

NEW YORK CITY TRANS ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

MARTY HERNANDEZ AVEDON

Interviewer: Lorenzo Van Ness

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Location of Interview: Lorenzo's house

Transcribed by Jamie Magyar

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Lorenzo Van Ness: Hello, my name is Lorenzo Van Ness, and I will be having a conversation with Marty Hernandez Avedon, uh, for the New York City Trans Oral History Project, in collaboration with the New York Public Library's Community Oral History Project. Uh, this is an oral history project centered on the experiences of trans-identifying people. Um, it is April 1, 2017, and this is being, uh, recorded at, uh, my house—at Lorenzo's house.

Marty Hernandez Avedon: Hi [laughter].

Van Ness: So, uh, Marty, um, can you tell me—uh, well, yeah. What are you—can you just say your name and your pronoun?

Avedon: Uh, my name's Marty, and my pronouns are he and they.

Van Ness: Okay, perfect. Um, and can you just share with us a little bit of information about yourself?

Avedon: Okay. Um, so, my—I was raised in foster care until I was ten. Um, I—Avedon is my original last name, actually. I changed it back when I did my [inaudible] name change stuff. And that was very important to me, as it—it was actually even more upsetting to be called by that last name than be called by a first name that I never really thought of as male or female, it was just my—my first name. Um, so that was a high priority for me, because I didn't have the best experience in the foster care system. Um, so, my dad was Puerto Rican, my mom was Jewish, but I was adopted by this Italian American family that was very proud of being Italian American, which is great, but, um, not so great when you're Italian and—and you're being raised by people who think it's just the greatest thing ever to be Italian. Um, so there was some friction there, and sometimes it got really nasty. Um, when I was twenty, I was kicked out, not because I was—well, it's kind of hard to tell whether it was because I was like, quote-unquote “gender non-conforming” or not, because I'm sure some of that colored what I experienced, but like—like, the immediate cause of it was I had got into a fight with, um, one of my older siblings. And she had been very, uh, physically abusive for the past—for the previous ten years leading up to that. So I got into a fight with her and the police were called, and I wanted to press charges against her, because I was sick and tired of this sort of thing happening all the time. And I was kicked out because I was told, “If you try to press charges against her, you can't live here.” So I was like, “Okay, that sounds like a great deal, because I don't like being—experiencing that kind of violence anymore.” Um, and thankfully, I had a backup. I went to live with my biological family at that point, and I, uh, kind of cut off contact with my adoptive family, because they're—they tried to get in touch with me, but they didn't want to admit that anything wrong had been done, and I just couldn't deal with that anymore. So, not the happiest period of my life. So, after that, I, you know—I'd been in touch for a little bit with my biological family before that point, and they let me live with them for a couple years, and then I was living with friends for a couple years, then I was living in Manhattan, taking care of my dad for a couple years, and he passed away. I was back on Staten Island and, uh, I guess I moved around a lot. So, back on Staten Island, then I was living with my, uh, partner in Queens for a couple years. They moved to Japan. Um, I had—my housing

situation kind of turned upside down for a while. And now I'm back on—you know, just figuring things out, basically. So that's kind of an overview, I guess.

Van Ness: Well, um, what was it like to be in like, foster care—like, going back to the beginning—like, what was it like to...?

Avedon: Oh, okay. Um, yeah. I mean, when I was really little, I thought it was kind of cool, actually, because it wasn't presented to me as anything negative and nobody told me it was anything negative. Um, I had visits with my, uh—my mom and dad sometimes, and they would take me to the arcade or the zoo, and it was a lot of fun, but it was also a little bit weird, because my adopted family didn't really like them very much, so they would say mean things about them. And like, I was a little kid, and sometimes I would repeat it back to them, because I was a little kid and kind of dumb. Um, I feel really bad about that now, but, um, you know, like, having these adults that would take me out on the weekends to all these cool places, and I would get to eat pizza and play video games—you know, that was a lot of fun. Um, so that—it wasn't too bad when I was really little, but as I got older, um, I had some siblings in the adopted family who—I guess they were kind of jealous of all the attention that the littler kids were receiving, or—and they also had like, their own issues against me in particular for being, like, gender weird, I guess, as a little kid—um, and just kind of weird in general. Like, I didn't—uh, I had a hard time learning social skills, I guess, is a—a way to put it. Like, I—I didn't really understand how to talk to people, and things like that. Um, so that was like, considered me being weird—or, /crazy—and I would get in trouble for that sometimes. Um, and I also was kind of what they would call tomboyish, but I just thought of it as like, you know, being myself. I wasn't the kind of kid that was very athletic, or like, I'd get into fights, or other stereotypes people have about tomboys. Um, you know, I was just a kid who didn't like wearing dresses or makeup, or being femme, or things like that. Um, and I guess the only way they could understand that is me being a tomboy. So as I, uh, got older from like, seven or eight, where it was more acceptable, to like, eleven or twelve, where—when it was a lot less acceptable, and it was sort of expected of me to be wearing makeup, and things like that—uh, and getting interested in boys, but I guess I was getting interested in the wrong way. Um, you know, I started like, hearing words like “dyke” and—other words a lot, like being told that I was crazy, or like, a slut or a whore, things like that. Um, so that—that part wasn't so great.

