

Interview – Tom Jackson

Interviewee: Tom Jackson

Interviewer: Cecelia Parks

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START OF RECORDING

Cecelia Parks (CP): So, this is Cecelia Parks. I am here with Tom Jackson. It is Monday, December twenty-fifth--December twenty-fifth. December fifth, 2022 [both laugh].

Tom Jackson (TJ): Not yet!

CP: Not yet! And we are here at--at Western State Hospital, and we're going to go ahead and get started. So, Tom, what words do you use to refer to yourself? Do you say that you're gay, do you say that you're LGBTQ, do you say that you're queer?

TJ: I mostly use “queer,” which is kind of interesting because, you know, my generation by and large, I'm one of the few people of my generation who uses it. Many of my friends take great offense at it. Now, part of the reason that, quite frankly, like a lot of things, part of the reason I do it is to piss people off. And to kind of rock their boat a little bit. Also, if I have to say LGBTQIA+ more than twenty-five times in a day, my tongue gets tied in a knot and it comes out sideways. And so I just use “queer” as all-encompassing and so on. I know it doesn't describe everybody but neither does LGBTQIA+. So, you know, you kind of choose your battles and--and take it from there.

CP: Yeah. That makes sense. How do you describe like a group of people? Do you say like “the gay community,” “the LGBTQ community,” “the queer community”?

TJ: Well, first of all I usually use the word “communities,” because it's not a monolithic community. That's the first thing. If I'm speaking about a single community, you know, “gay community,” which I would generally use to refer to gay men...then I would say that. I would say “LGBTQIA+ communities,” “queer community.” It kind of depends. Sometimes, you know, it's just whatever comes out of my mouth.

CP: Yeah. And then what pronouns do you use?

TJ: He/him.

CP: Okay. So tell me about where you grew up.

TJ: Okay. I grew up in New York City. Right smack in Midtown. Kind of halfway between the Waldorf Hotel and the UN. And lived there until I was nine. And then we moved to the beach in Connecticut, but not the fancy beach in Connecticut, the far eastern beaches where--beach towns, which were pretty conservative, pretty Republican, and as a, you know, big-word-using, funny-dressed, kid--city kid, didn't exactly fit in and it was, you know, not a pleasant experience for quite a number of years. Quite a bit of bullying. And then from there, if you want to know the whole story [laughs]--okay. So then, I went to boarding school at fourteen in western Massachusetts for two years. Then I spent a year abroad in Brittany, in France.

Then I came back senior year. Went back to Connecticut near where I grew up to go to college. Made it about two and a half years before I just kind of blew out for a whole pile of reasons. Quite frankly, some of them substance use and mental health related. That's sort of the early part of my lack-of-recovery story [laughs]. And then I

lived in Boston for six months doing an externship. I decided I wanted to learn how to cook, and so I found an internship in Buffalo, New York, that I lived in for a year. Then I moved to San Francisco. Lived there for fourteen--fifteen--pretty much fifteen years. Then I moved to Hawaii. Lived there for about four years, and then moved to Charlottesville in 1997.

CP: Okay, so what brought you to Charlottesville after that sort of world tour?

TJ: World tour? My best friends from college moved to Charlottesville thirty years ago--no, more than that. Thirty-five years ago, give or take. He of the couple--they are now long divorced, but he of the couple found a job here and they moved down here and eventually had kids and all of that kind of stuff. Two of the--two twins are my godsons. One of whom we actually lost in an accident a number of years ago. And I just-- I was in Hawaii. And within a matter of weeks, a relationship ended, a job ended, my lease was up. Also, I had emptied out my parents' house in Connecticut a number of years before--and my friends actually knew my parents because they--my parents were alive when we were all in school. And I had a whole house full of stuff in storage in Connecticut. And so my friend said, "Look. Just get yourself and all your shit here, and we'll figure it out."

And unfortunately, that was the beginning of really a first pretty serious mental health crisis that led to a hospitalization; led to that friendship being [TJ edit: broken] for a number of years. We had--didn't talk to each other for several years. Have since reunited, probably stronger than ever, I think, having both gone through some pretty significant life-changing experiences. And then, you know, I kind of got stuck in Charlottesville. You know, I was homeless for a while. I was unemployed for a while.

And then I started working in community mental health twenty years ago, and got a job as a residential recovery coach and went from literally being homeless and jobless to having, you know, a roof over my head, which was part of the job, and you know, minimal, you know, twelve hours a week of pay at a--I don't know what I was making, but it wasn't much. But it was enough for food, you know, that was all that mattered, really, because everything else was taken care of.

And then I worked my way up, worked my way up, worked my way up, and--and so on. And then moved here [TJ addition: to Staunton from Charlottesville] two years ago in January. I started at Western--we were just talking before you started--started recording. I started at Western State on January ninth [2020], which was two months--two months and a week before we shut down everything for COVID on March thirteenth. Started on a contract; went part-time in August, full-time in November of that year. And then just got tired of driving over the mountain.

And I was living in a pretty shitty part of Charlottesville. Kind of--I mean I described it as the DMZ, which it really kind of was. There were \$500,000 houses a hundred yards up the street, and the First Street Projects two hundred yards down the street. And it got to the point where the last month or six weeks I was there, I literally dove for the floor a couple of times because the gunshots were so close. And that's when I decided to move.

CP: Yeah. That makes sense. So tell me about some of your first experiences as a queer person.

TJ: Oh boy. Well, looking back, you know, I think the first time I realized that physically I was attracted to men--this is hindsight, I think--I was probably eight. And it

was at summer camp. Then...I just kind of sort of always knew. But I also kind of always sort of knew--I mean these were--I mean this was the early-mid '60s to late '60s--that you know, it just wasn't something you talked about. Now, that being said [laughs] I gave my parents--when I finally came out, right after I moved to San Francisco, I gave my parents holy hell. Because a family best friend was--was very visibly gay. Which, of course, I put two and two together then, but when I was a kid, we used to go to visit him--he lived right across the street from the Yale campus--his "roommate" --and I put that in quotes--would leave. So I never met his roommate. And you know, he had this apartment where he had this, you know, huge floral bed and then this little tiny room with like a cot in it, and that was his roommate's room. Which of course in hindsight was a total crock of shit.

My parents' dinner parties in New York literally--and I joke about it--we lived right near the UN, and they looked like the UN. I mean, there was a--a couple from Trinidad. There [TJ edit: was a Japanese-American couple, a Chinese-American couple], two Jewish couples, a lesbian couple, a gay couple, and I know I'm forgetting somebody. But you know, they--it was just never talked about. And then my aunt, my father's older sister, and her "roommate" [laughs] were together for forty-seven years [laughs]. But it was never acknowledged. So you know, the messages I got were "don't talk about it." And then I went to an all-boys boarding school where again, it was you know, "don't talk about it." And I had been having a relationship with somebody during [TJ edit: my pre-teen and later-teen years]. That I'm not going to go into details about to protect their privacy. So, you know, I just kind of always knew.

