

NEW YORK CITY TRANS ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

HANNAH E. SIMPSON

Interviewer: Grace Ramsay

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Transcribed by Sean Conner

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Hannah E Simpson interviewed by Grace Ramsay

Grace Ramsay: Hello my name is Grace and I'll be having a conversation with Hannah for New York City Trans Oral History Project in collaboration with the New York Public Library Community Oral History Project. This is an oral history project centered on the experiences of trans-identifying people. It is March 22nd, 2017 and this is being recorded at New York Public Libraries in location with the lions. Um, so thank you for coming Hannah.

Hannah E Simpson: I'm really excited to be here.

Ramsay: Awesome. Do you want to talk a little bit about your childhood and what your life was like growing up?

Simpson: So, I grew up in a suburban—generally middle-class home in New Jersey and it was a—I'm very privileged to say—a loving and supportive family. I think I knew from a very young age that I was different, and I looked at daytime TV talk shows saw—maybe not the best representations of gender identity and its diversity, but the idea that something was out there that was different. I from a very young age was wearing my sister's clothing. I probably destroyed the nicest stuff she ever had because I was a little bit bigger than her being two years older, and that's not really fair to her but I didn't have many other outlets—my mom was way larger than I was physically and I wasn't going to fit into her things. And what I tell people about my upbringing that people don't always think about in terms of gender identity and transitioning, is that I didn't fear coming out and telling my parents about this part of me because I thought they wouldn't support me. I actually thought that they would—I knew they would and that's what terrified me. And this is unique in terms of the perspective people offer sometimes but what I try to say is that—and the way I explain it I had three younger siblings and I knew that my parents would move heaven and earth, and perhaps even my entire family to another city if not state, for me to get the help that I needed and to live myself authentically as a female if that's what I decided to do because not that long ago the idea of transitioning in your own school—and your teachers getting used to it, and your classmates being told to respect you and how you present yourself, that wasn't a thing. It was kind of like the kid who perhaps got pregnant in high school and was sent off somewhere and you didn't quite hear from them again. And that's what I feared would happen to me only with my family taken for the ride too, and that's a lot to ask when you're somebody's big brother or big sibling—however I thought of myself—to upend their lives. To upend their friendships and their growth over something I thought maybe I'd grow out of, [was] something I couldn't really say for sure was the right path for me because there wasn't as much information out there, especially about youth. So it took a lot of time for me especially graduating high school, going off to college, being on my own where I was able to explore this and seriously consider it where it wasn't going to be such an impact on my parents and my family—where they were also older and more able to handle it as well as they could. Because coming out for me is coming out for them too, I had to be prepared for that. And what I say about it is that it's hard to talk as a 32 year old now and try to dissect my feelings as a child, and fear especially is one that doesn't have to be rational to exist. But I like to think that the general sentiment of opening

Pandora's box and not being able to control the consequences of what that would have looked like even if I would have been, I think, able to articulate what was going on with me. And I knew this, it was on the tip of my tongue so often I was seeing a pediatric endocrinologist because I was growth hormone deficient already and I knew that he was the one I would be asking about this kind of question—well actually I want to be a girl, why are we trying to make me taller? It was on the tip of my tongue so many times that I could never bring up, because I could not predict the outcome—and this could dramatically change the lives of my siblings, not only myself—and that was a big thing to ask of my family, and a lot of attention that I quite frankly wasn't sure I could command. In retrospect maybe it wouldn't have been that but I like to think that having seen the experiences of other peers of mine who were able to transition earlier in life and how that turned out—I probably wasn't as far off base as I could have been, and I have been tremendously lucky moving forward with my life and my family. Now my siblings are all through college, they were finishing up college as I was transitioning. My parents are empty-nesters but they're still in my life, and the acceptance of me—as me, as Hannah—is unequivocal. I tell people my parents drive me bonkers, but in all the ways a 32 year old woman's parent's should drive her bonkers. They wanna see me successful, they wanna see me independent, they wanna see me doing good things in the world, and bringing home a nice Jewish partner—the gender they're, you know, still not sure what that will be and neither am I—and they probably want grand kids by now and they're getting a little impatient, not just from me but also my three other siblings. So the drive me bonkers in all the good ways because if they didn't accept me for me unequivocally as the foundation of our relationship they wouldn't be in my life to torment me.

Ramsay: Exactly! So it sounds like you're really close with your family, and you were growing up. Do you wanna talk about your relationship with your siblings?

Simpson: Oh I have the three best siblings in the world. One of my sisters is a nurse down at Baltimore, another is a teacher—also in Maryland closer to Annapolis—and my little brother works in data analytics in a hospital in Illinois. I always joke about him because growing up he was also part of the reason I didn't transition earlier on. A lot of trans people have this experience of wanting to hyper masculinize or feminize themselves within their assigned gender to try to remove it from their thought processes. This is something ingrained within you but sometimes you think you can overpower it, you can compensate for it. For a lot of trans women that comes around their teens and they join the armed forces, and maybe they get really into athletics—not that athletics is necessarily a male or female thing—but they get into the machismo aspect of it. That's something that doesn't always pan out well, in terms of them saying “well this was just a compensatory measure”—for me it came at 9 years old with my little brother. I had two sisters before then and I was always wearing their clothing even at this age and then I had a brother and I said I need to man up. I'm gonna try to be a boy so that I can have him share a bunk bed with me one day. I didn't quite realize at 9 that he would come home, you know, an infant and it would be by the time he was old enough to share a bunk bed with me I was old enough to not want bunk beds anymore. So that idea didn't pan out although I did successfully nag my parents until they got me the bunk bed, which he never really slept on in the same room as me unless my grandmother came to visit and took his room. But, that aside [both laughing] he was the kid who I always loved to watch as he, you know, revered me as his big brother but then in time I got to

be there and support and appreciate him and sometimes he would do things always a little bit better than I did. I went to high school of course he went to high school and was salutatorian, then I went to engineering school—he went to engineering school and got an amazing GPA. I started running marathons, he got into marathons and crushed them. I got him into swing dancing after I did—he’s just this graceful, lanky, crazy human being on the dance floor. So I tell everybody, “You know anything I do he does better—he’s going to make a beautiful woman one day”. [Ramsay laughs] And I think that’s where we’re gonna stop [Ramsay laughs again] and I think I’ll give you that one. My other two sisters are also tremendously amazing and were there for me throughout all of this, and they’ve been able to take their experiences with me—my one sister is a nurse—and bring it into her practice to help other peers of hers that she met throughout her career and throughout her life. My other sister is a teacher, and too is really out there speaking up and saying that we need to protect students too, whoever they might be.

Ramsay: Awesome. Do you have any specific memories of, um, I guess gender—growing up, like the messages you were receiving about gender—whether its in your household or on TV, in the media, do you have anything that stands out to you?

Simpson: Well gender is tremendously pervasive growing up. As young as 3 years old my mom would sort all of our laundry—she’d do it all together then sort it out in the hampers and have like three hampers in front of her on the sofa with the laundry pile on the sofa next to her, and she’d toss things into each. My thought was if I’m going to steal a pair of my sister’s tights—because I really wanted to try tights on, because I saw all my friends who were female wearing tights and dresses, and I thought that must be the coolest thing because all I could ever wear was pants or the occasional shorts. I thought I have to take it out of the laundry and then try it on very discreetly and then bring it out to mom and say “Mom! Why did you put this in my hamper?”, and she kind of took it and just shoved it back in the other hamper—I think she bought it. There was just this divide and that’s what it was, and there was the divide in how the boys and girls were split up in school. I ended up sometimes in the class photo every year standing by a lot of girls because there were a lot of grades—like I said that I was growth hormone deficient—where I was the shortest kid in the class of the boys or the girls, especially when they all hit their growth spurts and the boys were a little ahead of me too. I had short parents there was nothing I could do, I was this height before I was a woman, but... [Ramsay laughs] I definitely felt the same pressures—the same internalized trans-phobia—the idea cross-dressing was a bad thing, the idea that there was something—not necessarily perverse and predatory the way the media and the conservatives today are trying to paint trans people—but more simply wrong. Simply not in line with what it took to be a boy, especially when I was trying so hard to be a boy for my little brother and even for myself because I thought “Hey, if I can just feign this cisgender, heteronormativity and be as typical a male as I can then I can have a girlfriend, and if I can have a girlfriend I can learn more about women, and that’ll help me if I ever want to be one—but also I’ll probably not want to be one because I’ll be happy just having a girlfriend like all the other boys in my class. Except I never really had a girlfriend because I was a dork and a little bit of a loud mouth, and obnoxious, and I tended to over analyze things... which hasn’t really changed.

[Ramsay] So, you said you were a dork. Were there any sorts of media or books that kind of got you through growing up?

