

Matt Bragg

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Boise State University

Transcript

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VOICE RECORDING

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DAVID COWAN

My name is David Cowan, it's November 29th, and I'm here with Matt Bragg. Thanks for your time, Matt.

MATT BRAGG

Thank you for taking the time.

DAVID COWAN

Absolutely. So, first let's go ahead and start off with some basic questions. What is your full name, and what do you like to be called?

MATT BRAGG

My full name is Matthew Bragg, but I just prefer Matt. But I also accept Mike, Mark, and Mac, because they all sound alike. And sometimes Shaquan. (*pauses*) Why not.

DAVID COWAN

When and where were you born?

MATT BRAGG

I really just want to give you the "son of a sharecropper," backwards Mississippi thing, but in actuality, I was born on May 23rd, 1971, in Akron, Ohio, at Akron City Hospital at 4:05 a.m.

DAVID COWAN

You know the exact everything.

MATT BRAGG

Well, because I'm approximately four hours and five minutes late, according to my mom's due date. And I have consequently been pretty much that late for everything else, the rest of my life. Yeah, that's the way it goes.

DAVID COWAN

How do you identify in terms of race?

MATT BRAGG

I'm white. I don't know if you can tell by looking at me, I'm a little bit on the white side.

DAVID COWAN

What about gender?

MATT BRAGG

Male.

DAVID COWAN

How about sexuality?

MATT BRAGG

(singsong voice) Gay, gay, gay, gay, gay.

DAVID COWAN

As gay as they come.

MATT BRAGG

Yeah, pretty much.

DAVID COWAN

Sweet deal. So, I did have some more unique questions. I was curious to know about what, just in a nutshell, what growing up was like in your youth?

MATT BRAGG

Like, in regards to...

DAVID COWAN

Just from birth onwards, to like your pre-teen years.

MATT BRAGG

Well, okay. Um, a little turbulent. I have a very domineering mother, which, of course, they always say that's the reason why you turn out gay – because your mom was too domineering – but it's just not the fact. We all know we were born this way. But I think once I formed my own opinion, I was kind of on my own after that. I realized I was gay when I was younger, and then really figured it out when I was 16. So, the constant struggle is – as you know, and anybody who's part of the GLBT community knows – it's a little turbulent. But for the most part I had really good friends in school, and great teenage adventures. You know, TPing people's houses and going to dances, and that sort of stuff. Not too bad, but a little turbulent here and there. But I think that's the same for any kid, whether they're gay or not.

DAVID COWAN

Did you have any religious background? I know you mentioned Ohio–

MATT BRAGG

Surprisingly, no. My mom was raised Methodist, and my father was raised Baptist. So, we went to church when we were real, real little. And then, my parents just sort of were like, “You can be whatever you want to be when you grow up. Hopefully it's Christian.” But they're kind of cool with whatever. I don't think they were expecting a gay son. The fact that I haven't brought a black guy home that's a Jew, I think they're pretty much ahead of the curve. Or, I'm ahead of the curve with them on that. So, that does not sound good in an interview. I always get myself in trouble. Every time I do an interview, I say something completely inappropriate, then they write it. The *Gay and Lesbian Times* in San Diego just nailed me to the cross on something, and it was like, oh my god, it was so taken out of context.

DAVID COWAN

There's no transcriptions here.

MATT BRAGG

So, you can get the context in which I'm talking.

DAVID COWAN

Absolutely. So, do both your parents know about you, then, and they're cool?

MATT BRAGG

Yeah, they're cool. They're definitely cool. My coming out story with them is, like the week after Thanksgiving one year – I think I must have been 24 or so – I decided to call them and break this news. So, thinking, “I've lived with it for this long. They'll be able to, like, by the time the

holidays are done. It's a new year, and we'll all be able to start new." And apparently I not only ruined Christmas, I ruined New Year's, and I think things were jacked up all the way through like Fourth of July. Took a while for them. Their initial reaction, my mom was like, "I just want my kids to be happy, but I don't want to know any more." And then a month later, she asked me if I was a top or bottom. Like, I don't even think you know what that means, first of all. And secondly, no. I'm not answering that.