Van Ness: Was that by, um, like, other people in school, or was that by your foster family?

Avedon: Um, the kids in school didn't really care so much about that. Um, I mean, they also thought I was weird, but I didn't really get bullied as much or as badly as by adults in my adopted family, who you would think would know better, but, you know, sometimes people are just bigoted. Um, yeah. And then, like, going back to the whole Italian thing, they were also kind of racist, because all—basically all the—the kids that they were taking were like, light-skinned Puerto Rican, uh, assigned female at birth kids, which is—like, looking back on it, is really creepy. Um, so, they were taking in all these Puerto Rican kids and teaching them, “Oh, being Italian is great and we're like, rescuing you from your birth family, because they're really bad,” all these stereotypes about, uh, Latinos and things like that. Um, and it's definitely something I've had to work through—a thing I've still had to work through because, you know, there wasn't really

anything in my life countering that for a long time. I didn't know any—any Latinos, and like, I—the only Latino people I ever really saw was like, John Leguizamo in the *Super Mario Brothers* movie and like, uh, Gomez Addams, the guy who played him. I thought he was great, but, you know, like, it wasn't a whole lot of representation. Um...

Van Ness: That's true.

Avedon: So, yeah. Um, so, sometimes they would get nasty in a racist way, too, towards me—and my little sister, especially, because I guess they thought I didn't—uh, she looked more Latino than me or something. Like, that was how they thought of it, and they didn't see me as Latino. Um, but, you know, that—it is pretty fucked up, and I guess I'm still working through, like, feeling like I'm not Latino enough or, um, you know—like, all of that stuff that happened.

Van Ness: Yeah. Um, how many, um, siblings did you have in that family?

Avedon: Um, I had one little sister, and she was only one year apart from me, and then I had, um, three older siblings who were teenagers when I was growing up, and two other older siblings who were, uh, much older—like, in their forties.

Van Ness: Oh, wow.

Avedon: Yeah, so it was kind of a big family. And, uh, previous to taking in me and my little sister, they also had taken, uh, other foster kids.

Van Ness: So, um, were you pretty steadily with this one family after you were ten?

Avedon: Yeah. Yeah. So, I was legally adopted when I was ten, and I was given their last name, and I—I didn't really understand what was going on at the time, or the ramifications of it. Um, but it's kind of come back to haunt me, because after I got kicked out, and I was trying to go to college and apply for financial aid, I started running into a lot of problems because, you know—um, I need to get my adopted family's signature when I wasn't talking to them anymore. And, like, for a long time before my adopted, uh, mother passed away, I was, uh, really upset and nervous about what would ever happen to me, because she was technically my next of kin and, you know... Um, so, for a long time I wanted to get my last name changed, at least, because that would be sort of a symbolic break, and then when I realized, you know, that I was trans and I could actually transition, um, you know, I—I put in double the effort to get my name changed, um, just so that my name would sort of match my, uh, gendered appearance or whatever. I could think of my name however I wanted it, but the rest of the world might not take a female-sounding name with a male-looking person very well.

Van Ness: Um, so, you grew up on Staten Island, mostly—

Avedon: Yeah.

Van Ness: —until you were about twenty.

Avedon: Yeah.

Van Ness: Um, what was that like? [laughter]

Avedon: Oh, yeah, it—um, I mean, a lot of the—the racist stuff and the gender stuff I was talking about, with my adopted family, was kind of just reflected back in the entire community around me. Um, I experienced a lot of street harassment growing up, and people just—just like, random strangers. Like I said, I didn't really get bullied that much or as badly at school, but just like, random strangers sometimes would hassle me, and high school wasn't so great either. Um, because I went to a really big high school and not everybody knew me. They just saw me as like, this weird, um, gender non-conforming girl. Um, so, you know, people in high school aren't always the nicest about that kind of thing. Um, and even as an adult, sometimes I've experienced a lot of street harassment. To be honest, it didn't really end until I moved off Staten Island, uh, part one, and part two, started on hormones. After that, a lot of the street harassment died down, though. Sometimes I still get people bothering me.