But it really was--and then college, you know...it was the--it was the mid-'70s where you know, everybody was supposed to you know, be able to do anything you

wanted. You know, we were sort of college--pot-smoking college hippies and stuff. But not that. No. I mean, there was--there was--you know, there were sort of two visibly queer people on campus and--literally, of 1,600 people, that was it. Now I've done a couple of--I've done a couple of Zoom things over the last few years with them, and of course like--like every school, they have you know [laughs] every type of support and so on that you could possibly imagine. And it's also interesting you know, the people of roughly my age who you know, we didn't know about each other. Not at all back then. So of course, you know, I look back with you know--or I see what's going on now and it's like, "My life would have been so different!" [Laughs] Had all of that been there, but you know--but if--but if that hadn't happened, we wouldn't be sitting here now.

So I decided that the only way I was going to do this was to literally get out of town and move to California. And so I moved there in June of 1979 and within six weeks came out to everybody I knew. Some by phone, some by letter. And of course, the--you know, the response was universally, "Well, why didn't you say anything?" [Laughs] To which I just answered a lot of what I just answered, although it took--again some of what I just said was in hindsight. But I needed that distance. I needed that distance where, you know, if somebody was going to reject me, I wasn't going to--I was already gone, in some ways. And so I wasn't going to feel it the same way I would have if--if you know, I had gotten kicked out of the house or something like that. Not that I ever thought that was likely to happen, and it wasn't.

And my parents came to visit once. They met all my--they met all my gay and lesbian friends and all that kind of stuff. And you know--and had a great time. My father established a years-long correspondence with one of my lesbian lawyer friends that I

worked with, and somewhere in there, I started dating somebody kind of on-and-off who did a year at Yale, which was about forty-five minutes from my parents' house, and he'd go up and spend time with my parents. He and my father had some--quite a bit of sort of social science stuff in common. He's a social psychologist, and my father was a philosopher who should have been a social psychologist. And so they had tons of stuff in common, so you know, there was that sort of--once I was out, I was out.

Now that didn't mean that there weren't times...especially after I started working in Charlottesville and working with--with Region Ten, with community mental health, living with you know, a wide variety of all homeless, drug using or in early recovery from using drugs, men with serious mental illness--serious mental health conditions, where it was like, "No. I don't feel safe." So it was like the people--the clients who--and there were a couple of--a couple of clients who identified as either gay or bi, so I was certainly out to them. There were a couple of clients who had gay relatives and I was out to them. And my coworkers generally I was out to, but the clients at large, no. And that was--again, that was twenty years ago. Things over time changed. [TJ addition: As I became more assertive in my own skin, I no longer let "do you have a girlfriend" questions go unanswered. I'd say either "No, I don't have a boyfriend," or "No, I don't have a husband."]

I changed jobs in 2012 and decided right from the start you know, there was no going back in. And it--it's been--you know, I've been--I've been totally out at work ever since. You know, I'm working on starting an LGBTQIA+ support group here [TJ addition: at the hospital] for clients. I'm on our diversity, equity, and inclusivity committee. And we've done one--one [TJ addition: DEI] training for staff. We have a--we

had a trans client here who was particularly badly treated by one admissions unit, and so we did some training for them. And someday we keep--someday we'll roll it out to the whole hospital, but it's one of those "someday" things. If you're used to bureaucracy, "someday" can be [laughs] someday could literally be next week with no notice or it could be you know, three years from now.

But you know, like I wear a rainbow wristband every day and if anybody asks me about it, depending on--you know, depending on the client, if somebody like snags me in the hall and asks me, you know, I will probably deflect it and say, you know, "That's a personal question. That we don't answer." And it's sort of weird being you know, being peer staff, because our--our ethics and boundaries and guidelines are significantly different than clinical staff, where clinical staff would just deflect that without even batting an eyelash. Where I at least stop and think, "Okay. Is there a reason to disclose this or not?" And so I have--you know, I have--if we have somebody who's either you know, who's a member of the queer community, oftentimes depending on--depending on their identified gender and so on--because one of my coworkers also--also identifies as pan. So between us we'll see the--we'll see whatever clients request--request peer support kind of as appro--as you know, whichever one of us is more appropriate to--to be seen.

So anyway, that's a very long-winded--you know, when I first moved to San Francisco, I worked for a gay civil rights organization, so needless to say, I was out, you know. And--and so on. You know, and it was pretty obvious. If you live in San Francisco and you're--and you're a single--if you're--and you're a single man, you know, there's--you know, dollars to doughnuts, you're a member of the gay community. And you know, all my friends and stuff ever since 1979, so that's been a long time.

CP: Yeah. I'm really curious about what living in San Francisco in that time period was like. Is there a particular memory or anything that really sticks out to you of that time period?

TJ: Well, yeah. I mean, of course, the biggest thing is HIV/AIDS.

CP: Yeah.

TJ: So I got there in June of '79.

CP: Mmm.

TJ: And it really was you know, party central. There was, you know, it [laughs] it wasn't a kid--it wasn't a kid in a candy store. It was, you know, a kid in something. Probably a kid in a liquor store, if you want to be honest, but. But...I think the first person who was a friend of a friend who got sick and died very suddenly--I think was in 1981 [TJ addition: or '82. Late '81 or early '82]. I think. I'd have to back and look. So there was about a year and a half or two years before the--you know, before these dark clouds started moving in.

And then of course, you know, it got to the point where by the time I left, almost everybody that I had--friends, people I did business with, you know, florists and doctor and dentist and most people I had dated, a couple of whom I had lived with, and so on were all gone. I mean, there's really only--and I lost touch with the rest of them when I started my recovery because they didn't. I don't--I mean I hope some of them eventually did, but I don't think they did. There were really only like three people left. And--you know, and I left--you know, I left just as people were starting to take meds that were--that were saving their lives--

CP: That would have been like early '90s?

TJ: Yeah, '93. '93-'94 is when they really you know—[TJ edit: the meds] really obviously were starting to work. And so you know, I suspect that there's one or two of them left, and every now and then I poke around on Facebook to see if I could find them, but I haven't. But again, we--we parted ways you know, just sort of naturally when I--when I started my recovery in '91 and they didn't, and we just sort of drifted apart, so.

CP: Yeah.

TJ: And most of my sober friends from '91 on are still alive. But they've all left San Francisco. One—I lost one good [TJ addition: early-recovery] friend not very long after I got sober, but--and the rest now are just dying of old age [laughs].

CP: Yeah. Yeah, I mean--well, anyways. What organization did you work with when you were there?

TJ: I worked for an organization called Gay Rights Advocates.

CP: Okay.

TJ: Which was...either the first or second, depending on you know, kind of who you talk to. Certainly the first gay male-started and run nonprofit legal organization that--that had a fair--that had some interesting lawsuits, you know, different kinds of employment and housing and immigration. Immigration was a big thing then. You know, these were the...you know, these were the--actually, well, I mean when I first got there it was the last of the Carter year--year and a half. And then you know, the Reagan-Bush [laughs] darkness for--for twelve years. And needless to say, all kinds of horrid immigration stuff about gay people in general. And then you know, adding HIV stuff on top of that. “We don't want--we don't want them diseased queers in the country,” you know. Which actually you know, some of it didn't get lifted until--until Obama, so. You

know.

