NEW YORK CITY TRANS ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

ROBBI ANN MECUS

Interviewer: Rachel Tenney

Date of Interview: August 23, 2019

Location of Interview: Robbi's Apartment, Keene, New York

Transcribed by Garrett Wood

NYC TOHP Interview Transcript #176

Rachel Tenney: Hi! So, my name is Rachel, and I will be having a conversation with Robbi, for the New York City Trans Oral History Project, in collaboration with the New York Public Library's Community Oral History Project- this is a project focusing on the experiences of trans-identifying people. It is Friday, August 23rd, 2019, and this being recorded in Robbi's home, in the Adirondacks, in upstate New York.

Robbi Ann Mecus: [laughter] Hi Rachel!

Tenney: [laughter] Hi Robbi! Can you tell me your name, and your age?

Mecus: So, my name is Robbi Mecus, and I am—47 years old.

Tenney: Mmm! Happy belated birthday—early birthday?

Mecus: Almost 48.

Tenney: Oh! Okay.—Um, what are your gender pronouns?

Mecus: I use she, her, hers.

Tenney: Awesome. How would you describe your gender?

Mecus: Aaah, how to describe my gender— I've always known from a very early age that I had a very clear picture of what my gender was—I let outside influences allow me to question that, from time— y'know— over the years, but I always knew I identified as female, as feminine. So, it gets awfully muddled, though, when I think about what I want from my version of femininity versus what I always thought the stereotype of it was. So, yeah, my picture of femininity has changed since I came out. I came out three years ago, and prior to that, it was all very secret, and very few people knew anything about me— so, I just accepted these stereotypes of what I thought I had to be. And since coming out, I've just developed my definition of my gender, which is still feminine, but it's my own version of femininity, that I feel like I identify with the most. I thought that in order to be accepted as a woman, that I would have to model myself after all the other women I see and, I think, one of the big lessons I've learned in the past 3 years, is that I don't have to model myself after anybody, except me.

Tenney: [laughter] I like that quote, "I don't have to model myself after anybody but me." So, tell me where you were born.

Mecus: I was born in New York City, in 1971, um— I think it was St. John's hospital in Queens, but I lived in Brooklyn, I lived in Greenpoint, Brooklyn.

Tenney: And who did you live with?

Mecus: I lived with my very dysfunctional family. I have an older brother and an older sister, we're all very close in age, all 3 years apart. My mother and father— we lived in a very— Greenpoint back then was a very, white, very blue collar, working class neighborhood. It was Polish, but there were a lot of Italian, and Irish there as well. And my mother grew up in Greenpoint, my dad grew up in East New York, at some point he moved to Greenpoint, his family moved to Greenpoint when he was probably a teenager. This was before Greenpoint was, like, a super cool place to live.

Tenney: [laughter] Yeah. Do you want to tell me a little more about what it was like growing up in New York City in the 70's?

Mecus: I can tell you what my experience was.

Mecus: Again, super blue collar, fairly conservative, very insulated— we were catholic, very insulated community— I didn't really know many people outside of my family, we didn't really hang out with other people. It was just my family, my cousins, aunts and uncles, on both sides of the family— both sides were catholic. So my notion of the world was what Catholicism taught me. We went to church every Sunday, and we stood up and we kneeled and we ate old bread wafers that I was actually convinced was the actual body of Jesus Christ. And then I watched my family, just, like, behave like total assholes during the week, then go to church, and then think that all was forgiven. And from a really early age, I questioned that notion of, like, you can be a really bad human being and then just say I'm sorry and it all goes away? That doesn't seem to make any sense.

Tenney: When did you feel like— so, the sense of catholicism not feeling true happened when you were pretty young, but were there experiences with people who were different from you that helped crystallize it or was it just from observing your own family?

Mecus: I think it was just from observing my own family, and the way that they lived their everyday life. As opposed to living this good, charitable, open minded, loving life, it was—my early childhood was—my father in particular, he was a Marine—y'know, was in Vietnam, very— I'll throw that buzzword out there,"Toxic masculinity." My father was extremely homophobic, extremely racist.
So that framed my childhood from a really early age. He was also an alcoholic. My mother— my father worked for the telephone company, so he worked for the New York Telephone Company, and he worked in Manhattan. My mother was a stay-at-home mom. She didn't have — Neither one of them had much education, my father dropped out of high school in tenth grade— my mom finished highschool but never did anything after that, she started having kids right out of highschool. So my world was shaped by what they told me, as most kids' are. But growing up with an extremely homophobic father really, really affected my ability to accept myself for who I was. I— so a little example of the homophobia, that I existed with—I clearly remember my father coming home and bragging to us how he would go down to the village with the people he worked with, and "kick the shit out of faggots."

Tenney: Wow.

Mecus: That's what he told six year olds, and seven year olds, you know.

Tenney: And this was in the mid-to-late seventies. And when we think about when Stonewall happened, in 1969, and New York City being maybe a more welcoming or inclusive place, for gays and lesbians, especially by the late seventies. But the reality, or the lived reality for even a kid growing up in Greenpoint was that there wasn't that- that welcoming and acceptance.

Mecus: There wasn't, yeah. I think it was pretty— I've been mostly sheltered from that community for most of my life because of that. But I think the reality was that outside of a very small community in New York City, there was a lot of violence, and a lot of descrimination and just a lot of not understanding, you know? And that included my family. This all occurred at a time when I knew I was different, I knew it, and at the same time, I have my earliest memories of knowing, I also have memories of knowing "I shouldn't be telling anybody about this."

Tenney: Do you remember a time when you met someone, or saw someone who was different, and it was kind of a moment where you noticed that difference and could see it in yourself, too?

Mecus:good question. **9:28** I don't have a clear memory of meeting, or seeing somebody, in person, and not on a movie screen or a television screen, that I identified with as either being gay, or lesbian, or trans. And probably until I was in highschool. Again, even though we lived in the city, we lived in a really white neighborhood, really just, everything was insulated, and at some point we— my parents got divorced and we moved out to Long Island— we moved to this italian neighborhood—this white, Italian neighborhood on Long Island where everyone was the same. Everybody was cis, and het, and white. So my first memory was a kid in highschool, who— so high school was '85 to '89, and everybody sort of whispered that he was gay. And he was effeminate. Sort of the classic "gay tells" back then— and I saw how everybody treated him, behind his back they just cut him down— I didn't witness any overt displays of violence against him or anything, but I knew, I just knew, what I was was not going to be accepted.

Tenney: Yeah, it was enough to send a message to anyone who knew him and knew how people talked to him.

Mecus: Sure. [Cough] Excuse me.

Tenney: Do you have a—so you talk about seeing people on movie screens, or in TV, that, that were different, and do you have sort of an early encounter, with someone from the trans or queer community?

Mecus: Yeah. Funny enough, I had this discussion with somebody not too long ago, once again I knew I was different from like 3-4 years old, and I didn't know how to explain that, I didn't know what to call it. None of those terms really existed back then. Back then there was "transsexual"

or "transvestite". That was basically it. At some point in time—I don't know what year—the Rocky Horror Picture show came out.

Tenney: [laughter] I love Rocky Horror.

Mecus: [laughter]

Tenney: I feel like so many people—that is like, a data tag in these interviews because Rocky Horror is such an iconic, and accessible item.

Mecus: So I have a very, very maybe unique perspective, I don't know. I watched a little bit of it, probably when it came out on cable or something for the first time, late 70's or maybe early 80's, I don't know, but, when I first saw that character, I hated him. And I hated them—I didn't know why, at the time, I just knew that that person who was clearly trying to present female, but also not, at the same time, that was my first exposure to, like, "Oh shit—there's somebody who's actually messing with gender right there," and I knew I wasn't that. I knew I wasn't that person. And the way they behaved on screen, felt to me at the time almost like it was a mockery of everything that I couldn't do in my life. I couldn't be open about it, I couldn't be that relaxed about it and just have fun with it. It really felt like a mockery. And I felt like I was not that person, and I was just a girl. I didn't want to be a "trans girl", I didn't want to be a "transvestite" or a "transsexual", I just wanted to be who I knew I was in my head. And to this day I've never watched the entire movie, because I can't sit through that and watch that image. And this, who knows, this may be internalized transphobia, I have no idea, but I get repulsed by that image. And there are things that, like—fishnet stockings, I won't go near them, because that character wore them in their getup. [short laughter]So yeah, that's it.

