

Wendy: Okay, so this is Wendy Chapkis, W E N D Y C H A P K I S, on August 20, 2020. You are?

Christine: Christine Caulfield.

Wendy: Can you spell that?

Christine: C H R I S T I N E C A U L F I E L D.

Wendy: And we are recording this in Portland, Maine in my back yard because of the COVID-19 epidemic. We are crossing our fingers that the sound quality is good enough and planes stop going overhead.

Christine: [laughs]

Wendy: Christine, I'm now going to sit six feet away and I will try to shout my questions. Okay.

Christine: We'll do okay.

Wendy: We will do what we can do, and if it really doesn't work we'll schedule another when this all over.

Christine: Yeah, yeah.

Wendy: Okay. So, Christine, I think usually the best way to start this is a bit of background on your family of origin, your childhood, your makeup of your family, anything that you would like to tell me about your early life.

Oh, and let me remind you, you can refuse to answer any question I ask, and we can also stop the interview if it ever gets to a point where you think, "I just don't want to continue anymore." We'll stop. Okay?

Christine: Oh, yeah.

Wendy: So can you tell me a little about your family of origin?

Christine: Yep! I grew up in the military. My father was a Korean War and Vietnam War vet, and he wasn't sure what he was going to do. When he went to Korea, he was wounded, and when he came back he convalesced in Hawaii and he sent for my mother and nine months later, I showed up.

So I was born in Hawaii within sight and sound of the ocean, and for the next 18 years I spent, oh, I think 13 of that moving. So 13 out of my 18 years were different schools, different communities, which was, in retrospect, very...I don't know, both lonely as well as ungrounded. So there was no anchor point except for our family and the traditions of the military. My father was a decorated war

veteran, two wars. In the parlance of the military, he was a badass. And that presented its own problems growing up, which I'll talk a little bit about.

My mother came from Reading, Massachusetts. She grew up in a rather broken, poor family. My father was middle class from the South Shore. But originally what we've discovered since was that 90% of my family is from Maine, but because of divorces and all of that, nobody really knew. So we were kind of an adrift family.

I spent eight years living in Germany during the Cold War. I've traveled extensively as a kid. My parents tried to, as much as they could have afforded, have us travel. So we visited a lot of different places. But this was time of, this was during the time of the Cold War, so it was pretty stressful.

So values in my family were really about everything centers on the family because there's no community that you can sort of reach out to. So that was how I grew up. Yes?

Wendy: Yes, did you have siblings?

Christine: Yes! I have one brother, one sister. They're both younger. My sister lives in Michigan, she has her doctorate in criminal justice and teaches at the University of Michigan at Kalamazoo, although I think she's now doing an administrative position. And my brother is an electrical engineer and just got laid off because his company got bought out by Bain Capital, so [laughs] yeah, we're living the dream here. He lives in South Carolina with my mother. My father passed away five years ago from complications due to exposure to Agent Orange.

So...I have, let's see, a couple of cousins, but nobody is really close. Growing up in that kind of an environment really, as I understand it now, led to a lot of distance. More importantly, not a really good understanding of how to have friendships that lasted, because nothing lasted more than a year or two. It was something I've had to cope with, and not always successfully.

Myself, I'm married. My partner and I just next week will have been together 42 years, which is astounding to me, especially that I'm transitioning and none of this could have been foreseen. I have two children, both daughters. They are 33 and 31. They are both married. I have a granddaughter who is almost two years old, and they live in Massachusetts and New York. One is married to a professional sailor who builds yachts, very eclectic person, and the other is a police officer on Long Island, which... So we're a real mix of different people, viewpoints, backgrounds. So...

Wendy: Before we move to a different subject, can you just tell me a little—you said that your father was a badass and that it kind of led to some problems.

Christine: Yes.

Wendy: Can you talk a little bit about that?

Christine: Well, the military in the '60s and '70s was not exactly a welcoming place for LGBTQ people [laughs]. I've known since I was eight that I was—back then, I knew I was *different*, I didn't have any language for it in 1966, '64, even. But it was very much frowned upon, that if you were assigned male at birth, then you were going to be, you know, a badass yourself whether you liked it or not. So I was small, I was effeminate, I liked music, I liked, I didn't like sports, I liked gardening, did a lot of gardening. I was admiring all your plants out here [laughs].

