

# Erica Barz

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## SUMMARY KEYWORDS

lgbtq, chuckles, iowa, people, community, events, spaces, lesbian, campus, des moines, high school, big, friends, pride, work, met, group, butch, feel, pflag

## SPEAKERS

Erica Barz, Rylee Dolezal

- 
- R** Rylee Dolezal 00:02  
Hello, my name is Rylee Dolezal and I will be having a conversation with:
- E** Erica Barz 00:07  
um, my name is Erica Barz. Pronouns are she/her/hers.
- R** Rylee Dolezal 00:12  
for LGBT Oral Histories of Central Iowa, a project of Grinnell College. This is an oral history project centered on the experiences of LGBT identified people in Iowa. It is May 24, 2020, and this is being recorded over Zoom due to COVID-19. Alright, so could you introduce yourself, please?
- E** Erica Barz 00:33  
Sure. Um, hi, I'm Erica Barz. My pronouns are she/her/hers. I currently live in Des Moines, Iowa, and have lived here for about, trying to do math here, but about five, five or six years now. I'm originally from Laporte City, Iowa, which is a small rural town in Northeast Iowa. Just 10 or 15 miles south of Waterloo. I currently work as a community engagement associate at the ACLU of Iowa. And before that, I was a communications and grants coordinator at One Iowa for about four and a half years. And that organization is a

statewide LGBTQ advocacy organization.

R

Rylee Dolezal 01:25

All right, and how's your weekend so far?

E

Erica Barz 01:27

Um [laughs], you know, it is it's, it's a little, I mean, I feel like all of the weeks are kind of blending together a little bit. What with the COVID-19 outbreak, like you mentioned before, we're doing this interview through Zoom, because we are not doing an in-person in order to preserve the health and safety of all involved. And I don't know it's pretty my, my week has been good. Um, I think my fiance and I have adjusted. We're both working from home and are doing, have sort of fallen into a rhythm, have kind of designated the guest bedroom as our official apartment conference room. So if either of us have meetings or phone calls, we go in there.

E

Erica Barz 02:15

Um, but yeah, it's just, it's honestly really hard to articulate everything that I'm feeling now, like I don't, just yesterday, I believe the New York Times released their, um, their front page for today's paper, which lists the names and a short like one sentence obituary for 1000 of the nearly 100,000 people that have died from Coronavirus so far in the United States. And it's like it's one thing to hear those kinds of numbers and not really be able to visualize it. But um, that I feel like that, that front page does, it's a really powerful illustration of just how awful this virus has impacted so many people and especially, like we we know that it's impacting Black and Latinx and low-income folks who don't have the option to work from home more than anyone else. And so it's, I feel really lucky to be in the position that I'm in, but also know that it's, it's not just luck, I have a lot of white privilege and class privilege and a whole other set of met many things in my life that have created a situation where I can be for the most part safe, well, as long as I take certain precautions, so it is, that is that is part of what I'm feeling right now [laughs].

R

Rylee Dolezal 04:03

Um, okay, and then we'll kind of start in childhood. So you said that you grew up in LaPorte, right?

E Erica Barz 04:11  
Mhm.

R Rylee Dolezal 04:11  
How was that for you?

E Erica Barz 04:14  
Um, it was overall pretty good. I think in terms, like especially, relatively speaking to a lot of other LGBTQ folks I know who grew up in rural areas of the state, and even relatively speaking quite good in comparison with people who even went to the same school as me. I know when I sort of figured out that I was a lesbian in, when I was about 16. So in high school. And it was difficult for me to accept initially, just because I had grown up, like didn't necessarily, my family is Lutheran and specifically for the early part of my childhood, attended a Missouri Synod Lutheran congregation out of Waterloo. And Missouri Synod is kind of the more, the more conservative branch of the Lutheran Church. And the church we went to specifically like didn't didn't really explicitly say anything bad about LGBTQ people, at least not that I was aware of [chuckles]. But it was never something that was like, brought up and like, accepted either. So I just remember when I sort of initially started figuring out that okay, maybe I am not straight.

E Erica Barz 05:53  
Just started doing the, I definitely questioned whether or not I would be, I was still right with God, essentially. And that was a lot for a 16 year old to be grappling with [laughs]. Definitely, um, and I eventually, like I now identify as agnostic. I that sort of, I think sparked a deeper dive for me in terms of like, what my religious life would look like going forward and if I would, if that would be a better part of my life, but it definitely, like it was tricky, but I eventually came to accept myself after.

E Erica Barz 06:42  
I mean, honestly, the internet [laughs] was such an important tool for me and I think it's such an important tool for a lot of LGBTQ youth who don't, who just don't see LGBT, out LGBTQ people in their communities and don't really have any role models to model off of or just to even like see that like, being LGBTQ is an okay thing to be. Um, and so definitely the internet, websites like After Ellen [laughs], and like I was an avid TV watcher. I still am to some extent but even more so then, so, and particularly got into TV shows that were

specifically, specifically talking about and representing LGBTQ women mostly. So just watching those TV shows and watching people online who are themselves LGBTQ talking about those TV shows [chuckles] and just seeing that people, people maybe not necessarily in LaPorte City, Iowa, but people out there in the world somewhere where living their lives and like they were, they were doing okay. And that showed me that I could I could be okay too. And I, when I did eventually get to the point where I was coming out to friends, like, everyone was really supportive. And when I did come out to my parents, initially coming out to my mom after she kind of explicitly just asked me straight up. Like mom's always know [laughs]. They always know. And I just didn't lie to her [chuckles]. And it was a little, I think it was, it was difficult for her to and my family to accept, not because they thought that there was something wrong with me, but just because they thought that it would make my life harder.

E

Erica Barz 06:42

Which I mean like the some of the responses, like still, still kind of felt personal and it took a little, it took about a year or so for things to sort of level out and for us to be able to sort of reach an equilibrium in our relationship, I would say [chuckles], and sort of get back to feeling as close as we had before. But now, I mean, my family is super supportive. They love me. They love my fiance. And we, like my mom in the midst of all of this, in the midst of the COVID-19 outbreak has started arranging Family, Family Feud, Zooms. So we'll get all like me and my sisters and my parents and sort of our extended family with aunts and uncles and cousins will all pop on a group Zoom. And my mom will have a list created, a list of Family Feud questions and we'll go through those and it's, it's it's really a fun way to stay connected and it's something that I'm just really fortunate and happy that I'm still able to have that kind of family connection in my life. Because I know that's not the case for everybody.