[Simpson] Well, it's funny actually, because I was a Trekkie growing up addicted to Star Trek. I started watching it while spoon-fed—basically by my mother—during re-runs of The Next Generation when it came out in 1987—I was born in '84—so I was right in this age where she was watching at nights so that's what I was watching too. Later I got into the syndication of the older things from before I was born, and then came right up into adolescence with the later spin-offs. It was interesting because in my school this was also around the same time—middle-school—that the new prequels were coming out for Star Wars and there were a lot of Star Wars fans in my class. Some of them liked to tease me a lot, and it's funny because this person would always say to me “die Trekkie scum!”. They were my bully and it wasn't anything to do with how I identified other than being a Trekkie versus a Star Wars fan. Now what I really—kind of retroactively—wish is that I had taken some of my issues and projected them, and been like “Well you have gender-identity issues, so you should talk!” And the reason I say I wish I had even though I would never have intentionally done harm to somebody, but I would have inadvertently crushed this person because it turned out that this particular individual in my class—I found out about ten years later had also transitioned, and she now identifies as a beautiful female out on the West Coast. [Ramsay laughs] So I would have inadvertently crushed her and maybe that would have helped a little bit through middle school, obviously at her expense but I would never have done it. If I had known maybe we could have been there to help each other through this in a positive way, rather than tearing each other apart but we were so repressed within our own identities that we came up with a lot of sillier things to argue about. I also didn't realize just how many closeted Trekkies there were in my high school who never wanted to talk about liking it while I was out there.

[Ramsay] [Makes affirmative vocalization] Mm hmm, so at middle and high school did you feel bullied frequently? Was that an experience you had?

[Simpson] Oh I was bullied very much in elementary and middle school mostly for being the shortest kid in the class, kind of the puny kid who wasn't very good at sports and had a bit of a loud mouth—wanted to be the class clown, didn't always think that—or didn't always know where and when. I'll admit that I was not the most—I was very intelligent, and I hopefully retained some of that into my adulthood—but I wasn't always the most attentive to all of the social cues and it didn't help, like I said being short. Then in high school that continued to the point that I was bullied a lot by some of the girls actually. They now call it in the educational settings the “Queen Bee Syndrome”, and they are these girls who liked to pretend that they loved me and said really dirty things to me about things they wanted to do which I didn't even understand how girls could do yet. It's hard to explain to my sixteen-year-old self—gender identity issues aside—internally how to properly process sexual tension and know what's good versus what's bologna. I thought they actually liked me so I tried to reciprocate and became the butt of a lot of jokes—and even fell under the administration's eye—because someone turned around and said, “Why are you harassing these girls?” who built me up to begin with. So, that required a lot of time; energy; and visits to school san... or not school sanctioned, school supplied

therapists, to unpack. In the end they realized at the administrative level at least that a lot of it was bologna because the students—especially one in particular—was claiming that I was so annoying, and this person didn't want to be around me at all. She made herself... we caught her basically placing herself in a position where she knew I would be where she had no business being, because we had a similar class with the same teacher on different and I was to go to mine, she was to go to hers, and I saw her in the room in mine when she was not supposed to be there. I said, you know to the school, "I cannot have an education if this person is complaining about me, harassing her, and placing herself where I am supposed to be." And the whole thing kind of fizzled away but the damage to my social life was done.

[Ramsay] Did you have any close friends growing up?

[Simpson] I had a lot of close friends, they didn't always go to the same high school as I did which became terrible around prom, especially when you find out your date who went to private school or the person you did ask to prom—a girl in this case—found out that her older brother's college commencement was the same weekend, and so she couldn't go and you end up mostly dancing with the school nurse, but that aside—no—I had some amazing close friends I'm still in contact with. A handful from high school, and when I do travel around the country for public speaking I make a point to reach out. Like I said, the beauty of anybody in high school is that we grow up. I went to my ten-year high school reunion, I was the one who came back as a woman—you kind of always hear about that "Oh yeah this person is successful, this person had kids, this person is off traveling the world, and this one is a woman now" and generally it went over fine. People were a little bit confused so I wrote out a name tag and explained precisely what was going on, and there was really only one person who decided to be a jerk about it. Everyone else was like "Hey great to see you, glad you're..." and I don't like to say being trans makes you happy, they always say "Glad you're happy!". It doesn't make me happy, it makes me me and gives me a chance to pursue happiness with any possibility of success, but from somebody else without training them specifically on this—which I do now—"Hey glad you're happy!" is... okay. I'll take it.

Ramsay: Were there any activities you did in high school? Any organizations you were involved with or anything like that, you know, music...?

Simpson: Oh I was in lots of things in high school actually. I was in the marching band after school; I was in the choir all four years; I was the Most Improved Senior, and I was also in the dramas and the musicals. I mostly did back-stage things and constructed the programs, so I was hunting everybody down for their bio and fiddling with the very early digital cameras to take the first in-program head shots that the school had ever had. I really tried to up our game a little bit with the programs and took it on myself and made this really nice program that got professionally printed out—and they left it on the floor at the end of the show. All the little thankless jobs, that's kind of where I fit in and found my niche, and occasionally something cool happened. I was part of the academic decathlon team and we had to do a timed essay as part of the ten exams we did throughout the day, and I did this timed essay on over-fishing and won a gold medal in the states. I took AP classes—I was involved in all kinds of stuff, and I did make friends through those. It wasn't to say that it was compensatory for any gender identity issues but that was always on the

front of my mind is, you know, could I be a girl and still do all this? Dress up in women's clothing, whatever I could scrounge from my sister that I'd stolen that day out of her drawers, or whatever I had the guts to order online and have delivered to my house, or I found at a rummage sale and picked up while no one was looking? It all just felt illicit, and whatever I had I would get fully dressed up before school in the morning, get ready to walk out the door of my room and get ready to go to school, whether it was my parents driving me or me driving myself later on as a senior, but no I'd go back in and I'd change. I'd put on my boy clothing, usually whatever I wore yesterday and wasn't the most hygienic back then—and I don't think any high schoolers are—and get on with my day. I think I was more hygienic about my girl clothing because I didn't wear it as much, I just wore it a lot of times for a minute or two so it stayed pretty clean.

Ramsay: Was there anyone that you spoke to about that?

Simpson: My sister was the only person I knew—sorry—who knew about me being trans or something, even if I didn't quite understand it. I think I told her when I was about fourteen and she was twelve, because she kind of noticed I was wearing some of her stuff, and I was like, "Well I don't know why I'm wearing it but it's cool and it's different than boy's clothing, and next time we go to Old Navy if I give you cash can you go to the checkout line and buy a skirt that's a size or two bigger than you are for me? That way I don't have to wear your stuff and my stuff will actually fit me!" She kind of bought into it, I didn't have to coax her as much as I expected to. Then around age eighteen I was about to go off to college and I said, "You know at some point I think I'm going to be your sister." She was sixteen and she was kind of getting into this, you know, feminism spurt and was like, "Okay, I don't really know much beyond that because I'm sixteen and you're my big... whatever, but yeah this doesn't seem new to me and it's probably a thing." The other thing is that growing up there was not the information there is now; there was also not the media to dispense that information through. I tell people I played with digital cameras in high school—and that sounds kind of cliché now, because every Millennial has how many of them in their phone, in their... whatever else that takes pictures—but I didn't have a digital camera really worth its salt until college. I got my first little pocket digital camera that was any good and really rivaled film at the time, and before that everything was film pictures. I never took pictures because I knew, growing up I was cross-dressing all the time in my parents mirror—this big wall on the closet doors across their bedroom—I'd go in their when no one was home because everyone was at sports or something else. My parents were soccer moms and dads and whatever things my siblings were at—me too—but on certain days I was home alone and I knew what times they'd be back, and I would take these long times to pose in front of these mirrors but would never take a picture. I mean, there was such a thing as a rear camera so you could see what you were taking, but even still I knew that the one-hour photo shop in town had this conveyor belt that went all up and down the sides of the counter, with the desk and the register, where all the photos came up out of the developing machine, up around the top and down into the envelopes. When I was a kid we used to count how many of ourselves we saw, "Hey look that's me, but I saw myself twice!" It was a competition when we got back from the beach or from Disney world, of how many times we were the star of the picture—maybe it was a group shot, those didn't count [laughing]—I was worried, somebody would have to develop these and would see these. So now today we have these two things that came up almost simultaneously, which was digital