Van Ness: What is, um—what does that look like, the street harassment. Um, when do you see that people are doing that to you?

Avedon: Um, just like—sometimes, people just yelling sexual comments at me, or just like, yelling curses at me or, um, you know, things like that.

Van Ness: Has, um—has Staten Island changed over the—over time, or has New York changed over time, since you've been living here your whole life?

Avedon: Yeah, um—well, I—I've recently been spending a lot of time on Staten Island because, uh, I'm dating a person who lives on Staten Island, and it's still pretty scary. Um, I started dating them a little before the election and, um—you know, like, riding on the ferry or—um, for a while, I would, almost without fail, hear people making comments about Jews, or black people, or Puerto Ricans, or Mexicans, or whatever um, you know, group that they had decided was the enemy. Um, so that made me really uncomfortable, obviously, but more recently, I haven't been hearing as much. I—I think maybe people's emotions were heightened during and immediately after the election. Uh, you know, I still hear a lot of comments, not necessarily directed at me but, you know, you hear people talking about that kind of stuff in public like it's an acceptable way to behave, and it does kind of make you anxious.

Van Ness: Sure. Um, what—what was your bio family like? I know you said you lived with your father for a little bit—or took care of him.

Avedon: Yeah. Um, well, they're not perfect, but they're a lot better than my adopted family. Um, I—whereas my adopted family was very proud of being Italian, my, uh—my dad was very proud of being Puerto Rican. He tried to educate me on all sorts of things. And at first, sometimes

he would tell me things that sounded crazy to me, like—oh, like, you know, “Gandhi was actually a very evil person because he was very racist.” Like, “How can you say that about Gandhi? I don’t—you know, like, Gandhi is like, the sweetest guy.” And then I started looking into it, and it’s like, “Oh, like—I—yeah, actually.” [laughter] Yeah. So, um, yeah. Um, he taught me a lot, though I think other people kind of looked at him as like, the crazy old guy who’s just always running his mouth about things. Um, because he—he could really, uh, talk for a long time once he got going. [laughter]

Van Ness: And would—was he just like, full of all these random facts?

Avedon: Yeah. Yeah, um, he actually used to collect newspaper clippings, and—yeah. He could be a little bit weird. [laughter] Um, he would collect used books to the point where it just like, filled the entire apartment.

Van Ness: Little on the—on the border of like, hoarding?

Avedon: Yeah. Not—not even on the border. [laughter]

Van Ness: Just like, right on there.

Avedon: Yeah. So—so he was a little bit of a hoarder and, um, he did have some issues, but he was also a really smart guy. He—he wasn’t just running his mouth about nonsense. He knew what he was talking about.

Van Ness: Did you ever meet your bio mom?

Avedon: Yeah. Um, things are, I guess, more complicated between me and her, because—uh, well, I guess the thing is that she—she never wants to say anything negative to my face, so sometimes she’ll just make things up, and it—it’s kind of upsetting. Um, but, yeah, you know? I mean, I love her, and I wish our relationship was better.

Van Ness: What about, um, your friends when you were younger, and now, and like—yeah, tell me about your friendships.

Avedon: Yeah, um, well, like I mentioned before, I was kind of socially weird as a kid and, um, I was also socially weird as an adult, and I still am [laughter]. Um, I’ve been working on that a lot. Uh, I’m trying really hard. Um, I didn’t have a whole lot of friendships when I was little. I had like, this one friend that I would sort of latch onto. Um, and sometimes I would get kind of annoying, I guess, to the other person, but I didn’t really understand how not to be clingy, because I was... Like, when I was a really little kid, I would be perfectly happy just sitting in a corner reading or drawing and not interacting with people at all. So, I had to kind of teach myself, “Oh, people should be talked to and interacted with sometimes,” you know? Um, and then I didn’t really know how, so I went about it really awkwardly. Um, and that kind of made my teen years difficult, because how—if you can’t make friends, you can’t even date. And there are other reasons why I

was really uncomfortable with romance, obviously, but—um, or maybe not obviously. Maybe other trans people didn't have that experience but, um, yeah. Um, I—I guess I didn't really start getting the hang of the whole "interacting with other human beings" thing until I was like, a junior or senior in high school. Um, and then after I graduated, I got a computer, and it became a whole lot easier to talk to people, because I could just type, and I wouldn't have to worry about me stuttering or like, not being able to think of what I should be saying, or I'm figuring out when somebody's stopped talking, I should start talking, and all that. So, people like to say, "The internet is very bad for socializing. It makes people more stunted in their socialization," but I think it actually helped me a lot, because it took away that element of, uh, difficulty speaking. Always kind of had a lot of difficulty speaking to people and having like, a give and take kind of thing. That's kind of been a huge problem with me when I've been trying to learn other languages, like Spanish, because it's hard for me to listen, and then formulate what I'm going to say, and then listen again. It's like, my brain just doesn't do that kind of thing very well, even in English. So, yeah.