Tenney: Was that—do you think that's the first time you heard the word transvestite, or transsexual?

Mecus: Yeah. I didn't know what that was, and that led me to the library, to look up the words that I'd heard. And that led me to learn that there was "transsexualism", and this was like, middle school. Sometime in middle school. So early 80's.

Tenney: So like, hitting puberty.

Mecus: Yeah, totally! Yeah. Yeah. And so once I'm like "Oh, there's other people out there," And then, I quickly found reference to a book by Renee Richards. Who was a pro tennis player. And **15:39** she wrote a book called Second Serve that was about her experience, I think back in the 60's, or 70's— I'm not sure, I've never found the book. I spent the better part of 20 years, before the internet came out, I spent the better part of 20 years looking for that book because that, at the time, was like the reference material that I thought was going to tell me everything that I needed to know about how to pursue my life. And I never found it.

Tenney: Renee Richards is a trans woman who—

Mecus: She's a trans woman who was a pro tennis player and I believe a doctor at some point, but, she transitioned either in the 60's or the 70's, and then wrote a book about it.

Tenney: Did she transition before she became a tennis player, or after?

Mecus: After. So she was a public figure—

Tenney: She was well known, and then she transitioned. Yeah. That's so interesting that there's this book that you knew about for so long, that you haven't read and haven't found—

Mecus: I still haven't read it.

Tenney: —that you were sure contained an alternative viewpoint than Rocky Horror did for you.

Mecus: Yeah I was totally convinced that that book was going to give me my pathway to myself. And then shortly after that, all the talk shows on, like, um… [inaudible] and Phil Donahue, and…

Tenney: With Kate Bornstein? Right?

Mecus: I don't even know the name of the person.

Tenney: I think it was probably Kate Bornstein, because she did a lot of talk shows in the 80's as an out trans woman—

Mecus: Right.

Tenney:— who was a lesbian too.

Mecus: [laughter] Right.

Tenney: [laughter]

Mecus: But anyway, yeah, I start seeing people on those talk shows, and again, I was seeing—A lot of this sounds fucked up in my head now—Am I allowed to curse?

Tenney: Yeah, you can curse! [laughter]

Mecus: [laughter] A lot of this sounds really messed up in my head right now- when I think about what I thought about those people. And it shows me the level of internalized transphobia that I had for myself, back then, which I'm still working on letting go of. I would see these people who were clearly in a masculine body, in a male body, dressing up as women, and then getting on stage and pouring their hearts out, and me sitting there as a kid saying "Well, I'm not them. I don't want to be that."

Tenney: Yeah. Yeah. "I'm a girl."

Mecus: "I'm a girl." And that's not what I want to be. And all these things just kept pushing me away from coming out and transitioning. I knew early on in my life that I was going to transition. I just needed to hide it for a long time. I knew early on.

Tenney: Do you want to talk about that? I was wondering, I think, sometimes there's a lot of time along the way to reach that identity, or come to full realization of yourself, and so, if you feel comfortable, if you want to talk about the journey, from this fairly young realization of who you were, and then seeing models that didn't kind of fit what you wanted, but then—between then and 3 years ago is—what happened?

Mecus: Wow. So, I think when I was about seven years old, I'd become pretty manic about having a penis. And I hid everything, I think I hid everything, I thought I hid everything really well, but I remember one night, I would go to bed and pray to god that I would just wake up a girl. Like "Dude, just do your thing. Like, stop fucking around and do your thing." And I never did. And, I got up one morning, super early in the morning before anybody else got up, and I said "Well, I'm going to fix this problem right now." And I went out in the kitchen, then I grabbed a knife, and I pulled my pajamas down, and I was ready to cut. And, I stood there for a long time, and then, I started thinking about—I just—I got scared. I got scared, and I dropped the knife, and ran back to my bed, and just cried and cried and cried. And that's the first time that I knew that I was just scared to face reality. I mean, I'm glad I didn't do it—[laughter] That would've been bad, but, that was a pretty early traumatic event for me, thinking about it now. It was pretty traumatic. And that's when I knew that—that's when I started to really suppress things. I think before then—it's funny, y'know, when I came out—and I came out to my family first, and I just assumed nobody knew, because—I thought I hid everything really well, I mean, I was not an effeminate little boy, I was the model—I was the model boy.

Tenney: Sports?

Mecus: Um—yeah, I mean, it was—I was small— I was a small kid—I mean, I got mistaken for a girl all the time, and would pretend to be pissed off about it, but secretly I wasn't pissed off about it. But when I came out to my brother and sister, they both had the same response, and both of their responses were "Yeah, we knew that." And I was like, "How—how did you know that?" And my brother told me, "You used to run around the house all the time screaming to mom that you weren't a boy, you were a girl." And then he was like. "I caught you dressing up, I caught you stealing Paulette's clothes," my sister's Paulette, "Stealing her clothes," and I was like, "You did?!" [laughter]

Tenney: And you don't remember this?

Mecus: I have no idea. No memory of this. I have a memory of—and, after my brother told me this, I kind of put two and two together—I have a memory, I was probably 4 or 5 years old, and I

have a memory of my mother, I was screaming at her, bawling my eyes out, and a memory of her picking me up and setting me down on top of the washing machine—and her and her aunt—this is such a clear memory for me. My eyes were all watery, and they were all blurry and watery, and it was like I was looking at them through a fish-eye lens, and they're both staring at me and they're laughing at me— like, horrible laughing at me, and I was really upset—and the reason I was upset, is because I told, I kept telling my mother that I was a girl, and they didn't know how to respond to that. They had no education on anything, nobody did back then. So all they could do was laugh like "Hahahaha, you think you're a girl, that's so cute," but that's what it was. I think I wiped a lot of that stuff from my early memory. Both my brother and sister independently verified that I did lots of things around the house very openly, and told my parents that I was a girl, and not a boy. But I don't remember any of it. I remember doing things in secret, and hiding it all, but I don't remember...

Tenney: I think young kids are—from all periods will play with gender, and will be flexible around gender expression and identity, but they very early pick up on cues about what is appropriate, and what's not appropriate and so if you're describing growing up with a homophobic father , and the catholic church that had very clear expectations, and in a neighborhood without models, that you're going to learn "Ok, I'm a boy, and I need to learn the things that boys do, and I need to do those things."

Mecus: Oh yeah, I would ride my big wheel down Guernsey street in Brooklyn, and...

Tenney: Which street?

Mecus: Guernsey street.

Tenney: Guernsey street?

Mecus: Guernsey street, on the corner of McCarren Park, yeah. I remember riding that thing, and trying to be the best kid on the block, pulling the little side brakes so you would spin out, and stuff like that. As I was doing that, I was wondering to myself, "Do they know?" I'm thinking to myself, "Maybe every boy goes through this, they question who they are and whether they're a boy or a girl— the thing was, is that I wasn't questioning it, I *knew it.* I knew I was—But there were all these things I did to deny the truth of me. I'm like, "Well every little boy goes through this, this is just a phase." I remember doing both of these things at the same time, playing stickball in the street, or skelsy in the street—yeah.

Tenney: So then what—what was it that, three years ago, or the things that led up to three years ago, that made you come out?

Mecus: [laughter] That's right, you asked about the whole period between 4 years old and 44 years old—

Tenney: [laughter]Haha, yeah!

Mecus: Yeah, just a quick 40-year period to talk about.

Tenney: Yeah. [laughter] I mean, you can talk about it if you want to, but I think it's interesting to think about how—there's this big umbrella identity, and it's a very large identity, but then everyone within it has a different story unto the point that they identify in that umbrella.

