

Marti & Ash Transcript 2020

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SPEAKERS

Ash Bruxvoort, Marti Payseur, Steven Saada

S Steven Saada 00:02

Hi, my name is Steven Saada and I will be having a conversation with Marti Payseur and Ash Bruxvoort for LGBT Oral Histories of Central Iowa, a project of Grinnell College. This as an LG—is an oral history project centered on the experiences of LGBT-identified people in Iowa. It is Monday, April 27, and this is being recorded—oh, April 27, 2020—and this is being recorded remotely from Mount Vernon, Iowa and Sammamish, Washington, due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

S Steven Saada 00:36

Hi. (Steven and Marti laugh). Yeah, so first, before we kind of go into this, I want to, you know, establish you individually as narrators. Um, so if, Marti, you could kind of introduce yourself?

M Marti Payseur 00:55

For sure. My name is Marti Payseur. I am twenty-nine years old. I live in Mount Vernon, Iowa. I was born and raised in Des Moines, but burned my life down to start Iowa's queerest bed and breakfast, which is called Thistle's Summit, named after our dog, who you will most certainly hear bark during this period of time.

S Steven Saada 01:20

Yeah. And Ash?

A Ash Bruxvoort 01:23

I am Ash Bruxvoort. I'm thirty years old and I grew up in Mitchellville, Iowa on a farm. And yeah, I moved here with Marti and I do—not only I run the bed and breakfast here, but then I also am an astrologer and I do that out of our bed and breakfast. Yeah.

S Steven Saada 01:53

Yeah. Can you tell me a little bit more about your childhoods? Kind of like what growing up was like?

A Ash Bruxvoort 02:01

Me first? Yeah, um, I grew up on a farm in pretty much rural Iowa. I grew up—the thing that's kind of interesting about my childhood is that I grew up about thirty minutes from Des Moines, so my mom worked downtown Des Moines. She actually worked for Pioneer Hi-Bred. And my dad is a conventional corn and soybean farmer. So I spent a lot of time both in Des Moines and on the farm and I pretty much spent most of my time at my grandparents' house, actually. And they lived on our family's farm, and I'm an only child—Marti and I are actually both only children—and my parents were really great people.

A Ash Bruxvoort 03:01

Um, I was pretty isolated, because I was living in a rural area and I was an only child. So I had a lot of time to be by myself. And I was, I think, a pretty introspective kid. (Ash and Marti laugh) Yeah, I was really into art and writing and I was very passionate about the environment at a young age. And so there was some conflict—even early on in my adolescence, when I was like thirteen—between my dad and I about agriculture issues, and I was very against pesticides, and Rachel Carson was one of my heroes. And so then, eventually, I went to school for English at the University of Iowa and—but I was very interested in writing about the environment: that was like my thing that I was really passionate about. So that's kind of like my overall childhood.

A Ash Bruxvoort 04:12

Um, and I knew that I was gay, like, pretty young, but I didn't, you know, I didn't come out

until later in life. I got married to my high school sweetheart, actually, when I was twenty-two, and that's something that Marti and I both have in common, so maybe we'll talk more about that later, but that's kind of my childhood.

M

Marti Payseur 04:44

I was—I'm an only child, as well, as Ash mentioned. And my parents were quite a bit older when they had me. My mom was forty, so she—consistently when I was a kid, and sometimes still does—refer to me as her miracle baby. She wasn't supposed to be able to have children. And so, my mom was a CFO (Chief Financial Officer) of three different universities in my childhood. First Simpson College, then Des Moines—DMU: Des Moines Medical University—and then finally Drake. And so I was sort of raised on college campuses, in a strange way. I have, like, really fond memories of being outside my mom's office and these enormous oak trees that are on the campus of Simpson College, and, like, talking to a squirrel as, you know, five-year-olds due (laughs), and that was like a really happy part of my childhood and definitely played a huge role in the person that I became, because my career before this I spent in museums. And I've always really gravitated towards places that are designed for critical thinking and learning.

M

Marti Payseur 06:11

My father owns an engineering company. And I'm now estranged from him, in part because I'm gay and it's not safe for me to be around him. But my mother was, like, an incredible parent. And I think about how, like, women are always, you know, trying to do it all. And, like, the concept of doing it all is a myth from the pit of hell, but my mom, like, did it (laughs)—somehow. She, you know, was this powerhouse CFO, and never missed a softball game of mine or a golf match or anything like that. So yeah, I feel really fortunate to, to have had that resource.

M

Marti Payseur 07:09

I grew up doing a lot of art. I played in sports and, you know, like any young lesbian, was raised in softball. (Marti and Ash laugh) I didn't know that, that I was gay, but I figured it out. Um, and yeah, I did a lot of art with my, my paternal grandmother who lived down the street from me. And some of my other fondest memories of being a kid were baking with my maternal grandmother and so, like, between the sort of academic mindset, the art mindset, and like spending time in the kitchen, it really has created the person that I am today.

M

Marti Payseur 07:56

And as Ash mentioned, I married my high school sweetheart. We met when we were fifteen and I had an inkling that I was different, but I didn't really know that I was gay at that point in time. And he was my best friend and my family. He was also an only child. And so it became like this source of normalcy that I had been seeking in my childhood, I found through him. And I'm really fortunate that he was the one that I chose to spend my life with for quite a while, because he helped me understand the person I am now.

S

Steven Saada 08:38

So you both mentioned kind of not knowing that you were gay right away. What were some moments where you, like, realized or came to that identity? (pause)

M

Marti Payseur 08:54

I can go first. (Marti and Ash laugh). So I have this really distinct memory—and you know, like, the way understanding queer identity—Okay, let me back up. I think that we are just outside the bubble of it being, like, really, truly okay to be gay, right? Like, we—the only gay person that I knew growing up—and I grew up, you know, in a fairly major metropolitan area—that was female and gay, was my gym teacher. And I'm not a gym-teacher gay. Like, that's just—it's not my brand. And so I knew that I wasn't her, um, and I didn't think that there was space for, like, a femme gay person. I didn't have any concept of that and I didn't know any out lesbians, even at my high school. Which is interesting, because I was always very, very close with gay men. Like, my whole life, I've had a gay man who's been my best friend.

M

Marti Payseur 10:08

But, um, I remember, maybe third or fourth grade, and it was summer break, and I remember I had made this friend during the school year. Her name was Jamie. And I remember that I thought she was really cute, but I didn't super have an understanding of what that meant at that age. But I remember writing her a letter and feeling like this visceral pain—the way for you do _____ (??) as a third or fourth grader—in my heart that I missed her. And I think that I now reflect on that as like one of the first moments in which I knew. And then, you know, as you explore your sexuality as you get older, and hormones kick in, I definitely was attracted to some of my female friends and, and I didn't quite know how to navigate that, because I was attached to this man who I knew I loved, too.

M

Marti Payseur 11:24

And then, it all kind of just changed. You know, when you get married, you, like, put everything in a box and you are societally told that your attraction can only be to this person that you're committed to. And then I found when I would be out and about, like, not attached in a social situation to my husband at the time, that my eye always seemed to be able to find the cute, female bartender, always. (laughs) And then I sort of figured out that maybe I needed to look at my life differently and that there were some elements of myself that I hadn't—that I had known about, but that I had shut in a box pretty tightly, because I was supposed to be this wife. And yeah, that was a hard thing to come to when you're like twenty-five. (laughs) People do that a lot earlier, usually. So that's sort of how it worked for me.

A

Ash Bruxvoort 12:45

Yeah, well, and then even—it was even more after twenty-five, really, before you really came out.

M

Marti Payseur 12:52

Yeah, I came out at twenty-seven?

A

Ash Bruxvoort 12:56

Yeah.

M

Marti Payseur 12:57

Twenty-seven. Um, and I came out after I had met Ash, because Ash broke my brain, so.

A

Ash Bruxvoort 13:05

Yeah.

M

Marti Payseur 13:05

Yeah, I was too in love to stay in the closet any longer. (Marti and Ash laugh).

A

Ash Bruxvoort 13:09

Yeah. Okay. I—one of my first memories of it is when I was probably like eight years old. I was talking to my cousin, um, and I said something about, like, that when I got older, I wanted to be like Rosie O'Donnell. Rosie O'Donnell. And my cousin told me that I would go to hell for being a fat fag. And I didn't know what that meant, but I knew that it was not good and I knew that there was something about being, you know, who she was, that was not acceptable. I was also really into Queen Latifah when I was young—when I was in my, like, late elementary, early teens—and was really attracted to Queen Latifah, actually, and she actually has the same birthday as my dad, and I was like talking to my parents about that, and maybe you said something about that, like, she was a lesbian and, like, that was a bad thing. So it was like very early on. I knew that there was something about some things that I was attracted to that were not, like, okay with my family and stuff like that.



Marti Payseur 14:49

And I think it's interesting to note that Ash was not raised in a super religious household.



Ash Bruxvoort 14:55

No, I wasn't.



Marti Payseur 14:56

I was, which played a factor in all of this, but Ash's parents were sort of more of, like, the moral objectors, right? Because, like, the whole pulse of the United States at that point in time was that gay people are bad, but not from like a religious objection perspective. So.



Ash Bruxvoort 15:14

Yes, and some other things that are important to know is that this is particularly on my paternal side of the family and my maternal side of the family—my mom's brother—my uncle—his wife has a gay brother. So there was this presence of this gay man in my life, to a certain extent, on my mom's side of the family, but on my dad's side of the family, this is where like, all of this stuff was happening. Um, then when I was in my early teens, like thirteen, fourteen, is actually when I had my first sexual experiences and they were all with women. And then one of my very close friend's mother actually, like, outed me, and called other moms of friends. I became suicidal. And I had a male friend who cared a lot about me and he actually went to my guidance counselor and told her, like, what was going on, and then my guidance counselor called my parents and told them what was going on. And so then, my parents asked me if I was gay and I said, "No."

A

Ash Bruxvoort 16:44

And then I was closeted, then, from fourteen until I was about twenty-four, twenty-five. I got divorced when I was twenty-four and then I think I actually came out when I was—I started to come out when I was like twenty-five. And then I—and then I was—when I got divorced, I actually then, like, left the state of Iowa. I basically kind of ran away from home and was like working on organic vegetable farms around the country and stuff like that. And then only after I did that for a while, did I actually come back home and come out to my parents and my family. So it's definitely still difficult on my dad's side of the family, in terms of me being out.

S

Steven Saada 17:50

Do the sides of your family, like, interact a lot or is it very separate?

A

Ash Bruxvoort 17:57

Between my mom's side of the family and my dad's side?

