

**Andrea:** [00:00:08] It is November 25th, 2022, and we're here in Payson Smith in Portland. My name is Andre Carpenter A n d r e a C a r p e n t e r. Could you say in spell your name? [00:00:25][16.8]

**Benn:** [00:00:26] Sure, Benn. Marine B e n n M a r i n e. [00:00:30][4.6]

**Andrea:** [00:00:33] Okay. Um. And how old are you? Or what decade were you born in? If you prefer. [00:00:41][7.8]

**Benn:** [00:00:41] I am 37. I was born in 1985. [00:00:43][2.2]

**Andrea:** [00:00:44] Okay. Um. So just as a reminder, you can end the interview at any time or refuse to answer any questions. Um. So what labels do you like to use for yourself? Like queer, um. Queer, trans. [00:01:12][27.6]

**Benn:** [00:01:14] Yeah. So for my gender identity, I identify as trans man or trans dude. -- I'll wait for it to finish its thing. Sounds like something's winding, but nothing's moving (reacting to mysterious machine noises).-- That's done. Okay. Oh, my brain stopped. Oh, yeah. Gender. So yeah, I was trans man or trans dude. That trans prefix is important to me to kind of explain my, you know, life experience and how I got here. And then in terms of my, like, sexual orientation, identify as queer. If you had if you pressed my hand, I would probably, to be more specific, I'd probably say pansexual because I'm more attracted to personality rather than gender. That makes sense? [00:02:15][60.7]

**Andrea:** [00:02:16] That's a good explanation of it. Um, so where did you grow up? [00:02:22][6.6]

**Benn:** [00:02:23] I grew up in Buxton, Maine, which is rural I'd say rural southern Maine. So probably 40 minutes from Portland. And then when I was --I think-- 24, my family moved to Cumberland. So. 85 04. What's that like, 12 or something? I don't know. I'm terrible at mental math, but whatever that math is, I think, well, 12, ten, 11, something. Something like that. I was in fourth grade. I remember that. I was in fourth grade. We

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moved another year to Cumberland from Buxton. It was a bit of a culture shock for sure, but yeah. [00:03:09][46.2]

**Andrea:** [00:03:11] How so? Was it a culture shock? [00:03:12][1.6]

**Benn:** [00:03:14] I mean, Buxton was, you know. Again, I would emphasize like rural, blue collar, you know, like for fun, my friends and I would run around in the woods. I was always just like a wicked tomboy and really fit in with that kind of crowd in that scene. And then when I moved to Cumberland, I was like a fish out of water. Cumberland's a more affluent area. Um. You know. Yeah. I don't know. I just. I struggled to fit in for sure. [00:03:47][33.7]

**Andrea:** [00:03:50] Oh. So who did you grow up with? [00:03:53][3.2]

**Benn:** [00:03:55] My in terms of immediate family. Yeah. Just my younger brother. So. And there's a three and a half year age gap between us. [00:04:02][6.6]

**Andrea:** [00:04:03] Mm hmm. And then. And then your. Your parents? [00:04:05][2.0]

**Benn:** [00:04:05] Oh, yes. And both my parents just. [00:04:07][1.7]

**Andrea:** [00:04:07] Just wanted to check [00:04:08][0.5]

**Benn:** [00:04:08] Yeah. Yeah. In terms of, like, household, it was both my folks, my younger brother. And then. But then we do have a big, um. Like my mom's like her. All my uncles and aunts are out in Vermont, and then I have one uncle on my dad's side in Rhode Island. But we're kind of estranged from that side of the family. But I my mom's side, like our cousins were like siblings, like we were all super close and we kind of grew up together. So. And they're all out of Springfield, Vermont. Yeah. [00:04:41][32.9]

**Andrea:** [00:04:43] That must've been nice. [00:04:44][0.6]

**Benn:** [00:04:44] Yeah. Yeah, for sure.

[00:04:45][1.0]

**Andrea:** [00:04:49] So you kind of already touched on this, but what was school like in your early life? [00:04:56][6.6]

**Benn:** [00:04:58] I mean, so like I feel like when I was really young. Well, when I was really young, I couldn't say hello my name as my teacher made of me. This is like preschool. And so I would, like, cry. And my mom, I think because my name was Elizabeth and I would cry to my mom that I needed my name changed. And because I couldn't say or spell Elizabeth and the teacher thought I was being a wise ass, but I just couldn't say it, I'd say "Wivabef". And so my mom made this long list of nicknames for Elizabeth, and the only one I could say Spell and liked was Bess. And so I was best for the first 27 years of my life. But then outside of that, I feel like. I don't know. I feel like I've always for the most part have been able to blend in. I guess if that makes sense. But I've also I've always felt like I never quite fit, but I always fit in enough to get by, except for when I moved to Cumberland from like fourth grade to sixth grade were pretty much pure hell. It was terrible. But then once we moved up to junior high, for whatever reason, I don't know. I started playng field hockey. I just seem to. Kind of be able to fit in enough. I guess if that makes sense to have had a pretty good or decent experience through high school. But yeah, four through six were pretty terrible. I came home in tears every day. It was real bad. Yeah. No. [00:06:49][111.2]

**Andrea:** [00:06:52] Well, what were the attitudes like in your household around the LGBTQ community? [00:06:57][5.0]

**Benn:** [00:06:58] I mean, in my immediate household, it never really came up. You know, I think in my extended family, I'd overheard homophobic things for sure. Like I have vivid memories of an aunt saying something to the effect of like "shipping all the gains away to an island" or some crazy, asinine thing like that. And I remember hearing not great things in the news that were pretty vivid, but it never really. I feel like there probably were some offhanded comments in passing that, but none of them stuck out as much as like like some of the other things. I don't know if that makes sense.

I mean, I was raised in a Republican Catholic household, so it was never like explicitly talked about because we never explicitly talk about anything. But I say that with so much love. But. Yeah, it. I mean, we had-- so growing up, we spent a lot of time on the water and there was actually a gay couple that had a boat across from where we kept our boat --and my folks were great friends with them-- but for the longest time, my brother and I thought that they were brothers. Like, we had no idea, you know? I mean, obviously, my folks knew and they had had no problem with it, and so it was, you know. It was just one of those things that you didn't talk about. Like it just wasn't talked about. Like, it just was like this big secret. I don't know. And I just remember from a very young age, like, wanting to be a boy and feeling like a boy and all of that, and also knowing --and I couldn't tell you how I knew this-- but somehow just knowing that that wasn't okay or feeling like, "okay, that's not that's not like normal or not, okay?" Like "there's something wrong with me", but I got to like get over it basically, for lack of better language. Or at least that was my experience or how I felt then. Yeah. I don't know how that answers your question. [00:09:17][138.9]

**Andrea:** [00:09:18] It sure does. Um, well, do you have any particular, like, earliest memories of feeling like a boy or knowing that you were a boy? [00:09:25][7.3]

**Benn:** [00:09:26] I mean, I remember, like. Yeah, I mean, I have some pretty vivid memories. I remember, I don't know, like four or five standing in the driveway in Buckson and just looking up at the sky and, like, praying to God to make me a boy. Um. Yeah. And then later in --this is probably an overshare-- but and then later, like when I had my first, like, I don't know, like official physical whatever with the doctor, the doctor was like, "Oh, you have a male hair pattern". I was like, "Oh, like Jesus tried like he tried to fix his mistake", you know, like "A for effort buddy" you know? Um, yeah, it was really interesting. Because it yeah I mean a little of a sidebar but it was interesting because it like --in a really weird way-- it kind of like reignited some of my faith like, "oh, maybe there is a god" because like "maybe he did actually try", like maybe he was like, "oh, shoot, like I up, you know, like I made a mistake. Okay, I'm

going to try to fix it", you know? Which is interesting. But yeah. [00:10:38][71.5]