And my dad took it really hard. My dad is just very, very funny, but very out of the blue, "you never see it coming" funny. And about a year later, we were sitting on the back porch, and he out of nowhere said, "I could have lived with just suspecting that you were gay. I didn't actually need to know." And I was like, "Well Dad, you didn't raise me to be a liar. I didn't want you to find out from somebody else." And his immediate reaction was like, "Look, I just don't want to hear how he sucked a big cock last night." I was like— (*stammering*). And my reaction was like, "First of all, it wasn't that big. And secondly, don't you think I would tell Mom and Grandma?" And then he got up and left.

But I had a really interesting full circle moment with him, about 10 years after the fact. He took up crocheting, for some reason. Which is, yeah, that's always suspect. It's always suspect. But he took up crocheting because he said it relaxed him. And for Christmas one year – and I'll show it to you, so you can see exactly what it is – he crocheted me this monstrosity of a hat. It's just hideous, and it's made out of rainbow colored yarn. And so, I got this for Christmas when I was living in L.A., and there was a note. There was a card, and there was \$50 in the card, and the hat. And the card said. "This is your gay magic hat. Wear it to protect you. P.S., You can't spend the \$50 until you wear the hat in public." So, me being me, I grabbed the hat and \$50, put the hat on, and went to the liquor store, because where else am I going in this hat. But it was a nice full circle moment, that my dad had acceptance about it. I never missed too many beats with him, but it was a little tense for a couple minutes. I never felt like he didn't love me. I never felt like I'd lost my father. It just needed some time to work itself out.

So, when I got the gay magic hat, which is hideous, I have that hat. I will always keep that hat. I use it when I do speaking engagements – like when a company will hire me to come in and talk about GLBT issues. And it's kind of a centerpiece for what I talk about, about how my father wasn't happy with the fact that I was gay, but he made me a hat to protect me. Which is terribly sweet, but at the same point, just completely tragic, when you look at it. It's just – he did it on purpose, I think. It's his sick sense of humor that he has. Like, "Here's the most hideous thing ever, but I love you." Thanks, Dad.

DAVID COWAN

Not to mention you only earn \$50 if you wear it out, right?

MATT BRAGG

Right, right. Which, of course I went to the liquor store, why wouldn't I? Where else are you going in that hat?

DAVID COWAN

I can't wait to see it.

MATT BRAGG

Oh, yeah. *(laughs)*

(pause)

DAVID COWAN

So, gosh. You went from your younger years – that story with your parents and stuff. And so, it sounds like they're all on board, everything's great with family issues.

MATT BRAGG

Well, as much as they can. Despite whether the fact that I'm gay – if I was straight, I would still have issues with them. But that's just any family. They're both batshit crazy. I don't know how much I can go on to this, with not getting you into trouble by swearing too much. And I'm politically incorrect, so let's go ahead and state that. I don't know if we really mentioned that I'm a stand-up comedian, and I have no filter. So, let's just put that out there. So, anything you hear after this – shit can get a little crazy. But they're crazy, and that's why I'm crazy, and I frankly wouldn't trade a minute of it.

DAVID COWAN

Well, that's interesting you mentioned that you are a stand-up comedian. What brought that about? Going into comedy, and starting comedy, and doing it?

MATT BRAGG

Comedy, it was sort of accidental. I had never really planned on stand-up comedy. I thought about it, and I wanted to be an actor. I really wanted to be an actor. I wanted to be a song and dance musical comedy actor, it's what I really, really wanted to do when I was a teenager. I was in all the high school plays, voted "most talented" at Ellet Senior High School, Class of '89, thank you very much. Yeah, that's right. You can touch me later. But that's what I really wanted to do. And I worked with a guy. I got out of the Navy. I moved from Ohio, went to the Navy for four years, and when I got out, I stayed in San Diego.

And one of the guys I was working with at my day job was a comic, and he was booking a room. And he's like, "Well, all my comics bailed." He goes, "You're enough of a smart-ass, every single day, here. Why don't you come down and do it?" And I was like, "Okay, give me a couple weeks, and I'll think about it." And he kind-of, sort-of made me commit to it. And my first set went really well. Of course, it was a bunch of hack material that I stole from various places, because that's what you do the first time out, until someone goes, "Oh, you can't do that." Because comics have no scruples until you start stealing material, and then it's on. But, you know, stuff I read in a book that I thought was funny.