R

Rylee Dolezal 10:15

And then you were talking about, like being an avid TV watcher. Do you remember what some of those TV shows were?

E

Erica Barz 10:24

Yes [chuckles]. So, Buffy the Vampire Slayer was kind of the big one, I think the the OG, if you will. I've, one of my most vivid memories from high school - my, um, my family's house was sort of set up where we had a TV room in the basement and that's where we would watch most of our TV. And so I just remember sort of like flicking through channels, as one does [chuckles]. When, during the time when people still have cable, and just flipping

through channels and just there was an episode of Buffy the Vampire Slayer on where, Willow and Tara are like the two lesbian characters in that show, and they were clearly being affectionate with each other in a not-straight-friends type of way. Um, and I just like paused and was like, I am going to watch more of this [laughs]. And then just kept, just watched that episode and that was, I mean it's kind of a bummer because I don't want to, I mean Buffy the Vampire Slayer is like, over 20 years old, but I will still not spoil anything, but it was definitely an episode that I wouldn't, was not a good one to have watched before you watch the rest of the show. It was like a particular episode in season six. Um, but it was definitely a turning point for me in terms of life. This, it's like they're portraying this as something that is okay. And I feel these things and maybe I can be okay too. And so that was sort of the jumping off point for getting into other TV shows. So like other, other shows, I've watched Skins, Pretty Little Liars. Back from the very beginning, that show lasted so long [chuckles]. And those are sort of the main three and it's sort of, like sort of expanded out into like, comic books and different things as I got older but yeah.

R

Rylee Dolezal 12:45

What were you like as a kid?

E

Erica Barz 12:48

Um, I was a weird kid. Not gonna lie. I was definitely a goody two shoes. Got almost Poindextery type of kid, like I had the glasses and when I was in kindergarten, I had an astigmatism that was such that they, it was making my left eye lazy. And so in order to correct it, they put an eyepatch over my right eye. And then I had to wear glasses on top of the eyepatch. So that was a look [laughs]. I got to have all through kindergarten and I think part of first grade.

E

Erica Barz 13:33

But I was definitely, definitely a kid who followed the rules and was I mean, my mom was a librarian for my elementary school at the time. And so all of the kids knew who my mom was, and I, there were a bunch of teachers who were like, pretty good friends with my mom and still are. And so it was like these people are my mom's friends [chuckles]. And I am like really looking up to them. And I just really enjoyed school and was good at school. And as I got older, was involved in a ton of extracurricular activities, which is something that I have, as I like, as an adult, and looking at different schools of different sizes around the state, it's like very interesting to me, because I went to like a smaller school where my graduating class was a little less than 100 people. And in order for all of the extracurricular clubs to like, have enough students to actually like continue and do what they wanted to

do, they had to all work around each other and they needed students to be involved in multiple things. And so which, as I, as I have come to understand is not necessarily a typical experience for people who go to larger high schools like you, you specialize a lot quicker. Whereas with, with my school, it was like, we were encouraged to do everything and they kind of needed us to do everything in order to survive. So I played three sports, I was in all of the band and choir groups that one could possibly be in, was in the fall play in the spring musical, like, did all of the things and was definitely something of an overachiever. And I think that's something that I've had to sort of grapple with as I've gotten older where it's like, you don't you don't have to be the best at everything all the time. Calm down. So that is that was sort of what my childhood was like, in a nutshell.

R

Rylee Dolezal 15:52

Did you enjoy doing those activities?

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Erica Barz 15:54

I did. I enjoyed um, I would say probably the music things were the things that I enjoyed the most. Just because the most of my friends that I was closest with were also music wingers [chuckles], as we called them in high school. But, um, and a lot of them actually, when I was in high school, I was one of like, only two or three people who was out. Um, and there wasn't a GSA yet, there is now at my old high school, which is really, really cool to think about that they've made that kind of progress. But um, I, it was definitely interesting to see just how many of my high school friends who, especially the ones who I continued to have contact with after high school, did eventually end up coming out as LGBTQ. It's like we were all flocking together even before we knew that that's what we were doing [chuckles]. And so that was just an interesting social phenomenon. Then I think it was definitely a big part of why my high school experience was as good as it was, because I had, was surrounded by these supportive people who, even if they weren't as open about it, we're going through something similar, and that we were just able to do activities that we all enjoyed [chuckles]. So, yeah.

R

Rylee Dolezal 17:32

And what high school did you go to?

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Erica Barz 17:35

I went to Union High School, which is located in LaPorte City. LaPorte City - it's not a big enough town to sustain its own school system. So the two main towns in the Union school

district are LaPorte City and Dysert. So I went to elementary school in LaPorte and then middle school in Dysert, and then back to LaPorte City for high school.

R

Rylee Dolezal 18:11

And do you think, I know you said that there wasn't a GSA, but do you think in general, your high school was like accepting of LGBT people?

E

Erica Barz 18:24

I wouldn't go that far. I think that, um, my experience was kind of unique. I think just because both my mom was a member of the staff within the school system, and so people knew who she was, um, and also my dad was on the school board for a period of time. So I was and my, my family's name was like, pretty well recognized within the town. Um, I had multiple other family members within the school district there, and who your family is and like what they do hold a lot of power in, in a small rural community like LaPorte City, I think. And so I think I got to sort of bypass some of the, some of the negative experiences and bullying that were happening to other people. And were part of the reason that I was able to come out in high school and some other people were not.

