

Ryan Li Dahlstrom
Narrator

Andrea Jenkins
Interviewer

The Transgender Oral History Project
Tretter Collection in GLBT Studies
University of Minnesota

March 28, 2016



The Transgender Oral History Project of the Upper Midwest will empower individuals to tell their story, while providing students, historians, and the public with a more rich foundation of primary source material about the transgender community. The project is part of the Tretter Collection at the University of Minnesota. The archive provides a record of GLBT thought, knowledge and culture for current and future generations and is available to students, researchers and members of the public.

The Transgender Oral History Project will collect up to 400 hours of oral histories involving 200 to 300 individuals over the next three years. Major efforts will be the recruitment of individuals of all ages and experiences, and documenting the work of The Program in Human Sexuality. This project will be led by Andrea Jenkins, poet, writer, and trans-activist. Andrea brings years of experience working in government, non-profits and LGBT organizations. If you are interested in being involved in this exciting project, please contact Andrea.

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1 Andrea Jenkins -AJ

2 Ryan Li Dahlstrom -RLD

3

4

5 AJ: So, hello. My name is Andrea Jenkins and I am the oral historian for the Transgender Oral
6 History Project at the University of Minnesota. Today is March 28, 2016, and I am here with
7 Ryan Li Dahlstrom, a long, long time friend and comrade, and just amazing person on the planet.
8 And so we're going to do a little interview today. We're here in Minneapolis and Ryan Li, if you
9 could just state your name, maybe spell it just for our transcriber who is going to be transcribing
10 our comments today, and your gender identity as it is today and your gender assigned at birth,
11 and the pronouns that you use.

12 RLD: Cool, thank you so much Andrea, it's great to see you – thanks for having me.

13 AJ: It's so good to see you. Thank you.

14 RLD: The appreciation for you and your friendship and the comradery all these years is appreciated.
15 So, yeah, it's an honor to be here two days before my 35th birthday.

16 AJ: Is that right, you've got a birthday coming up?

17 RLD: Yup, I'll be turning 35.

18 AJ: Happy, happy birthday.

19 RLD: Thank you. So my name is Ryan Li Dahlstrom. I prefer to go by Ryan Li as my first name. Ryan Li
20 is spelled R-y-a-n L-i and then Dahlstrom, D-a-h-l-s-t-r-o-m.

21 AJ: Oh cool.

22 RLD: You wanted me to spell it, right?

23 AJ: Yeah, yeah. Thank you so much.

24 RLD: Thank you to whomever is transcribing.

25 AJ: Thanks, Mary!

26 RLD: What else? So yeah, I was born here in Minnesota – Duluth and grew up here. I go by he and
27 him. I currently identify as trans or trans masculine, sometimes I think I'm pretty gender
28 fabulous so I might sometimes use that word, gender fabulous.

29 AJ: You are.

30 RLD: I think we're all gender fabulous in our different ways.

31 AJ: Gender fabulous as an identity, I love that.

32 RLD: Yeah, I was a female assigned at birth.

33 AJ: Thank you, thank you so much. Ryan Li, what is your earliest memory in life?

- 1 RLD: Oh, that's a tough one . . . earliest memory in life? I don't know if it was my earliest but it's one
2 that comes to mind and just happens to be gender related.
- 3 AJ: Sure – and it doesn't have to be gender related. If it is gender related that's awesome, but it
4 doesn't have to be.
- 5 RLD: I have a spotty memory from when I was a kid but one of the things I remember is being pretty
6 young – I think I was kindergarten-ish and I was always really into sports. My dad was really into
7 being kind of coach, either informally or we played at the Y. So I played . . . I think it was up in
8 Crystal, Minnesota, I played at the YMCA and I was on a basketball team. I remember being kind
9 of medium-height on the team but there was like two girls on the team . . . or no, I was the only
10 girl on the team and it was all boys. I remember a lot of the boys teasing me because I was the
11 only girl, but also I was kind of one of the better players so it was an interesting kind of . . . I felt
12 like I fit but didn't fit. I was kind of just having fun . . . I didn't really care, I don't even think I was
13 that conscious of it but I really liked playing sports.
- 14 AJ: But you remember this sort of dichotomy of being teased because you were a girl but also sort
15 of being . . . I don't know, maybe celebrated because you were a better player.
- 16 RLD: Yeah, yeah, yeah. And I think it was a way that me and my dad really connected as a young
17 person – my interest in being physically active. I played a lot of sports.
- 18 AJ: That's super cool.
- 19 RLD: Yeah.
- 20 AJ: I didn't know you were an athlete, per se.
- 21 RLD: I wasn't necessarily . . . yeah, it was more of a hobby.
- 22 AJ: That's what it is for all school kids basically – until you start getting paid for it, but that doesn't
23 really happen until the pros. That's cool. Where did you go to elementary school?
- 24 RLD: Meadow Lake – it's in New Hope.
- 25 AJ: OK. So you were born in Duluth?
- 26 RLD: Yes.
- 27 AJ: And then your family moved to the Twin Cities.
- 28 RLD: Yeah, I lived there until I was 2 and then we moved to Brooklyn Park. So I grew up in Brooklyn
29 Park.
- 30 AJ: OK. Any memories of Duluth at all?
- 31 RLD: Those are actually where I have a lot of childhood memories. I was very close to my
32 grandmother so we would go up there in the summers a lot. I spent a lot of summers up there.
- 33 AJ: So your grandmother still lives in Duluth.

- 1 RLD: She's still up there. So as a kid we would go up and spend a lot of summer time with her, play
2 with all the neighbor kids – it was definitely the kind of place . . . the retreat place I wanted to go
3 to as a kid.
- 4 AJ: Nice, nice. But you went to . . .
- 5 RLD: Robbinsdale Cooper was my high school.
- 6 AJ: So you went to school kind of all of your . . .
- 7 RLD: Brooklyn Park, New Hope area.
- 8 AJ: What was school like for you?
- 9 RLD: I always like to say I was very . . . I was the oldest grandchild on both sides of my family.
- 10 AJ: Cool. I actually have that very same experience in life – the first grandchild for both of my
11 grandparents. The first child, clearly, for my parents.
- 12 RLD: Yeah, my parents were kind of on the younger side. I think my mom was 24 when she had me,
13 now I feel like not as many people have kids at that age overall – or at least my peers. So yeah,
14 it was very celebrated. I would say I was kind of the overachieving Asian, overachieving Gaysian
15 kind of kid who was really involved in everything. It was really kind of my outlet to excel at
16 school, to get involved in . . . I played the drums, I was in student government, I played a lot of
17 sports. I was just kind of involved in everything.
- 18 AJ: Were you popular?
- 19 RLD: You know, it's funny. I never really thought of myself as popular. I knew everyone and people
20 kind of knew me because I was involved in a lot of stuff, but I didn't have a crew. I kind of would
21 fly a little solo or as I got older my friend, Danny, that I mentioned before – him and I were
22 student council president and vice president so we joked we ran the school. We were just really
23 involved and kind of did our own thing.
- 24 AJ: So you were well known.
- 25 RLD: Yeah. And my parents were pretty strict so I wasn't going out and rebelling or anything like that.
26 I had to wait until I left the house to do any of that kind of . . .
- 27 AJ: That's interesting. Were you . . . did your identity play a role in sort of how school was for you
28 at all?
- 29 RLD: Yeah, I think for sure.
- 30 AJ: I guess the real question would be did you experience bullying or anything? But I don't know if
31 you were out in school.
- 32 RLD: Yeah, yeah. Definitely not. We didn't talk about sex, sexuality or any of that kind of stuff
33 growing up. So I don't think I had a consciousness . . . I don't think I was young and was like,
34 "Oh, I know . . ." I didn't have language, for sure, but I think I always felt different in some way
35 and I think part of that is being mixed race and being part Chinese and part white and kind of

1 often getting messages . . . people would often say growing up, “Well your mom is so beautiful.”
2 My mom is Asian. “Your sister looks just like her.” And then they’d be like, “You look like your
3 dad.” I have the light eyes, a little lighter skin, so there was a lot of those kind of early messages
4 like race and gender wise where I kind of didn’t really feel like I fit but also I was kind of more
5 associated with the masculine and also the kind of white side of my family. So, but I also always
6 identified as mixed, I think – or part Chinese at least. So I think there was some of that. And I
7 had a mix of friends – like racially. I had a decent crew of Asian friends, some white, some other
8 races. So it wasn’t like I wasn’t around it in school but I think because I was sort of . . . I kind of
9 felt like I was kind of a loner a little bit and just kind of did my own thing. It’s hard to know how
10 much of that was gender or race or different things.