cameras by which you can basically take pictures and show them to nobody—not to mention instantly see them yourself—without anybody else intervening; at the same time you can also put them on YouTube and show them to everybody! So, all of a sudden there's such a larger narrative and foundation of narratives, including this public library project here in New York, of trans discussion and conversation about what it's like to be, and of seeing people go through successful—both physical and social—transitions. Because when I was growing up on AOL and hearing the deedeedeedaadaadaa, and typing in “transgender”, maybe, or “transsexual” perhaps back then—this is not that long ago. Or “Harold Benjamin Syndrome”, which was kind of the code word for it because he was one of the pioneers in the development of transition protocols that one could use as a doctor, that got replaced by the World Professional Association on Transgender Health, or WPATH, but they used to be called the Harold Benjamin Standards. I digress, my point is you saw narratives, these one-page Geocities web logs—and I'm not saying “blogs” they were called web logs, they weren't called blogs yet [laugh]—of older individuals, at least older than me, in their thirties; forties; fifties, who were saying, “I have to be a woman now, and this is going to destroy my marriage. My kids aren't talking to me, and my wife” and I was mostly looking at trans women so they were usually married to a woman as a cis-gender, heterosexual couple “doesn't know what the heck to do with me, at all.” My promise to myself was that I'm not going to get to that point, that I'm not going to drag another soul into tormenting my soul. That was a promise I tried to make to myself, and thank God I've been able to generally keep. At the same time what I also realized is that gender identity is a time bomb within yourself, that you will continue to masculinize or feminize as per your body's assignment regardless of what your gender within yourself happens to be if you don't intervene. I feared getting older and I feared a lot that it was too late—well I already have a beard, can I get rid of it?—and I didn't know all the options I had. I already have hairy legs, I already have this skeletal structure, and will I even look presentable as a female? And vis versa a trans man might think the same if they have the body parts that they're developing as a female-bodied person or female-assigned person, and it's terrifying. So, it took a lot of time and honestly it took a lot of the people a little bit younger than me, who were putting up everything on YouTube as if it was always there—because it wasn't for me—and me seeing those narratives and saying, “Hey, wait a second, if this twenty-year-old can do it why the hell am I not doing it at twenty-five? I damn well better or there's not going to be anything left of me by thirty.” And, I did, and thankfully there was, and there is, and it's not the thirty I thought I would be at. It's not the thirty I wasn't sure I'd make it to, it's the thirty where I'm a generally well-adjusted, generally accepted, thriving and somewhat outspoken young woman. I'm lucky enough to say that my mom is pretty proud of the strong Jewish woman she raised for a son.

Ramsay: Yeah. I'm interested in hearing more about your relationship to YouTube and the internet. You know you're someone who was alive for this big shift from the modem to social media now and how has that shaped—you've spoken a little bit about transition videos on YouTube, but do you have more to say about that?

Simpson: Well, it's kind of the motto I've taken on now that not hiding my past will help somebody else to stop hiding their future, but the visibility the media offers and also the media's insatiable appetite to jump the shark, is part of what's bringing transgender issues to the national

conversation. That could not have happened anywhere near this fast or with this much positive pressure upon the world, and positive representations to counteract the vocal minority of negative impressions and hypotheticals and fear-mongering that's out there. This is because we can disseminate these movies, these stories, and like I said you know it started out when I was watching television growing up the trans person was kind of a novelty, and TV shows were trying to equalize themselves in terms of race so you had, you know, Full House on at eight-o'clock on TGIF and then you had Family Matters—the black sitcom—come on at eight-thirty. You started to pick up that they were trying to balance these things, and they tried to do more female leads and then they tried to introduce gay characters. Then, all of a sudden—and I kind of say this very tongue-in-cheekily and jokingly—I say you know for example the show Glee kind of beat the gay to death. Not in the any way violent way of beating a gay person but in the—they explored so many gay plot lines that they made it hard for themselves to come up with something that was novel and rather—oh my gosh this show has six gay characters within the main recurring cast, we're going to put a seventh in? No, they started delving into trans issues and one trans person wasn't enough, and then came two trans people and possibly more when the show ended with a lot of other circumstances around that which I know were external to anything to do with trans, but merely to show that the gay thing was not new anymore and the media was looking for a new story to tell. I don't know where it's going go necessarily beyond trans, except right now we're in this little window there's a beautiful spotlight for intersex and non-binary people where we're really starting to delve into the stories of people who don't see themselves as male or female. Who don't see themselves within these artificial and sometimes arbitrary constructs, irregardless what their bodies might lead someone to think just looking at them. I think that's really beautiful, and I think there's so many parallels that the media can let us see but sometimes also suppresses. You know, I tell people—I was doing a talk yesterday—and I was explaining that there are as many genders as there are political parties in this country. Two make a hell of a lot of noise, and the rest struggle to be taken seriously. I think that's a great analogy, and if you meet somebody who's part of those other parties it isn't necessarily right for you to call them undecided, “Oh you're just eventually going to have to pick one of the two major candidates.” Or you're wasting your proverbial vote or existence. We don't want to call them confused, some of those people can be the most literate and educated on the issues that I've ever met. Some of those people can be phenomenally intelligent and have a different set of beliefs to myself; we call them independent, we call them third-party. Or even within the constructs of these two big tents that we have there's seldom consensus, and there's lots of infighting. You don't know everything about women by dating a single one; you don't know everything about men by dating a single one—well maybe you do, but the fact you're laughing as I say that implies how ludicrous the statement is, and even the stereotypes. I love that right now we're exploring that non-binary space. I don't really know where the media is going to go next with any of that and what they're going to do when trans stories become cliché, and part [fan starts in background] of the regular discussion of sitcom or a presentation. I think there are people in the polyamorous community who would love to see their stories told of multiple relationships that were based upon trust, understanding, and equity of power. On the other hand I think there so much indentured—not indentured but um, build up of stories based upon of multiple relationships that were everything but I almost wonder how to do that without making them boring. I leave the polyamorous people to take control of their narrative and I can't wait to see how they tell beautiful stories

about their lives because I'm—being in the trans community; and in the geeky community; and in the secular Jewish community where I intersect with so many different circles. All these people in non-traditional relationships are also within those circles and I get to hear stories, I get invited into homes where there are different parenting strategies and family structures, and the beauty of a family is a beautiful family whatever shape and size it takes. So, I can't wait to see all of those things and I'm just here to tell my little end of the tale.

Ramsay: Yeah. So you've mentioned your Jewish upbringing and being a Jewish woman now, were you raised secular, or were you raised in a Jewish tradition with religion?

Simpson: I was raised in a secular household that was involved within our Jewish community, so a lot of the general line is drawn around, "Do you observe the dietary laws?" The answer is no. Did I believe, so to speak, in a God that is big and beautiful and wants us to draw closer to itself? And for God I kind of play around with pronouns; itself, themselves, sometimes I'll say himself for simplicity but I'd never try to imply that God is necessarily male or should be seen solely as such. I see God as all of those other things [fan in background stops] and what I love about Judaism and our religion is that they teach people to not only understand but to question, and there's an appreciation within Judaism that, in a sense, the commentary—[following sentence difficult to understand/may not be accurate] so the tome-rubbing, the book, and then the tome of being the writings on the oral law that commentates on it and explains how to follow it, and then the commentaries on commentaries, and the commentaries on the commentaries on the commentaries, never stopped to this day—so that everything I write in a sense can be almost as valid as any of our sages. What I love about it is that we never stopped writing, and I used this as an example when I teach about trans issues because I say, "Look at our bible, and in the bible you have this one group of animals—crustaceans, so your shrimps, your crabs and lobsters—described as shellfish, and you have this other class of animals—cetaceans, so your whales, your dolphins, your porpoises—described as big fish. Now what are neither of these two animals? Actually what we call a fish!" So if you're calling everything a fish you're kind of doing a disservice to yourself, and maybe to a limit extent of the conversation that would be sufficient, but like I said we never stopped writing books; we kept learning. We, and the Judea-Christian tradition, are not the only reason but part of why we're sitting here in a public library in some of the most prime real estate in New York! Because books matter, and writing matters, and there's so much more in this world to describe, that I believe our big and beautiful creator gave us the power—and expects us to do with our free will, and our inspirations and our passions—and how to direct those for good. So, I tell people today, seeing only male and female as God created is seeing only fish. It doesn't invalidate the existence of male or female—or of fish—but if we call everything a fish or we think there can only be fish we're missing out on a much bigger and more exciting picture, and that's not the direction I think our God wants us to go as that God's creations. I think there's a different direction we need to go, both in terms of learning to be more boundless in our loving and our appreciation and our embrace of one another—which in itself is a worship of God and Heaven above—but also in being stewards of the world that we were given. To protect these animals, to protect these diverse creations whatever species or gender they happen to be, and if you can see more of them you can do the right thing by all of them. If you call everything fish you can't protect the whales.

Ramsay: Right. So I want to backtrack a little, we were talking about your life in high school. Um... [laughs] and I was wondering if—did you go to a public high school?

Simpson: I went to a public suburban high school.

Ramsay: Okay, so what was the expectation around continuing education like? You know, what did—was your family's expectations in terms of college?

Simpson: Oh my parents expected me to go to whatever college I got into and made me happy, the same went for all of my siblings. It was never an issue of whether or not we were going to college, I think if we had had other aspirations, whether it would have been towards service or towards vocations, and joining a guild of something like that, within that in that realm. That's definitely not unprecedented within my family, my grandfather was a master electrician and contractor and my other grandfather was a contractor, so they were—and also college educated and served in the military—so any of those things my parents would have supported. I think they were a little bit more surprised when I wanted to go onto medical school, not because they didn't think I could do it or I shouldn't do it as far as being a passionate and appropriate human being to be in that kind of interaction with a vulnerable person. I had been serving as an EMT in my community, I had been involved in all kinds of extra curriculums, and I'd studied engineering with a focus on medical devices up to that point. I think they were more concerned about will this make you happy the way being a physician has turned out to be in the current climate; that it isn't necessarily the secure position; that it isn't necessarily the comfortable position; that it isn't necessarily the place where you have as much power and less bureaucracy than you might in other careers. I think they were a little apprehensive at first but still fully supportive of me going, and of me going through the application process and were thrilled when I got in. You know, what mother doesn't want to say "My son" or my daughter "the doctor!" [laugh] I mean, I like to joke back then I said, "You know you probably look at me and realize I don't want to be referred to as mister anymore. Don't worry in three more years you'll be able to say doctor." Well that didn't pan out unfortunately and I ended up taking a hiatus from that particular set of studies...[door opens]

Unknown male voice: Hi, sorry...

