NEW YORK CITY TRANS ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

TOPHER GROSS

Interviewer: Nadia Awad

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Transcribed by Jamie Magyar

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Nadia Awad: So it is October 1, 2017, and I am in Crown Heights with Topher Gross, and we are going to do an oral history for the New York Trans Oral History Project, which seeks to document the lives of trans New Yorkers as told in their own words. Um, thanks, Topher, for coming through. I'm really excited. Um, I think I'm going to start with—uh, if you could tell me a little bit about where you were born and what that place was like?

Topher Gross: I was born in Canarsie, here in Brooklyn. Um, I grew up in my grandparents' three-family house. So we lived on the bottom, my grandparents lived on the top, and my mom's sister and her husband lived on top of them. Uh, so I always had like, family around and it was like, a very cute, suburban-ish Brooklyn neighborhood, uh, that was like, very quiet and kind of quaint in a weird way.

Awad: Um, where—did your grandparents always live in New York, or where did they come from?

Gross: My grandparents have always lived in New York. They lived in East New York, I think, when they were little. Um, but yeah, they're New Yorkers and their parents came from like, Russia and Poland. My mom's parents, anyway, came from Russia and Poland—or, I should say, great-grandparents. Um, but my—that side of my family was always like, Brooklyn people.

Awad: And what about your father's side?

Gross: So my mom's first husband, who's technically my father—which I also refer to as my sperm donor, since he wasn't good for much—he was, as far as I understand like, Coptic Christian Egyptian, but he was a New York person. I believe his parents and grandparents came from Egypt, uh, but I don't know much beyond that. And then my stepdad, who's been my dad officially since we were in—since I was in elementary school, his family—his parents are New York people, like Lower East Side New York Jews, and my dad's mom came through from Canada. Um, I guess they weren't allowed in the US and so they went to Canada before they came here, and I believe they were also Eastern European. The great-grandparents were Eastern European.

Awad: Do you—that's interesting. Do you have any idea why they wouldn't have been allowed at that time?

Gross: No. I'm not really sure exactly what the deal was. I should really talk to my dad about this, but I just know that like, his mom came through via Canada, which was always very interesting to me, um, since my dad I don't think has ever been to Canada. Um, but yeah, then—then everybody was like, Lower East Side and Brooklyn peeps.

Awad: So what—what was Canarsie like when you were growing up?

Gross: It was primarily like, white people. Like, a lot of Italian folks and Irish folks, and like, a small amount of folks of color. Um, it was a lot of like, one- to three-family homes like, directly in my neighborhood, and then there were like, some apartment buildings further down. Um, it was very quiet. Everybody had a car, except—I mean, not me. I was a kid. Um, and it was very safe,

although I had like, very protective parents. I joke that I was not allowed out of the gate until I was thirteen without adult accompaniment, um, which is not true, but… It was like, super easy to like, walk around everywhere. Little kids were like, leaving their house and going to the grocery store at like, six. And it was like, a pretty easy place to be as a kid. Like, I didn't really—I guess I grew up in this like, very sheltered, sort of naive sense at the time—um, with like a lot of—like, not a lot of exposure to like, a lot of other things. It was like one of those sort of weird, um—you know, it was like a quiet Brooklyn neighborhood with not a lot of excitement, but with like, a lot of kids just freely running around the streets with a lot of freedom.

Awad: And—okay, so both of your parents grew up in New York. What—what did your mom do?

Gross: My mom was a schoolteacher. She—um, she worked at, actually, the elementary school she went to in East New York. Um, and she specialized as her career went on in reading programs. So like, something called Reading Recovery, and then all these like, facets of reading assistance for kids. That's what she did like, my entire life, whether it was at like, an elementary school in Canarsie or in East New York, or—her like, last job before she retired was in Bay Ridge. So she was like, an education assistant throughout.

Awad: Hmm. Do you know what school she worked at in East New York?

Gross: It was 219—P.S. 219, and then she worked at—um, there was like a very limited, maybe a three year run of a school that, um, was like kind of in Canarsie-ish, and they had a program of like, this—Howard Gardner's seven intelligences, that was like, brief-lived, and then she worked at 115—P.S. 115, and then I can't remember the name of the school in Bay Ridge, but…

Awad: I—one of the reasons I ask is because, um, in East New York in the 70's and the 80's, uh, there were strikes at various schools, uh, on the part of African American communities, to try and get more diverse teaching staff. Um, and so I was wondering if, you know, your mother had experience with that or—maybe if, you know—maybe she had, maybe she hadn't. I don't know.

Gross: She I don't think started at 119 [219?] until maybe the 80's? The like, early to mid 80's. Yeah, so I think she missed all of that.

Awad: Okay.

Gross: Yeah. But I don't know—yeah, because then she was in Canarsie after. So I think, yeah, she pretty much—she missed all of the strikes.

Awad: Okay. I was just curious. Um, so she was—she sounds very—obviously very committed to education.

Gross: She is totally committed to education. She's like, a teacher of the children. And especially like, kids who were um, not ready to read at their grade level. My mom was like, very devoted. She thought it was like, super important to like, really take care of the kids at the school that she

was at, and like, um, make sure that they were able to like, read, and… She was—she was like a kind of teacher that like, bought her own pencils and pens. You know, there's never enough funding, so she was like that lady that was always like, going to buy school supplies for like, kids. So it was like, very cute.

Awad: And can—just um, as a random question, you had mentioned earlier the Howard Seven Intelligences? I don't know what that is.

Gross: Oh. I think it's Howard Gardner's Seven Intelligences [Multiple Intelligences, actually]. It's like, how people learn. Um, and it's—you know, spatially, experientially, um, you know, visually. Like, there's all these like, seven intelligences. And the school was like, based around—um, it was like, kind of a little pilot program, which I think only lasted from like, kindergarten to second grade, or first to third grade as they like, added more classes, and then I think it was done. And it was like, uh, based around how everybody learns very differently, and so creating lessons where everyone can have a chance to like, understand and take part in the lesson. So, uh, various facets of education, you know, gearing people to how they learn and understand things.

Awad: Thanks. I just wasn't sure what—I'd never heard the founder of that. I have heard of different intelligences, but not that name.

Gross: I want to say it's Howard Gardner, but I just—I think that's what it is. [Yes, it is.]

Awad: Oh, people can look it up.

Gross: Yeah, Google it or DuckDuckGo it or something.

Awad: Um, and so as the child of a teacher, what was your education experience like? What was it like for you to school and…?

Gross: Oh, I was very obedient, um, in schools, because I was like, "Oh, these teachers all know each other. My mom is going to hear about everything." Um, I was like, an early adopter of reading as a kid. So um—like, I can't remember if I was at a third grade reading level in kindergarten or more, but like, I loved to read and I did not want to get in trouble, so I did all the things that I was supposed to do in school. But yeah, it was like, important as like, the kid of a teacher to like, listen to the teachers and like—school was like, very chill and fun as a kid.

Awad: And you went to a public school in Canarsie?

Gross: I went to, yeah, a public school in Canarsie. I went to P.S. 276, which at the time was like a magnet school for computers. Um, so like I learned how to use a computer very early, uh, and learned to type. And it was super cool being like, that young and able to be on a computer. I think we might've had like, early early early early *early* Macintosh computers—like, weird little boxes that they were. So like, I remember that being like, really cool when I told other kids. Like, "I get to like, go on a computer! It's awesome."

Awad: Was this still the floppy disk era?

Gross: Big, fat floppy disks. Yep. They were like, gigantic.

Awad: Did you ever play Reader Rabbit?

Gross: I did. Also that typing program with the—what was it, turtle or something? Yeah. I remember doing that and playing a lot of, um, Swiss Family Robinson.

Awad: I—I really loved Oregon Trail.

Gross: Yes! Oregon Trail. I would always die. Always die. There was just no way to win that game. No. I always got frostbitten or ate bad berries, or…

Awad: I used to hunt a lot in Oregon Trail.

Gross: Oh yeah. I never really actually—I think, did I get killed by a bear? I might've gotten killed by a bear or something, too. I was terrible at that game.