Clinton was not always a great help with that. [CP laughs] I was at--I didn't actually meet him, but I was at the Clinton Global Initiative in New York in September and you know, sort of interesting to see how--how far, as far as you know, LGBTQIA+ rights, you know, they've become. You know, the rumor of course always was--and I dated somebody briefly whose sister worked for Hillary--that she was far more liberal than he was when it came to that, and was always you know, totally accepting of her queer staff, and she always had some. And so on. He was you know, bent a little more toward the...well you know, it's interesting, you know, the more I think about it, he really stuck his neck out at first, and got it cut off, you know, and backtracked way too fast, you know.

CP: Yeah. He's from Arkansas, also, which--

TJ: Yeah. That's true--yeah. [CP laughs] Yeah. But you know, he went to Yale and stuff, so you know, he lived in--not that New Haven is what I would describe as cosmopolitan [laughs] having grown up near there, but--far from it, but--but I mean, it's really interesting, it's just this week that you know, the Defense of Marriage Act was repealed.

CP: Yeah.

TJ: It's really interesting.

CP: Well and then--yeah, you think about the--the contrast between the way Reagan and them handled AIDS versus how the Clinton administration handled like HIV/AIDS research. It's like--

TJ: Yeah. And you know, and Bush--Bush made a few...you know, Bush made a

few--a few steps here and there. And of course you know, the most hysterical thing was you know, we were--not we, I wasn't, but you know the collective "we"--you know, we're chaining ourselves to the FDA fence and--and in particular, you know, Tony Fauci was--was [laughs] one of my--one of the lawyers--lawyer friends who did a lot of--did a lot of early HIV/AIDS litigation and eventually went to work for the ACLU always called Tony Fauci "that dumb fuck." [Both laugh] So--

CP: Yeah. Yeah.

TJ: And I'm not sure a whole lot has changed [CP laughs] but--except I was--somehow I stumbled across this--this federal salary database. I was actually looking up some--a Virginia state salary for something and I stumbled across this--he makes \$468,000 a year. Which, you know, most of the docs of his experience do. He's the--he's the highest paid but only by like \$2,000, so you know, it's what they all make. Anyway.

CP: Yeah [laughs] Were you in San Francisco, in California--I don't--my California timeline is a little bit less good than my Virginia timeline--but were you in California working around the time of like the Briggs initiative and all that like Anita Bryant stuff?

TJ: Just after.

CP: Okay.

TJ: Just after.

CP: That was earlier in the '70s. Okay.

TJ: You know, the--one of the lawyers I worked for you know, everybody--I mean, Harvey was in the--was in the office you know--I got there--I got there the month after the riot, which was in May, which was...after the assassinations, which were in

November of '78. So I got--I was--I was you know--but everybody knew everybody and I mean, it was really funny. I finally--it took me forever to see the movie Milk because I knew it was just going to be too painful. But it was really funny because it was like, "Oh! Dated him. [Laughs] Literally. He was my roommate. Dated him." And stuff. And of course it was funny, because they didn't look at all--you know, they didn't look at all like they were supposed to. Or like they did, you know. So it was kind of funny.

No, that was just before me but everybody who was in the environment I worked in; I was a member of the Harvey Milk [TJ addition: Lesbian and] Gay Democratic Club and stuff. And pretty active in--in queer Democratic politics. And I you know, not long after I got there--and of course that's what everybody had done. No--no, although every time I see the--the video that--and it popped up again and I can't remember why--not all that long ago--I mean every time I see her [Anita Bryant] get hit in the face with the pie I think it's hysterical [laughs].

CP: Never gets old.

TJ: Yeah. No, never gets old. And so you know, it was really interesting because you know, as I--it may have had something, looking back, something to do with the organizing that I've been doing and I did--I did a--a ten-week long organizing leadership development course in--in the spring this past year based on the work that a guy by the name of Marshall Ganz at Harvard, at the Kennedy School at Harvard, does. And he was really the--he was really the organizer behind Cesar Chavez and the farmworkers. You know, Cesar was out front giving speeches and meeting people and so on, and Marshall was organizing the campaign. And has taught at the Kennedy School for quite a while and the--the--we had--the people who taught the course that I took, which was out of an

organization called Wisconsin Leadership Development, you know, they were trained by him at Harvard and then they trained us, so it was kind of one person removed.

But it's interesting looking back, how much of you know, how much even in the Briggs Initiative in particular...we used a lot of organizing tools that--that we're using now for recovery advocacy stuff. You know, and interestingly enough, I mean, I don't know where this fits in, but I might as well talk about it now, you know, what drew me to recovery advocacy specifically was a guy by the name of Ryan Hampton, who was the co-founder of the Recovery Advocacy Project, his first book in 2019 was called *American Fix*. And like most of my favorite books, it was about a third his story, a third the story of other people in recovery and not, and then a third, you know, sort of the in this case, legal and political stuff. And he has a second book out on the Purdue Pharma bankruptcy. But at the end of it, basically what he said was that the only thing that is going to solve the addiction crisis is an ACT UP-level response.

And you know, one of the things about ACT UP was that everybody came out, you know? And everybody came out everywhere. To their family, to their friends, their doctor, their lawyer, everybody. And that was the same thing that--that Harvey and company did with the Briggs Initiative, which was everybody come out and once you know somebody that you care about is queer, it's a lot harder to deny them rights. I mean, there's always going to be some people who do, and I suspect probably in the last two to five years, it's gotten worse. Certainly from the you know--it feels as though we're, you know, entering [laughs] well you know I think we were probably two or three months into Trump and I said, "You know--you know who I really miss?" And my friends went, "Who--no. Who?" And I said you know, "I miss Nixon, you know?" [Laughs] And I

never thought I'd say that. My parents are turning over in their graves of course, but-- because he was the--the devil incarnate when I was growing up, but--but--no, seriously. Anyway.

But no, I mean that organizing goes all the way back to--it's what they did with Briggs, it's what you know, to a significant degree we're doing with Recovery, and we have--we have even more challenges I think because the stigma and discrimination around people in recovery is based on a lot of misunderstanding. And so there's an education piece that there wasn't with--with gay rights stuff because you were either queer or you weren't and you either identified as gay or you didn't, and you know, the--the legal issues were pretty clear. You know, recovery we have a shitload of language stuff to deal with. There're are surveys even--even--there was one that I read about a few weeks ago where you know, even when doctors hear that somebody is in recovery, they still think that means they're using--substances. So you know, those are doctors. Now, we know that--we know the substance education that doctors get is usually a day in medical school but you know, that needs to change too. But anyway that's--

CP: Well, I'm curious, actually, if you could just define what “recovery advocacy” is. Like what--what kinds of things are you all working for? Like what is the work that you're doing?

