

NEW YORK CITY TRANS ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

BERNIE WAGENBLAST

Interviewer: Aviva Silverman

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Transcribed by Jamie Wild

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Aviva Silverman: Hello, my name is Aviva Silverman, and I will be having a conversation with Bernie Wagenblast for the New York City Trans Oral History Project. This is an oral history project centered on the experiences of trans-identifying people. It is December 13th, and it's being recorded on Zoom. Hi

Bernie Wagenblast: Hi, how are you doing, Aviva?

Silverman: I'm great. I was wondering if you wanted to introduce yourself a bit.

Wagenblast: Sure. My name is Bernie Wagenblast. I live in Cranford, New Jersey. I've lived in New Jersey all of my life, except for six months when I had a job in Indiana. So that's where I've lived. I'm many different things. I am a parent. I'm a grandparent. Professionally, I'm a transportation journalist. I'm a voice actor. I previously worked on the radio in and around New York City. So a few different things that I've done over time.

Silverman: Wow. Could we just start with where you grew up?

Wagenblast: Sure. So I grew up in the town that we're talking in right now, Cranford, New Jersey. Well, let's see. When I was born, my dad had just gotten out of the Army, so they were living with my grandparents. So my very first house was here in Cranford, but we only lived there for about six months before my parents got an apartment. And we lived there until I was about four years old, and then we moved back to Cranford. And I ended up going to Cranford schools. I guess I lived here most of my life. I've had a few other houses around the area, but most of it has been in Cranford. And it's kind of neat growing up in or living in the town that you grew up in.

Silverman: Wow. And what was your sort of the background of your family? Did it have a deep religious background? What was your class background? What were some of the details?

Wagenblast: My dad was a blue collar worker. My mom, when she was working, did a lot of clerical related things, but she also was one of the early people doing publishing with computers in the early days. I would say that we were pretty much a middle class family. I have a younger brother and a younger sister. I'm the oldest in the family. It was, I think, kind of a relatively ordinary growing up life. We lived in a 1950s house, a split level house. We had friends in the neighborhood that we played with. It was a suburban town. Cranford is very much a suburban town. We had our adventures of playing in the woods and riding our bicycles, different places and things like that. That pretty much describes what it was like in terms of, I went to public school from K through 12th grade. I would not say that my family was deeply religious, but they certainly were religious.

I grew up primarily in the Lutheran church and was thankful for that because I felt I got a good religious education doing that. It wasn't such that, like say going to Catholic school where it was as part of my curriculum in school, it was just things that I did on Sundays and when I had confirmation classes and things of that sort. Even after I left home and was out on my own, I was involved with church work, again, primarily Lutheran church, had a lot of different roles that I played in the church, was vice president and president of the congregation. I was an elder. I was a trustee. Just about anything, not dealing with numbers. I'm not a numbers person, so I stayed away from that, but pretty much anything else, I managed to have a role in that kind of thing over the years.

Silverman: And just out of personal curiosity, what are some of the tenants of Lutheran sort of religion that drew you in that maybe are separate from mainstream Christianity?

Wagenblast: Well, I would say Lutheran is pretty much a mainstream denomination. It's a Protestant denomination. I think in terms of my initial, it wasn't a choice, you know, it was where my mom was going to church. It was what she was raised, so I just kind of went where I was told to go. So I didn't really have a say in it. But in terms of my adult life, I think some of the things that were appealing, the theology, this particular branch of the Lutheran church that I was a part of was relatively liberal in terms of its beliefs and how it dealt with different types of people. It was not a religion that I felt condemned people because they did not live the right way, so to speak. So I think there were a lot of different things that appealed to it, and there was also the social aspect. We had our friends there in the Lutheran church, so that also made a big difference for us. Yeah, that makes sense.

Silverman: I was wondering during that time if you have any early memories of either a trans person or trans life or something in the media that you've held on to?

Wagenblast: Yeah, I didn't say this at the beginning. Right now I'm 67 years old, so I grew up primarily in the 1960s and the 1970s. I knew that I was trans, although obviously I did not use that word back then, from my earliest memories. One of my earliest memories was I was probably about four years old. I was visiting my grandmother who lived just down the street from our house, and it was a weekday. Everybody was at work except for my grandmother who did not go to a job at that point, and I was sitting in front of her vanity, and I was putting on these faux pearl necklaces that she had, and there was a powder puff, and I was putting powder on my face. I didn't know what the heck I was doing, but I know that that felt like something I wished I could do all the time. You know, a couple of years later, my best friend who lived across the street from me, she was a girl, and I remember going into her fort that her dad had built in her backyard, and I thought, oh, this is kind of a private place. There were no windows or anything like that, and I convinced her to exchange clothing with me.

I don't remember what she was wearing, but again, it was just a very nice feeling to know that I was wearing what was considered girls' clothes. Unfortunately, her older brother, maybe he was 10 years old at the time, discovered us. He told his parents, who in turn told my parents, and as I remember it, my parents weren't upset with me. They simply explained to me that you can't do that and told me not to do that, and it was very clear, I guess, from that point on that, you know, this was not socially acceptable at that point in time. So those were some of the earliest memories. Another early memory, this was kindergarten. Kindergarten was a little more loose back in those days. There was less learning and more just, I think, socialization, and one of the things that we did was finger paint, and the kindergarten teacher sent a note home to the parents saying, you know, please bring in an old blouse or shirt for your son or daughter because we're doing finger painting and we don't want them to get paint on their clothes. So I guess my dad didn't have any old shirts that were available, and my mom let me take in one of her old blouses. It wasn't especially feminine, as I recall, but it was clearly different because the thing that I noticed were that the buttons were on the opposite side of all the shirts I had ever had up to that point, and I was pretty happy about that. I was glad that I was able to wear this blouse to school, but the other kids, even at that early age, knew that it was a woman's blouse, and they started picking on me.