**Andrea:** [00:10:40] So you touched on your faith. Did that play into any of your feelings around like did that affect feeling safe in your identity or anything? [00:10:51][11.3]

**Benn:** [00:10:53] I mean, truthfully, I don't know that. I mean, being raised Catholic, like, you know, we did the Sunday school thing and we but I don't know that I was ever like a real believer, if that makes sense. Like, I don't know. I don't know. Like, I don't know. I have people in my life that have very strong faith and it means the world to them. And I have so much respect for that. And I can see I can see where that-- I don't know I've had moments where I'm like, "Oh, I wish I had that". But like. Yeah. I don't know. Sorry. This is probably the answer you're looking for, but faith has been an interesting thing for me and I think especially now as an adult and seeing-- yeah. It's a tough spot, I guess. I don't know. That's not a very satisfactory answer. [00:11:54][61.3]

**Andrea:** [00:11:55] It is. It's. It's a good answer. [00:11:56][1.2]

**Benn:** [00:11:57] Yeah. It's complicated, I'll say. [00:12:00][3.0]

**Andrea:** [00:12:06] So I read that you came out as gay rather than lesbian. Um. Could you talk about that a little bit? [00:12:14][8.8]

**Benn:** [00:12:15] Yeah, I mean, I never really so I also think I probably had a lot of internalized homophobia, but also, was a bit of a misogynist in my own way, and I will own that and I've come a long way there, but I never really identified with womanhood. And I don't know if that was because all of my ambitions were like in business or in like sports where, -- I mean, I don't think it's probably fine (reacting to the machine noises)-- where is just such a male dominated field that it was like, "oh, like women don't get a fair shake anyway". So it's like, you know, like trying to push that part of me aside, you know, that "I am as good as the guys", you know? I mean, like having to prove in that way, I don't know. I don't know if that makes any sense. But anyway, long story short,

I also was never identified as a lesbian because like to be a lesbian means that you are a woman attracted to other women. And I just never identify as a woman. So I was like, "Oh," like a lesbian. I just like a weird, I don't know, it just never really felt like it really described my experience because I didn't really feel like a woman attracted to women, if that makes sense. But. Yeah. It was interesting, Arlene, the author of the book, I think maybe you just referenced one of the things she poses the question in the book of "if I had been born, I-- can't remember if it was like 20 or 30 years earlier,-- would I be butch instead of trans?" And I remember reading the draft being like, "hell no!" you know, like thinking that I just didn't have the exposure to, like, butch culture and like, dyke culture, all of that. And I'm like, "no, I definitely have have been" and I definitely have like butch friends who identify as like dykes and like that is definitely in my sphere of knowledge and that. But all of those identities to me still are like womanhood centered, right? And for me, I'm like, I'm not at what? Like, I just have never it's just never felt like it is described like who I am, if that makes sense. But now that I'm like out and trans and very, you know, I've passing privilege, very like masculine presenting, for sure. I flirt more with femininity now than I ever had in my life, which is an interesting observation that I've noticed in myself. I don't know what that's about, but I don't know what I'm for. That's work. [00:15:13][178.0]

**Andrea:** [00:15:14] Now, that was really good. Could you go into some of that struggle that you faced with your gender before you started to transition? [00:15:23][9.3]

**Benn:** [00:15:26] Yeah. I mean, I think for the longest time, it was something that I pushed aside. Um. You know, like like "that wasn't the hand of cards you were dealt". You know, "move on" was kind of --I think-- where my head was with it. And you know, coming out as "gay" felt significantly easier, still not easy. Because I think growing up, I thought, oh, gosh, being gay be the worst thing I could ever possibly be. Like, "I can't possibly be gay" to where like, I almost, like, overcompensated in the other direction. Like, I, I mean, I did try to be feminine and I did try and, like, you know, fit what I thought people wanted of me. And I think

## Defining Labels

I've always kind of done that, but thinking about. So then later I saw that I was super involved in. After coming out as gay. Like fast forward a little bit then I'm like, I have all this community and I'm meeting Trans folks and now I have all this language and I'm like, "Holy shit, I'm not the only person feels this way. There are other people that feel this way and oh my gosh", "there's like modern technologies where like, I could actually, in this lifetime see myself as I've always felt I am." And that was kind of mind blowing and terrifying because on the one hand, it meant that I could, like, see myself in this lifetime. But on the other hand, it was like, "Oh shit, that means I'm going to have to, like, come out". And that felt infinitely harder and scarier because when I came out as gay, it was like, "I'm dating a woman. This does not impact you. I don't really care what you think," right? Like. And by that time, I mean this was 2009 that I came out as gay. It was a little more, still not like, definitely not mainstream by any stretch of the imagination, but like definitely a lot more acceptance than, you know. Like I wasn't as worried about, I mean, I was worried about comments, but I wasn't like, like, I'm not going to say I wasn't worried about it because like, it definitely wasn't like a not scary thing. It was something that I definitely put off for years. So, you know, it wasn't nothing, but. It was like, I didn't have a big coming out. I wasn't like, "Mom, Dad, I'm gay". It was like, "and I'm going out to meet somebody." And then my dad just randomly asked, like, "is this a man or a woman?" And I was like, "That's a great question. It's a woman bye". And I just like walked out the door and that was that was my big coming out. That was it. And, you know, and my parents, I'm lucky, so fortunate, super blessed to kind of shrug their shoulders. And we're like, "okay." And yeah. But then coming out as trans is so different because I'm asking people who have known me my whole life to use a different name, to use different pronouns. Like I'm challenging their --you know--, understanding of, I mean, channeling someone's understanding of gender is like, for so many people gender is binary and it's like this, like facts set in stone thing. And it's like, when you, challenge that, it's like you're challenging their entire universe, you know? And it was really terrifying and scary. Um yeah. It was a lot. For me. I think it's getting easier for folks? I don't know. Everyone's experience is

Struggles with gender Identity

Coming out as gay versus coming out as trans

different. [00:19:43][257.1]

**Andrea:** [00:19:48] Were there any particular challenges in coming out as trans? [00:19:53][5.3]

**Benn:** [00:19:55] I think telling my folks was the most scary. I couldn't do it. I actually asked my brother and his wife to do it for me because I just I could I just can do it. I mean, I even had the thought plant in my head like, "oh, maybe I just won't come out as trans until, I don't know, like 40 years from now, my parents have died and then I don't have to deal with it now", like, you know? But then I'm like, "that's that's kind of messed up", you know? Like, I don't know. I knew I had to figure out how to move through it. Um. And I was really it was terrifying. And I knew too that when it came to like medical transition, I had to bring them along on that journey or I really felt like I risked losing them. You know, like at the time that I came out, I was living out in Oregon, in Portland, Oregon, and working on a campaign out there. And I just knew that if I continued on the campaign trail, like doing what I was doing and just showed up two years later, like looking like I do now. I don't know. I mean, I don't know. Maybe it would've been fine, but I don't know. I was really scared that it wouldn't have been. I really felt like they had to be part of you know, they been part of my whole life, I felt like I had to include them in that journey as hard as that was. And it wasn't, you know, for the faint of heart, for sure. But it was it was hard for me. It was hard for them. But we got through it.  
[00:21:44][109.0]