11 AJ: Yeah – no, I totally hear that.

12 RLD: But I think I actually got bullied more as a younger person because I was kind of the good
13 student and so I kind of got positioned as a teacher’s pet, or, “You’re doing everything right,”
14 that kind of thing. So I remember in elementary getting bullied a little bit and I was definitely
15 not really a fighter at that time so I would just kind of deal with it and do my own thing but I
16 wasn’t really fighting back – I was just kind of like . . . yeah. And then as I got older, I think, I
17 didn’t really experience the bullying in high school because I think I was more . . . I got bullying in
18 elementary and middle school. But then I think come high school I was . . . I think I was also kind
19 of gender conforming enough where I wasn’t really bullied for that, it was just more of being
20 different in other ways.

21 AJ: So you . . . this narrative that you’re sharing right now sort of not necessarily dispels but it
22 certainly is a different narrative from one that is shared by a lot of trans and gender non-
23 conforming folks around, “I knew I was . . . at birth and then . . .” Because I’ve talked to a lot of
24 people and they’re just like, “You know, when I was three people were calling me a little boy
25 and then when I became 15 I was going into the men’s bathroom,” and things like that. But that
26 wasn’t your story.

27 RLD: It kind of happened later for me. Like I said, the consciousness around it – and like I said, I also
28 don’t remember a lot of things. As I’ve come out and I’ve talked to my family a little bit, my
29 mother tells me she remembers . . . she kind of said she knew actually.

30 AJ: Really?

31 RLD: And she said that when I was very young, I think it was kindergarten, I didn’t want to wear
32 dresses. There were things . . . I don’t actually remember that.

33 AJ: Right.

34 RLD: So she said that there was a lot of things that she kind of had a queue that I was kind of wanting
35 to be different in some way, but I didn’t necessarily . . . I guess I sort of remember wanting to
36 wear pants, or she said I wanted to go to the boy’s section and wear corduroys. I didn’t really
37 remember that but I guess it probably did show up a little bit in me being a tomboy. I always
38 played with a lot of the boys and I played sports. To me, that doesn’t even necessarily mean
39 someone is trans or even queer.

- 1 AJ: No – absolutely it doesn't.
- 2 RLD: It's kind of just that's where I felt comfortable, I guess, at the time. And I will say on that whole
3 narrative thing, it's like I really respect . . . that's obviously . . . everybody has their own story
4 and narrative but it's something I kind of want to consciously fight against a little bit too because
5 it feels like it fits a dominant narrative that makes it easier for kind of a mainstream to
6 understand trans people.
- 7 AJ: To understand, right – exactly.
- 8 RLD: And I'm like it's not always that simple. I want to live in a world where we can actually . . .
- 9 AJ: I absolutely just love that, which is why I'm trying to . . .
- 10 RLD: I have a kid who I'm like chosen family with his family and he's . . . I think he's seven now. But
11 he's very gender fabulous, he has long hair, is fine with he pronouns but most people always
12 think of him as a girl, or see him as a girl.
- 13 AJ: Right.
- 14 RLD: And his parents are just supportive of him being who he is and dressing like he is. And who
15 knows, someday, what that will mean for him. I like to see that as . . . like as an adult seeing a
16 younger kid be able to be supported and not have to pick something until they really know what
17 they are and what they want to express.
- 18 AJ: I think that's critically important. I think it's important for us to hear differing narratives around
19 that – like you classified it, dominant sort of comforting story like, "Oh my God, you knew you
20 were a girl since age 3 and how horrible it must have been living in this other body," kind of
21 thing. So I'm going to . . . as a straight ally, I'm going to help you because you've had such a
22 miserable . . . When it's like, "No, I was a great student, I was well liked and then as I got older I
23 became more introspective." So when did you come out?
- 24 RLD: Well, I was in high school and kind of in the middle of high school I started having a decent
25 number of queer friends, partially probably because I was playing sports and other folks were
26 kind of identifying as bi-sexual or lesbian or queer. Some of us joke, "There must have been
27 something in the water or something," because there was so many of us – there actually was a
28 good amount of us. This was before GSAs or any of that was around. We actually had this
29 group that the chemical dependency counselor put together that was very hush-hush, it was like
30 this private group. And so we would go and we would just talk. I'd have a couple friends go
31 with me and kind of be there as allies. Later in life they actually have come out as gay, but they
32 would come with me and just support me.
- 33 AJ: And wonder why they were going to these meetings.
- 34 RLD: Names shall remain nameless.
- 35 AJ: Absolutely.
- 36 RLD: And yeah, and so then, like I said, I was pretty involved and people knew me and whatever. So I
37 was getting ready to write the senior class speech for graduation and I went to a counselor of

- 1 mine who was . . . looking back I didn't realize it but I kind of gathered that she was probably a
2 lesbian – she was kind of butch presenting. I went to her and just said, “What do I do? I kind of
3 want to use this in part of my speech and all this stuff.” And she basically told me, “Do not ever
4 tell anyone, do not come out,” and just kind of told me I should never tell anybody. I think right
5 after that then someone in that group outed me, even though it was supposed to be a
6 confidential group. So it then became kind of out at school, my parents found out because my
7 sister was younger at the time. It didn't go well – my parents weren't at all open.
- 8 AJ: They were not supportive.
- 9 RLD: No. I just lied and told them, “No, I'm not queer, no that person isn't my girlfriend.” Because I
10 was dating somebody at the time and they kind of figured it out. I just had to kind of repress it
11 and kind of just put it in – or not really be out about it.
- 12 AJ: Sure.
- 13 RLD: So it wasn't until I went to college and I left home that I was able to start to really think about
14 what it really meant for myself in terms of my gender and my sexuality and just being more free
15 to be kind of who I was outside of my parent's house.
- 16 AJ: Where did you go to college?
- 17 RLD: I ended up going to Concordia College in Moorhead for one year. I got a full ride. I was the first
18 to go to college in my family and it was a big deal. My dad is Lutheran so it was like . . . he was
19 very proud that I was going to go to this Lutheran school. But, you know, it was a struggle. It
20 was a school where they actually said they didn't have any gay or lesbian students – they said it
21 was friends of lesbians and gays on campus so the local group was called FLAG.
- 22 AJ: OK.
- 23 RLD: Meanwhile, there was a lot of us.
- 24 AJ: Even though there were no gay and lesbian people to be friends with?
- 25 RLD: Yeah, right.
- 26 AJ: Wow, OK. Ghost friends of gay and lesbian people. And they weren't even friends with the bi-
27 and the trans people.
- 28 RLD: Yeah, we didn't even exist. So I lasted up there for about a year. I got involved with some of the
29 other student groups in organizing – that was more of the tri-college area, so North Dakota
30 State, Moorhead State, and Concordia have some different groups that were across the
31 colleges. So I got to meet people a little bit outside of the more conservative Lutheran school.
32 But it was a really white place, a much smaller town than I was used to and after a year I just
33 really wasn't happy. So I transferred to the University of Minnesota in the Twin Cities. And I
34 think it was around that time that then I found . . . I met other people who were performing as
35 drag kings and queens – more kings. I think I knew of drag queens but I actually never knew of
36 drag kings. So I started going to a lot of the bars here, underage.
- 37 AJ: Oh wow- OK.

- 1 RLD: I don't know if my parents, or whoever watches this, knows that. But there was Lucy's back in
2 the day and Club Metro.
- 3 AJ: Yeah, I remember Lucy's in St. Paul. Club Metro in St. Paul – yeah.
- 4 RLD: So I just started meeting different people and I ended up starting to perform at a couple of the .
5 ..
- 6 AJ: Is that right?
- 7 RLD: I think it was mostly Metro I performed at and kind of met some people who were a little bit
8 older.
- 9 AJ: So you were a drag king?
- 10 RLD: Yeah, so I did drag. I think that . . .
- 11 AJ: I never knew that about you.
- 12 RLD: My Minnesota accent comes out with the drag. Yeah, yeah. I think it was one of the first few
13 times that I felt more of a creative outlet expression and it really actually helped me figure out
14 my gender, honestly. I started kind of performing this gender and then I realized that I actually .
15 . . I was realizing that I felt more comfortable in that gender. So that was definitely a big part of
16 my kind of then understanding of being trans and being gender non-conforming.
- 17 AJ: So your process to gender exploration, if you will.
- 18 RLD: Yeah.
- 19 AJ: Wow. So how long would you say you sort of performed or do you still perform?
- 20 RLD: A few years. No, not so much now. A few years . . . not that long. And I think the bar scene just
21 wasn't the thing I wanted to end up in. And so, I think then there were things like . . . what was
22 it, Vulva Riot and Hot Bed later.
- 23 AJ: And then there was . . . did you ever get involved with Gender . . . ?
- 24 RLD: Well, Gender Blur. Yeah, I was one of the founders of Gender Blur.
- 25 AJ: Right, exactly.
- 26 RLD: I think I might have performed there probably – yeah, I probably did perform at Gender Blur,
27 which was one of those times . . .
- 28 AJ: You kind of stage managed a lot of those . . .
- 29 RLD: Yeah, yeah, yeah, I did a lot of stage managing for the different shows, but at that time I was like
30 the volunteer coordinator for Gender Blur – when we first started. I'm pretty sure I did perform
31 at least once or twice there.
- 32 AJ: Who was all involved with the founding of Gender Blur?