Van Ness: Um, let's see... In terms of, uh, your identity, what—what is your relationship with, um, other like, trans and gender non-conforming people—

Avedon: I—

Van Ness: —in general?

Avedon: Yeah, I—I guess I would say it's pretty good. Um, for a long time, I just had this general sense of not fitting in and not really being able to articulate why. And I would like, try to find reasons growing up, and sometimes they would be really silly reasons, like, "Oh, I like this hobby, or that hobby," you know? Um, and—and I guess a lot of people go through that stage as they're figuring themselves out. Um, and in middle school, I started thinking to myself that I couldn't really fit in with boys or girls, because I started noticing, you know, "Everybody's starting to get their hormones raging," and things like that, and it just felt like there wasn't any place for me anymore, because I used to hang out with, you know, like, boys and girls who had similar interests as me, and it was okay, but after twelve or thirteen, it started changing, and I felt like I didn't really have a place anymore. And I felt like that for a while, until I started meeting other trans people and I started thinking to myself, "Oh, maybe—maybe this is where my place is, and other people have also experienced what I've gone through and, uh, maybe things are making a little more sense for me." Um, so I—I came out, uh, relatively late, age 27. Before that, I was sort of experimenting, and wearing the binder for a couple years, and—well, not a couple years. Maybe a couple months. But like, cutting my hair short and sort of experimenting with my appearance, things like that. Uh, then I started, uh, making a lot of friends in the trans community and, um, once I started my, uh, medical trans—medically transitioning, legally transitioning, and all that, I started feeling a lot more comfortable, a lot more easy around people. Um, for a long—there was a long period of time when I wasn't, uh, dating anybody—like, between 19 and 27 or 28, basically—um, because I just didn't feel comfortable enough around people but, uh, since then it's gotten a lot easier. Uh, and most of my partners have been other trans people, uh, partly because that's who I've been hanging out with and meeting, partly because we have some

common experiences that we can talk about that are a little more difficult to talk about with people who haven't gone through that.

Van Ness: Do you feel like, um, you're more visible now, um, because of your identities, or...?

Avedon: I guess it's easier for me to come out and be visible with my identities. Um, I—I guess I'm in a pretty privileged place, because I, uh—like, cis people see me as a guy and, um, don't expect me to come out and say that I'm trans, so, um, when it's like that, it's a little bit easier, and you get less hostility. Um, so, I feel more comfortable being out as trans, um, than I did when I was younger and people would be very hostile to me just based on my appearance and, um, not fitting into their expectations of "boy" or "girl" or what have you.

Van Ness: What does, um—how do you understand gender right now, or what—what does gender mean to you?

Avedon: Uh, it's difficult...

Van Ness: Yeah. [laughter]

Avedon: I mean... Um, I sometimes describe myself as like, vacillating between being a guy and being non-binary or like, having a neutral gender. Uh, I'm not sure if it—that's really true, so much as like, uh—like, being a guy is the closest thing, in terms of the binary system, that I can articulate my gender as, and sometimes it doesn't feel as good to call myself that as at other times. Um, yeah. I mean, I guess my self-concept has always—and what I tell other people—has always been sort of a compromise between how I feel inside and how people are going to take it. Um, so, it—it always—it's not just about how I feel. It's also about how other people feel about it.

Van Ness: Alright.

Avedon: So, it always just kind of... Yeah, I mean, I could blow it off and be like, "I don't care," but I do have to care in terms of personal safety and things like that. Um, I—I can't really give you an abstract, like, super sociological definition of what I think gender means. Um, it's not that I haven't thought about it a lot. It just—it just kind of feels like it's something that's really up in the air, and it affects my life, but it's also kind of over my head, talking about abstract geometry or something.

Van Ness: Mhm. What are some, um, memories that you have of like, you know, being like, a teenager or, uh, being in college, or—what are some things that happened around those times?

Avedon: Huh. Uh, a lot of things.

Van Ness: What—what do you most remember?