And it went well, and I sort of remember where it went from being a hobby – because I kept saying, "Oh, this is a hobby, it's just something to do." And then someone, I think around a year into it, said, "Well, what are you doing with your career?" And I'm like, "Oh, I have a career now, huh?" And so, that sort of changed things up, to go, "Yeah, I guess I do have a career, I could look at this as a career. This could be a career, I could do this." And I will say this about anybody that's in entertainment. You, as an actor, know – and maybe I'm not speaking for you or other actors, or other people in the entertainment industry – you have to be a little bit crazy. You have to be a little bit not-right, because most normal people don't go, "Oh fuck it, I'll tell dick jokes for a living." No sane person does that, no completely sane person. The sane person goes, "I'll go to college, I'll get a degree, and I'll get a day job, and then I'll be able to retire." Which, to me, is death, if I had to do that. I'm so glad I got into it. But you're a little bit off your rocker if you think this is a good idea. And I, apparently, thought it was a good idea, like most bad decisions I ever make. It's like, "Oh, I probably shouldn't do this. Yeah, fuck it, let's do it," and then I almost get arrested. So, you know, you never know.

DAVID COWAN

So, almost got arrested. Do you have more on that story?

MATT BRAGG

Oh, I've almost been arrested like 100 times. And, thank god I haven't. As of today, I have no criminal record. That could change tomorrow. Who can say.

DAVID COWAN

Well also, you mentioned earlier that you had worked a short stint in the Navy. Could you tell me a little bit more about that?

MATT BRAGG

I joined the Navy. I clearly wasn't ready for college, I was just barely getting by at high school, and my parents basically forced me to go in the military. They're like, "You're not living here, so you got to go someplace. So, the military is where you're going." And I ended up choosing

the Navy quite by accident. My dad kept saying – he tells me this later on – he kept saying, “You need to go in the Army. I was in the Army. You need to go in the Army. The Army will shape you up, make a man out of you.” And I was like, “Not when you put it like that. No. No, thank you. I’m gonna get my hands dirty, I’m not okay with this, really.” That’s the way I am. I don’t like to get my hands dirty like that, unless I’m gardening or something like that. I don’t want to be, like, getting shot at, and running with a 150 pound backpack, running for my life, from god knows who’s trying to kill me. I don’t need that shit.

So, I thought, “Air Force? Seems safe.” And I went to the Air Force recruiter, I was like, “I’ll look into this,” and the Air Force office was closed. But the Navy office right across the hallway was open. So I was like, “I’m here.” And they didn’t really have to sell me on too much stuff. I actually just kind of looked around and went, “This could be more interesting.” It’s, “Join the Navy, see the world.” And it occurred to me, I’m like, “I could get stuck someplace really hideous for four years. I could just get stuck someplace horrible for four years.” And I was like, “Well, at least with the Navy you’re out to sea. You can go places, you’re gonna end up someplace else.” The recruiter, I don’t think he really BSed me too much.

They did ask me the question though, like, “Are you or have you ever been a homosexual?” – which they were allowed to ask at the time, because this was 1989. And of course, I had never acted on being a homosexual, but I kind of knew. And I was like, “Nope. Not me, ever.” And that was pretty much about it. I spent four years in the Navy. The first year, I was stationed in San Diego. And I had a really interesting time of it. The first place we went, we went to Hawaii. That was the first place we went. So, I was there for probably like a month and a half. And I do really recommend – and granted, I was 18 and just off the turnip truck from Ohio – I do recommend, if you ever go to Hawaii, go by boat. Because it was something that was – I don’t necessarily say the “life altering,” I don’t know what the word I want to use for that is – but it was just such an amazing experience, getting closer and closer to the island, and you could smell it.

Going into Pearl Harbor, all the officers’ houses that you have to pass by are all classic 1940s, World War II houses that are completely up-kept. So, it was literally like – and hello, this is a gay moment – It was completely like I kept hearing the song from South Pacific. It’s exactly what it was, it’s exactly the way it looked. It just unfolded in front of me. And that’s why I say, if you go by plane, it’s one thing. It’s like, if you’ve never been to New York, when you first come out of the tunnel or across the bridge, and you all of a sudden turn around, and Manhattan opens up in front of you. It’s just like, “Whoa!” It’s amazing. So, I spent some time in Hawaii. We went to Acapulco after that. And it was very funny, because I called my mother. My mom is such a ball buster. I was like, “Oh, I’m an Acapulco,” and she flipped out on the phone, because she’s pretty harsh, she can be pretty harsh. I think she really would have been happy with me

going in the Army and getting my ass whipped every single day. She would have been perfectly happy with that. But her response was, “Well, of course. Your father spent four years in the Army, in Alaska, freezing his ass off, and you're calling me from fucking Acapulco.” And I'm like, “Good talking to you, crazy. Bye.”