**Andrea:** [00:21:47] So you mentioned the physical transition. What was it like going on testosterone? [00:21:52][5.0]

**Benn:** [00:21:54] Yeah. So I. Okay, so I socially started Transition Summer 2013 out in Portland, Oregon, and then I medically started to transition February 2014, I started taking testosterone. And I'm super fortunate I've got a great PCP that recommended a great specialist for me to go to. And he had he's almost, he's now in more in recent years he's working more and more with trans folks and less and less with everybody else, which is kind of cool. So he's really kind of, I mean, no one's got this figured out, but like, seems to like

Transitioning



really kind of have to figure it out. I don't know as much as any doctor came at this point, but he got me on subcutaneous injections, so it's injecting the fat rather than intramuscular. And so for me, I mean, it was awesome because testosterone for me --I mean-- I had post ovarian syndrome. So I was at a really elevated risk for ovarian cancer. And it was something that like, you know, and I have cancer in the family. So that was kind of like a big kind of high risk thing for me. And the benefit of my being on testosterone is that kind of whole system that where those cancer cells would grow, as it's been explained to me, is in layman's terms, it basically has been shut off. So like it almost completely negates that risk, which is exciting. Also in terms of just my experience on testosterone, I found that I was just more even keel. Like, I don't know. I didn't have a lot of the emotional highs and lows I was having prior to. I don't know, I feel like I've mellowed out a lot as a human. I don't know. Yeah. It's been. It's been good for me, for sure. No doubt. You know, also, it's hard to say to. Right. It's like, "well, how much of that is aging and how much of that is hormones?" You know, I don't know. It's hard to say, but it does seem like my temperament has become more even keeled. I feel like I was very reactionary and very kind of explosive prior to. And since being on it, I feel like I'm more steadfast. Not that I'm not that I never react to things, I certainly do, but I feel like I'm much more steadfast. In my mental state and emotions then prior to. Also, I used to be called all the time. Like I lived in Florida for a few years. I used to like wear sweatshirts and like sit in the hot car in the summer, like in Florida, right? Like I was just cold all the time, and since being on t (testosterone) I feel like --I don't know-- Like normal to I don't know, like I'm not cold when, like, everybody else is cold, but not like, you know what I mean? Like, I know it feels like my body temp has either risen or, I don't know, maybe have better blood flow. I haven't. I couldn't tell you the science. I don't know. But I don't seem to have that problem anymore. So, um. Yeah. For me it's been great and I haven't had a period in since 2014, which I feel great about. [00:25:31][216.1]

**Andrea:** [00:25:35] Um. What were your parents' or families' reactions to the physical changes that

were happening? [00:25:44][8.9]

**Benn:** [00:25:47] Um. You know, I think this is part of why I moved home to transition. Yeah, I moved home to transition and promised myself that I would --when I moved out-- I'd be buying myself a place. I moved home in 2014. I'm still living at home. It's fine. Um, I don't know. I mean, I think it does happen. Like it's not like I take my tee shot in the next morning. I've got a full beard and I'm like, "Hey, guys", you know? It does happen slowly over time. I think. Talking -- not true no because-- I think just being there helped everybody through it. I think my me having passing privilege has actually helped them more than anything because they really struggled with name and pronouns were like so hard, especially in those like years where I really wasn't. I mean, I was a very large chested person and I didn't have my top surgery until May of 2015. And so even in a binder, I still was very like I was very clearly a female body person, if that makes sense. And that those like couple of years were the hardest, I think, for me. I think for everybody, you know, even just simple things like going to the bathroom. Like I remember shooting a wedding and being like, oh, shoot, like. "How are people perceiving me right now?" Like do people. "how am I being read?" I just I don't want to deal with I don't want to freak anybody out. Like, I don't want to freak anybody out in the women's room. And I also don't like I just, I just want to pee and I don't want to think about this, but, like, I have to, like, evaluate how I'm being perceived, like, you know what I mean? And so it's just, like, exhausting in that way, but. Yeah. And they, they struggle with naming pronouns for a long time. But as I but now that my pass like. I think when other people could see me, the way that I saw me, it was like, "Oh", but I took a long time for people to get there. You know? Yeah. Yeah.  
[00:28:21][154.5]

**Andrea:** [00:28:24] It sounds like it was hard navigating using the bathroom. How did you go about doing that? [00:28:32][7.8]

**Benn:** [00:28:33] I mean, I would if there was like a gender neutral bathroom around, I would always opt for that. I mean, I always felt safer --I mean, I'd still feel safer in a women's restroom-- but I don't go in women's restrooms anymore. It's been

Family matters while transitioning

Navigating using the bathroom

probably years because I definitely I definitely have passing privilege for sure, I think I would scare a lot of people, but. Which is silly. Yeah. Scratch that. Yeah, that's what I mean. But, um. Yeah, I know. It's tough. Like, I would just try to, you know, as I said, after I had top surgery, I started using the men's room more. For sure. But up until then, it was like a coin toss, like 50/50 split, like, "oh, I don't know", you know, and it depended on where I was like I was down south, like I would just default to the women's room because like legally I'm covered. Like, I have all the things I'm supposed to have to be in this room, you know what I mean? Like, because in some you know it because at that time in some states, like there were a lot of bathroom bills that were. It was. Yeah, it was just. But, um. So the other thing I was listening to was like, what are like what legislation? You know, are there local ordinances? Are there, you know, is some person going to call the cops on me? And I don't know. That never happened to me. And it was fine. But I just, there's always something I was thinking about. Uh, yeah. Yeah. Bathrooms were not fun. And it was interesting, I remember knocking doors in Miami and talking to this one woman, and she was Catholic herself. And. I don't think I mean, this was pre my top surgery. I didn't think I was passing then, but I don't know, maybe I was. And she was reading me as male, which I hadn't figured out, but I did in our conversation. But um, uh. Anyway, won't cut to the chase. We're having this conversation about like, um, I was able to get her to move a little bit on because I was talking about an nondiscrimination ordinance for Miami and, and she was like, Yeah, I just, I was like, 'you know, what's holding you back from supporting this nondiscrimination ordinance? It sounds like your faith is important to you. It sounds like your faith supports not judging" like and this is after I mean, I had probably spent like 20 minutes with her. You know, she'd shared like, well, you know, like her real like where she struggling with it. I was like, "what's what's really holding you back?" You know, she's like, "Honestly, just the bathrooms." She's like, "I don't want men in the bathroom." And I was like, "Well. You know, without this, it would mean I would have to be in your bathroom". And she kind of like I blew her mind. She had she just like did not like it didn't compute, like what I was saying. Like, she just

couldn't just like, "wait, what?" And I'm like, so and I had to explain her like I she did not know she was talking to a trans person. I was like, "I was assigned female at birth. So technically, you know, without these protections, I would have to use the women's restroom. Would you feel comfortable with me in your bathroom?" You know, she's like, Oh, no. And then, like, you could just see, like, things can change in her mind. I was like "and, you know, even, like, thinking about trans women using the women's restroom, they're more likely to face violence than you ever would. You know, like, statistically, like, it's just not people facing violence in bathrooms are rarely cis straight people", you know, not saying it never happens, but like by and large, it's trans folks, you know, and so that really. Yeah, I don't know. I never forget that just made me think that just yeah. That conversation was just so vivid. Speaking of bathrooms. [00:32:56][263.5]