TJ: Okay. Well, RAP--Recovery Advocacy Project--is...thirty-eight? Forty state organizing teams? That are grassroots-based. There's a national team but it's tiny and it just kind of collects knowledge and provides--provides support. But we're not a federal-oriented organizing group. We've done a couple of little things in Virginia over the--over the summer and fall, some petition stuff and so on, only because one of our local

politicians was involved. So there was a thing we're doing with--with the Senate, because Tim Kaine is on the committee that is hearing the bill. And that's the only reason we did that. We did a thing a couple weeks ago, a letter campaign--email campaign--because the FDA has posted public comment on making Narcan available over the counter. And we have a couple--couple of initiatives that we're working on that relate to some stuff that the Board of Pharmacy is doing.

In particular, one where making Narcan available in public dispensing boxes that the Board of Pharmacy says you can't do. And has come up with this convoluted pilot project where they put a box out with Narcan in it that has a QR code on it. You scan the QR code, you watch a five-minute video, the video spits out a code. You punch the code into the PIN pad on the box, and it spits out a box of Narcan. Which is great except the machines cost on the order of \$10,000. And you know, are from an advocacy standpoint...there's some people that--that are friends and acquaintances in the--in the movement, the goal is to have a Narcan dispenser everywhere you see an AED. That's the ultimate goal. So that's one thing that--so we're working on Narcan dispensing.

We're working on pharmacist dispensing Suboxone. People in rural areas in Virginia, especially through chain pharmacies, are just getting all kinds of grief from pharmacists, most of whom have--are basing it on a DEA memo from many years ago that was retracted, but the DEA memo of course made a big splash and scared the shit out of everybody, and they published the retraction but they didn't broadcast it. They never announced, really, that they--that they had retracted it. And there are some pharmacies in West Virginia in particular that have been prosecuted and so you know, rumor goes around and so on. And one of the things we want the Board of Pharmacy to do is let all

the pharmacies in Virginia know what the real deal is and to get them to stop doing things like asking people who have been prescribed Suboxone, “Well, what's your taper? You know, what is your--what is your prescriber done to taper you off the stuff?” And now some people stay on it for a very long time. And so it's none of the pharmacists' business! They're not doctors. You know? And so if they're asking that, to some degree they're practicing medicine without a license. So that's one--that's--that's one thing we're doing.

We're doing a fair amount of administrative stuff this summer, fall, and coming into the spring. We did a lot of legislative stuff a year ago this time and into January and with the change in party in the House of Delegates and in the governor's mansion, we took a shellacking. I mean, almost everything that we were--we were advocating and working for and some of us were testifying about and--and so on, pretty much everything went down the tubes.

One other thing that--and so what we're trying to do now is do it community by community. Police department by police department. Hospital by hospital, where we have a presence and we have--we have--we have some organizing team members who are interested in doing the work. In Charlottesville and Albemarle, for example, and this blew me away when I found out--I found out a few months ago. Charlottesville and Albemarle police refuse to carry Narcan. And of course in a county as large as Albemarle, oftentimes they are going to be the first people on site. You know, EMS and the fire department are going to show up twenty minutes later and by then the person's dead.

But it's based on you know, another old folks' tale of cops being exposed to fentanyl. Which we know [laughs] is a total crock of shit! You cannot be exposed to fentanyl through your skin. It's the reason they put it on patches, you know? It takes a

patch to get fentanyl through your skin. And even inhaling it, a friend of mine--a friend of mine with the Charlottesville Albemarle Rescue Squad said in a training they went to, somebody said something like, "You'd have to put a pound of it in front of a fan and have it blown into your face to inhale enough of it to--to actually affect you, you know, breathing it." And so the reason--the ostensible reason--the stated reason the cops won't carry it is they don't want to get close enough to somebody's who's overdosing because they're afraid they're going to be exposed to fentanyl. Now unless there's a dirty needle that they stab themselves with, you know, the chance of them being exposed is zero.

And also you know, the other thing is all the symptoms all of the law enforcement and other first responders are describing when they claim they've been exposed to fentanyl. You know, fentanyl's--fentanyl makes you stop breathing and these are people who are quite literally having panic attacks. You know? Their heart rate's up, their breathing's up, they're sweating. Fentanyl doesn't do that [laughs]. So. So that's another thing. That's another thing we're working on. We have a bunch of stuff that is on hold related to defelonization, reclassification of felonies. One big thing--Virginia has--this relates to peer employment as much as anything else--Virginia has the highest--the largest list of barrier crimes in the country. Something like 170. The federal list is tiny. Most states have fifteen or twenty.

CP: So what--what is a--a "barrier crime"?

TJ: It means that you cannot be employed in a licensed medical setting as anybody, but a peer in particular. If you have any one of these hundred and I think it's seventy-some odd charges. And you know, it's like--like spitting at a cop [TJ addition: while intoxicated or in a mental health crisis] and things like that that you know, any

other state is going to like...and some of them now you can get waived if they were related to substance use or mental health history, but even--but that list is pretty small. And you know, coincidental things. You know, I was--I was talking to somebody recently who had possession charges that would have normally been waived but their kid was in the house. Not present, but in the house sleeping. And so they charged them with child endangerment, okay, and that's not waivable. So. Stuff like that. It's ridiculous. And we were making real progress on changing that and then lost--how many was it? Five or six seats in the House of Delegates and down the tubes for--well, now three more years. And so we're doing--looking at more administrative stuff. We've had a few successes.

I'm a--I think I mentioned earlier I'm a peer trainer. And noticed in a listening session that we did for VRAP...somebody I know from the recovery community in particular, a queer person of color said, "You know, I didn't feel comfortable in my training. I didn't feel accepted. I didn't feel any--you know, I didn't feel welcome or anything." And so we started thinking about it and I went back and I looked at the training manual among other things, and the Virginia--current Virginia peer training manual from 2019 has three paragraphs on cultural competency. That's it. And so we did a letter campaign. We got a good response from the Office of Recovery Services. They did a couple focus groups that we participated in--they asked us to provide people for. They were also doing some LGBTQ stuff at the same time. I participated in one of those focus groups fairly recently and we're hoping the new manual will be far more inclusive and even the intent of taking all of us peer trainers back into training so that we can add probably a day's worth of diversity training to the peer curriculum. Ultimately. And so we had--we had something to do with that.

So we've had a few successes, but then you know, we are starting to keep an eye on the Opioid Abatement Authority, who are the people who are going to be chopping up and monitoring the--all the opioid settlements that are coming in. Another RAP peer and I went to an Opioid Abatement Authority listening session in Fairfax on Saturday. I stood up and talked about the fact that based on some comments that other people made, that a lot of the recovery community organizations--the way they are disbursing the funds, which is exclusively through local city, county, and state governments and agencies [clears throat] excuse me--means that small organizations, small recovery community organizations, could really be behind the eight ball.

And they've cooked up this really bizarre thing where 35% of the money--I think--is regional money where--so for example, if you were a peer organization that serves five counties, you would have to go to all five counties and get them to work together to develop a plan that in turn, they would give you the money for. But you gotta get the five of them to agree for you to serve all five counties. And so I suggested that they do a couple of--a couple of whatever you want to call them, get-togethers, town halls, conferences, something between now and April or May when the--when the deadline for the grant--for the applications is. To facilitate that, you know. Whether they do it regionally; something like that. Get the city and county people in; get the recovery community organizations in, all in one room and see what can--you know, for a day and see what can get worked out. They said, "Oh, that's a great idea, give me your name and number." So I'll follow up on that. Those are just some things we're doing.