But I went to Acapulco, we went to Seattle. Then we went into dry dock, which is right around the time that the Gulf War broke out. So, technically, I am a Gulf War veteran. But I don't really like to claim it, because we were in dry dock, in Long Beach. Like, my contribution to the war effort was picking up cigarette butts off the pier at Long Beach Naval Shipyard, and going out to nightclubs in Hollywood on the weekends. So, I don't like to say that I'm a foreign war veteran, even though, technically, I have the medal. It's on my DG-4, or whatever the hell, my discharge papers. I can claim those rights or benefits from the Veterans Association, but I never would, because I do have some sort of honorability about that. Like, I just happened to be serving, but the hull of the ship was tore apart, so we couldn't go anywhere.

And then after that, we spent a year in San Diego. And then after that, we spent the last year of it in Japan, which was cool. We were stationed out of Japan, so I went to the Philippines, Korea, Thailand, Guam. Went to Hong Kong during Christmas, which was amazing. I look at the Navy as, I got paid to go on vacation to a lot of places. I had to work, out to sea. But I got paid to go on vacation to a lot of places I probably would never go to. Like, nobody ever wakes up in the morning and says, “Hey, spring break. Fucking Korea, let's do this.” But I got to go to Korea, and it was a cool experience. I got to see a different culture.

Got to also experience how other Americans act in other cultures, which is sometimes disgraceful. Sandra Bernhard, she's one of my all-time favorite comics. She has a bit about, she was with somebody, and they were in, I think, Morocco. And it's the same exact thing that happened to me. It's almost verbatim what I said to my friend, where I turned around to my friend, I go, “You know what? You are in another culture. You respect these people. They will cut your fucking hand off. Knock the shit off.” It's funny to see Americans like, “We're Americans. We can—” (*grumbles*) It's like, “No, Tex. I get it, but you're going to get us killed, or sent away someplace, and we're never going to come back.”

So, that part of it was interesting. I don't know. I don't regret doing it, the Navy, at all. I had a good time. I actually – thank you, Facebook – I am in contact with a lot of people that I thought— Like, it's two weeks now, I ran into him on Facebook, if you can run into somebody. But I found a friend on Facebook that I hadn't seen in 18 years. And I just sort of have always wondered what happened to him. And now I gotta make the time to take the phone call, and take a couple hours to be able to catch up, and go, “Where the hell have you been for 20 years?” And those men, they're like my brothers. They always will be. I'd do anything for those guys.

DAVID COWAN

Did the men in the— is it “platoon,” in the Marines?

MATT BRAGG

The platoon is in the Marines, yeah. But I was in the Navy.

DAVID COWAN

Or yeah, the Navy.

MATT BRAGG

So, we had a ship. And then, we had a department that we worked, and a specific division within the department. Like, I worked on a flight deck and the crashing salvage crew. So basically, if a helicopter caught on fire, I would have to put it out.

DAVID COWAN

Gotcha. Did they know about you?

MATT BRAGG

No. Everyone suspected. Everyone thought. I was in denial. I figured it out when I was 16. And then, I went immediately back into the island in the back of my head. I’m like, “Maybe this will straighten me out,” because you’re looking at the 80s in northeastern Ohio. There’s no internet, there’s no support group, there’s nothing you can do. I sort of joke, like, men your age have it a little bit easier. And thank god you do. And not you in particular, but the other men, I think they’re just a little flippant about it, that they’re not doing anything to help the next kid. Somewhere there’s a three-year-old kid out there that doesn’t know he has a dick, let alone what his dick is going to fucking cost him in his life. To be honest about it. But there are men that are in their 60s and 70s, that did what they did so that I’m able to be 40 and be an openly gay stand-up comic. So, I make a big joke about it, that when I came out of the closet, you had to just basically go find a gay bar. Like, I didn’t have the intranets, I didn’t have the interwebs, to go explore and find things and read. I had to work my shit out on the dance floor, in the clubs, in the 90s. That’s how I did it, Boo.