E

Erica Barz 19:30

And I felt okay doing that because I, even when, because, I mean, definitely, I mean, you asked me earlier what kind of kid I was like, I feel like definitely in a different, had situation, had circumstances been even slightly different - I would have been a kid that would have gotten bullied [chuckles], and I was not. And I think a big part of that is because of who my family was and the position that they held in the community. And so I sort of had that kind of protection going through school, um, which was not the case for other people that I knew. Like, I know, one of the only other people, one of, one of the only other two people who were out at the time were, well, one one of these people is later came out as a trans man, but at the time was what appeared to be two female students who wanted to go to prom together. And that was a no no. They were, they ended up having to like both take beards, beard dates [chuckles] and then connect at prom later. But so that's sort of the type of environment that it was. I mean, I wouldn't say like, it was definitely not the worst that it could have been, but it was not good [chuckles] by any stretch, unless you happened to be in the type of position where at, which at, that I was in, which is, is not what should what should protect you from bullying in school. So.

R

Rylee Dolezal 21:19

Did you know any other like gay people in LaPorte?

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Erica Barz 21:27

Not outside of my high school. So not anyone who was significantly older than me. Um, so that's part of why I think the internet was so important for me, because that did allow me to see people who were adults who were LGBTQ and who were surviving and thriving in their own lives. But I didn't know anyone in LaPorte outside of the one or two people in my high school who were also out.

R

Rylee Dolezal 22:06

And then you went to Simpson, right?

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Erica Barz 22:10

I did. Yes.

R

Rylee Dolezal 22:11

How was that for you?

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Erica Barz 22:13

Um, it was really good for me. So, um, Simpson College is a small private college in Iowa, in Indianola, which is, I want to say like 15/20 miles south of Des Moines. Um, and I just remember my first, my first week, um, well, they they do this every year, the first week that people are on campus. They have this event called Org Fest, which is essentially where all of the student organizations on campus come together in the in the square [chuckles], in the middle of campus and set up booths for, it's mostly for the, for the new freshmen to sort of figure out what groups they want to be involved in since they are brand new to campus. And as a freshman who was brand new to campus, I was like, I had looked at Simpson's website and knew that they had a pride group for, specifically for LGBTQ students and allies. And that was like, that is not a thing that we had at my school. And I was just like, very excited to be able to, like, there will be like, to like, meet and become friends with and build community with other LGBTQ students who were like, proud enough of themselves to be part of this group where the like, combining factor was that you were all members of this community.



E

Erica Barz 23:49

And so I just remember, going straight like, going to Org Fest, seeing the booth with all of the rainbows, walking straight over there, [laughs] writing my name and contact information on the clipboard very quickly. And then just being like, yes, I'm in. I'm ready for this [chuckles]. And so that was sort of like the beginning of my experience at Simpson, and it just ended up being a really, really good experience for me. I studied English there, along with multimedia journalism and Women's and Gender Studies as minors. And all of my professors were great. Got to write some really cool papers and explorations and things. My senior project was about Buffy the Vampire Slayer [chuckles]. So we're coming full circle. And it was just really good. And I ended up actually becoming president of the pride group for my, for about a year and a half there and I, and then my very last semester at Simpson, I actually did an internship in Washington DC with PFLAG national, the national office for PFLAG.

E

Erica Barz 25:05

And PFLAG is an organization. It's a, it's a chapter based organization. So I believe there's like five or six chapters here in Iowa. And then there's, last I knew like 450, maybe almost 500 at this point, chapters around the country. And there's a few in other countries as well. But they're specifically geared towards, um, allies of the LGBTQ community. So like parents, families, friends - for those folks to come together and like, have a space to be able to sort of learn more about LGBTQ issues and learn how to advocate for the LGBTQ people in their lives. So it was a really cool organization and it was also cool to have the opportunity to live in Washington DC for a few months and do work with an LGBTQ organization and then come come back. Um, and before before I had interned it at PFLAG, I had spent the previous summer interning at One Iowa, where I would eventually end up getting my first job. So, definitely, I feel like Simpson prepared me for the career that I have now. And I met a lot of really cool people and just learned a lot of great things and I think had a really good college experience.

R

Rylee Dolezal 26:38

What sort of events would the pride organization have?

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Erica Barz 26:46

Yeah, um, so, the big, we definitely created some new events while while I was there, but the big one that was sort of like the event that pride was most known for on campus was the annual drag show. Um and that was every year on -

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Erica Barz 27:09

Excuse me for a second sorry.

E

Erica Barz 27:10

[pause] It was, it was every year on Campus Day Eve. And Campus Day at Simpson was like a big day where everyone had class off and if you, if you were civic minded and like wanted to give back to the community, you could like get paired into groups or like your, your organization's, like pride, would often create its own group for Campus Day. And they would have us like, go rake leaves for people around town or like do other like community, community service type things. So there was that option and then the other option for Campus Day was for people to get absolutely hammered [chuckles]. And then be hung over all the next day because there was no class. Um, so definitely the drag show was always the day before Campus Day, which was always interesting given the second group of people who were participating in Campus Day activities. Um, but was was a whole lot of fun. I know, one year, a couple of years, um, me and some of my friends were LezSYNC. So we did NSYNC songs in, in drag, which was a lot of fun, and tried to stay true to the original choreography [laughs].

E

Erica Barz 28:41

Um, but then, definitely while I was president of pride, I wanted to try to do some more educational events around campus. And luckily, the LGBTQ community calendar comes with some lovely dates and things built in throughout the year that we could build things around. So for example, for Ace Awareness Week, for, to teach students and faculty and people on campus like about asexuality and sort of dispel some myths and stereotypes about asexual people, we set up sort of, every, every year during Ace Awareness Week, we'd set up a booth in the Campus Center. And the day before we would get a bunch of like cake ingredients and make "better than sex" cake [chuckles] to distribute at the booth, so it's like, we'll get you to come to our booth with cake and then we will also hand you this informational sheet about asexual people. So it's like get them with the food and then give them some education as sprinkles on top. So that was definitely a fun one. And we did some other similar things throughout the year as well, like partnering with the Interfaith Alliance on campus for Trans Day of Remembrance at the chapel doing a service for that.

E

Erica Barz 30:16

And making, making some like braided yarn bracelets that were the color of the bisexual

flag for Bi Awareness Week. So, yeah, so there were definitely, um, it was sort of a social club, but also wanted it to be educational for the campus community as well.