- 1 RLD: From what I remember, I don't want to leave anybody out but my memory is foggy because it's
2 been a while, but I remember people like Max Gries, Lane . . . I forget their last name now, Lane
3 McKiernan or something like that.
- 4 AJ: Yes, yes – Lane McKiernan.
- 5 RLD: So Max, Lane, Grady . . .
- 6 AJ: Grady Shapiro.
- 7 RLD: Grady Shapiro.
- 8 AJ: Grady Lee.
- 9 RLD: Oh yeah, Grady Lee now. Cian McDonald.
- 10 AJ: I don't quite remember Cian.
- 11 RLD: But definitely those are some folks. I mean you were around back then too – remember that's
12 probably when we met.
- 13 AJ: Yeah.
- 14 RLD: But in terms of that initial group of people, that's at least some of the people I remember. And
15 then there were other people like Henry Schneiderman and other people I met through it. And
16 then, I think . . . what was I thinking? Yeah, so that's . . .
- 17 AJ: So that was one of your performance venues, but also a creative trans organization.
- 18 RLD: Yeah, and I definitely remember it feeling like really transformative at that point in my life
19 because it really felt like a lot of us, and at that time I wasn't in touch with my family at all, so
20 there were a lot of us who I think were really creating kind of community and family for one
21 another through . . . you know, there's a lot of people that would come to that space that I
22 remember well – older trans women from northern Minnesota who couldn't dress as
23 themselves anywhere else in their lives but would come three, four, five hours to Gender Blur,
24 get dressed there and be who they are in this space. And I remember just thinking - wow, what
25 a privilege I had at that time to mostly be supported to be who I was and not feel like I had to be
26 kind of living two different lives or be hidden. And at the same time a lot of us getting to
27 connect around, you know, the challenges with families and challenges with being who we are,
28 in different ways and different challenges.
- 29 AJ: That was amazing that you guys created that kind of space.
- 30 RLD: Yeah.
- 31 AJ: How long did Gender Blur exist? About four years? Five Years?
- 32 RLD: You know, I can't quit remember. I'm so bad. I think at least that long and then toward the end
33 I feel like they were really trying to transform . . . like move from just sort of a community
34 building, creative/social to more like let's really address some of the different intersections of
35 oppression and race and class and different things that, I think, were coming up. One thing,

- 1 also, I think they were really good at the beginning of talking about disability justice and really
2 trying to make it an accessible space. So, for me, it was a big learning curve to be able to do that
3 in community with a lot of different kinds of people and bodies and needs and how do we co-
4 exist in this space together.
- 5 AJ: So there became this political analysis around it too?
- 6 RLD: Right, totally – yeah, yeah, yeah. I think at first it started more social and I definitely think it was
7 trying to grow into something more political in nature.
- 8 AJ: And I would argue to say that it actually did become the Minnesota Transgender Health
9 Coalition. Or . . . maybe Gender Blur did not necessarily become that but many of the founders
10 of Gender Blur . . .
- 11 RLD: Totally, yeah.
- 12 AJ: . . . shifted into the creation of the Minnesota Transgender Health Coalition.
- 13 RLD: And I was around during that time still. I remember we put out a survey, it was one of the first
14 surveys of trans people in Minnesota and we did a lot of outreach at Pride. So I think there was
15 some kind of . . . yeah, definitely some crossover between those two organizations and kind of
16 really trying to better address . . . because I think also what was happening very informally with
17 Gender Blur was people being like sharing recommendations about doctors or therapists or how
18 are you accessing hormones. So there was a lot of that sort of resource sharing and so I think it
19 kind of made sense to figure out other means to really address that at a structural level as well
20 as a community referral way.
- 21 AJ: Yeah. And you don't have a sense of when Gender Blur kind of really started?
- 22 RLD: I think it was like 2000.
- 23 AJ: That sounds about right.
- 24 RLD: I remember I drew the first flyer for it before we did any type of graphic design. I was like,
25 “Well, I have decent handwriting.” I think I still have it actually.
- 26 AJ: Do you still have that?
- 27 RLD: Yeah, I saved a lot of stuff.
- 28 AJ: Ryan Li, if there is ever a chance that you . . .
- 29 RLD: I actually just found a bunch of stuff, I archived a bunch of stuff I can send you.
- 30 AJ: Oh wow.
- 31 RLD: Back from 202, I have a ton of stuff from 202 and a ton of stuff from Gender Blur.
- 32 AJ: It would be amazing to be able to maintain that in the archives and then you could access it
33 whenever you want to but a broader community of people can access those things – particularly
34 your hand drawn Gender Blur.

- 1 RLD: I don't know. It was pre-logo so we were still trying to figure out what the logo would be, who
2 could make that, and where do we get the resources.
- 3 AJ: Ryan Li, I've got to have that.
- 4 RLD: I'll find it, I think I still have it.
- 5 AJ: I'll pay for the shipping.
- 6 RLD: Oh stop.
- 7 AJ: I'm serious.
- 8 RLD: It's my donation to what you're trying to do.
- 9 AJ: That would be amazing to get that, absolutely – and all of those documents. And just to let you
10 know, we actually just got the papers from TYSN, which you were deeply involved in as well,
11 serving as TYSN's first ED, right?
- 12 RLD: I think, technically, the second. There was somebody there before me for a short period of
13 time.
- 14 AJ: Really?
- 15 RLD: But I was there when . . . basically helped make the move from being a program of 202 to
16 moving TYSN to . . . TYSN is Trans Youth Support Network, just for whoever is listening.
- 17 AJ: Right. No, actually I was just going to ask you to say what is TYSN and kind of give, from your
18 perspective – and you were there creating the mission statement and all of that, as was I. But
19 for people who are watching, what is TYSN? What is the Transgender Youth Support Network
20 and what did it mean to this community?
- 21 RLD: My sense of TYSN was, or Trans Youth Support Network – we could be turning the camera
22 around and you could be interviewed too.
- 23 AJ: Yeah, but this is not that.
- 24 RLD: Yeah, I know. Next one, I hope someone is going to interview you. I remember at the time I was
25 working at District 202, which was the Queer Youth Center where Andrea and I got a lot of time,
26 a lot of coffee time – talking at that coffee bar about all the things happening in Minneapolis.
- 27 AJ: Absolutely, that's where we met.
- 28 RLD: Queer trans organizing.
- 29 AJ: Organizing around Tamika McDonald, which led to TYSN. Remember Tamika who was shot five
30 times in the face.
- 31 RLD: Yes, right, exactly. Totally.
- 32 AJ: Trans woman of color.

- 1 RLD: Right, no thank you for raising her name. I was going to say what I remember is there was just a
2 lot of, and she was one of them, but there was just this increasing violence that trans women of
3 color, younger trans women of color, were facing here and I think TYSN and my understanding . .
4 . and I actually wasn't there when some of the first community meetings were happening, but I
5 think it was . . . my understanding second hand or being in the community at the time, was let's
6 figure out a way to address at a structural and kind of a service level what's happening to trans
7 women of color in this community. And so I think . . . at the time, I honestly think it was a lot of
8 direct service providers at some of the different homeless youth shelters like . . .
- 9 AJ: That's exactly what it was.
- 10 RLD: Like Avenue, Ridge, District 202, Streetworks Collaborative. So a lot of the outreach workers. So
11 I think there were people . . . my sense is that there were people who wanted to be like, "Let's
12 provide better services, let's make sure people get what they need – whether it's shelter beds or
13 condoms and safer sex stuff, whatever folks need to be surviving." And then I think there was
14 also a desire to kind of say, "OK, that needs to happen, but what are the structural barriers and
15 what's happening structurally that we also need to address that direct services aren't set up to
16 address." It's basic needs which people need to get their basic needs met.
- 17 AJ: Gotta get your basic needs met.
- 18 RLD: And how are we going to address this on a structural level particularly. And I think there was a
19 lot of white direct service providers and it was a majority of youth of color so there was that
20 dynamic.
- 21 AJ: Right.
- 22 RLD: I don't know how much who was making what decisions at that time and where the youth
23 voices were in those early conversations exactly. I know where people wanted it to be centered
24 but I'm not sure in terms of how it all started. I think it was largely white social service providers
25 and adults.
- 26 AJ: Adults.
- 27 RLD: So, you know, TYSN, from my understanding, started at 202, District 202 and it was a program of
28 202. Well actually . . .
- 29 AJ: It was a program of this consortium.
- 30 RLD: That's true. Right, right. But that's where it got a little confusing.
- 31 AJ: But that's where it lived.
- 32 RLD: Yeah, it lived at 202, it was housed at 202. So it was housed at 202 and my sense was it was
33 hoping to become both a place to develop curriculum, to kind of . . . this was kind of started
34 before my time, like let's go to the homeless youth shelters or the teen clinics or these different
35 places and do kind of Trans 101. How are you as a direct service provider respectfully creating
36 both policies but also interpersonally working with clients who might be trans, gender non-
37 conforming, maybe not sure but are figuring out their gender identities. So I think there was a
38 lot of 101 trainings happening before my time. I think that was kind of mostly what was