DAVID COWAN

(laughs) And so, you mentioned that during your short stay in the Navy, you would sometimes go to the clubs in Hollywood. So, would you go to gay clubs?

MATT BRAGG

Oh, no. God no. No, no, no. I didn't know where those were at. I was in total, total denial at that point. And the irony being, we had 900 sailors on the ship, we were a marine-deployed ship. So, anytime we would pull out to do any exercises, or go do something, we would take on 2,000 Marines. As I have found out via Facebook, apparently everybody was hooking up left and right. I had no idea it was going on. I could have got so much ass. But had no clue. I didn't even know Kenny and Tommy were a couple. What? I used to hang out with them all the time. They didn't tell me? No fucking clue.

DAVID COWAN

So, it sounds like there had to be a lot of secrecy in the Navy, if you were—?

MATT BRAGG

If you were. Towards the end, I think like October – I got out in June of '93 – so, in October right before the '92 election with Bill Clinton, I remember one of my shipmates while we were sitting at a table, eating on the mess decks, and he's like, "Everybody at that table over there is gay." I'm like, "What?" There were some people that I had already sort of suspected were gay. And there were some people, I'm like, "What? No. Wristband's gay? What? Shut up." So, we had this. But it was just something you just didn't really talk about. We were really close friends, so he told me. I don't know if Kurt is gay or not. I haven't talked to him in 20 years. But wouldn't surprise me if he is. But he also just might be one of those guys that's just, he just doesn't care. Like, nothing. Pretty unflappable, that guy. So, he didn't really seem to care, and I don't know why he told me.

But then shortly after that, one of my shipmates was beat to death in Japan, in a public park, for being gay. And it's something that's a little hard to talk about. I think the point I would most emphasize about it, for me personally, is it's something I'm never going to get over. I'm never going to get over what they did to him. And I didn't really know the guy that well. There was 900 sailors. So, you kind of knew everybody on the ship. You know everyone's name, but you didn't actually know everybody. So, he was a guy I didn't really know all that well. But the weird thing is, I was in the park a couple hours before it happened, and walked by the two guys that did it. They were also shipmates.

And I think, what essentially started out as a routine gay bashing, "We're gonna go beat up this fag," turned really bad. Where one of them, Terry Helvey, as I understand the story, got bloodlust. And the other guy, it got too heavy for him. He was trying to stop him, but then he was afraid he was going to turn around and kill him. Like, he beat his face into a urinal, in a men's room, in a park in Japan, so bad that when the Shore Patrol had finally showed up, they

tried to give him mouth-to-mouth, and the air was coming out of where his eyes should have been. It was very brutal and savage. And we were slated the next morning to pull out, to go to the Philippines, to close the Navy base. They'd had a Navy base there for a hundred years, and we were turning it back over to the people of the Philippines. So, we were the last ship to go in. And we got held up in port, and they eventually pulled Charlie off. And then, they kept Terry in the brig, and we pulled out to sea.

DAVID COWAN

And for clarification, Charlie and Terry are the men—

MATT BRAGG

That beat him up.

DAVID COWAN

Okay.

MATT BRAGG

Yeah, Allen Schindler was the shipmate who got beat up. But Charlie and Terry were the ones that did it. And Charlie used to work for me. He was a very mild-mannered, very well-mannered, respectable guy. I was more shocked that he had anything to do with this. Terry was the big, broody, strong silent type. And they kept him in the brig, and the next day, they had to fly him off the ship. And it was this, just, ghastly (*pauses*) vision I'll never get out of my head. They had one helicopter on the flight deck turning, and we knew they were pulling him out. And they pulled him out, walked him across the flight deck in handcuffs, and got onto the aircraft, and we knew we were never going to see him again. Everyone knew the story, by that point. He was going to go to jail. That was his last moment of clean, open, fresh air. It just was haunting to see it. It was so silent that you couldn't even hear the helicopter turning. It was that kind of surreal.

And no one knew what to say or do. This was somebody we knew. It wasn't like we're watching this on the news, we're watching this actually happen. It's somebody that we're like, "What the fuck happened, man?" And so, we were out to sea for about two weeks. We had a memorial service out to sea. And we were told by the ship, very specifically, when we pull into port, if a reporter or anybody asks you about anything, you are to say, "I cannot confirm or deny any information." That simple. Because they didn't want to hinder the investigation.