R

Rylee Dolezal 30:46

And then could you talk about the community work that you've done after college?

E

Erica Barz 30:53

Sure. Um, so my first job out of college was at One Iowa, which is, as I mentioned before, is a statewide LGBTQ advocacy organization specific to Iowa. Um, and while I was there, I started off just doing communications work. So running social media, writing a lot of the copy, um, and doing graphic design was something I sort of picked up on the job. I didn't really have any formal training in that before [chuckles], doing that work, but I learned, I learned InDesign as quickly as I could [laughs]. But did some of the graphic work for the organization as well and press releases and building relationships with journalists to educate the wider Iowa public about LGBT, LGBTQ people and issues they face in Iowa and ways to help out.

E

Erica Barz 32:02

And that, that was, uh, honestly the best first job out of college that I think one could ask for [chuckles], um, it was really great. My, my boss, um, uh, was Donna Red Wing, who was an incredible force for the LGBTQ community nationwide, let alone just in Iowa. And unfortunately, she's no longer with us, but is an amazing hero to me. And someone who I respect a whole awful lot and try to emulate in the work that I'm continuing to do now.

E

Erica Barz 32:48

Um, and then, let's see, a few years ago, I think would be, would have been three years ago now. Donna was actually part of creating an LGBTQ Advisory Council for the city of Des Moines. She was a commissioner with the Civil and Human Rights Departments at the time, and sort of came, came to me and said, "I think you would be a good person to be on this Advisory Council, and you should apply". And so I did, and I'm still part of that council to this day. It started up and, it started off with like five people, and just recently we've increased it in size to 15 people. So I'm really excited about that. Through, through that sort of that groups, groups main purpose is to sort of serve as a connector and the liaison between the city and the LGBTQ people who live and work in Des Moines. And sort of both educate the city about things that they could be doing to better serve LGBTQ people. So, for example, like making sure that any forms that the city puts out are asking

about gender in a way that is inclusive and potentially, like proposing ordinances that would be more inclusive for LGBTQ people. And then also educating the LGBTQ people in the city about what the city does and how the, and how the Civil and Human Rights Department most specifically can help them, like if they, if they are discriminated against in a restaurant or at work or when they're applying for credit, like knowing that that is against the law and also you can submit a, file a complaint with the department and they will work with you on how to, on addressing that issue and potentially getting you some, the word is escaping me, but getting getting you some justice essentially [chuckles]. Um, but yeah.

E

Erica Barz 35:26

And then now I am working at the ACLU of Iowa, which is not a specifically LGBTQ organization, but LGBTQ issues is something that the organization works on in addition to racial justice, immigrants rights, freedom of speech, religious freedom, all of the civil liberties issues [chuckles]. And so that's been, I've been in that job for about about six months now, and it's been really, really rewarding.

R

Rylee Dolezal 36:08

What was it like to work with Donna Red Wing?

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Erica Barz 36:14

It was really incredible. She's, she's a powerhouse [chuckles]. Um, she was definitely someone I looked up to a lot and still do. One of the things that she always said was that there is no small work in a big movement. And she definitely lived that, like there was nothing that she, like even though she was the executive director at One Iowa and had held all of these leadership positions before that at, for organizations like the Human Rights Campaign, and GLAAD and like the big LGBTQ name organizations that like people within the community like know and respect.

E

Erica Barz 37:01

When she was on, like she worked with, um, like, was like an advisor on LGBTQ issues for Obama and for other, other politicians. Like she was, she was incredible and it's honestly amazing that she came here to Iowa to lead, lead One Iowa like she did. Um, I know some, she had, um there was a documentary actually made about some work that she did in Oregon, um, in, I think it was like 1992 around Ballot Measure 9, which was a really awful [chuckles] ballot measure that was in Oregon, and then I know other states like Colorado

and potentially some others had pushed forward similar language. But um the, the intent of the ballot measure was to put it in the state's constitution that, um, it was that gay people were not protected by any anti-discrimination policies that basically, writing it into the constitution that all gay people are second class citizens who don't deserve civil rights or protections.

E

Erica Barz 38:31

And Donna was one of the leaders in Oregon who helped to defeat that measure. And it's a really cool documentary. I would absolutely recommend getting your hands on a copy if you can. I know I recently purged all of my, most of my DVDs, so I only have like four now. But Ballot Measure 9 is one of them [chuckles]. Um, and yeah, she was just an incredible person, and it just makes me sad that she was taken from us too soon. She passed away from lung cancer in 2018, just like a year or so after she had retired, and I remember, because I was still working at One Iowa then - and they asked me to help write her obituary, and to sort of do some of the research to make sure that the obituary was like, well informed. And as I was writing it, I was going through different files and found the press release when she announced that she was retiring. And she had said that she was looking forward to like, like she had given all this time and her energy and her work to the community, and was looking forward to taking some time for herself and for her wife [voice wavers], and the fact that she didn't have the opportunity to do that is still really upsetting to me [sniffles]. As you can hear [laughs]. Um, but yeah, it was amazing to work with her, and I try really hard to just like keep her legacy going with what I'm doing now.

R

Rylee Dolezal 40:34

And then I remember you had also talked about a Rural Summit?

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Erica Barz 40:42

Yes [laughs]. Yes. Okay. This was one of my favorite stories. So, um, I want to say, well had to have been 2015 because it was right at the end of President Obama's second term, and Tom Vilsack was still the head of the USDA, US Department of Agriculture. And so the USDA was doing this tour of LGBTQ Rural Summits in different parts of the, in different rural parts of the country. And I'm going to put air quotes around rural, because to them, Des Moines, Iowa was rural [laughs]. So it was, the one in Iowa was hosted at Drake University. And they had, they asked One Iowa, where I was working at the time, and the university to sort of help them organize it and put, and help publicize it and everything. So while, and as the communication person I was mostly on like promotion duty like getting the word out about the events, um, and through, through some of my work and the other

PR folks like with Drake and the USDA who were working on this, Rush Limbaugh found out about it and was very upset [laughs]. So he goes on his show, and starts talking about, and this is the part that I think folks are most likely to remember - but he went on this rant about how these events were like, a way for them to give give money to lesbian farmers in these red states [chuckles] so that they could turn them blue and push their gay agenda on a national level. And it was just so, so, so fun [laughs].