- 1 happening before my time. When I started . . . but there were young people involved, there
2 were young people on the board. It was an advisory board of youth and adults.
- 3 AJ: Sure.
- 4 RLD: And I think there was an intention to have authentic youth leadership, or youth voice. When I
5 came on that was really my, I guess, priority. I felt like as a light-skinned trans masculine person
6 I shouldn't long-term be running this organization. I wanted to come in and sort of . . . when I
7 was sort of asked and it was a need, I didn't necessarily seek it out, but I felt like I could be a
8 vehicle to help hopefully eventually move the organization to be really youth-led and really have
9 young trans women of color leading the organization. To me that was always my intention in
10 starting it was to say, "How can we use this as a leadership development opportunity to get
11 people trained in public speaking, get people trained in terms of advocacy and organizing skills?"
- 12 AJ: Budgets.
- 13 RLD: Budgets and finance and fund raising – all of that, so that eventually the organization could be
14 held and led by young trans people of color, in particular trans women. I think in my time I tried
15 to engage a lot of different folks in the organization and things like that, but I think over time . . .
16 it was great to see after I left Minnesota and left the organization, that I think they really did
17 move over time to be really youth led and have young trans folks leading the organization. I
18 think it filled a really important need in the community around both the community building but
19 also trying to really deal with structural issues that I think a lot of other organizations just
20 weren't at the time. It was very service provision. Often, I think – you know, no disrespect to
21 any entity but I think a lot of the services that were set up could also verge on the side of being
22 kind of paternalistic or just not youth empowering or really youth led or driven. So I think it had
23 a lot of potential to be that and I think that is part of what excited the community and young
24 people being involved. It was something that I think people felt a great deal of ownership and
25 desire to have a different space to be able to . . . yeah. Or organize with one another but also
26 deal with what's happening in the community.
- 27 AJ: I'm going to ask you the tough question.
- 28 RLD: Sure, OK.
- 29 AJ: So from a distance, because I think you probably left within two or three years of TYSN's
30 founding and it lasted for 10 years.
- 31 RLD: Was it 10 years? OK.
- 32 AJ: Yeah, they were around for 10 years. So from a distance, what would you say was sort of the
33 downfall of the organization?
- 34 RLD: That's hard.
- 35 AJ: And honestly knowing that you weren't necessarily physically in the community per se. I know
36 you can say personalities and all of those kinds of things because you weren't here.
- 37 RLD: Honestly as someone who has done non-profit work for a really long time and also now does
38 fund raising and working with foundations and different things, I think part of it is the system

1 we're working within, because I think . . . I remember back in the day when you and I were at
2 202, we tried to do some kind of . . . kind of really addressing like ageism and youth and what do
3 people believe youth can do. Can youth write budgets? Can youth fund raise? Can youth be
4 public speakers for an organization? I think there is just so much ageism and racism that doesn't
5 allow people, like does not support leaders of color, right? And especially if you're a younger
6 person of color.

7 AJ: Yes.

8 RLD: For me, I felt that way but I also was . . .

9 AJ: And even more specifically if you're trans identified.

10 RLD: Yeah, totally. And I think I have a lot of privileges as a light-skinned person, but if you're a
11 darker skin, black or brown, trans person trying to lead an organization, I think there is not a lot
12 of . . . I think people get set-up a lot. I think people aren't given the support and resources to
13 lead and often just not the space. And so I think . . . I don't know what all the different things
14 that led to, but I think part of it is not supporting the leadership of young people of color. I think
15 part of it is potentially, and I don't know what their funding looked like by the end, but I think
16 foundations are very fickle, it is hard sometimes to get multi-year funding to really support
17 projects and particularly projects that are trans led, trans people of color led. Also it might be
18 around organizing. People can support services, that kind of thing, but to organize or to really
19 do systems change and structural work, I think, is a lot harder to fund. And then I think . . . I
20 don't know what the individual donor base looked like at the end, but I also think also
21 organizations struggle to have that balance of foundation support and a diverse kind of income
22 stream that's sustainable and that the community is really behind the organization. So if some
23 funding were to . . . somebody wouldn't get renewed in funding from a foundation that they
24 would have a base of community, that could really fold the organization. I feel like that could
25 have been connected to TYSN but also just broader in the field that just really doesn't . . . I've
26 seen in the last 5-10 years so many amazing trans or people of color led, or trans people of color
27 led, projects that haven't been able to thrive for a lot of those same reasons.

28 AJ: Yeah, I would have to . . . the only reason why I asked you that question is because I sort of
29 believed that you would have that analysis of this broad . . . what is happening to trans and
30 gender non-conforming led organizations all over? Right? Some of the same symptoms. Of
31 course, there is probably personality challenges and all of those kinds of things that come into
32 play, but even those I would argue are sort of perpetuated by this system or lack this system of
33 non-support by the broader, richer . . . TSYN was sort of, in many of these trans and people of
34 color led organizations, were thriving. If you do some research, mostly all the trans
35 organizations – even starting with the Transgender Law Center and the Sylvia Rivera Law
36 Project.

37 RLD: National Center for Trans Equality.

38 AJ: Yeah, they're only like 12 years old and those are the longest-term organizations and so within
39 that span of time, or during that span of time, the marriage equality movement was going on,

- 1 which was sort of sucking up all the resources, the energy, and so many of those organizations
2 suffered those same things.
- 3 RLD: Totally.
- 4 AJ: Ryan Li, what challenges have you had since you began to express your true gender identity?
- 5 RLD: Honestly I think, like I mentioned earlier, one of the biggest ones has been family. I think that's
6 true for a lot of us – for lots of different reasons. Actually I think . . . well, yeah. I think there's a
7 lot of different reasons for that. I was going to say . . .
- 8 AJ: Whatever you need to say, say it.
- 9 RLD: I was going to say, back to what we were just talking about but then also I think for some of my
10 challenges, really I think in a lot of communities of color, a lot of trans communities, there's just
11 such trauma and I think that actually also has added to the ending of a lot of organizations.
- 12 AJ: Sure, absolutely.
- 13 RLD: Where everybody's kind of oppressions and trauma are not being supported or dealt with.
- 14 AJ: And they all converge at the same time.
- 15 RLD: Exactly. And so I think that's something I have really been happy to see, and I'll come back to
16 your original question, but more work focused on wellness or healing or body-based work to
17 sort of heal a lot of our trauma. So I think that is something that I think is just so needed and
18 important in our community, and it feels like in my last 15 years doing non-profit stuff, to see
19 just that that is . . .
- 20 AJ: It's shifted.
- 21 RLD: . . . becoming more centered and that there is that . . . so I think for me too, some of my family
22 stuff is because of my family having feelings about me being trans but also some of it is their
23 own unhealed trauma that they just couldn't really figure out how to be there for me in this way
24 that I'm very different from anything many of them have ever known. So we just haven't been
25 able to kind of really meet each other – some of my family. That's actually been one of the
26 hardest pieces for me but I think I feel really grateful for all the chosen family that I've built
27 because of the political work and getting involved in community work since I was young and
28 honestly was very much part of my gender identity, was part of getting politicized and being
29 political and being a part of organizing – whether it was around trans health stuff to clerical
30 worker and student organizing at the U campus, it was all a part of who I was and then the
31 communities that I've built – or community supporting relationships that I've built. So yeah, for
32 me I think it was both a hardship but also a place where I found my people basically. I've found
33 other people to kind of be like, "Yeah, we're chosen family, we don't have families to see at the
34 holidays but we're it." I think that's actually a powerful piece and a resilient part of trans people
35 and trans people of color – kind of finding that and making that with each other.
- 36 AJ: Have you been able to . . . what's the relationship like with your family now?
- 37 RLD: It's mixed. Yeah.