Awad: So—okay, so you're growing up in this like, predominantly white suburban enclave of Brooklyn. Your mom's a teacher. You're a pretty obedient kid. What—can you tell me what were some of the messages you were getting about gender or about, you know, who you are supposed to be in the world at that age?

Gross: Oh, as like a little kid?

Awad: Mhm.

Gross: I know I was always a weird little kid. I, um, hated wearing dresses but I wore them anyway, but in like… I vividly recall I had this like, blue dress with white polka-dots and a little red, uh, I don't know, like fake little bow, and like saddle shoes—and my mom was like, really big into saddle shoes and her favorite color was red. So like, I remember as a kid like—you know, my mom was like, "You—you know, this is a dress," and da da da, and I like, hated it. I have—I definitely was like, not thrilled about it, and as a result, to like, combat the wearing a dress thing in dynamics of like, playing house, I was always the dog or the dad in a dress. Um, so, you know. I guess that's, uh, something. Um, and then as I got older I think my mom realized like, "Oh, there's, you know, this kid," so I was like, able to pick out my own clothes and do all these things. But like, you know, nobody ever really said anything to me in like, elementary school, with me like, wearing jeans or like, skateboarding-type shirts or skateboarding-type paints, or Airwalks, or—Airwalks were really cool when I was little. Now I don't know how cool they are. But like, I never—aside from like, needing to wear a dress here and there, I luckily was never like, deterred from dressing more like a quote-unquote "boy," um, and because my grandparents lived above me it was easy to just take my grandpa's clothes. So I did that a lot. It was never like, discouraged

for—he was a mailman, so I would wear his like, mailman uniform. And he and I, as I got older, had the same shoe size-ish. I was like a half a size smaller than him. So I would like, totally be able to like, wear his clothes and nobody was really angry or upset about that. So I got very lucky as a kid, um, until junior high when kids started calling me "Pat," which was like, after the Julia Sweeney character from Saturday Night Live. I had that Brillo hair, I had those glasses, and I was like, gender-indeterminate, uh, for a lot of that like, portion of my life. Um, but other than that, you know, taunting a little bit here and there, people were just like whatever. I was like a little tomboy kid, so thank goodness for like, the 80's being like—you know, bright parachute material and skater-type clothes were popular, so I got away with, I think, a lot of things.

Awad: And—yeah, I remember the "Pat" skit because it was—it was this puzzling thing where the joke is that everyone's trying to determine what Pat's gender is, uh, but through this really circuitous way, and I—it was one of these weird—it was a really weird—I don't know.

Gross: It was very strange—it was a very strange skit and they would always try to like, ask questions about Pat's partner, who I think was named Chris. Um, and there was like, never any like, gender—they were like, "Chris and I went to the whatever," and they're like, "Oh, Chris. What'd Chris wear to this thing?" "Clothes," you know? It was very like—everything was indeterminate, everything was gender neutral, everything was like, a questioning of this person's like, very existence, which in some weird way like, I very much identified with but was also like, slightly offended by, um, when people called me that. But it made—I mean, it made perfect sense. Like, if I showed you a picture of Pat and I showed you a picture of myself at that age—I mean, aside from like, you know—I had a 36DD chest that started in junior high—so even with a 36DD chest in like, junior high, I was still called Pat. I mean, it was Pat-ing, you know? So like, that was very much like, the time that I grew up in, but—you know, able to hide it under like, skater shirts and like, OP shorts, you know. That was like, the 80's and 90's.

Awad: And so when—when did you start sort of having some feelings around, uh, I guess your own orientation or, um, that you might be—you might identify a little differently with your gender—not necessarily language around that, but when did you start having…?

Gross: Oh, jeez. I think like, when I was very, very little. Just like, the clothing choices I gravitated to, the fact that I like—you know, I hate to be like, the gender stereotypical thing, but you know, given the choice, I was totally a Rocker Ken guy over a Barbie guy. I was totally like, a G.I. Joe, LEGO kid. I preferred the like, quote-unquote "traditionally masculine" toys. I mean, I had dolls and things but my doll choices were always like, boy dolls or, um, animal dolls where you can kind of like, pick their gender, and in any sort of like, "house" situation I was always like, the dad, Ken, you know, Bob, Steve, the guy on the motorcycle. Um, so I think like, from a very early age I very much identified, um, along with like, the masculine people. The like, little boys—I generally had a lot of boy friends—like, friends that were male-identified people at the time—um, but also like, sought out the coolest, prettiest girls—or the people that I found most attractive, who were like, mostly ladies. Um, so I always like, chilled with the very pretty ladies, but mostly because I wanted to be with them, not be one of them, and then wanted to like, be one of the boys, like, continuously. As like, an elementary school kid I would, um, redraw images in like, Sears

magazines or, you know, any other magazines with what I would like my face to be as a kid, like, continuously. And my mom would always be like, "Why are you always drawing boys?" and I was like, "Oh, I really like them," but it was truly just like, me drawing myself into these like, male magazines. So from like quite an early age, I want to say—like, five or six—I think I realized that I was not like all the other kids—like, all the other girls.

Awad: And so—okay, so when you—you got into middle school and then high school, were you still in Canarsie?

Gross: Yeah. I didn't leave Canarsie until 1995. When I was going into my senior year of high school, my parents moved—decided they wanted to move to Staten Island.

Awad: Oh, wow.

Gross: Yeah. So I commuted back and forth my senior year from Staten Island to Midwood High School, and then my mom would go to Canarsie to teach and then would pick me up on her way home. Or I would like, stay at a friend's house.

Awad: So can you tell me a little bit what—what, um—about like, what you did for fun at that time?

Gross: In junior high?

Awad: Yeah, in your—

Gross: Well, as a kid I was like—I always—because of like, this joking about being sheltered, which was like, kind of true and not true, I was like the good kid, and people, when they would go out and do things that their parents would not approve of, would say that they were staying at my house, because the Grosses would never let—you know? I was such a nerd. Um, so like I would—um, I played with LEGOs a lot. I played with the younger kids on my block a lot. Um, I was never on a sports team. I tried piano and hated it. Um, I would play like, video games. It was like, around the time of SEGA. So I played a lot of SEGA and Nintendo. And it was the time, I think, when everyone was playing outside, so I played a lot of stoop ball, um, and box ball, which is like—you get like, four squares or two squares in the sidewalk and like—I don't know. It had to do with like, a bounce here and there. I don't know. I played a lot of like, weird ball games, um, and kickball and things like that. That's like… I drew a lot as a kid. Did—that was like, pretty much what I did for fun. Would like, walk around the neighborhood and um, go to the park and—again, it was like, so super mellow there that like, we could just do whatever we wanted, and we had like, a certain time we need to be home, and that was that. You know? So it was a weirdly idealistic childhood in many ways, of like—I had a lot of freedom but my parents were definitely like, not as like—I don't want to say open, but you know, they were definitely like, a little helicopter-y compared to like, my other friends.

Awad: And so when you moved to Staten Island then, were you—was that like an hour-long commute, or what—like, two hours? How was that?

Gross: My mom would wake up at a quarter to five every morning. I would wake up like, twenty minutes before we had to leave. Um, and then we were driving in the morning so my mom—I had class—I had to be at class at seven some days, because I was like, taking AP Bio. So I would get dropped off like, a little before seven and then that would probably—it'd probably be like an hour commute, and then depending on—my mom was done somewhere between like, two or three or whatever, and if there was days where I had nothing I would go home with her. Um, and if not I would like, stay at a couple of my friend's houses in Canarsie. I spent a lot of time like, not at home because it was just easier.

Awad: And so—okay, so that was your senior year and, you know—when did you start like—sort of experiencing like a crush or having that kind of…?