E

Erica Barz 42:57

Well, one must think of it as fun or else it's like you spin down a hole, but um, it was definitely like the most, one of the most wild things he could have said [chuckles]. And then Raygun in response to that created the now iconic "America Needs Lesbian Farmers" shirts and stickers and hats and everything that I think they still sell to this day [chuckles] from many of their stores, and that was sort of, sort of riffing on the "American Needs Farmers" tagline that, um, I can't remember what organization pushed that tagline initially, but it's a, it's a common one, but now it's "America Needs Lesbian Farmers". And you know what? Yes, we do [laughs]. We do need lesbian farmers. Lesbian farmers are great. But that was, that was definitely one of my favorite memories from working at One Iowa and just in my life in general. It was, it was delightful.

R

Rylee Dolezal 44:02

Was there any evidence of any lesbian farmers in attendance of the summit?

E

Erica Barz 44:09

Yes [chuckles]. There, there were definitely, definitely a few. I don't think that they received the amount of funding that Rush Limbaugh was convinced that they would get so, um, I don't know. That's, that's, that's kind of a bummer [laughs].

R

Rylee Dolezal 44:33

Um, and then just kind of as a general question, what do you think the LGBT community is like, specifically in Iowa?

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Erica Barz 44:49

Hmm. I think the LGBTQ community in Iowa is very online [chuckles]. At least I mean, everyone is very online right now during the COVID times, but definitely, I feel like because the, because of just like the size of community, of like cities and towns in Iowa and there

isn't like, unless you live in Des Moines or Iowa City or one of the larger metro areas there, there's still not that infrastructure yet. There are people, there a lot of really good people working on building that infrastructure, but I don't think it's quite there yet, for people to have in-person opportunities to like come together as a community. So there's a lot of online spaces for people to come together, which is better than nothing. So I think that that's really good. And it's really inspiring to look at folks in like, the people who founded Orange City pride in Orange City, in arguably one of the most conservative counties, not just in the state, but in the entire country [chuckles]. And them hosting a pride celebration year after year, and I think they're on like, their fourth year now, is just incredible. So I think the LGBTQ community in Iowa is resilient, um, and I think also has some internal work to do in terms of making sure that all, making sure that people of color and low-income people and people with disabilities are still, still have their voices heard and represented within the community and the work that the community does. So all in all, I think I'm, I'm proud to be LGBTQ Iowan.

E

Erica Barz 47:01

And I think that too often, and that's part of why I'm doing this project and why I'm really happy that this project is happening, is that too often the, the history and the work of people in the middle of the country in places like Iowa and other states are not as celebrated or recorded as LGBTQ people and their accomplishments that happen on the coasts. And so, just the fact that LGBTQ Iowans just keep living their lives and keep trying to make things better, even though they oftentimes are not getting the cred for it [laughs]. Um, it's it's really inspiring and I'm happy to be part of it.

R

Rylee Dolezal 48:01

Do you know of any, like physical spaces in Des Moines that gay people go to?

E

Erica Barz 48:09

Um, I mean, The Garden and The Blazing Saddle are probably the two big ones. Not right now [chuckles], again, because of, you know, the Coronavirus, but I know at least The Blazing Saddle has been doing a really cool, some really cool things with doing online shows and creating online space so that people can still come together somehow, even if it's not physically. So just for context's sake, The Blazing Saddle is I believe the oldest gay bar in the state and The Garden is another another gay bar that is a, is a little more like, The Blazing Saddle is like more like dive bar vibes and then The Garden is sort of like, more like nightclub vibes. And both, both are cool and just are like very different vibes from each other.

E

Erica Barz 49:07

Um, and then there is the Pride Center, which is, um, again, nothing is happening right now [chuckles] because of things, but I know that they have a lot of support groups that meet out of there. Like there's a, like Transformations Iowa, I believe is a group for transgender people, and I think they meet at the Pride Center. And I think there's a non-binary group that meets there as well. And yeah, there, and then I think there, those are sort of the permanent spaces that exist in Des Moines, but there are also, and I think more of these are popping up all the time, which is great, um, but sort of transient spaces in places like the library will, is hosting more and more LGBTQ events. Like an LGBTQ book club and different LGBTQ support groups. And so that's really cool. So there's, I would say, there's definitely a lot of room for improvement. Um, but it is, it is improving. So that's good.

R

Rylee Dolezal 50:26

And where do you find a sense of community?

E

Erica Barz 50:31

I would say, I find my sense of community like I, I work in the nonprofit space and something that I've come to discover about the nonprofit space, especially among my age group, is that a lot of nonprofit professionals are LGBTQ [chuckles]. And so I have like, just through doing, just through my job both at One Iowa and the ACLU, and particularly at One Iowa - working for an LGBTQ organization - just opens up a lot of doors for meeting other LGBTQ people and building community that way. And in a way that has been sustainable, even though I'm no longer working there, like I'm still friends with and still have community connections to a lot of the people who I worked with there, which is really, really wonderful. Um, and even folks who didn't, who like I didn't necessarily meet through One Iowa but just met because I am an, I am a nonprofit professional [chuckles] in their mid 20s living in Des Moines, and have met folks working at different nonprofits who are also queer and who I've become really good friends with. And so that's sort of where I've found my community, is sort of, not necessarily in like the physical spaces, even though I've like, will sometimes go to The Garden or The Saddle with friends. But more just sort of like through incidentally meeting people and like being intentional about building community with them and maintaining friendships and relationships, and that's worked really well for me.

R

Rylee Dolezal 52:32



In, like, nonprofit spaces, do you think that any identities are like more represented than others?