- 1 AJ: It's healing and . . .
- 2 RLD: I wouldn't really say healing, time – a little bit of time, and now I'm in a different place where I
3 can kind of just accept where they are and their limitations. But really my family is my queer
4 and trans people of color – with a few exceptions. I have a very amazingly supportive aunt and
5 grandmother and some family members, but really my family is like my friends in the
6 community.
- 7 AJ: I know you've mentioned, since we've been in this interview, that you were very close to your
8 grandmother growing up and I know that you're here in Minnesota now – because you don't
9 live here anymore, right?
- 10 RLD: No, I live in L.A. now.
- 11 AJ: Oh, OK. So you're here and visiting your grandmother, so there's some closeness there.
- 12 RLD: Yeah, for her – for sure. Yeah, one story I like to tell people about her is that . . . I don't know
13 why, I think sometimes it just skips a generation or what happens, but she's always very
14 thoughtful with birthday cards and so one year . . . it was right around . . . I was like 20 or 21
15 when I came out as trans and we were still very close at that time, we've always been. She sent
16 me a birthday card and it said, "For my granddaughter," and then she crossed daughter out in
17 red Sharpie and wrote son. She called me and she's like, "I hope it's OK." She felt bad but she
18 said, "But I had picked that card out for you before I knew, it was just the perfect card for you."
19 I'm pretty sure I still have that card – it was just like the sweetest . . .
- 20 AJ: Did you bawl?
- 21 RLD: Oh yeah. I was just totally shocked. So she's just done a lot of things like that that just have
22 really surprised me. I had no idea that she would be so accepting and open.
- 23 AJ: That means so much. I have a poem in my new collection of poems, called, "Mamma calls me
24 Anna." It talks about my mother sending me a card, "To my Daughter, Merry Christmas" or
25 Happy Birthday or Happy Easter or whatever. Family support really means a lot. The National
26 Transgender Survey, Discrimination Survey, concluded that trans people of color who really
27 thrive mostly are those who have family support. But, as you have identified, and so many
28 people have identified, it's challenging to come by that support. I know I'm deeply privileged to
29 have the love of my family. It wasn't always easy, it's been a struggle, but yeah. So, Ryan Li, to
30 the extent that you are comfortable, talk to me about any medical interventions that you have
31 undergone as a part of your transition?
- 32 RLD: Thanks for asking, and also for the disclaimer piece as well. My disclaimer for answering that,
33 just because I think it's good to have this noted to let whoever watches or listens to this, I have
34 always been a person who has felt a little uncomfortable by the . . . well, a lot of trans people . . .
35 I think just the assumption that, and I'm not saying your question is assuming, but people
36 assuming trans people have to have different kinds of medical interventions to be trans. For
37 me, when I used to do trainings and things, I felt like it was a really good opportunity to really
38 educate people to be . . .
- 39 AJ: And this is one such opportunity.

- 1 RLD: Yeah, exactly. So I like to just say that as a disclaimer, you know. For me, it's been a really, I
2 think, positive journey. I think when I was pretty young I decided to start hormones and I was
3 lucky enough at the time, stuff wasn't actually as regulated a little bit. And so I actually kind of
4 slipped in the cracks and was able to get a hormone prescription without having a therapist
5 letter.
- 6 AJ: Oh wow. So, it was probably right around informed consent time.
- 7 RLD: Maybe . . . although no, because other people were having to. I think it had to do . . . I don't
8 remember exactly how it happened but I was working with a therapist because I knew I needed
9 to, and then I went to this . . . I won't say the name, but this provider and they asked if I was
10 working with a therapist and I said, "Yes," but they never required an actual letter – to get the
11 letter from the therapist.
- 12 AJ: Right.
- 13 RLD: But I know other people seeing that provider did have to. So I don't know how that happened.
14 At the same time, or a few years later, I hated that all those systems existed, so I was really
15 doing a lot of work here to try to get models from Callen-Lorde or Lyon-Martin in San Francisco
16 or other places where how do they do informed consent because I really felt like a lot of my
17 trans health care was really disempowering and felt very much like this doctor who is like, "I've
18 got the carrot, I have the script." It didn't always feel very respectful.
- 19 AJ: But you've got to conform to my ideas of what trans masculine people should be.
- 20 RLD: Right, and especially for me when I started, I only really had models for white . . . mostly white
21 trans men who were probably very much . . . the people I knew very much wanted to be very
22 masculine, kind of had a whole plan of a trajectory and for me, I originally identified very gender
23 queer. I started hormones very low dose, I didn't necessarily know what that was going to mean
24 and I also wanted to see how my body responded.
- 25 AJ: Sure, absolutely.
- 26 RLD: But I felt a lot of pressure, even within the community, to conform in a particular way and to
27 kind of perform masculine in a particular way that just didn't feel like who I was. Yeah, so yeah .
28 . . . I would say that once starting hormones, I do feel like it actually opened up and made my
29 gender more expansive. I wanted to wear pink, I wanted to be more feminine, I wanted to
30 actually be more gender fabulous – even though I think growing up, like I said, I was more on
31 that tomboy sort of . . . yeah. So it's interesting. It's definitely been kind of an always evolving
32 kind of journey in terms of how I see my gender and what that's meant for me. Again, I think a
33 lot of my early kind of exposure to people who were having medical interventions were mostly
34 like white trans men, so I didn't . . . I didn't have a lot of Asian role models. I think eventually
35 maybe in my mid-20s I started meeting other Asian trans men, which made a really big
36 difference for me, just to see other people and talk to other people and share our stories. And
37 also, at that time, didn't really think I wanted any kind of surgeries and I feel like I . . . part of
38 that was largely class stuff. I never really had the resources, I worked like three jobs, I didn't
39 always have health insurance. So it really took . . . it was actually just a few years ago that I
40 finally had top surgery and it was, honestly, the best decision . . . not the best, but it was a really

1 important decision I ended up making. I ended up having part of it covered from my insurance
2 in California, which is pretty incredible. I think it's really just helped me align in feeling much
3 more confident and happy in my body and it's something that I never . . . I kind of fought
4 against. I didn't want to have to do it because I felt like it was going to be like this permanent
5 thing or that it was going to make me less gender queer or gender fabulous or whatever, but in
6 the end I'm really, really happy that I made that choice.

7 AJ: Awesome. Thank you for sharing that. It is a challenge to always have to respond to our bodies
8 per se, but I would have to say that body discomfort or body image does play a role in
9 transgender identity. I appreciate your response to the question. So just looking back over your
10 decision to express your true gender identity, what were some pivotal moments? I think you
11 just kind of described one, you talked about how your top surgery sort of created this space to
12 evolve your ideas and thoughts around your gender identity. So, are there other pivotal
13 moments and would you do anything differently?

14 RLD: I think I've kind of touched on most of them in the earlier questions – the drag king stuff, the
15 hormones and even being able to feel like I could make decisions about, you know, this may or
16 may not be permanent and I'm going to try this out. I think for me, really, the top surgery was
17 an opportunity for me to kind of align my politics and more of an embodied self. I think for a lot
18 of us who, as trans people or as different marginalized oppressed people, that we just have a
19 real disconnect from our bodies. I think I was always very political, strategic thinking, but not
20 always knowing how I could match that to who I am in my body. I think actually that was one of
21 the biggest, I feel like, ways that I was able to really be like, "Oh, this is political, this is
22 connected to all these different things and also I can be more embodied in who I am." I think
23 that, honestly . . . I don't think there is anything I would really change.

24 AJ: Has there been any specific people that have sort of shifted or made an impact on your life?

25 RLD: Oh my God, we could have an hour already. You're obviously one of them.

26 AJ: Ohhh.

27 RLD: No really, I didn't know . . . we've talked, there weren't a lot of other trans folks of color that I
28 was connected to in my early kind of coming out here, or just being in the trans community. A
29 lot of the organizing I was doing was mostly with white trans folks. Yeah, I think starting to go to
30 conferences and meeting other trans men of color, other mixed race trans people was huge. It
31 was really just formative because I didn't feel like I necessarily had that around me a lot. And
32 then obviously all of our elders – Miss Major, Sylvia Rivera, Marsha P. Johnson.

33 AJ: Do you Kris Hayashi?

34 RLD: Oh, of course, Kris Hayashi. You know, just all . . . Alex Lee was huge.

35 AJ: Alexander – yeah.

36 RLD: And it's kind of beautiful how all these things come together. Alex Lee, I met him at a trans
37 justice conference in New York where I met some of the first other mixed race trans men I ever
38 met, this was back in like 2005 . . . something like that. So we stayed in touch, like a lot of the
39 folks that met there, and he ended up when I was helping TYSN move from being housed at 202

- 1 to getting our own fiscal sponsor and all of that, he was like totally . . . because he also has a law
2 degree.
- 3 AJ: He's a lawyer.
- 4 RLD: He did that with TGIJP.
- 5 AJ: Is that right?
- 6 RLD: So he helped them get their own fiscal sponsorship, so it was just this beautiful . . . I can actually
7 go to another Asian trans person who is also working at a trans organization. Just that kind of
8 necessary . . . it's like some of that personal family kind of who we are as people but then also in
9 our political work. I think that's what is sad about seeing a lot of the trans organizations fold or
10 whatever, is that we don't always . . . we can't always find each other and that's what I love
11 about Trans Justice Funding Project and others that are really working to connect.
- 12 AJ: To connect, that's a big part of the whole project.
- 13 RLD: So, yeah. There's been so many formative people in my time. I feel like yeah – really looking to
14 our elders because there are so many fierce trans people of color who have even made it
15 possible for you and I to be here. And then people in our own communities like you and others
16 who I think really helped me stay grounded here and have those sometimes hard, real
17 conversations but also show up for each other at times when we needed each other.
- 18 AJ: Absolutely. You get me all emotional here, Ryan Li. Talk to me about love and relationships
19 man. How does that go for you? Are you in a relationship now? Who do you date? Who do you
20 see?
- 21 RLD: Well, I am in a relationship. We've been together almost four years, it's really great.
- 22 AJ: Wow, that's incredible.
- 23 RLD: Yeah, I date kind of everybody. I am attracted to, if that's what you're asking . . .
- 24 AJ: Yeah.
- 25 RLD: I date women, I date men, I date trans people.
- 26 AJ: Yeah, I don't mean specifically who you date but who do you date.
- 27 RLD: I like everybody, I don't discriminate.
- 28 AJ: Would you call that gender queer?
- 29 RLD: I would say queer, I just think of myself as queer. Yeah. I think I am attracted to a variety of
30 genders and I still think it's funny, a lot of us will joke . . . sometimes I'm like do I want to be that
31 person or am I attracted to that person?
- 32 AJ: Oh wow, that's interesting.