**Andrea:** [00:33:01] Could you go a little into picking out your name? [00:33:03][2.6]

**Benn:** [00:33:05] Yeah. So it was more utility than anything. Was like. I don't know. Benn. All the folks I'd met that had been named Ben previously, I liked, I was like, I don't know, it seems like cute and it's not that different from Bess. Because had been Bess for, you know the first 27, 28 years of my life, whatever. And so yeah. So I was on a I was on a road trip. I was, uh, so I had just gotten out to Portland, Oregon, and we were launching the, we're building the paid canvas team from marriage equality out there. And I was the canvas director out there, so I was overseeing all that, like hiring, recruiting, doing all the training stuff. And we were building up to this Pride Festival and then we were going into like a long weekend, which is like unheard of on a campaign. But this was like a longer term campaign was like a year and we were a year and a half out. We were working to be on the ballot 2015, nah, 2014 and this was summer 2013. And we had this long weekend. And my friend Molly happened to be in town for a national LGBTQ Task Force Leadership Summit thing. And so her being in town lined up with this like long weekend that I had and, um, we decided to take a road trip down to Eugene and down to see like craters, crater, lake and then spend some time in Eugene and then come back up. And as we were driving down I think she

Choosing the name  
Benn

Activism

was the first person --You know-- aside from my friend Allison, who I had like kind of broached the topic with before I moved out to Oregon. She was kind of the first person where I was like, I think I'm like ready to start coming out. And I'm like, sobbing and crying. I'm a hot mess and. She's like, "Well, what would you want me to call you?" And this is really actually thinking back to when I was telling Alison she was like "Oh, but don't you know, but don't ask me to call you something like Ben, because that would just be really hard", you know, with, you know, laughing in jest and in good nature. Right. And so then when I'm in the car having this conversation with Molly, like, I don't know why that just popped into my head. And it's like, "do you want me to call you something else?" And I was like. I don't even know how to have that conversation. It was just so, it felt so unnatural. Like, it just was so. I mean, even. I mean, you know, I knew Molly. I know Molly would be supportive for sure. I mean, she's a queer herself, has worked in the movement, like all of this stuff. This should not have been a hard person to come out to, but it was so hard. And I was driving and, like, crying and was like "Benn". I mean, even now I was like, recounting. It's, like, hard to even say, like Benn. But then she's like, "okay". So and then was like, "Well, do you want Ryan", who was my roommate and my boss on that campaign, he was the field director and also my roommate and we'd work together on other campaigns. But she was like "do you want Ryan to call you Benn?" And I was like, "I don't know. I don't know". And I said, "Well, do I'm going to help you have this conversation, Ryan?" I'm like, "Yeah", and Ryan's an amazing human. And I knew he'd be supportive again and all like, these are just amazingly wonderful, you know, beautiful queer people that, like, I know would be supportive. But for some reason, it was still so hard even to come out to them. And Ryan asked like, "Well, do you want me to call you Benn at home? And Besss at work." And like, I was like, "yes". And we tried that for like a week. And he was really, I have to give him credit, he was really, really good at it and he was really good at it. It kind of made my head spin. I was like, "I don't know how you're doing this because, like, I can't like, this is like, too much. Like, I can't". And I was like, "I just need to rip the Band-Aid off because this, like, in between shit, I can't do this double life thing. It's too hard, it'd be easier to rip the

Coming out socially

Band-Aid off". And so and again, I, you know, I'm working on marriage equality. I, like, built, hired and built this team. Like, it's a very queer like it's a very, you know, very queer, positive, very like supportive. Should not have been a scary thing. It was terrifying. And I then I think about like, what about people have to come out like banks like I can't even imagine. Like I just like, like it's got to be so hard because it was so hard for me in this, like, ultra queer space. It was so hard. And, and so then like, you know, of course, the team was amazing, super supportive and it was great. And I had even hired a trans man, I don't even know he was trans. And he, like, pulled me aside afterwards and we like it was really cute and great and amazing. And then after, you know, we had a really strong like kick off to the program. And so we went and we went to some like Orchard or something and they had, they were selling smoothies and I went to order. And now being Bess, prior to when I was Bess, nobody had heard-- it was a very uncommon name, I think. And people like never understood us and they're like "best?". "Beth?" Like I used to have to spell it for people like, "Oh, I'm Bess B e s s". And so I would always like, you know, reach my hand out and like spell my name as I said it. And so then as I'm like ordering a smoothie for the first time using Benn publicly in like a space like that, I just, without, just because of the habit of spelling Bess, I spelt Ben was like, "it's Benn, B e n n". And I threw an extra and I'm like without even thinking about it, I was like, "okay, it's done". So that's the super long-winded way as to why I'm Benn with two Ns.  
[00:38:55][349.9]

**Andrea:** [00:38:58] I love it. Um, could you. Do you. Sorry, I'm trying to think of how to word this. What do you think was so hard about coming out to your friends? Like, why do you think you were so afraid? [00:39:09][11.4]

**Benn:** [00:39:12] I don't know. I mean, it's just such a vulnerable thing. And it. Oh, man, that's such a good question. Why was it so hard? I almost think part of it was in coming out, it was also like not just my sharing this piece of myself, like the hardest thing of my life with, you know, coworkers, but also in theory, like the public. Right. Like. Like, just. It just felt very vulnerable. Like this was really hard. I felt

Fears about coming out

really vulnerable and I think a huge part of it, too truthfully, was saying it out loud. Coming out, was also part of my accepting and owning it, which was equally hard because to me, if that were true, if I were really owning my truth. Then that would mean I would want for sure --And for me-- like if I were to really accept and if I were to really go down this path, I knew what it meant. I knew that it would mean coming out to family. I knew that it would mean. I knew that I would want hormones. I knew that I would want top surgery. I knew, without a doubt in my mind for me that that was what I wanted. And I knew that this was the first step of that path and just knowing how treacherous that path can be, knowing that like I could lose friends, I could lose family. "Am I willing to lose friends and family? How much does this really mean to me? Am I willing to be vulnerable in this way?" You know, not just with like --you know, my colleagues and my friends--, but with strangers on doorsteps, with people at the grocery store, with, you know, all of that, everything that comes with that, you know. And it just was really daunting. It was just really daunting. It was like it's like it's like if you were going to do something like, I don't know, climb Everest -- and I mean, I've never climbed Everest, and that's a terrible example-- but like, I don't know, you're going to take on some huge, massive thing and you're just sitting at the bottom looking up, being like, Oh, shit, like, you know. And then you come back and it's like, okay, well, "we're going to just get to Camp one and then we're going to get to like Camp two, and then we're going to come back and we're" right. And it's like breaking it down to those steps is important, but it. Yeah, it just was scary. Yeah. And you know, I'm working on priors to that I had been working mostly --actually wait-- I had only worked on marriage and worked on, um, discrimination yet. And um, and I talked to, I had, you know, interface with hundreds of trans folks. I have heard every heartbreaking story you could imagine, you know. You know, like I've seen just the most, like, beautiful, strong, amazing people, most resilient people. And some of what they had to go through. And it's, I can't help, I couldn't help but ask myself, like, "am I strong enough to do it, too", you know? Yeah. And I ended up being super fortunate and, you know, I was able to bring my family along for the ride, but I don't know. Everyone's not so lucky. So definitely grateful.