So I, of course, went home and said I can't wear this and ended up getting one of my dad's old shirts and wearing that. So those were some of the very early memories for me. In terms of people, I think the first time I discovered that there was such a thing as or there were people like me who weren't comfortable in the gender they were assigned, I saw a paperback biography or autobiography of Christine Jorgensen. So I think she was the first person I ever became aware of who, and again, using the terminology of the time, who had changed their sex, and that was an eye-opening experience for me that somebody could do this. Not only that they could do this, but that I wasn't the only person in the world that felt this way, because up until that point, that was all I knew was how I felt, and I was afraid to share that with anybody else. One of the things that little kids did back then was the boys would run away from the girls saying that they didn't want to catch cooties. Well, I would let myself be caught because I wanted to catch cooties. I didn't know what cooties was, but I knew it was a girl thing. So if I could catch it, that would be great. So those, again, are some of the earliest memories.

Silverman: I love thinking about, I haven't thought about cooties in a long time, but that's true. And then, so where did you go after high school, or yeah, how did you leave home?

Wagenblast: Well, I went to Seton Hall University. I was the first person in my family ever to go to college, but I couldn't afford to live on campus, so I commuted when I was at Seton Hall, and a lot of the students were commuters. The majority of the students were commuters. I knew from about fifth grade on that I wanted to work in radio. So what drew me to Seton Hall, which happens to be a Catholic university, is that they had a radio station, and I call it a real radio station, one that broadcasts beyond just the campus or the immediate neighborhood of the campus. And it was an opportunity to get real life experience as a broadcaster. So that was what I did for my four years at school, was really spent more time at the radio station. This is not an exaggeration that I did in class. That was what I wanted to do. It was what I was learning. So it was a wonderful opportunity. And even though I was not living on campus, I was probably on campus more than even the people that lived there because I was there on holidays, on

weekends, during the summer months when school was out, I was there all the time. The first time I actually ever moved away was I got a job at a radio station in New Albany, Indiana, which is just across the Ohio River from Louisville, Kentucky. And went there, again, this is before the internet, so it was pretty hard to do research on things. And wasn't exactly sure what I was getting into, but it looked like a good opportunity to be on the air in a fairly big market of Louisville, Kentucky.

Packed up my car, drove to Indiana, and quickly discovered that this was not such a great radio station. It was in an old funeral home. It was the signal of the AM station was directed away from Louisville, so you weren't even reaching that big part of the market while you were on the air. And I only stayed there for about six months before my apartment lease came to an end and then I moved back home.

Silverman: What drew you to radio?

Wagenblast: I think it was the people that I heard on the radio that drew me to radio. Again, a different time, AM radio was the dominant medium. People were not really listening to FM. There was no such thing as satellite radio or podcasts or streaming or anything like that. And the personalities on the radio just seemed so friendly and engaging. And I think there was a little mystery to it that you would hear these people, but you really didn't know what they looked like. You just heard them. There was a theater of the mind that was created in terms of what they were doing. My particular interest was news. I wanted to be a radio news person. And I think what drew me to news was a couple of things. Number one *small pause* I was kind of a shy person, so I didn't necessarily think I had the personality to be a DJ on the air. That it required a more outgoing personality than I felt I had. And I was interested in news and information. I used to read the newspaper every single day, pretty much cover to cover.

As I learned more about it, I liked the idea that you would get to do a lot of interesting things covering stories, where you would go different places and meet interesting people. So that was part of it. And I think I always had an interest in being able to give back in some way. And to me, being a news person was a way to give back. You were reporting on things that the community needed to know about. So all of those things, I think, were what attracted me to radio. And I was working on my voice, so I felt I had a fairly good voice for radio. So that...

Silverman: Sorry, when you say working on your voice, what does that mean?

Wagenblast: Oh, I would read out loud. I would read the newspaper out loud and just try to be able to read it without stumbling. To be expressive with my voice. To be able to pronounce words. And also even being able to ad lib. If you did stumble, how would you get around that? You can't be on the radio and say, oh, I'm sorry, let me do that again. You have to kind of roll with it. That was one of the things that was also neat about radio is, for the most part, it was live. So when you make a mistake on live radio, everybody hears it. There's no take two and let's try that again. You're there in front of everybody's ears that's tuned in and they're hearing what you do. So I think that was also a part of the appeal.

Silverman: Yeah, that's so interesting that it's both, as you said, like a theater of the mind. It's just, it is based on voice and not on one's looks. But also, yeah, that there's responsibility and being able to be like the carrier or like the reporter that brings people that information. Were there any particular shows that you really coveted when you were getting into radio?

Wagenblast: Not really. There was a station, though, that I coveted. It was WNEW AM in New York. And back then, radio stations, well, they still do. They have different formats. But a format that no longer exists was what WNEW was. It was called Middle of the Road, MOR. So they would play some white rock tunes by groups like the Fifth Dimension or The Carpenters. But they would also play Standards by Tony Bennett and Frank Sinatra and folks like that. But it wasn't necessarily the music that was really attractive to me. Again, it was the personalities. I was probably in fifth or sixth grade and I was sending letters to the various disc jockeys on the radio station and saying, can you give me advice about how I can get into radio? I'm 12 years old. What can you suggest? And one day when I was in school, the morning show read my letter on the air. I was in school, so I did not hear it. But one of my neighbors did and told me about it. I was so excited and thrilled that my name got mentioned on WNEW. I can't believe this. It was Clavin and Finch. Gene Clavin was the guy that did it. He was a very funny guy. He did all sorts of characters on the show. And it was just magical to be part of that radio station, even in that small way. But I would listen to it seven days a week, as many hours as I could. So I would listen to the Sunday morning public affairs shows. I would listen to the New York Giants football games that were broadcast on the station. I would listen to the newscast. And they had a very good, one of the best news departments in New York radio. So I would listen to everything. And I would write down, you know, 1:07 PM, commercial for Eastern Airlines, 1:08, the fifth dimension, would you ride in my beautiful balloon? Yeah, whatever. I would write down a whole list. So I knew what the station was playing. It was, the whole thing was just fascinating to me.