Avedon: Yeah. Um... [sigh] Um, I was alone a lot as a teenager. My little sister had started running away from home, and I was—I was trying to be protective towards her, but I couldn't really do all that much as a kid myself. Um, so, that kind of colored my whole teen years. Um, I was kind of an artistic kid. I liked drawing, and making comics, and things like that—um, and spent a lot of time recording music off of the radio onto cassette tapes, [laughter] and playing, uh, *Sonic the Hedgehog* on my SEGA Nomad—um, [inaudible] Gameboy games, I don't know. I mean, yeah. And I didn't really start dating until my senior year of high school, and that—that was some guy I met in math class, and he was being kind of pushy, but at that point, I just wanted to try things out, because I felt like, you know, I was 17 and I should be having interest, or—romantic interest, or things like that. So we messed around for a bit, and I told him right off the bat, you know, "I'd prefer it if you treated me like a guy friend, or just like a guy," and I guess that should've signalled, to me at least, that yeah, um, you know, something is off, but it didn't really signal anything to me at the time. It didn't signal anything to him at the time, either. He actually tried to push me to wear makeup more often and be more girly, and I wound up dumping him over that [laughter].

Van Ness: Good. [laughter] Um, what were some things you remember about like, college? Or what—what college did you go—or colleges—did you go to?

Avedon: Oh, um—oh god, yeah. I—I somehow wound up in college straight out of high school, and that was really by the skin of my teeth, because I wasn't a good student in high school, and I was absent a lot. I had a lot of mental health issues due to what was going on in my, uh, home life. Um, but I—I won an essay contest my senior year of high school, and I got a bunch of money from that. And I went to CUNY [City University of New York] and financial aid was paying for everything, so I actually got off to a really good start. I was studying biology. I—I really liked it, but, um... I—I had always had this artistic side, and I felt like it wasn't really getting expressed anymore. And then when I was 20, I got kicked out. Um, I couldn't really pay for college anymore, because I had trouble with financial aid, um, so I started taking classes one at a time and, um... You know, a bunch of things happened in my life that forced me to switch from bio—being a bio major to being a graphic design major. So, um—so, uh, I was studying biology for like, five or six years, and then I switched over to graphic design, um, not immediately but like, in 2008, basically. And I—I was really successful at it, in class at least, and, um, I graduated. I had a good GPA, and started looking for jobs. I couldn't really find anything that would pay me. Um, I'm sorry I'm not really mentioning anything about like, the partying aspects of college or like, all my friends, and—you know, all the guys that I was dating, or all the girls I was dating, or non-binary people. Um, but that really wasn't at the forefront of my life at that point. Um, I was mostly focused on academics and, um, after a certain point, also on like, going to a lot of protests and being more politically involved, because that was during the Bush years and there was a lot to be angry about. Um, so, yeah. Um, I—I guess I didn't really get to have more of a like, fun and, uh, carefree college experience until I went to Hunter [College], in my mid- to late-twenties [laughter]. Um, so, yeah. I had a little more, uh—more of that stereotypical sort of fun college experience there, but I did wind up leaving, because I was transitioning, and the school was a little bit hostile. Um, I applied for a name change. They decided that they didn't recognize the name change even though the State of New York was okay with it. Um, so things got weird, and I wound up, uh, writing for websites to make money. Um, I was doing that for a while, and then started studying coding,

because I still want to use—uh, like, be a commercial artist, basically, and I—that wasn't—writing wasn't really scratching that itch. It also wasn't making a lot of money, whereas if you're a coder, you can make a lot more.

Van Ness: What, um—I know you mentioned, uh, you were political in—in school, because it was during the Bush years.

Avedon: Yeah.

Van Ness: What—what were you doing, or what were the protests, or...? Tell me more.

Avedon: Yeah. Um, I—my adopted family was very conservative, so I couldn't really do much while I was living with them because, um, of all the violence and like, threats and things like that. It wasn't safe for me at all. But, um, my—uh, my mom and dad were actually politically involved when they were younger. My dad had been to like, meetings for the Young Lords and things like that, and my mom was also very, uh, politically involved. Um, she had been collecting signatures for the Green Party the first time that I met her as an adult, actually. Um, so, they were—it was a lot safer—safer for me to be politically involved. And, um, you know, I started—the first protest I went to was actually with my mom and, um, it was at an abortion clinic that, um, was being threatened by Christians. Um, so that—that was kind of cool. Um, yeah, I mean, there—there was a lot of bullshit going on. There's still a lot of bullshit going on. I'm not going to say that it ever ended or that—or even that it started with Bush. But, um, I—you know, I went to marches on Washington with my family members and with friends of the family. Um, I did Food Not Bombs for a while. Um, I—I started getting more involved in LGBT activism as I started feeling more comfortable being myself, but some of the people that I was hanging out with, even though they were liberals—or, uh, like, leftists—they weren't always very approving of that, and they would tell me, "Oh, you're just interested in identity politics," and it's like, "Well, I don't want my—I want to have rights, you know? And I mean, I'm sorry if that upsets you, um, or—or you think that I'm only in it for myself, but I'm also going to your protest, so why aren't you coming to mine?" Um, but—I was involved with community health action, like, handing out safer sex packets and things like that. Um, I guess I didn't really get involved in trans politics more until I started meeting trans people and realizing, "Oh, this—this is like, a big issue," because, you know, it wasn't really being talked about in the 2000's so much. I wasn't—didn't really have much awareness until I started meeting people who were more involved in that kind of thing.