- 1 RLD: It's interesting, especially because I wasn't necessarily attracted to masculinity as a younger
2 person but I think as I've come into myself I've realized that I have more of a range of attraction
3 to a lot . . . all genders, all different kinds of genders.
- 4 AJ: So this four-year relationship you're in right now, is that person trans identified? Are they cis?
- 5 RLD: She identifies as a woman – yeah, yeah, yeah.
- 6 AJ: So cis gender.
- 7 RLD: Cis woman, yeah.
- 8 AJ: Awesome, awesome. Wow, that's awesome because many . . . I've interviewed over 60 people
9 now for this project and a lot of people talk about the challenges of having a relationship or
10 even finding a relationship, let alone being in the relationship which we know is challenging in
11 and of itself, and that's just because relationships are challenging. When you bring a trans
12 identity into that, then it becomes, I think, even more challenging. Can you talk a little bit about
13 how you deal with relating to others?
- 14 RLD: I feel like I've been overall really fortunate. I think, again, if we go back to structural and kinds of
15 different oppressions, I think there are different people who have different trans identities who
16 might have, I think, sometimes more crap that they have to deal with – just in terms of misogyny
17 and trans misogyny and sexism, all those things. But for me, when I was very first coming out
18 and on hormones and the person I was dating at the time was just really cool and it wasn't a
19 thing. That person was super supportive of me exploring my sexuality and just being who I was
20 and kind of coming into who I am now in this gender. So I, fortunately, haven't had . . . I know a
21 lot of people who say that they transitioned within a relationship and the person hasn't been
22 able to support that.
- 23 AJ: Right.
- 24 RLD: Or, just in general people having a hard time figuring out their attraction to a trans person and
25 what that means to their identity. But I think, for me, I've never . . .
- 26 AJ: Which is a big thing.
- 27 RLD: It's huge. Oh no, it's huge – it's definitely a huge thing. I think for me, I've tended to date
28 people who are in community or who are already . . . I don't know, just like comfortable with
29 and familiar with . . .
- 30 AJ: That helps, right?
- 31 RLD: So I think I haven't necessarily gone on a dating site or things that I think make it harder because
32 you meet people who may not be conscious of trans people period. I think also I haven't . . . I'm
33 really upfront about it too if I'm going to date someone. So it's not something that has become
34 known later, it's usually from the beginning. So it hasn't been a thing that . . . if it's an issue then
35 it doesn't move forward.
- 36 AJ: Have a nice day.

- 1 RLD: Yeah, yeah, yeah. It's hard though because there are so many just gross narratives out there
2 about trans people and I think there's a lot of fetishizing, I think there's a lot of . . . just a lot of
3 things that make it challenging. I've definitely had bad experiences of like going to a bar and just
4 having somebody approach me, and mostly gay cis men, and then be really disrespectful and
5 gross. So, and I think that has a lot to do with misogyny, right? And a lot of certain ways that I
6 think people who tend to be socialized as cis gender men can feel entitlement to talk about
7 people's bodies or kind of just be a certain way that I think . . . I don't know. So I definitely have
8 had not so good experiences as well.
- 9 AJ: Yeah. Wow. What do you . . . so you sort of brought up this issue, being in a gay bar and sort of
10 being disrespected . . . what do you think the relationship between the L, the G, the B and the T
11 is like? Just in your personal opinion.
- 12 RLD: I mean it's interesting. It's funny, I was just talking to a friend the other day about bi-sexuality
13 and kind of . . . I think in general it's like B and T are often . . . bi-sexual and trans are often not
14 really . . . well they're more marginalized within the L and G, right?
- 15 AJ: Absolutely.
- 16 RLD: And often I'll even think of . . . I'll just say, "That's very G and L," or, "That's very gay and lesbian
17 or lesbian and bi." Or, I'm sorry, gay and lesbian or lesbian and gay depending on what part of
18 the country you're in – because I think here people say GLBT more or have they changed it to
19 LGBT?
- 20 AJ: I think most sort of progressive folks say LGBT. I think gay men say GLBT.
- 21 RLD: But I think it was a regional thing for a little while. I remember being here and a lot of things
22 were called GLBT, but then other places it was called LGBT. But I think it's changed now.
- 23 AJ: I think you're absolutely right. The programs office at the University of Minnesota was GLBT.
- 24 RLD: I think that's what I was thinking of.
- 25 AJ: Which they are changing, finally – thank goodness. I think you're absolutely right. I do think it's
26 sort of segmented . . .
- 27 RLD: Based on who is . . .
- 28 AJ: Who is saying it – more progressive folks that I know and I certainly use LGBT.
- 29 RLD: Yeah.
- 30 AJ: Because TLGB is just too hard on the tongue.
- 31 RLD: Yeah.
- 32 AJ: I want to do that but it's challenging for me to do that – to say. But what's your thoughts
33 around that?
- 34 RLD: That could also be a whole afternoon conversation. I just think the issues our communities are
35 facing are really different. I think what you talked about earlier around same sex marriage, like I

- 1 think there is sadly a . . . maybe for the mainstream or even maybe gay and lesbian people who
2 are maybe not necessarily having current struggles of survival or just kind of living their lives and
3 it's not really a big deal. I think there is just . . . how do I say this? I think there are really
4 different issues facing our communities. I think there is a lot of . . . I think there are more and
5 more gay and lesbian people who have access to more . . . like different sets of privilege,
6 whether it's marriage, whether it's being able to buy a house, have a family, all these different
7 things. But then, as you know – as you and I know, we're having the highest rate of trans
8 women of color being murdered, right?
- 9 AJ: Right, exactly.
- 10 RLD: All these things.
- 11 AJ: And high rates of unemployment and . . .
- 12 RLD: Right, exactly.
- 13 AJ: And lack of access to health care.
- 14 RLD: All of those things, right.
- 15 AJ: Specifically trans specific health care.
- 16 RLD: Right. So I think what is hard is that I think a lot of gay and lesbian people don't necessarily see
17 or know that or realize the extent of it. I think definitely the mainstream world doesn't
18 necessarily . . . they think, "Oh well, same sex marriage has passed, we should celebrate that
19 and everything is fine." Well actually, no – our people are just trying to survive, and like you said
20 health care, employment, housing.
- 21 AJ: Huge.
- 22 RLD: If you think of gentrification and all the things that are happening, it's black and brown and
23 trans, particularly trans folks, who are right at the . . .
- 24 AJ: And queer people who live in these sort of marginalized communities that are now being
25 gentrified.
- 26 RLD: Right, right. So I think there is just so much and I think it's sad that it has become, like a lot of
27 communities there is just a lot of divisiveness. I'd love to see people who were backing the
28 same-sex marriage movement really put some resources and put some ally ship and solidarity
29 into, you know, a whole variety of issues that would help improve the lives of trans folks. We've
30 talked about incarceration and criminalization and all of that stuff for folks in detention. So I
31 think there is just so many issues that are happening within trans communities particularly and
32 that's the community I feel like I can speak most to. But I think there's just a real disconnect
33 about what is really happening.
- 34 AJ: Have you seen this petition by . . . I think it was started by a cis gay white man to now have the
35 split.
- 36 RLD: No, I totally didn't see that.