Gross: Oh man. I think like, in elementary school I totally had a crush on this one girl. I was super into her. I thought she was very pretty. Uh, I spent a lot of time hanging out with her. We were really good friends. Um, and oddly—she was like—I would say she was like, my best friend in many ways. She was like, one of my—I had a lot of crushes as a kid, but she was like, one of my crushes and I would like, stay at her house and we would play like, boyfriend and girlfriend and I would, um, ride on her stationary bike and pretend it was my motorcycle, and then we like, kissed a couple of times. And that was like, elementary school, junior high-ish. And then she called me a lesbian! And then we never really spoke. We had like, animosity at like, bar and bat mitzvahs as kids, and we just like, stopped speaking. And that was like—when I like, sort of realized like, "Oh shit, i really like this girl." She's now like, a lawyer or something. We like, sort of found each other for like two minutes on the phone once in college, [clears throat] and then I never talked to or heard from her. Yeah, it was like, super weird. But I had like, a crush on this other girl—a couple of girls in junior high. Um, I would like—oh my god, she was so cute! We were in um, drama class together and she had like, a best friend. And actually, we all went to high school together, oddly. But I was like, "Damn, these girls are so pretty and I want to do all the things that they do." But I was not—I could never get in there. I was always like, the person that was like, friends with all the people but like, those girls never really like, looked at me beyond like, hanging out as friends, which was a bummer. Um, and then I like, totally crushed out on dudes. I had this one—these two boys, actually. They were like, my best friends in elementary school and I thought they were so cute, and my mom really thought one of them was really cute. He had really beautiful eyes. Um, but—I see him on Facebook, too. He is like, a dad now with like, three kids. And I can't find the other kid—the other kid that really was like, my best friend. He was like, the first person I like, made out with or like, touched body parts in the junior high school book room.

Awad: Wow.

Gross: Yeah. Who knows where the hell he is.

Awad: Wow. So, okay—so in your high school, what was your—the size of your graduating class?

Gross: Oh, I think we were maybe 925. Something like that. Yeah. I graduated, Midwood High School, in 1996. Um, and I might've been like, one—I think I might've been like, 125—I don't know. I was like, smart, but I went to school with hella smart, hella smart people that were like, Westinghouse scholars and like, went to fancy schmancy schools. Um, but yeah, our graduating class was really huge. And I—I realized in high school that two of the people that I really looked up to were like, softball lesbians that were together and totally out, and years later ended up—like, some girl that I met on like, AOL Online was the roomie of one of them at Wagner College, and so we caught up again and those two girls were still together, and it was like amazing. And I was like, "Do you know that you were like, kind of my only lifeline in high school? I saw the two of you and I was like, oh my god! Like, those are my people." Um, that was like a very sort of like, full circle transformative thing. So there were not many like, out gay people at my school. There was one person whose like, quote in the yearbook was, "Yes I Am," which was the name of an album from Melissa Etheridge, um, and that person is still like, my friend on the internet. Um, and then there was like, one out gay boy who um, I'm still friends with on the internet and just moved back to New York. And it was—he was like, amazing to me. He had a purse. He would go shopping here in the city at like, all these stores and I was like, "Man, that kid is like, really living his truth." My dad was like, "Wow, he carries a lunchbox and wears a lot of makeup." You know? Like, it was awesome. It was amazing. He was like, a very important figure for me. Because like, in high school, you know—it's like you're searching for yourself a lot in high school, and then to see like, these people who were like, really just being who they were was like, so cool. That was amazing to me.

Awad: And so would you say these flashes of people in your—you know, in your high school—who were just sort of out the world this way—would you say that those were—that was your first exposure to like, queer people?

Gross: I mean, I think that there were queer people in my life. Like, there was no one out in my family. There's no one—my parents had these two lesbian friends. Um, I thought they were very much like, whatever that TV show is—*Kate & Allie*. I was like, "Oh, those two ladies are like Kate and Allie!" and my mom was like, "Well, kind of," but they never said they were lesbians. They never said anything like, that they were really together. And then I didn't realize they were together until like junior high. And I was like—oh my god, I can't remember their names. I think one of them might've been named Marcy, but whatever. That is neither here nor there. But I was just like, "Holy cow, like, that's two women that were together." They each had kids. Like, it was really awesome to me and I think that was just like, the people who I was consciously aware of that they were like, living together with, you know, their kids. And that, to me, was like, really cool. But I think like, because I didn't have any family that were like, queer—although my cousins totally knew I was gay. Like, I don't remember who aside from like, Melissa Etheridge, was out as gay at that time, but they were like, "How is so-and-so," you know, like, "How is…" Who was like, a dyke at that time? Um.

Awad: That was before Ellen [Degeneres].

Gross: Yeah, that was way before Ellen. It was like, Joan Jett. And you know, they were like, "How's Melissa Etheridge? Did you get her new album? Did she call you?" Like, they knew I was queer before I knew I was queer, and they were only like two years older than me, you know? And I was like, "No, I'm not friends with her! I don't know who that is!" but I totally knew who that was. Um, you know? Like, but I didn't have any like, queer role models as a kid. Like, I looked to—like, I remember seeing *Cry-Baby* as a youngster and I was like, "I am Johnny Depp." But it was actually like, "No, I want to be Johnny Depp." Like, I wanted to be Johnny Depp and that was like—opened up a new world of like, you know, John Waters queer life. I was like, hooked. I was like, "Oh, there's my people." Like, visibly weird, outcast-y people. And that was, I think, in junior high. I want to say that was like, my revelation in junior high.

Awad: That's cool. Wow. Okay, so—and also, we're talking about—this is before the internet, and I think a lot of people—

Gross: This is way before the internet.

Awad: —don't understand, like—

Gross: This is—we're talking 1986—or '89, I think i graduated junior high. So I graduated, you know, high school in '96—or maybe I graduated—so that means I graduated elementary school in '86 and then '92—math. Whatever. Doesn't matter. It was like, way before the internet, and so there was no way to access queer people. There was no way to like, search on the internet and find like, people that think like me or people that are born this and want to be this or think they're this, or, you know? I didn't have access to any of that until like, around 1996. 1995 or 1996, I think, we had the internet. Um, and that's when I discovered a lot of things, like LiveJournal and AOL chat groups and um, had no idea about gay stuff—queer stuff at all.

Awad: And so after you graduated high school, what did you do?

Gross: I went to college. I went to the College of Staten Island because they had a good pre-med feed-in, um, and sort of like, realized I was queer in a way when the internet happened, um, and I was able to join like, a queer—whatever the queer group was at the time. And yeah, I was like, a pre-med student for a little bit until organic chemistry, and it made me want to die. Um, and then I switched to English Writing and I was, um, introduced to a lot of queer stuff and feminist writing from this woman, Judith [inaudible], and Sarah Schulman was one of my professors. So I—it was like the time of *Rent* and *People in Trouble* and um, I learned a lot about like—you know, like Judith Butler and um, all of these other—like, *Annie on My Mind.* I don't know if you read that. It's a very like, New York lesbian book—like, young lesbians finding themselves book—and I think like, I really came into my own around that time when I was able to like, explore gender and sexuality in like, the more like, far-reaching ways. Like, there was this like, bookstore here that I found when I was in college, um, that I can't remember the name of but it was like a big deal bookstore—like, a queer bookstore. And then like, discover this like, whole world of like, "Oh my god, these are queer people. This is what—this is who I am. Oh, I'm a trans person. Oh.

Noted," you know? Like, college was like, really eye-opening. It's when I discovered AOL chat rooms for like, lesbians, and met people that I became very close with and friends with and, um, found my like, high school idols again because of it—and was able to like, really be supported by a network of people who were like, all about—they were like, "Okay, cool, we're all weirdo queer people. Um, we're all like, very different, but here's like, a supportive group of friends to like, live your truth." So it was like—even though Staten Island was not an easy place to be—it was kind of like, an awful place to be—um, I was really supported by the people around me, which was like, nice to have on like, a weird island that is like, oddly far-removed from the city.

Awad: And can you tell me a little bit—like, where on Staten Island did your family live, and what was the community like there?