Ramsay: Hi

Unknown male voice: Hi there, we're just checking on—looking for gray chairs [unintelligible]

Ramsay: Okay that's fine.

Unknown male voice: [unintelligible]

Ramsay: Okay thanks.

Unknown male voice: Alright. [door closes]

Simpson: We can edit that out.

Ramsay: [laughs] Sorry for that interruption.

Simpson: That's okay. What was I saying a second ago?

Ramsay: You were talking about medical school, that it didn't pan...

Simpson: Oh yeah. So unfortunately that didn't—we can start from here again, I'll compose myself. [single click or clap, quiet laugh] Unfortunately that didn't pan out and I've taken an indefinite

hiatus from my medical education. What I love is I've had a chance to attain some of that background and then bring that into my advocacy work that I'm doing now and it's given me a real inspiration to say, "Hey perhaps rather than being a physician myself I can help teach physicians by listening to something like this. I can guide people who are working with trans people all over the country and perhaps world." And then that is an equally valid use of my time, and perhaps I can do more for a community that I am passionate about than I can as one single physician. It doesn't mean that I couldn't one day go back to medical school and become a physician, it would be complicated and the math is simply different when you start something like that—on that path older and later in life, but anything is possible. I love that my parents instilled within me an expectation—in my siblings as well—not just that we would get through public school and high school and go off to college, but that we would all have our coming of age Bar and Bat Mitzvahs, that we would all continue in Hebrew school through our high school graduation; that we did things that were both educational with our pursuits, but also socially minded. So whatever we chose to do—and all of my siblings and I at some point or another played in the college marching band, I didn't stay in it for all four years but my sisters stayed in for five each, because they went on to get extra degrees or do other projects. We were all involved in our campus Hillel, the Jewish organization on campus; we've all been traveling whether it's studying abroad or going to Israel and learning more about our culture and our heritage; and we've all been socially minded as well in any number of different ways through our work and through our outside of school engagements and involvements. I'm excited to take all those values my parents bashed into my head bash them into my own children's head one day. Like I said my parents are nagging me for grand kids, and one day I will be more than happy to oblige, and I think that I will hopefully be a lovely mommy.

Ramsay: Um, so what was your transition to college like, from high school?

Simpson: [sighs] My transition from high school to college I think was very similar to other people's, that all of a sudden you see this much bigger worlds and you realize just how small the potatoes were in your own home stew. At the same time there was a tremendous breath of relief because all of the issues I had had in high school with being teased, and this complete flip on its head—as I said—of how I was perceived as someone who was an actual perpetrator of bullying as opposed to a survivor of it. That, like I said by the end of my high school career had kind of proven

and dis proven and thrown away, but the damage had been done to me of having that perception, then coming into a place where I literally had a fresh start—but it also gave me the time and the space to start cross-dressing and meeting other people who like wearing women’s clothing. I sought cross-dressing at that point because that what I tried to call it to both do it and normalize it because there wasn’t even a trans presence on campus yet. I think my sophomore year I met a freshman who was transitioning, she was probably the first other trans person I had ever met and this was groundbreaking to me, but I watched her struggle. I watched her try to be taken seriously as a girl, even by the administration of that school who didn’t want to put her in a dorm room with another girl, and she ended up giving her a single room to herself for the lower price of a double room as some kind of a compromise that was really just putting her off in a pen because they didn’t know what to do with her. Even me, I was still proud to have a trans friend and I wasn’t quite with it yet, that I would say to my friends, “Hey do you see her? She’s trans, that’s so cool!” When she wasn’t in the room, and it was me subconsciously trying to feel out their approval but it was coming at her expense, and I felt terrible about it... in retrospect; at the time it didn’t even occur to me how wrong and awful that was. I’ve been lucky enough to do a lot of personal growth through my own transition, and just grow! I would never do that again, but yeah it was a time of feeling out it, was a time of trying to find new places for myself. I think a lot of people do—I had bit of a rough freshmen year the way everybody else does because I wasn’t so good on time management. I wasn’t out drinking and partying, but I wasn’t the best planner and I took a calculus class that was a bit over my head so it kind of wrecked my GPA, but I did really well second semester and brought it back up to where I wanted it to be to keep the scholarship I was offered—and I was accepted to go study abroad in Europe in my sophomore year, at the end of my freshman year—so I did just that, I was thrilled!

Ramsay: Yeah, um, so you mentioned you had kind of found community, or being involved with other people who were cross-dressing—does that mean you had an awareness of any sort of LGBT presence on campus, or are they different communities?

Simpson: Well the cross-dressing at that time was drag performers in the LGBT group on the campus—and also other friends of mine that through classes and other things like theater groups who just did costuming and cosplay, whether for Halloween or other times throughout the year for whatever project they were working on, so that gave me more access to women’s clothing and it gave me a couple of places to go out. I think it was my senior year in college actually—so well after my adjustment time—they were hosting the campus’s first drag ball and I still have a single picture from it, taken on the outside of a group of about seven or eight of us who all went together and you can tell who I am because I’m the one female-clothed person wearing traditional drag around a bunch of guys in male drag—or drab as it’s sometimes called—and one of them, Elaine—not Elaine excuse me—Ileana... Wow, mixing up people—she was actually my date and bought me a corsage and I bought her a boutineer, and it was the cutest thing ever and it was kind of like making up for the prom I never had. You could kind of tell from me at that point that I wasn’t doing this drag for the sake of drag, I was doing this as—dressing up as a woman—to the extent possible to pass and be perceived as a woman; pass is a horribly loaded word in its own sense but that’s the word that there is to explain that phenomenon to be appearing, you know, typically as a female. It was just a burden lifted off me and I still wasn’t quite ready to take

the next steps and say that I am going to give up on ever dating a straight girl as a straight boy, and being happy in that way, but yeah this is not going away. I still look at that picture sometimes and remember all the other people in that picture—all eight of them are to this day my closest friends from college. I still talk to all of them regularly and see them as often as I possibly can although I think only one of them actually lives in New York—they're all spread around the country. It's just crazy that that group of people—that we just had this moment of us all going to this drag ball, the first one held on the campus at least as long as I can remember. Maybe—God knows the campus is one hundred-fifty years old or something—their may have been one before that but at least in the recent times it was something incredible.

Ramsay: Were there other places you found community at college?

Simpson: There were for every other type of community I was looking for, whether it was theater things that I was still interested in, the short-lived experience I had for a year and a half being in a band before I realized just wasn't the level of musician I needed to be to continue that at a college level and put the time in that it needed when I was focused on my engineering classes—my engineering classes of course themselves, and doing research projects, so I was finding all kinds of communities. I did try once to go to a transgender support group, this one happened to be across the river from Boston University at MIT in one of their buildings in the basement. They had trans support—I want to say once a month, or maybe once a week—group, and I went for the first time. I'd asked a friend of mine where it was because they didn't want to publicize it and you had to ask to know what the room was and the meeting time so you couldn't really show up their unannounced. They kind of maybe knew I was coming but didn't know much more about me then that because I wore this Hawaiian shirt. I mean, obviously I wasn't wearing women's clothing yet, I would never go out of the house let alone the dorm room that way unless it was Halloween or to a drag ball or something, but—Rocky Horror was the other place I went frequently, and then you could dress up in drag as well and wear fishnets or whatever else you wanted to—but this particular support group I went to, presenting as a male granted because I—that was my body assignment, and I was wearing this hat even indoors and sunglasses and a scarf trying to mask myself a little bit. I ultimately got inside, got really hot wearing all that, so I'm like forget this I'm taking it off and I'm just going to try to—I don't think I had shaven that day so I was kind of stubbly from the last few days of just facial hair growth. So in this group you introduced yourself and I don't think I listed my pronouns because I was afraid to say, "Oh it's He and Him." Because that would mean I wanted to be called He and Him when I didn't, but I didn't want to say She and Her yet because that would have felt to me really weird if I was looking like a man. I think I just said my name was whatever it was, and we went all around in a circle and they would all say something affirming about you, like "Hey it's nice to meet you, thank you for coming!" And by the end as they're coming back around towards me one of the people says, "Well you look great, you look really handsome." And the next person catches on and says, "Yeah you look amazing!" And by the time it came back to me I realized oh my God, they think I'm a female-to-male transgender person, and that this is me post transition, I don't know if I even make a convincing boy, how am I ever going to make a convincing girl? I was so terrified from that, that I honestly admit, I didn't go back for another two years. So the community I most desperately needed was the one that I took a very knee-jerk, honestly irresponsible reaction to