CP: Yeah. Yeah. That's amazing. So how did you get involved in this kind of like community mental health, like recovery kind of work?

TJ: Well, you know, I'd been in recovery for...nine years when I got hired as a recovery coach. And I didn't really do much for a long time, advocacy-wise, public-wise. You know, there's this whole completely misunderstood concept of anonymity. There's a great movie called *The Anonymous People* that everybody in recovery should watch, because it blows the whole misunderstanding of anonymity that goes back to literally the founding of AA and talks about how it's been totally misunderstood, especially through--especially through the '40s and '50s and '60s. Or maybe even the '50s and '60s. It was totally misunderstood. It doesn't mean if you're a person in recovery, you can't go out and advocate in public and say, "Hi, my name's Tom. I'm a person in long-term recovery." And talk about why I do what I'm doing. So--but it was really going back to 2019 when I really started--started doing this.

You know, my--my personal advocacy history really goes all the way back to...even--even before the Vietnam War. My parents did--my parents did some advocacy in New York in the '50s and '60s as part of the Civil Rights Movement. And the first thing I remember was after we moved to this small conservative town in Connecticut, one of our neighbors who you know, it was a summer beach community we lived at. We lived there all year round, but it was mostly beach--you know, cottages. People came for the summer. This family from West Hartford...brought down a bunch of inner-city kids for a week at a time. And needless to say, the lily-white Republicans did not like that. And--and some of them were you know, friends of--or parents of my closest friends. And some of our friends were not very kind about it either. And it just hit me that, "I gotta say something." Because these people are wrong and so you know, here's this like, I don't know, eleven- or twelve-year-old you know, literally telling these people that you know,

their outlook sucks and that they really need to you know, sort of wake up and--and--and look at this differently.

And then it led to a Senate campaign in Connecticut in--in 1970, which really kind of put the old school Connecticut Democratic machine in the grave. Knocking Chris Dodd's father out in a primary, who was just a Neanderthal even though he was a Democrat. We lost the general election to a liberal Republican, but--but we kind of broke the back of the Democratic machine. And then I did work for McGovern in '72 and so on. Long before I could vote, but it was like people are hurting, people are dying, you know. For me, it always comes back to people are dying. People were dying in the Civil Rights Movement. I mean, I vaguely remember the March on Washington and--and King's speech. I vaguely remember it.

CP: As in you were there, or you remember hearing about it?

TJ: I was hearing about it.

CP: Yeah.

TJ: And seeing it on TV and some of my parents' friends went.

CP: Got it.

TJ: Some of my parents' friends went. The private school I went to in New York...the three kids that were killed in Mississippi, who went down there, one of them went to the same school I went to, and so there was that connection as well. Goodman of Goodman, Chaney, and--I can't remember the first one. Don't get old. But anyway, you know, my--my political consciousness and activism goes back to there. And then you know, people were dying of HIV/AIDS and the government wasn't doing shit. And now you know, people are--the overdose rate seems to be--the death rate from overdoses--I

just heard this this week--the death rate from overdoses seems to be coming down. The overdose rate is not coming down, but the death rate is coming down. Which among other things means that Narcan's working, because that's the difference. But you know, it's 108,000 year-to-year as of the summer that you know, that die from totally preventable overdoses and so you know, I just don't handle people dying very well. It really hurts.

So that's--I mean for me, that's the--that's the--the kind of foundation of all of this, you know, that--and it's--and you know, the mental health piece, both my own experience as a--as somebody who is a--you know, who copes with long-term you know, depression in particular, probably related to--set-off by the substance use, you know, I see people here--I see people in the program I first worked for--you know, serious mental illness is a lethal condition. In the--in the residential program I worked in we lost somebody--I can't remember. I figured it out. It was either every fourteen or sixteen months, we lost somebody. Either to poor health, suicide, overdose, or some combination of all of those. But almost nobody lived past sixty. And that was really one of the--one of the other motivators too, was when word first came out from Sampson's studies in particular that on the average, people with serious mental health conditions live twenty years less than their peers, so.

CP: Yeah. So how did you get that first job in Charlottesville working for Region Ten? Like how did that come about?

TJ: It was really just one of those you know, sort of fortuitous things. When I was homeless, I'd been couch surfing and couch surfing and couch surfing and the last people I was--I was--well, guest room surfing said, "You know, you can't do this anymore." So,

went to the Salvation Army. Stayed there for...I don't know, sixty days, give or take. Something like that. It was the heat of the summer. But they made me go to Region Ten. And so I walked in to Region Ten and they said, "Is this an emergency?" I said, "Well...not quite but pretty close." Because of course I found out later that at a community services board, you get seen right then and there. If not, it's come back in six weeks. It's gotten better, but not enough. That's another thing we're working on.

But anyway, so I got seen that day. I got referred to a therapist, and you know, maybe six weeks into seeing him, he said, "Oh I got this--this coworker friend who runs this recovery program and he's looking for a couple of house managers and you should apply." So I did. Got called for an interview. Showed up for the interview--turns up--turns out I showed up for the interview at the right time two days later [laughs]. We rescheduled for the next day, and I think within 48 hours I was hired, I had a roof over my head, I had you know, a job and everything, and then I just kind of kept doing it. And I kept getting--you know, kind of went from--from part-time to full-time to a promotion to another promotion to going to work at a crisis stabilization unit. Retired as a program manager from there a few years ago then took a peer job part-time, then took a peer job full-time, and then landed here.

So that's sort of the whole--the whole arc of that [clears throat]. And it was really where I started realizing that you know, I was using my recovery experience--I cannot stand the phrase "lived experience." It's just got--I burned out on it. Every time I hear it, I cringe. Because it's--first of all, it's redundant. It's not--you know, my death experience would be the opposite and [laughs] you know so--but my recovery experience was something that could be valuable to other people, is kind of where that all came from.

CP: So how has doing that work changed over the time--you know, you've been doing this work for well over--

TJ: Twenty years.

CP: Twenty years now. Yeah.

TJ: Yeah. Almost exactly twenty years in October. Well, and interestingly too just as an aside, the person that hired me twenty years ago is a very good friend and the hearing in Fairfax on Saturday we went to, he came up with me. He grew up in McLean; we had dinner with his parents, you know. So. So we've just--we've been friends for--well, he supervised me for a year, year and a half and then he left and we've been friends ever since. So--remind me the question?

CP: How have things changed in your--in your time sort of working in this area?

TJ: Well, you know, in some ways--in a lot of ways, sadly, they haven't. You know. In some ways, sadly, they haven't. One of--one of my personal goals is to see the--the...to see...organizing and advocacy around people who have co-occurring conditions. Because there are the advocacy organizations for mental health. There are the advocacy organizations for substance use. RAP is wonderful because we have the opportunity to address recovery--lowercase "r", which could be for--recovery from you know, whatever--whatever is causing you distress.

