denounce it all together or to denounce, or to just love the whole thing.

Gentili: Yeah. I think like, oh, I have fucking years without shooting anything in my veins. I love them. But then I remember, you know, men opening the curtain in my shower and trying to touch me while I was taking a shower there, and I fucking hate them. It is difficult. And I'm very grateful. I really—I want to be a person that is a grateful person, right? I work on being grateful for everything that I have and for, you know, it is like my country. I love my country, but I hate so many things that happen in it, and sometimes I wonder how can I love a country that did me so wrong, right? But I still love it. And I love my dad. He was an asshole, but I can't help but love him with all his assholiness, right? Sometimes this is no different, right? Since this happens a lot. I'm very used to dealing with these encounters, opposite feelings about people, places, and things. How recovery is that, right? People, places, and things.

O'Brien: You mentioned that you've been working with Samaritan Village around developing a better trans policy.

Gentili: Yeah.

O'Brien: So what do you wish they had? How do you wish they had related to you and what kind of policies have you been helping them try to implement now?

Gentili: Well I, you know, we've been working on the older, you know, allocating clients to be regarding gender identity, and has nothing to do with gender assigned at birth. And that—although they're a super straight place, people should have an opportunity to say like, because of where I find myself in the spectrum of gender, I should be here, right? And if that is not the male or the female, they should have an area, right, that is for people that are non-binary.

O'Brien: Oh wow, have they set that up?

Gentili: In bathroom policy. They're working on it. In bathroom policies and creating equity, you know? Because sometimes a trans person needs that specific extra push, right? I think I was successful because somehow I had a case manager that understood that case management and counseling wasn't going to be enough to be around drug counseling. It had to be an extra part about my issues around gender. And she understood that she wasn't ready to do that, and she sent me outside to get that.

O'Brien: Where did you go to get that?

Gentili: I went to Center.

O'Brien: Okay, yeah.

Gentili: I went to the Center. I went to the Center, and I remember, you know, taking my first counseling and going to this room and finding out that my counselor was going to be a trans woman. And in my book—

O'Brien: Who was your counselor?

Gentili: Christina. The wonderful Christina Herrera. And in my mind, trans women were only supposed to be whores. Remember, so what I was told. So my mind was like, what do you mean— you work here? And she said yeah. And I would just come every now and then to be a counselor? And she was like no, I work eight hours a day here. I'm like, so this is your job? And she's like yeah. I'm like, wow. You are a trans person who has a job that is not being a sex worker? And she's like yeah. And that was like—and then she said like, and I want you to meet another group of people, and some of them are not sex workers, some of them are, but some of them are not. And she took me to a group, and I remember the first group was the biggest group of trans women that I'd ever seen. For some reason I think they were all waiting for me. And it was extremely—it was a big room, but it was extremely crowded. There must have been like about 70 trans women in the same room. And I opened the door and I'm like, what? All these people here, all these women here, talking about life? And some of them do sex work, but many, many, many of them don't. And you know, meeting other people, like this woman, like, you know, who was like, I'm an architect. And I'm like, wait a minute, what? You are a fucking architect? You know, I have to say they're mostly white women, the ones that have the architect and lawyers and things like that, you know? But you know, I've never been afraid, and I've always been like, you know, I've never felt—that's my mom, you know, she always told me you're not less than nobody, you know? And when I saw all of this, I said I can be one of them. I can be.

O'Brien: I imagine it really helped with your recovery to have that help.

Gentili: Yeah, I can be one of them, you know? I choose not to do sex work anymore, and I finally see another possibility. Right? Because before it was like, sex work is the only thing that I'm going to do, and in my mind was the thing that I was supposed to do. So learning that there was another choice in life and making the decision to take it has been fundamental in my recovery and my overall wellbeing, right? And so I made that decision, and soon enough they asked me if I wanted to facilitate the group. I made many mistakes. I gave many, many awful, regretful groups. Horrible groups. I gave horrible groups. I gave groups that were so binary sometimes, like talking about an idea of femininity, and some guys were like, what are you talking about? I don't want to be that kind of woman. But I learned. We all learned together I guess. And then they told me oh, there's an internship here if you want to do it, and it's a paid internship.