And so when my father left for Vietnam, he was gone for two years. We were cut adrift, and I was bullied unmercifully. He came back and we went to Kansas, that was probably the worst year, sixth grade. I was five foot, 80 pounds [laughs]. Just a little person. And I can distinctly remember being assaulted, beaten up, almost every single day of that year, and my father's only reaction was, "I should teach you how to fight." Rather than going after people who were assaulting me, it was up to me to deal with this. Which was the pattern growing up with him.

I made my peace with him a long time ago, so we're all good. But it sure didn't help, and what I see now is that as I became a teenager and I was really conflicted, because I didn't know, was I gay? Was I trans? What am I? There was absolutely one message: That you're going to play sports, you're going to be rough, if you have any problems, you're going to solve them with your fists. They taught me how to use a rifle, how to use a pistol, and this was in high school. I was on the rifle team. Go figure!

Yet every opportunity I had I would do the things that made me happy. But it was very frowned upon and I would be attacked for it. It got so bad freshman year that I attempted suicide. Fortunately, my friends found me. We were on a camping trip—that was the other thing I had to do, was join the Boy Scouts [laughs]. Which was horrendous, because I was sexually abused in the Boy Scouts because I was effeminate.

Wendy: By other boys, by...?

Christine: No, by an Assistant Scoutmaster. And so it was winter, we were doing a winter campout, and I just went out into the woods and decided I was just going to go to sleep. And I didn't want to [inaudible]. And my friends found me, and I was very hypothermic, and they got me back and saved my life. And thank goodness.

But the military is a horrific place, or was a horrific place, still is not great, for anybody who is not conforming to those kind of values. So growing up with it and trying to find yourself was even worse [laughs].

Wendy: So you said that as a young person, you knew you were different, but for a long time you didn't have language for it.

Christine: Yeah.

Wendy: How did you start to develop that language? Did you know people who were gay or trans?

Christine: I internalized everything. I internalized my own homophobia, my transphobia. It wasn't until my junior year, where my hair was actually longer than it is now, and I was playing on the football team, I was different. And my father came home from Korea—he was gone in Korea for two more years—and he wanted me to go to West Point. And because he was pretty highly decorated, he had a guarantee. I had a guarantee. And I turned him down flat, and he functionally disowned me, so I moved out.

So I was homeless when I was a senior. I would go back, when he went back to Korea I could go back to my house and my mother would, like stock me up and let me shower and stuff like that, and I found an apartment with some friends who were drug dealers [laughs]. Not heavy stuff, mostly just grass. But I sort of fell into that for a little while. Not long, maybe about eight months, and just finally said, you know, “I don't need to do this.”

And I graduated high school. I graduated National Honor Society, I managed to do it. But I found myself overcompensating everywhere I went around my identity. So that I had to date the prettiest girls in the class, I had to date the most vivacious women in my class, I had to be the toughest one on the football team. So I internalized it all to sort of hide it really, really well, to go over the top on everything I did so that nobody would even question it.

That all changed when I went to college.

Wendy: Where did you go to college?

Christine: UMass Amherst, because it was \$300 bucks a semester [laughs]. So I could, that was in the days when you could work in the summer and make just enough to get by for nine months in college. So I would work on Cape Cod, I was a restaurant chef, I worked my way up from dishwasher and they trained me.

My first inkling of...sort of an awakening, I joined the theater group. I was in theater all through high school. I joined the UMass Music Theater Guild and there were gay people, and I was like, “Wow, okay, well this is cool, this is fine.” Whatever I had internalized in myself, it didn't apply to anybody else. And one gentleman named Alan was wonderful, and my RA from my floor came out as gay while we were in my very first production. And he lived right next door to me! And so I was like, “Okay, well, Phil, I know you!” And I never really had any issues with it at all.

A defining moment was the second semester. I was in a particular dorm, a very small, very effeminate man moved into the dorm, and became an immediate target of some of the bullies on the corridor, and he was gay. His name was Jim, I won't tell you his last name. But I was just, like...and it was comments. And one night, I was in my room, and all of a sudden all these fireworks went off, and I didn't

know what they were at first, but that's what they turned out to be. They had opened up his room and were throwing fireworks into his room and yelling at him, and I sort of saw red. That's the only way I can describe it, because the next thing I knew, I had grabbed the biggest one of these guys, a guy named Robbie, and was pummeling him. And I just tore into these guys, and they're like, I beat 'em up pretty well. Three of them. Because this was just so wrong, this guy just, just the nicest guy in the world, and they're going to do that because he's gay?