And I would go to the library and read encyclopedia articles about radio. I would, if there were any books about radio broadcasting, I would get those to try to learn about it. I wanted to know as much as I possibly could about radio, so that I would have a leg up one day in terms of getting a job in the field.

Silverman: Wow. And so where did that lead you?

Wagenblast: Well, first it led me to Seton Hall and the college radio station there. And during my four years, that was really the focus. I went to class because you had to go to class to get the degree and to work at the radio station. But I felt I learned far more in the radio station because you were actually doing things. So it started out as a freshman doing newscasts and things like that. And then as I got into my sophomore year, I became the assistant news director. And then my junior year, I was the news director. And finally, my senior year, I was the top student position of station manager. And I did a little bit of everything, even though news was my main interest and my main focus. I did sports. I did disc jockey. I did engineering. I did pretty much anything and everything you could possibly do. At the radio station to, again, just be well-rounded in my knowledge.

But my junior year was the 1976-77 academic year. And it was a fantastic year to be the news director at the radio station. And because we were a real broadcast station, we were able to get press credentials and cover stories. In 1976, a lot of big things were happening. First, it was the bicentennial for the United States. And in New York Harbor, they had the tall ships that came into the harbor and naval vessels from around the world. I got press credentials. So I was on a boat in the middle of the harbor reporting on the parade of ships. And then that evening, they had fireworks display on the 4th of July around the Statue of Liberty. So I got to do that. It was a presidential election year. And not just the contest between the Republican and the Democrat for the White House, but there was also a primary. Gerald Ford was the president. And for those who don't remember, he became president when Richard Nixon resigned. And he had been appointed as vice president. So the public had never voted for Gerald Ford to be vice president or president. And he was challenged in the primary by Ronald Reagan. And it was a relatively close contest. So the White House was using the power of incumbency.

And they sent out an invitation to the New Jersey media prior to the New Jersey primary, inviting the media to come to the White House for a day of briefings to be capped off with a news conference by the president in the East Room. It was the summertime. So I was out of school. I was working part-time at a radio station, a small AM radio station. And they got the invitation via a telegram. And the news director read it, tore it up and said, oh, we can't do this. We don't have the staff or the money to send somebody for this. I put it back together with tape and said, tell you what, you give me the day off. I will pay my own way down to Washington, D.C. And I will report back to the radio station on what's going on. And they were fine with that. You know, that was a good deal for them. They got a reporter reporting from the White House for the station. And they didn't have to put out any money to do this. And I just thought, well, this is a once in a lifetime experience. I think it cost me \$50 each way on Braniff Airlines to fly from Newark to Washington, D.C. So I had this wonderful experience.

And what was most exciting about it was at the end of the day, they were serving coffee and tea and little baked things, I think, in the blue room at the White House. And so we're all in there and having that. And near the end, the president walks into the room. And it doesn't matter if you're a Republican or a Democrat or an independent. When you're in a room with the president of the United States, it's a big deal. And he went around and shook everyone's hand. And he got to me and I just shook his hand and said "good afternoon, Mr. President. My name is Bernie Wagenblast. I'm from WJDM in Elizabeth, New Jersey". It was just one sentence, but to be in the presence, shaking the hand of the president was totally cool. And then after that little reception, they went into the East Room where they had the news conference. You know, I'd seen that room and news conferences on TV so many times before with presidents. But to be there, being a reporter, again, was just this great experience. And also, the vice president came to New Jersey to campaign. And it was Nelson Rockefeller was the vice president, the former governor of New York. And I remember going to an event that he was at in New Jersey and being able to ask him a question.

Jimmy Carter came and was following him around during his journeys around New Jersey. So it was just this fantastic experience to be 18, 19 years old and covering all that. And the Democratic National Convention took place at Madison Square Garden in New York. So I was there every night for the Democratic Convention, was able to cover that. It was an experience

that I will never forget.

Silverman: Wow. Wow. And I know you mentioned transportation journalism. I was wondering how you got to that role.

Wagenblast: Well, like I said, I wanted to be in radio. And after I had this job for six months in Indiana, I came back home, still living with my parents, and was looking for a job. And this new company for New York was coming to town called Shadow Traffic. And Shadow Traffic was a new concept. They had started in Philadelphia and had expanded previously to Chicago. But they were going to provide traffic reports to most of the radio stations in and around New York City. And they were hiring a staff of reporters. They were looking for relatively young people to do this. I think in part because they weren't paying a lot of money and young people would take the job. But also because it was a split shift, so the hours were not the greatest you would be in at five in the morning, work till nine, come back in the afternoon, I think, at 3.30 and work till seven. So it was kind of a crazy schedule. But again, when you're young and you're hungry, you'll do almost anything. And it was a fantastic opportunity. Again, I was on the air in New York City during what's called drive time, the times when people are going to and from work. It's the most listened to time of day for radio. And was on two of the biggest radio stations in New York City, WABC and 10 10 Winds, which is an all news radio station. And it was a great experience.