Gross: So my family moved to, um—like, Bloomingdale Road, which is fairly far out—like, right before Tottenville. It's like, Huguenot, Woodrow-y kind of area. Uh, in 1995 when we moved there across from the house like, it was—there were all these like, newer little houses, and my grandparents sold their house in Canarsie and everyone moved as a unit. So like, my uncle came from Jersey with his kids, and so there were um, like rows of houses, and we were outside of a cul-de-sac, and across from us was just forest. Like, weird pheasants and rabbits would like, chase our dog. Um, but there were seven houses in a row and like, our one little row—you know, before driveways—and like, it was my grandparents—my grandma and grandpa—then it was like, a next-door neighbor, a next-door neighbor, us, a next-door neighbor, my mom's sister and her husband, um, and then my mom's brother and his wife, and their kids. So, seven houses in a row and we had—four of the seven houses were my family. So again, sheltered life. Couldn't throw a party because everybody would know if people were in your house. Um, and it was—I didn't have a car. I didn't have a license. We moved on the day I was supposed to take my road test. So I got everywhere on like, the bus or cabs. And on Staten Island there's only one train, and it just runs from one side of the island to the ferry and back. And so it was like, weirdly isolating until I found like, the internet and made friends where people had cars and things like that. Um, it was very weird to be there from Brooklyn, because in Brooklyn you can like, walk everywhere. I didn't take the train as a kid, though. I didn't take the train until we snuck on the train in high school. Um, so it was weird to be in an isolated place where I didn't really know anyone except for a couple of people I had met at camp that summer. Um, and it was very like, family-oriented, until AOL chat groups allowed me to find other dykes on Staten Island.

Awad: And so tell me a little bit about what your college experience was like.

Gross: So, I went to the College of Staten Island, which is a CUNY [City University of New York], and it was weird. I mean, it was nice.

Awad: Was it free?

Gross: No. I had to pay. It was—it wasn't that expensive. I mean, this was like 2000, so I was there from like—I graduated in 2000, so it was like, not that expensive, comparatively to other, um, colleges. And it was—um, it was okay. There was like, a lot of like, very Staten Island kind of

townie people, a lot of um—like, I'd call them like "Sonic-heads," like Sonic the Hedgehog haircut—there was like, a lot of guys like that who had like, a fade-up and then just like a lot of gel, so it looks like they're a porcupine-head. So there was a lot of that. Um, and as like, a pre-med student being in like, 500-level classes as a freshman was really weird and interesting, because a lot of people were older than me. Um, and I was—it was like, very chill and then um, I found out that there was like, a gay club, and I like, secretly went to the—like, I didn't tell my parents but I like, went to the like, gay club and like, met someone who ended up being my like, partner for a couple of years.

Awad: Wow.

Gross: And he also transitioned, so—like, after, way after the fact. So that was like, kind of awesome that I found him, and then I found like, another person who was like, the first bisexual person—officially bisexual person I had ever met. So like, in many ways it was like, a really good experience. Um, I have like, a couple of—my best friend I met there, and she was also like, out as bisexual, um, and we did a lot of like, poetry-writing because I—when I switched to English Writing, the whole world opens up, where like, "There's gay people here? There's like, queer people here? You're writing poems about hooking up with a girl?" Like it was definitely like, a good place for me to be, and manageable, I think, being a smaller school—or rather, you know, not a giant college, like away college. So it was like, a good college experience in many ways, but it wasn't like, special in any way. You know?

Awad: So, when did you, um, start to think of yourself as trans, or…?

Gross: I think I always knew that I was trans. Like, I had this vision of myself as like, a kid, but I didn't—

Awad: Right, right. I mean, articulate—I mean in a more of like a—

Gross: Oh, yeah, in a more concrete way?

Awad: —conscious—not conscious, but—like, when did you sort of connect with this idea of like, "I'm transgender. I need to transition." Was that in college more, or…?

Gross: I thought about it in college, but I was kind of like, "Whatever, I—that's not a thing," you know? Where you're like, "Oh, that's not a thing. I'm just going to live my life as like, a really bad butch dyke. Like, the worst. I was not a good butch."

Awad: What does it—what do you mean, you weren't a good butch?

Gross: Oh my god. Like, at the time, you know, butches were like tough, handy—um, I had like the—the like, chivalry part of the butch stuff down, you know, but I was like—couldn't play sports, just—like, I looked the part but I couldn't—was not the part. I was the part, like, in many ways, just not the tough part, and I had 36DD's, so I was like, butch with the boobs. Um, and I—

you know, reading about stuff in college, I read—you know, I think my first experience with like, sort of varying gender identity was like, *Stone Butch Blues,* which was like, really upsetting and transformative to read. Um, and I believe Sarah Schulman, I think, might've been the one that assigned that, or Judith [???], one of the two of them. And that really changed me for like, a lot—started like, getting my head going of like, "Wait a minute, so here's this like, butch person who's like, definitely a tougher butch than me. Um, and—"

Awad: I mean. She's—that's a very high bar.

Gross: Yeah. Yeah. I mean, this badass person that like, lives their life as who they truly are and dealt with like, horrible, horrible, horrible things, um, and you know, was able to like, still exist, was like really powerful to me. Um, and I think like, uh, that was like, really a big deal to me. And so like, definitely in college I was like, much more aware of trans people and kind of had kept it in the back of my head, and then in 2000 I got a job in the city at this publishing company, and on company time, um, I would like, look at LiveJournal and found, like, trans people and ended up meeting this guy—this trans guy—um, who I became really, really, really best friends with. He was like, big dude. He like, came from the West Coast. He had been on T for a while. He was like—he was like my big dog. I was his little dog, and I like, learned so much about like, queer identity because of him, and he was the kind of like, trans guy who was like, raised out on Long Island. He can like, build things and fish and, um, cook, and um, fix cars and smoke weed and—um, I really admired him. He was like, a very transformative—no pun intended—person in my life. And he was always like, "Dude, you're gonna—you're gonna transition before you're like, 27 or something." He and the girlfriend I had at the time were like, "You're gonna transition." I was like, "I'm totally not. No, I'm not. I'm a dyke. Like, that's how it is," you know? I recognized that obviously that was what I wanted, but I was very much concerned with my family and so I was like, "I'm a butch dyke. This is how it is and I'm not gonna transition. I'm totally not a man." Um, I wasn't like a lesbian separatist or anything but, you know, I think my fear at the time was like, my family. I was like, "I can't become this man because I will lose my family. They're okay with me being a dyke. It took a while. They're fine with it, but like, I don't think I can like," you know? Even living out of their house, you know, I felt like it wasn't something that I could do because I have like, a fear of being rejected by my family, but he—

Awad: And you were—you had—sounds like you had a pretty close family.

Gross: Oh yeah. I mean—yes. Everyone's super close in my family. I mean, I lived at my parents' house until I graduated college, which was like, not ideal. I basically kept my stuff there and slept at everybody else's house, especially this like, one sporty dyke's house. We hung out there a lot. And then, you know, my friends were like—also went to college on Staten Island, but were in away dorms. Um, and other friends went to college upstate or in the city. And so I spent a lot of time not at my parents' house so I can like, live my like—you know, live my life in a "closer to the city" sense, you know? So like, he was like, "You are totally gonna transition, and you just have to be who you are," kind of thing, and I was like, "Yeah, whatever." Um, and that was like, really important because at the time, then I started reading a lot more books about like, trans people and gender nonconforming people—like, whatever I could get my hands on of like, subversive

queerness. Um, that was like, a big deal. But like, because of the internet it like, changed my life and I was able to find my people. You know? But he was like, the first trans person that I had ever gotten close to. We were like, inseparable. It was like, a really big deal for me.

Awad: Okay. So, after you graduated, you started connecting with this person. What—what were you—after you graduated, what was your plan for your—uh, for your life? What did you, you know, want to do? How did you—you know?

Gross: I was like, a spoken word poet and comedian and, um, drag king here in New York. Not a good one, but a drag king. And I, um—when I was working at this publishing company, I was just like, writing, and I had—I had, um—I started a clothing company, a feminist clothing company called New York City Pussy Power. Um, and that clothing company was born out of a performance series—an all-women's performance series that started off with seven poets and one girl band, and then grew to be a seven hour long show with multiple performers. It was written up in like, Time Out New York and the Village Voice, um, and I thought, "Oh, I can just be a performer my—that's what I'm gonna do. I'm gonna be a performer." Um, and I like, started hosting queer burlesque shows called The Red Hots that belonged to the girl I was dating. Um, and I was kind of just like, "I'm gonna work this day job and figure out everything else." I was working at dyke bars. I was working at Meow Mix at the time. I was like, throwing this weird queer event—feminist event, um, and running this poetry company and then the whole time like, trying to connect with trans people. Uh.