a tiny misconception that I probably could have quickly cleared up, and I think I even did within the meeting itself. I think we were having the conversation we needed to be having, but the moment I left it it was back to oh my God, this is just not going to happen. I used that, probably, of the beginning of one of my purge cycles, in kind of the binge and purge cycle you have with amassing female clothing. I disposed a lot of it, I just put it out of my mind for a year or so, and then it was really when I was still living in Boston after I graduated when I started to say, "Hey, you know what, I'm starting to get a better idea of what's out there, I should start talking to one of the clinics here that does trans health for adults." I had graduated out of the pediatric stuff whether I had wanted to or not, and that was kind of scary because I never actually called them, and by the time I did they were all, "You're too old for us call this person." Which is like, again going back to that time bomb thing where you've missed your window. So I finally got involved with the trans clinic in downtown Boston—or, kind of in the periphery, but near Fenway Park—and, you know, said, "I really think this is what I need to do, I want to start with just banking sperm." So that one day I can have biological children, if my partner or a surrogate happens to have a uterus, and again that depends on if I marry a cisgender woman or a transgender man. There's different permutations of how my life could go, but having my own children is something I wanted to keep an option open for. So I started doing that and figured well this isn't changing me in any demonstrable way, and I was able to get a discount on it and write it off by saying I was a volunteer EMT in New Jersey, and as a first responder I could potentially injure my genitals and they had a discount package built in to the sperm bank I chose for military and first responders—which was generally police and firefighters, but I was a volunteer EMT so they accepted that, and as well they should. That was not the actual reason I was doing it, but they didn't need to know that. Again, the less people knew about what I was doing as I was doing it the better because plausible deniability was key, and if I could navigate and make progressive movements without reaching my plausible deniability I was golden. Really, after I started banking sperm, and actually one of the sperm bank attendants came back to me one day and said, "Hey, just so you know, you're banking this amount of sperm per visit which is... not on the, like, pathological, or not on the," what's the term I'm looking for, "not on the you-have-an-issue end of things, it's within the normal range, but it's on the lower end of normal range. Would you want to consider talking to your doctor about testosterone supplements to boost your sperm count? So that you can do better storage." All I could think to myself was, "Wow, that's a problem I'm not going to solve. The last thing I want is more testosterone, if anything I'm working up the courage to go on anti-androgens and estrogens, so that's out of the question." I think that was kind of the point where I said you know what, whatever I've got booked so far and just chilling—literally just chilling—is probably enough, it's time for me to start hormones. I think it was getting to that point, and it was that conversation, because I could have gone on banking sperm forever because you never know when it's enough sperm to bank. Like, you don't bank just one vial because one vial is basically one encounter with an ovulating person if you use the turkey baster technique. So your chances it latching on—literally—and leading on to a pregnancy let alone a viable one, is somewhere in the twenty to thirty percent range they tell you, so they say about every four can work out to a—but that's not a guarantee. At a certain points it's like, do you need a dozen? Do you need two-dozen? Who the heck knows. It depends on how many kids you want to have and quite frankly just how lucky you are, but I had a certain number which isn't worth disclosing, it's kind of private to me. I said—and it wasn't a lot believe me, it wasn't like I had fifty versus a

hundred—it's like do I need, you know, five or do I need fifteen kind of range. I decided this is enough, and it's time for me to start hormones, because I know when I do take hormones whether or not I stay on them that is going to render me at least in the short term impotent and infertile.

Ramsay: So it was a conversation with someone at the sperm bank that made you...?

Simpson: I think that was the trigger—

Ramsay: [affirmative vocalization] Mm hmm.

Simpson: —but it was something I'd been working up to for a year of doing the—every couple weeks or months—sperm bank whenever I had time to make an appointment, go down there, and do what you have to do which is not the most, eh... It's kind of awkward, but people do it and it's what you need to do to access your sperm. You do that and you get on with your day, and you hand them the little dish and they go on their way to go ahead and stick it into the freezer. I'm sure they treat it with God knows what on the way, and clean it, and make it all prim and proper but basically that was the time when I said, "Okay, it's time for me to try the things that are not completely independent from my body, but try the things that are reversible." I'd already been doing some of the things that were completely reversible, I grew my hair out. Even in high school I kind of had the Johnathan Taylor Thomas bowl cut, and it was me trying to—in college—have the have the boyish pony tail which a lot of college guys do who aren't trans, but if you happen to be trans it's a good thing again that you can write it off as just being a hippie or a hipster or who knows what you want to call yourself at that point. But, I did it and now I said, "It's time to try hormones." And once I tried hormones—I started those in 2012—and I've been on them now for just about five years, I think I'll have my five year hormone anniversary coming up in June, and... Yeah, it was right for me. It was taking hormones just—even the sperm banking—but especially on the hormones, it wasn't that it made me a female instantly but it abated the gender dysphoria. It said hey I'm dealing with this now, I'm facing it head on, I'm not repressing it again, I'm not going out another day as a guy and telling myself this is how I have to be. That alone got me through the next stages, and I was taking hormones throughout the beginning of medical school. It really got to the point where, in the second year of medical school, I was being confused for a woman because I had feminized myself sufficiently that if I wasn't wearing overly masculine clothing people weren't really sure what to make of me. They thought I was effeminate, possibly gay. I had also started getting laser hair removal on my face and it became a point where I had become more perceivable as a female so when I bumped that completely with a feminine hair style, with feminine makeup and putting on a bra, all of a sudden it was, "It's Hannah," and that's how I was able to make that final leap. Now, this is my story, the milestones and the end goals are different for every trans person. Some people socially transition, and ask and deserve to be respected as whatever gender they tell you they are before they take a gram of estrogen; before they bank sperm, even if they never do; before they wear any kind of clothing that indicates a gender assignment or expression. In my case it was very much the social transition, came after the buildup of freeing myself of this male part of myself, and then building this female part of myself to the point where continuing to present as a male

would have been almost unsustainable. I had a teacher in my class in medical school, a doctor, come up to me and kind of looked at my chest, and was like, “Are you having cancer treatments? We just had a talk on breast cancer awareness and you’ve been growing breasts the last few months, is there something you’re not telling us about some medical issue you’re having that’s causing this?” And she thought it was secondary to some kind of treatment I was having, because we learned that breast growth can be a complication of hormonal issues; not necessarily in the intended effect of tweaking your hormones intentionally, or the intended effect of tweaking your hormones. I kind of had to say, “Let’s not talk about this in the hall, let’s go into your office tomorrow.” And so, I explained this to her—and she’s South American—has a thick accent—and I said, “So you know how you said I was growing breasts, and remember me at Halloween when I dressed up as a girl?” As a Star Trek character actually, wearing the red Uhura dress in fact, going back to my Trekkie nerdy-dom I wore a red Uhura to medical school over Halloween a couple months prior to this conversation, and she says, “Oh yes you were so beautiful! Oh my gosh I didn’t even recognize you but then I saw it and thought that’s such an amazing costume!” And I said, “Well, that’s kind of the direction things are heading.” She didn’t quite understand, I said, “That’s how I identify and this is part it.” And her jaw just dropped like in the cartoons, “I never expected that... [attempted South American accent]” Like, in her thick South American accent I can’t do justice to, and she gave me this huge hug and all of a sudden realized that—you know this was maybe November or December—and coming back in January the intention was to not be a male in how I comported myself day in and day out throughout the medical school. This was kind of her catching me and—not a bad thing but just what was happening, and that was... Interesting, and a little embarrassing but at the same time it was good to know who my allies would be.

Ramsay: As your social transition progressed do you have any other stories like that, as you were coming out to your friends and family and everything?

Simpson: Oh I could talk for hours I’m sure—and I’m sure you’re happy to have me do just that—about all of these stories, there’s countless ones! You have to be a little more specific than that in a sense, but there were the good and the bad in that same medical school a girl in my class—like I said the students were generally apathetic if not supportive of my transition—but one decided to walk up to me in the middle of the hallway and grab and squeeze my breasts and start teasing me, “When are you going to get me estrogen?” As if this were another drug traded on the classroom, you know in the... in the seats like Adderall or something—not that I ever traded it but just that I knew it was going on—and she made it out as if this were some other kind of commodity, forgetting the fact that her body makes estrogen on its own—not in the way mine does and I take it supplementally. I had to get on her and explain how completely uncalled for, hurtful, invasive, and completely unbecoming of a future physician that touches bodies—especially in places where we are trained to differentiate a good touch from a bad touch—and trusted to comport ourselves as professionally as possible in doing our jobs, often with our hands in very intimate ways as caregivers, as doctors. I brought this sentiment exactly to the dean of students of this school, who said to me I’ll never forget, “Help me in understanding, how much of this are you just going to have to take as students adapt to your situation?” I was in shock, like, how do you even answer a question like that? Why is it even being asked of you? Why are the

victims shamed for being assaulted within these walls? None! Absolutely none, and it has nothing to do with my situation. I shouldn't have my breasts grabbed and squeezed if I wasn't trans—if I wasn't even a girl if I was a boy it would still be inappropriate to vocalize any medication that I am taking for others to hear. It was made clear to me that if I pursue this further that maybe every other student in the class would think I was on some kind of vendetta if I got her punished and if I pushed the issue—whether in the school or with the police— they wouldn't want to interact with me at all for fear that they'd be next. So, even if it was justified that she be expelled I don't know if she even got a slap on the wrist, and needless to say now she's a resident here in this area and I am in efficacy and that is sometimes how the world works, and I'd like to change that. I'd like to change it for myself, or at least for other people. There's all kinds of stories with my transition and they're not all happy but that's—the majority are happy or I wouldn't be here. It only takes one sad story and you're sometimes not in control of it, but on the whole the beauty of the experience and not just of opening myself up to people in the world, but of having them open up to me in return has changed me as a human being. I say my gender—I didn't change gender, gender changed me. It changes other people too, it changes how I see them and how they see me. This is a story that I'll get into that I like to call the Jewish Boston love story—well semi-love story. So, there was once a nice Jewish boy—me—that met a nice Jewish girl at a young adult community within the Jewish auspices that specifically intended upon us meeting and hopefully one day procreating and then donating lots of money—in either order, but as long as you did both. [laughing] You're smiling, did you ever go to Jewish stuff?