Retrospectively, for sure. [00:43:37][264.9]

**Andrea:** [00:43:39] Yeah. So I read Arlene Stein's *Unbound*. And it seems like that experience was like a big part of your transition, having a sociologist, like, work with you. How did you first come into contact with her? [00:43:56][17.0]

**Benn:** [00:43:57] Yeah, so I actually had a go fund me, which might actually still be up. I don't know. I don't think I ever took it down. But I had a go fund me, uh, top surgery page up and Arlene was looking to do I think initially, if I remember right, she was looking for folks that were looking to have top surgery and wanted to explore why top surgery and want to explore like what in her mind was a "phenomenon", for lack of a better term. But, um, and so she found my fundraising site for my top surgery and was like, "Hey, I'm a sociologist. I'm going to be profiling like 25 to 50 trans folks getting top surgeries. Would you mind if I tag along?" You know, and I talked to my folks about it because I was going to my folks are going to be with me for that whole experience. They were going to because my I went to a top surgeon down in South Florida, Dr. Germany. At the time, there were only like two folks that were like, that's all that they did, all top surgeries. And it seemed like at that time, like Dr. Martin was like the best. And I was like, "I got one body I want the best" like, you know? And so I was like, whatever. And also he was the most he was the cheaper of the two. Also, I think my surgery was like 7200, and I think the other doctor was going to be like 12 K or something. So that was also part of that equation as well, because I didn't have health insurance at the time and the surgery was completely out of pocket because your money doesn't. Or at that time he might. Now, I don't know. But at that time he didn't have health insurance anyway, so it didn't really matter. But so I talked to my folks. I was like, "Hey, this sociologist reached out". I also did some like poking of like just trying to learn a little more about her to make sure, like, she was, like, legit. And my mom was like, "you know, when you came out. There were no good resources for us", which was true. Like there was no really, you know, there was nothing I could point her to that was like, you know, read this or to help you understand. And she's like, "if we can help even one other parent", she's like, "to me, that's worth

Getting top surgery



it". And since, you know, since the book has come out, you know, I've talked to I've kept in touch with Arleen. And one of the things she said was that when she was writing the book, she was writing it like. To my parents like. To my mom. Like. As if, like, she was like the person she and her mind was like. You know. So anyway, there's an interesting tidbit, but. So, yeah, that's how Arlene found me. And then I told Arlene, sure, like we're in, count us in and because I agree like, you know, also having by that time, I had done nondiscrimination campaigns. I've done all this work on marriage campaigns. I had done a lot of like trans 1 to 1 trainings for schools and nonprofits and like had really learned how to kind of educate others and felt I was like, "if my parents are cool that like I feel great about it for the same reasons". So I decided to do it. And originally, like when Arlene first approached us, it was like, "Oh yeah, it could just be one of like 25 or 50 folks like, you know". And then as we got to know Arlene and Arlene got to know us, some months later, she was like, "How do you feel about being like the main story?" It's like, "Oh shit. Okay, sure, we've come this far". But part of I think what was beneficial to me in having so Arleen actually flew down for the surgery. She was there in South Florida with us that whole week because of the way that the surgery set up is you do your pre-op consultation surgery the next day and then the end of the week you go back, they take all your drains out and make sure everything's good and kosher and then you're on your merry way. So it's like a week that you're there kind of recovering and then in and out, all that stuff. So I was there for that whole week and and she was there at the surgeries. She was there for every step of the way. And, but the thing I remember the most was on the first day at that pre-op consultation, right afterwards, we went out for lunch at Outback, which was like right in that same plaza. It's like this little the surgeon's office was like in this little strip mall, but really strange. But anyway. And then the cross was like, that was Outback. And so we were having lunch and Arlene was just asking us, like, you know, in retrospect, like just really thoughtful questions about their experience, my experience, like how we got there. And like I said, now, both my and my both my parents are Democrats now. And my mom has since converted to becoming Unitarian Universalist from being Catholic, but

still, you know, raised in the Republican Catholic household. We didn't talk about feelings a lot, you know, like we don't talk about much of anything. It was like, "okay, we're just gonna sweep that under the rug". So there were a lot of, like, really thoughtful conversations that I don't think would have ever happened if it wasn't for Arlene. And Arlene also went and interviewed kind of all my friends and family and, you know, and being able to hear their perspectives, too, on what their experience was, I mean. That's a gift I don't think I would have gotten otherwise. You know, so I feel really grateful and honored for sure to have crossed paths. Arlene and to have had that experience. [00:50:04][367.4]

**Andrea:** [00:50:08] Did you have any fears with becoming the main person in that book?  
[00:50:12][4.0]

**Benn:** [00:50:13] I mean, I don't know. Maybe I'm just a paranoid person, but I'm like some like. Nut job. gonna, you know, try to hunt me down and you know what I mean? Like, I just. I don't know. I always. I don't know. Maybe it's the times we're living in. I don't know. I just always am like, "oh! Someone's out to get me", you know, I, I know it's crazy, but, you know, and that's why I had Arlene change my name for the book, though, anybody who actually knows me would read the book and be like, "Hmm, I think I know that person", because while she changed my last name and dropped one of the Ns in Benn. Yeah. I don't know how many people, yeah because like oh going to USM and surfs and is a trans guy and like I don't know how many people fit that description at that period in time with like all of the yeah. Like if you knew me and you read the book, you'd be like, Oh yeah, like I know who that is. But yeah, but definitely have my name changed for that reason. And especially, it was right after the 2016 election cycle where Arlene was like, we really got to make a decision about like because I was struggling with whether or not to use my real name because I was like, "well, if I use my real name, then like maybe I can like be a resource for folks and maybe I can continue to like educate and whatever," you know, if that's meaningful in any way. And then I was like, You know what? "I can do that. And people do not need to know who I am or where I live", you know? And so after the 2016 cycle, I was like, "we got to change

it. Like, I don't feel comfortable. I don't feel safe having my legal name out there" and because we changed the name, even the publisher flew me down to New York to do, like, a speaking series of, like, a few different radio shows and whatever. We couldn't. One of you had to, like, go through security. And they had my name change for everything. Like they had, like Ben Shepherd for everything. And I, they wouldn't let us in to Sirius XM because and Arlene had to, like, pull out her I.D. and show that she is the author of the book and, like, held the book out and then was like and then showed like the name Ben Shepherd in the book and was like, "this is Ben Shephard! Like his I like we changed" just like it was this whole thing. So even yeah, even then all of the PR stuff I used stuck with the pseudonym there. But yeah. [00:52:58][164.6]

**Andrea:** [00:53:02] What was it like right after getting top surgery? [00:53:05][2.1]

**Benn:** [00:53:08] I mean, painful, but good. I mean, I don't know. I was like. I mean, I was so super stoked. Also my memory is pretty terrible, which is also why I'm grateful for the book because it like, you know, documents like the whole thing for me. But yeah, I don't know. I was super like. You know, it also was so prior to the week before my surgery, this is actually kind of funny, I had I was down in Miami for a trans conference and actually USM paid for and I took like six or seven other students down to it. It was National LGBTQ Task Force who I'd worked with in the past on different campaigns. And one of my buddies there was part of the organizing committee and was like, "Hey, like, you should come". And I was like, "Oh, I can't afford to go". But we worked with Sarah Holmes and it was amazing. And she advocated really hard for us to for the school to pay for a bus, but not a bus, a van and a hotel room for us down there and like for us to pay like, like USM covered the cost, the whole thing was amazing. And my buddy Justin, who was the organizer from National Task Force, he was having top surgery, I think like a month later and, and myself and this like van load of folks went down and we were down on South Beach and and this was like two weeks before my top surgery. And it was like myself and just like two other friends were down on. It was like after hours, like the cops were like, "you know, the beaches closed", and