Van Ness: Um, what would you—who would you say is, um, someone who's like, really impacted you in your life?

Avedon: Um, I—I guess the obvious answer is my dad. Um, I've already talked a little bit about him. Um, growing up, I—I guess I looked up to, uh, a lot of nerdy guys, basically, or just like, guys that were sort of ethnically coded as similar to me, I guess. I don't know. I mean, it's just so hard to talk about race or ethnic stuff when you're really little, because you don't really understand what's going on, but you still have a sense of it. Um, I—I was really into biology and, um, I like—in terms of writers who were a big influence on me, I would have to say Stephen Jay Gould, uh,

because he would talk about biology, but he was also pretty left-wing, and he would also talk about race and other things like that that I didn't really get to talk about with the people around me because it was too violent and not safe for me. Um, so I remember reading *The Mismeasure of Man* when I was a teenager, and that had a huge impact on me, because it made me realize, "Oh, all this historical bullshit was going on that nobody ever taught me about." Um, so it was definitely a big influence on me in terms of people I didn't necessarily know, but...

Van Ness: What is, um, the historical bullshit that was happening? I'm curious.

Avedon: [laughter] Um, he—he was just talking about, um, scientific racism, and human zoos, and other, uh, like, fuckery that was going on in biology in the, you know, 1800's and uh, early 20th century.

Van Ness: Um, who—who are people that you're close to now?

Avedon: Close to now. Um, well, I have two partners, and I'm very close to both of them. [laughter] Um, yeah. I'm not so much close to my biological family, but, um, I'm also an adult and not as dependent on them as I used to be. Um, yeah. My partner, Margaret, and I met at this, uh, coding fellowship that I've been part of for the past couple of months and, um, she's really cool. She's nice, and good, and sweet [laughter]. Um, my partner, Melissa, I'd met previous, uh, to joining the coding camp. Uh, I met her like a year—two years ago, I think, actually—at a Halloween party. [laughter]

Van Ness: What were you dressed as?

Avedon: I—I think I was actually dressed as like, a video game character, um, from *Undertale*. Um, and she's also really cool, and sweet, and kind, and cute. [laughter]

Van Ness: Um, let's see... Have you been, uh, inspired by anything in particular—like, a historical or social movement, or whatever, or anything that's really, like, had an impact on your life, you would say?

Avedon: Huh. Um... This might sound a little bit silly but, um, I guess a major turning point in my life was actually when Richard Avedon died, um, because my—my adopted mom was really fucked up, and the day that he died, she told me, "Oh, your uncle died today." Like, I didn't even know I have an uncle. And she showed me the newspaper with like, the headline "Richard Avedon died, and he was like, a famous photographer," and I was like, "What the fuck? I don't even know who this guy is. What are you talking about?" And then I started learning about him. He had been like—you know, just like, this working-class guy. He served in the army during World War II and just was like, a nobody for a long time, but then he—when he was 21, he became really famous as a photographer and was a very influential artist, and he was just like, some random guy from the Bronx before that. And it was really inspiring to me, because, you know, he was like, this guy who came from nothing, and we had the same last name, and, you know, he became really successful and important. And that started making me think differently about my family

background, even though it's never been clear to me how we're related or if we're related. Um, so it made me think a lot differently, because all my life I'd been told my family was trash and garbage, and I should feel lucky that somebody else's family took me in, because my own background was so bad, and I should just feel lucky. Um, so that was definitely a big inspiration, um, even though I still don't know.

Van Ness: Did you ask your, uh, father about that, or other family?

Avedon: Um, well, I guess I should go a little bit into my last name [laughter].

Van Ness: Oh, sure.

Avedon: Yeah. My last name, Avedon, is actually my mom's last name, because when I was born, my mom and my dad weren't married. Um, and then when I got the name change done, I—it was partly funded by money that I had gotten from my dad passing away, and I wanted to honor him in some way, and I knew it was the Spanish way to have, you know, your dad's name, then your mom's name, so I went with Marty Hernandez Avedon. And I guess that's kind of confusing to people, because they expect that—Avedon to be my dad's name, but it's not. Um, it's my—from my mom's side. And, uh, my grandfather had actually changed his last name to Avedon, as well, to match his mother. So it's kind of a family tran—tradition, I guess.

Van Ness: Cool. Um, let's see... Are there anything else—are there any other things that you even want us to know? Like, what are some things that you need to know to know who Marty is?