Mecus: So somewhere around puberty, around sexual awakening,I awakened to the fact that I was attracted to boys, and men, but I also knew I wasn't gay. I think I probably inherited some of my father's homophobia, like how could you not, being in this— I was just immersed, in Gay Hatred. And I knew I wasn't gay, and it repulsed me to think—to have people around me think that I was gay, and I knew I couldn't behave around boys the way I wanted to.
It's hard, y'know, we don't know anything about this stuff, and there's no terminology to describe it, and, mixing up gender and sexuality is really complicated, like "Why am I attracted to these boys, but like, I'm not gay?" But then I, you know—every sexual dream I had since I was a child, I was a girl in the dream. Having a sexual experience with men— it was never the other way around. So I kind of figured out on my own, that I was—the reason I was attracted—Nah nah nah, they're not linked, but it made sense to me. I was like, "Yeah, I'm attracted to boys because I'm a girl," Not that all girls should be attracted to boys, that's not what I'm trying to say, but it made sense in my head. But I couldn't explain that to anybody else, I couldn't. I couldn't talk about that to anybody else, so I became aware about my sexuality back then, but I was also intensely interested in girls and women. I had an intense study—of women, and I convinced myself that that study of women was attraction—like, sexual attraction. And I convinced myself of that for a really long time.

Tenney: Because it was easier.

Mecus: Oh it was so much easier to deal with. Even though I knew from my first sexual experiences that I'm like, "That was not right.[laughter] That was a yucky feeling, I don't want to feel that again," but of course I'm like, "You're going to feel that again, you're straight, you're cis, and you're not all these other things. But I remember in high school, some time, there was a Lou Reed song, um—[taps on desk]

Tenney: Walk on the Wild Side?

Mecus: Walk on the Wild Side. And—all these other songs, like Aerosmith, and "Dude Looks like a Lady", and all these others, like—Lola, from The Kinks, and y'know they're all singing about trans people—trans women, and they never got it right in my head—they were misgendered, they were describing somebody who wasn't me. And Lou Reed's song, and I have no idea what Lou Reed's politics are, I just know this one song, and Lou Reed's song—he seemed like he got it right. He gendered Holly, in the very beginning song, correctly. "Holly came from Miami F.L.A., she hitch-hiked her way across the U.S.A." right?

Tenney: She.

Mecus: Her. Right. And I was like, "Well shit, that's what I'm going to do! When I graduate, I'm going to say goodbye, and I'm going to pack a bag, and I'll disappear. Nobody's going to know where I am, and I'm going to restart my life." That's what I was—I was convinced that's what I was doing. And when graduation day came, just like the knife in the kitchen, I graduated, and I still had the plan in my head, and I started to pack a bag, and I never went anywhere. Because I was scared. I was scared. Not just moving away when you're 17, because that's scary, y'know? I wasn't scared about that so much as I was scared about facing the truth, facing the reality, like "Shit, am I actually doing this?"

Tenney: And your models you had at the time were not appealing to you, so it was hard to imagine, maybe, what your life would be like—[Tenney and Mecus briefly are speaking over each other simultaneously.

Mecus: I had no models, yeah—Holly, from the Lou Reed song, was my model because she just got on a bus, she shaved her legs, and plucked her eyebrows—

Tenney: And Renee Richards, whose book you hadn't found at that point.

Mecus: Right. Yeah. And that's pretty much how I lived most of my life. I cross-dressed, closeted. I experimented with that, and it got bigger and bigger and bigger and bigger, and it would push against the wall of like "Holy shit, everybody's about to find out," and I would throw everything away and pretend it didn't exist for a few months, and it would start to build again, and I've heard that from countless other people, where it just builds and builds and you push back against it, then it builds and builds and builds and you push back, and I did that, for—I did that for 40 years—Something changed—[laughter] clearly something changed three years ago. I began to accept that I had a community, I had an online community of people I could talk to. The internet came out, and I was able to express myself without being out in public and worrying that I was gonna get the shit kicked out of me, or somebody I knew was going to see me, so there was this outlet for it, and that outlet was a big pressure valve for me, but it also—it's like a slippery slope, and once you start having a safe outlet you want more of that outlet, right? And at some point I started going down—I had moved up to Upstate New York, and I would have to go down to New York City for medical monitoring for 9/11 related stuff, so I was making regular trips down to New York City. When I was doing that, that was my opportunity—that was my chance. I was married at this point, I had a young child, a young baby—and, but this was, my spouse knew, I had come out to her before we got married, and she knew, and she was tacitly accepting.

Tenney: Had come out as someone who was a crossdresser, or who was a trans woman?

Mecus: She knew it as cross-dressing, I knew it as something different, but I couldn't say it. I couldn't say it to her. Because it would be admitting that I wasn't even attracted to her. But I had this approval, from her, to go release this part of me. To go down to the city and spend 2 or 3 days there, and outside of my work appointments, I would be in femme the entire time. And this wasn't my first experience with being out in public, I'd done a bunch of it before, but it was the

first time that I was able to spend amounts of time, like, blocks of time, and not just 2 hours, or 3 hours, it would be days. And it got harder and harder to come home. I didn't want to come home anymore. I didn't want to come back to my life. And in December of 2015, I spent two days in the city just crying, I sat on the pier and just cried because I knew that I had to go back to somebody I wasn't. I came home, it was Christmas, and we had Christmas, and the day after christmas my spouse and I had a minor argument, about something not related to anything trans stuff, and I went out in the garage and had a complete breakdown, and it was the first time in my life where I thought that killing myself might be a better alternative than doing what I was doing. And then, really without deciding, I just found myself walking into the house a complete blubbering mess, and telling her that I was transgender and that I needed to transition. And things happened pretty quickly after that. So, [laughter] that's the really short 20 year version of how I got to where I am right now.

Tenney: I think it's interesting that New York was like a place you came back to?

Mecus: New York has always been the place I come back to. I spent the formative years of my life in New York City, and then I went to high school in Long Island. I moved back to New York City when I was a young adult, early 20's. That's when I had my first taste of freedom, I was living on my own, living in Queens, and I was dressing and going out all the time. Well, I wasn't talking to anybody, I wasn't interacting with anybody, I was a ghost in the landscape.But the fact that people were seeing me, and they were seeing a feminine figure, a feminine person, was all I needed. That was all I needed.

Tenney: I have a question of—tell me a time that you felt seen, and I guess that could apply to that period of time when you were going out, just being seen as a woman.

Mecus: Just being seen, yeah. Just being seen. So yeah, early on—

Tenney: Where would you go?

Mecus: [laughter] Some of my first experiences, my first forays, trying to go out in public as myself—this is so messed up, I don't know how I didn't get murdered—doing really unsafe things, like, I wanted to be seen as a woman but I was also desperately afraid of being seen, as a woman—I don't know how better to explain it. I wanted people to see me but I was so afraid of people seeing me at the same time. So I would do the absolute worst thing I could do. I would wait until like, 1:30 in the morning, deserted streets, or I would drive to industrial areas, dressed up, then I would walk by myself. And to think about doing that now is like, "You're insane." But that's what I did. And I survived. And I would want one more person to see me, so I would walk out of my house at like, 7 o'clock at night, and I would pretend to go drop a letter in the mailbox.

Tenney: [Laughter]

Mecus: The mailman on that street corner got thousands of blank postcards in the mail with nothing on them and I just wanted to walk out, just so people could see me, you know? And I

was deathly afraid that I was going to get clocked, and be killed. I really was. I was convinced. This was the early 90s, there wasn't even the marginal acceptance there is today. At that point I knew there was legitimate danger. Not just of being a woman in the world, but of being trans in the world.

Tenney: Did you ever get harassed on the street, or beat up, or anything?

Mecus: No, I—I was remarkably lucky, I think—I think I had this incredible privilege of being young, being very slim, and of being able to be accepted for who I wanted to be without people questioning it very much.

Tenney: And white.

Mecus: And white. Exactly. Yeah. I lived in a white neighborhood, I travelled in white neighborhoods. I didn't go to neighborhoods with people of color, I just didn't do it. Again, one of those things I brought from my childhood, from my father, was like, you don't interact with those people. I've been really fortunate, I've only ever had one really scary experience, prior to coming out, when I was out dressing. And that was a bathroom experience. And that really shaped my behavior, to even until this day, shapes my behavior. I was in a bathroom at Macy's, and—

Tenney: At Harold Square.