I thought at the time that it was just a radio job. That's how I viewed it. What I didn't realize was that it was my introduction to the world of transportation. And I left there after about five years. Initially, my goal at that point was to own my own small town radio station, because that to me was the best way to be able to give back to the community. You could do everything. If you own the station, you could decide what was important or what they would cover and being involved in the Rotary and the Kiwanis and the JC's and the Chamber of Commerce and all the different organizations in town. But I knew if I was going to do that, I needed to learn the business side of radio, which is basically sales, selling ad time on the air. So I got a job with an excellent local radio station out in Hackettstown, New Jersey, WRNJ and became a salesperson. And the biggest thing that I learned from that experience was I was not a salesperson. I was a terrible salesperson. You needed to have a particular personality. You needed to be able to do cold calling and just knock on somebody's door and try to sell them this amorphous thing. It's not like I'm selling you a phone and here are the features of the phone and look, it does this and that. This was I want to sell you airtime, which you can't hold. You know, it's not something that you can feel. And for me, it just was not part of my personality.

So I left that job, took an interim job at a mail sorting facility where I was the night shift manager, because by this point I was married. I had a baby and I knew that I needed to support them for what we were doing. And while I was doing that job, my old boss from shadow traffic had been hired by the New York City Department of Transportation. They were starting up what they called a communication center. It was located in Long Island City, just on the Queen side of the 59th Street Bridge. And my old boss called me and said, you know, "I'm doing this project now for New York City DOT. Would you be interested in working with me?" And I liked working with him at shadow. And this was certainly more in line with what I knew and liked than being a night shift manager at a mail sorting facility. So I said, sure. And I took the job and was working for New York City's Department of Transportation.

Well, at about the same time this communication center was starting up for New York City DOT, the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey had started a new project that they called TransCom. And the idea behind TransCom was that it would involve all of the transportation agencies in Connecticut, New York, and New Jersey, at least in the metropolitan area, and would be a central information point where they could share information, whether it was incidents that were taking place, say a crash, or construction that was planned, or special events that were planned, whatever it might be. This would be the hub where they would share that information with all of the other agencies. And the way TransCom was initially set up, they had their staff contributed from the different agencies. So New York City DOT, since I lived in New Jersey and this organization was located in New Jersey, asked me if I would be interested in being their agency loan to TransCom. And a commute to Jersey City sounded a whole lot more appealing than the commute I was doing to Long Island City every day. So I took that opportunity, worked there.

The Port Authority had another project that they were doing. It was only going to be a short-term project, I think six months or so. And they'd hire a project employee to do it. So it would be a temporary spot. And I knew some of the people that were involved, and I applied for this project position, even knowing that it was only a temporary job. I figured, well, let's see if we can work this out. So I did that and ended up then being hired by the Port Authority to work at TransCom on a permanent basis. So I worked there initially. I was sort of their media person. But later on, I became the manager of the Operations Information Center that coordinated all this information, working with all the different agencies, and worked there for about a decade or so. And that was how I really went deep in the world of transportation.

Around 1996 or so, went on AOL. AOL was like one of the first ways that people first got involved with connecting to the internet. And I remember back in college when we were studying broadcast history, thinking it would have been really cool to have been around in the 1920s when radio was getting started, or in the 1950s when television was first growing, to be in on the ground floor of a medium as it's being developed. And I figured there's nothing like that that's going to happen in my lifetime. I missed that. Well, in the mid-1990s, along comes the internet. And I thought, oh, maybe here is my opportunity to be in on the ground floor of this new medium called the internet. And one way I thought that I could become involved with that is by sending out a newsletter, an email newsletter. Initially, I did that at Transcom, where once a week I would send out a newsletter about what was happening that weekend with construction, which is usually when they did some of the big projects, special events that were going on, sports, things in the city that were taking place. And I did that. And then when I left the Port Authority, I decided, well, I'm going to do something on my own. And I created this discussion group that I called the Transportation Communications Discussion Group. And it was a place where people who worked in any aspect of communications and transportation could ask questions of one another, share information, things of that sort. And shortly after I created it, I started sharing news stories involving communications in the transportation field, thinking that might be of interest to other people in the group. Well, there wasn't a whole lot of discussion, but people did seem to be interested in the news stories that I was sharing. So the discussion group morphed into a daily newsletter that I still do to this day. We celebrated it, or I celebrated it, my 25th anniversary of doing it back in June. And it was something that was a way to keep connected to a lot of people in the transportation world. It was a way for me to stay on

top of news that was happening in the transportation world. And like I say, to be in on the ground floor of this new medium. And when I say the ground floor, my newsletter was actually older, is older than Google. Google didn't exist when I started my newsletter. So that's pretty early on in the internet world. And did that. And as I did that, some other people saw what I was doing and said, could you do something similar for us? All of these were transportation organizations. So it wasn't as if I was doing one about transportation and another one about baking and another one about building management. These were all interrelated. But each one had a little bit of a different focus. So I started doing these electronic newsletters for the different clients and still doing those again to this day.