E

Erica Barz 52:44

I would definitely, I think in my experience, there are fewer trans folks, um, which is unfortunate. Um, I think that there, like there are definitely some but it is to a lesser degree than for lesbian, gay and bi folks, at least, at least who are out. Um, and I think, I mean, part of that is just because of like, the systemic things that trans folks face when seeking employment and holding employment. Um, but yeah, I'd also say that it's very, very white [chuckles]. Um, I think the nonprofit community and employee space is just pretty darn white in general, especially in Iowa. I mean, I think this, this is a problem that is nationwide in terms of like nonprofits being very white, especially with leadership positions. But because of the demographics of Iowa, it is even more pronounced [chuckles]. And so definitely a lack of trans people and LGBTQ people of color. So that's what I would say as far as demographics in the nonprofit community go.

R

Rylee Dolezal 54:14

Do you have any memories related to being a lesbian in Iowa or like that are specific to the Midwest?

E

Erica Barz 54:28

I mean that the rural, LGBTQ Rural Summit is a big one [chuckles]. That's definitely one of them. I would, I would say also, back to high school for a minute, but, um, and I still to this day, I'm not quite sure how they were able to get away with this. But the Fellowship of Christian Athletes is a, I think it's still a group that exists and like has different chapters at different schools around the country, but The Fellowship of Christian Athletes chapter at Union hosted this event called Fields of Faith [chuckles], where they essentially commandeered the high school football stadium for an evening and like set up a stage and basically had a praise band and like did a whole service that was very like megachurch, um, sing-along, praise band type thing on school property. And by the way, this is a public school [chuckles].

E

Erica Barz 55:39

And so it was one of the like, I remember it was sort of at the point where I was like, starting to question whether or not I was Christian, but it was, but also like, one of the big things about um, growing up in LaPorte City in particular, but I think also, this is a common

experience in other rural communities around Iowa, is that honestly, a lot of the church events are social events almost as much as anything else. Like you go to them to, like, be in community with other people. Because other than church events and school events, there's not a whole heck of a lot else for you to gather around [chuckles], unless you create it yourself, which can be difficult. So went to this event and was in the audience and was in my feelings [chuckles] about being a 16 year old lesbian in LaPorte City, who was not sure if God was cool with me at this God-centered event. And I just remember feeling like "God give me a sign that everything is going to be okay".

E

Erica Barz 56:59

And like, I don't know, like, I don't like, I don't believe in God but like I don't - like my brain had I think created this as a significant event as far as like pushing myself to be okay with who I was. So after the event ended I went to, I went to get up and saw this like, like it had to have been like a Happy Meal toy [laughs] on the football field. No clue how it got there. But it was a little, like bobblehead thing of Toothless the dragon, from How to Train Your Dragon [chuckles]. And I was just like, this cute toy is a sign from God that everything's gonna be okay [laughs]. It's just like, this is what my 16 year old brain is latching on to [laughs] and I just remember I had put that like, probably not something I would advise for any one to do if they want to sell their car later, but like took some of that putty sticky stuff and stuck it to my dashboard and was like, and drove around with it for several years after that. It's like, this is my symbol that everything is going to be okay. And so just something about going to a church event, which is one of the only social event options in your town, on your, at your school, um, and finding a beat up Happy Meal toy on a football field and then like, just keeping that for a while is just something that strikes me, is something that's not super likely to happen anywhere else besides the rural Midwest [chuckles]. So that is definitely something that sticks out in my mind in that regard.

R

Rylee Dolezal 59:01

Was it common to have like, church events at your school?

E

Erica Barz 59:07

No, at least not in that, not to that scale. I believe the Fellowship of Christian Athletes most of the time didn't, I remember I went to exactly one meeting [chuckles] of the Fellowship of Christian Athletes. But they usually, they didn't meet at school, they met at a local gym, which was owned by the head football coach for the high school team, which everything is all interconnected [chuckles] in the world of small towns. Um, and the only other similar thing that I can think of that was actually on school grounds was they, and I

think this was a pretty common thing at other schools during this time as well. Not sure if it still is, but. Oh, why can't I remember what it's called. They gathered, like gather around the flagpole early in the morning to like, and did like a prayer circle before school started every now and again. They, there was like a name for this event, it was, and I cannot remember what it was. But the premise was that they would gather around the flagpole and pray in order to like start the day off on a good, on a good foot.

E

Erica Barz 60:31

But yeah, I know outside, outside of school I was, me and some of my other friends who were in the music wing would travel to Waterloo. Well actually it was traveled to Cedar Falls every week, every Wednesday evening for Big House, which was sort of very similar to the Fields of Faith premise but indoors [chuckles]. So it was like at this giant megachurch in Cedar Falls and there was like, it was like their big youth event each week.. And they would like, there was a praise band. And they had the giant screens with the lyrics that were streaming down so you could like sing along. And because we were all music wing kids, we were trying to harmonize [laughs].

E

Erica Barz 61:15

And it was definitely more of a social event for me than anything. And I think, ended up being the case for quite a few of the other students who went with me to that. But definitely, there were some points where school and church like interconnected a lot. And then there were others where it was like, it's just very, this is just a very churchy community in general, and that bleeds into basically everything else [chuckles].

R

Rylee Dolezal 61:53

And then you said that you live with your fiance, right?

E

Erica Barz 61:57

I do. Yeah.

R

Rylee Dolezal 61:58

Um, could you talk about how you guys met?

E

Erica Barz 62:03

Yes [laughs]. Um, so we actually met through a mutual friend, who she went to college with. And this friend hosted a RuPaul's Drag Race watch party [chuckles] at their apartment, and I met, I met her there, and I think that's possibly the gayest meet cute story, meet cute situation of all time [chuckles]. But um, that's, that's how we met and we just like kept, kept in touch after that and talked and talked quite a bit and then started like meeting up outside of our larger friend gatherings. And were sort of like, did that thing where it's like we were sort of seeing each other for a few months in like a datey romantic way, but like neither of us had like, called it that yet. So it was like still plausible deniability [laughs], but eventually we like I, I did ask her on a date. And then her response was, we've already been on so many dates, which was extremely accurate [laughs]. It's, we had been on multiple dates before I actually asked her on one but, um, the rest is history [chuckles]. We've lived together for a couple of years now and are engaged and are in the process of buying a house, which is very exciting, and are starting to like, build, build a life together, which is really exciting. And that's, um, definitely, like, sometimes I'll just think like, I don't know that I, that 16 year old me would have seen 27 year old me being in this, being like in this type of position where I'm, like, engaged and like, building a life with somebody. Like I think, I think like when I was, when I was first figuring things out, it was like, I'm going to be okay. But I don't know if I'm going to be, be able to have a family and build a life like that. But it's possible and I'm doing it and I love it [chuckles].