What we found out, later on – this happened roughly around the 28th. It was about a week before the Clinton election. Which is interesting in its own regard, because – it was before he actually started calling it Don't Ask, Don't Tell – but it was one of his campaign things, about putting gays in the military. I think if that would have went public, it could have screwed up that election. It might have changed the tone of the way people were going to vote. I don't know that for sure.

But we were out to sea for those two weeks, so we were clueless. And this is the 28th. The story never broke. The story never broke in the U.S. until the end of December. And what's hilarious about it is how bad the media– the levels they went to, to make us all look bad. Make the whole military look bad. In particular, our ship. This happened the very end of October. The story breaks in the U.S. in the end of December. November we were in the Philippines the whole time.

For some reason, it went into my hometown. It didn't mention me, but in the *Akron Beacon Journal*, there was a picture of the ship. We were building orphanages, we were doing everything, because this whole city was based and built up around the U.S. military. It catered to the military. So, we were trying to set the city up so that, when we pulled out, it wouldn't be so devastating, that they all of a sudden had– it was all strip bars, and it was an adult Disneyland, basically. It catered to the military boys.

DAVID COWAN

Where'd you say this was?

MATT BRAGG

It was a Olongapo in Subic Bay in the Philippines.

DAVID COWAN

Oh, okay.

MATT BRAGG

So, it largely depended on the income from the military boys spending money on the girls and buying drinks and, you know. And so, we were setting up orphanages, we were doing all this stuff, we had all this really “good guy” press. And then the story broke in December, of what happened to Allen. And suddenly, we were thieves, and we were thugs, and we had this notorious bad reputation, and we caused all kinds of problems. It's like, wait a minute. This happened in October. In November, the press had us as these really great guys building orphanages. And now in December, we're a bunch of thugs. It was really, really hard on everybody.

And we were also told we could send a condolence card to his family, but we were not to write anything else inside of it. Other than “condolences.” Because they didn't want to hinder the investigation. As it turns out, the military was trying to cover it up. They were trying to make it not be into gay bashing, and let it go. And so, once it broke in the U.S. press that it was a gay bashing, all hell broke loose. So, that was a nightmare, to just sort of live through, with the random reporters on the street, and people trying to get information out of you, and I could get in trouble for this. I met his mother, Dorothy Hajdys. She went from sort of just being a commonplace—

DAVID COWAN

This is Allen's mom?

MATT BRAGG

Yeah, yeah. His mother. She has since remarried – a couple of times. She sort of went from a commonplace Chicago house FRA to being a nationally known gay activist, because she didn't want any other mother to go what she went through. And I met her several years later, two or three years after I got out of the Navy. She was in San Diego. She was gonna speak at something. And they decided to have a memorial service down by the piers. Not the Navy piers, but the city piers. And so, we all went down to it.

And I didn't realize what I was getting myself into, because I literally had just told all my friends I was gay. And it was always with the same exact thing: “I'm just not dating any girls. I'm going to be the same Matt you know. I'm not going to be on the six o'clock news. And I'm not going to be on a float in the Gay Pride Parade.” And lo and behold, I go down to this memorial service, and there I am on the six o'clock news. Because, my ship had this tradition of – and a lot of ships in San Diego do – there's a big bridge you have to go under to get into the Navy harbor. And usually, the last time you go out to sea, as you pass under the bridge, you throw your hat off the back. And it's just a symbol of leaving something with the ocean. And I don't know, it's just a tradition.

And so, because the last time I was in Japan, I never really got to throw my hat. So, I thought this would be a good thing, where I'll bring my hat, I'll just go down and throw it in the water. And I was telling somebody about it, and the next thing you know, his mother is up in my face. She's like, “Come on, let's go do it.” And there's news cameras, and I'm just, like, mortified. And we went and did it. And it was horrible, and awful, and awkward, and weird, and I'm glad I did it. She seemed to get something out of it, so that was good. But the next day, they were doing this thing at the Metropolitan Community Church, which, is a gay church.

DAVID COWAN

Yes. I know what it is.