So that was my first exposure to activism [laughs]. And I became a little bit more involved because I got elected to the Student Senate, and we started a, in response to the assaults that were going on against women on campus, we started a Student Senate escort service. So you could just call a number and we'd be on duty and we would go walk someone from the library to a dorm, or whatever they needed. And as it happened, it also turned out there were gay students that needed to call, and that was another sort of, "Wait a minute! What the fuck is going on here?"

So I moved out of that dorm, and a bunch of friends in the drama group had formed a special interest corridor. In UMass, you could do that if you had...I think it was 15 people who shared a common interest, you could get a corridor and all of you could live on the same corridor. So here was this drama group, and then there was a common area with stairwells, and the other side was the Gay Liberation Corridor which, by sheer coincidence, I moved next to.

And it was like, my roommate was gay. His name was Mark, wonderful person. He made enough...I don't know how I would phrase this, but it was clear he was interested in me, but I was absolutely freaked out about that. I was like, "I don't think so." Because I wasn't sure about where I was at all. I was still caught up in my own internalized views of myself. I wasn't homophobic by a long shot, but I was certainly scared about any kind of introspect that might lead to me discovering something.

But I had also met my partner, she lived next door to me, and we hated each other at first. And I was on the fencing team, and I would practice at night after I got back from drama practice or studying, and she was on the UMass swim team, so she had to get up early and I was a night owl, so she was constantly opening her door and telling me to shut up.

And I walked in one night, I walked into my room, and my roommate had a lover in the room, and he hadn't done the old put something on the doorknob to give me a clue, and I literally walked in and, "Oh, hello!" [laughs]. And so I very, I just said, "I'm sorry," and I shut the door and I went next door and I knocked and I said, "Elise, is it okay if I spend the night on your floor?" And she said, "Yeah, what happened?" And so I said, "You know, I think I just walked in on a little love nest and I think they want to be alone." So she took me in, and here we are 42 years later [laughs].

Living on that corridor cast a huge sense of doubt into me, and literally within a month I ran away from it. I just couldn't, I couldn't cope with all the internalized transphobia that I understood now, that it wasn't homophobia, internalized homophobia, it was transphobia. And so I joined the Marines [laughs]. I literally drove down to Holyoke, talked to the recruiting sergeant of all four branches, went back the next day, and enlisted in the Marines. I needed—I understand now I needed to prove to myself that I was the über male, and that this was my feelings of being feminine were something that I could conquer and overcome [laugh]. That they weren't real. That something might be wrong with me. So I joined the Marines.

Wendy: Can I ask, before we move into that chapter, because that's [laughs]—

Christine: [laughs]

Wendy: ...interesting as well. Had you met any trans—I mean, you talk about meeting a lot of gay men—

Christine: And women.

Wendy: And women, uh-huh. But had you met any trans people?

Christine: No trans people.

Wendy: But you knew trans people existed then?

Christine: Only drag performers. And it got, I got twisted pretty well when one rehearsal I had some very wonderful women friends, wonderful women friends. This one woman, Ricky, we were working on costume fitting one night, and she was both the costumer as well as a makeup artist, and she said, "Let's try a different costume on you," and she put me in a wicked cute skirt and then did me all up, and my hair was kind of long, and it was absolutely amazing to me. Like, I wanted to stay that way. And I did for the whole rehearsal, which drew a whole—a lot of eyebrows went up. And that kind of threw me. It threw me. Like...that a lot of eyebrows went up. That this wasn't something I was supposed to be doing. Even from Alan. And so that threw me.

Wendy: Did your partner have any clue of what was going on with you?

Christine: No, no. Not until 2001 [laughs]. I really internalized it pretty deeply. Although I would go out on my own...not a lot, but... I wouldn't even say frequently, but once in a while, I would just, like, I kept a stash of women's clothes and I would go out and just hang out. So...

Wendy: Okay, so the Marines.

Christine: Yeah. Well, that was a place where you could... If there was any place where you could prove that I am totally male, and whatever this is, this isn't [inaudible], it

isn't right, it's some kind of an...I don't know, aberration would, how I would probably put it back then. So I graduated first in my battalion of 250. So I was the honor graduate for the battalion, and because of that I got my choice of duty station, I got a promotion, I got a bonus. I was like, "Wow, you get rewarded for being super male here!" And combative, and, you know, all those things that, the values that are espoused by the Marines. So I went to school, I aced my schools, I got three meritorious promotions all the way up to sergeant.