S

Steven Saada 18:00

Yeah.

A

Ash Bruxvoort 18:00

Oh, they don't interact at all. My parents are—

M

Marti Payseur 18:05

The funeral is a good example of that.

A

Ash Bruxvoort 18:06

Yeah, no, my parents are—they came from very, like, different backgrounds. Um, and their families—they don't necessarily dislike each other, but they're definitely not interacting with each other. And, yeah, Marti just said—so my grandmother, who was a very significant person in my life, she—my paternal grandmother—actually died last year—it's just been one year—um, she and I actually shared a birthday—and she, like, taught me how to read and write, which was like very significant to me, because I am a writer. So

anyway, and she like basically raised me a lot of the time when I was growing up. And I always kind of knew—I mean, not necessarily always knew, but definitely in my adult life, I'd kind of come to the realization that I was probably not going to maintain contact with most people on my dad's side of the family after my grandma passed away. And so her passing was significant for a lot of reasons, because it meant that I was actually probably going to be not seeing a lot of those people again. And at her funeral, Marti was not allowed to come. And she—in the program and like at the service, they go through and they list all of the kids and the grandkids and their spouses and stuff. And one of my cousins—it's actually the same cousin who told me that I was going to hell for being a fat fag—her boyfriend was listed in the program and acknowledged at the service, even though they had been dating for about half the length of time that Marti and I have been together. And like Marty and I own a business together, live together, have built our whole life together. Um, yeah, it was very upsetting. And—

M

Marti Payseur 20:17

It was a hard moment, because how do you, you know, like—I, I wanted to be really understanding of the situation, but I also had a lot of rage in, in that moment that this person that I loved so dearly, is suffering and I'm not allowed to be there to comfort them, just because we're gay. And, and it made for like, kind of a weird bounce back too, from Ash's dad, because, he kind of _____ (??) the determining factor for the decision for me not to attend the funeral. And, and they're really—they're very supportive of us. Ash's parents are very supportive of us. But in that moment, it didn't really feel that way, because there are all these layered family dynamics that exist.

A

Ash Bruxvoort 21:26

Yes, my parents are very accepting of me and of us and we have no issues anymore with any of that. But, um, I think one thing that's really difficult about being queer is that even like, well-meaning parents and family members don't necessarily know how to be good advocates, or know—because, like, they don't understand the family dynamics or the way that there are all of these systemic barriers. I mean, like, I see that with both of our parents —

M

Marti Payseur 22:04

Totally.

A

Ash Bruxvoort 22:04

—all of the time, that it's only through us explaining why something is not right that they come to this understanding of it. And that's one of the things that I think is so frustrating about social change, is that, like, to get things to scale, there's all of these conversations that have to happen, and it takes a long time to like really make people understand this stuff. And I think about that all of the time, especially coming from a rural background, just about how social change actually happens through conversation, which is wonderful in concept until you actually have to execute those conversations on like a massive scale.

M

Marti Payseur 22:17

And people can be so well-meaning but also like really lack an understanding and sometimes those people are even harder to move from an organizing perspective than people who just don't, don't know anything.

S

Steven Saada 23:10

What are some of the conversations that you've had or like things you've had to explain?

M

Marti Payseur 23:19

So, with my mother—and you know, she's radically intelligent, has identified as a lifelong feminist, was like, definitely a hardcore second-wave feminist in the '60s. When I came out to her, which I imagine might be a question later, because if it was a fun one—but in kind of the aftermath of coming out to her—I've struggled with depression my whole life—and my mom said, "Well, aren't you just relieved of your burden, now? You know, aren't you just happy you can finally be who you are?" And, you know, I had to explain to her that it's not quite that simple. I—there—you know, gay culture, particularly trying to figure out, like, how to speak an entire different language when you're twenty-seven and you've had this whole systemic identity shift happen, that you definitely were not planning for, was, was really hard. And so, having to explain that to her took a while.

M

Marti Payseur 24:50

One that comes to mind for me, that's a bit more topical, was Pete Buttigieg and how it's my belief and the belief of so many in the queer community that we've had conversations with, that he like—and now it doesn't matter—but that he would have been a really bad candidate for the queer community, because he is not only the moderate perspective, but a lot of his policies and a lot of his platform would have actually, you know, been detrimental, particularly as it related to health care, for the queer community, and putting

power towards corporations that have systemically oppressed queer people forever—having to explain that to—like, my mom got it eventually, but having to explain that to other people who were like, Yeah, we're so pro-gay. Like, we would love a gay president! And I was like, "Yeah, but not him." (laughs) Maybe not, maybe not Pete. Because there's a lot of, a lot of nuance to understand there. You know, the difference between being pro-gay and being for, like, a radical queer future, I think is a moment that I've had to butt up against. And I guess those conversations usually take the place of politics, because it seems to be the place when we can really identify and move our family along a continuum. To say, It's cool that you are like, you know, down with the gays, but, maybe let's think a little bit more about, like, gender not being a binary. And those conversations, I think, have been, have been interesting—and hard.

A

Ash Bruxvoort 26:47

Yeah, I think when I came out it was really even just like very basic, like what is—I mean, I don't want to say like, what does being gay mean? But like, kind of. It was like, So are you, you know, you're only attracted to women—

M

Marti Payseur 27:04

Because you've been married to a man.

A

Ash Bruxvoort 27:06

—because I've been married to a man.

M

Marti Payseur 27:06

That's a hard thing for people.

A

Ash Bruxvoort 27:08

Yeah, that is a hard thing for people. So you were married to a man, but now you are a lesbian. And also, like, I cut my hair off, because that's what people do when they come out when they're dykes. (Marti laughs) It's like, they cut their hair and I—Marti and I are both very tall. I am about six feet tall. And so I looked, like, pretty masculine. And so then I started getting a lot of questions from—mostly my mother, but then also just random people, too, people I met at parties and things like that, who would ask if I was trans and so then I had like, basically been out, you know, as a lesbian, for three months and then people are starting to ask me if I'm trans and I'm like, "I don't know. I don't think so." You

know, "What?" And then my mom's, like, asking me lots of questions about that stuff. And like Marti says, when you first come out and you're an adult, there is—and you've already—for one thing, you've been out of the dating pool thing nightmare for a while, and—

M

Marti Payseur 28:24

And you've established, like—I mean, I was very much in a position where I, I was somewhat of a public figure, because I had worked in the Des Moines nonprofit museum world for a while, and I knew a lot of people, because I was an event planner, and like, that's just, that's just how your business works: You just know everybody and, you know, people would ask me about my husband and I would go, "He's fine." (laughs) Or, or I have to have that conversation, um, and you've known me as one version of myself for, like, maybe ten years at that point. So I think that's hard, too.

A

Ash Bruxvoort 29:11

Yeah, definitely. That was one of the most difficult things about getting a divorce, for me, was that I was—I don't want to say I was prominent, but I was well-connected in, like, the Des Moines nonprofit community, especially around the environmental community, and my husband was as well. And so when we got divorced—there's just a lot of shame that comes around getting divorced. And then you also have to work through all of the shame that you've built up over the course of your life about being queer, and then you also have to learn all of the words and what everything means and all of the codes of dating, like, people who—and there's like so much to know about dating when you're queer. It's like, really, we have to have books about it, literally, because there's so much to know. And then, you have your family, who is like, uneducated and has no idea and you know, like, a little more than they do, and they're asking you these questions and then like, you're also having to navigate what your identity is through that entire process. It's intense.

A

Ash Bruxvoort 30:27

Um, so I feel like we kind of started talking about something else, but that is the kind of stuff that I typically would be talking about with my parents, specifically more with my mom. And I will say, too, I feel like my mom had had—she had a gay man who was her hairdresser. She had a gay man who was her boss. She had this gay uncle person who was part of—that's part of my family, too. You know, so she interacted pretty regularly with gay men, but I think she did not know a single lesbian. Actually, one of the first lesbians I ever met, was the mother of my high school—my first boyfriend—was a lesbian (Marti laughs), and I, I knew that I was like her. (Ash and Marti laugh). There's something that's a little off-putting in—I remember him telling me, like, "My mom's a lesbian—"

M Marti Payseur 31:28
"And they go to Melissa Etheridge shows—"

A Ash Bruxvoort 31:30
Yes, with her—

M Marti Payseur 31:31
—with her—

A Ash Bruxvoort 31:31
—with her best friend. (Marti laughs) And they, they were still married—she was still married to his dad at this point. Eventually they did divorce and then she came out and, like, got together with the friend, But yeah, I remember, like, on one of the first dates that we ever had, my first boyfriend and I—he was like, "Yeah, my mom's a lesbian, but she, like, hasn't come out yet." And I also remember that being, like, kind of intriguing to me, like, "Oh, your mom's a lesbian?" Like, "Woohoo!" (laughs) Like, "You're not, but—" (Marti and Ash laugh)

M Marti Payseur 32:05
Something exotic. (Marti and Ash laugh)

A Ash Bruxvoort 32:07
Yeah, it's exciting. Well, and that was actually the first relationship I had after I went back in the closet. So it was sort of like a comfort thing, too, I think.

M Marti Payseur 32:20
Yeah.

S Steven Saada 32:23
Um, so what—you talked a little bit about what it was like kind of trying to go into queer culture as an adult. Can you talk a little bit more about that, like experiences you've had, things you've had to learn?

M

Marti Payseur 32:37

(Ash laughs) Yeah. Um, so, as I mentioned, I've, I've always had—I mean, it's been a few different men—but I've always had—like, my best friend has always been a gay man. And I—like, about the time that I was, I was in deep depression, I was probably twenty-five or so, I'd switched jobs, really hated my job, and, you know, when you start analyzing one aspect of your life, so many more come to light as, you know, like, What can I fix in order to get myself to a place where I'm more satisfied? And my best friend at the time, he had moved to the Cedar Rapids area, and so I would go visit him on the weekends and like, my husband was fine with it, because there was no threat, because he's a gay man. So—and it became very apparent to me that it was like the only time that I could be sort of free, but we would go to this one gay bar—the only gay bar in Cedar Rapids. I say that like there's a lot to select from. There's just one. (laughs) But we would go out and, you know, basically I would try and facilitate like a hook up for him.