O'Brien: Were you out of Samaritan Village at this point?

Gentili: No, I was at Samaritan Village.

O'Brien: You were still living there.

Gentili: So I did—I started getting an internship, but I was still undocumented. While I was at Samaritan Village, they connected me with a lawyer from Catholic Charities who did my asylum. So I'm at Samaritan Village, being in recovery, connected to all this trans paraphernalia.

O'Brien: And what year is this?

Gentili: Oh, shit—that must be 2010, 2011. And getting with an asylum process. So part of the whole trans thing was me doing an internship. That was a paid internship. But I wasn't able to get paid because I didn't have a Social Security number. It's very funny, the day that I got my work permit, that was about the same time when my internship was going to finish. And I went to the Center and I told them, I got my work permit, and they said if you go and complete this paper right now, we're going to be able to pay you retroactively for the whole year's internship, and that's how I got the money to get out of treatment and rent a room.

O'Brien: Because it's enough to put the deposit down.

Gentili: Like everything worked so perfectly. And when I was doing the internship, this amazing person named Adie asked me to do a resume. And Adie said, you know, you should work on a resume, and I said what am I going to put in it?

O'Brien: Adi Ben-Israel?

Gentili: Yes. Yes, yes. The amazing Adi Ben-Israel. And Adie asked me, do your resume. And I said, what am I going to put in my resume? And Adie said, you know, things that you did in your past. And I said I can't put that I did sex work, and Adie said you can say that you were an entertainer. So Adie helped me change the vocabulary for what I put years of work without saying what work was actually, and Adie explained to me that sex work has, like a big part of—how do you, customer—

O'Brien: Relations or satisfaction.

Gentili: Relations, satisfaction, so Adie helped me phrase all of that and create a resume. And with that resume, I applied for a job at APICHA as a Patient Navigator. Actually I applied for some kind of nutrition something. I don't know why I applied for that, but they offered me a better position as a Patient Navigator. And I had a job.

O'Brien: What were your skills like at this point? Can you use a computer? Can you read and write well?

Gentili: No, no. No. Very limited.

O'Brien: But you were very good at relating to people I imagine.

Gentili: I'm very good at lying. I'm very good at making it look like I know.

O'Brien: And you're extremely smart and very charming.

Gentili: Like you know, I was very good at making them feel like I knew it. I remember my first task when I met my supervisor at APICHA, he said okay, in the future you're going to have about 40 patients, but for now you're going to have only 12 to help you adapt to this whole thing. These are the names of them, and this is the system that has all their information. I want you to create an Excel sheet with all their names, addresses, phone, so you can have a clear way of communicating with them. I didn't know what an Excel sheet was. And I went and I went took the courage and I told somebody I was asked to do an Excel sheet, and I don't know what that is.

O'Brien: A co-worker at APICHA?

Gentili: Yes. And that person looked at me and said, who the fuck hired you? And I said, that doesn't matters. What matters is that I need help, and you look like a generous enough person to offer me that help. And he said like, you got me. Let me show you what an Excel sheet is. So the person, he explained to me and very quickly, I got it really quick, right?

O'Brien: I imagine you pick things up very fast.

Gentili: Yeah. And I did my Excel sheet. And then I went to somebody else and I asked how do I attach this thing to an e-mail? And somebody came and explained to me how to attach that Excel sheet to an e-mail. And I wrote in the e-mail, Dear Timothy, this is the sheet that you asked me for. And I spelled sheet, s-h-i-t.

O'Brien: Oh no.

Gentili: Yeah. So, he got an e-mail saying this is the shit that you asked me for.

O'Brien: Which somebody might say if they're really angry, right? That's the problem.

Gentili: Yeah, but in Spanish, sheet sounds like shit, how you write shit. The sound is—yeah. So, he called me in and is like, I think we need to have a conversation about the way of communication here. And I'm like, what do you mean? I'm like, look at this e-mail—and I said yeah—he said to me, what does that say? And I read it, and he's like, can you read it for me? And I'm like, this is the sheet that you asked me for. He looked at me and he said no. What it says here is this is the shit. And I started crying.