Mecus: At Harold Square, I had met another trans woman, from an online group called "My Husband Betty." So we had gotten together to do a day of museum-going, and shopping, it was one of my New York City forays, and I met her and we went to—I knew we went so some museum, uptown, I forget what it was, then we went downtown, had lunch, and then went to Macy's. And we were just window shopping, we were just picking up stuff, she was way more comfortable in herself than I was, I was a nervous nelly, and people picked up on that. So she left and I had to go to the bathroom. And I had used the bathroom before, but with a lot of trepidation, you're standing there and you're like—you're waiting until you're pretty sure the bathroom is empty, so you can run into a stall. And then you stay in that stall until you're pretty sure the bathroom is empty again, and you run out. You don't wash your hands. That's too much time in the bathroom. And today I decided, "I was going to wash my hands." So I left the bathroom and I washed my hands, and I saw this woman walk in, and I saw her just eyeball me, the entire way around me, and she stood right next to me, and she's like, "Oh, hell no!" And I looked around, and that shot of adrenaline went through me, and she was like, "You are not gonna fucking come in here," yadda yadda, she started calling me a faggot and a pervert, all this stuff, and I just wiped my hands really quick and started walking out of the bathroom. Her boyfriend, her very large boyfriend, was waiting for her outside the bathroom, she started calling to him, telling him there was this perverted faggot in the bathroom, and I had to walk past him, and he started screaming in my face, he told me he was going to kill me, he followed me out into the street, and telling me he was going to kick my ass and kill me. And I ran, I just had to run, and I ran back to Grand Central, crying— I didn't know what I was going to do. I thought I was

Frankenstein, and I thought the mob was behind me with pitchforks and torches. I just couldn't get home fast enough, take everything off, and just pretend that none of this existed, and I was never going to do any of that again, ever. I was genuinely afraid for my life. This dude was big, and he was mad.To this day, that still informs how I use the bathroom. To this day. The second a woman even—and I haven't had a bad experience in the bathroom the last 3 years, but the second someone even looks at me, I'm like, "I'm about to run." But I've been really lucky otherwise, really privileged and fortunate, and I know that. I know that.

Tenney: And I'm glad that didn't go bad, that it was—I'm glad that you got away from that situation.

Mecus: Yeah. Macy's. And I haven't been back to Macy's since. [Laughter]

Tenney: We can make a plan, we can go to Macy's!

Mecus: No, no thank you! [laughter]

Tenney: [laughter] Okay! If you change your mind, we can reclaim it, I promise!

Mecus: No, thank you.

Tenney: Yeah I mean, bathrooms are just such a vulnerable position, to be in the bathroom.

Mecus: It's Super vulnerable. I don't even want to get into the bathroom debate, because that's a whole thing.

Tenney: We don't have to get into the bathroom debate. So, what—I kinda want to ask about community and relationships. So, you talk about how online community was important for you before you felt comfortable, being out, outside, and there were increasing times you were dressing, and going out in public, as yourself, and so, I guess, what was it like—what were your relationships that were most important to you, in that community, and what did they look like?

Mecus: They were mostly—early on, they were anonymous relationships. There were people I chatted to online—and it was kinda weird—It wasn't weird, but I wasn't looking for other women to talk to. I was looking for men to validate my identity. I was looking to have conversations with men, I was looking to hook up with men online, just so they can tell me I'm beautiful, tell me I'm a real woman, tell me that I'm desirable, you know—I wanted to hear that stuff, I thought that that was what I needed. I guess it was what I needed, back then, I needed somebody to find me not hideous. And I did, there was lots of them out there that will tell you whatever you want.

Tenney: Age/sex/location. [Laughter]

Mecus: Yeah, right, their—[laughter]Age/sex/location, ASL— [laughter]

Tenney: I'm old enough to remember that period of chatrooms.

Mecus: Yeah, yeah.

Tenney: I guess—what was your first time that you encountered a trans, or queer community, and found people in person? That you wanted to be a part of—

Mecus: I will tell you about my first experience trying to contact a trans support group. I was living in Orange County, I was living in Newburgh. New York. But I hung out in New Paltz, that's where I went climbing all the time, and—I wasn't married, I hadn't met my spouse yet, my ex-spouse yet, and I was looking for a trans support group, and I found one in New Paltz, at a Unitarian Church on Main Street, in New Paltz. And I talked to this woman, for a couple of weeks. I was kind of hesitant to go, again, because—and I can't reiterate this enough— I did want to be associated with gay people back then. I didn't want to be associated with trans people, either. I just wanted to be me. I just wanted to be a woman. That's how much I carried from my father. But I was trying to—and I knew inherently, that that was wrong, I knew that was wrong, but I didn't want to—I didn't want people to think I was just a gay man, at all. But anyway, she finally convinced me, she was like, "You should come, you should meet everybody!" And I'm like, "Okay,"—I was really looking for support, I wanted to hear that there were other people that felt like me, that they were dealing with the things that I was dealing with. And I agreed to go, and I went, and it was just her. It was just her with a stack of porn magazines.

Tenney: What?!

Mecus: Yeah. And I think she was just looking to have a mutual masturbation session.

Tenney: Whaaaat.

Mecus: In the basement of a church.

Tenney: Wha—that's not what you thought it was going to be.

Mecus: I couldn't get out of there fast enough. Again, I was like, "I am not that person, that's not who I am." Yeah.

Tenney: That's disheartening.

Mecus: Super disheartening, and it turned me off from looking for any sort of community. I spent probably five years not doing anything, and not looking for any kind of community at all, but eventually I did, and I reached out to another group in Poughkeepsie, and it was probably the first trans person that I spoke to, that I identified with, and that I started hanging out on a semi-regular basis, when we'd go—I'd go to a support group, and there was this woman named Melissa, who was just in the middle of her transition, and I was just listening to her life, saying, "God, I can't believe that people who have to do this, I can't believe that people have to go

through this shit." But it was a group of mostly closeted crossdressers—that was mostly what it was—with a couple of out trans women who were transitioning, but it was mostly closeted heterosexual crossdressers. And we would meet up, they would meet up like an Econo-Lodge conference room in Poughkeepsie or something like that. I did that a bunch of times, they would all go to a gay club in Poughkeepsie afterwards, and I went a couple of times—and again, it didn't feel right for me, I was a woman going into a gay man, a gay men's club, and all the men were hitting on eachother and nobody was paying any attention to me. [laughter] So, it felt kinda weird, you know? So I didn't—I stopped going, I probably went three or four times, and I stopped going, and then I—I actually can't talk about someone without outing them, so I won't. But they were integral in me trying to figure myself out, and accept who I was. So, um. But I can't really talk about them without outing them, so I'm not going to do that.

Tenney: Yeah. So you talk about the struggles you've had, and what hardships you've had, but at this point now in your life do you feel like there are—what you get out of being involved in trans communities and how that—they've been more important to you in the recent past? If they have been?

Mecus: Yeah, so we keep coming back around to this community thing...

Tenney: [Laughter]

Mecus: And this is a big thing for me, so—I live in Keene, New York, I live in the Northern Adirondacks— there is no community here.

Tenney: You mean there's no trans community, there's no queer community in Keene?

Mecus: Yeah, there are some really young kids in Saranac Lake who have a little network of, y'know, and— Kelly Metzger is a very out, and vocal trans woman in Saranac Lake, who tries very hard, and—

Tenney: And Saranac Lake is like, nearby, but not immediately close to Keene.

Mecus: It's 45 minutes away, yeah. It's a 45 minute drive, so it's not close. [laughter] And she tries very hard to build a community, but everybody's so spread out, and there's so few people, it's just a number's thing, there's so few people here. Plattsburgh has a small LGBT community—I've never been a community person. Maybe I just got turned off from early on, from that one experience, and—I've never felt the need, to have to go, and so— I'm going to be honest, and it may or may not sound really bad, but, every time I would go to some version of a support group—even after coming out, and in the middle of my transition, and even now—I would go, and it's comforting on some level to be around people who are going through stuff that I used to go through, or I'm currently going through, but it's also soul-sucking. There's a lot of pain in that community, there's a lot of struggle, there's a lot of heartache, and to be surrounded by it—it can really, really like, take emotional energy out of me. And I have a hard time dealing with that, I have a hard time going to support groups and I'm still trying to—I don't know. They serve a

really good purpose, I know they do, but I have a hard time maintaining my connection to support groups. I go to one in the Hudson Valley now and again, in Kingston, and it's hard. Most of them are very young, most of them are 19, 20 years old, most of them are still living with their parents, they're not dealing with how to raise a child when you're trans, they're not dealing with—

Tenney: Being trans in a rural place.