- 1 AJ: And take the T out and have the trans community go off on their own. You haven't seen this?
- 2 RLD: No, I haven't seen that.
- 3 AJ: OK. It's real, sort of a change on-board petition that was circulated. A couple of stories in
4 *Huffington Post* and that kind of thing. I think the person was a lawyer.
- 5 RLD: Pretty recently?
- 6 AJ: Yeah, pretty recently. But he was one of the lawyers for same-sex marriage.
- 7 RLD: Oh wow.
- 8 AJ: One of the attorneys, and he's a gay man. But, as you stated, just says that the issues aren't the
9 same and so consequently now that what we've gotten what we need, we should let that
10 community go off and do their thing. But, at any rate.
- 11 RLD: Back to what you were saying earlier about who I've been influenced by, we know our history
12 because the fact is that the LGBT movement is the LGBT movement because of trans women of
13 color and drag queens and trans folks were the ones at the front lines of the fact that we even . .
14 . you know what I mean? And so that's just sad to me that where things are now and folks just
15 really kind of have . . . and that's why I think projects like this and others are so important to
16 kind of document. Also, we need that in the schools, we need that in other ways for people to
17 really know the history and also not to sort of . . . once someone gets some level of privileged
18 access forget where we've come from or leave others behind. That's trickle down social justice,
19 eventually you all will be taken care of but for now I don't care about you. I think that's just not
20 right and not OK.
- 21 AJ: Yeah, well thanks to you Ryan Li there is no chance that some white filmmaker will make a
22 movie about Gender Blur 30 years from now when a white cis male at the center of organizing
23 clearly trans endeavor. Interesting. What do you think the agenda should be for the trans
24 community going forward? Is there an agenda and if so, what should it be?
- 25 RLD: That's a really good question. I think it touches on some of the stuff I was just sharing. I know
26 we need it all. I know we need policy change and advocacy at state, national, local, regional
27 levels. We have all these terrible bills coming through.
- 28 AJ: Right.
- 29 RLD: All these anti-trans bills that wouldn't allow people to use the bathrooms of our genders. I saw
30 recently too there was some potential bill in Kansas or somewhere where they were going to
31 suggest that students would have . . . if they knew a student was using the bathroom of not their
32 assigned gender, they would give them \$2500 to rat them out.
- 33 AJ: To report – yeah.
- 34 RLD: It's just wild, the level of these different measures. So I think in this moment we need to defeat
35 those and that's not going to be enough either. Do you know what I mean? We have to be,
36 unfortunately, reactionary to these things coming out. So that's, I guess, an immediate urgency,
37 of sorts. And, at the same time, I've been talking with folks at TLC and other places . . .

- 1 AJ: The Transgender Law Center.
- 2 RLD: Transgender Law Center, yeah, and others.
- 3 AJ: In the Bay.
- 4 RLD: In the Bay – thank you, in Oakland. Or NCTE, National Center for Trans Equality, I talked to them
5 a little bit. Those need to be defeated but also the trend right now is that they are in these kind
6 of Midwestern, Southern, other places where there may not be the infrastructure – like trans
7 groups or even trans leaders connected with one another or ready to say like advocate on policy
8 stuff. So I think while we need to defeat those, I think we also need to be really focused on
9 building up the grass roots, building up the leadership of trans people, particularly trans folks of
10 color, to be able to be speakers to what is happening and to kind of both be able to organize and
11 kind of mobilize when these things happen but also just to build more kind of local
12 infrastructure basically, and support. I think TJFP, they just did that . . . Trans Justice Funding
13 Project, the Trans Law Center, just did that . . . like a training institute.
- 14 AJ: Leadership Training Institute.
- 15 RLD: Leadership Training Institute, right. So more things like that, I think, are really necessary. So
16 when these things come out we have more of a mobilized base of people to be able to activate
17 and address that. That's one thing. I don't know that there is one agenda but I think . . . or
18 there's not. I don't believe, but I do think really looking at the grass roots trans leadership, trans
19 leadership of color, is really important and I think dealing with things around health care and
20 housing and health care housing – you know, access to jobs. I think all of those are huge and
21 obviously also, like right now, there is a lot around folks being incarcerated and folks being in
22 detention and not having any . . . immigration detention and not having any resources or
23 advocates. So I think there's just a lot, honestly. I think all of those things . . . many of those
24 things are of equal importance so it's really about trying to figure out how we can get more
25 resources and get more capacity and people to be able to really address what's happening. It
26 feels like we're in a crisis honestly, it feels like the level of urgency around what's . . . and
27 violence. There are all these things are intersecting at the same time so I think we really need to
28 think about . . .
- 29 AJ: Because violence sort of is created because I don't have a job, which means I don't really have a
30 safe and secure home, which means I've got to eat and so I need to do things that may put me
31 in more precarious situations and then this cycle continues and now I'm out in the streets at
32 3am in the morning and I get shot, right? Or raped or . . .
- 33 RLD: I'm carrying a condom and then I'm told I'm soliciting for sex.
- 34 AJ: Right.
- 35 RLD: And just the whole criminalization of sex work.
- 36 AJ: That's state violence and I would argue that all of it is state violence.
- 37 RLD: Totally.

- 1 AJ: Because it's created by the refusal of the state and not only the refusal of the state to
2 acknowledge but actually the state is creating policies and legislation to directly disaffect
3 transgender identities in the system.
- 4 RLD: Right, yeah. That's what it's all about.
- 5 AJ: But I think today was a good day in that the anti-trans bill in Georgia was vetoed by the governor
6 as well as North Carolina, which did pass an anti-trans bill, a horrible anti-trans bill but multiple
7 law suits have already been launched against the state, which are claiming that those actions
8 are completely unconstitutional, which I'm positive that they are and the state is going to lose.
9 But it's just sad that we have to spend our time and energy and resources on sort of beating
10 back anti-trans legislation.
- 11 RLD: And what that does to people's psyche's too, going back to the national discrimination survey
12 and all the trauma, how is it to live in the world when there's all these things telling us we don't
13 . . . that we're like disposable and we're worthless and we should be criminalized for just going
14 to the bathroom or incarcerated . . . all those things, just the whole disposability and kind of the
15 level of . . . yeah, I think it's . . .
- 16 AJ: It's painful, quite frankly it is. Have you ever worked for or volunteered for any trans or LGBT
17 organizations that we didn't already talk about?
- 18 RLD: Yeah, so many. So the ones we talked about and then I also worked at Rainbow Health
19 Initiative.
- 20 AJ: Oh really, RHI?
- 21 RLD: Yes, RHI here and then . . . what else? Maybe just those. TYSN, 202 . . . yeah, I think that maybe
22 I mentioned most of them. I may be forgetting something. I'm right now on the Astraea Lesbian
23 Foundation for Justice Board, so that's great.
- 24 AJ: Yeah, so how's that going?
- 25 RLD: Yeah, it's really good.
- 26 AJ: Astraea is . . .
- 27 RLD: It's an LGBT foundation based in New York and we're one of a few LGBT foundations who fund
28 LGBT issues domestically and internationally. And definitely a lot of the issues that we're talking
29 about has a whole portfolio around anti-criminalization and violence. So some very progressive
30 strategies to support kind of what . . .
- 31 AJ: And I think they have a strong focus on queer and trans people of color led organizing, right?
- 32 RLD: Right, right. Yeah, so that's pretty incredible.
- 33 AJ: Yeah, that's incredible.
- 34 RLD: And then I guess before I was on the board of CUAV, Communities United Against Violence.
- 35 AJ: OK.

- 1 RLD: In San Francisco.
- 2 AJ: San Francisco.
- 3 RLD: So it's a local LGBT . . .
- 4 AJ: Communities Organized Against . . .
- 5 RLD: No, Communities United Against Violence.
- 6 AJ: Communities United Against Violence, OK.
- 7 RLD: CUAV. And they were formed actually in the 1970s so they've been around for a while, really
8 kind of as a direct service organization to address . . . and I think it was around the Harvey Milk
9 time and I can't remember all of the . . . but it was really more of a direct service organization
10 and over the last few years they've been moving to more kind of community wellness and
11 organizing leadership development work as well as some direct service, so it's pretty amazing.
12 It's people of color led and works with folks living in the mission, largely mission, folks of color.
- 13 AJ: That's awesome. You've dedicated quite a bit of your adult life to queer, trans, and LGBT
14 organizing and service provision. That's quite amazing.
- 15 RLD: Well, we have to. I've been fortunate enough to be able to do a lot of that work through the
16 non-profit sector and as a staff, but also a lot of it has been volunteer time and it's political work
17 because I feel like we need to be doing that to take care of each other and to make stuff better
18 but . . . I don't know if can swear on here, but shit's messed up and we need to . . .
- 19 AJ: You can swear.
- 20 RLD: We need to really get it together and really improve all of this injustice and oppression that our
21 people are facing on a daily . . .
- 22 AJ: Wow. What do you think about this election that's coming up?
- 23 RLD: Oh gosh, I don't know. I mean, yeah . . . it's a mess.
- 24 AJ: You're a brilliant person and . . .
- 25 RLD: It's a mess, it's a mess.
- 26 AJ: Your ideas are important, I want to hear about them. We don't . . . we are not relegated to only
27 talking about trans issues, right?
- 28 RLD: I know, right. Totally. I was just having this conversation with someone – totally. I think it's a
29 mess, I think it's . . . I'm not really interested in any of the candidates really. I think . . . not that
30 you're asking me to say about a specific candidate. I think it's interesting that Bernie Sanders
31 talks about the working class and working people in a way that at least in my time in the world,
32 that I haven't seen a lot of presidents talk about. So that's interesting to me as something . . .
- 33 AJ: I don't think I've seen any and I think I'm a little bit older than you are.