M

Marti Payseur 34:04

And then, you know, fast forward two years, and I had to figure out how to navigate those same spaces, but with a totally different lens—for myself, alongside him and that was— So I—for my twenty-seventh birthday, my best friend Nick and I went to Toronto. And we always traveled for our birthdays. It's like something that we, we try to do and just the two of us go. I was still married to my husband and I had met Ash. And Toronto is—we stayed in West Queen West, which is like the gayest part of the city. It's like just—it's a—the gayborhood, and I went to the lesbian bar. It was the first time I had ever been in a lesbian bar. I've been in so many gay bars, but like, there just aren't very many spaces that are designed for queer women. And it was called the Beaver, which is hilarious and my favorite. (laughs) And I recall having dinner with him, before going there, and having a panic attack the entire time at dinner, because I was so nervous that if I went to this place, that I wouldn't know how to be me. And I think that's really the hard part about coming out is like, Okay, I'm going to come out and share this authentic version of myself with everyone, but holy shit, I have no idea, like, what act to put on. And then, like, through the process of coming out, you understand that it's not an act. It's like who you've always been, and who, who you are. But there's this tremendous pressure in that moment to figure—like, I remember thinking, you know, I didn't even know what to wear. And I was like, Oh, I probably should wear a flannel, because that's what lesbians do. And like, that's (laughs) not necessarily my brand.

A

Ash Bruxvoort 36:34

I don't know, you wear quite a bit of flannel.

M Marti Payseur 36:36
Now I do but, (Ash laughs) but at the time, you know, I—

A Ash Bruxvoort 36:39
You used to wear a lot of dresses all the time.

M Marti Payseur 36:42
Yeah, I used to wear a lot of dresses and a lot of high heels and—yeah, but it felt like a costume to me, and I also was always peripherally aware that pretty much everyone I listened to musically was gay. But then, like, you hear it different when you realize, Oh, this is like a representation of a culture that I belong to. And so I think that was a really distinct moment for me in which I was hearing, like, Tegan and Sara, and Brandon Carlisle in a whole different light, where they were actually speaking to things that I had experienced or things that I wanted to experience.

A Ash Bruxvoort 36:43
Oh my gosh, the things I had to learn.

M Marti Payseur 37:10
I think your—the book example, the—you when you were going to Colorado, you were on your way across the country: That's my favorite.

A Ash Bruxvoort 37:43
Mmm, yeah, okay. So, um, like I said, I got divorced when I was twenty-four and I decided to actually quit my job. I'd been working at The Nature Conservancy for two years and I'd been married for two years. So I decided to leave both of those commitments at the same time. And I ended up—this is like kind of an integral part of my whole story, I guess. Um, so I ended up starting to work on vegetable farms and I did it through an organization called Women, Food and Agriculture Network when I first got started, and then I became very involved with that and was very involved with WFAN up until very recently. But—so that was like the first farm that I worked on, was in western Iowa, and I'd been there for three months and then I basically—I decided I was going to move to California. So I went to California and I was going to stay there for four months and I left right around Halloween. I remember I went out the night before with my friends and basically almost

all of my friends were straight, except for one of my closest friends, who—he and I had been friends since we were in high school, and we actually dated for a while when we were in high school, and his name's Dennis and he is also gay. So Dennis was—I think I knew he was gay at that point in time, but I didn't know that he was actually dating one of our other very close friends.

A

Ash Bruxvoort 39:37

So I left and I was—I got up in the morning and I was driving across Nebraska and listening to music that was, like, from my high school iPod that I had found when I'd been packing, and then I just kind of realized that I was gay, like on the drive. I was just, like, talking to myself while I was driving, listening to these old songs from high school, and I was just like, You know, Ash, it's time to just come out and face the fact that you are a lesbian. And, you know, that's what's happened. And so I didn't really consciously know that that's what I was doing, moving away from home so that I could come out, but unconsciously that's kind of what I had apparently decided to do. (laughs)

A

Ash Bruxvoort 40:38

And I tried to date men for a while after I got divorced. I had kind of like a boyfriend for a while and I was just sort of like over it. (laughs). So, anyway, I was really excited, because I was going to Denver for the night and I was going to stay in an Airbnb and Airbnb was kind of like new back then. because this is in—what, 2014?—Airbnb was kind of a new concept around that time. And I did not tell my parents that I was staying in Airbnbs, because that would have been dangerous. And so I get to Denver and I go and I find a bookstore, because I decide I'm going to try to find a book about being a lesbian. (Ash and Marti laugh)

M

Marti Payseur 41:28

"How To—" (Marti and Ash laugh)

A

Ash Bruxvoort 41:32

So that kind of became a thing, then, for me. I stopped— was traveling—So I did this a couple times, where I would, like, move across the country and I would go to work on a farm. And I would take, like, a couple weeks in between and I would just drive and travel and I would stay at different Airbnbs and stuff like that along the way. And so, I would do this in like every city that I went to; I would go to bookstores and I would go to their LGBTQ sections and I would try to find books. So like I would find lesbian erotica. I would

find used books from like the '70s about being a lesbian. Like, one book was actually called Lesbian Choices, like choices you have to make as a lesbian. There was one about, like, the lesbian guide to relationships. Keep in mind, I was like, not dating anyone at this time, not even kissing anybody at this time. (laughs) There was no—

M Marti Payseur 42:31

And you hadn't, like, had any kind of interaction with a woman since you were a teenager.

A Ash Bruxvoort 42:37

Since I was a teenager, yeah. So like, I was in this really difficult situation where, like, I've had sexual experiences with women, but not for a long time. So that was one whole part of it. And when I was working on vegetable farms, I would try to go out and stuff, but when you're living in the middle of nowhere, like the towns I lived in, they have like ninety-five people were the population, and then you would have to go into the city, which would be like a very small city, like of maybe, at most, fifty thousand people, and that—there you might find some other queer people, but on the farms I was at, I was always like the only queer person, and I didn't even know how to be queer. I was just like, lost. Lost out in the woods trying to find my way.

A Ash Bruxvoort 43:28

Autostraddle.

A Ash Bruxvoort 43:29

Yes, Autostraddle was huge. They have—it's like a lesbian online publication. I read everything from Autostraddle during that whole period of time. I read a ton of books. Ursula Le Guin, who is not queer, but talks a lot about anti-capitalism and has a lot of queer characters and stuff like that in her writing, um—

S Steven Saada 43:51

Who was that?

A Ash Bruxvoort 43:52

Ursula K. Le Guin: She's a science fiction writer. Um, she was very significant to me. Also at

this time, I was going to a Buddhist temple, when I lived in California. And so I was exploring religion a lot at that time and kind of coming out with my spiritual beliefs, which was also very significant, because my mom also has similar spiritual beliefs. And so that was something else that I kind of had a lot of, like, layers with as a child. So like unraveling all of this stuff.

A

Ash Bruxvoort 44:32

Then I moved back to Iowa, because I broke my hand and I couldn't keep working on farms. And this was kind of when I came out to my parents. I started actually dating—and I was only dating women at this point in time—in Des Moines, but I was spending pretty much all of my time, in terms of hanging out with other people, with heterosexual men. And my friend Dennis, who was gay, was part of the same friends group, but he actually ended up leaving and moving to California, basically right after I came back home. And so then I was kind of starting to, I would say, explore gender and sexuality around that period of time, when I was dating women for, like, the first time, too, and maybe starting to explore the idea that maybe I didn't just identify as being a woman, too. So this is when that sort of first came into my worldview.

M

Marti Payseur 45:49

And people were asking questions of you—

A

Ash Bruxvoort 45:50

People were asking questions of me, but I also, I think, because I was predominantly—I felt really more comfortable hanging out with men and so that was part of something that I was dealing with at that point in time. And then, and then I had a long-term partner before I got together with Marti, and that was a lesbian relationship. And then my friend, Dennis, who, as I mentioned, was also gay—the three of us were all living together in, like, a gay house, basically. Um, and so then there was like this whole other thing of navigating having queer roommates and what does that look like, when you have two lesbians living with a gay man, and all of that stuff?

A

Ash Bruxvoort 45:52

But there was—I felt when I was first dating that I had no idea what I was doing. It was very stressful for me. I hated dating. I was an anxious mess, even by the time Marti and I got together—and I'd been dating for a while at that point—I was still kind of an anxious mess when it came to dating, because I like to know what to do and in like queer

relationships, it's not always that clear. And especially if it's—at least on the surface—it's like a femme-femme dynamic, there's just a lot that you have to learn. And I think there's many layers, especially because you're not only dipping into, like, Oh, I'm looking—I'm a woman looking for a woman, I can be like, I am a nonbinary femme looking for somebody who is also a nonbinary femme, or not, or like someone who is in a poly relationship, or like, I don't want to date somebody who's in a poly relationship, and so how can I make that differentiation when I'm dating? Or like, I don't want to sleep with somebody who is married to a man. All of that kind of stuff has to get navigated all of the time when you're dating, especially because everything happens online. And that's like the only way to find other queer people in a city like Des Moines is through dating apps and, like, meeting some other people so that then you can meet other people.

M

Marti Payseur 48:16

Yeah, and I think like learning the language of that was very hard and complicated for me, because I had never—I truly never dated. And, and—

A

Ash Bruxvoort 48:35

And there's, like, codes.

M

Marti Payseur 48:37

Yeah, there's codes.

A

Ash Bruxvoort 48:38

People use like emojis and you're supposed to know what that means. (Marti laughs) And if you don't know what "unicorn" means, then, like, you could get yourself into a situation, because it's not just a unicorn. (Marti and Ash laugh) So you have to, like, learn all of that stuff, which is why you need a website like Autostraddle and like these websites that tell you this stuff, but then you have to actually be able to find those, too.

M

Marti Payseur 49:07

And, uh, and there's like this fear factor of it, that when you are, I think—I think that there's fear and anxiety in the whole spectrum of queer culture—by design, right? Like we are fearful all of the time that there will be, uh, you know, rights taken away from us, that there will be violence committed on—to us, and so it, like, permeates sort of the culture even within queer interaction, but there's this, this notion, I think particularly present for women,

that is unpacking, like, I want to pursue but not fall prey to toxic masculinity and, like, the traditional trappings of a heterosexual relationship, but also, I may want to be more, like, socially or sexually dominant in that relationship and in that interaction than I'm allowed to be as this, like, more careful—like to be pursued. You know, I think women—queer women—really, oftentimes struggle with knowing how to navigate those waters: Who is the pursuer? How active can I be in this interaction? And how can I figure out how to do that when I am attracted to somebody? Everyone talks about the, like, gay stare, you know, that you like—the way that you hit on a woman is just to, like, look in gay across the room. And I feel like that's a real typical interaction in queer girl culture, like, nobody wants to make the first move. Nobody wants to be the one who, you know, potentially makes somebody uncomfortable and so it's just this like, coded waiting. You have to figure that out. (Marti laughs)

A Ash Bruxvoort 51:37
Yeah, it takes time. It's like a long process. (Marti laughs).