R

Rylee Dolezal 64:36

What are you proud of?

E

Erica Barz 64:41

I'm really proud of the work I've done. Both at One Iowa, ACLU and PFLAG, just and, and the Simpson Pride group and the LGBTQ Advisory Council for Des Moines. Like, just all of the little things that I've done through all of those positions that have in some way, like helped the LGBTQ community in our state, I'm really proud of that. And also just really proud of the life I've been able to build for myself. Also just like acknowledging that not all of it is because of the work I have done. I'm in a very privileged position from an upper middle class background and like have had a lot of support in being able to do a lot of things that I have, that I have done, but I am proud of the way that I've been able to sort of utilize the privilege that I, that I have in order to, try to improve the lives of LGBTQ people. People like who, who don't have that, that type of privilege. So I'm really proud of that. And it's also just like something I am, I never want to be like, "Ah yes, I'm done now. I have done everything I can possibly do. There is nothing left." Like there's, there's always something. There's, I mean, it's like Donna always said, "There's no small work in a in a big

movement". And I'm just proud of all the small things that I've been able to do to contribute to the larger whole.

R

Rylee Dolezal 66:39

And how do you express yourself?

E

Erica Barz 66:44

How do I express myself? Um, I definitely think that I have held on to a lot of my theater kid roots [chuckles]. I was like, as I mentioned before, like in all, in all the musical extracurriculars in high school and all the plays. And I think have just held, like, something I know about myself is that I'm a very, I'm very expressive, and I, it's very easy to tell what I'm feeling [chuckles] when when someone is talking to me just because of the general way that I am. Um, so I feel like I definitely express myself in a kind of like, bombastic theatrical way, which is something that I don't know I'm, I guess, sort of tying into the last question like something I'm proud of is that I've never really like, never really wanted to, and I don't think would even have the ability to if I wanted to, like dial myself back and like be less of myself. Like I am, I am always 100% me all of the time and there is no, there is no shutting that down [chuckles]. And so, definitely, I think, as I've gotten older, I have figured out, like more fashion wise, like what I've, how I've wanted to express myself, um, I have had, I had long hair for a very, very long time [chuckles]. Like, mermaid length, down my back type of hair, which I hated, but like, never felt confident enough to cut off until a couple of years ago. And even though I haven't been able to get a haircut for a couple of months [chuckles], because of the virus, it's been like, it is exponentially better than, um, the hair and style that I had before. And I've also just, like gotten, I think, a little more butch [chuckles] with the way that I dress, and I feel comfortable when I'm wearing like a collared shirt. And I've recently started wearing bow ties when I'm trying to like dress up a lot which is, which I enjoy. So, definitely, um, the way I express myself has shifted a little bit but I think has gotten just like, more in line with the person that I truly am as I've gotten older, which is really exciting. Excited to see what I do next. Stay tuned. [laughs]

R

Rylee Dolezal 69:31

Um, do you feel like you identify with like the butch role?

E

Erica Barz 69:42

In some aspects, but not quite as much. Like I feel like, definitely like on an aesthetic level maybe, but I feel um, it's hard. I think that I need to do more reading. Like, I know butch is

a historical term. And I think that we have sort of like, the definition of butch now and the definition of butch, like, throughout the decades is like, different and has shifted. And so it's sort of like an enigmatic term where it's like, I don't really know if I fit it because I'm not really sure what it is and maybe there isn't really an "it" to be [laughs]. You know, so I think in some ways, like definitely, as far as like my fashion choices and style goes, yes, but as far as like a butch role like in a relationship, or just like in the world, like I'm not so certain.

R

Rylee Dolezal 70:54

And do you think that you see those roles played out in the LGBTQ community in Iowa?

E

Erica Barz 71:03

Um, somewhat. I think definitely more in some spaces than others. Like, for one example of, like I think the Lesbians of Iowa online Facebook page and Facebook group, um, there are definitely a number of, a number of folks in there who really, really heavily identify as butch or really heavily identify as femme and have, and like, talk about that a lot. Um, in the context of that group, I would say that's where I see it the most, as far as actually like, out in physical spaces, and also like in other groups, like particularly groups that are more geared towards like trans and non-binary folks, I don't see it quite as much. It sort of seems to be a like, you do, you do you. Whatever "you" is. And maybe, maybe you, you, um, call yourself butch or call yourself femme and maybe you don't. But whatever you do, it's, it's cool. Um, so that's, which I think is, which I think is a good thing. And I think, I mean, I think people being able to choose labels for themselves that they feel like they fit and then people accepting those is very good. And also if you're someone who like doesn't necessarily identify specifically with anything, like, that's good too. So, yeah.

R

Rylee Dolezal 72:44

And do you remember when you started to make different fashion choices or like when you cut your hair?

E

Erica Barz 72:54

Yeah, um, so I cut my hair um, about a year ago now, I think. Actually, it might not even be quite a year. I think we're coming up on, because I did it like mid-summer of 2019. And there is a barber shop in Des Moines called Dapper DSM, which is owned and run by lesbians. So I was like, I must go to this les - like once I have committed to making the cut, I am going to the lesbian barber shop, obviously [laughs]. So I went there and got got my hair cut and it just like immediately was like, "Oh, this is maybe my forever haircut". Maybe

I will never, like I don't think I'm ever going to grow my hair long ever again. Like this is, this is great. And so I think for a while I had like, I mean, I had told myself that like the upkeep of having to get your hair, you have to get your hair cut more often when it's shorter. And I was like had, I think wrongfully kind of convinced myself like, that's what's holding me back from getting my haircut. But like really I think I had, because there was a point in middle school where I did get my hair cut pretty short and it did not work out well for me [chuckles]. Like I didn't like it and definitely got some weird comments about it from like family members and some other, other students. So I was like, okay, we're never doing that again [laughs]. But now I have done it again. And I think getting my hair cut by someone else in the community who like, knows what I mean when I say I want like a short Rhea Butcher-esque haircut [chuckles]. Like they know what I mean when I say that and it is not the "I would like to talk to your manager" haircut. It is very different. So that's definitely been a, been a very good thing for me.