Right after top surgery

we were like, "Oh, but we're from Maine. It's our last night can we just, like, touch the water?", like, whatever. Just being really ridiculous. And they let us do it, which was which we didn't expect. And, and they, like, went on their way. And then we just like, wait, we like stripped down. We were skinny dipping. And I just remember, just like that feeling of, like, the air on my body and. I don't know it was just such a like. It felt like this, like beautiful moment of like. you know, and I was there with one of my buddies who would in time end up actually getting top surgery themselves. But it was just this really, like, insane experience. It's almost like this, like letting go and, like, saying goodbye to like this, like piece of my body that's been attached to me for too long and it was really beautiful. And then, you know, to be back down in South Florida kind of like again and then to have that gone, just felt. I don't know. It was just was amazing. It just felt really good, you know? And I mean, the week of that was like, you know, you're on a lof of drugs and like you can't do a whole lot, you know, but. Yeah. I remember when he, like, took the bandages off. I was like, "Holy shit, that's so cool". Like, yeah, this is the coolest. That's pretty awesome. And then coming home and. You know, it was very celebratory. You know, it was like at that point, it's like all the hard stuff was done. You know, the hardest thing for me was coming out socially. That was the hardest thing. And, you know, that was the hardest thing. And. And took a lot of time and it took people a lot of time to kind of get there. You know. But. Yeah. So it was. It was like the cherry on top, for sure. Very liberating.

[00:57:13][245.4]

**Andrea:** [00:57:15] That does sound really liberating. So you've mentioned a few times the activism that you've done. Could you talk about the first form of activism you've done?

[00:57:26][10.6]

**Benn:** [00:57:28] Yeah. I mean, I think. I haven't always been involved. I think in high school I tried to start a SAVE chapter Students Against Violence Everywhere. It was right after Columbine happened, because I remember thinking like, should have that happen there actually happened in our school because like our schools were almost like identical in demographics and size and everything.

First forms of  
activism

I guess like, wow, you know, this could happen there totally happened here. And it didn't really, you know, struggled with that. I didn't know what I was doing. It didn't really take off, wasn't really successful. And then I didn't really, you know, was I from like volunteering with different organizations? I didn't do a lot until 2012. I received a phone call, a volunteer recruitment phone call from the marriage campaign that "was like, Hey, will you come phone bank?" I'm like, "What is phone banking like? What is this phone bank you speak of?" And I had no idea, but I had recently this was May of 2012. Um, I was like recently single and like I, I had been with my first kind of girlfriend and that ended December of 2011. So I was like single living in downtown Portland. I'm like, "Yeah, I should be like, Yes. I have no idea what this phone big thing is that you're talking about, but it's for marriage equality. So like sign me up". Because I also remember when I was living in Florida and the state of Maine, when we lost marriage at the ballot, in 2009. And I just, you know, I wasn't out then. It was so painful and I had so much faith in the people of Maine that they would do the right thing. And they didn't. And it just. It was terrible. And I was like, I can't. That can't happen again. And so they were like, It's from marriage clinic. Sure. So I went as far farm. I had no idea what to expect. I didn't even know. I literally was picturing, like, a vault full of phones because I'm like a bank. I just couldn't wrap. My brain was like, I don't understand, but whatever, I'm gonna show up. So I went and it ended up being a persuasion phone bank. So it was calling voters and, and, and learning about how to move a voter to be more supportive of marriage. So it was like we were calling people that were either undecided or soft supporters and trying to like listen to what their concerns are and like help move them on their journey. And I think I only had like two or three conversations that night, but I left feeling totally like lit up. Like, I just felt like holy bananas like. I don't know. It just. I don't know. There was something really -excuse me- There was something was really invigorating about it. To like connect with this total stranger. And it was amazing what total strangers would share with you. You know, when you're having this, like, super open, honest dialog, um, it was, it was wild. And, and then I remember at the end of the phone bank,

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Campaign

the lead organizer, Mona Wang, came up to me and was like, So when are you come back? And I was like, uh, I was like, I know this was awesome. And I don't know, like, I was like, "my schedule was kind of crazy" it was like, I just couldn't figure out, she's like, "why don't, like, why don't we grab coffee and talk about it?" And I was like, "okay, great, let's do that". And Mona then like in time became the regional field director for the Portland office and she's amazing like. Still a good friend to this day. Like, love her to pieces. She taught me like her, Molly, Justin taught me, like, everything that I know about organizing. And, yeah, I went to that one on one with Mona, and she was like, you know, like, "how can we get you plugged in in a meaningful way?" And she kind of recommitted me to more volunteer shifts. And then before I knew it, I was volunteering full time, and then I was running all the in-person volunteer recruitment actions for the Portland area. And then the campaign hired me to be a lead field organizer up in Lewiston. And then and then I was like, "okay". And then and then, you know, the campaign ended and we won. And it was just amazing and like, it's incredible. Then I'm okay. I'm done. And then? Then there's this campaign in Rhode Island. Everyone's like, "Oh, you should come. You should come". And I'm like, "Eh I don't know. Like, I don't know". And but and then eventually I did. And so then I. And then in Rhode Island, I was the deputy campaigns director working under Ryan, who would become my roommate and Boston, Oregon. And that was Ryan was such a incredible campaign because. So in Maine, my role was as an organizer, it's like full time, like you eat, I mean, and it's it's really kind of like it also feels like it was like this like magical queer community where it's like these people that I'm organizing with, they are like my friends, my family, my coworkers, and it's and we just do everything together. And that was so awesome and it is so awesome until it's not right. You know, I still love all of that. Like, I have no, you know, oh, this is amazing. But that's what organizing was is it was just go, go, go, go, go like full time. And there'd be these just like beautiful moment, like just beautiful moments where you just break out into song or, um, you know, can we go climbing in the know that, like, just, like, kind of crazy? I know I'm kind of all over the place, but it just I cannot. The campaign in Maine was really a unicorn. And I remember while on that

campaign and it being my first one, everyone saying that and I just didn't quite get what that meant. I didn't understand it until I went and worked on other campaigns. And I mean, I think, yeah, it was just really unique. The cool thing about Rhode Island and my role in Rhode Island was as a deputy canvas director, my, hour, you know, it was really like supporting the canvas team in those hours. They're pretty set. It's a pretty it's like 35 hours a week and that's it, right? So I had a lot of free time and so I would come in and like volunteer anyway and just hang out with the team anyway because they were all my friends from Maine and, and they're my queer family, you know. And, but what was really cool is I felt like I got to learn a lot. I mean, I learned a ton in Maine on the organizing side and paid canvas programs are so different. Like I think sometimes people think of canvassing and organizing as the same thing and they're not like a paid canvass team so different. And so I really got to just like I would go in and I would just hang out with Ryan and I would like learn about like paid canvas programs and learn about like the data and how to build spreadsheets and how to do all this, like, kind of some of those other bits and. And I got to really document the Rhode Island campaign. Like I said, my prior life I was a photographer and of all the campaigns I've been on, the only campaign I have a ton of photos from was Rhode Island because I had the time to do it. And so I have a lot of really great images from like some of the testimony in the hearings, and that was a legislative campaign. But then from Rhode Island, it was Oregon, New Jersey, Indiana, super burnt out, like done thrown in the towel. Have to hit the pause button on life somehow. Couldn't figure out how to do it. I figured I'd go back to school. So I went to Goddard College that spring of 2014. And the way that Goddard works is you're on campus for a week and then you're, like, remote the rest of the semester and. I did get roped into a couple of campaigns, a couple of nondiscrimination campaigns that were actually really rewarding. One was a volunteer vacation gig in Utah for like a few weeks, and the other was also, I think like three weeks. But that one was paid in Idaho. And that one really stands out. I actually have that one tattooed on my leg because. That campaign in Pocatello. It was a nondiscrimination ordinance and. When I got on the ground, they only have like two or three