S Steven Saada 51:47
How did you meet each other, then?

A Ash Bruxvoort 51:50
We met through the internet—

M Marti Payseur 51:51
—the internet. (Marti and Ash laugh)

A Ash Bruxvoort 51:54
Yeah, we met through an app called Her and like she said, Marti was with her ex-husband at this point in time, so—and I had just broken up with my girlfriend, and so I was excited to start dating again. And I felt like I had learned a lot about being queer and so I was, like, more ready to enter the dating scene than I was when I had the first time around, before this other relationship. Um, and I think it's also important to note the political moment that we were in at that time, because this is also around—this was like, right after Donald Trump was elected. Bernie Sanders had inspired, you know, many people, and I was definitely somebody who was involved in that campaign and then I became very

active in Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) and was organizing women and queer people in the Des Moines area around these issues, um, and these identities.

A Ash Bruxvoort 53:08
And so Marti and I, like, met through a dating app. And this was also around the time when I was really starting to get more into DSA stuff. And, um, yeah—

M Marti Payseur 53:24
Can I tell it?

A Ash Bruxvoort 53:26
Yeah, you tell the story. (Marti laughs) You tell the story.

M Marti Payseur 53:30
So, yeah, I had this, like, particularly potent interaction with a woman when I was traveling and it—I just couldn't get it out of my head. And I had gone to my husband and I said, like, "Hey, I think—I don't know what's going on with me. But I think that this is something I need to explore and I need you to just, like, give me some grace and patience in that." And he, he said, "Absolutely. Like, this is something that you need to, need to figure out for yourself and I love you for who you are and I want you to be the person that you feel comfortable with."

M Marti Payseur 54:24
And so we matched and I have this distinct memory of seeing Ash's face for the first time. And I was at a bar and there—we were with like a group of our friends—not Ash and I, but some of my colleagues—and I remember seeing Ash's face and I was like, "Woah." (laughs) I was instantly, like, lightning bolts attracted. And we started texting and in Ash's dating profile there were like several photos with, you know, very, very cute. And then there was this slide that was text and it said, "eco-feminist, radical socialist, farmer, educator, TERFS and"—something, somebody else—"need not apply."

A Ash Bruxvoort 55:25
I have no idea what that would have been.

M

Marti Payseur 55:26

It was—you were like something, something along those lines. (Ash laughs) And I remember thinking, like, This person is serious and I would really like to meet them. And so we started texting. And one of the first messages we exchanged, because I had a lot of game, and this was like a pretty frequent line of mine—but if somebody was telling me that they were listening to music, you know, I would say—and I do believe this—that like, “Tell me about your playlist for this thing, because it basically tells me everything I need to know about you.” So Ash was going to the gym and assembling a playlist and said that it had, I think, Tyler the Creator, Sleater Kinney, and some—somebody else on there.

A

Ash Bruxvoort 56:20

Probably, like, Pixies, and—

M

Marti Payseur 56:22

Yeah, probably—Yeah. And Sleater Kinney is basically my favorite band of all time, and they hadn’t put out music in a really long time at that point, and so it was, it was pretty niche to be still, you know, a riot girl nerd, at that point in time. And it—we basically never stopped talking from there. Our first date, Ash plunked down, didn’t even introduce themselves, and just started in with, like, how they had had this really hard day. And it kind of never stopped. We, we stopped dating, for a while, because I needed to—

A

Ash Bruxvoort 57:12

We both needed time to recover from our breakups and to kind of, like, find ourselves individually, I think, before we could come together.

M

Marti Payseur 57:20

But we never stopped talking. I mean, we were very much like best friends, and, um, Ash was like the first person that I would talk to when something went sideways in my life and it, and it wasn’t ever in a way—because I think millennials do this sometimes where it’s like, Oh, we’re like, air quotes, friends. But, you know, you’re still, like, potentially sleeping together or at least engaged in a way that is flirtatious. That really wasn’t us. We put all of that into a tight box and I was so grateful to have someone who could understand some of the things that I was experiencing and going through. And I was so grateful for just like this, this easy and wonderful, beautiful friendship that blossomed for us.

A Ash Bruxvoort 58:11
Well, because Marti was going through so many of the same things that I had gone through just a few years before, and so we did have a lot to share and talk about. And we were also at very similar points in our career and so we shared a lot of—just help with each other, helping each other on projects and stuff like that, too, because we were both in nonprofit jobs where, like, you're doing the work of three people. And so sometimes there would be like, I would maybe have downtime, so I could help her with something or she would maybe have a little time and she could help me with something and—

M Marti Payseur 58:44
Yeah, there was this beautiful mutual aid that happened. And then, and then we, like, both very much made this conscious decision that if we were going to date, it was not ever going to happen lightly.

A Ash Bruxvoort 59:02
Right. Yeah.

M Marti Payseur 59:04
(Marti laughs) That it was pretty serious.

A Ash Bruxvoort 59:07
So then we did actually start dating then, like, the following spring is when we actually committed to dating, but we'd kind of been sort of getting to know each other throughout that whole period of time. And then, that—it really wasn't much longer after that, then, that we started looking for Thistle's Summit.

M Marti Payseur 59:30
Yeah.

A Ash Bruxvoort 59:31
And we were also doing a fair amount of organizing together within DSA at this time, so we were working together in a lot of different ways. And I think, like, one of the last things that we did together in Des Moines was we ran a spaghetti dinner fundraiser for the

Eastern Iowa Community Bond Project and I was really nervous about moving to Mount Vernon and into this house with Marti and what I was doing, but I also knew from that experience, specifically on that project, working with her, that we would be able to work things out, because we work on working together. And that was really important to me, to have somebody—and even early on in our dating, we said that to each other, that like our dream was basically always that we would have a partner that we would work with, and that was really important for the longevity of any long term relationship we would get into.

S Steven Saada 60:42

So tell me about your decision to start a B & B, then, specifically like a queer B & B.

M Marti Payseur 60:50

Um, so we had been drinking some wine, where (laughs) all, all good ideas are birthed, and in Ash's previous life and previous career, there was a trend in organic and sustainable farms, that they would have—need to diversify their income. And so Ash had become aware of this and that there were a lot of folks who were starting bed and breakfasts or starting, you know, an Airbnb, whatever that might look like, um, to make sure that they could keep their farm afloat. And we'd been talking about this one person in particular who has a bed and breakfast in the Midwest, and we—like, I flippantly said, "Well, we could start a bed and breakfast," you know, fueled by lots of red wine. And it, it makes sense now, kind of, but, um, I've worked in events and hospitality my entire career and I love to cook and Ash is an amazing and avid grower of food and herbs and, like, there are some intelligences that came together in a really beautiful way, but on paper, I wouldn't have necessarily said that I thought my life was going to be owning a bed and breakfast. But I was at a point in my career where I needed to move to a major metropolitan city and work for a bigger museum, or I needed to get out. And I was so tired and so burnt out that this sounded really, like, the Hallmark, idyllic, perfect solution.

A Ash Bruxvoort 62:44

Well, and I had told you when you got your divorce that you needed to do something. (Marti laughs) I said, "You need to burn your life down." I said, "You need to just totally, like, go do something completely different from what you've been doing, try something completely different that you would never think that you would do, because this is what I did and I felt like it was really helpful." And then I got roped into this. (Marti laughs) This is how it happened. Marti and I were like, looking at this—you know, I showed her this

person who I knew who had this bed and breakfast, showed her the website. We were looking at this stuff, she was like, "I could do this." I'm just kind of like, "Okay." Like—

M Marti Payseur 63:24
Well, you know—

A Ash Bruxvoort 63:25
—what do you do? (Marti and Ash laugh) And then the next thing I knew—

M Marti Payseur 63:28
—and then I got on Zillow the next day—

A Ash Bruxvoort 63:30
—we're looking at houses and—

M Marti Payseur 63:34
—and, uh, we were like, "Oh, we're just going to go look, you know. We're just going to go look at it. No harm in that." But it's like when you go to the animal rescue league and you are just going to go look at dogs, like no one has ever just gone to look at a dog.

A Ash Bruxvoort 63:49
Well, I think this is important too: she sent me a message and said, "So if you were going to open a bed and breakfast, where do you think you would do it?" And I said, I thought I would maybe do it around Solon, because I went to the University of Iowa and Solon is right outside of Iowa City—

M Marti Payseur 64:05
—and Big Grove Brewery is based there.

A Ash Bruxvoort 64:08
Yeah. And they have a couple, like, nice restaurants. There's some people I know who farm

in Solon, too. And so I thought that it might be an okay spot. Well, we didn't know this at the time, but you actually can't open a bed and breakfast in Solon. But houses there, because of the proximity to Iowa City, are more expensive and the local government is not as amenable to small businesses like ours, whereas in Mount Vernon, the main street and the local community is very supportive of this, and there's other bed and breakfasts in this town, too, although I would say that we're probably one of the more prominent ones. Um —

M Marti Payseur 64:51

And so we—I mean, really, we had sort of talked about this, like, as a joke, and how cool it would be to have this radical queer space that—and we thought we would name rooms after famous books or writers in the queer canon and that we would have this farm-to-table notion where Ash would do all of the growing and I would do all of the cooking. And it all just was sort of this dream that I think happens when you are very newly in love and you are crafting that life together. And then we walked into this house and we knew we had to do it.

M Marti Payseur 65:43

And, I mean, all it all came together within the span of—

A Ash Bruxvoort 65:51

A month.

M Marti Payseur 65:51

Yeah. Well, I mean really, like, making the offer on the house. We have a little bit of trouble with closing; it took a while. But within the span of two weeks, I had sold my house. I sold my house in Des Moines with six hours on the market. I mean, it was just unheard of, like all the obstacles cleared out and we were able to have this, this come to fruition and—

A Ash Bruxvoort 66:21

Kind of. We had some issues in the purchasing of this house and that was very stressful.

M Marti Payseur 66:26

It was.

A

Ash Bruxvoort 66:26

For a while, we were stuck in that process.

M

Marti Payseur 66:29

But initially, it seemed like everything was just really happening. And then, you know, it became very real, at least for me, when I was speaking at a conference in Chicago, and we were driving to Chicago and we went by, you know, like Mount Vernon, Iowa City, and we were like, Oh, our house is there. On the way back, we'll have to come see it. And we checked into this beautiful hotel in downtown Chicago and we were asked three separate times in the span of check it in which, you know, is such a short period of time, if we were sure we wanted a king bed, and I was like, "What don't you get here about this?" I, I just find this to be so tremendously uncomfortable.