Awad: So, can we just pause for one second? Just need to use the restroom. [recording pauses and resumes] —early twenties?

Gross: My early twenties.

Awad: Okay. Alright, so where we left off: you're in your early twenties. You're trying to be a performer. This is New York in the 90's?

Gross: Late, late, late 90's, early 2000's.

Awad: Okay. People have a lot of nostalgia for what New York was like before, and, you know, how "before" gets defined, you know, changes from person to person—but, you know, I wonder if you could tell me a little bit about what—you know, what was it like? What was it like for you? What was at your disposal in terms of like, spaces to go to or community activities, events, um, as a young person who's a native New Yorker who identifies as a lesbian and is, you know, perhaps transitioning soon, et cetera? Can you tell me—describe what New York was like for you at that time?

Gross: Yeah. There was many, many, many places and parties for us to go to. There was like, the Clit Club—I mean, it's like—always is like—that stuff is already gone, you know? There was like, Crazy Nanny's, which was like, primarily folks of color, really good music. I knew a bunch of people that like, worked there. Henrietta Hudson's. There was like, Girl Nation. There was just so many

different—if you were like, a Lesbian with an L, or like, a Dyke with a D, there were—I was like, not really in the Riot Grrrl scene, although I knew people that were, but there was like, that stuff, too. Um, there was just stuff—literally every night of the week—we could go out every single night of the week, there was parties. And um, I worked some of those parties and helped throw some of those parties and events, um, and it was really like a buffet of things to do and places to go. And there were many more actual bars, um, to like, physically be at. Like, it wasn't just a party that necessarily moved around from bar to bar, and it wasn't like, you know, a monthly. It was like a weekly, every night of the week you could go to this bar for this type of dyke, and this bar for this type of lesbian, and this—if you wanted to see like, you know, women's spoken word, you would go to Girl Salon, which I hosted here, from this women Jeannine. She created an event that was a poetry event at Meow Mix that ended up also being hosted after me by Robin Cloud, who's like, an amazing, um, comedian, and she's like, kind of a big deal now. And, um—and then there were like, all these different kinds of like, lesbian parties. There was like, a sporty dyke party. There was like—you know, um—it was awesome. It was really amazing, and it was dirty, and sweaty, and filled with makeouts and—it was really great to be like, a homo at that time, in many ways. Like, it felt like there were just so many options and so many ways of being gay, um, and so many places to do it, uh, that it was—it felt really like a heyday. And then, you know, comparing it to now, all those bars have closed. There's like—while there's events, I'm sure, every night of the week, and parties here and there, the actual like, concrete and mortar places to go to are less and less. Um, but at the time it was amazing.

Awad: In your opinion, why do you think that is?

Gross: Well, I think like, lesbian spaces were not prioritized over gay male spaces, and the money just wasn't there, you know? I think also like, the gentrification of New York in general had a lot to do with it. Rising rents, um, changes of like, the amount of money people make, and um, people's priorities have changed over the years, too. People get done with it and want to have families, or want to leave New York, or, you know? I think like, gentrification is like, a huge part of it, too. I mean, look at the Lower East Side. God only knows how much a bar probably rents out for now. So I think since the 90's, so much has changed real estate-wise with New York. And also with the—with women's spaces in general. There are very little spaces for women to be at. Um, very little like, women-owned queer bars, you know? I mean, somehow the Cubbyhole is still standing, uh, which is great. Um, and Henrietta's is still standing, which is great, but like—you know, queer bars open up and close fairly quickly here. So I think it was a very different time. Uh, and I'm nostalgic for it in many ways and not in others. Uh, but I think it was fairly easy to be a dyke in those times, even though it wasn't easy in many ways to be a dyke at those times, but it felt like the camaraderie was really there. Um, and it was like, a good time for me to be out. And like, I acknowledge my privilege as like, a white-passing person who, while butch, was not terribly butch, um, so I didn't experience the things that like, my bouncer friends did, or my other like, super masculine friends did at the time. So I think like, I—I got away with those days unscathed.

Awad: And um, can you talk to me a little bit about where you were living at the time, and…? You were—did you—were you able to survive off of this publishing job?

Gross: Oh man, that publishing job. I made—it was like, my first job out of college. I made $24,500 a year. I made like, no money from my Pussy Power events. A friend of mine was the manager of Starbucks. Um, it's closed now, but it was the one that was linked with, um, the college on—whatever, what's the name of that school where you used to be able to go for free?

Awad: Cooper Union.

Gross: Cooper Union. So it was like, in a Cooper Union building. So I did that at night. I worked at Meow Mix hosting karaoke one night a week. I worked at *snapshot* doing the door. I threw another party as the years went on. I um, hosted different burlesque events. I—you know, I just worked my face off. Um, so I was able to make it happen because I had all these other gigs. And then, um—I had like, moved out of my parent's house and lived a year in Astoria until after like, 9/11, and then I moved to Brooklyn. So I lived on Wa shington [Avenue] between St. John's [Place] and Sterling [Place] from like, 2002 on. 2000—yeah, I guess it was—yeah, end of 2002 on. So I've lived like, in and around Crown Heights but I managed to like—one of the parties that I kind of like, promoted, which wasn't really a party, but it was Monday nights at Doc Holliday's, which was Ladies' Night, which originally they didn't charge—and because I had like, a secret mailing list of events, uh, we ended up packing the place, so they ended up charging $5 a head for people. But I met a girl there. She was like, really attractive, and I went over to talk to her and asked her why she was holding up a pole. Um, and then we started talking and I realized I should stop hitting on her because she said she needed a roommate. And I, um, really wanted a kitten, and my roommates at the time, in Astoria, wouldn't let me have a kitten in that apartment, and I like, met her on a Monday, went to see the apartment on the Friday, and was her roommate, uh, a couple of weeks after that. So I'm really grateful for dyke parties for like, getting me a really amazing apartment that I could afford on my very low salary at the time, um, compared to like, other people. So, you know, while that publishing company didn't pay me enough, I had a lot of freedom while I worked there to like, host these shows and run this clothing company and—I don't know if it's okay that I'm saying this since it will forever be on record, but I had 24-hour access to the building, and so I was able to use the photocopier to create programs when we did Ladyfest East, which was like a women's music festival here in 2001. 2000 and 2001, I think, and—or 2000—whatever. It was like, 2000, 2001, 2002, something like that. And so like, that—that awarded me a lot of, uh, perks while working there. And they were really fucking cool with my transition, too, because somebody had transitioned before me there, so they were like, "Okay." They were kind of "whatever" about it. So I managed to like—yeah, like, eke by, um, while working there. I still actually don't know how I paid all of my rent and did all the things. I think it was credit cards. Um, but—but it was like, a really interesting place. A lot of women were higher up there. No one was out at all as a lesbian except me and this other woman. Um, but everyone else I think was totally closeted—not everyone, but there was a lot of like, closeted older ladies.

Awad: Now—you know, as we know, there's—with women-only spaces, there have been a lot of issues around trans-inclusion, and I'm wondering if you—what has been your experience with that, uh, as you were working with these sort of women-focused festivals and that sort of thing, if you could speak to that a little bit?