And you know, my--my stigmatizing language way of saying it, but it's true is, crazy people don't want the addicts and the addicts--and the--and the junkies don't want the crazy people. I mean that's really almost literally how the advocacy organizations break down. And even in Virginia, there really isn't anybody who--who really addresses both. Each stigmatizes the other. And it's funny, there's a guy by the name of Bill White

who's the historian of the modern recovery movement who says he's stopped using the word "stigma" and calls it "discrimination." Saying stigma is a feeling; stigma is--stigma is an attitude, but discrimination is the result. Discrimination is the behavior. And so--and I've tried to--I try using the word "stigma" as little as possible and just call it "discrimination." But trying to end that.

You know...I always have to be a little careful, because you know, I have most--I mean, all of my clients here in one way are connected to community services boards. But you know, by and large, community services boards in Virginia are composed of phenomenally hardworking people who are colossally underpaid. [TJ addition: And] in many cases, horrifically managed. They have this idea that you can--that the only promotion path for clinical staff is to become managers. At some point not very far into a career as a clinician, you hit a ceiling because there are no other advanced clinical paths for people. Especially money-wise.

So you get promoted to [TJ addition: be] a manager and they have this idea that you can take somebody who could--who could be a phenomenal clinician and turn them into a manager, and what you end up with by--significantly end up with are shitty managers. And so many of them have caring people but the management is just not there. Management skill is just not there. And the funding is horrible, you know. People are paid tens of thousands of dollars less than somebody with a similar degree would be paid in a different industry. Now, why has that happened? It's very simple: the--the mental health profession is significantly female. Okay? Probably [TJ edit: two-thirds to three-fourths] give or take. Maybe even more? And literally the pay is about sixty-five to seventy cents on the dollar. That's why. And--aside from the fact that you know,

legislators don't want to give money to crazy people and drug addicts. So there's no--the government funding isn't there.

And it's why just all kinds of unfortunate things happen in terms of you know, people not having access to services. Because--because there's no staff to do it. Now, you know, one of the big--one of the big ways that we can change that is now just this past summer, peer services finally are reimbursable by Medicaid at a rate that makes it worth billing for them. And so you know, peers can fill in an awful lot of that work. And there's even some work that I've been--that I've been just starting to get involved with the Medicaid folks. Right now, you have to have a clinician order peer services. Well, why do you have a clinician order peer services? You know, a peer supervisor should be able to order peer services. So there's some work to make that happen. So. That's at least a little bit.

CP: Yeah. That's--yeah. That's super interesting. I'm curious; you know, you've worked in Charlottesville, which is supposedly--it's a little bit more urban. It's supposedly more progressive, although that's sort of a debatable thing we can debate. And then now you work in--

TJ: Especially when it comes to queer stuff.

CP: Right, right, right. Well, and then now you work in Staunton, which is much more rural, much more conservative part of Virginia.

TJ: Well, it's really fascinating.

CP: Yeah.

TJ: Okay. Because the city of Staunton--like the city of Charlottesville--geographically is tiny. You know, the city of Charlottesville is--I forgot what. Three

miles, four miles on a side? It's tiny. And Staunton I don't think is even that big. We have a gay and lesbian community center, you know?

CP: It's amazing.

TJ: We have an active presence in things. And so on. So actually, this is a far more you know, sort of out in public place than--than Charlottesville is.

CP: Yeah.

TJ: You know, Charlottesville has a larger Pride celebration but that's only because you know, it's a--it's a bigger place. But so--yeah. No, and I think--actually, you know, I think it's interesting because I think you had originally approached me about was what you know, what is queer life in Charlottesville like. To which my very brief answer is, "What queer life?"

You know, totally telling--you know, Randy Rainbow who's the YouTube actor/singer who makes all these wonderful you know, Broadway tune-based spoofs of politicians in particular, was at the Paramount in Charlottesville a couple of Sundays ago. And at one point--and you know, he's--he's--he's seriously queer, he's out obviously and everything. And it was all middle-aged heterosexual couples. And at one point from the stage, he even said something like, you know, "Where are the queer people here?" Or "Where are the gay men here?" Or something. And there were like four people who either raised their hands or shouted. And what does the Paramount seat? Twelve hundred or something like that? Nope. Four out of twelve hundred, you know? And I'm sure there were more but you know, God forbid they should say anything.

CP: Yeah. I mean--thinking--I haven't made it to one of the Pride festivals yet, but I've heard that the bulk of the people who attend are straight couples, you know, straight

people.

TJ: Oh yeah. Yeah. Yeah.

CP: So--yeah, so I'm curious, you know moving from--you moved to Charlottesville, like were you trying to meet other queer people, and if so how were you going about doing that?

TJ: Well, when I first moved to Charlottesville, there was a queer AA meeting. And that was where I did most of my initial socializing. And it probably lasted--my recollection is maybe three years. And then it just sort of fizzled.

CP: Yeah.

TJ: And then somebody tried to start one a number of years after that and it lasted for a couple of years and fizzled. So probably--what? Five years ago now? Four years ago? Two years before COVID, so probably five years ago, I started doing almost all my recovery stuff in Richmond. I started going to queer meetings there, I found a queer therapist, and so on. And even moved some of my you know, queer medical stuff if I didn't have--already have a practitioner of that you know, whatever it was. So you know, like I needed a foot doctor. So I ended up going--you know, I'll go to a foot doctor in Richmond. My--I've had my psychiatrist and internist here for twenty-plus years, and they're fine. One of my AA friends actually referred me to my internist, who's you know, totally--totally wonderful. Although the only out gay doc in Charlottesville moved quite some number of years ago. To the Jersey Shore.

So you know, there's--as far as I know, there's no--there are no out gay doctors, dentists, lawyers--no, that's not true. Well, there's a couple lesbian lawyers. But--but that's it, you know. And it's interesting you know, I've--I don't know whether it's just that

it's the, you know, sort of old genteel you just don't talk about it, you know, sort of old South part of--of Charlottesville. You know--I mean, my--my bad joke--but it is to some degree true is you know, the largest queer population in the Charlottesville are the lesbian foxhunters that hang around Rita Mae Brown [both laugh]. And it's true! [Both laugh]

CP: I--I ride, so that's--

TJ: Oh, do you? Okay. [Laughs] It's true.

CP: It's a good--yep. Mm-hmm. [Laughs]

TJ: I've been saying it for years, that--and--and some of my friends actually--one of my--one of my best friend's sister is a Nelson County horse person.

CP: Yeah. [Laughs]

TJ: But--yeah.

CP: Yeah.

TJ: So.

CP: Yeah, I mean that's--that's so interesting that you say that, because I mean, every--you know, there were gay bars when you moved--in the time that you moved to Charlottesville--

TJ: Yeah.

CP: But that was obviously not something that you were really doing.

TJ: Well I--you know, when I first moved here, I went.

CP: Yeah.