M

Marti Payseur 67:20

Um, and I think from then on, for me, when we, we came to see our house and we sat outside of it on this massive hill that's just outside our home on Cornell's campus, when we were coming back to Des Moines, and I just sat there and looked at it and I thought that like this is going to be in some ways such a radical space and a space that people—I never want them to have to experience that, that we had. I wanted it to be this space that would just like, be here with open arms and feel comfortable for whoever you are and whoever you love.

A

Ash Bruxvoort 68:04

Yeah. And I think that was one moment that definitely inspired the creation of this space and I think that some of the other things that kind of inspired it, or made us aware that we—like, a place like this needed to exist, was when I was with my ex-girlfriend, she I stayed at a small bed and breakfast. We went on—actually, we went on an Iowa Prairie Network field outing—I'm wearing an Iowa Prairie Network t-shirt right now. Uh, and so I had booked—I think it's in, like, Rockford, Iowa, I want to say— anyway, we stayed at this bed and breakfast, and it was a really lovely experience, but the rooms were named after things like Peter Pan and Alice in Wonderland and there were little dresses and things on the walls and lace doilies and stuff like that, which is what you would expect in a bed and breakfast of that nature. But I remember we were talking about it and we were like, "We want to be like the opposite." (Marti laughs) "And we want to be, like—we don't—we want to be unapologetic about who we are and we want our bed and breakfast to be"—and obviously we had both stayed in Airbnbs a lot and I traveled very frequently for my job

and so I was always staying in Airbnbs and stuff like that. So we had, like, ideas about what we wanted to do.

A

Ash Bruxvoort 69:47

But then also another aspect of this was that the nature of my job—working in sustainable agriculture—I was often working in smaller towns, smaller communities—communities that are much more conservative than Mount Vernon, but I had had some situations—experiences where like, I'd been chased out of gas station parking lots, had, you know, been threatened in gas station bathrooms, things like this, for being queer. If people thought that I was, you know, trans, that usually escalated the situation more. So that was a situation that I dealt with pretty regularly, and so knowing all of these things, and having these kind of separate and then joint experiences, we thought—also in the political moment that we were in at that time—that having a bed and breakfast that was made by young queer people, for queer people, would be something that people might like, and people thought we were like, kind of crazy. Like they definitely thought we were crazy when we told them about this and definitely thought—like Marti had a very—she was the director of events at the Des Moines Art Center. She had a very prominent job that she walked away from—I kept my job for quite a while, because I work from home—to come here and do this. And, you know, I thought we were crazy. Like, we basically hadn't really even been dating for that long. We didn't know each—we knew each other very well, because we had really developed a very intense and deep bond and had basically been spending all of our time together, but I was very hesitant about this. I was very nervous. I did not know how I would feel about having people come and stay in my home and I had a lot of hesitation. But—

M

Marti Payseur 71:54

I just knew—and I think we both knew—that we were called to do this.

A

Ash Bruxvoort 71:58

There was like an unexplainable force that, like, made us do it. And so I had to just kind of like, jump, even though I had all of these fears and trepidations and anxieties, which is hilarious, because I was the one who told her—

M

Marti Payseur 72:12

—to do it—

A Ash Bruxvoort 72:12
—to burn her life down. (Marti laughs) But—and I also at that time, I had looked at moving into an apartment with somebody else in Iowa City, too, because I felt unsure about like, if this would work. But it was so clear, but that was not the option. So then we just did it. And we had our challenges. We had our share of challenges, but we have also had some amazing, once-in-a-lifetime, just wild life experiences. Like I have not ever experienced doing anything else in my life. So—

M Marti Payseur 72:59
Can you get the charger?

A Ash Bruxvoort 73:02
Oh I've got to go—

M Marti Payseur 73:03
Can we pause for just a second?

S Steven Saada 73:05
Yeah.

M Marti Payseur 73:05
Charger. Okay.

S Steven Saada 73:06
(pause) There we go, recording again.

M Marti Payseur 73:10
Okay. Um, the last thing to kind of add, that I think was really critical, and I think it's important to know about us—So in my work for the museum I was in charge of planning accessible public programming, and because I believe that art contextualizes—like the art can be used to contextualize the current moment in which we exist in and that's the

philosophy of contemporary art, I wanted to make sure that, that the museum could be a space of political action and not just a space of, you know, beautiful paintings on walls. And so I had worked hard to create programming that was related to social justice and related to what was happening.

A Ash Bruxvoort 74:15

And you were very focused on representation and intersectionality.

M Marti Payseur 74:19

Yeah. Yes. And, um, museums are having a bit of a crisis of faith right now. They want to wade into the waters of being a conduit for political change and that was very much the space that I was caught, caught in, in those crossfires, and I, I found, like, every time that I would have push back, because I was being too political. That I was like, Man, this doesn't feel good to me. I really want to be able to have a space in which I can be unapologetic about who I am, that I can be a conduit for social change and that I can, you know, do so in a way that is integral to a brand, and not just a mechanism to get more people in the door. And Ash and I had worked together. Ash actually founded the Socialist Feminist—uh—

A Ash Bruxvoort 75:28

—Working Group.

M Marti Payseur 75:28

—Working Group for Central Iowa Democratic Socialists of America, and we'd done a lot of work there. And we wanted this space to be a true unapologetic space and that was really integral to, to why we did this as well.

A Ash Bruxvoort 75:47

Yeah, and I had—and that's basically kind of what I did in my full-time job, too. I brought women together for, like, learning circles and I did training on running for office for women in the sustainable agriculture and food justice movement. So that's what I was doing kind of like up until when we started Thistle's Summit. So I was bringing all of that experience to what I was doing in DSA, which basically meant that I was organizing twenty-four/seven. I was working like all the time. And so some of the only social interactions I really had were with Marti, I would say, other than like, all of the work I was doing. And I was really

interested in organizing not in a city. I really wanted to be doing something that was in a smaller community and so that was also sort of part of the thought process when we moved to Mount Vernon, was that we were going to kind of bring our energy and who we were and our skills and abilities to this community to try to kind of push it in a more intersectional direction. And we felt like Mount Vernon was a place that was liberal enough that we would be accepted, although we were not totally sure when we moved here how our neighbors and how the community at large would feel about us. But we actually talked to Joe Jennison, who is the main street director here—

M Marti Payseur 77:33
And he's a gay man.

A Ash Bruxvoort 77:33
And he's a gay man and like a public—publicly gay man. And he assured us that he'd never really had any issues with being gay in Mount Vernon, and that he thought we would be well-accepted, which has definitely been the case.

M Marti Payseur 77:50
Absolutely.

S Steven Saada 77:53
So can you describe the B & B? Or like, you know, what did you name the rooms, how have you made it intersectional and welcoming?

A Ash Bruxvoort 78:06
That's something we're always trying to do better at, too, but—

M Marti Payseur 78:10
For sure. So the house was built for a dean of Cornell College. So Cornell College is our front yard for all intents and purposes. At the back of—we sit on a fourth of an acre—and at the back of the fourth of an acre, there are beautiful woods. So it's really, very idyllic setting. The home was built for one of the original dean's of Cornell and his wife in 1901. And it is a four-story, sort of Victorian, sort of mission—it's kind of, like, straddling the line

—custom home that is on the historic registry in Mount Vernon. It is on— The main floor, you come in and there's our beautiful lobby and we greet you with our dog who may or may not have a small bark once in a while. (laughs) But it has a beautiful open-concept living area, original woodwork, original fireplace, a big farm kitchen and a sun porch as well as a massive front porch.

M

Marti Payseur 78:20

All of the guest rooms are on the second level. We have three guest rooms and we also have a small yoga studio up there that has the ability—as an amenity for our guests, but we're certainly considering in the future potentially expanding. Business has been kind to us and we would love the opportunity to host more folks. So Rubyfruit Jungle is kind of our premium room, I would say, it has an attached screened-in porch to it, and it's named after Rita Mae Brown's seminal work and her sort of journey of coming out: Rubyfruit Jungle. And it has plants and ruby tones. It's sort of bohemian in nature and overlooks our garden and our—the woods in the back.

A

Ash Bruxvoort 80:23

Also in that room—Each room has a small library of books in it. So that room has some other books. There's some other Rita Mae Brown books in there. There's also some books just about, like, women's history—

M

Marti Payseur 80:39

bell hooks is in there.

A

Ash Bruxvoort 80:40

—and there's some bell hooks books in there. And then, every room pretty much, I think, has a lesbian or queer astrology book in it, as well. (Ash and Marti laugh).

M

Marti Payseur 80:56

Um, but we—so our other two rooms, they actually join. So if you had potentially three people, or if you had a family that you were traveling with it. It's certainly convenient that they can rent separately. Martha's Room is named after, um—

A Ash Bruxvoort 81:18
It's named after an Audre Lorde poem.

M Marti Payseur 81:23
And it's a poem that she writes about—

A Ash Bruxvoort 81:26
It's like a coming out poem.

M Marti Payseur 81:27
Yeah, she's coming out through the poem. But, um, she writes about her lover and how she would feel if her lover died and she hadn't told her all of these things. And it was really important to us that we selected authors of color, to be as intersectional as possible, and also works that had really moved us. So that room is at the front of the house and you can actually see our massive pride flag _____(?). Imagine this, like, Victorian house with an enormous red flag hanging off the front porch. You can see that billowing in the wind and it's just like a really beautiful, cozy space. And then we also have a—

A Ash Bruxvoort 82:10
It has a pothos climbing up the wall, which is really cool, I think. And that one's got some —it has more books about or featuring trans characters. And then there's also some like Angela Davis books and stuff in there too.

M Marti Payseur 82:28
And then it attaches to our—it's a single room and it's actually our most rented unit. And we wanted to make sure that we offered something at a price point that's accessible to everybody, because we know that there are a lot of solo travelers who want a safe place to stay and don't have a lot of money and that they've always had to sort of do that cost/benefit analysis regarding their safety, and we didn't want that to be a concern for folks. So we call it A Room of One's Own, after Virginia Woolf, and it has—one wall is a chalkboard, where people can leave quotes that have moved them. And we always love when guests do that. And it has a writing desk and a little library in there as well. That—it's very much designed as a space for creatives to have a retreat and be able to, to hear themselves think and it overlooks a beautiful magnolia tree in our front yard.

M

Marti Payseur 83:31

We have really tried to—not only, like, through being very overt in our marketing and our branding, so that people have a good expectation of what they're walking into by the time that they get here. We have tried to feature, like, feminist and intersectional art all throughout our home. In our dining room, we have a big piece that says, "Let's move beyond binaries." And we also have a big piece that says, "Eating together is feminist art." We, we feature lots and lots of books—I mean, books and plants is really like our, our decor motif. Um, but we feature lots of books by trans authors and, and we really just focus on being as inclusive as possible in our marketing, as well.