R

Rylee Dolezal 74:59

Do you remember what some of the comments were from when you had your hair short in middle school?

E

Erica Barz 75:05

Um, I don't think, it wasn't so much specific comments as much as it was like, um, well, like, I guess once the comment was like, "it'll grow out" [chuckles], like in a, "it's gonna be okay, it'll grow out" . "It looks bad now, but it'll grow out". And it's like, but "Oh, no. Do you mean it doesn't look good now?" Um, and also just sort of, just sort of like that general cadence. When people were like, talking about my hair - was definitely like, it was just very clear that it's like, oh, this is not how my hair is supposed to be. I guess I'll have to wait for it to get fixed and then I just won't cut it this way ever again. Except that I, now I have and it's great [chuckles]. But that's sort of what I remember from that time.

R

Rylee Dolezal 76:06

When is a time that you felt seen?

E

Erica Barz 76:17

I don't know if I could like name a specific time, but I feel, and this is probably, this is is definitely corny, but I feel seen by my fiance constantly [chuckles]. Like she just always knows exactly what is going on with me both like on an emotional level and I'll, and will also just like point out things about myself that even like I didn't know. Like I'm very, I'm

self-aware in some respects, and in some respects not at all. And she'll, and she'll say things like "you do this thing with your thumb when you're like, really when you're like feeling anxious". And I'm like, "I do do that!"

E

Erica Barz 77:03

But I didn't know that [laughs]. So, I would say definitely, um, in that regard. And I do feel seen by, by my friends, um, who I'm closest to, like, I feel like they see me and we see each other and we're able to have a closer relationship because we know who each other truly is.

R

Rylee Dolezal 77:30

What is your friend group like?

E

Erica Barz 77:32

Um, a lot, a lot of like mid-to-upper 20-somethings working in nonprofits, who are also queer [chuckles]. Um, and definitely folks who are not as into, like, who are sort of more domestic and like smaller gatherings and like talking about, and just like getting coffee together or having a dinner party. As in like, very, very occasionally going to larger events and going to like a bar or going to a festival or something, but will most, mostly like pretty, pretty low key.

E

Erica Barz 78:22

And yeah, I would, and then I would also say definitely very like, very just like justice focused. Like people who are, who want to make the world a better place. And we'll do, and recognize that they have a duty to make, to try and make the world a better place. Which I think surrounding yourself with people like that helps you to be a better person and do more things to assist, I'm trying to think of the exact phrase, but it's like, something about water and raising all ships or something. I don't know. But like, we all support each other and that makes everyone better.

R

Rylee Dolezal 79:16

And then you said that your group doesn't like go out to big events as much. Do you think that majority of LGBTQ lowans do that sort of thing?



E

Erica Barz 79:33

Not necessarily. I think, I think that because those are like big events and more public and also because, I, I know in Des Moines, I think this is the case in other Iowa towns that have gay bars, because the gay bars are some of the only designated physical - like this is a queer space [chuckles]- have like, I think that, the part of the community that does go to those places frequently and goes to those types of events frequently is just more visible, just because, just by virtue of like, the type of space or the type of events that it is, and not, there's not necessarily more of them. And there's not like, I think sometimes to our detriment, there can sort of be this backlash within our community where it's like, people think that people who go to those things are not as, people will, people will say that, well, we can't like - it's true that we do need to, that more types of spaces need to exist, but I think it's wrong to take, take the frustration that those places don't exist out on the people who do enjoy the spaces that do exist. And I think it's just like, there's not, it's a, it's about the fact those spaces are value neutral. There is nothing inherently better about them or worse about them than any other, than any other activity or type of community event. They all exist and people just like, just like all people [chuckles] in the world, like LGBTQ people are not a monolith. And everyone enjoys different types of activities.

R

Rylee Dolezal 81:37

Do you know of any other like smaller groups even online? You've mentioned the Lesbians of Iowa group. Do you know of any other groups like that?

E

Erica Barz 81:51

Yeah, um, I know some of the different pride organizations in different cities is, also kind of double as online spaces. Like I know the Orange City pride folks that I mentioned earlier have a pretty strong like online community that talks to each other a lot. Um, same with Iowa City Pride and Cedar Rapids and some of the other towns. Transformations Iowa also has a pretty robust online space. Like their meetings take place in Des Moines, and I think they maybe have some meetings in Cedar Rapids as well, but it's a statewide group and they do a lot to engage people outside of those areas online. Um, and then I know that Ames Pride has, and the Ames library, has been doing a lot especially for LGBTQ youth. Like you know, Ames library has hosted drag camp for youth and drag shows for, specifically geared towards LGBTQ youth, which is really cool and sort of something that's newish to the state I think.

E

Erica Barz 83:25

So, there definitely, and there are definitely more [chuckles] than I've just listed. Those are just the ones that spring to mind. Um, and definitely, more and more popping up all the time, which is a great thing that more and more people are creating spaces for themselves and for their community.

R Rylee Dolezal 83:50  
What do you want people to know about you?

E Erica Barz 84:03  
I don't know. I feel like I have, over the past however long this interview has been, shared a lot of the things that I want people to know about me. I think it is, I'm not a person who, like I think I want people to know that I am a, I'm a hard worker and that I don't really want glory for myself. Like I don't really want people to like, I want people to respect me, but I don't want people to think that I am like, put me on a pedestal or anything. Like I just want to do work that will benefit my community and hopefully inspire some people to do work that helps their community too. But not, I don't want to be a figurehead [chuckles], or like I'm the face of anything. I am much more comfortable being a cog, a cog in the machine of justice [laughs].

R Rylee Dolezal 85:27  
Alright, and then is there anything else you'd like to share?

E Erica Barz 85:36  
I think, I think I'm good.

R Rylee Dolezal 85:40  
Alright, thank you.

E Erica Barz 85:42  
Thank you.