Avedon: Um, I guess—I mean, I've been thinking about this a lot as I've been going through the coding camp. Um, it's called Access Code, and it's specifically for underrepresented groups in tech. Um, the stats are crazy for, uh, programming. Something like 6% of programmers are, uh, African American, 7% are Latino, 25% are women. It's really not, uh, the most diverse or most friendly place, so I've just been thinking about it as I've been going through the program. How many kids who've been raised in foster care are—you know, are in the position that I'm in now? I've been lucky enough. How many trans people have—you know? Um, so I guess I would want to say that it's just like—you know, you can have a really rough start in life and have lots of fucked up things happen to you, and you can still hang on. I'm not going to say it's going to get better, necessarily. A lot of work has to happen. A lot of luck is involved, but you shouldn't necessarily feel trapped by your circumstances. You can get—I mean, not really past them. I feel like everything has built up that made me the person I am now, but it's not necessarily a dead end. It's—like, for a lot of—for a long time, I felt, uh, really down on myself—um, you know, would wake up every day and just have this constant thought of wanting to die and things like that. Um, and I'm not necessarily think—saying that things are perfect now, but it's getting better. So, um, yeah. I—when I was little I'd never imagine that I would be where I am now. I mean, I guess that kind of sounds like a cliché, but I really—I really didn't. I thought I'd just be trapped in other people's expectations for me. I would always have to be what my adopted family wanted me to be, uh, regardless of how I felt, or what my background was, or what choices I wanted to make for myself. Um, and being kicked out wa almost—I mean, it was awful, and it was very traumatic

and made me feel really bad at the time, because I just felt totally rejected and like nobody had my back, but in a way, it was also kind of a gift, because I could make a break with them and feel okay about it, um, because it was a reaction to what had happened. Um, I'm sorry. I'm rambling.

Van Ness: No, no. That's perfect. That's great.

Avedon: Yeah, um, but... Yeah, I mean, being a—being able to start over at 20, and be in touch with my biological family, and eventually be in a place where I could, uh, start to transition, even though I was in my late twenties, uh, were all really lucky and good, positive things.

Van Ness: That's good. Do you feel, um, like you've had to ever, uh, choose between like, expressing your gender identity and like, economic or social, like, safety or, you know, something like that?

Avedon: Yeah. For a long time, I—I just felt like I couldn't transition, because I didn't—I didn't know anybody. Um, I just thought it was like, this thing that people who were a lot braver than me, or a lot cooler than me, did, or people who were in different circumstances, and I just couldn't picture myself doing it, regardless of how I felt. Or like—like, maybe being trans was only for people who felt more masculine than me, or things like that, and it was kind of silly things like that. Um, and in terms of personal safety, I think my safety has actually increased, because male privilege, basically. I'm not harassed as much in the street. Uh, economically, I—uh, my medical care has mostly been covered. Sometimes hormones have been really expensive and I've been in circumstances where I haven't been able to pay for them, or I've had to make a choice, or what have you, which has sucked. Um, but—um, you know, I figured things out, and things have been okay in general. But I recently was able to get a binder for free from a binder exchange, which was pretty cool. Um, I—I guess I don't feel as negatively about my chest as other trans guys, and I'm actually not binding right now, because I don't enjoy it, but I enjoy having the flatter appearance, um, and I feel averse about going out in public not covered up.

Van Ness: Okay. Um, you mentioned, uh, a few things. What are—you mentioned, actually, your—your parents had certain expectations of you. What were some—what was that? What did they expect from you?

Avedon: Um, my adopted family was just like, um, expecting me to sort of fit into their idea of what a girl should be, and especially as I became a teenager. Um, and I guess there are these certain expectations that are particular to working-class Italian American girls, where you're going to be interested in boys a little bit younger, want to wear makeup a little bit younger, things like that, and I wasn't really interested in that kind of stuff when I was in middle school so much, and it was considered really weird. And, um, the kids in my school were actually really sexual when they were, uh, around that age. Like, kids would be running around talking about giving each other blowjobs, and things like that. I didn't even know what a blowjob was. Um, I mean, it might've just been kids talking and not necessarily doing stuff but, um, you know, it was considered weird that I wasn't interested in doing that kind of stuff, or I wasn't interested in wearing makeup or being, uh, a girl, basically, or wearing dresses, or things like that. Um, they

also had a lot of high expectations on me in terms of academics, because, um, I had been—started reading when I was really young, and I was always like, this weird kid who was, uh—like, had a lot of knowledge about trivia. Um, so they were—there was a lot of academic pressure on me to be successful, and also kind of stereotypical, because, uh, my mom—my mom is Jewish, and I guess they sort of saw me as that stereotypical smart Jewish kid. Um, and when I wasn't performing as well in school, it was like, "Oh, you know, it's because of your background." And so, like, the stereotypes like, seesawed back and forth and put a lot of pressure on me to be more of that positive stereotype versus the negative one, I guess. Um, they're—they were also Catholics, and they didn't necessarily go to church, but they expected me to be, like, a good Catholic kid. Uh, and I didn't even know that my—I came from a Jewish background until I was older, and I was really upset about that. I felt like it was really, uh, fucked up. They never even mentioned it to me.