Ramsay: Yes [laughing].

Simpson: [laughing] Okay so you know how those places are, yeah? I see you grin. [several moments of shared laughter] So, she and I—or, well, I'll get—so this nice Jewish boy and this nice Jewish girl jumped the punchline. The Jewish boy quote-unquote is me, but this nice Jewish boy and this nice Jewish girl developed a bit of a rapport and I tried to ask her out many times but it never really went anywhere, and it was kind of like we were friends; we were friendly; we had great conversations; we were so on the same wavelength in terms of what we believe in and cared about. We talked so wonderfully even the Rabbi noticed this, but, I mean I was never really able to seal the deal. It was always like oh, our schedules don't work out or maybe another time and it was kind of like... A lot of relationships like that end up that way, this didn't seem abnormal. Just, it happened. Anyway, the seasons change as they always do, and it was not early Spring and the Pride Parade was coming to town. And, this contingent of often misunderstood; often ostracized; somewhat different from mainstream people—the Jews—made a contingent within a larger population of often misunderstood, marginalized, and ostracized people—the queers, because there are queer Jews. So, there are Jewish contingents in queer parades, their queer contingents in Jewish parades when they're allowed, and this was with an organization in Boston specifically was for LGBT outreach to Jews, and programming. I'd been going to them for a few months—kind of like I'd get home, get dressed up as a female, and then go to their Shabbat dinner, and the other times in the month that they weren't hosting one I'd go to the mainstream stuff—where I'd be a boy talking to girls. So I was kind of living this duality, and I'd get their dressed as a female in public—this is a little before I'm on hormones but I'm going out more and more and getting more comfortable at least in short skirts and presenting myself as a girl—and,

who do I see there? The other nice Jewish girl. So, it turned out that, you know, nice Jewish girl number two—er, or nice Jewish girl original, happened to be interested in other Jewish girls, and this was her first time coming to the parade or any of the LGBT programming with this other Jewish group. And nice Jewish boy actually identified as nice Jewish girl as well, and this was her first time at the Pride Parade. So there was this this kind of mutual, “What the hell are you doing here?”, but at the same time in light of new information that we both had about each other, take a wild guess what the first thing I did was... I asked her out again! And it still lead nowhere but the beauty is when you put out, and you seek out more little bits of information about people, or little bits more of people, and you reach a more authentic place you can discover these points of connection that could have never existed previously. We were both trying to feign the other person’s anticipated expectation of cisgender heteronormativity, and we were both missing the boat. Then when we both realized we were actually both lesbian women it made a lot more sense both why it didn’t work before, and there was at least a totally different chance that it could work moving forward. Like I said, it didn’t but I gave it a shot and I think that’s the most beautiful thing that can come out of a revelation like this is that when I open up about myself other people feel empowered. That’s why I come out here and I tell these stories over and over, and I hope to for a long long time not need to because it means they will be out there for people to listen to.

Ramsay: Yeah, I’m thinking about how you’re an advocate now—that’s what you do professionally—and I’d love to hear about you coming into your political consciousness. Like, where was the first moment you felt this need to organize?

Simpson: I think as trans people are—and I think this also applies to gay and lesbian people, and any other kind of activist honestly—that our activisms are directly tied to our personal experiences and you start to realize as you try to do things and walls are put up around you, that they’re there and as you get more involved in any kind of organization you start to learn how it works and you start to learn how you can impact change in that organization at any level. So why not suit those changes to your needs? A great example of this was, I was was in medical school and I became involved in the medical school student government. We were usually the ones who were trying to argue for rescheduling exams after snow days to give people more time, or over points on questions that were ambiguous. Things like that, the normal announcements; goings on; extracurricular activities; but also I said to myself I’m trying to access transgender care and both the American Medical Association and its counterpart the American Osteopathic Association—as well as a lot of other non-physician bodies like the Psychological Association, the Pediatric Association within medicine, and all of these reputable organizations have in their bylaws already passed resolutions saying that transition care and medical attention to transgender people is medically necessary—so why is the insurance my school offers coming with a line item in the exclusion that says “We do not cover gender related care for transition, whether medical or surgical.” This was a question I brought up, and I said, “Well if I’m going to be making resolutions to this organizing body, why don’t we make a resolution saying that we should heed our own by-laws that say this care is medically necessary, and thus any school that is affiliated with this medical body—or accredited by—should provide inclusive health care to its students, its faculty and physicians, as well as its residents and their partners, spouses, and children?” As you build on each of those circles it becomes lots and lots of people, and we then have this

because you don't know who's transgender, but you know if you have enough people somebody has a transgender child; somebody has a transgender spouse; or someone is transitioning themselves, and here is a great way to respect our medical ethics and our pledge to do good and to expand out capability to help more people with the existing precedent we already have that this care is necessary by requiring our insurers to follow suit, and to cover this care so we can provide the best possible care we can. With lots of supporting evidence to why this is useful, why this is not cost-ineffective, especially compared to the co-morbidities depression and anxiety, and anything that happens by not transitioning when you are called to that within yourself. So, that's one of the first places I started becoming and advocate, and the first time I presented the resolution it wasn't quite perfectly written, and it was something I was really the only one standing up for, and it was basically torn apart. But, at the same time no one at my medical school was really putting up any resolutions at all within the body that applied to all the medical schools, so even just having a resolution even if it wasn't a good one was still was a step that was very well received by my faculty. They were proud of me for stepping up and doing something even if they didn't quite realize it applied to me yet. While the first time I did it it didn't go too well what came from it is two other students from a different medical school said, "Hey, we love this can we take a stab at it?" They rewrote it from the ground up, put all kinds of extra sources and footnotes into it, and then we could have up to five so we had two more co-sponsors on it from two other schools. So all of a sudden it became this four school, five person team effort—which is exactly what they want to see—and then all of us were coming together and working on this and we actually passed part of it. It still got bogged down in a lot of procedural things and I'm not happy with the outcome that didn't have as much teeth as I wanted. They kind of passed the part that said, "We should explore this," but not the part that said, "and we're going to set a goal for ourselves to actually do anything." Which is kind of like, how politics works, and that's where I started to learn more about the persistence of it. That really never left me, to the point where as different votes came up, as different things entered the national conversation about use of bathrooms by transgender people, athletics, everything else especially when they hit my own high school I said, "I need to be involved with this. I owe it to my previous—my older self to be there, to be part of this environment for the kids who are going through this now." Because I found out there were three transgender people in the same school, in my school—myself included—and none of us knew anything about each other. Two of those three of us are no longer welcome in their parent's household, and two of those three moved out to the West Coast for that reason. That puts me kind of as the lucky one in three and I don't like those odds for youth growing up today, because especially when our government says—when Donald Trump says, "Oh this is actually a states rights issue, so I'm repealing the Federal Government guidance by Barack Obama." It's not just becoming a state by state issue, or a zip code by zip code issue. As Conservatives want to write it off as what works for them in any given municipality, it becomes a household by household issue; living room by living room. When you have blanket policies in place that affirm trans existence it gives kids who are in places where their parents don't want to believe in this at first a leg to stand on. It tells them real, they are loved, and that if you bring this out to the community they will help you get through it and they will help your parents get on board too. The opposite is basically sanctioning abuse, it's saying that the gender of your child is within your domain as a parent to control the same way their curfew is or whether they take piano lessons. It's not withing your prerogative let alone ability to control, just as it wasn't when

they came out and that's what I'm all about teaching, is that you should be excited to have a little boy or a little girl when they come out—I'm not trying to deconstruction gender, I'm just trying to add on that if that gender happens to change or evolve when your child is five years old; is fifteen years old; or is fifty years old, that's beautiful too. It doesn't make you a bad parent [fan starts in background] it makes you the best kind of parent there is.

Ramsay: What kind of work did you do at your old high school?