Mecus: Right. They're not dealing with finding decent medical care being trans, and I'm dealing with that, they're dealing with, like, "How do I get my mom to stop calling me 'he?'" You know what I mean? That's what they're dealing with. And that's important stuff! It's just not what I'm going through.

Tenney: It's not relevant for—

Mecus: It's not relevant for me—

Tenney: You, at your stage of life.

Mecus: So I find myself offering support, and offering guidance, and just offering you know, a shoulder to cry on, but I'm not getting a lot of that back, because nobody's—

Tenney: You're being a mom again.[laughter]

Mecus: I guess so. But I have all sorts of empathy for what those people are going through, and I want to support them, but I only have so much emotional energy to give.

Tenney: Yeah, you have a young child, and you have all these other pieces that we've talked about too.

Mecus: Yeah, and plus it's so far away. I mean it's community and all, but it's two hours away, and that's just hard.

Tenney: How do you think trans communities have changed over the years?
I mean, obviously, the "Support Group"—I'm using air quotes here—in New Paltz, the basement of the church, is probably unlikely to be encountered.

Mecus: Yeah that was bad, that was bad—how have they changed over the years—well the trans community clearly has changed since I grew up, and I think—I've experienced this with a couple of other trans people that I know, that are closer to my age, is, they're—their vision of what the world is, and how the world reacts to trans people, was informed by their experiences in the 70s and 80s. You know, when we were growing up. It was something to keep quiet. It was something to—don't announce it to the world, you know, don't walk around with a sign that says "I'm trans, and I'm proud." It was like, you accept yourself, and you transition, and you move on with your life. The people I see today, young people I see today that are coming out—I'm so happy for

them, I'm so happy that they can accept who they are—they're proud of who they are, it's not like, "Uh, I guess I have to accept this." They're like "No fuck you, this is who I am, and it's awesome!" You know? And it is awesome. I still struggle with that part, and I'm glad that people can own a trans identity and be proud of it and walk it every day. That's awesome.

Tenney: I feel like it gets kind of to something that we had talked about in June, when you came down to take part of Trans Day of Action, and other stuff that was happening for Pride Month, and we talked about, for you, the difference between going into a trans rally, versus going to a pride march, and how you feel differently about those two different things.

Mecus: Yeah, I've talked about this to two different people, and you're one of them, my feelings around pride, and I'm not—it's really complicated, and it's changing, it's evolving, as I go on in my life, it's evolving, but I'm not proud of being trans anymore than I'm proud of having a cleft palate. It's something I was born with. It's something that has made my life extremely difficult—it's something that has—I've hurt people with it, I've hurt because of it, I've messed up other people's lives because of it. My daughter will have to explain shit to people for the rest of her life because of it. I've incurred tens of thousands of dollars in bills and medical expenses. I'll be on medication for the rest of my life, because I'm trans. It's not something I'm proud of. It's just something that I am. I'm proud of being a good parent, I'm proud of being a good friend to my friends, I'm proud of being the best forest ranger that I can be. Those are things that I'm proud of, I'm not proud of the condition that I was born with. And I think in that way, it's a little different than being proud of being gay, or lesbian. I'm not sure how to explain that any better, but—

Tenney: I think one question I had was, "Do you identify with LGB communities?" So lesbian, gay, bisexual, or queer communities, and, maybe you do, maybe you don't, and maybe it's different being trans in those spaces that are like, that big, big, umbrella vs. just like, the trans space?

Mecus: Yeah, and like I said, all this stuff is changing, as my experience grows, and as I accept new people and new experiences into my life, I don't identify as gay. I don't identify as being a lesbian. I don't identify with being queer. Queer has a very specific meaning to me that other people may or may not hold—I'm kind of a soccer mom.

Tenney: [laughter]

Mecus: I'm pretty—air quotes—"normal." "queer" is this notion of—to me, it's this notion of rebelling against everything normal. Rebelling against society's expectations of you, and that's awesome, for people that are.

Tenney: Wait, like the quote: "Not 'queer' as in 'gay,' but 'queer' as in 'fuck you,'" and kind of wanting to change the entire system?

Mecus: Yeah. [laughter]

Tenney: [Laughter]

Mecus: So, yeah, I don't identify with that—I have tremendous empathy, and my empathy has grown, since I've come out, for other people. My empathy has grown for people who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer, people of color, Native American—

Tenney: Non-binary?

Mecus: Non-binary, people with disabilities, like—my empathy has gone through the roof for these, because now—I don't know—I don't know how, why it has, it just has, and I'm able to have compassion, way more compassion than I used to have. And having different experiences too, going to the queer drag thing with you in Bushwick.

Tenney: Yeah, we went to Bizarre, in Bushwick.

Mecus: Yeah, Bizarre Bushwick.

Tenney: They like to have place names in these interviews so that you can connect them, and link the physical place. So we were at Bizarre [in] Bushwick, and we saw "The Fuck You Revue," which is like, very, performance art queer burlesque co-produced by my friend Zoey, and so, yeah—[unintelligible]—talk about that experience?

Mecus: Yeah, so, again I was down for something—[clicking noise]—sorry, I was playing with the pen.

Tenney: [laughter]

Mecus: I was down for something, and I am not one to go to places, I—

Tenney: You don't go to bars, you don't go to clubs—

Mecus: I don't go to clubs, bars, I don't do any of that stuff, I—

Tenney: You go rock climbing.

Mecus: I go rock climbing,

Tenney: And hang out with your daughter.

Mecus: I hang out with my daughter. So I was down, visiting you, and you were like, hey, let's go to this thing, and I was like, "That sounds like fun, I've never done something like that before." And the moment I walk through the door I'm like, "These are my people. I feel comfortable here." For the first time in my life, I think that was the first time I felt comfortable in an almost exclusively queer space**.** Now I'm using the word queer to denote anybody who's not cis/het.

Tenney: [chuckling laughter]

Mecus: Everybody was freaky. Everybody had some version of freak going on that night, and nobody seemed to care. I didn't feel like the Frankenstein, I didn't feel like the only weird person in the world that I often feel like I appear. And that was awesome, I didn't want to leave that night. I thought about it a long time afterwards, it was really good. I've been going to the Trans Day of Action, last—I'm not a huge political activist. I never was. I'm becoming more and more of one, now—so going to the joy before the rage thing at the LGBT center before the Trans Day of Action this year was super empowering for me—being around trans people who have—control their lives and they're taking back their own power, and who are demanding what's due to them, what they deserve...

Tenney: Housing rights, and access to medical care…

Mecus: All of it.

Tenney: Protection from job discrimination—

Mecus: Yes.

Tenney: Yeah.

Mecus: So empowering.

Tenney: Do you feel like you're seeing yourself in relation to other social and political movements now that you've—

Mecus: Yeah, I am.

Tenney: Like you went to the women's march in 2016?

Mecus: I went [in] 2016, it was—was it January, of 2016? It was January 2017—

Tenney: That you went to 2017, because—oh yeah, 2017, of course, because it was the day after the inauguration.

Mecus:I had only been out half a year, so I was still really early on in my transition. I often—I didn't feel like I was accepted in a lot of women's spaces—not that the women's march was a purely-women space, at all, but I took my daughter down to see some friends in Boston, and they have a young daughter too, and we decided that we were going to go to this thing in downtown. And we got on the train, and we went to downtown, and we got out of the subway, and I was amazed. I was amazed at the power of seeing—what was it, half a million people in Boston?

Tenney: Mmmhmm.

Mecus: It was a lot of people. [laughter] And I was just—I felt like I belonged there, demanding to be seen as a woman, for the first time, in sort of an angry, like "You're going to listen to me" kind of move, you know.

Tenney: As opposed to that hiding, "I want to be seen but not be seen, I want to be invisible but I want to—"

Mecus: Yes.

Tenney: "—only be seen as a woman, at 1:30 in the morning or 7'oclock at night, but not on a saturday morning."