Van Ness: So, um—I guess, how do you feel right now in terms of like, emotionally, mentally, physically?

Avedon: Um, yeah. I feel like I'm in a better place than I've been in the past. Um, I'm coming towards the end of my training and of Access Code. We're part of the—we're in the job, uh, search portion, and they're giving us a lot of support in terms of looking for work, which I never got when I was in college or in high school, you know? I guess the expectation my adopted family always had for me was that, you know, I—I might go to college, but I would spend most of my adult life just like, taking care of older members of the family and having a husband, getting married, and things like that, not necessarily having a job of my own. So I never really got that sort of business training, um, which really hampered me when I was looking for work, um, after I got my Associates Degree. I didn't really know how to go about looking for a job. Um, I—I'd been working jobs previous to that, but it was just like, for friends of the family. Like, you don't have to go in for an interview or, um, worry so much about that kind of thing and like, being a white-collar—uh, having that kind of white-collar job search experience. Um, so they're—they are providing that for me right now and, um, I'm hopeful that it's going to help me in terms of getting better work and, um, being able to have a place of—on my own and, uh, be able to share—share it with my partners and, you know, maybe eventually be able to open up a community space. Um, that's always been a dream of mine, to have a community space where people can come to and, um, you know, just like, hang out, because there really aren't any places in New York City where you can just hang out. There's like, the library and Starbucks, and Starbucks obviously is like, an awful company. Um, and there aren't really a lot of community centers out there, and it's just getting worse in terms of that, you know? Everything's being privatized. So, I would really like to be able to open a space that would be really for the community, and people hanging out and, you know, just enjoying themselves without having to pay money. Um, and, yeah. I like art, and I like games, and I'd like to work on a game, I guess—uh, a video game or things like that. But, um, you know, just in general, I just like making things. Um, it's always been really fun for me and, uh, yeah. I think tech is actually a really good fit for me, because I have a lot of different skills that necessarily—haven't necessarily been expressed in things that I've been doing previous to this. I like writing. I like drawing. I like—um, like, figuring things out—like, figuring out algorithms and things like that, and problem solving, so it's actually been a really good fit for me.

I'm pretty hopeful about the future as a whole. I'm keeping my fingers crossed, because I know that I'm not going to get anything unless I work for it [laughter].

Van Ness: Well, if you, um—if you were to be remembered for one thing, what would that thing be?

Avedon: What would that thing be?

Van Ness: And what would you want to be remembered?

Avedon: What would—um, oh god, I don't know. Sometimes I Google myself [laughter].

Van Ness: And what do you find?

Avedon: Um, I made a mural back in my senior year in high school, and there's some pict—photographs on Wikipedia that I had taken, and that's in another name. Um, and I get a lot of pictures of me at protests as well, um, but...

Van Ness: What are you gonna guess for future Marty?

Avedon: For future Marty?

Van Ness: What would future Marty be remembered for?

Avedon: Well, I do hope to be an asset to the community—whatever community I'm part of, um, because there are a lot of interlocking communities here, I guess. Um, I—I do worry a lot about the kids who are in the system right now because, I mean, as horrible as what I went through growing up, it was also not as bad as what some kids experienced, or are experiencing, or even what my little sister went through. Um, and it's difficult. You can get into a place where it feels like you don't have a future. That's how it felt for a long time. I couldn't really envision myself as being an adult. And now, uh, I'm 33. You know, it's—the whole system is fucked up, and there's not really any kind of reform they can do to it, because it's just really racist and really classist, and... You know, I guess I would want other kids who have been experiencing that kind of violence, and abuse, and neglect in their lives to sort of be able to look to me and realize, you know, that things can be bad, but they can also get not so bad, or—ugh, it's really hard to articulate, but...

Van Ness: No, I think you're doing a great job.

Avedon: Yeah. Um, I don't know. I think that sounds stupid right now.

Van Ness: No, not at all. Uh, well—I mean, I guess, uh—so, is there anything else that you'd like to add? I have to go soon.

Avedon: Um, yeah, I don't know. [laughter] I can't think of anything right now.

Van Ness: Okay. Alright, well, thank you for, um, chatting with me today. Um, yeah.