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volunteers. And the lead organizer was this like white, cis straight guy that was trying to tell me that people don't volunteer in Pocatello. And I was like, "Hmm, okay, sure. All right". And then "can I try? Like, do you mind if I try, like, just do some recruitment and try?" and he's, like, "sure but it's not going to work", like, okay. Sure. And we ended up on Election Day, I think we had like we had like over 40 I think volunteer shifts worked and we won that campaign by I think they were like 13,000 votes cast. And I think we won it by the initial count was 85 votes and they did a recount and it would be like 54 votes. So it was every single volunteer shift really mattered. And then it stands out. The most to me was this trans woman who got involved on that campaign who like refused to work with the campaign because the campaign only wanted her to knock doors and or do phones. Because one of the things that we know is that people are more likely to support trans folks and they know trans people. So there's this like push to put trans people on the front lines, which if you're down, great. If you're not, you shouldn't be doing that. Like, right. Like safe. Like people should feel safe and feel good first. And so they were pressuring her and she didn't want to do it. So it made sense that she didn't wanna be involved that way. And I met up with her and was like, "hey, like what would feel good to you?" and she's like, "well. Can I help with, like, logistics?" I was like, "Sure you can. Would love that help, you know?" And she ended up running logistics for almost every single action. She started training some of the actions, like training people how to go out on doors, even though she had never been on doors herself and come the end of the campaign. So then we're sitting there watching the vote come in and she's just starts like crying when we find out that we won and. And she was like "one, I didn't think this city cared enough about me to support me like I didn't think we would win". She was like, "I just don't you know, my communities never supported me. Like, I've never felt supported", which is, like, heartbreaking. And so she was just so moved that like we were able to pass this ordinance and two she was like, "I did things I didn't know I could do". You know, and that was just so cool. And I'll just that campaign has a special place in my heart for sure. And then school full time for me. And then I got back and a little bit of organizing work locally here in Maine after being home, worked

ordinance campaign



on ranked choice voting and background checks for guns in 2016. And ranked choice won and background checks lost but. Yeah. And then just did a bunch of, like, consulting work, um, like trans ally trainings and all that kind of fun stuff. Oh and then I ran Equality Maine's canvas program a few summer for a few summers too did that for a little bit but yeah it'll have a special place in my heart forever for sure. It's good. It's important work. It's important work. It's also not sustainable. Unfortunately. Are long hours. Long, long hours. Long days. [01:09:53][745.4]

**Andrea:** [01:10:01] So what were you. Let me just clarify. Where are you working on campaigns while going to school. Or did you take a break?  
[01:10:09][8.0]

**Benn:** [01:10:10] Ha! So, yeah. So those two campaigns, Utah and Idaho, I think they were about a month apart, but they were both in that spring semester as a Goddard. But the way Goddard worked, I was like, Oh, not a problem, because you like build your own curriculum. And actually the curriculum that I built for myself was like I wanted to really unpack burnout. I really wanted to study burnout. And so one of my so you, like, decide, like, what is it you want to learn about you create your own curriculum that week that you're on campus with an advisor and then you go out into the world and then you're supposed to write, you know, it's essentially kind of like almost like a thesis over the course of the semester that you're like then deliver the end of the semester in your advisor gives you just like a bunch of feedback, which is kind of a really cool way to learn. But so I was in school while I was in Utah and Idaho, and then I and then I. And then I transferred to USM the fall of 2014. And I was a student spring of 2015, and it was June of that summer that I got hired as the statewide field director for the Red Cross voting effort. Wrote the field plan for ranked choice voting. Stayed on that campaign until May of the following year. And I just was there was. I was struggling with some of the national organizational leadership, and I chose to step away. But. I did my internship, my "internship" at USM, uh, as a field director. So I technically was enrolled, I think, for like. I think I took like a class and I took a leadership. I think I took an online leadership class and did

Colledge life

the "internship". I'm air quoting "internship" because to me it was like it. Yeah. I don't know. I was hired anyway. I was doing the job anyway. But it counted. And I failed the leadership class. I did do great on the internship when I got all the credits for that, so that was good. And then I was like, This is too much. So then I took that spring semester off and I don't think I did. I didn't take any classes the rest of 2016, and I think I came back 2017. I think I'm pretty sure, yeah. And then I started chipping away at it again in 2017. That feels right. Yeah. Yeah. So I started back in school 2014, and it wasn't until 2020 that I actually graduated. I guess it took six years to do what should have only taken two. But, you know, it happens. [01:13:28][197.9]

**Andrea:** [01:13:30] I'm on that path too so, like there's no shame in it. I read that you were an entrepreneur working on in the way. Oh, sorry. Oh, my God. Wakeboard industry. Could you tell me a little more about that? [01:13:44][13.5]

**Benn:** [01:13:44] Yeah. So I was in love with wakeboarding. It was my greatest passion. And I was a photographer. Like I. I got into photography because I want work in the wakeboarding industry, and that kind of seemed like that was a pathway that would make sense for me and so I had been going down to Florida and like trying to network and trying to meet some of the pro athletes and trying to like shoot the guys as much as I could. And then while also. So that time that was two. So I graduate high school 2003 and went to Lynn University down in Boca Raton, Florida. And. While I was there, I spent the majority of my time, like all over the state of Florida, like shooting these different athletes and trying to do like these interviews and trying to like write articles and get published in these different online publications, magazines and stuff. And, and it started to like, I started like making connections and like, things started to work out was like, Oh, this is cool. And then, and then I started getting jobs that were like a little over my head, and I was like, "Oh, I don't technically know how to do. I'm going to try". And I'm like, "Oh, it may or may not work out". And I ended up going to a trade school for photography Hallmark Institute of photographers ten-month program in western Massachusetts. I did that, and then when I