Gross: I think that because I did Ladyfest East, and it came from like, a Riot Grrrl-y kind of perspective, that there was never sort of like, TERF-y [Trans-Exclusionary Radical Feminists] things around the people that I organized with—uh, at least none of my close friends were like, really trans-exclusionary radical feminists. So, uh, we didn't have to—I didn't really have to deal with that. Um, but also like, as a transmasculine person, or a person who was like, on the masculine end of the gender spectrum, like, I remember when Camp Trans started at the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival, and I had never had a desire to go to the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival. It was like, not exactly music I was into, and I don't camp, so—I like to shower—so it really wasn't a place for me, but I understood why Camp Trans happened. And then—I didn't have a lot of like—a ton of people were not transitioning around my time, so I didn't have a lot of like—a ton of transmasculine people here in New York that I could like, commiserate with about this. And um, the trans women I knew were a little older than me, so they weren't exactly part of that like, scene at the time. So I didn't—I don't ever recall having to like, defend trans women in places, although if given the time—like, given the chance at the time, I was very much like, pro-trans folk all around. So, um—but I never saw a trans woman get kicked out of, uh, Meow Mix or out of—I guess *snapshot* wasn't exactly like, a women-only space, but I never saw a trans lady get kicked out of any of the spaces that I was in, knowingly, or aware of them even bouncing at parties. So, um—but I think like, at that time I found out about trans-exclusionary radical feminists, although I don't know if they were called TERFs at the time. I just thought they were like, lesbian separatists. So, um—so I didn't really have like, personal experience with them, but I'd heard stories, and why Camp Trans existed at that time. So it was—it was definitely like—older, more masculine butch dykes were very upset with me for transitioning. They—the people who were most angry at me told me that I was a traitor and that I was like—basically, they thought I was erasing a butch identity. Uh, I couldn't understand why I was being—becoming a man. So there was this like, very angry group of folks that felt really betrayed and um, upset about that, and a lot of girls were like, "I don't date men, so now that you're like, a trans man, it's not happening," which is cool—like, didn't really matter to me—but the anger for a lot of like—from a lot of like, butch dykes, was like, really hard because I—I am really grateful for those people who were sort of like, gender nonconforming masculine-spectrum people who I encountered that paved the way for me to like, be a transmasculine person. And so like, in trying to have dialogue with that, that was like, very difficult to hear. Um, and that was like, really hard at the time. Like, people were really, really angry with me as a person—friends with—who I was friends with, who were not into me transitioning at all. Uh, and a lot of those people, I sort of realized—it was—I think like, the people who were very angry with me about it are very different people now, but it was very hard to look at those like, people that I looked up to—those like, butch or masculine dykes that were just so upset and hurt by my personal decision. Uh, and so that was very hard at the time, because that was—people would get very angry to my face about it. Like, and also that they would never accept me. So that was like, a little tough. Um, but I didn't—I never really—thinking back, I never really had talks with those people about trans women, and I feel like, you know, had I had those talks about them with trans women, I don't think I would've been able to be their friend.

Awad: So, how old were you when this—when you had, um, started this process and were getting this reaction?

Gross: So, I started to change my name to—I just started to go by Chris. I was like, Christie, and then I preferred to be called Chris, or Don, because my drag name was Donatella Lesbiana, the don of the lesbian mafia—um, and that's how like—I hosted karaoke as the don. And, um—and that was like, 2003-2004—um, and I remember like, this guy Ethan, through a party called Trans-Am, and that was like, the first like—I was like, "Oh, there's more transmasculine people. It's like, amazing." Um, and then I started testosterone in 2004, also came out to my parents in 2004, and I had top surgery in 2005, all while like, throwing parties and um, working at the publishing company, and um—and yeah, like, throwing events. But after I transitioned, I've stopped throwing Pussy Power, because it felt like it wasn't my place anymore, and I stopped going to women's-only spaces, because it didn't feel right. So I stopped—it's sad to like, stop going to the Dyke March, but I totally stopped marching in the Dyke March and just went as like, supporter. Um, so it was definitely like, an interesting time for me.

Awad: That's a lot of change.

Gross: So much. So much. I was like, "I gotta be respectful of like, my spaces," because, you know, I was very aware that women like, fought for so long, for—so hard to have spaces that were theirs, and I didn't want to like, intrude on them. Tried to be as respectful as possible, especially with more facial hair than some of the bearded ladies I know.

Awad: So, can I ask how your family took it or dealt with it? Do you want to—if you don't want to talk about that, that's okay, but…

Gross: No, I can totally talk about it. So there was the Yom Kippur incident of—uh, I believe it was 2003 or 2004—when I wanted to wear a tie to synagogue. Just, did not go over well. Like, I could wear the suit jacket and the button-up but they like, lost their shit over me wearing a tie. I could wear a kippah, but not a tie. And so I was like, "Oh, this might not go well when I like, tell them what's up." So at the time, I created like, manila envelopes for my family—like, my parents—which included like, a letter from my therapist, a printed-out letter from PFLAG, um, another article about like, having a trans kid, um, my like, letter of intent—meaning like, uh, you know, "I love you guys. This is like, my personal decision," and I think I still have like, a packet at the house, probably—where I was going to like, go to Staten Island, my—with my girlfriend and my best friend, and my friend Richie was going to pick us up and drive us to my parents' house, and they were all going to hang out in the car while I did this. Um, and that was like—um, maybe July or August of 2004—went out there at my parents' house. I looked at the clock, and it was like, I don't know, one o'clock or something, let's say, and I like, had my manila packets and like, went into my parents' house, and I'd gone there with like—under the guise of having lunch with them for like—my mom had turned 50, I believe, at the time, and my dad's birthday was coming up and I like, wanted to see them before they disowned me. Uh, that was like, in my mind. And my grandma—my grandpa had already passed at that time—my grandma knew that that was happening. She was like, all about it. She just wanted me to be happy.

Awad: Wait, so you talked to your grandmother first?

Gross: First. She was the first family member I told, ever. She was my best friend. She was awesome. So I told her, and she was like, [with heavy New York accent] "Good luck. You know, I'm here for you no matter what. I just want you to be happy and healthy, and I support you in all your decisions. I don't know what your parents are going to say,"—this is my mom's mom, Edith—

Awad: Can I just pause and ask what—in your mind, what—what did you think your grandmother understood from your conversation? Like, how—can you explain that? Because that's a different generation, and…

Gross: Yeah. She knew. She was just like, "If it makes you happier to—um, to become a man and make the change," I think she said, "and make the change, you know, I'm here to support you," you know, "I don't know how your parents are going to take it, but I'm 100% behind you, and you always have grandma here, no matter what the decisions, no matter what happens you're not gonna lose grandma." You know, it was like this very sweet like, thing of like—Grandma Edith is always like, 1000% behind you. I was like, "Great, cool, at least I have my grandma." But I like, totally prepped like, losing my family. I was like, "My parents, that's it. I feel like they were like, cool with me being a dyke but like, who knows what's going to happen when I have—they have to explain to their friends that they have a son," you know? So like, um—

Awad: And you're an only child, right?

Gross: I have a younger sister—she's two years younger—

Awad: Oh, my mistake.

Gross: —who was mad that I didn't tell her first, but I had to tell my grandma. It was important. So she was supportive. My sister was fine about it. And um—I go in there and I'm like, "You know, mom, dad, I love you. I want to talk to you," and my mom goes, "Oh, I know what this is about. I don't want to have a conversation with you." I said, "What do you mean? You don't know what this is about," and I was like, "Can I talk to you guys?" and my dad comes down, and I stood on one side of the table and they stood on the other side of the table, and I said, "Listen. You know, I wanted to come and tell you this," um, because they had met my friend—the other trans guy—that they loved—my grandma loved him, my parents loved him—and my mom was like, "Oh, you're becoming like him? You want to be like him?" and I was like, "Yes," and my mom was like, "Well, I raised a girl. I raised a daughter and I will not tolerate this," and she took her packet and she threw it in the trash, and she said, "I'm going upstairs." She went upstairs and my dad, who's like—you know, he's like, kind of sensitive, and he was like, "I—you know, you've made your mother very upset." Um, he pulled her packet out of the trash and he was like, "I don't understand this," and then he started grabbing what was left of his hair and going from counter to counter. My mom's name is Sandy, and he was like, "Sandy, why? Why?" and then he turns to