M

Marti Payseur 84:34

I mean, we really try and like highlight and find that intersection between being a bed and breakfast—but we also know that we're not just a bed and breakfast: We know that we're a space for political action. And so our marketing very much straddles that line where we talk about issues that are affecting the queer community and that are affecting the trans community and, you know, times that people need to call their legislator. And I wouldn't have thought previously in my life that a bed and breakfast could do all of that successfully, but I'd like to think that we do.

A

Ash Bruxvoort 85:09

Yeah. Like the first month that we had like a good month here, we donated quite a bit, actually—it was like 20 percent of the money that we made—to the Iowa Harm Reduction Coalition. And so that was something that we felt really committed to. We've done stuff like that kind of throughout our time, just trying to pay attention. We have gotten more active in community stuff at times, too. We've talked to young queer people in high schools and things like that in the area. I would say another way that we are pretty intersectional is that, um, we—I mean, I'm a witch. And so we have, you know, alters, and we definitely are pretty open about the fact that we are into Earth-based spirituality. Obviously, I do astrology here, too, so that's something that sometimes our guests—

A

Ash Bruxvoort 86:15

It's interesting—So, I think it's important to explain this to people. We host a lot of queer people. We do actually host a lot of queer people. More than I thought we would. Many of them are coming here to see their families and don't want to stay with their families. Like they've moved to other states and so they're coming back. They don't want to stay with their parents, so they stay with us. A lot of them also are people who live in cities and are

queer couples, and they want to get away and they want to have a nice, idyllic, small-town experience, and they want to do it in a place where they feel safe, and so their ability to come here and stay with another queer couple affords them that ability to know that they will be safe. And, you know, and then we give them recommendations of places that we think are okay for them to go or, like, that they'll be fine to go to some of these places. Um, and we also have a lot of people who just spend a lot of their time here and they don't really leave, because they like to be here and it is like a magical place within itself. I mean, I live in Mount Vernon, Iowa, but I really live in Thistle's Summit, within Mount Vernon, Iowa. It's kind of a world within a world.

A

Ash Bruxvoort 87:37

But we also host, you know, we host a lot of straight people and we are actively educating them in the process of them staying here about what it's like to be queer in Iowa and that is a huge part of what we do, because we are an actual bed and breakfast. Marti makes breakfast for our guests. They sit down at the dining room table. Very frequently, most of the time, we sit at the—one or both of us—sits at the table and talks to our guests. They ask us questions about what it's like to live in Iowa, what it's like to be gay in Iowa, what the political atmosphere is like here. And they're from all over the country and the world. And so we tell them about these things and, um, there's a lot of education that happens, just at that breakfast table, and way more than I think I really even thought was possible. And once I started seeing how powerful those conversations could be, I would say my hesitations about doing this went away, because I started to see how powerful it was, and how powerful is for us to even just be a presence here, across campus. And the things that I hear from, like, students who know about us, too, and especially high school students in this community and in the surrounding towns know about us, and so that's been really cool. And, you know, I think that we are at the top of a hill at one of the highest points in, like, the state of Iowa with a rainbow flag. (Marti laughs) And so just the symbolic gesture of our presence is very political in itself, in addition to all of the conversations and everything that we do on top of it. I mean, I think sometimes we even forget how politically charged a lot of the work that we do is.

M

Marti Payseur 89:51

Absolutely. I mean, we sort of affectionately refer to like the mission of Thistle's Summit as "breakfast table organizing." I mean, we have so many conversations. To give you a range of things that we've talked about, we had a gentleman come into our house—he was one of our first visitors—and he said, "Oh, so I see that you have a Lima, Peru flag out there." And I was like, in my head thinking, If I have to explain to this, like, grown man what a pride flag is, I think that I, you know, maybe miscalculated my audience a little bit here.

And it ended up that he was sort of joking and he'd been to Peru and they have an extra stripe on their flag and so it was, I think, him kind of trying to say, in his own bizarre way, that he was like, okay with it and to sort of put us at ease. But the morning after our discussion, point blank, he asked me—he was from Texas—and he asked me what it's like to be gay in Iowa and to be asked that question, you know, at your breakfast table when, when you're—it's like, your home—the tables sort of get turned in that moment. And it was a really powerful conversation.

M

Marti Payseur 91:27

And we've also found ourselves reminding people that though the current administration in Iowa does not look as it did years ago, that Iowa was really once a leader in progress in terms of LGBTQ rights. And that's something that people really forget about. And I would say, often it's, it's folks that are in that well-meaning category that we were speaking about earlier, like the neoliberals, that sort of forget, and kind of want to mark off this whole state as a space that's not safe for queer people—and there are pockets and places where that is true—but I don't want us to forget history and I don't want us to discount the work that activists and organizers are doing in the state to make sure that people are safe and people have, have every right. And we've also had conversations where people have come out to us at the breakfast table. And we might have been the second and third person that they had ever told that to in their whole life and that is so powerful, it's really hard to put into words. I mean, it's a full-body goosebumps sort of sensation. And, and that's why we do what we do.

A

Ash Bruxvoort 92:59

Mhmm. Another thing that's really been important for me about Thistle's Summit is that there's this idea that queer people only exist in cities, and that is very damaging to people who are queer who live in small towns, and they live in rural towns, and then their needs get erased, because there's this idea that queer people don't exist outside of urban communities and, like, I know, absolutely, that that is not true, because I've worked with many queer people who lived in very small communities. And I also know, because I grew up in rural Iowa, that the nature of those communities means that there's lots of queer people who aren't out, and so then their needs get erased. And so that's another part of this experiment (laughs) is like, trying to also give voice to some of those issues, too, and just to make people understand that queer people actually exist everywhere, and so we need to be thinking about their needs all the time.

M

Marti Payseur 94:07

And that is an intersectional concern, you know. I think—yeah, I think it's like, okay, there's a gay enclave in, you know—all the gay people live in New York and they all have their gay friends and it's like The L Word all the time, which is such a lie. (laughs) And, and so to hold space in these, in these communities that—I mean, we were very much concerned the first day we put our flag up. Our neighbors are lovely people. We absolutely adore them, and we'd have many conversations with them, but we were so afraid that someone was going to light our house on fire.

A

Ash Bruxvoort 94:44

Yeah, it was a really—the first time we ever got written about in the Cedar Rapids Gazette, we were very concerned about what might happen here.

M

Marti Payseur 94:51

Yeah, yeah, and there's a, uh, there's a degree of organizing and action that just comes from being visible, and that—we feel really lucky to have the privilege to do that. And to have a community that's really supported us in that endeavor.

A

Ash Bruxvoort 95:19

Yeah.

S

Steven Saada 95:19

You mentioned kind of giving people recommendations on places that you thought were safe and places that you thought weren't safe. Could you give me, like, those recommendations basically?

A

Ash Bruxvoort 95:30

(Marti and Ash laugh) Our recommendations—I mean, I would feel comfortable with any restaurant in Mount Vernon, sending a queer person to go into. I don't see—

M

Marti Payseur 95:42

And it's not just like, Oh, it's okay. It's like, you can walk down the street and not look behind you and hold your partner's hand and be fine. Like, no one will bat an eye that you kissed your wife on Main Street—in small town Iowa, which, which really is not always the

case.

A

Ash Bruxvoort 96:04

Yeah, and like we're not—you know, we're obviously—and we've already talked about—we're not the only visibly queer people in Mount Vernon and so I would feel okay with that. Big Grove in Solon definitely is big enough and like, sees a large enough clientele that I would not be concerned about that. But there are definitely places that I would be more concerned about, like even the Casey's in Solon. I don't think that I would recommend definitely a trans person to go into that Casey's.

M

Marti Payseur 96:35

Would not. Yep. Correct.

A

Ash Bruxvoort 96:37

Um, I would say that about a lot of gas stations, actually, just in some of the smaller towns—which Solon is not a small town—but, you know, gas stations for queer people are really—that can be a very difficult aspect of traveling in smaller communities. I personally have had issues with this. I know many people who—we've heard stories of people who have come and stayed here about their kids or themselves or whatever, you know, and so like figuring out those gas stations can be a challenge. I actually think I feel better about the Mount Vernon Casey's than I do about the Solon one. I've never had any issues in there or seen anything, but Marti has had negative experiences at that Solon Casey's before.

M

Marti Payseur 97:24

I have. And we also—I mean, we definitely refer out restaurants pretty often, because we only do breakfast, so folks are always really interested in, you know, like tasting what this region gastronomically is like and there's a really—there's something acutely interesting happening in this region with food. People are kind of using—like Cedar Rapids is fifteen minutes away and so they have a really rich Eastern European tradition and a lot of Eastern European immigrants settled Cedar Rapids, and so there's this great tradition of Czech food and there's this really friggin amazing restaurant called Rodina. And we like to tell people, you know, "Go here because it's tasty," because we're both food snobs, but also we like to know that people are running ethical businesses. Rodina, there, is owned by a young couple, they're in their first year of business, and they offered a drag brunch and it's, you know, like a high end restaurant, which I just love that concept of taking drag and kind of giving it a platform of art and pairing it with artful food, the way it can lend a

whole new lens to it. And so they did Cedar Rapids' first drag brunch. So we love Rodina.

M

Marti Payseur 98:48

Lightworks is one of our particular favorites and it's a coffee shop, but it's predominantly queer staff and they're just delightful, wonderful humans. Iowa City I think is like, unilaterally a safe space for people. And you know, like, the wonderful thing about Iowa City is that you can be like, as weird as you want to be, and you're still not the weirdest person in Iowa City, like ever. And so our couples, you know, sometimes go there. But I would really say that people come to us, because they want a space away from a city and Mount Vernon has antique shops and art galleries and restaurants galore, and so it really does make for a comfortable place for them to stay here.