And then a friend of mine from high school was stationed next door, which was a helicopter squadron, and asked me if I wanted to go back to Cape Cod, take a trip—this was from North Carolina—take a cross-country trip on a helicopter. So I ended up doing that three times, and the second time the pilot let me co-pilot, and I got that flying bug, and I decided it might be cool if I was a pilot. Because fighter pilots, you don't get more tough jock than fighter pilots.

So I applied and was one of seven marines out of 350,000 that got commissioned that year up through the ranks. So I did that, I went to [unclear], I graduated fifth in my class out of 250. Then I went to the Basic School, where you are taught six months of infantry tactics. I graduated seventh in my class of 250. And I got my choice of duty stations, all this stuff, but none of it happened. It was the first time a lot of promises got broken.

So I was supposed to get my choice of duty station, my choice of occupational specialty. Anybody who graduates in the top ten. But I didn't get either. The needs of the Marine Corps. So I lost my flight status, which is the whole reason I did it. We were married by that point, we were sort of talking about family, but I knew I didn't want to raise my family in the service. And so after two years, I decided to get out, even though they did everything they could to keep me in.

I had a bit of a problem with authority in the Marines. I disobeyed orders of a superior officer once, which I had no problem doing because he was an idiot and what he was asking me to do was actually dangerous, and it was just an exercise, it wasn't a mission. But there was some traumatic stuff that happened in the Marines. It just did.

I would drive down to Wilmington and get dressed up and go in town and hang out in some of the more seedy sections of Wilmington [laughs]. But it was an escape. I flirted with gay experiences. Didn't really work for me. So I liked women [laughs]. I got out, I came back, I went to USM. And again, became a karate instructor, I mean all this stuff.

Wendy: Can you give me a sense of years? So when did you come to Maine?

Christine: Oh! So I enlisted in '77.

Wendy: Okay.

Christine: I got out in '82 as a Captain in the Marine Corps. I resigned my commission two years later, I was a Major Selectee. I graduated with my first degree in communications.

Wendy: From USM?

Christine: From USM, in 1984. I started work at National Semiconductor and I worked there for a couple of years in management, and then as a marketing representative for IBM. And then it got sold, so I just, we were redundant to National Semiconductor, so Fairchild went away, and I went away. Our whole department went away.

I bounced around between jobs, management jobs. Probably the one that was the most fun was I was the Operations Manager for Humpty Dumpty Potato Chips. I ran the whole show for the owner, everything but sales. Which was really fun! And when I was hired there, it was with the understanding that if the owner was going to sell it that the Vice President and I would have a right of first refusal to buy it. We increased the value of the company so much that the owner sold it without telling us [laughs].

And I left business, and I was teaching karate at that point, and I got a six-month stint at the Jewish Community Center teaching kids, and I loved it. And somebody said, "Well, why don't you become a teacher?" And I said, "What are you talking about? I am a teacher." "No, no, why don't you become a *teacher* teacher?" And I was like, "Oh, okay."

So I took EDU 100, went over to Wescott School, fourth grade, in Westbrook, and fell in love with it. I went to the ETEP Program and got my master's, and I taught in Gorham for 24 years. Ended up teaching high school. Well, I started at seventh grade. I got a wonderful offer from North Yarmouth Academy one year, and it's right in the same town I lived in, so I tried that out, a private school. Hated it. Went back to Gorham. So...yeah, so I graduated to high school [laughs]. And I ended up teaching high school civics, government, and American history, AP European History, and I'm still in touch with a lot of my students.

Wendy: Are you retired now?

Christine: Yes. In December of 2016, I was having some weird symptoms, and I went to get checked out, and it turned out I have bladder cancer. And I just got done with the treatments in May of this year. So right at that point...well, let me backtrack a little bit.

In 2001, I was going through therapy related to the sexual trauma and abuse that I experienced. And it was then that my counselor, my therapist said, "You know, I think you need to think about the idea that you might be transgender." And I said, "What? No!" [laughs] Well, after a couple months, you know, I said, "Maybe I'm transgender." [laughs]

So I spent a couple more years in therapy. I told my partner. That went south quickly, and we went through a bunch of years in therapy to decide whether we wanted to stay together, and ultimately, we did. We had a wonderful therapist which made all the difference, I think. But at that point, nobody knew except her and my daughters. I came out to my daughters. Initially, they were pretty shocked, because I was the super jock. But they're fine now, yeah.