Fast forward to around 2014. And while podcasting had been around a little bit before this, initially podcasting, you needed to be a programmer to figure out how to do podcasting because you had to be able to upload it. And it was a much more complicated process. And I'm not necessarily a technically savvy person when it comes to that sort of thing. But by 2014, it had become relatively easy for someone to start a podcast. So I started two different podcasts, one about my hometown, about Cranford, and the other one about transportation, which I called Transportation Radio, which you see there. And I would do interviews with different transportation newsmakers, just again, kind of trying to learn. Nobody was paying me to do these, but it was a chance to use some of those old journalism skills that I had first learned in college radio of how to do an interview and then how to edit the interview and things like that. And again, after a little bit of time, I felt confident enough with what I was doing, that I approached an agency, an organization in transportation, the Institute of Transportation Engineers. They had a new CEO. And I said, what about the idea of doing a podcast? And he thought about it and said, yeah, okay, let's give that a shot. So I've been doing that for them, I think since about 2016. Later on, another organization that I was already working for doing newsletters for asked if I would host a podcast for them. That was AASHTO, the American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials. So for each one of those organizations, I do a monthly podcast for Cranford Radio. I do a weekly podcast of people I interview around town. That, again, sort of goes back to that, when I talked about having my own little radio station one day, that was my goal. This is my way of living that part of that dream of doing that without having to worry about hiring a staff, selling advertising, worrying about a transmitter and all that stuff. I could just do the podcast. The thing that I was best at, which was the interviewing side of it. So that's how I got involved with transportation journalism. A long answer to your question, but it was a little complicated. So I needed to explain that.

Silverman: Thank you for explaining. Wow. And I know that, like, because you're known in the headlines for having been the voice of the subway, I was wondering how that happened, how that came about and how you feel about it now?

Wagenblast: Sure. Well, going back to TransCom, as I said, that was made up of all the different transportation agencies in the tri-state area. And one of those, of course, was the MTA. And when I was at the Port Authority, because of my radio background, I would do occasional voiceover projects. If they had a video news release about big construction at the George Washington Bridge, or they wanted to do some radio commercials about construction at the Lincoln Tunnel, I would be the one that they would turn to to voice those. Because, again, I had

the experience and the skills to do that. Well, this fellow at the MTA, this was after I left the Port Authority, he was put in charge of a project to install what they were calling countdown clocks in the numbered line stations of the subway system, the one through seven trains. And he knew my background and that I was a voiceover person, although I didn't do a whole lot of that. He asked, well, would you be interested in being the voice for these countdown clocks? And I wasn't sure exactly what that involved, but it sounded like fun. I said, sure, I would love to do that. So we went into a studio, and this was over a couple of days. And I recorded probably close to a thousand different recordings that are used to this day in the subway. Most of them were either short phrases or individual words. So things like first, second, third, or Skirmihorn Street, Central Park, things like that. Things like that. I think the longest sentence and probably one of the few sentences I recorded is, please stand away from the platform edge. So I recorded these, and a year or so after I recorded them, they started rolling them out. And that was how I did that.

Now, a little before that, I had also been asked by the Port Authority to be the new voice on the air train at Newark Airport. That's the monorail which connects the terminals and the parking lots and the rail station at Newark Liberty International Airport. So I did those. And those were a little bit more expressive because you're doing whole sentences. So the next stop is terminal B, airline serving terminal BR, et cetera, et cetera. And I should mention, when I was doing any of these recordings, and when I still do these recordings, I do not do it in this voice. I do it in what I call my guy voice. And I can still switch to that. So if I had to do a new announcement for the subways, and I just recorded some about a week ago, I switch off this voice and go to, please stand away from the platform edge. Or if I'm doing Newark Airport, the next stop is terminal B, airline serving terminal BR, Air France, Air India, United, United Express.

So that was important to me that I could kind of call on both voices. And it takes a little bit of time when I switch to go back to the more feminine sounding voice. But I, since that was part of how I made my living, I did not want to just totally get rid of that voice. I wanted to be able to call that up. But at the same time, my voice has always been very important to me professionally. And for me personally, it was very important that I be able to get my voice to where I felt it would sound decent as a female. It's still not where I want it to be. I'm still, it's still a work in progress. I continue to practice, but it's far better than it was when I started. I could do it, you know, maybe for 30 seconds at a time before I would lose it. And it would get very tired, but it's something that I continue to work on. And again, for me personally, it's something that has been very important.

Silverman: Wow. And at what time in your life did you sort of create the switch where you were able to both use both voices?

Wagenblast: I would say it was this year, early 2023. I'd been practicing. I'd been seeing a couple of voice therapists, and I'd looked at videos on YouTube and practicing, you know, just at home where I would read things out loud, but really wasn't happy with it. But I publicly came out January 1st, 2023. So I needed to be able to use this voice or a version of this voice on that day. So as of that day, that was pretty much when I started using this voice full-time, except for professional purposes. So on my transportation radio podcasts that I did for clients, I would switch to the guy voice. The one place I did not use that voice was on my local Cranford radio

podcast. And when I came out in January, I did a special podcast on Cranford radio where there were several women who I had shared this with ahead of time about my transition. And I said to them, I'd like to do a podcast where you interview me, where you interview me, and I can explain a little bit about what it means to be transgender, why I transitioned, things of that sort. So we turned the tables, and when I opened that podcast, I was doing it in my guy voice, and I said something along the lines of, you may remember the movie, The Wizard of Oz. And in the beginning of the movie, when Dorothy is in Kansas, everything is in black and white. And it's only when she lands in Oz that the movie turns into technicolor. I'm going to be doing the audio version of that today. Yet the voice you're hearing right now is the voice you've always heard. But in just a few moments, we're going to switch to a more feminine version of this voice. So I switched during the podcast from the deeper, more resonant voice to this higher pitched, more head resonance voice that I use now. And that was probably the most public example. But like I say, as of January 1st, I wanted to start using this as much as I could.

Silverman: Wow. And you chose the new year as the day. Was there any other reasons why it was on that day or this year?