TJ: When I first moved here, I went, but what I even heard after a while was, by and large, it was like you know, UVA students who went on Friday and Saturday nights and stuff and that there was--again, there just was not much of you know, gay men in

particular who went, so. And yeah--and many years--I mean, I don't have any problem going to a bar, but--I did a lot in early recovery in San Francisco and it never bothered me, but also you know--you know, there's--I could never remember the exact punch line, but you know it's something like you know, "somewhere between forty and death." I think it's a line from a Stephen Sondheim song. You know, and I'm definitely in that category of you know--a queer male of somewhere between forty and death [laughs].

CP: Yeah. Yeah, that makes sense. And now there's--you know, there's--there's not--there's not a gay bar in Staunton, but there is the community center in Staunton, yeah.

TJ: Yeah.

CP: So have you done anything with--with them?

TJ: A little bit. A little bit. Not a lot, but a little bit. I've gone to a few things.

CP: Yeah.

TJ: I've gone to a few things.

CP: Yeah.

TJ: My therapist urges me to go to more [both laugh]. My friends urge me to go to more.

CP: Yeah. So you know, you--it sounds like you were able to meet some other queer folks when you first moved to Charlottesville.

TJ: Yeah, some of whom are still friends.

CP: Yeah. So what did you all--you know, where were you going to hang out with them? Like what were you all doing? Would you go to people's houses? Would you go to other--

TJ: I mean, go out to eat, mostly. Go to other--go to other twelve-step meetings that were you know, friendly.

CP: Yeah.

TJ: That you know, that there were some gay people at. Again, I mean you know, there were like five of us, but--but you know, we'd go out for food. We'd go--yeah, to some degree we'd go to each other's houses, but--but I also fell in with, for quite a while, fell in with a mostly straight NA crowd that I used to play bridge with on you know, Saturday nights and stuff like that. So it was kind of hit-or-miss, you know... And then again here, you know, trying to think. I don't have any gay male friends in Staunton. The couple of people that I met at the last community center event I went to, you know we exchanged phone numbers but neither of us called the other. And there's some guy from-- I think he lives in Fishersville, and we went back and forth and back and forth on Facebook, "Let's get together, let's get together," and it never worked out and so it just kind of fizzled.

CP: Yeah. That makes sense... Is there anything else--is there anything that sort of stands out to you besides--I don't know. Is there anything else that sort of stands out to you from your experiences of being like a queer person in Charlottesville?

TJ: Yeah. Just that it's pretty oppressive [laughs]. When you get right down to it, you know. There just is--there's almost no visibility, you know. You know, you see--you see the--I mean, I see more--I see more rainbow flags in Staunton than I do in Charlottesville, driving around by and large. And--and I see more--I see more rainbow signs--rainbow bumper stickers in Staunton than I do in Charlottesville. And again, not that--not that I've necessarily done anything about it, but at least there's a slightly comfort

level being here. If I could stand the heat and humidity, I've thought about moving to Richmond. If the advocacy stuff progresses farther, you know...you know, you kind of sort of need to be in Richmond, too. But--you know, Charlottesville to Richmond was easy. I'd--you know, it was a fifty-five minute trip and I'd just hop in the car and go. This-

CP: It's harder.

TJ: It's an extra forty minutes over the mountain and you know, my--my twelve-step home group is--is Monday nights and--I mean, if I bolted out of here at quarter of five, I could make it, but--but. You know. [Laughs]

CP: Yeah. Oh my god, I just--oh, yeah. It's interesting. I've done a number of these interviews and I've listened to a bunch of other ones that--that Cville Pride has done, and it's--it's interesting because there are some people who feel very strongly you know, sort of what you're expressing, of like they're--that it doesn't feel like there's a community in Charlottesville; there needs to be more like you know, queer-specific stuff. Which is kind of I think what you're kind of saying. Maybe.

TJ: Yeah.

CP: And then there's some people who are like, "Well, it doesn't--it doesn't matter. People in Charlottesville are so accepting. I can go into any bar and it's a gay bar because I'm in there." Like that's how it is. Yeah, so I'm--I'm sort of curious. That doesn't--that does not sound--

TJ: I don't see why it has to be one or the other, first of all.

CP: Okay.

TJ: You know, I don't see why it has to be one or the other. I mean, I go--I--yeah,

I mean I--that latter thing is--is certainly true, but I wouldn't say it's a gay bar because I went, you know. It's a gay bar because it's a gay bar and lots of people--lots of gay people go there. And that that's the intent and the destination and so on. You know, and--and look, I mean the--you know, the bars that have gotten shot up in the last you know--we just had one recently, you know those were--those were you know, sort of community respites as well as anything else.

CP: What are you referring to, just to be clear?

TJ: The Colorado Springs shooting.

CP: Oh. Oh, sorry, I thought you meant in Charlottesville.

TJ: No. No, no no. No. The Colorado Springs one.

CP: Right, right, right.

TJ: Although you know, hell, it wouldn't be--it wouldn't have surprised me if somebody once upon a time somebody did that in Charlottesville.

CP: Somebody remembers somebody throwing like bricks at like Muldowney's or you know, the Silver Fox, or you know, at some point in its evolution. But--anyway.

TJ: You know, that's interesting you mention that. I remember something at the Silver Fox. But I don't remember what it was. Was it--was it a fire? Was there a... was there a fire at one of them? Something like that?

CP: I don't know. I haven't heard--

TJ: I don't remember.

CP: But I mean--yeah. [Recording switches to iPhone]

TJ: But something--there was something like that. There was something like that.

CP: Yeah. So, zooming out a little bit, and this kind of ties into what we're

thinking--what we've been talking about a little bit, but you know, especially in Charlottesville, you think about you know, race relations is a really big issue.

TJ: Yeah.

CP: When you think about Charlottesville, especially in the last five years since--since Unite the Right. So I'm really curious. In your experience, how Black and white queer people in Charlottesville have related to each other?

TJ: That's interesting. I'm trying to think...trying to think if I've ever seen any you know, sort of mingling of people. I mean you know; you mention--you mentioned those two bars back in the day. I can't say I remember any Black people being in them. One way or the other. I don't remember there were; I don't remember that there weren't. And I never went to the private clubs, you know, 216 and stuff. So... I can't say that I have any visibility or any acknowledgement that there was any overlap. I do know that having done--gone to some recovery-related things and community wellness things and so on, that there is a total exclusion of anybody other than African American people when you start talking about diversity, equity, and inclusion. That brown people are not included, and we have a huge, especially rural, Hispanic population, you know. I worked in Nelson County doing rural health for five months. Huge migrant community there. Also in Albemarle County. And in the city. And you know, there's no, "Oh, there are--there are people of color, too." You know.

And certainly no understanding that you know, queer people are a marginalized community too. Or Asian people or--especially now, with some of the violence that's been committed against the Asian people. And I understand it. To a significant degree. It's like, you know--you know, if--if I had a history where you know, not very long ago

my forebears were owned by other people, you know, I would--I would--I think I would look at things in a particular way. At the same time--you know, at the same time, Martin Luther King said, you know, "Nobody's free 'till we're all free."