A

Ash Bruxvoort 99:41

Yeah, people sometimes will like free food on their way here, too, and they'll just stay in their room—

M

Marti Payseur 99:49

—and have a little, like, charcuterie plate. (laughs)

A

Ash Bruxvoort 99:51

Yeah. They might come down here and read in the living room or talk to us. Sometimes we will have—you know, share a drink with our guests and talk to them, too—definitely, I think—especially when people are traveling by themselves, it's more common. Um, yeah. That's kind of the stuff that we—and then Palisades Kepler State Park is just down the street from us, basically, and so that's definitely an attraction that people come here—because they want to go hiking there, go shopping at some of the places on Main Street. I mean, I work at Kae Apothecary, and we work—

M

Marti Payseur 100:28

—which is—

A

Ash Bruxvoort 100:29

Yes, I'm going to talk about that. (Marti laughs) Okay, so I work at Kae Apothecary and we are very—we've always worked closely. Even before I worked there at the shop, we had a

pretty good relationship with the owner, Andrea, and Kae Apothecary is a metaphysical and herbal store. So we make tea, and we sell supplies for magic and sell metaphysical books and things like that, too. So that's on the main street. That's on the, like, most visible storefront on our main street in Mount Vernon. Um, not to say that all queer people are into metaphysical stuff or into spirituality, but I definitely think there's a big intersection there, and so that's also something that I think a lot of our guests, when they come and stay here, they want to go there, too. And there's some like other cool—there's lots of other like cool shops, but they're more like antique shops here.

M

Marti Payseur 101:30

We also have a—and like, I really can't express enough what a different world Mount Vernon is, um, than any other small town I've experienced. We have, like, literally everything you might need, but we just have, you know, one really high quality option, which is—it makes for some really beautifully creative people that also are business owners in this town. And we have a quilt shop that people come from all over to visit that's owned by two gay men. And we also have one of the last, like, independent yarn shops that spins their wool. And so it just becomes like this—

A

Ash Bruxvoort 102:22

Everyone's into, like, artisans up here. (Marti laughs) Everybody makes their own soap, makes their own bread, makes their own clothes—

M

Marti Payseur 102:29

—kombucha—

A

Ash Bruxvoort 102:31

I mean, like everybody is into that stuff here. It's awesome, because we are also into that stuff and there's a lot of trading that happens amongst people who are, you know, small businesses or entrepreneurs of some kind. There's just like a sense of community I—there's a lot of just—even if I look at this moment in time, being in Coronavirus, most of the money that has gone out for me, other than just like my regular bills, has been to other small business owners, or them paying me for my services, and like that kind of stuff. So everybody's just very supportive of each other and there's a lot of real, pure kindness that still exists here that I haven't found in other places, which is absolutely, absolutely a necessity to running a business like what we do.



Steven Saada 103:27

You mentioned Coronavirus and I definitely want to make time to talk about that. So how has it kind of changed your business, your lives, your sense of community?



Ash Bruxvoort 103:37

It's changed a lot. You want me to talk about this first or—



Marti Payseur 103:42

No, I—



Ash Bruxvoort 103:42

You're good to go first? Okay.



Marti Payseur 103:45

I mean, our, our business is shut right now. Um, and with the governor's orders, we don't have to explicitly do that. With her stay—shelter in place, you know, air quotes, um, we wouldn't have to do that. We would still be able to legally accept business; however, we live in the home and our guests share communal space. Our living room is, is spacious and filled with books and we want people to come down and make sure that they feel comfortable to enjoy this beautiful home. It's too wonderful not to share, and how we would protect the—you know, our brand is built on safety—and how we would protect that for our guests during this moment in time—It felt like too much of a risk to us to remain open. And also, as we are entrepreneurs and we exist in the political moment that we do right now, with America's policies favoring capitalism, our health insurance is absolutely subpar. And so many queer people are in that exact same boat that they would—whether it's that they are immunocompromised already, or that they are just economically less fortunate than other people to—if we became infected, it would be absolutely devastating—



Ash Bruxvoort 105:31

—financially, yeah—



Marti Payseur 105:33

to just to be incredibly real with you. And that risk was too great for us, in addition to the risk to our guests to remain open right now, so we are closed for the foreseeable future, until the pandemic is resolved. It has been hard and more than that, it's been really sad. We miss our guests, we miss having conversations about, you know, a lot of what we've talked about today, and we miss being able to be a bright spot for people.

M

Marti Payseur 106:18

Also, I work for One Iowa, which is the statewide, LGBTQ advocacy organization, and I'm the eastern Iowa liaison. And at this moment, because their gala celebrating the eleventh anniversary of marriage equality was set to happen last Friday. As you might imagine, having five hundred people in a room right now is not possible, so they've moved their gala to August and hopefully that will be able to carry on without a hitch, but they're a small nonprofit and that means that right now folks that are—financially, they're struggling and, you know, statistically speaking, queer people and queer nonprofits are disproportionately affected anytime there's economic crisis, so they're not able to do their work to the capacity in which they need to right now, because of the restrictions. And that also means that the income for their contractor roles throughout the state can't be fulfilled. So it is a hard and humbling moment to be an entrepreneur.

A

Ash Bruxvoort 107:50

It's also been especially challenging, because we haven't been open for a whole year and December and January were—they're like a lower point for us, because for one thing, we get a lot of snow in Mount Vernon. People are not coming here. There's not a lot of—even people who live in Mount Vernon aren't leaving as often.

M

Marti Payseur 108:11

And campus is closed.

A

Ash Bruxvoort 108:12

And campus is closed, so we don't have any Cornell traffic during that time. So we don't qualify for really any of the emergency funding that has been put out, so that's been a challenge for us, as far as our business goes. We are very privileged. We have support, so it's not a death sentence for us or our business at this point. And I definitely know that people are very excited to come back to Thistle's Summit as soon as they can. So I'm trying to focus on that and I have been extremely busy throughout this entire process, because I—Kae Apothecary has continued to be open for online orders. We do—also we

do freelance marketing work, so that's part of our diversifying of our business, and so I've been doing a lot of website work for Her, and we are now working on another marketing client, and I had another marketing client that I was kind of wrapping up stuff with throughout this entire process. Plus, one of the ways I would say that people have chosen to support our business through this time is that they've been booking more astrology readings with me, so I've been very busy on all of that stuff.

M

Marti Payseur 108:56

And I've been building patio furniture.

A

Ash Bruxvoort 109:28

Yes, (Marti laughs) and Marti has been very focused on building our outdoor spaces, which is honestly something that needed to happen. And it's great to not have guests here while we're doing that, because it is loud and it takes a lot of hammering and our yard looks great, but there's definitely some projects that need to be wrapped up. So—

M

Marti Payseur 110:06

Yeah, we, we hope and—we hope that when folks are able to safely return, that we have an even more magical experience for them than we did before. And so we're really trying to focus our energy there.

A

Ash Bruxvoort 110:27

And we have a lot—I mean, we have a lot of things that we want to do and we were just kind of getting into starting some of the stuff that we want to do here, but we'll, you know—we want to do a lot more with creating community and bringing people together, (laughs) which is like, kind of hard to do in a moment like this, but that is what our goal is for the long term for our business. And I do, like, definitely, 100 percent believe that no matter what, Thistle's Summit will continue on. And it will look—it will evolve over time.

M

Marti Payseur 111:09

Absolutely.

A

Ash Bruxvoort 111:10

And, you know, we've talked about lots of different ways that we would expand or have

offshoots of Thistle's Summit and what we would do, what that—obviously, running a bed and breakfast is not—it's not work that you can just automate, like we do everything ourselves. We do all of the housekeeping ourselves. We do all the marketing ourselves. We check in our guests. Marti does the cooking, I do the readings, we do all of it. And then we also have other jobs that we do to support everything that we do here. You know, we don't make the bulk of our income from the bed and breakfast, although we do make a significant amount of our income from the bed and breakfast, enough to support living in our house, but this is, you know, this is a moment where some of the diversification has fallen off, and that's part of being an entrepreneur, is that you have all of these different balls that you're juggling. And I've been self-employed for off-and-on throughout my entire adult life, but Marti has more recently become a self-employed person. It's unfortunate that these kinds of things happen often, I think, when people are early on in their self employment and they don't have the kinds of records that are necessary to like back up their claims and stuff like that.

M Marti Payseur 112:40
But I mean, we are not alone—

A Ash Bruxvoort 112:43
No, there's a lot of people.

M Marti Payseur 112:45
—and, you know, the impact, the effects of this, are financially devastating to so many and we are extremely fortunate that we're not making the decision between paying the mortgage on our storefront and on our home. It also means that we only have the one, you know, (laughs) which is a little bit terrifying, but, um, I believe that community is going to be more important than ever upon exiting this pandemic, and I certainly hope that people choose to spend that community here, because it has been incredible so far.

S Steven Saada 113:35
Kind of transitioning, I guess, back out of the pandemic, then, as a topic, what other kind of elements of queer community do you interact with in Iowa? How is that changed, you know, with the pandemic, but also what was it like before?

M

Marti Payseur 113:57

Mm, yeah, I mean, my primary source of queer community—Well, Thistle's Summit is sort of like this, this transient, temporal queer community, like every weekend it's a different sort of barrage of folks that, like, we all share something in common with. Um, there is this like sense that everyone's sort of like a distant cousin, right, like everyone—that cousin that you've seen in a family reunion before, and it's like, familial comfort that happens here. So that's a huge source for us. But my work with One Iowa is another huge source of queer community for me and, and right now it's non-existent, but, you know, it looks typically like talking to other queer professionals and learning a little bit about their, uh—

A

Ash Bruxvoort 115:08

Needs?

M

Marti Payseur 115:09

Huh?

A

Ash Bruxvoort 115:09

Needs.

M

Marti Payseur 115:10

Yeah, learning about their needs and what change I might be able to affect in their organization and if, you know, potentially, they're not at a place in their company where they feel comfortable being out, like helping them in that process. And it also looks like being a resource. We get calls all the time about like, kind of the most strange and random questions and sometimes they're really hard. Like I had a person contact me, because they have a trans employee and they had been sexually assaulted and they just wanted to know if there were any resources they could connect them to, and you know, that's sort of like, niche, more or less—not that it should be—but that's how it—that niche knowledge. I feel really lucky to be a source of that. And I think too far, you know, work that we do with young people and conversations that we have with like GSAs (Gay Straight Alliance) in this area, being able to have those interactions and to be able to have conversations, just like face to face and not just through an Instagram comment, is something we really miss. So.

A

Ash Bruxvoort 116:32

Yeah, I think that most of my queer community comes from living at Thistle's Summit and doing this business. Like Marti said, we have, you know, at least, I would say, every other weekend, we have a queer person or a queer couple staying with us and we've even like, become friends with some of the people who have come and stayed at our house. And so that is a huge source of queer community. I actually think I probably have more queer community living in Mount Vernon, because of Thistle's Summit than I did living in Des Moines, because in Des Moines, my interactions were more—they were more focused on organizing, and I was doing a lot of organizing with straight people. Um, you know, there were some other queer folks there, too, but—and I have friends who are queer, who I, you know, stay in touch with and talk to over Instagram, stuff like that. I have some queer community working at the apothecary, which I'm not really getting right now, because we're not having customers in the shop, but we have some pretty regular—especially we have a lot of young queer people who come into the store, and I really enjoy that and working with them and talking to them and things like that.