Wagenblast: I only came to the decision that I was going to socially transition last fall, a year ago, this fall. So at that time, that was when I wanted to make the switch. And so I had about a month and a half to try to prepare myself. Starting to buy some clothes because I did not have any female clothes in my wardrobe. I knew I needed a lot of different things. And January 1st just seems like a time of new beginnings. People make resolutions. Oh, I'm going to lose weight. I'm going to start exercising. I'm going to quit smoking. Well, I thought I'm going to make the resolution to top all resolutions. I am going to change my gender presentation as of January 1st. It was a very specific day. And it just felt like that was a perfect time to do it.

Silverman: And what was the reception?

Wagenblast: The reception has been primarily wonderful. That day, January 1st, my brother, who's four years younger than me, had season's tickets to Six Flags Great Adventure in New Jersey. And he asked me if I wanted to join him and his family at the park that day. And January 1st, 2023, was an unseasonably warm day. So I figured, oh, this is a good day to go down there. You know, nobody at this park is going to know me, most likely. I'm not going to run into anybody I know. You know, I had a different wig. It was a blonde bob and had a woman's parka, you know, and women's jeans. But it wasn't like I had to wear a dress or anything like that. And it was a day to be with my brother, who was very supportive, two of his kids, who also were very supportive, and kind of try it out for the first time. And it went very well. It was a great experience. It was unlike anything I had ever done before. And I felt after I did that, that, well, maybe this can work. Maybe this will not be as bad or scary as I feared it might be.

Silverman: Wow. And since or during, have you had any connection or relationship to trans communities or other trans people?

Wagenblast: Yes, yes. I've had connections with the trans community going back to one degree or another since I was maybe 14, 15 years old. One of my, well, not one of my first. My first experience ever talking to another trans person was a teacher here in New Jersey. She lived a

few towns away from me. And she was in the news. This was the early 1970s, where, again, using the terminology of the time, somebody having a sex change was big news. It was sensational news. And she was getting a lot of news coverage in the newspapers locally because she had been a teacher at one of the local school districts. And the school board was debating whether they would fire her because she had transitioned in the summer months between the end of one school year and the start of the next school year. So I went to the library, looked up her address, mailed her a letter, introduced myself, and said, you know, I would love to talk with you. You know, at this point, I don't have a driver's license, so I can't drive to her house. We made arrangements for her to call me at a pay phone at a particular time. I gave her the phone number, and that evening, I rode my bike up to this pay phone, and she called at the appointed hour, and we had a discussion. And it was a very big moment for me because it was the first time I ever was speaking to somebody who I knew understood what I was feeling. She had gone through this already. And I don't remember any specific advice that she said. I think it was just what I came away with was, it's okay. That, you know, this is, you're not weird. You're not sick. You are okay. With this. And one of my big regrets was I never got to tell her again after that how much she meant to me. She's since died. But that was my first experience. And I didn't have another one for decades later. I was probably in my 40s, I think, when I sought out a therapist. And again, at that point, there weren't a lot of therapists that I was aware of, at least locally, that I could meet with. And again, this is pre-COVID. So if you met with a therapist, you had to meet with them in person. You couldn't do it online. You had to go to their office. And so I reached out to this therapist. I remember being so afraid when I called. I was speaking to her assistant. And it was obvious how nervous I was. And the assistant said, don't worry, I'm trans too. And kind of reassured me. And I started to see this therapist. But she was moving a little faster than I was ready to move. She was not trans herself, as far as I know. She was encouraging me to experiment with transitioning. Now, again, at this point, I've got three kids at home who are in school, I'm married. I did not see transition as something that was in any way feasible in my life. Plus, I did not feel strongly enough about it that I felt I needed to do this. So when I felt she was encouraging me to transition, I backed away and stopped seeing her. And didn't see another therapist for another decade or so, start to see another therapist. And I saw a few different therapists, some who specialized in gender issues, and some who were here in my town, or in the surrounding towns, who were therapists, but didn't necessarily specialize in this. And I think with each one, I learned a little bit more about myself. And, oh, I'm not sure exactly when this was, probably over 10 years ago, I decided to look up a support group. And I found one that wasn't too far away, that met once a month in the evenings.

And I joined that support group. And I remember the first night I went there, saying to the group as I introduced myself that, you know, I'm trans, but I have no intention of transitioning. What I was looking for, from the support group, as well as the therapist that I had been seeing, was, I was looking for tools that would help me transition. I was looking for tools that would help me cope with this, to help me avoid needing to transition. That was my goal at that point, because I was afraid of it. I just felt that it would blow up my whole world if I were to transition.

Silverman: Sorry, when you say transition, you mean socially and or medically, or what?

Wagenblast: Yeah, every little bit of everything, socially, medically, legally. And I just felt that this was not something that was going to work. But as I was in the support group, I saw other trans

people, some who I could identify with, and others who I did not identify with, for various reasons, like you do in any group. You know, there are some people you have more of a connection to than other people. And I started feeling a little bit jealous of some of those people that I did connect with, who were either in the process of transitioning or had already transitioned. But I still felt this is not something I'm going to do. I had always been a person who tried to learn as much as I could about this. From being a kid, I would go to the library. There was very little that was available in books in a regular community public library. So I didn't see much there. I would look up magazine articles whenever they came out, try to learn a little bit about it through that. And as I got older, I started reading books. And I remember reading one book about by a woman who's older than I am. She was a doctor, and she had transitioned. And she was going to be speaking publicly to a group of medical professionals at Rutgers University in Newark. And I had reached out to her, and she invited me to come to this presentation. And so I watched the presentation, and I talked with her afterward. And one bit of advice that she gave me was, I would advise not transitioning unless you absolutely have to. And again, at this point, I had no plans to do that. But I remembered that. And she had lost a lot in her life, her marriage, her medical practice. There was a lot that she had lost. So I remember that bit of advice. And again, I'm still part of the support group at this point, had seen a couple of therapists. But the turning point for me was in April of 2017.