O'Brien: I bet you were afraid you were going to get fired.

Gentili: I started crying and I said I'm so sorry, this is how it sounds in Spanish. And he looked at me and he said girl, we are all Asians here, we all have these mistakes. Don't worry. Don't worry. I know how it feels to be somebody who has limited English and being around people who may have more it more advanced. So don't cry—this is totally fine. I just needed to know that you didn't do this on purpose. And I do understand that you didn't. So that's it, move on. And I did that work for about six months. I was really good at it. I was really good at it.

O'Brien: What did you bring to it that enabled you to be good at it?

Gentili: People love me. Clients loved me.

O'Brien: So your charisma and your charm?

Gentili: Clients love me, and a couple of gay dudes, I remember at the beginning, were like hey, patient navigation, you have to work with clients at the doctor and you know, one guy I remember he said, I don't know how I feel about walking the streets with you. And I looked at him and said well, I don't know how I feel about walking the street with you, but check this out, we both have to walk together because it's my job and you need it. And he said okay, let's do it. So I found ways to deal with this very transphobic things in a way that wasn't an issue for them. And I also was able to do my job wonderfully, right? I got everything on time, and six months after, the Trans Clinic Coordinator—the trans clinic was very new at APICHA. It was very, very new and had like, very dear clients. I think at the beginning they had nine clients, right?

O'Brien: And is this medical services?

Gentili: Yeah, medical services. It was already open. But they really didn't have many clients. So they offered me the position and I took it. Actually, they didn't offer it. They put the job position there, and my friend who worked here then, who we became very good friends at APICHA, he came in and he said why don't you apply? And I said because they're asking for a bachelor's degree. And he said—you know, he does grant writing, right? He said like, I'm a good writer. Let's sit together and write something explaining why they should hire you without a bachelor's degree. And we sat there and we wrote this amazing—oh my God, I'm going to cry.

O'Brien: Like a cover letter.

Gentili: Yeah, a cover letter, when he said, you know, because I don't have a bachelor's degree doesn't mean that you shouldn't give me this job because I can do it. I can do it, and this is why you should hire me. And they hired me. And I will forever be grateful to Dan because he's been one of the most empowering people for, like, a white, cisgender, straight dude, it's like you'd never expect that. I would never expect that. And he was super empowering. And I got the position and when I left APICHA, they had 625 patients. So I grew the shit out of that place. I grew the shit out of that place.

O'Brien: That's incredible. That's really incredible. In my job, work in AIDS services, I would see a lot of trans women of color who would go in and out of peer educator kind of positions, and then another layer of white trans women, mostly white, who had social work degrees sort of doing some administrative jobs. And very few people like yourself that worked as peer educators from spent time on the streets and then moved into a position of administration and authority and real influence.

Gentili: Thank you. I mean, I don't think I've got real influence, but thank you, that's very nice to say. I don't want to come across as with an idea of success for the community, because success means different things for everybody. Like you know, when I meet this girl that is where I was seven years ago, I don't even want her to go where I went. I want her to go where she goes. She wants to go right, so—I don't want to come across as like, oh, successful, I was able to get out of sex work and now as an advocate—in my book, my personal idea of success is what I wanted. So, I am successful. Other people may find ideas of success that are different, but for me it is what I wanted to go and how I defined success was to be here. Like, to have a fucking office where I can close the door and do this fucking interview with you and nobody bothers me? It may sound mundane and stupid, but that was part of my idea of success, and getting this office was huge for me.

O'Brien: When I worked in the policy department at GMHC, I could not have imagined a trans person being in charge of the department.

Gentili: Thank you. Thank you, thank you. Yeah, that was that. So, I worked for four years at APICHA, and—

O'Brien: I imagine you developed a lot of skills in administration.