Mecus: And it's really helping how I go about my days, now—earlier on in my transition, I just wanted to blend in, I wanted to pass, I just wanted to do all the things necessary to pass.

Tenney: Do you think that had also to do with staying in the same place and transitioning? That you really had to push people's understanding of you as a woman because it was the same people who knew you, before...

Mecus: Right.

Tenney: Before transition, and it was the same community and the same job, which I think is kind of unique, that you transitioned in the community you were living, and the household you were living in, and also in the same job.

Mecus: Yeah, maybe that's unique, I don't know. Yeah, I needed people to see me as a woman unequivocally, and now that I'm comfortable, I don't—how do I put this?—I guess I'm not so worried about people thinking whatever they think of me. I'm not so worried about always having my voice at the perfect pitch, or walking the perfect way. Those things are so ridiculous to have to worry about, all the time.

Tenney: There's other stuff to worry about.

Mecus: There's other stuff to worry about, and I think visibility is so important. I've come to realize that people with privilege need to fight for people who don't have that privilege. They need to help, and the way they help is by being visible. And by fighting visibly. Not being afraid to get called out because you're at a trans march, or because you're hanging out with these sex workers, or recovering drug addicts, or whatever the case may be, like—I'm a middle class, white, gainfully employed trans woman. I have all sorts of privileges that lots of trans people don't have. By hiding in my own existence, I'm not helping anybody. And I think the only thing I can do is be visible to my community, to the people who maybe subtly think that, "Well Robbi is okay, but those black trans women who are doing sex work down in New York City, they're not the same thing," but we are the same thing. You know? So yeah, I don't know how else to, how else to do

that—and you know, I'm so removed, I went down to the Trans Day of Action yesterday—ah, this year, and there were—I think we saw two other protests that day, while we were down there, it was like your protest du jour…

Tenney: [laughter]

Mecus: Like, New York City, just pick your battle and you can go fight it, you know?

Tenney: Can you imagine if Keene had not just like a Trans Day of Action but a Pride, like an LGBTQ pride event? Do they have them?

Mecus: No, I think the closest one is in like Plattsburgh, which is an hour away.

Tenney: Yeah, the closest pride march is an hour.

Mecus: The closest pride march is an hour away. It'd be super awesome, yeah it would be. [laughter]

Tenney: I'm looking at Robbi right now, and making eyes at Robbi, to say, "Well maybe you could start it."

Mecus: Well maybe I can do something, yeah.

Tenney: I guess I'm curious also, transitioning in a rural community—one thing they often suggest we talk about is access to medical transition, and how you were able to access that, and I think that's a thing that intersects a lot with rural life, is access to medical care.

Mecus: My access to medical care was really good in one sense, because I have good health insurance. That's another one of my privileges, is that I don't worry about health insurance. So I knew that my mental health care is covered. I knew that once I got letters from my therapist that my hormone stuff was going to be covered by my insurance, I knew that, I wasn't worried about that...

Tenney: Because the State of New York says "We will cover our employees' transition—medical transition."

Mecus: Um, yes, and no, because—but yeah, I guess, mostly yes. I was worried about whether they were going to cover surgery—my bottom surgery, because that was—it's just a big bill, and how do you not worry about that? So I wasn't initially worried about the affordability of it, or being able to do it, completely—I struggled with my access to it. My therapist was an hour and a half away. That was the closest therapist I could find who had any experience with gender issues at all, which was marginal when I first—she had only had one other patient—she turned out to be amazing, and I love her to death, but it was a three-hour round trip drive to go see a therapist for 45 minutes, so, that was challenging. My endocrinologist was two hours away. To go see him.

That was challenging. There are no doctors up here who have any training in transgender healthcare. None. There's none. Planned parenthood now does transgender health services. And that is my—that's my godsend. I go to them for my trans healthcare. They don't offer primary care, so I still don't have a primary care doctor who knows anything about trans [health] issues. When I do go to them, I explain to them what it is that—

Tenney: You basically diagnose yourself.

Mecus: Yeah. She didn't know that I still had a prostate.[laughter] Yeah, they just don't know. They don't know how to care for me. They don't know that I still need prostate exams. So that's hard to explain to your doctor how to care for you. So my access—my ability to cover it has been really good, but my access has been difficult. My surgeon was in Pennsylvania, so that's 6 hours away.

Tenney: Do you want to talk about—do you feel that you've ever been discriminated against at your job, either because of your gender or because of other aspects of your identity? Or in school? It says job or school but I guess I'm thinking about transitioning while staying in the same job.

Mecus: I work for New York State. I'm a New York State Forest Ranger. I work for the Department of Environmental Conservation. Very masculine field, very hyper-macho. I think the force is about 12% women. Rachel and I were just having this conversation—there's no people of color right now, there's no openly gay people. Out of 150 Forest Rangers across the state, there's no openly gay person. That's just statistically not probable. Somebody there is—they're still in the closet. And I was a ranger for 17 years before I came out. I never experienced discrimination—again I hid everything, and I heard everything that people, you know, all the guys I work with—all the homophobia, and the transphobia, was pretty rampant. Forest Rangers are police officers, under the New York State penal law, we're police officers. Law enforcement has no love for gay people, or trans people, or queer people. And I know that. And I didn't say anything, because I was deathly afraid of somebody calling me out, if I stood up for somebody, like, "Hey, you probably shouldn't tell that joke, or talk about trans people that way." I was so afraid of being found out that I just kept my mouth shut. And—

Tenney: Do you feel also like—before you transitioned, you were involved in—people would tell anti-women jokes in front of you?

Mecus: Oh absolutely. I remember I worked down in Hudson Valley—the D.E.C. is split up into 9 regions, so I worked in region 3, in Hudson Valley, and the Adirondacks is region 5. Now I remember, when I first came on, there was a women working down near me, and she'd taken a transfer up to the Adirondacks, and all the men—there was no women working up near the Adirondacks—they took up a very vocal campaign that said "We don't want any chicks in region 5."

Tenney: Wow…

Mecus: This is State Civil Service, this is State employment, but they were very vocal about it: "We don't want any women in region 5." Region 5 was male only. They told her that to her face. That's the kind of stuff—it wasn't directed at me, but—

Tenney: You heard it.

Mecus: I heard it, I knew it was out there, if I needed to transition at some point, I knew that was there—

Tenney: So then you transitioned.

Mecus: Well so then I transitioned, and I was pretty convinced I was going to have to quit, I came out before GENDA was passed, but New York State—

Tenney: Can you say what GENDA was?

Mecus: GENDA is the Gender Expression Non-Discrimination Act, that was passed this year. Just passed 2019. It took two thousand and 19 years to do that. [laughter]

Tenney: [laughter]

Mecus: But, New York State Government Employees are protected under New York State policy for state employees, there's no discrimination for all these protected classes, and gender identity was one of them. So I knew I was protected legally, they couldn't just fire me if I came out as trans, but nobody, but—[sigh]

Tenney: But what was your life going to be like after you did that?

Mecus: What was my life going to be like—being a Forest Ranger means that you have to rely on the people around you to come help you when you have an incident going on in your area, you have to have pretty good relations with the people around you, you have to network with all the local law enforcement agencies and fire departments, you—we work a lot with fire departments—fire service is another very masculine, very macho culture. There are very few female firefighters in the volunteer fire service, anyway. I knew all those relationships were going to break down, and I wasn't getting any respect, I wasn't going to be able to do my job properly, so I just assumed that I was going to be socially pushed out of my job. That was one of those things, when I came out, I was like, "Yep, you're not going to be a ranger for much longer. And I was pretty surprised by the reaction.

Tenney: Which was…?

Mecus: Overwhelmingly positive. Overwhelmingly positive. There's a lot of ignorance out there, and ignorance doesn't necessarily mean discrimination or phobia, it just means ignorance. And

so I've had to do a lot of education—that has been met mostly with open ears, somewhat with defensiveness, like people telling me after three years of being out, and living with my true identity, that they need time to get used to calling me "she." Like, dude, it's three years. [laughter] If you don't get it in three years you're not going to get it. So there's a little bit of that. I don't get that with any new people. I don't get that with people I meet on the street, I don't get that with the public that I interact with for work, I don't get that with new rangers who come on now not knowing me before, I only get that from people I worked with who knew me before.