me and goes, "We let you be a lesbian, dress how you want, be how you want. You are not a boy!" you know, and went off around it. And I was like, "This is—A) feels like it was hours—that I was there for hours, B) I can't believe this is really happening. This is like, the most dramatic, ridiculous thing, that the man is holding onto what's left of his long, balding hair and my mom has already like, given up and went upstairs," and then he starts crying, and she comes down and she goes, "Look what you did to your father." And my father like, goes upstairs, I guess to try and collect—and she goes, "I think you should leave." And I was like, "Okay. I'm gonna go." So I like—you know, I was like, "I love you. This is not about you. This is about me," and like, you know, whatever, and I like, left the packets, and I left and went in the car, and I looked at the clock and only fifteen minutes had passed. And it felt like fucking hours of my life. *Hours* of my life. And I had stopped by my grandma's after I like, tried to collect myself in the car, and I told her that I loved her and that it didn't go well, and that she was like, "Well, I love you, and they'll work it out." And then we went for some retail shopping at the mall, and we went to my best friend Nancy's house, and her parents were 1000% supportive, and they were like, "We will always be here for you as your parents if you need us." So that was like, really fantastic. Um, and so like, I had the support of them and I had the support of like, all of my coworkers and all of my friends and whatever, and then—um, I argued with my dad on the telephone for some—my mom didn't talk to me for a little bit. She just couldn't do it. My dad and I argued on the phone one day and then he sent me an email, a very long email, and he was like, you know, "I think you need to think about this decision," the whole thing, "We let you be a lesbian, just how you want. Like, you want to wear a suit and be a lesbian, that's fine. Like, you want to like girls, that's fine. But like, once you take off, you can't put back on," and he was talking about my chest. And he was like, "You need to wait six months. I think you need to think about this." And like, I'm really bad at lying and I just responded, "Yeah, totally. I'll wait six months." Meanwhile, I already had a surgery scheduled for six months in California, and I had lied and told them that I was just going out to California for my birthday with my roommate and my best friend. And, um—and then I had top surgery and no one—like, I should say, everyone besides my parents knew. So like, my aunt and my uncles knew, my grandma knew, everyone knew—

Awad: Your aunts and your uncles knew.

Gross: Yes. No one on my dad's side. Like I didn't—I don't like my dad's family, so I didn't tell anybody there, but my grandma wanted to have a conversation with the surgeon. "I want to talk to this Dr. Braunstein, because if anything happens to you, I will kill him. I want to talk to him before. I want him to know." I was like, "I don't think that's a good idea." Um, but like, everyone knew. Literally Facebook, MySpace, Friendster—my parents did not know, and my dad's family didn't know, but everyone knew. And that was March 16, of like, 2005. I had two top surgery benefits. I had saved all the money. I like, had a giant surgery benefit at um, Southpaw, which is now closed—like, another amazing venue closed. I had it at the Slipper Room, and—and yeah, and I didn't talk to my—didn't see my parents until May of that year. So, 36DD's gone, nobody said anything. And they never said anything to me until I was like, on the cover of GO Magazine in like, 2010. They'd never seen me with my shirt off. They had never asked about where my boobs went. They—it was crazy. Like, it was like, a non-issue. I mean, they met all the people I had dated, all my girlfriends. They never really said anything about my beard. Like, it was never

a discussion. I think like, after the—after the arguing back and forth they just got used to it. I mean, my dad would like, slip now and again and we would just be like, "He's—he's having a hard day." Like, he would always call me "she" and I'm like, "I have a giant fucking beard, man." And then something happened, and they were fine with it, and that was that. Like that—that cover of the magazine in gold lamé shorts and heels, I think really desensitized them to so much. And then I competed in Mr. Trans Man and my mom was like, "I don't know. Nothing surprises me anymore," and that was it. Like, the end. Like, they never—they never questioned anything after that. They were like, cool with everything. They were always cool with everyone, uh, but I was just like—well, you know, I just like, didn't give them any opportunity to not be okay with it. I was like, "Well, this didn't go well, but it's going to be in your face forever, and there's nothing you can do about it." So I really—I really pushed them, and they didn't have a choice. They just had to accept it if they wanted to be a part of my life, and they had to accept literally everyone I had ever brought to their house for any holiday, or… You know, I had a party in—in Astoria, and they were like, mixed with a whole bunch of queer people and all these different humans, and they were fine! They just wanted to know what was in the dip, you know? They were like—got to be like, really cool, amazing humans. And the internet, I think—learning to Google really helped. So I was very, very, very, very fortunate and really lucky, and very privileged to have like, a family that um, was awesome.

Awad: And can I just ask—why did you go to California to get top surgery instead of doing it in—doing it in New York?

Gross: Because the surgeon that was here was terrible, and in fact, I believe he ended up losing his license. Um, I can't remember his—

Awad: So there was only one surgeon that you knew of in New York doing top surgery at that time?

Gross: Yeah, that one person. He really like—no pun intended here—like, butchered people's chests. And so I went to Braunstein in the Bay, and I paid for it. Like, it's—my health insurance was not going to cover it. I think at the time, maybe only the people who worked for Babeland got top surgery covered, and maybe even not that. Um, but yeah, I paid for everything out of pocket. I had those fundraisers. I like—thank goodness for my roommate's mom allowing us to put stuff on her credit card—um, and I stayed at a hotel for like, ten nights, eleven days, in Union Square in San Francisco that was like, right around priceline. So I named my price, paid for everything out of pocket or with credit cards.

Awad: So you didn't—so in terms of your care afterwards, you weren't—you stayed in a hotel.

Gross: I stayed in a hotel and paid for it straight-up. Like, um, I got connected to a bunch of California people from like, someone I knew from New York—my friend Lionel like, introduced me to all these people in the Bay. Um, and yeah, a bunch of people like, happened to be out for like, an ALA [American Library Association] or APA [American Psychological Association] nerdy English conference or something, and so I got to see a bunch of people because of it, but

everything—nothing was covered by health insurance. Nothing was—my aftercare was not at a hospital. My—you know, it was like an in and out surgery, same day, um, surgi-center. Um, and—and yeah, I stayed at a hotel. It was bananas. I can't—cannot even believe to this day that I didn't tell my parents. I could've died and they would've like, not been the wiser, which I think—we never talked about that, but I always wonder if they were like, upset that I didn't tell them because what if something happened to me. But yeah, there—Braunstein was like, the best option at the time. I mean, there was a surgery called FTM or—Transter?—Transter, and it was about like, all these top surgeries with like, grainy cell phone pictures, like first edition digital camera photos of people's surgeries. And then I saw a bunch in person in New York, and I was like, "That's it. Braunstein is the guy. I have a giant chest and like, I want it to look as natural as possible." And I was very lucky that I don't like, keloid or whatever, and I was like, super anal-retentive and careful with how I took care of my scars, um, and I ended up with like, a really good chest. And it was very fortunate that I could make it happen with Braunstein because some of the other surgeries I saw, people were really very unhappy. And I just like, couldn't stand the thought of like, looking in the mirror and already disliking what I saw, and then it's like, have a chest that I have to look at for the rest of my life and having it not be what I had wanted. But who knows? It could've ended up in any direction even with a really good surgeon, so… But this was like, 2005 and there were not many options.

Awad: When you were preparing to get top surgery, what kind of health services were—did you use in New York, and what was available to you?

Gross: When I was talking about top surgery?

Awad: Yeah, like did you—was—did you go to Callen-Lorde [Community Health Center]? Did you—you know, what did you make use of, or…?