MATT BRAGG

And so, she was speaking, and she was really kind of funny. She's like, "I didn't really know any gay people. I thought you guys were all like Klinger from MASH." You know, she just assumed we all wore dresses. And she was very, very funny. And I spoke with her for a little while, after the thing the night before. And I spoke with her before we went into the church service. And a reporter pulled me aside after and said, it basically was like, "Well, what did you tell his mother that she didn't already know?" I'm like, "I have fucking no idea what I told her." I just told her how it was day-to-day for us.

Like, I apparently gave her some sort of information that – and I still don't know what it is – that they shielded it from her. I think it was something to do with the fact that, like, we were allowed to send condolence cards, but we weren't allowed to communicate. I don't think she knew that. Something along those lines, I had said something. So, it was a little bit weird. But it's something that still – and granted, this is Boise, Idaho, and it's not very crime-ridden – but because of that, and because of the fact I lived in L.A., I still look over my shoulder when I'm walking home at night. And I always will. And I hope that no other 20-something year old kid ever has to live like that. It's just something I've learned to live with. I'm not happy about it, and it makes me mad sometimes, when I think about it – that somebody might be trying to harm me based on who I want to be with. Which is just stupid.

DAVID COWAN

Absolutely. So, that kind of brings up questions about Boise. Do you think Boise is a safe place for the gay community?

MATT BRAGG

You know, I keep hearing there's a lot of things going on lately, a lot of gay bashing. I don't think it's unsafe, but I also lived in Los Angeles. So, I always will just look over my shoulder anyway. But the things I've been hearing – and I don't know specific cases. A couple of people, I've heard, have been messed with. Either thrown around or beaten up, or whatever.

DAVID COWAN

Physical–

MATT BRAGG

Physically harmed. And, I know this sounds terrible, but based on the two people that I've heard about, I'm sort of like, "Were you asking for it?" Not in the "I was walking down the street holding hands with my boyfriend" asking for it. But meaning someone like, "Get out of my

fucking way.” “Well, fuck you! You got a problem with a fucking fag?” Like, starting shit with something. I’m like, “That’s not a gay bashing. You’re an asshole-bashing, is what that is. That’s a whole different kind of—” you know what I mean? Like, you kind of go, “No, that’s not a hate crime. That’s an ‘I hate you’ crime.” It’s different.”

So, based on the things that I’ve heard, I’ve sort of questioned the validity of it. Like, I don’t think everything is homophobic. I’m just not one of those people where, there are certain people that will automatically be able to take their minority status and use it as a crutch. Which I think is bullshit. “I didn’t get the job because I’m a woman.” “I didn’t get the job because I’m gay.” “I didn’t get the job because I’m Black.” “I didn’t get the job because—” You didn’t get the job because you showed up late, you had a chip on your shoulder, and you weren’t qualified. That’s why. It had nothing to do with you being gay. I mean, unless they said, “We don’t hire faggots.” Then you got a case.

But other than that— I also have an advantage. I’m pretty quick-witted. I’ve always been able to talk my way out of a lot of shit. I’m so fortunate for that. Plus, I’m also six-foot two. So, I have a slight advantage on that stuff, where I look a little tougher than— The people listening to this, you can’t see me, but I’m definitely not a catch. I’m looking rough these days, and it’s okay. But you know, I’m six-foot two, and I’m a 40 year old, six-foot two white man. Not exactly the first person you’re going to go pick off.

DAVID COWAN

Right.

MATT BRAGG

Even though anybody could whoop my ass. So, I don’t see it happening. And the times I have actually seen something going on, I’m like, “You know what? You were in drag on 6th and Main. You didn’t deserve it, and you didn’t ask for it, but you were not being smart.” And that is a gay crime. That’s a hate crime, you got hate crimed. But you weren’t being smart. You weren’t being vigilant. You cannot go down there – it’s like a Black guy showing up at a KKK meeting. (*stammering*) Nobody’s going to give you shit? Are you kidding me? You’re a Black dude at the KKK meeting. What— that’s what’s going to happen. I’m not saying you shouldn’t be who you are, and be as fabulous as you want to be, but you also have to be smart about it. No place is safe. No place is completely safe for gay people. Provided – and I hate to say “play by the rules” – but just sort of be smart about it.

DAVID COWAN

We’re looking for equality, not...