So I came out to friends in the high school in 2007. A very close friend of mine, Rob, who was head of the Gay-Straight Alliance then, and he was my friend before that and he's still my friend today. And in 2014, I decided that it was time to come out. And I did that. It went pretty well.

Wendy: Did that how?

Christine: I... First I came out to, I picked seven people. So, building circles of trust. And probably the most... Everybody questioned my choices of two people, but I figured, okay, if the PE teacher coach of coaches [laughs] was okay with me, because we were good friends, that would probably go a long way towards helping the whole faculty and community sort of make this shift in how they saw me. So I did, and he was awesome. Absolutely awesome. He's probably the toughest, most outspoken person in the entire school and he was crying. He was absolutely crying. And so I was like, "Okay, I think I'm good."

So then I came out to the administration, which was difficult because my relationship with the principal was not good. I had some real professional issues with how he ran the place—not so with the previous one, and not so with the one who is there now. So I was not in the minority, I do know that. But he was supportive. The superintendent was supportive, I think, if anything, from just a professional basis. So, all set, I'm going to come out. So I wrote a letter, and at a staff meeting, all hands on board, we finished all the business, and then the principal said, "Any more business?" And I raised my hand, and I stood up and I read this letter, and you could have heard a pin drop. And everybody was awesome. First question was, "What pronouns do you want to be known by?" And, yeah, okay.

Wendy: Incidentally, what pronouns do you want to go by?

Christine: She/her, yeah. How about you?

Wendy: She/her, they/them.

Christine: Okay.

So, great. I'm out! And my wife's an attorney, and two of her clients walked out within that week, and she watched tens of thousands of dollars walk out the door, and she says, "Maybe you need to, we need to rethink this, how you're going to transition." Okay. Her law firm was fine with it. They were really, really good. They said, "We don't want those kind of people as clients anyway." Okay. Which

shocked her. She thought that they would be... I mean, they haven't exactly been super, but they've been pretty good. Some inappropriate comments. I just take that to a lack of education [laughs].

So my transition was put on hold for two years, because I wanted to start HRT. So two years went by, and then I got cancer. I had just started HRT [laughs]. Just started literally three weeks before. So everything went on hold, and it turns out the cancer was related to my service in the Marine Corps. That over 300,000 marines had been exposed to toxic chemicals in the waste, in the water supplies, and they had covered it up for more than 20 years. It was so egregious that Congress passed a separate act in 2013 so that any marine veterans who served in this place at this time were automatically covered, you didn't have to apply to the VA or anything, it's automatic.

So the VA stepped up big time, and I got through two years of treatments and trying to teach at the same time, and I just, I couldn't do it anymore. So I had to retire. That's the long way around to getting to your question, "Are you retired?"

So the only reason I could really retire, because I really hadn't, teaching was a second career, I didn't have a huge amount of vested time, was for the VA 100% disability compensation to take the place of what I would have had. And all my doctors, all three of them said, "The best thing you can do is retire and just rest and get through the rest of these treatments." Because they made me really sick.

I think the biggest concern I had was my AP students and my seniors, because that takes such a, that's just a grind. The senior class was just wonderful, but I was missing way too much class. I would miss three weeks at a time. So I retired.

Wendy: Did you, when you came out professionally to the administration and your colleagues, did you also come out to students?

Christine: Yes.

Wendy: And what were the students' responses like?

Christine: It was a mixed reaction. Fascinatingly enough, that was the year Trump was elected [laughs]. So, you know, it gets interesting. We like to say that... Well, one of my colleagues, James, and I were really good at, if you will, "turning" some of our seniors away from the dark side. Not through anything other than just, "Let's explain history and these different views of authoritarianism versus democracy and progressivism." And eventually they came around. Not all of them.

I also co-taught a course with a couple of other teachers called Power and Privilege where we examined how power structures set up, where privilege comes from, ableism, transphobism, homophobic, racism, feminism, and misogyny. We looked at all of these things. It was a semester long elective. It was wonderful to teach that course, just wonderful.

I also got involved with First Event in Boston, which is a transgender conference. I started out just going for fun. I was a model in a fashion show [laughs] which was wonderfully affirming. And I've done that now for, this is my eighth year. But this year I did something different, I did spoken word. And I decided—this is in front of hundreds and hundreds of people—I did Eve Ensler's "My Short Skirt," which blew them away [laughs]. So I was also asked to give a speech this past year at the Women's March here in Portland. And I'm the treasurer for MaineTransNet. I don't do a whole lot yet, but... COVID has had a bit impact on that, so...