Gross: Yeah, I mean I—like, before transitioning, to take T, I had to go to six months of therapy so I went to the—um, the Center [The Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Community Center] here in New York. That was really awesome. And I had like, a really great therapist to talk to about this, and then I went to Callen-Lorde. Um, and that's where I got T, lessons on how to inject, and um, it was the only option that I knew of at the time. And I had a very long talk with my doctor at the time—she's really great—and um, you know, got my letters from everybody and, you know, I was like, "Listen, I don't want to go here in New York. I want to go in California. Is there a way that we can cover this with insurance?" and she was like, "No, you're kind of on your own." Um, and—uh, my best friend Nancy's mom, who was basically like my second mom, was a nurse, and she was like, "You're not making any appointments anywhere until I like, vet this doctor." And so when she like, asked around and did her own research as a nurse, she was like, "Okay, this guy's okay. Like, I—if you're not going to tell your parents and I'm your parent for this, like, this is what you—I'm 100% behind you with Braunstein." And so I was like, "Okay. Tippy says it's alright, so, done," you know? And that—that was all I did was like, have a conversation with Callen-Lorde, talk to the therapist, talk to people, and then sort of without hesitation I called up and made an appointment. And, you know, I sent them pictures of my chest and then the first time I met the doctor was the day before surgery, when I had like, a surgical

consult. So it's like—I literally was just like, "This is what I'm gonna do. Make the appointment, figure it out, figure out the money," and um—and then I was there. And there was like, really no internalized process about it. I was like, "This is it. There's the only options. This is what I'm doing, and then I'm going to go." And I think about that, and I'm like, "God, I really did not think about anything." I was just—no consideration of any outcomes, had no idea what would happen if it didn't go well, had no savings account if anything went wrong, nothing. I had—I had nothing. Just like, hope. But I think a lot of the people at that time were also going with hope. No, I didn't really know anyone with like, a savings account or whose insurance covered it, or who didn't have to have fundraisers at the time, or, you know? And at that time, that's what you did, you know? You helped out your community. People were having benefits all the time. And so, you know, five dollars here or ten dollars there, whatever you can give, you just did it. You took care of your community, and unfortunately I think that's what's happening now, you know? We're going to all have to take care of each other again, which is like, the reality of being a queer person.

Awad: And now—okay, so you got your top surgery, you went back to New York. When did you start cutting hair? How did you get into hair-cutting?

Gross: So, I quit my job—quit the publishing job—no, wait—yeah, had top surgery in like, 2005, and at the time I had been working—dating a girl who was a hairstylist in Park Slope, and I was like, shampooing hair for extra money—cleaning up for extra money. And I was like, "Ugh, this is awesome. I hate working in an office. I don't want to be at a desk. I want to like, have hours that I can like, be outside and see people." And um—and my girlfriend at the time was like, "Why don't you just do hair? You cut people's hair already." I'd been cutting people's hair like, on my porch, you know, and cut my own hair, and I was like, "Yeah, but I can't afford—who can afford hair school? It's crazy," and she was like, "You should just do it. You're unhappy at your job. Like, just do it," and I was like, "I'm just going to do it." And I called my parents up and I was like, "I'm quitting my job. I'm going to apply for student loans. I'm going to work at the salon. I'm going to work at the bars. I'm going to hustle and I'm going to like, figure this out." So I quit my job, went to hair school, took out a bunch of school loans, ran up about $50,000 in credit card debt—

Awad: It was that much for hair school?

Gross: No, it was like $25,000.

Awad: But to live while—

Gross: Yeah. I—actually, hair school was like $15,000 and I took out $10,000 to live, and then I worked at, uh, the bars, where you make no money, and then I did freelance for the publishing company, um, reformatting college textbooks for the blind and visually impaired and the students that use them—the professors. And—and I had to file bankruptcy years later, but that is another story. Um, but yeah, and I just—I just did it and I got really lucky. I went to Aveda for hair school and the person who came to kind of like, um, assess me—I competed for a full scholarship, which I didn't get—but the head of education was like, "You should come work at Arrojo after." And I knew two queer people. One was actually my therapist's girlfriend who

worked at Arrojo, and another one was this woman who was like, an amazing drag king who I knew for a really long time, uh, who worked there, and I was like, "Okay, if they're cool with these two people who have trans partners, um, then I'm in," and I got a job 45 minutes after I graduated hair school, at Arrojo, and I worked there for like, almost nine years and had to teach everyone about like, gender nonconforming people and how to address my clients, and how to not address my clients and, you know? It was like, a weird place to work, but they let me be who I was. So, I got really lucky in all the things, and like, all my—worked all of my connections to all of the ability, you know? So I got—I'm like, really, really very fortunate, you know? To have built like, a community of folks around me in New York.

Awad: And—wow. Are you back working at Arrojo now?

Gross: No! I quit that spot. It was not a good place for me to be. Uh—

Awad: Well, you were there a long time.

Gross: I was there a long time and I didn't like how things were being run, and it was very corporate and in many ways very straight, um, and run by a cis straight, sort of misogynist, racist man, so I was like, "Peace!" Um, and then I did my own work for three—two to three years—and then I had known about Seagull for a really long time, and Seagull's owned by Shaun Surething, who's this like, beautiful, wonderful human, and Johanna Fateman from the band Le Tigre, and it is a queer feminist salon space, and I had like, really wanted to work for them for so, so, so long, but they had a very small space. And so they moved to a larger space and were able to take on more staff, and without a doubt—we had been courting each other for ten years, almost, basically—and I was like, "Done." I couldn't even believe that I was like, working at an amazing queer salon that's like—did not tolerate misogyny, did not tolerate racism or xenophobia or, um, you know, transphobia. It was just like, "We will not allow any shit to be said or done in our salon, and if there is a client who is behaving badly or saying any of these things, we will call them out literally at that moment. We will bar people from the salon. This is like, a safe space," and I was like, "Oh my god, I love it here!" So it was like, amazing to like, be a queer person working for a queer-owned, you know, feminist—and not in that like, white social justice people zone, but like a true, like, walk the talk kind of space. So it was awesome.

Awad: Well, that was an amazing story.

Gross: Thanks. A very long-winded story.

Awad: No, it was good. Um, I guess my final question for you is—um, you know, we're living, uh, during a very challenging time and, uh, there's a lot of—there are a lot of new sort of—well, they're not new, but trans people are facing a lot of the brunt of that right now, and I'm just wondering as someone who is—you know, you're a native New Yorker. Throughout your life you've really been able to like, build communities and connect people, and—you know. What do you hope for for the future for trans folks, and what do you—you know, what do you envision for your future here?

Gross: And I think—you know, it's a terrifying time right now, and so often it feels like there's not any hope as like, you know, queer and trans people are continuously murdered and forgotten about, and ignored and—you know, much like folks of color who are just basically being destroyed and targeted by this administration—you know, poor people, all of the folks who are not like, white rich men. Um, you know, I really, really hope that we can come together as a community and fight against all of this, and in an ideal world, like, people would have jobs. People would be able to have housing. People would be able to have an education. Um, and queer and trans people would not have to fear for their lives or not have health insurance, or not be able to do the things that allow them to be who they are in this world. That is ideally the way it is, but I don't think it's going to come without like, a fight, and without like, coming together as a group of people to—to take on this terrible administration who just wants to destroy all of us. You know? And my hope is like—I'm going to be 40 in a couple of months—and I hope that by—I know it's like, wishful thinking, but by then—you know, by the time I turn 40—for everyone to like, have some security. But I know that it's going to be a long fight, so I hope that I'm not like, destroyed in some sort of horrible thing, um, and that, you know, I can see like, the young trans women of color who are in my life be able to like, be older trans women of color who are successful in whatever ways they want to be, and not have to worry that something will be taken away from them, you know? That is my hope, to be an old grandpa looking at my like, little trans and queer babies like, living their lives, you know?

Awad: Kind of like your grandma.

Gross: Kind of like my grandma! I am the Edith Small of the trans universe. Yeah, no. Yeah, you know, I just like—I'm in many ways a very idealistic person with the realization that the world is not perfect, um, but, you know, I'm hopeful. You know? Especially for like, our queer brethren.

Awad: Is there anything that you wanted to add to this conversation that we had, or anything that you wanted to ask me?

Gross: I mean, what is your ultimate goal with this project? What do you hope comes out of this project?

Awad: Um, I mainly hope that people just have a record of all the different ways that trans people have survived in New York in 2017, in spite of many, many challenges, and I think that's really important. That's—that's just my—that's my only goal right now. And the—and we have clear audio [laughter] in all the interviews.

Gross: Oh, those are excellent goals. I feel like my three-year-old niece will hopefully grow up and be able to like, listen to this archive and like, be able to like, get a little picture of like, who we were, and like, how we made it happen here.

Awad: I hope so, too. Thank you so much, Topher.

Gross: Oh, thank you.