When I was online, I was seeing videos that were from some of the late night comedy shows like The Tonight Show or Letterman. And they were doing bits where they were taking photographs of NFL quarterbacks, you know, some of the manliest men you can think of, NFL quarterbacks, and putting them through this new app called FaceApp. And the app would change their gender, make them look like women. And they didn't look like guys who had just, you know, a wig was put on their head and lipstick was put on their lips. They looked legitimately pretty, in my opinion. So I downloaded the app. And I had previously seen things that like beauty products and hair product companies had advertised online where you could upload a picture and try different hairstyles or different colors or makeup and things like that. And it was always very disappointing. You know, all it did was it took your regular face and put a wig on it or made your lips red or something like that. It was terrible. And I wasn't expecting a whole lot more from this app. But I did upload a picture. And when it gave me the picture back, it changed everything for me.

I saw for the first time what I thought was a legitimate view of how I might have looked had I been born a girl. I saw a resemblance to my mom, which I had never seen before. And from that point, everything changed. The first thing that I decided that I was going to do was see an endocrinologist. And I wanted to go on the lowest dose of estradiol that I could do to see if I would do something that would be maybe calm how I was feeling, but at the same time, not change how I physically looked in any way. And I did that. And it felt great to be doing that. And it wasn't causing any changes to my body, but it turned out not to be enough. So I began a series of small and big steps to see if I could make changes. Again, things that would be invisible to everyone else, but that might make me feel like I had done enough, that I had transitioned in some form without actually socially transitioning. And by socially transitioning, I mean that to mean presenting to the world as a female. And so, like I say, it was small and big things. One of the small things I remember going to Walmart, I saw that they were selling sneakers, that they were advertising as women's sneakers in women's sizes that you could buy. They didn't look any

different to, I think, most people, including me, than men's sneakers. But just the fact that they were advertised as women's sneakers and they were in women's sizes made me feel good. I was so nervous going to the store to look at them. I would take them off the shelf, walk them back to the men's department and put them on. And I was just, again, terrified of being discovered.

So I did that. I did some bigger things. In December of 2021, I legally changed my name. I've always gone by the name of Bernie, but that wasn't my legal name. So I would have to use my legal name on documents and driver's licenses and credit cards and things like that. And I changed it legally to Bernie. I got rid of my middle name of Robert and just now became Bernie Wagenblast. And when I did that, I could change everything else, my driver's license, all my legal documents, my passport to say Bernie. And Bernie could also be short for Bernadette, which was how I viewed it in my mind. So that was a fairly big step. In the meantime, I had a lot of fun. In the meantime, I had also increased the dosage of estrogen that I was taking. So there were starting to be changes to my body. People who had no idea noticed changes to my face. There was breast development, which was getting more and more difficult to hide. The final big thing was in October of last year, I was getting ready for an award ceremony that the support group I was a part of held annually. And they hadn't held it for the past couple of years because of COVID, but they were going to have it for the first time again in person at the hospital in New Brunswick that sponsored the support group. And it was always billed as being a semi-formal event. So in previous years, when I went, I wore a jacket and tie and I was completely comfortable doing that. But now I was feeling uncomfortable. This was a group of people who knew who I really was. I knew that they would be accepting and supportive. And I just felt really dysphoric about going and getting an award. I just felt really dysphoric about going to this event in a jacket and tie.

So I said to an older trans friend who was a part of this, is there anything that you can suggest that I could do that would add a little feminine flair to the jacket and tie that I have to wear to this event? Figuring, oh, maybe she'll suggest a kerchief or who knows what she would come up with. I was desperate. I was looking for something. She said, you come to my house that afternoon of the event, pick up a cheap costume wig. It was around Halloween time. So I got this cheap, terrible looking wig, went down to her house. She had a dress that fit me. Another friend, I did not know this until I got there, had given me a wig so I didn't have to wear the cheap costume wig that I bought from Party City. And this friend did my makeup and gave me the dress and we drove off to the event that evening in New Brunswick. And I was quite nervous while we were in the car because it was still daylight. People are able to see me. I'm thinking, oh, you know, what are people, you know, people are going to be staring at me. What is this going to be like? You know, just get me into the hospital where people know me and are accepting of me and I'll be fine. And it was a wonderful evening. You know, people complimented me on how I looked. It was the first time I had ever used a lady's restroom presenting as a woman. And it all was very good. When the event ended, I had to go back to my friend's house to change. But she was hungry, so she asked, hey, let's stop off at a diner near my house and let's get a bite to eat.

I'm thinking, oh, this is totally different. This is someplace where they don't know who I am. I don't know how accepting they're going to be. I'm going to have to order food with my voice, which was still sounding very much like a guy, I thought. And we went to this diner and I

ordered. The waitress didn't say anything. Nobody looked at me, laughed, pointed that I could see no one was staring at me. And it went well. And we went back to her house and I changed back into my boy clothes. And I described it as sort of my Cinderella night. You know, Cinderella, her fairy godmother comes along, waves her magic wand and she has this beautiful gown and her pumpkin turns into a coach. I, my fairy godmother gave me the dress and the wig and the makeup. And now it was midnight and I had to go back to my boy clothes and my boy life. That evening, I had decided that I was going to socially transition. That was the evening that I made that decision. And like I say, that was early November. And from there on, I just started to prepare for January 1st.