Wendy: So how wonderful that you were asked to give a speech at the Women's March. Have you found that the organized Women's Movement has been embracing of you as a trans woman, or has it been like the students, a mixed bag, or...? How has your experience been?

Christine: Mostly very positive. Mostly very positive. I was tough, you know. I sort of... I talked about how there were so many things that are intersectional, and was very specific about those. And then I challenged everybody, I said, "So are we all going to go home and look at our selfies of the Women's March today and not do anything? Are you going to remember the stories you've heard up here?"

So I, that's sort of the way I work. I like to think that it's one of the reasons my students liked taking my classes—because I got a lot of repeats—was I challenged them. I challenged them to think, and I think that me transitioning has a lot to do with that. I was that way when I was in the Marines. I always, when I was the commanding officer, I challenged the marines under me to give their best. Because you don't *have* to. But you *can*, and what would happen if you did? And that works pretty well. And I would never do anything that I didn't ask them to do. And it was true with my students. So...

Wendy: Do you have any contact with people that you knew in the Marine Corps?

Christine: Yeah.

Wendy: And how have their responses been to your transition?

Christine: 50/50. Yeah, my closest friend, Patrick, who I've known...since 1979, so 31 years, I told him, and he was like, "Yeah, okay." [laughs] "What do you want me to call you now?" [laughs]

But I attribute some of that to, you know, oddly enough, you know, he and I used to play Dungeons & Dragons together. And of course, in Dungeons & Dragons you're creating worlds, and you're creating characters, and there were certainly these potions that would change your gender, which we ran into quite often and never had a problem with. It's interesting [laughs] that people who are more open-minded and are creative in how they see the world tend not to have problems with who I was and now who I am. But I can remember some people getting in touch

with me who were like, “You’re what?” “Transgender.” “Okay, well, it was great knowing you.” Click [laughs]. And, I mean, the Marines is, it’s...

Wendy: [inaudible] environments that were going to be easy. Did anyone that you came out to go, “Oh, I thought so.”

Christine: Yes.

Wendy: Oh, interesting.

Christine: My partner. She said, “There’s an awful lot.” After she had been and saw her therapist for a while, she said, “This makes a whole lot of sense.” [laughs] I like to write poetry, I like gardening, I sew quilts, and I did all of that before I came out. Things that I just liked to do, but I think our culture slots into “feminine.” Since... It’s interesting, I just restarted HRT, and finally got on estrogen to the point where it’s more than three weeks, and I’m calmer. I’m getting more things done. I feel right in my own body again, which I haven’t felt since probably I was a little kid. So she’s very empathic, and she’s very empathetic towards this, and that makes a big difference. And other people who are important in my life, same thing.

Wendy: Have you come out to your family?

Christine: Oh, yeah.

Wendy: And their response?

Christine: Complete rejection, yeah. My brother and I were close for many, many years. He lives in South Carolina with my mother. When my dad passed away, she moved there. So it was sort of a toss-up, “Where do you want to live? We want you to be close to one of us so we can help you out.” She didn’t want winter, so with my sister in Michigan and me in Maine, South Carolina was the choice. Somewhere in the past five years, my brother joined an Evangelical church and everything went south. He got my mother to join it. My mother is...very problematic for me, because she’s very passive aggressive. She’s the past master of passive aggressive, but she recognizes me. I think she’s trying to find some kind of bridge. So I got a birthday card that was addressed to me. So she’s not throwing me out of her life, but she’s not welcoming me back and inviting me to South Carolina either. Okay?

Wendy: And your sister?

Christine: We’ve been estranged for a while. She did some very hurtful things to my daughters, and I didn’t know about it. And one of my daughters ended up with some eating disorder, which multiplied into eating disorders and we wrestled with that for quite a while, and it turns out that part of it was my sister. And so when we confronted her about it, she took off. Walked out. And I haven’t seen her

since. So it's been a long time. I think probably about 15 years, but I saw my brother and my mother just two years ago when I came out to them. So...

Wendy: Well, switching gears a little bit.

Christine: Sure [laugh].

Wendy: You mentioned in the background information that you gave me that you were quite interested in culture, you said, and writing, poetry and literature. Can you talk a little bit about the role that culture has played in your life?