Gentili: A lot. And a lot of very generous people. One of them was Dr. Moriama, who was the Chief Medical Officer. But they also took I guess my courage, right? I took the courage, and one day I went to him and I said, you know, you asked me to do this, this, this, and this, and first of all, I don't know how to do it, second of all I don't know how it's important so you should teach me how to do it. So he sat with me and taught me, you know, things about programming, you know, and I would go and say the same thing to the people who would write the grants, or the people that have to write a report, and they would say don't worry, we'll write the report for you. And I'd say no, don't write that report for me. Teach me how to write it. And I always had that drive. And I learned a lot. What I consider a lot, or for me is a lot. But I also got very tired of client services, the client services (inaudible 2:13:07) that sometimes you find yourself being successful but many times you find yourself being unsuccessful, and it's not because you're not good enough, and it's not because your staff is not good enough. That's something really cool that I was able to do, to hire trans people, hire trans people. Like when the clinic started growing, growing, growing, I said we have to—we need to hire people. And they were like oh, we can assign you with some people that are already working here, and I'm like no, they're not trans. We need to hire trans people. And I also hired only trans women of color. So I had people working with me and my team, and it was, I guess, my little ship.

O'Brien: How big was your team when you left?

Gentili: Three. Mya Wong, Daniella Semba, and Misty Vidal. Daniella went to school. She did go to school—I shouldn't be talking about her but whatever. She went to school to be a graphic designer or something like that. but Misty and Mya have high school diplomas or GEDs, and that was really important for me to create these positions, and I fought to have these positions not to have bachelor's degree requirements. And again, that was very important for me. That was very important for me.

O'Brien: I imagine that the design of the position that really uses their skills—

Gentili: That was really important for me, and I was thinking, you know, having somebody with sex work background because I need to reach out to sex workers and they were like oh, we need a social worker. No, you need a sex worker. You know, social workers read about sex work. Sex workers know about it and know how to reach through to these people so it was a really intensive fight, and I was successful. So as I said, as I was learning (inaudible 2:15:45), I just—services just, I was unhappy. I started being unhappy, I started feeling that I was ready to look at these issues from a better point of view that wasn't just providing services. And I thought I would be doing some community organizing and advocacy was going to be my best fit. And I applied for a job at the Center to learned the Gender Identity Project, where I started as an intern. And I got the job. But at the same time, I was already in conversation with GMHC, and they started recruiting me. Going to the LGBT Center would have been wonderful, because being an intern to be leading the Gender Identity Project would be a triumphal return, right?

O'Brien: It would be very inspiring to lots of people I imagine. But when they offered me the job, GMHC and Kelsea said, we want you here. Come work with us, tell them no and come work with us. And they told me, you can basically do whatever you want. Tell us what you want to do. We want you here. And I came here and I took a position as the Assistant Director of Policy under the leadership of Anthony Hice, working with Michael Jasquez. And I came here to do trans work, but I also came here not to do trans work. I told Kelsea, whatever my position is cannot have trans on its title. And that's why I came as the Assistant Director of Policy. That allows me to do trans work, but it's not just about being trans. And when I talk to friends sometimes, the misinterpret this as some kind of rejection of my transness, and I never own my transness more than when I own it now. It was just a step of reassurance that I'm good at what I do besides being trans, that I am somebody that can do great work and happens to be trans, right? So I did that. and then, circumstances, Anthony left and Michael left, and I was called to Kelsea's office once, and while I was walking, I knew that he was going to name me director. I knew it, since I was working there. And he did. And that was very generous, and that was very trusting, right? And I am grateful for that trust. Because I work my fucking ass off, so. You know. And I think in part it is because I am trans, right? And I really have to show that trans people can do the same or better work than cis people do. So I make it my business to show that all the time. And I think that works in my favor when it comes to my relationship with my employers. And GMHC does not have the best esteem from the trans community, and I am changing that and I love doing that. And at the same

time I'm doing a lot of other work that is extremely relevant to me around drug use, around HIV, around Hep-C, around housing, homelessness, and around youth. I am doing all the things that I want to do for my community but I'm doing a lot of other things that are just part of my development to where my next step will be in life.