Tenney: And it's mostly the men.

Mecus: It's all the men. Yeah. It's all the men. The women have been super accepting. Almost from day one, pronouns weren't an issue. Almost from day one, they included me, early on—in a class action grievance we had, against our department, for not giving us uniforms built for women's bodies, they were just giving us men's uniforms. And that was happening as I was coming out, they were like, "Do you want to be part of this?" And I was like, "Fuck yeah I want to be part of that." It's ridiculous, you know, here's a uniform that's clearly built for a man, but we call it unisex, because it's supposed to be for both. It's not for both. Unisex uniforms are built for men and women just have to deal with it. And I struggled a lot, I became a vocal critic of my department, and my union—even the union wouldn't back us up at first. The union president—

Tenney: Who is a man—

Mecus: Who is a man, who is the most liberal, progresive ranger on the force. Just for perspective here. When this got brought to him, he was like, "We have much bigger issues to deal with, you having to wear that uniform is not a big deal, don't worry about it." So I said to him, I said—I'm not going to use his name, I said, "Listen—

Tenney: "Friend!" [laughter]

Mecus: [laughter] I said, "Listen to me. What do you think would happen if the 123 men on this force were, tomorrow, given women's clothing to wear to work? Do you think they'd put up a stink?" And he was like, "Okay. We'll put it through." [laughter]

Tenney: [laughter]

Mecus: I'm like, "Dude, how can you not see that this is biased?"

Tenney: Well, and you said too, just moments ago, how transitioning has led you to have more empathy, and to recognize how individual struggles, though different from yours, are important and real and need to be supported by those who have privilege to do it, and so, I think sometimes, it's just, you're right, ignorance, not necessarily thinking outside of your own experience to understand how someone else might feel.

Mecus: Yeah, and I think, some of the things that I benefit from being trans for at work—I spent 17 year presenting at work, and I spent most of my life socialized as male, and accruing the benefits of that, and one of the benefits is being able to speak my mind and have people listen to it. So I think that's something I still hold at work, is—the men at work—I have no problem getting in their face and speaking my opinion, and expecting my opinion to be heard and respected. And a lot of the other women on my force don't. They're not as aggressive with getting their opinion out there and demanding to be heard. So I think that's something that I carry over from being identified as male by everybody else. They still see that part of me, and I still use it very liberally at work. But now I use it for a different purpose. [laughter] "This isn't right, and this is why you're going to change it, and you're going to listen to me."

Tenney: I mean, that makes me think about—one of the questions was, "Have you had experiences with police/law enforcement?" which is just the generic question, and I think it's kind of interesting to think about—I want to hear your thoughts about it but, also, thinking about how your privilege as being a member of law enforcement, of—as a police officer, how you can, maybe, show and share your experience with them in order to help them to understand what it means to be a trans person interacting with law enforcement.

Mecus: So let me start this conversation off by saying that I have not had any negative experiences with law enforcement. Myself. Either in my past life, as presenting as male, or now. Outside of the—smoking dope in the woods in high school and getting chased by the cops. Outside of that, I've had no negative interactions with law enforcement. But I'm kind of a rule-follower, too. [laughter] So I don't find myself in situations where I'm going to be challenged by police. I was raised by my parents to—police are to be respected, their word is to be followed at all times. That's how I was brought up.

Tenney: And as like, a "white" "boy"—air quotes—you were given the benefit of the doubt probably in situations. By other white—

Mecus: Oh yeah, I know all of that now. I didn't know that back then—I bought into the whole storyline of "Cops are good, you people are bad, you're only getting in trouble because of you." And it wasn't until that building of the empathy, that I'm able to see things differently now. I know that the law enforcement community has a systemic problem with homophobia, transphobia, and racism. I know that. I'm around it all the time, I hear it all the time. It's also very misogynist. It's all the things.

Tenney: All the phobias.

Mecus: All the bad things, all the Trumpisms. Right? But I also know that I'm one of them. And this is something that only recently has begun to bother me—is how the law enforcement community interacts with the trans community. I know how people feel, I'm on facebook groups where I hear trans people and queer people saying that—so, most of this started with me hearing about police presence at pride events, and how there's this movement to remove police presence at pride events, because of the history, and because of ongoing bias that's occuring. Prior to that,

gullible little ol' me, I'm like, "Well the police are really trying hard, they're trying really hard to be our friends, we should—come on, let's bury the hatchet and be friends." Without really understanding, like, they're still fuckin' with people. While they're trying to be friends. They're still raiding places where gay men go to hang out, they're still doing that shit. People I work with, do that, now, today. They go to places on Long Island that are frequented by gay men, and try to arrest them for, indecent public—you know what I mean? They wouldn't do that to straight people, and I know that. So, I'm becoming aware that my privilege has been blinding me for a long time, and now I'm becoming aware that there's really valid reasons why the trans community should be, at the very minimum, really leery of police, and the law enforcement community. I feel like something I really want to look into—I heard a podcast of an NPR interview with a woman in Philadelphia, I think, who's doing a lot of work on the law enforcement community and the trans community and trying to help law enforcement develop good policy. There really is no policy—law enforcement gets zero training on how to interact with the trans community, at all. I feel like that's something that I can do, I can work with my department at least, to help them become aware that there—this is a problem. So one of the things that happened before I came out, just before I came out, it was probably a few months before I came out, we—so, part of my patrol district has an area, we have a conservation easement where trails cross this private country club. And the country club has a guard, who sits there and basically talks to everybody who goes through the gate. And they have their own special rules, there's no dogs allowed, there's no bikes allowed, yadda yadda, so on and so forth. And all those trails lead to my state land, so when there's complaints, I have to go deal with them. So this guard, who's all the -isms, all the phobias. He calls me one day and says, "I need you to come down here, somebody tried to sneak a dog onto the property, I need you to write them a ticket." I'm like, "All right, whatever." I really don't like this guy, I don't like interacting with him, because I know what he is. I don't like being around it. But I have to, it's my work, so I have to sort of put the face on. This is before I came out. So he's got the two people, the two women, sitting in the room. And I walk in, and I look at them, and I can—I see quickly that one of them is a trans-identified—a transfeminine person. So I'm like, "Okay." This is before I really became aware of law enforcement / trans community interaction. But I have a lot of empathy for this person, I'm going to do the right thing, and be—do my best to respect them. So I took them outside, I asked for their IDs, I took them back to their cars, they gave me their ID, they hadn't changed their gender marker or their name—yet.

[sound of audio cutting out due to tape ending]

Tenney: Oh it did start a new one! Okay go ahead.

Mecus: Okay, so I got their ID,they hadn't changed their gender marker, but they were clearly presenting as feminine. So I treated them with respect, used the right pronouns, yadda yadda, and I had to write them a ticket because they were clearly trying to, you know, break the rules. So I wrote them a ticket and sent them on their way, and I went back up to the guard so he can write down the information that he needed. And he looks at the name, and—

Tenney: The ID vs the person.

Mecus: And he's like, "That's not the person that I had in here." And I'm like, "It is." And he's like [sound of beverage can opening] "No, I had—there were two women in here." And I'm like "Yeah, yeah, one of them was a transgender woman." and he's like, "What?" So I had to explain to him, I said, "She's—she identifies as female, she's going through transition, she hasn't changed her gender marker yet, she hasn't done any of these things yet." And he's like, "They can't do that! That's—that's giving a false name, she gave me a false name! You can't do that! She has to be arrested!" And I'm like, "Calm down. She doesn't have to be anything." He was such a jerk about it, right?

Tenney: Like, a guard, not an actual police officer?

Mecus: Yeah, he's a "peace officer." We're using air quotes. But again, this was like months before I came out. So I left that encounter saying, "This is what I'm going to have to deal with. People who think that I need to be arrested, because I'm using a female name now." You know what I mean? So that was an early-on experience with law enforcement and the trans community, and what worries me now, is that—I get gendered correctly by the public, and I've run into other trans people at work, I've run into other queer people, as members of the public that I'm interacting with, and I hear how much the trans community and the queer community—I don't want to use the word "hatred", but they have a lot of angst about the law enforcement community—

Tenney: Valid fear.