- 1 RLD: Yeah, so I think that's something. I think given my beliefs and feelings about capitalism and the
2 fact that this system doesn't work and it's structured to make rich people richer and poor
3 people poorer and that's the way it's set up. I think it's refreshing in some ways to have
4 somebody talking about some of that.
- 5 AJ: Absolutely.
- 6 RLD: And I don't think it has like the . . . him, or just in general, there isn't enough of a race analysis. I
7 think it's like we see all these anti-trans bills happening, we see the amazing Black Lives Matter
8 movement that's really taken . . . it's amazing.
- 9 AJ: Yes.
- 10 RLD: I think people in this country are really uncomfortable with the potential for an increasing offset
11 of the power structures that exist and the power that's moving in our communities. So, to me,
12 it's an exciting moment but it's also scary because I think it's really heightened the backlash, it's
13 heightened the conservatism and people life Trump and people . . . you know, both around the
14 folks who are most oppressed and particularly Black folks in this country and then also if you
15 think about undocumented immigrants and folks . . . like the levels of attacks on communities
16 where I think there's also some increasing . . . you know, the Not One More movement, like just
17 all these different things that are happening that I think really are showing people power and
18 people, like the struggle of communities of color coming together to fight these systems that are
19 not working and are . . . you know.
- 20 AJ: Yeah, it's amazing to see the activism that is growing up around those things. Some days it gets
21 a little discouraging but it's very hopeful to know that people are woke as they say.
- 22 RLD: Yeah, totally – yeah, yeah, yeah. And to see, it's like even if you're on FOX news and you're
23 going to see some haterade you can't not see what's happening. Even if the person is telling
24 you it in a way that's . . . or like CeCe McDonald, having her name on *How to Get Away With*
25 *Murder*.
- 26 AJ: That was huge, right?
- 27 RLD: Yeah, and it wasn't like just in a celebrity way, it was actually talking about the issues impacting
28 trans women of color in terms of incarceration. So I think it's just an interesting and powerful
29 moment to be like . . . people are more woke and people are more seeing and can't really turn
30 away from. So I think for some people they're moving toward it and other people that are
31 scared as hell and they're like getting behind people like Trump or whatever. So I think it's . . .
32 it's a scary and hopeful time and I think people are really rising up though and I think we're just
33 seeing more and more the power of protests, the power of speaking out, the power of
34 organizing – and really, you know, I think there's more and more possibility of not leaving folks
35 behind. I think there is just more and more of this kind of like synergy around bringing all these
36 intersecting issues together with a really strong race analysis.
- 37 AJ: Wow, that's beautiful. Thank you. You know, you actually touched on something that I wasn't
38 necessarily going to ask, but the trans community is becoming more and more visible, right?
- 39 RLD: Yeah.

- 1 AJ: For a number of reasons, but I would have to say one big possible or one . . . it's not even
2 possible, one big reality is Caitlyn Jenner.
- 3 RLD: Can you even say that? Yeah.
- 4 AJ: Go.
- 5 RLD: Well, I'll tell you more of a story on that offline, but I'm working on an interesting project
6 around that but I'll tell you about that later.
- 7 AJ: OK.
- 8 RLD: Yeah, I mean . . . let's see, where do I start? I would say that . . . I think somebody like Che
9 Gossett or someone . . . or Reina or a few different people I've heard talk about this, I think with
10 the increased visibility, I think there is also . . . and a lot of people are saying this, but there's
11 also like a very increased surveillance, increased violence, increased . . .
- 12 AJ: Backlash.
- 13 RLD: Backlash. So I think that's to me what I see happening right now and it's like as people are
14 seeing more of this I think they're getting more and more uncomfortable. Caitlyn is a
15 complicated person and I don't . . . I honestly don't really care that much about her. I mean,
16 whatever – do her thing.
- 17 AJ: It breaks my heart that she waited 65 years . . . or felt like she had to wait 65 years.
- 18 RLD: Totally. On a human level, I can empathize with that – in that we live in a world where someone
19 would not be able to be who they are because of internalized stuff, because of the world we live
20 in – so that, on a human level, yes. But I think it's also like we're now in a moment too where
21 not just people like her, but I think there's even more conservative trans people out in the world
22 being able to kind of . . . so it's not like I think for me and a lot of people in my generation or just
23 who I'm around, but I think we came up into our trans identities in a very politicized way.
- 24 AJ: Yes.
- 25 RLD: About solidarity, about taking care of the people who are most marginalized and impacted by
26 oppressions and seeing that. So I think it's just interesting now to have more of these celebrities
27 coming out and it's just a whole different thing. I think in some ways, some of that, I think,
28 maybe can have positive impact to kind of just get it more on people's radars, but I also think . . .
29 I don't know.
- 30 AJ: The other visible people are people like Laverne and Janet . . .
- 31 RLD: Like Laverne.
- 32 AJ: Who really understand the issues, have a huge platform and are sort of challenging and
33 changing hearts and minds and that kind of thing.
- 34 RLD: Which is good.
- 35 AJ: Yeah, but they're not Caitlyn though.

- 1 RLD: Yeah.
- 2 AJ: That's a big one man.
- 3 RLD: Yeah, and she's got a lot of money and a lot of power and a lot of . . . like a following of her
4 different stuff. Honestly, I don't follow her that well but I think . . . yeah.
- 5 AJ: Well thank you for just sharing your ideas and thoughts around that. Thank you for sharing your
6 ideas and thoughts and your own story today, Ryan Li. I really, really deeply appreciate it. I
7 guess I would just ask one last question and that is where do you see the trans community in 50
8 years?
- 9 RLD: Wow. Gosh. That's a hard question. Maybe if it was 10 or 15 years, I don't even know if I'd
10 have an answer for that . . . but 50 years. I mean, is it like the hopeful or the likely/realistic?
- 11 AJ: It's whatever you think. I think it's probably got to be a mixture of hope and reality.
- 12 RLD: One thing I'm thinking a lot about and I guess in 50 years I'll be elderly . . . or an older person,
13 hopefully. I've just been thinking a lot about the lack of care structures for trans folks as we age,
14 like just the whole trans aging thing. And so, like I said earlier, for a lot of us that don't
15 necessarily have biological family who is going to kind of care for us as we age, and so I think
16 that there is a piece of that that I've just been thinking about more, and not even because in 50
17 years I'll be needing that, but just that it's something that even right a lot of our folks are
18 struggling with and I wonder now in 50 years what that will look like. So I think that there's
19 things like that that I think about and I think are maybe under . . . just not something that I think
20 a lot of groups are working on actively right now.
- 21 AJ: Sure.
- 22 RLD: And that also could be for other movement leaders and other people who aren't necessarily
23 trans . . .
- 24 AJ: Yeah.
- 25 RLD: I think of Grace Lee Boggs and I think of Miss Major.
- 26 AJ: Mandy Carter, who I just spent the weekend with – yeah.
- 27 RLD: Mandy Carter, totally. Jay Toole – there's a lot of folks in our movement who have been doing
28 movement work for their whole lives and don't necessarily have what they need to age,
29 otherwise they're aging and maybe can't work at all or as much or whatever. So that's
30 something I think we need to address as a community and think about. I don't know . . . I want
31 to abolish all the things that aren't working and really . . . like song, Southerners On New Ground
32 always talks about liberation in our lifetime, right? What would liberation in our lifetime look
33 like? And I think what's hard for a lot of us is we've been so used to living the way that we're
34 having to live and survive and we have those glimpses or moments or breaths of liberation, but
35 what would that really look like? It's really hard to actually put it into words – but that's what I
36 want. I want us to feel free and liberated and I want these oppressive structures and the
37 violence and all these things to end so that we can be . . . like everyone, but particularly trans
38 folks and folks of color are free and know what that feels like.

- 1 AJ: That's a beautiful vision.
- 2 RLD: So I don't know. I don't know if that's going to happen in 50 years but I think whatever we can
3 do to get there.
- 4 AJ: To get there – yeah. We live in a time of rapid change. One hundred years ago it took 50 years
5 to make sort of moderate change and now we can have monumental change in six months –
6 that happens.
- 7 RLD: Yeah.
- 8 AJ: The marriage equality movement is one example. It went from going downhill and then three
9 years later it's the law of the land, so things happen quite quickly.
- 10 RLD: That's true.
- 11 AJ: A lot faster now than they used to. Thank you, Ryan Li.
- 12 RLD: Thank you so much, Andrea.
- 13 AJ: I appreciate this opportunity so much. Thank you for your candor, thank you for your honesty,
14 thank you for all the work that you do in this community and on this planet to make our lives
15 better.
- 16 RLD: Well, I'd say the same for you. Thank you and thanks for having me and thanks for all the work
17 that you do.
- 18 AJ: All right. Until we meet again, my friend.