O'Brien: So what year did you start at GMHC?

Gentili: I started at GMHC on June 6, 2016. One year, one month, and 11 days from now.

O'Brien: When did you become the director of the department?

Gentili: Six months after.

O'Brien: Six months after—okay. So—

Gentili: It wasn't just merit though, it was the whole rest of the department resigned for different reasons. Not resigned, moved—

O'Brien: For different reasons.

Gentili: Yeah, so it wasn't just merit. It wasn't just my merit.

O'Brien: Sure, but they would not have offered you the job if they hadn't been confident that you could do it. So, tell us for people who might not be familiar with GMHC, just sort of broadly what GMHC is?

Gentili: GMHC is an organization that has been working for 35 years, working with people living with HIV and all those affected, and the goal is to end AIDS, but also to empower those living with HIV. And also, people around them, right? Sometimes HIV does not just affect the person that lives with it, but everybody around them somehow. So, we have like, an incredible amount of services that go from offering lunch and dinner and barbershop services and yoga class and job placement and case management to crochet classes and whatever you want to do, like arts and crafts. We're just open (inaudible 2:24:22) so we have wonderful mental health services. We have an amazing workforce development that has programs that are crafted for people living with HIV, another one that is crafted for people that aren't and are receiving benefits wants to move out of receiving benefits to re-join the workforce that are living with HIV, but they have another one for people that are not living with HIV, and we also have one that is specifically for trans people. We have—sometimes I don't think I know all the services we have here because there are so many. And part of the work we do is around policy right? And making sure that federal, state, and city policies align with our mission and what we believe is the right thing to do. Sometimes doing all this work takes a lot of talking to politicians and to elected officials, and I love doing that, you know?

O'Brien: You love doing the lobbying?

Gentili: I love it.

O'Brien: Oh wow, I've never heard anyone say that before.

Gentili: I love it. I love it. I love the spotlight, I guess. I love attention. I love it.

O'Brien: How big is the staff?

Gentili: And you know, when I work there, I'm Claire Underwood, I'm not (inaudible 2:26:11) anymore, right? I put all this character on, like I'm doing some acting (inaudible 2:26:17), right? So that's what I do. And I manage the Action Center too, and also engaging people in civil actions is very important to me, and also making sure that those people do it with conviction, and at the same time they are respected while doing it.

O'Brien: How big is the staff at GMHC now?

Gentili: I wish I could tell you that. It is, as you can see, is a huge agency. I don't have a number of people working here. But there's so many.

O'Brien: How big is the Policy Department?

Gentili: The Policy Department has my boss, who is the Vice President of Policy and Public Affairs, Eric Sawyer. Me, who is the Director of Policy, and under me I have a Community Organizer and under the Community Organizer we have three positions for Peer Assistants, and we are about to have two small positions for people that are going to be paid for the work with City Council and with different (inaudible 2:27:58i) that they do. And we also have a couple of interns that work for us.

O'Brien: You mentioned some of the elements of your portfolio, but what are the major focuses of your work?

Gentili: The focuses are of course the ending the epidemic initiative. Everything that has to do with HIV criminalization and also everything that has to do with prevention, right? And everything that has to do with treatment is of course our main priority in all of this, but looking at HIV in a more intersectional way is what brings a certain magic, right, to the job. Like, understanding that paying attention to sex work issues is important to HIV regardless of anything. Understanding that working around trans issues is important because it effects HIV. Working around youth homelessness is very important in understanding how those interactions work and why it's important for us to work around those things, although you can say, this is not HIV. But phrasing it in a way that shows why so many issues should matter to us is magical to me, and helps me do so much work that I didn't know that I was going to be able to do. So I have bosses, like Eric and Kelsea who trust me.

O'Brien: That counts for a lot.

Gentili: And I can go like, hey, I need to go and take a shit in the middle of the street, and they trust me that that's the right thing to do because I say it, right? Of course, I don't do that. It's just an extreme thing to say, right? So you know, feeling supported in my judgment is fundamental to me.