Mecus: Valid fear, right. And when I stand in front of them, and I have a gun, and I'm wearing a uniform, they don't see a Forest Ranger, they see a cop standing in front of them, and I hate the thought that that person is looking at me, and detesting me. They may not be reading me as trans, they may not be reading me as queer, they're reading me as cop. And I don't—it really disturbs me, on my level.

Tenney: Are you concerned that you are negatively impacting them, or just that they're making this assumption about who you are?

Mecus: I feel like they're making an assumption about who I am, and as such, it might be valid—if you're a person who's had lots of bad experiences with police, you're going to tend to be—expect a bad experience with police.

Tenney: So then you can give them—I mean, positive, as positive as you can be, that you're interacting with them.

Mecus: I did—the last person, you know, they're out camping—there was one queer person, at least one queer person, I don't know what the other person was, but I mean there were—pride all over the place, rainbow things, and, you know. All the things.

Tenney: Pride.

Mecus: [Laughter] And so I'm interacting with them, and they were nice enough, but I wanted to just let them know. I'm like, "Hey, happy pride month by the way." And they're like "Oh, thank you, thank you!" And we like, high-fived and stuff. It was great. But I really want—I really think that this is one area where I can use my visibility, I can use the privilege and the power that I have, and try to effect some change, at least in my sphere. I want to work with my department to develop policy about how to treat—not only how to treat other people, in my agency, who come out as either queer, or trans, but how to deal—how to interact with the public. And not just develop policy, but develop training. Policy does nothing without training. If it's just a stack of paper sitting on some supervisor's desk somewhere, and the field personnel don't see it, it does nothing, you know? There has to be training behind it. And that's really what I want to—what I'm hoping to focus on, in the last years of my waning career. [laughter]

Tenney: [laughter] Waning? What? Not waning. I guess I had just two more, well—one more thought area, and one more question after that.

Mecus: Okay.

Tenney: So this is the Trans Oral History Project of the New York Public Library, and the encouragement is to interview someone who has a connection to New York, and we've talked about, you growing up there, and younger experiences, and kind of your pull back to New York City to be in communities, and to be in spaces that feel welcoming and affirming. And I guess, is there anything about your connection to New York City that we haven't talked about, and maybe if you talk more about your connection to New York City, that would be interesting.

Mecus: Growing up in New York City, I always knew that I was a mountain girl.

Tenney: [Laughter]

Mecus: I always knew it. And when I was young, I was cutting out pictures of forests, and mountains, and I was tacking them up on my wall. The kid who—I never left the city until I was 15 years old. Never left New York City, never went upstate for a vacation—I mean, I thought Lake George was like, "Oh my god, this is wild!" Lake George, right?

Tenney: The town of Lake George which has lots of restaurants, an amusement park, and like, outlet malls.

Mecus: Oh yeah, it's tourist central.

Tenney: But still is next to a beautiful lake.

Mecus: So I wanted to leave New York City, to—

Tenney: Be in the mountains.

Mecus: Be in the mountains—the mountains are ultimately where I feel like I belong, but, I crave that social, I crave that culture, I crave that difference—diversity, I miss. So, any chance I get to go back to the city, even if it's for one day—I leave that. But my connection to New York City is not all fuzzy. [laughter] Um—I worked 9/11, two years after becoming a Forest Ranger, and I'm up in the woods, working in the woods, and all of a sudden, I'm sifting through smoldering debris. Looking for bodies, looking for people, looking for evidence. And I have permanent health effects from that. And to this day, I've tried—[cough] I've tried to go down to ground zero three times, since then. And I can't do it. I can't get down there. I get a couple blocks away, and I'm just overwhelmed, I'm overtaken, by panic. I had a view of the Twin Towers from my bedroom window.

Tenney: Growing up?

Mecus: Growing up, yeah. When I lived in Brooklyn, in Greenpoint, before all the condos were built—

Tenney: On the waterfront, yeah.

Mecus: On the waterfront. [Laughter] And, I would lay in bed, as a weird, weird kid, I would lay in bed and imagine—I would imagine them falling down. To me they were just like towers of lego blocks, and I would just push lego blocks over, right? And I would imagine what would happen if they fell over. And when I actually saw that happen, I felt really guilty. I felt really guilty that I had engaged in some childhood perverse pleasure of wanton destruction.

Tenney: Of course, that had nothing to do with the actual—

Mecus: No, but I felt horribly guilty. And that was an iconic symbol of my childhood. The Twin Towers were, that was—

Tenney: Because they were fairly new—newly built.

Mecus: They were.

Tenney: And they were, they definitely—people had strong opinions about them, and how they impacted the skyline, and how large they were, and—

Mecus: Yeah, I think they were finished in '73 or '74, somewhere in there—I remember my mother taking us up to the top of one of them, really early on. I was super young. Yeah, they just—that was New York City to me, and to be there, cleaning up the mess—New York City's not the same to me.

Tenney: How has New York City changed over the years? I mean, that could be a touch-point.

Mecus: Pssh, wow, how has New York city changed over the years? Greenpoint is not Greenpoint, I'll tell you that.

Tenney: It's a different Greenpoint.

Mecus: Oh my gosh—you'd never find—what was it, Kombucha?—in Greenpoint! [Laughter]bNow you find it all over the place.

Tenney: There's still like, Polish markets, and—

Mecus: There totally is, yeah. I was there not too long ago,

Tenney: —Polish restaurants—

Mecus: With you, actually. So not too long ago, and—saw my house, it's very small now. [Laughter] I saw—I looked in the window where I first secretly put on my sister's dresses. You know, it brought me right back there. I think New York City has changed in so many ways, for good and for bad. New York City was gritty when I was growing up, it had something, it had crime, it had dirt, it had all that stuff, but it had something. It's pretty much spotless now, which is good, I guess, if you live there, but if that's your memory of the city, it's like—you don't get on the train after dark, you don't go in Central Park after dark, you—

Tenney: Don't go in McCarren park after dark, or maybe?

Mecus: Oh yes, McCarren park, sorry—yeah, there were nightly gunshots in McCarren park, from the north side, which is actually the south side of the park. I don't know why we called it the north side, but anyway, it—oh it was the north side of—it went to the north side of Williamsburg, right—duh! I just put that together. [Laughter]

Tenney: [Laughter]

Mecus: But it's also changed.

Tenney: But also, there's no swimming from the piers in Greenpoint. You talked about people like jumping off the pier—

Mecus: Yeah, yeah.

Tenney: And never quite doing that. Or like, the freedom, also, that, I think kids had, at that time, to go and play in the street.

Mecus: Yeah, we were—I remember being about seven years old, and my best friend and I would steal[cough] subway tokens from our mom's purses, and we'd sneak out and go catch the L train

and go into New York City—seven years old! Nobody questioned that. Nobody questioned two seven year old-kids, wandering around the streets of lower Manhattan, and our moms never questioned it! We never got questioned about where we were—we just were not in the house, and they didn't seem to care. It was a different time back then, for sure, not saying it was better or worse, but it was definitely different. But, I mean—it's different now, for me, in that I use it for different purposes. I use it to get a sense of community now, I use it to see people like me, to talk to people like me, to hear people like me. I didn't do that back then, and I can appreciate that now—I can appreciate that the community is so big in New York City, and I have such immense awe of it. And it's like—a friend of mine described to me, they said, "If New York City now—" I'm messing up the quote, but it's basically in reference to—"If New York City is current day of trans acceptance and equality, upstate New York is 1950." And it's pretty true, I think, it's pretty true. I think that was a pretty apt description of where things are, in terms of like, access to care, in terms of access to support, it's just—it's not here, it's in New York City. Yeah.

Tenney: Before we end, is there anything that you want to talk about, that I didn't ask you?

Mecus: [Sigh] No, I think we did a lot—I mean, I can talk all night... [Laughter]

Tenney: [Laughter]

Mecus: But I'm pretty sure people don't want to listen to me all night long, so we'll end it there. It's been super exciting to this, thank you.

Tenney: Thank you Robbi, this was awesome.

Mecus: Yeah.

[Tape ends]