Christine: Yes. My seventh-grade teacher, Mr. Rock, saw me struggling. As I understand it now, Mr. Rock was gay. I know that, it's not a conjecture. In tenth grade, I had a drama and English teacher, Mr. Mulder, who was gay, who, both of them took great pains to help me through the stuff I was going through, especially Mr. Mulder after my suicide attempt. And one of the ways that they did that was with writing.

So I started writing a few short stories, but I started writing terrible poetry. Just awful stuff. You know, that whole teenage angst, trying to figure your shit out. But it was a way to sort of vent. At that same time, they're introducing me to poets. They're introducing me to literature that helped me at least calm down the demons. Especially Herman Hesse. One of his books, which was introduced to me by my eleventh-grade English teacher, who was also pretty awesome...

Just a side note: Those were the days before they had standards, when you could actually take care of your students [laughs]. "Okay, I'm going to have you read this book because this is important for you to read." They were my role models, that's how I taught. Screw the standards. I'll do those anyway. But...

Had me read a book called *Magister Ludi, The Glass Bead Game*, I don't know if you're familiar with it. It's completely, he won the Nobel Prize for Literature for that book in 1949, and it was a hypothetical scholastic kingdom ensconced somewhere in Europe that all the heads of Europe and aristocracy would send their kids to learn. But the high point was what was called the Glass Bead Game, where you could...it was essentially a metaphor for—how do I want to put this? Not just amalgamation, but synthesis of every possible idea, activity, thought, philosophy, religion. And the game was to come up with different combinations of these glass beads to introduce new combinations that would create new types of thinking. I still have that copy of that book from my eleventh grade. I still read it every two to three years. It had a profound impact on me that you could create new things.

And from that I began to branch out. I read Tolkien. I began to read science fiction/fantasy. I began to read history. I was especially interested in Chinese history and Chinese poetry, introduced by a history professor at UMass who then, like, turned me onto history. But I took a creative writing class, Creative Writing and Poetry, with James Tate, who turned out to be a, he won the Pulitzer Prize for

Poetry one year, and he was phenomenal. He was phenomenal, and he was not easy. The first two weeks, he said, “Bring in two pieces of poetry. We’re going to read them and critique them.” And he was just, he savaged us. Just savaged us, just, he would say, “This is crap. What are you...?” You know, and the add/drop period ended, and only about a third of the class was left, and we came back that Tuesday—I’ll never forget this—and he says, “Okay, now that add/drop’s over, you’re the ones that are left, we can talk seriously about it because you can take critique.”

And I just stopped in my tracks. I was like, “You just put people through some real hell, but I mean, I get it. But holy cow.” But he was really amazing, helping me to try to figure out a voice. That was the beginning of trying to find my voice.

Theater has always been huge. The ability to take on roles. I gravitated towards neutral or feminine roles, which was perfectly fine. I tended to like an eclectic mix of music. Again, this idea of synthesis, like, expose yourself to as many different kinds of music as you can and don’t judge it.

Growing up in the service, ninth grade through tenth grade, ninth and tenth, seventh through tenth, the predominant music was soul. The makeup of the US Army at that point was about 35 to 40 percent Black/Puerto Rican, you know, four times easily the national percentage. So I was exposed to racism, race issues really early on. And the music, there was a weekly dance to keep us out of trouble, because you could go downtown Germany and you could buy wine out of a vending machine for 50 cents, so I mean, the drug and alcohol issues among US military dependents was enormous. Really a problem. I didn’t get really sucked into it. Not that I didn’t try it once in a while, I’d get drunk a few times and try that out, that’s just being an adolescent.

But the dances were all soul. If you didn’t like James Brown, if you didn’t like the Jackson 5, if you didn’t like Carlos Santana, you were a social outcast. [inaudible] like the music, and then I started to like the music [laughs]. But there was also room for Led Zeppelin, The Who, especially The Who because some of the themes that they were singing about spoke to me about transition. You know... Later on I got into playing the piano, I taught myself how to play the piano at UMass, mostly because I was extremely poor [laugh] but I needed a creative outlet. And again, I could, I played a lot of feminine musicians’ work, but also Stevie Wonder, who’s amazing. It wasn’t until I started teaching high school that I began appreciating LGBTQ culture. And it spoke to me.

Wendy: For instance, can you...

Christine: I went to my first drag show, and I didn’t like it. I thought it degraded women and trans people. Now I’m, I’m fine. I think it’s wonderful now.

Wendy: So what was the, what was the shift for you?