Simpson: So, when I came back to my old high school about a year ago they were just starting to have conversations on implementing a transgender affirming policy that would support the rights to trans students to be referred to by their appropriate, identified and requested pronouns within the classroom and to a certain extent on documentation—such as like, a student ID card that corresponded to their identity—and to be in all other ways considered within that gender-identity when it came to restroom use and any other place in which the school was gender segregated—locker rooms, etcetera. There are places where that comes up and then there are places where gender is not an issue anymore, like anybody can join the marching band for example. So, this was a tremendously beautiful thing, and it went a step further to say as well that the school was in the business of providing the best opportunities and the best environment for the student. There could be circumstances where the parent not being brought into this situation appropriately could be harmful to the child, so it was basically saying that it leaves administrators and faculty discretion on working with the student rather than immediately reporting back and saying to the parent, “Hey, I met with your student—they are doing this.” Or whatever it was, you know if your student cut class they're going to tell the parents immediately. If your student comes out as trans they wanted to say, “Well we don't necessarily want to tell the parents about this immediately if that's going to pose a risk.” So they wrote into it protections to say that, the same way if a faculty member found out that a student was sexually active in any way they could guide them to help that was within a protective class of information separate from what a parent would immediately find out. That was a beautiful thing that a lot of people thought was usurping parents rights in some kind of Board of Educational activism, but really it was doing the best thing by the kids. So I was there speaking out about that and was talking with elected officials as well as with the community—I hosted two community forums on gender-identity, basically telling a lot of the same story I'm telling right now for anybody in the community who wished to come. I actually wanted to host it at the high school, the high school said, “Well we really can't do it at the high school, not because you're an alum and would generally not be invited to speak here, but we don't want to offer a space for you and then get criticized that we're not offering space to someone who opposes you, even if we're fully behind this. We want you to do it in town.” So I asked the ambulance core I used to work for if I could use their board room for this forum and they were happy to have us their. They hose meetings there all the time for different organizations, and we're not in the way of the garage where the rig is so everything was fine, and people showed up and we talked about these issues and I broke them down as best I could. I explained how this helps students, how this doesn't hurt parents, but how we have to understand within this is the spectrum of parenting that comes with any other kind of issue a student could have. And I do not call being trans a disability, but with students who have special learning needs there are different ranges of places parents can be

from, “Well, okay school do what you think is best.” To, “You’re not doing enough, here’s how to do the best thing for my child.” To, “My child is totally fine and I’m not going to accept that he or she or they need some other kind of intervention.” And that can often stall a number of kids from getting the care they need. And parents, likewise on trans issues can be anywhere in that place, and a policy by the Board of Education has to incorporate those contingencies that protect the child because not every parent is not going to be their for them. In fact, we have plenty of precedent of parents who’ll push them out even within our own district. So that’s what I was their to speak about, and the reason this became so big in a sense was this was a relatively affluent school district in a major media market, and even though this had been in conversation for a while before it was brought to public forum it was one of the first schools that was working on this issue directly after the passage of North Carolina’s HB2 bill—which was the one that is supposed to designate the use of restrooms by birth certificate designation in public buildings, and also limits the state from having different municipalities enact their own LGBT affirming protections and anti-discrimination clauses. With the confluence of the timing plus the proximity to the New York market, this became a very large story within this media market and to a certain extent around the country of just how it would play out. It was neither the first district in New Jersey to do this nor the last since but it was a pivotal one because of the timing, and thus when I came out there it was good for me too as an advocate because I said, “I’m loyal to my school, I’ve been coming back here throughout my adulthood whether to see the musicals that my friend who was in high school with me actually came back to direct.” Over the past few years. Whether it was the decade I still had a sibling in the school so I was going to band performances, and choir, and graduation ceremonies, and all of those things. Whatever the things were that I was doing at the time, and I said at these Board of Education meetings that the students who are in the school now who have just spoken to you have come up and addressed this community with a grace and a distinction and a poise that is beyond their years, and a testament to the amazing educational opportunities that this district offers and just how well you train us for the world beyond these doors, but they should not have to expose themselves to this level of scrutiny—and quite frankly vitriol. People going up quoting bible verses, saying we’re all sinners and that God created male and female divine, and all of these things that sounded more reminiscent of the Scopes trial, and the attempt to ban evolution from the public school—then they do of a modern debate and discourse over a Board of Education policy. I tried to bring that out and say, “Hey, look a me. I’m an alumni of this district who has successfully transitioned, albeit later in life because it wasn’t an option as it is for these brave kids. I’m a little bit older, arguably more mature, and I’ve got nothing to loose so come talk to me and I’ll tell you all about this.” And, people in the community did and so did every major channel, ABC; NBC; Fox; CBS; and Telemundo. I even got a shout out of my name on the Howard Stern show when they went through the news round up.

Ramsay: So it’s quite an introduction to activism.

Simpson: Exactly and I said I want to keep this up, and I actually went down to North Carolina as a field organizer for the 2016 Presidential Election as well as the down ballet races. I was based first in [inaudible name] and then in Charlotte, and I said, “I’m a transgender woman, I want to be sent to the front lines.” I was promoted when I got down there to be the state-wide LGBTQ

constituency organizer liaising between the campaign and some of its allied non-profits, and trying to engage and lean in a little bit harder on anybody I could to do a little more, to explain just how important this is. I said quite simply, “The future of coming out depends upon who we vote in, and we have this chance right now to stand against hatred; bigotry; ignorance; quite frankly the subjugation and disgusting; awful; harassing treatment of women.”—at least by the presidential candidate. I like to make the point that the things that North Carolina was accusing transgender people of doing in bathrooms, our presidential candidate was actually bragging about having actually done—going into women’s changing rooms without permission or any reason to be there, grabbing people by their genitals, and every other imaginable thing that he was quite happy about. And I won’t say his name because I’ll leave that for the listeners in posterity to pick up the pieces on, but I don’t think it will be that hard. The same thing happened with the down ballot races too, especially the governor who we were able to bring over to the democratic ticket with someone who had vocally affirmed his support for trans rights and equality, and that was an amazing this to be a part of, to just have those conversations there on the front lines with as many people as possible. It wasn’t an official campaign event, but while I was in North Carolina I was invited by a friend of mine who was a psychiatrist to speak from experience as a transgender patient to a panel of mental health providers for the active duty army. Now the army only recently made it no longer an immediately dischargeable situation in being trans. It used to be that if you were trans it was considered paraphilia and a medical exemption, so you could be court martial with the result of a dishonorable discharge if you were transitioning or even caught considering. It was not applicable to Don’t Ask/Don’t Tell, it was in a separate part of military code, so when Don’t Ask/Don’t Tell was lifted and open gay and lesbian service was put out trans issues were still not addressed. Only about a year ago in May did they finally say, “Well, this can no longer be the singular reason that you are discharged from the army if it comes out.” Which has allowed a lot of open service members and current service members to transition with the defacto approval of their individual COs throughout the different branches and within their specific assignments. So it’s kind of a gray area where it’s happening now and the military wants to train its providers how to care for these people because it can, so I have this beautiful distinction of being one of the very first trans people to speak out to the army on these issues—to talk about how this is just one part of ourselves and I never got to serve because it wasn’t something that was available to me, at least I felt given the way the standings were and the risks that I faced, but some people took that chance anyway and now I have this meager little chance to serve the people who are serving me—oh my gosh, and that is what they needed to hear in so many ways. Of course I made a lot of jokes, it happened to be that this was the training center—Fort Bragg—where the army airborne were so I said, “All of my transgender jokes are kind of like paratroopers—most of them land, and I sincerely apologize if they don’t.” And I got a good laugh out of people and I really tried to keep it upbeat and say that you can be trans and funny; you can be trans and thrive; you can be trans and a kick-ass soldier, quite frankly, and I know a few of them personally. So, I think political activism even when you can’t political—I mean they would not have let me in at the base at all if I’d said, “Hey I’m with the Hillary Campaign or the Democratic Party.” But I came in as me and in a different capacity and was still able to impart not so much a political value but a human perspective, and when you appreciate people for who they are then the politics fall into place. Because up close and personal I’m a little bit cuter and a lot less threatening—and way harder to deny—then whatever hypothetical you have built in your

mind of what a transgender person is. The things that you're worried a person would do by putting on a piece of women's clothing to walk into a bathroom, all of that's already illegal. It doesn't mean it stops people from doing it, but it doesn't mean they fall under protection of being transgender if they do, or they can't be prosecuted by other laws if they do something. What it does is takes another class of people which has no evidence of being harmful—and isn't what you think it is in the first place—and puts an undue burden on us. Then you bring it back to say, "Is it really about the bathrooms?" Which is the exact same argument you can make in the Jim Crow era, when there were other signs on bathrooms that designated who could use which bathroom because a certain class of people, a certain race in this case were deemed to be threatening or perverse or pose a risk to those of a different group of people. I talked about this yesterday in a high school the girl who asked me the question said—in fact just yelled at the top of her lungs, "That's bananas!" Yeah, exactly! My point is it's bananas, we think about it now but people thought very seriously back then, but the important point to remember is it was never about the bathrooms. It was only about the bathrooms to the extent that if you can't use a bathroom safely or comfortably, then you're not going to go to that building whether it's your municipal town hall; whether it's your school; whether it's the hospital, and it's going to keep you out of public life which is going to make it hard to get an education; harder to get a job; and harder to be a productive member of society. If that conforms to your world view where you're seeing only fish that's great, but that's not really fair to the people who aren't fish, the people who aren't within your world view. That's what discrimination is all about, that is the essence of discrimination, and why we enact laws to try and protect the rights of minorities. So it all ties together and I try to use the history, I try to use the future and the lived examples to just talk to anybody about this. I say that, you know asserting our own and assuring others freedom of expression is perhaps the greatest expression of freedom there is, that this is what we as Americans—as patriots—are supposed to be out there doing especially in this country that was created by a rag-tag band of people who didn't fit in elsewhere and generally speaking does better every time it brings in more people. Then I can use my voice that maybe have honed in trans issues to talk about immigration; to talk about religious freedom; to talk about women's issues, and it all ties together in just a, "What kind of world do I want to create? Do I want to accept traditional definitions or define traditions?"