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graduated, I started working at Hunt's photo and video in South Portland. Like saving money to move back down to Florida to like really do that really do photo full time and I met now Megan Keller was Megan Kerry there at Hunt's who also happened to be the first woman I admitted to myself I was attracted to. And she was trying to get down to Orlando because her boyfriend at the time was down there. And I was trying to get down to Orlando because that's where the hub of the Wakeboard scene was. She was a wedding and portrait photographer, and I was more of a commercial editorial photographer and we were like, "We should start a business together in Orlando". So after only knowing each other for like three months, we were like, "Yes, this is what we're going to do". And so we moved down January of 2008. And I had done my SO while I was at Hallmark, they have this kind of like an internship thing where like you have to intern with another photographer. And we had a spring break that was a week long. And I had my favorite photographer of all time, Josh Letchworth, like my hero, still one of my heroes that I was like, "Oh man, if I could, like, if I could, like follow him, even for a day, I would be out of my mind, excited". Like I had been looking at this guy's photos in Wakeboarding magazine since I was, like, 13. Like, I just the sky was the man. Him, and Joey Meddock like, if I could just, like, meet those guys, I would be so stoked. And. And so I had. So I emailed Josh and was like "I got this internship for school that would be honored to, like, you know, assist you, whatever, even just for a day, like, whatever". Never heard back from Josh. I sent the same email to Joey and Josh and Joy were working together on a magazine at the time and and Joy was like, "Sure, like we're trying to launch this magazine". And yeah, I was like, "sweet". So I got like the cheapest flight to Orlando, rented a car, stayed at my friend's mom's house, literally bought a loaf of bread and a thing of peanut butter. That's all I ate all week except for lunch that Joey bought me one day at Chipotle. And and in that time, he I got to I actually got to meet Josh, and I, like, tripped over myself. I was, like, super excited. And Josh was like. I don't know, impressed enough to say, like, "if you're ever down here, like, let me know. I might have a job for you". And I was like, "Oh, really?" So when Meghan and I decided that we were going to move down there, I like reached out to Josh was like "so still like up for

hiring me?" And he did. So we hired and so I got to work underneath Josh And then at that same time, Meghan and I were building our own business where I was doing wake photography, selling that, selling images to like wakeboarding magazines and different wakeboarding brands. And then she was doing the wedding portrait type of stuff. And what we kept running into at the end of the day, fast forward like a couple of years, we, we're just really struggling financially. Like our water got shut off and it was just it was really tough. And I remember asking Josh was like, "did you guys ever like did you ever have a hard time?" Because I would have brands that, you know, we had them sign contracts and like send invoices and like they just wouldn't pay them. Like we just would not get paid. I was like, "Did you ever run into this?" And he was like, "Yeah, not as bad as you guys have though. Like, not even close". I'm like, "okay". And just not understanding, like, why we're, like, slamming our heads against a wall. And, you know, Meg's sister offered her free room and board in Philly, and Meg's like, I kind of can't pass it up. I was like, I don't blame you. And she was like, "Are you going to stay or are you going to go?" And I'm like, I, you know, and I didn't know. And then eventually, like, "I'm going to go". And one of the deciding things for me was one of the last shoots we did was with a Cyrus Shoes women's team, and it was this all women's shoot. And one of the women who's one of the like she was one of the top pro wake boarders at the time, she goes "oh, it's so different being photographed by women". And I immediately got all defensive and I'm like, "like, what do you mean? Like, whereas there's the guys like, right?" Like I'm all like, "what do you mean? Like, it's so different being photographed by women", you know, and she's like "No no no" like she's like "I've just never been asked how I want to be photographed". And I was like. "Oh". You know, like, she's like. "Yeah", she's like, "we're always just told, like, in our bikinis and on the back of a boat". I was like, "oh", you know? And like, in that moment, it just was so clear, like. It's like, yeah, like I like "I'm going home". Like, you know what I mean? Like, this isn't this. This industry is not for me, you know? Um, and I don't even, you know, I was myself was just so blind to the blatant, like sexism and all of that. I mean, and myself I even had, you know, like I remember one of the guys, one of the pro athletes,

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wakeboarding  
industry

Sean Murray. We were in the boat one day and, you know, telling these like riddles and jokes or whatever. And he goes and he tells us riddle about, you know, a dad and you may have heard this like a down a son get in a car accident and they both go to the hospital and mom comes out or the doctor comes in and says, I can't operate. That's my son, who's the doctor? And I'm all like, it's a it's a gay dad. Like, it's the it's like a extended like he's like it's his mom. Like, "you are so sexist". And I was like, "holy shit". Like, you know, like I just internalized so much of that stuff and I think I didn't even know it. And yeah, you know, and we even had other women that were like, wow, you know, "no other like women photographers have made it as far in this industry as you to have". And we're like, well, we were oblivious, you know, like I at least I was I was totally oblivious to it and. Yeah. It just wasn't. I think that I wanted to support it more, I guess. Yeah. But those were formative years for sure. How are we doing on time? Sorry, I'm rambling. [01:21:27][463.0]

**Andrea:** [01:21:28] No, it's okay. So we are coming down to, like. [01:21:30][2.4]

**Benn:** [01:21:31] Yeah. [01:21:31][0.0]

**Andrea:** [01:21:32] Getting close to it. Is there anything you want to touch on? We do have a little bit more time. [01:21:37][4.9]

**Benn:** [01:21:41] I mean, I guess really like the only other thing would just be that. How. And I guess maybe maybe it's appropriate that we're talking about the industry now because just how real that like. I mean, I know it sounds so silly to even say it, but I just like how real sexism is, you know, and, like, misogyny and all of that. Like, I just. You know, especially after transitioning like people who I've worked with prior to like I just people just treat you like people treat men differently like and they don't even know that they're doing it, you know, like, I don't know. And that's been something that I've had to work really hard at because coming from me, an entrepreneur as a woman and having to fight to be heard, to have to like battle on the phone with like companies to pay their invoices so that we could literally turn our water back on to like have to advocate so hard just to be heard and to like

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have my work valued as equal to, like, men's work and then to now. Like people just default to like, "Oh, well, what do you think about?" I'm like, I don't know. How about any of the other folks at the table that probably have way better ideas than I do". You know, so, like, I've had to really work hard after having to, like, fight so hard to be heard, to be like the without having to be the loudest voice in the room, really having to retrain myself to dial that back and like, make space for other folks because I know how hard it is to fight to be heard, you know? Um. Yeah. [01:23:29][108.4]

**Andrea:** [01:23:33] You. You must have like a really interesting, like, perspective on it, having been experiencing both. [01:23:40][6.4]

**Benn:** [01:23:42] Oh, for sure. I mean, and even just like, you know, there's there's even just some like, cultural things that are just kind of mind boggling. Like, I've had men I don't even know, like, come up and, like, elbow me and be like "Hah Hah hah", like, make like, jokes about women. And I'm like, "what? Like, no, like, that's not funny. And, like, who are you? Like, what? Like what is happening right now?" You know? Um. You know. It's jarring. For sure. For sure. Yeah. But all I can say is it's real. that shit's real. Yeah. And I think even back then, I think maybe it was denial. I don't know. It was like I didn't want to see it. It was like I didn't want to. It's like I never even even with all the shit we were going through, I never at any point was like, "Oh, we're going through this because we're women". Like, I just never that never that never entered my mind until that shoot. Where one of the athletes was like, it's so different being photographed by women where it was like called out like that. And I was like, Why like I don't understand. And then, you know, I just yeah, it was definitely an awakening moment for sure. Like a lot of Florida was awakening for me. Yeah. Yeah. [01:25:20][97.7]

**Andrea:** [01:25:21] Okay. [01:25:21][0.0]

**Benn:** [01:25:22] That's all I got. [01:25:22][0.4]

**Andrea:** [01:25:23] All right. Well, thank you so much for coming in and talking. Yeah. Yeah. [01:25:27][4.4]

**Benn:** [01:25:28] Hey. Yeah. Any other questions?  
[01:25:30][2.0]

**Andrea:** [01:25:33] I think we covered it really  
well. [01:25:34][1.5]

**Benn:** [01:25:36] Cool. [01:25:36][0.0]

**Andrea:** [01:25:36] All right. [01:25:36][0.1]

**Benn:** [01:25:37] Sweet. [01:25:37][0.0]

[4992.5]