You know, a few days before January 1st, 28th of December, I posted announcements on my Facebook and LinkedIn pages where I explained what was happening. I'd already told a number of people and family and close friends, so they knew about this, but this was telling the world for the first time. And the reaction that I received online was near 100% positive and supportive. And I felt I was ready at that point. Still scared, but I was ready.

Silverman: Wow, that's so beautiful. I'm so happy that that was the response.

Wagenblast: Yeah, thank you, thank you. And I should also mention, I had reached out to the MTA and some of the other big clients that I had the summer before, or even, I guess it was even spring at that point, and told them that I was probably going to be announcing that I was trans sometime in the coming month, because June was coming up. I thought maybe I would make some sort of an announcement in June. At that point, I was just expecting to tell the world that I was transgender. I wasn't planning on socially transitioning. The reason I wanted to announce that was because I was seeing what was going on in various places around the country and how anti-trans laws were being passed and a lot of trans discrimination was taking place. And I felt that representation was very important. And even if I wasn't socially transitioning, it was important to stand up and be counted. So I had reached out to the MTA and the Port Authority, among others, and let them know that this was probably going to be happening. And again, they were very supportive, had no problems with it, and to this day, they have been supportive of what I've done. Wow, that's incredible too. It was. I was wondering, yeah, if there's any other sort of, or this is kind of a broader question, but in terms of all these different subjects that you've shared around your trajectory in radio and in transportation life and your transition, if there's any aspects of your identity that feel more important or more valuable to you? I think, I realized that I have benefited from a lot of privilege. Being a white, seen as a cis, straight guy gave me a lot of privilege. But at this point in my life, I've been very fortunate that I've had the career that I had always dreamed of. Certainly it took some twists and turns, like everybody's career usually does. But, so I look back with some pride on what I did.

And the fact that I did that as being seen as a man, I don't have a problem with, I don't have a problem with the voice, the old voice. That's not an issue for me. I don't feel dysphoric when I hear that voice. But I think because I had that opportunity to build that career, I also benefited from having built a reputation, a positive reputation in the eyes of many people. And that has benefited me with my transition. So I was not at a point where I would have been, say, if I had somehow been able to do this in my 20s or 30s, where my career was still getting off the ground

and I had to be accepted, that had already taken place. So that reputation was already there. And that made it a lot easier, I think, to be seen and to come out. So I'm not sure if that completely answers the question, but that's kind of how I viewed it, is that those things that were important, my voice, obviously, is probably the thing that most people identify me with. Because whether it's being on the radio or being the voice in the subways or on the air train or other places, that's always what sticks with people. And my name, I think, has also been, it's unusual enough that people used to think that I made it up just for radio. But it's a name that tends to stick in people's minds because it is unusual. And a lot of people think that it fits for somebody who does voices on the subway. Wagon Blast fits for that kind of a job. Deeply, yeah.

Silverman: And if you wanted to address an audience or a specific audience that you'd like to listen to this interview, is there anything you'd want to tell them?

Wagenblast: I think there's a couple of messages, and it's two different audiences. The first audience is the cisgender audience, whether or not they're an ally, but particularly those who are not allies and maybe are undecided or even transphobic. That trans people are not really different from other people, except for that one aspect of how they identify with their gender. We have jobs, we have families, we have to worry about paying bills, we have to paint the bedroom. All the things that everybody else has to deal with are the same things that we have to deal with. And being a part of the subway means that I'm a part of millions of people's everyday lives when they're going in and out of the subway stations. They're hearing my voice. And even though it's the guy voice they're hearing, just the knowledge that it's a trans woman that performed those announcements means that I'm a part of the fabric of their lives, which I think is important. And for trans people, I just want to be part of the representation. If they don't feel seen, I want them to feel seen. That a trans person is a big part of New York City life. That, you know, unlike when I was on the radio and when you're on the radio, there's a certain demographic that listens to your voice, that listens to that station, and hears your traffic reports. But it's not a wide swath of New York City. The subway pretty much covers everything. It's everybody except perhaps the very rich who can afford to have private cars take them everywhere. But for everybody else, it's the subway. That's how they get around a good part of the time. And to be a part of that is important. And I think another thing that is important, again, for people who are transphobes, let's say, if you want to avoid more well-known transgender people like a Laverne Cox or an Elliot Page, it's relatively easy for you to do that. You just don't watch the TV shows or the movies that they're appearing in. You turn the channel. You can't easily turn to a different subway. You're kind of stuck with me there in the subway. And again, I think that just kind of reinforces that trans people are part of everyday life, that people need to see us as co-workers, neighbors, professional acquaintances, family even. And that, I think, increases acceptance as that becomes more understood.

Silverman: That's so beautiful. Thank you

Wagenblast: Oh, thank you. Thank you for asking.

Silverman: Is there anything else you'd like to add?

Wagenblast: Nothing that jumps out at me. I think the things, well, I guess another thing that I would add is just to any trans person, whether they've come out or not come out, who might be

viewing this, is just not to lose hope that there are people, there are many people who are there to support you. If for whatever reason, your immediate world, whether that's family or co-workers or whoever it might be, is not supportive, there are people who love you. And to seek out those people, to not lose hope, to not lose hope, to try to find those people who can affirm you and who understand where you're coming from. That would be the biggest thing, because that would have been something that I would have loved to have heard when I was a young person and trying to figure out how is this all going to work out. I remember thinking, even as an adult, what am I going to die as? Am I going to die as a man or as a woman? It's not something most people ever have to ask themselves, but it was something that I did not know. And even if a person doesn't transition, that there are people there that can help you just by being an ear to hear what you have to say and to hug you and hold you if you're upset and be that support that you might desperately need.

Silverman: Thank you.

Wagenblast: You're welcome.