Christine: The shift was, it was like, “Wait a minute, that’s not how feminine is.” Like I knew. And then I realized, “Hey, wait a minute, how do you know?” [laughs] That’s literally what happened. I was like, I had to really think about that, and some friends and I were talking about it, and I was like, and they called me on it and said, “Well, what do you know about being feminine?” And I was like [laughs], “That’s a good question.”

So I began reading a couple things. Alan Ginsberg, he’s classic, classic Beat, classic gay poet. Began reading... And I was struck by the rage, and the rage was in me. The rage was in me, and it had to come out. And he was a spark, he was a real spark to understanding how much I had suppressed, for how long I had suppressed it. Like right now, I’m tearing up thinking about it, just because it has that emotional connection. How powerful he was.

And I began frequenting clubs and enjoying, from the sidelines, gay culture, because I wasn’t “gay” as I understood gay back then. Now I would say I’m definitely bisexual, but nonpracticing [laughs].

Wendy: Well this raises for me a really interesting question, because where the LGBTQ+ community is very expansive, but there are major differences between people within that community. And you’ve talked about some of the alliances that you experienced between the gay community and yourself as someone who identifies as trans, because a lot of your early mentors, it sounds like, were people who were gay, your teachers who kind of took you under their wing. But you also had a pretty clear sense it sounds like from pretty early on that you were attracted to women, but [inaudible] you were bisexual, that that kind of meant you weren’t the G in that acronym.

Christine: Yes.

Wendy: So can you talk about... How has that worked out well for you, being able to have both alliances and differences in the LGBTQ community?

Christine: I would say yes. There’s two parts to this. It’s personal as well as intellectual. Personally, having gay men who supported me throughout my whole life is extremely important to understanding that we may have differences about how we see ourselves in relationships and are close friends, and we may have developed principles that...

Without risking offense—or risking offense, I don’t know—but being careful here, is that some of these are political. And I understand the necessity for that, that... And I’m still new to this, understanding identity politics and all of its nuances. But we are fundamentally a marginalized community at large, and within that community, variations of marginalization. But we’re still being marginalized by a society that really wrestles with how to be human. And that, I think, has resonated for me a great deal. And as I’ve read and come to understand

more gay, lesbian history, bisexual history, that it was the history door opening up for me that allowed me to see these things.

Once I began making more definitive personal connections with people, I haven't had any that were negative. You know, it's different if you go to a club and you bump into somebody who says, "Oh, you'll never be a woman." And you just look at 'em and you go, "Okay, whatever" [laughs]. It's limiting, I think, in my mind, to let any of those differences [inaudible] override being human.

Wendy: Christine, is there anything I didn't ask you about that you would like to talk about a little bit as we start to wrap this up?

Christine: Let me think... I think everybody ought to be in theater. Everybody ought to experience theater to understand that society is theater. If it taught me anything, that's true. That we construct roles, we have roles constructed for us, that we're not even always aware of.

I just recently binge watched *The Matrix* after the sisters came out and said, "Yes, that was our intent." My partner watched it with me, and like, we watched the first one twice and then watched the next two. And it was remarkable to me how that works as a metaphor in this idea of social constructs throughout my life, and what a huge price I paid over a lot of years, including the suicide attempt, because some people think they've got this all figured out for all of the rest of us.

And I think my life has been spent since becoming aware that I'm trans very well pushing back against that. So... It's why I like to think that I have so many of my students still on my Facebook account who still contact me, who still want to get together.

One of the most profound moments I had happened just this past April, when I got contacted by a former student who just wanted to come and hang out and have coffee. I said, "Okay." So we met at a startup in Scarborough, and I walked in and there's Emma, Emma's awesome, we did a yearlong collaborative personal one-credit independent project on writing poetry. I was a history teacher doing this stuff with these students. And I walked in and there was this young man sitting there working on the computer, and Emma. So I walked over and gave her a big hug, because she reaches out and wants a big hug, and it's like, "Yeah!" And she says, "You remember Casey?" And I looked and I said... And Casey's looking at me, and Casey says, "Look at me." And I looked, and Casey used to be Casey with a K and now it's Casey with a C, and I was like, "Oh my god." And she said, "You were a big part in giving me the courage to do this." So...yeah.

Wendy: Well, thank you. Thank you so much.

Christine: Oh, you're welcome. I was kind of flattered when you asked me. And the only reason I haven't taken your course, literally, is because I had cancer [laughs].