Ramsay: Yeah... I kind of want to just end but I have more questions—how are you feeling?
[laughing]

Simpson: I'm doing okay, do you want to take a minute or two break?

Ramsay: Yeah lets take a break, that sounds great.

Simpson: Because I've probably been talking, almost an hour now?

Ramsay: Yeah.

[editorial cut]

Ramsay: Okay, so we took our break, um, so we're back and I wanted ask Hannah about your introduction to the trans lifeline which you had talked about a little earlier, if you're comfortable speaking about that.

Simpson: Yes, so the trans lifeline was a really interesting experience to be on. I found out about it though a friend of mine who was transitioning who I met at the Philadelphia Transgender Health Conference, who had been in touch with its founders—a couple who at the time were living out west and had since moved to Chicago—and it was a really exciting idea to create this listening and crisis hot line for and by the trans community. I came in at a very early stage of it when it was still in its infancy starting to go online and was one of the first batch of operators who were trained, and I later took on roles in both being a call operator and also coordinating other operators, in fact training other operators myself. I started developing some of the early programming and materials with which to train people, and it's very challenging when you have no professional credentials yourself which isn't necessarily the biggest issue. That people assume that if you're a social worker or you're a psychologist you just have some innate ability to do this, when in reality it's about can you discuss these issues and how you address them, but the bigger problem was not so much my lack of credentials so much as the fact we were trying to train—cram a lot of training into two hours by video conferencing with a group of people, and have them ask questions a feel comfortable to take on these anonymous calls from people anywhere in the world potentially at their worst possible moments. The calls we got were not all crisis calls with imminent threats of self harm, it was people asking for resources; people asking for what to do in x y z situation that came up; how to come out; or even just having someone to talk to. I think what it gave me that was humbling in the experience was a chance to hear so many different stories in a way that you will never tell them to another person you actually know—to hear them anonymously, because that person knows that I don't know anything about them that they don't offer. You know, I generally asked, “Can you give me just a general location you live in, like a city or a state, so I can paint a bit of a picture? And just how old you are?” ...by their own self description—and I'm sure people lied about it too, but I probably had people calling the line from... maybe ages ten to well into their seventies, and for some of these people it was the first time they were ever talking to another transgender person; for some of these people it was their first time ever announcing these issues, and I would ask them, “What pronouns do you like to hear? What name should I call you?” And on that line you could be any name you wanted—I took on a different name myself actually, I didn't want to be bringing with me the baggage of Hannah Simpson, that maybe people knew outwardly and could look up and associate with myself on the line, so I actually used my middle name and I'd say, “Trans Lifeline, this is Elsie speaking; can I ask what name I can use for you? Hi there, so-and-so.” And I would teach people to say that just that way and leave as many doors open, as many avenues as possible for people to express themselves, because at the end of the day that's what our line could be a platform for—we couldn't always provide help directly. Sometimes I was able to go the extra mile and, like I mentioned I could bring that person into an email address that I'd set up to communicate that was separate from all of my others, so they couldn't start using at random times to start making me into a care provider that I didn't have the credentials or the boundaries established to take on, but at the same time I could link them to other resources—for example one person I talked to before we start—er, one person I talked about with you briefly before we started recording

was an individual youth in Canada who needed Mandarin-speaking resources, or Mandarin language resources, or people who spoke Mandarin because he was a first generation individual in this country, and whereas he spoke English natively his parents struggled with it, and sure he could try to translate anything from English but that provided a barrier where when he was translating it his parents maybe didn't want to hear as much or didn't think it was as authentic as if it's coming out of the mouth of somebody in a language you understand, and especially when you're coming from a traditional household that has certain cultural values that your parents are trying to instill within you, and believes in honor and maybe doesn't see transition as an honorable thing. If you can come in there and use those words and know that culture and say, "Actually, I am here to honor your child. They are so honorable that I sent somebody all the way from America to come to your city in Canada—or to video conference in with you—because I want you to hear this in a way that's comfortable for you, and to kind of bring things to your level." That's a beautiful thing and it gave me that chance to do, and I think the problem with a lifeline like that at the same time is while it also offers a lot of opportunity for that, we also have to be careful to not bring our own biases into it, and that was something I worked hard to train people on as well, to say "That when you're listening to a caller on the lifeline you can't assume they have the same concerns; the same access; or even the same fears that you might. As trans people we can be afraid of going to the doctor even if we're out; we can" —because you had to be out to be on the line. Generally speaking that was one of our requirements, is that if you weren't living out you couldn't really help people come out to the same extent, as just one of our baseline—if you're on this you're identifying yourself as a trans and non-binary person by your own self-admission. That was part of our criteria for operators, so to say that you had to broaden your own perspective to a certain extent that, even if we're out we might feel uncomfortable calling the police; might feel uncomfortable going to a doctor's office, but we need to express and convey all those options to this person who might see those things differently, "Have you considered going to a doctor?" And then, "Can I help you find a doctor that will help you through this in the safest way possible?" Rather than kind of keeping a preconceived notion in our mind that no trans person will ever find a doctor that affirms them just because we ourselves haven't. Or, took us a while and we're seeing— [door opens] —it from their perspective..."

[quiet voice] Oh, sorry.

Ramsay: [whispers] It's okay. [door closes]

Simpson: And we're seeing it from their perspective going back to our own beginnings where it was it was a struggle, maybe for them it won't be.

Ramsay: Mhmm.

Simpson: So it was really a chance for me to teach these things, not just how to embrace transgender identity but to help others. That's to me such a beautiful and important thing that I've had a privilege to do. I'm a big advocate for everyone to give as much opportunity—to give as many chances for their family and their loved ones to become less closed off to the world. I know it takes time but I say we owe this to ourselves and we owe this to the next generation. If

my siblings were not accepting of me—which they are—but if they weren't and they didn't want me to be as close with their children one day as their aunt, then it is my job to be as present as I can and keep giving them that chance so that one day in one of their families someone comes out—someone expresses themselves differently, that there is not a chance that child will not experience the same hate, and the same absence that this family may have had in our generation. That we owe it to them to create a better future, to teach them to be different than their own was, as best we possibly can and to never rule anything out. I tell a story about this as kind of a parable; there was a neuroscientist—and this is all true—by the name of Eric Kandel, and he was a graduate level neuroscientist, maybe already a doctor, and he said, “I want to study the brain. I want to study how people learn, adapt, and react differently to situations.” And he said, “I want to do this one the sea slug.” And if you've never heard of a sea slug you can look it up here in the library—it's under aplysia, a snail without a shell that does everything you'd think a sea slug would do except less—but it has this one hole which everything comes in or out of called the siphon, and it has some fluffy gills that it uses to get oxygen from the water. If you poke on the siphon—or maybe you poke on the gills—if you poke on the siphon the gills kind of retract on these sea slugs, and maybe it makes them smaller and harder to eat. It's hard to say what a sea slug things because it's a sea slug, and actually that's exactly what the people who were looking at this research proposal by Doctor Kandel said, “You know if you want to study the brain pick an organism that has one.” So, he went on with his experiment—he set up rows and rows of sea slugs in rows and rows of little fish tanks, and he would poke them with sticks and shock them with electricity— [door opens]

Ramsay: Hi.

Male Voice: Hi how—

Ramsay: Do—do we still have the room?

Male Voice: No, we are having a meeting at three.

Ramsay: Okay, so we are out of time, um...

Simpson: I'll finish the story then, and then we'll—

Ramsay: Yeah, well it's 3PM now so they may want us to leave. Um, it's up to you, what do you want?

Simpson: Can we finish in like, three minutes and that will be—

Ramsay: Okay yeah, let's just, yeah...

Simpson: Is it still recording?

Ramsay: Yeah.

Simpson: So, he poked them and shocked them with electricity and sure enough found that if you did this in specific intervals you could change the outcome of whether or not the gills would retract, and he actually proved the foundations of how the brain learns and rewires itself at the neuro level to create new patterns of behavior. So what did he get for this trouble? Just a little Nobel Prize in medicine, and the moral of the story I tell over the lifeline to young trans youth and in person when I'm mentoring is that if it has been scientifically proven that a sea slug can learn, so can your parents. You just have to prod them hard enough, shock them hard enough, and wait around to see what happens.

Simpson: That is awesome, thank you so much.