A

Ash Bruxvoort 117:57

Queer community has changed for me a lot over my life. I was really into working with other people in the food justice movement, and so I was pretty focused on working with queer people in that—working with lesbian farmers, specifically. And I don't really do that anymore. You know, I still stay in touch with some folks through social media and things like that, but it's not like the face to face that we get here when we have guests come and stay with us for a whole, you know, weekend, or whatever. I think that's a lot of it for us. So it's kind of a different experience being in Mount Vernon right now and not having that transient community, because that's a lot of what makes it fun for us to live here.

M

Marti Payseur 118:45

And I think a lot of it's gone digital, which is, is wonderful. I mean, I love being able to interact and like, you know, see what people are working on in their time off work or working from home, but I'm kind of old-fashioned; I like face to face and there's like an intimacy that's available there that just I have not found on the internet in the same way.

A

Ash Bruxvoort 119:17

I did offer to do free readings—like free tarot readings—for some queer folks and so I did get to have some one-on-one conversations with people through that, which I did actually really enjoy a lot and it kind of fulfilled that need that I had to have that queer community. And then I've also been, throughout the Coronavirus, working on raising

money for Black and Pink, which works with queer people that are in the criminal justice system, which is particularly needed right now, because there's a lot of people in jail who are being impacted by the Coronavirus and so they're working on aid for those people, specifically for queer people. That's something I'm pretty passionate about working on right now.

S Steven Saada 120:20

So I'm kind of getting to the end of my list. Is there anything else that you two wanted to talk about that we haven't?

M Marti Payseur 120:32

I don't know if I have anything to add.

A Ash Bruxvoort 120:36

Yeah, I don't know if I have anything to add either.

A Ash Bruxvoort 120:40

I think one thing we haven't really explicitly talked about is that we take very seriously how we run our business and how reliant we are on Airbnb and we recognize that Airbnb is like, Silicon Valley Technology and that some of their business practices are really stupid. And we have been on the receiving end of some of their practices. And so if anybody were to ever listen to this and think, Boy, I really want to start a queer bed and breakfast, I would just really recommend that you not be reliant on Airbnb and that's something that we've taken seriously from the beginning. And so we actually take our bookings offline, too, and we have like our own website that we take bookings through. And this moment, specifically, I think, is showing how sensitive, or—what's the word I'm looking for?—

M Marti Payseur 121:46

Fragile?

A Ash Bruxvoort 121:47

—fragile a lot of these things are, um, and so I do—I am really proud of the fact that we

have taken that into consideration in building our business. And I think this is a really good example, actually: Something that often came up for me working in food justice with queer people was like, how does being queer change your approach to things? And like, how does it change your mindset when you're working towards something? And I think that Thistle's Summit is a very good example of this, because like, when queer people are building a bed and breakfast, they think about different things, and also, just like, we think about things differently in how we approach everything. So like, with our business, we are very much thinking about—I don't want to get, you know, basically screwed over by the system, because I've been having to deal with that for my entire life, and so, like, I'm going to think about that from the beginning, which I think is a unique perspective, also, that we bring to the table. And so that's something else that I want to mention.

M

Marti Payseur 122:54

And I mean, also we want to manage that relationship, you know. I want the ability to send our Christmas card, which was a photo of Mount Vernon, in front of a church on our main street, has rainbow stairs, which is, like, just so wonderful. And we took some marketing photos with our dog, Thistle, and us on those stairs and that became our, like our holiday card and we, you know, like sent that out to people who had stayed with us, because we want them to feel like this is a little bit of home for them, as well. And, and we want them to tell their friends about it and to feel like they can, can always come back and have the same sort of care and attention and that it's not just transactional, like, nothing about what we do is transactional. (laughs) We work extremely hard. I mean, we make everything from scratch. It is like as salt-of-the-earth as you can get. And we want people to know that there's love put in every level and it's not just, like, a place for you to crash. If you want to do that, that's fine, but like, it's so much more than that. And that's, that's where we find our fulfillment in it.

A

Ash Bruxvoort 124:18

Yeah, we don't know, for sure, but we think that the original owners of this house might have not had children, actually, and been hosting—

M

Marti Payseur 124:27

—students.

A

Ash Bruxvoort 124:28

—students at Cornell, people who were older and going to get their degrees, because

that's what they themselves had had to do, was to go to school later in their lives. And, like, I bring it up just because that's kind of part of how we approach Thistle's Summit. Like we have these rooms here and we want to nurture the people who come and stay with us, whether they're our guests, or our friends, or our family, or whoever it is, you know, organizers who come and stay here to—while they're working on stuff in the area and things like that, too. Like, we want to kind of feel like, you know, your gay aunts, or whatever, that you go and visit and that's a lot of what we—that's a lot of what we do and a lot of what we've created here and the people who come here once, they stay in touch with us on social media, or they come here again. Like we really build relationships with the people who come here and that's pretty, pretty awesome. I miss seeing people, but I like having, um, you know, I just—I really have still enjoyed having the interactions with the people who support us. It's awesome.



Marti Payseur 125:53

Yeah, we want to be your like radical, leftist, gay moms. So— (laughs)



Ash Bruxvoort 126:00

Our dog, Thistle—and I don't know if we ever explicitly mentioned that it's named after our dog—



Marti Payseur 126:03

It is. (Marti and Ash laugh) That's all we got.



Ash Bruxvoort 126:08

(To Thistle) Yeah, we had to tell him about you, girl.



Steven Saada 126:19

All right. Um, there is one last thing—just, you mentioned earlier, like, over an hour ago, that there's only like one gay bar in Iowa City—if you just say on the record what that is.



Marti Payseur 126:33

So there's one gay bar in Iowa City and there's one in Cedar Rapids. Cedar Rapids is the—is Basix, and it's spelled B-a—

- A Ash Bruxvoort 126:43
—s-i-x.
- M Marti Payseur 126:45
—s-i-x. And then in Iowa City—
- A Ash Bruxvoort 126:49
—Studio 13, I think is the only—
- M Marti Payseur 126:53
—official—
- A Ash Bruxvoort 126:54
—official gay bar in Iowa City.
- M Marti Payseur 126:56
But every bar in Iowa City is a gay bar.
- A Ash Bruxvoort 126:58
Not every bar, but like, some of the bars.
- M Marti Payseur 127:03
The Dogwood.
- A Ash Bruxvoort 127:05
Yeah, I mean, like—What gay culture—Iowa City is diverse enough in terms of queer culture that there's multiple places where queer people hang out, which is very different from other places in Iowa.
- M Marti Payseur 127:20

Um, and yeah, I would say Cedar Rapids also has—

A Ash Bruxvoort 127:28
Oh, yeah, definitely. There's like—

M Marti Payseur 127:30
—a lot.

A Ash Bruxvoort 127:30
Well, yeah. I know. Then you get into a whole other thing, (Marti laughs) I mean gay men culture versus—Yeah, there's like a bunch of layers to that. Anyway, we answered the question. (Marti and Ash laugh).

S Steven Saada 127:41
I mean, if you want to get into that— (all laugh)

A Ash Bruxvoort 127:45
I think that—I mean, there is something to be said for—that we have this bed and breakfast, because, um, I think that lesbians—there's sort of a stereotype that like, lesbians like to go on little getaways to bed and breakfasts and they don't like to go to bars, and that's part of the reason why lesbian bars struggle to survive is because lesbians don't support them. That's like a huge topic of conversation within lesbian history and lesbian culture, because lesbians are more likely to want to be homebodies and like, stay home with each other, with like their cats and whatever. This is the idea that people have about lesbians, and it's like—a lot of it is true. And like, obviously, we have a u haul relationship. (Marti laughs) Um, so that's also kind of a layer to why people come and stay here, too. And like, the queer audience that we serve and what they do when they come here—Also, like, drinking and alcohol is a huge topic of conversation within queer culture, because being a sober queer, there's like a whole subsection of being a sober queer within the overall queer culture. And I think that, while we are not sober by choice—Marti's sort of soberish, but not by choice.

M Marti Payseur 129:06

I'm allergic to alcohol. It's a real pain in the butt.

A Ash Bruxvoort 129:09
But I do think that we kind of, like, serve that aspect of queer community, too, because we're like, a place where queer people can come and gather and it's not centered around alcohol and things like that either. It's centered around, like, having conversations and talking. So—And I also think it's interesting that there's, there's other gay bed and—or there's other bed and breakfasts that we know of that are owned by queer people, but they are not overtly queer. Like, there might be something on their about page that says it's owned by two gay men, but other than that—

M Marti Payseur 129:45
It's not at the heart of their brand.

A Ash Bruxvoort 129:47
Yeah, it's not the heart of their brand, whereas for us, we have centered it in everything that we do.

M Marti Payseur 129:51
Yeah.

S Steven Saada 129:52
What are those other bed and breakfasts, if you can say it without, like, outing them, you know.

A Ash Bruxvoort 129:56
So Brown Street Inn in Iowa City is owned by two gay men and then there's some places in Illinois that you know about.

M Marti Payseur 130:05
Yeah, the Felt Manor is owned by two gay men and it's in Galena, Illinois, and their marketing—and I want to be clear about this: neither one of these bed and breakfasts are

hiding anything. Like the Brown Street Inn, for instance, they have a flag outside their house. They're just adjacent to downtown Iowa City. Some of their marketing has a flag featured, some doesn't. There's no question, for us. It's, it's everywhere and if anyone rolled up to our house and didn't understand that, they wouldn't have been looking at the right website. I mean, it's just very clear. And the Felt Manor, I think on their Instagram, has something about, like, all are welcome, in their bio. Um, but it's not, you know, super present. It's just kind of a lighter touch. And then there were—We were featured in an article for Domino magazine, which is a national design magazine. And the Sycamore Inn is owned by two gay men, and that is on the East Coast, and they're, they're not really present in their brand. Their house is beautiful. They have done all the work on it themselves, but it's not really about them. Like when you come here, it's about us and the whole package. I mean, predominantly Thistle, the dog. (laughs) She's the focus.



Steven Saada 131:52

All right, well, that's all I have. Yeah, thank you for sharing your stories with us.



Marti Payseur 132:00

For sure, no, it's an honor to be asked, and yeah, we wish we could've had you IRL, but life was weird. (laughs)



Ash Bruxvoort 132:11

Yeah. Thistle would've liked you to pet her.



Steven Saada 132:15

Me too. (all laugh) All right.