And it's really interesting; one of my advocacy friends--new friends, acquaintances, friends, is an indigenous person from Maine. And he dropped into--Zoomed into the class I just finished teaching and talked about the White Bison and well-briety movements and also about his--his family history of--of genocide and so on. Both generally and specifically. And--but he put up the--he put up the--the website for White Bison and--and it said something like, you know, "We're here for indigenous people and all people in recovery." And that really struck me, because I certainly never saw anything in Charlottesville from any minority community that included anybody else. It was us--we got ours--we're working on getting ours; you can you know--you can go find it on your own. And--and again, I understand the history of it. But it doesn't make it feel particularly welcoming.

CP: No, I've heard that from folks about--about Charlottesville in general and UVA in particular as well, so.

TJ: Mm-hmm. And you know, I mean UVA--you know, UVA has made some strides in the twenty-five years I've been around here. But it's still a plantation [laughs] when you get right down to it, it's still a plantation.

CP: Yeah. Yeah. I've definitely heard students who--who will still call it that, so. Yeah. And that actually sort of brings me to another question of you know, in your experience, especially as somebody who--who wasn't directly affiliated with UVA, do you see--how do you sort of view UVA in the community? Either sort of generally, or as

like do you see like queer faculty and staff at UVA kind of sticking to themselves; do you see them kind of intermingling in the larger gay community in Charlottesville; like what's sort of your perspective there?

TJ: I think--both, although I've gone to more--I've gone to more queer events at UVA than I ever went to queer events in the city. Mainly because there were--there were them to go to, versus in the city where there just wasn't anything to go to, when you get right down to it.

CP: Mm-hmm. Like what kind of events?

TJ: You know, just...you know, either you know, a political thing, a... a fundraiser, a commemorative event, you know. Anything like that. You know, there's-- and I'm on--I'm obviously on UVA's mailing list. And I worked at UVA for I don't know, did temp work for eight or ten months, you know, in my early times here, so. You know, so I'm still on all the mailing lists and stuff. So. I mean, and--and--and certainly you know, they're more cosmopolitan, which you know, which is something that I enjoy. Far more likely to find people to talk to and things like that. So.

CP: Yeah. So do you feel like you're part of a queer community now? Either in Charlottesville, in Staunton, in Richmond?

TJ: Right now, having moved here and not completely engaged here and being farther away from Richmond, right now, no. You know, if anything I am most--and again, you know, I didn't even think about this until you asked that, but I'm also a member of the RAP Inclusivity Caucus, which we've had for two-plus years. And there, there's a mixture of everybody. Queer people, people of color, indigenous people, and so on. And I spend as much time on that as I do anything else.

And also you know, my--my home group actually in Richmond does a hybrid meeting and so I'll--I--you know, I do Zoom into that. I keep forgetting--I haven't done it for a while. I've been bad. And--and so on, but in early--early to mid-COVID, I was Zooming into a lot of stuff. And then I kind of hit a wall. I went to a--my godson was in town and I went to an NA meeting and there were like six of us at noon, but I was like, "Oh my God, I forgot what a real meeting was like." And Zoom meetings for a while just--I--I started calling it "diet recovery." You know, it felt like drinking a Diet Coke when you really wanted the real thing, no pun intended [laughs]. And...and so I actually took a break, kind of, from Zoom meetings for a while. Because they just were like--they were like fake meetings, you know? They just like...and then I was like, "Okay, fine, I'm going to get back and do it." And then they were fine.

But I--I was also doing just so much Zoom stuff with advocacy stuff and also using the opportunity to do a bunch of Zoom trainings. We had--you know, we shut down our learning centers on March 13th [2020] and it was months and months before we came up with an alter--alternative programming, keeping all the units separate. And didn't start co-mingling them until a few months ago. And so, had a number of different you know, type--schedule-type things. I also spent a lot of time with one particular unit, doing groups there, but also we had tons of time where you know, I just spent time learning stuff.

CP: Yeah. Yeah. That--yes, that was also my experience of most of early COVID.

TJ: Yeah [laughs].

CP: Lots of time on Zoom. Let's see. Oh, I wanted to circle back. You--you sort of mentioned that life in Charlottesville as a queer person is "oppressive." But is there

any sort of like specific examples or things that you can remember where that--that sort of really came through?

TJ: You know, again it was more in the you know--I can--more in the--more in the recovery community than anything else, where you know, the one meeting just sort of withered and died and--and nobody was really interested in starting anything else. And then when it did start, it didn't last, you know. And so--and there's really good, solid queer recovery in Richmond. There's--there's really good--we had one meeting that we tried starting that wasn't a go, but it was timing as much anything else. 5:30 on a Friday night is not a good time you know, especially if you work until 5:00 and then--I mean, not that Richmond traffic is bad, but still, trying to get someplace by 5:30 is a pain in the ass. But--but it wasn't from you know, lack of--lack of--of interest you know, of it being a queer meeting and stuff.

So...you know, it's like again, it's just--it's more invisibility than anything else. It's just that there's no, you know, the old Gertrude Stein quote, "There's no there there." You know, it's sort of the [laughs] Oakland of [laughs] just what she originally--the quote was originally about. You know, there just--it's just not there. You know, I don't remember--I mean--and actually, it just popped up this weekend on Facebook. Is it the tenth anniversary of that young trans person who vanished?

CP: Yeah, I saw that. Yeah. I think so. Sage Smith.

TJ: I just saw that. Yeah. I just saw this. Ten years. And so you hear about something like that. Now, you know, you go to a big city, you hear about that all the time, so you know. But no, I mean it's--it's--it's really a void more than anything else, you know. And if it's there, you know, I would love to--I would love if your research proves

that there's something there that nobody knows about, I would love to know about it [laughs].

CP: We'll talk about the Instagram accounts after [laughs].

TJ: Okay [laughs].

CP: After we stop recording. But yeah, we're--we're kind of about to wrap up. Sort of reaching the end of my questions. But is there anything else that you want to talk about that I haven't.

TJ: Well, you mention--actually you know, it's interesting you mention that because needless to say you know, there is online stuff, you know. There is online stuff. And I actually did--when I first got here, I actually did some online dating. Back in the literally AOL days. I mean that's--that was--you know. And every now and then--you know, every now and then I'll go on to one of the sites and you know, chat with some people and so on, but for a whole bunch of reasons, have never you know--personal reasons--have never really followed through on it. But there are certainly enough people out there. You know.

CP: Yeah.

TJ: Yeah. Maybe that's it. I didn't even think about that until--until you mentioned Instagram. You know, I think maybe it's all online. Maybe it's all online.

CP: Yeah.

TJ: And that's a way for people to not have to be visible in public. As opposed to both [laughs].

CP: Yeah. Yeah. Yeah.

TJ: Like the rest of the world [laughs].

CP: Yeah. Yeah, exactly. Yeah, so is there--I mean is there anything else that you--that you would like to share or to talk about before we wrap up.

TJ: I think that's it.

CP: Okay. All right. Well, I really appreciate you taking the time to--to talk with me today. I'm really glad we finally--we finally made it work [laughs].

TJ: Likewise. Thank you so much for your patience. This was--this was great. I really enjoyed it.

END OF RECORDING