O'Brien: And you mentioned to me that you've been successful in improving the reputation of GMHC amongst trans people in the city?

Gentili: I didn't say improving the reputation, I said just improving the relationship and having a new, refreshed view of what GMHC does and how it's also being done for trans people and how they can relate to the agency and renewing the commitment for the community. That's important for me. And I don't know if it's a good thing or a bad thing, but I felt when I was working at APICHA, I also felt like I stopped being Cecilia, and I became Cecilia from APICHA, right? And I feel like I take my job wherever I go. Now I'm Cecilia from GMHC, and that's great for Cecilia, but it's great for GMHC too. So, it's a win-win situation. It may sound fucking presumptuous of me to say that, but that's how I really feel. Cecilia from GMHC is good for Cecilia, but it's also good for GMHC.

O'Brien: Do you—where do you see the future for trans services and trans movement?

Gentili: I think that from the work that I do, I think it's time to change the narrative, right? I keep going to meetings where they say well, I don't know if we can propose this because elected officials are not going to relate that much because you guys are a small population. So I think we have to start changing the narrative. We are not a fucking small population anymore. We are a big community, and we have to, you know, at the same time that we benefit from the status of minority status, we are a big, you know—I think that our goals should be phrased into a population that is big enough and not just as a minority. I think it's time to talk about Trans with a big T, right? When it comes to services, of course we have to keep focusing on housing and employment and things like that. But I feel like most of the work that is done, it is done to address a problem, right? And I think the work that is being done is to address a problem, right? And to address discrimination. And I think we are at a point where we have to kind of anticipate those things, right? Let's put it as unemployment. I think creating trainings and development to get trans people jobs is great. But I think it's time to move one step further in pushing different powerful stakeholders to create these jobs, right? And to assign them to trans people.

O'Brien: Both government and corporations.

Gentili: And corporations. Right? And when it comes to health care, yeah, creating trans specific clinics is great. But we have to move away from that to make it to like every fucking medical space has to be trans sensitive. Right? Because I get sick on the weekends. I can't wait until Monday to go and see my trans-sensitive doctor. I have to go to the fucking hospital. So I think it's time for us to move away from the program and look at the big picture and what is causing it. And how

to create solutions that would anticipate the problem coming instead of trying to fix it. Does that make sense?

O'Brien: I think so. I, yeah—in my work, I've been thinking a lot about the relationship between trans exclusion and trans poverty, and poverty in general, right? Like, trans people, many trans people are totally excluded from being able to get waged work. But then they're in communities where half the people are not getting enough work. And what's the—on one hand, it's anti-trans discrimination, but on the other hand it's like the racism and politics of poverty. And how to thing through those things together.

Gentili: And also, you know, all these things, we have to start looking at it in an intersectional way, you know? We keep saying this, like, you know, trans people, trans people, we can be afraid to say white trans people and black trans people and brown trans people, right? Because I am a brown trans woman, and my life sucks because I'm trans, but it sucks much more because I'm brown. But it sucks much less than what it sucks for a black trans woman, right? So, we shouldn't be afraid of saying that. That's why when it comes to identification, I know that you know, sometimes when people get annoyed, but you know, I say now I'm a non-black trans woman of color, right? Because that owns to the privilege of being light-skinned, right?

O'Brien: Recognizing anti-black racism.

Gentili: So it is important to, you know, make those distinctions, and own to our own privilege, right? The thing is, I never felt like I had any privilege, until I now, oh I fucking have a lot of privilege.

O'Brien: You have a door you can shut.

Gentili: Yeah, I have a door that I can shut, look at this. I'm going to open it, look how it sounds.

[door closes]

Gentili: So, you know.

O'Brien: Anything more you'd like to talk about?

Gentili: No, just that I'm very happy with doing this. Thank you so much for taking the time.

O'Brien: Thank you. I really appreciate it.

Gentili: To interview me and being very nice and wonderful while doing it.

O'Brien: I enjoyed it greatly. Thank you so much Cecilia.

Gentili: Yay!