MATT BRAGG

I'm looking for equality, not tolerance. And that's a long way off. It's happening. It's getting better. And in 20 years' time, this whole conversation we're having right now will seem ridiculous, that that even happens. It's like beating up a Mexican guy because he's Mexican. That's so stupid. Why would you do that? Who does that? What is wrong with you? And gay people will eventually get around to that. There is equality, and there's a lot of tolerance. The tolerance needs to go away. It needs to be treated as equality. But it's just simply not going to happen overnight.

It's something that's going to have to take— it's an evolution. It's the baby steps. It's Ellen DeGeneres coming out on her show, and losing her sitcom. The next season, Will and Grace gets ushered in. No one says anything about it. It becomes this huge hit. And then, the next year after that, Ellen has her own show, and she's hosting the Oscars, and she's back on top. If Ellen wouldn't have bit the bullet, then Will and Grace might not have happened. So, it's these baby steps. We always seem to take two or three steps forward, and then we're going to take six back. And it's okay to do that. You have to let people get caught up to it. Earlier with my parents, I've dealt with this for 24 years. I would expect that they would be over it by the end of Christmas, a month later. It's baby steps. You have to appreciate the evolution. And keep the fight, but at the same point, just be realistic about it. You can't expect everyone to change overnight.

DAVID COWAN

Well, I'm a little curious, with that conversation you just had there, about what's changed now that wasn't there before. Have we made steps forward? Like, your generation versus my generation, what has improved?

MATT BRAGG

There's Gay Straight Alliances in school. 1980s Ohio? Oh, hell no. That wouldn't even be considered, let alone, even just thought about. So, those things, we're definitely coming on, we have more. One of the things I'm very, very happy with is the way the major media outlets are treating GLBT stories. They're treating them as actual stories. They're important, they're not skirting it, it's not about the freakshow quality of it.

And granted, that still goes on. I don't know how many Gay Prides I've worked or performed at, and it's the same thing in every city. Six o'clock news, they show the freakiest people they possibly can. The Gay Pride Parade was downtown, and it's the eight-foot tall drag queen, with the beard, and the neon, beehive hairdo, and the fat hairy guy with his ass hanging out of his chaps. It's always those same two people that are on the news. Not you and me, not the t-shirt and jeans gays, the average Joes, if you will. That's the way the local news always seems to treat

it. But the national news organizations are getting better about covering GLBT stories with the same amount of decorum, and dignity, and respect that they treat any other story – whether that be with racism or your opinion about the war, and all that stuff.

I don't know. I think we definitely have come along way. We still have a long way to go. We can get married in a couple states. It's all coming around, it's just, you have to be patient, and just get it. Here's another example. That is the Don't Ask, Don't Tell policy. Now, that just got repealed this year. That was on the plate for 17 years. Now, had Clinton gotten into office in 1993 and said, "Fuck it, gays are allowed in the military" – I was in the military at the time – it would have turned everything upside down. It would have been a bad decision for him to do that. Instead, he came up with Don't Ask, Don't Tell.

Now, Don't Ask, Don't Tell sat on the shelf for 17 years. Most people that are in the military usually serve four years, and granted, if you're not in wartime, they usually serve two to four years. The people that stay in career-wise stay in for either 20 or 30 years. So, 17 years this has been on the table, Don't Ask, Don't Tell. Everyone, for the most part, that's been in the military, this has been on the table their entire career. This isn't shocking. It isn't new. People are climated to the discussion, whether you're for it or against it. And 17 years later, Obama's like, "Enough," and it's done. It's just done. But it had to go that long, because most of these people, if you've been in the military for 17 years, you're used to this fact by now. It's not shocking. It's not going to completely upset everything, as opposed to just one day going, "Oh yeah, by the way..."

DAVID COWAN

So, would you say, then, Don't Ask, Don't Tell made you feel safer when you were in the military?

MATT BRAGG

Well, it wasn't into effect. It didn't come in effect until after I got out of the military. So, when I went in, they asked. And you had to tell or lie. So, that's just the way it was there. "We don't allow homosexuals, period." That's it. Done. End of story. And then, once Don't Ask, Don't Tell came in, there was a lot of gray area. And a lot of a lot of people were affected by that, because there's just so much gray area where, "Well, I didn't ask, I didn't tell – but somebody else decided to snap a picture of me at a gay bar and witch hunt me." There was a lot a lot of witch hunting that went on for a long time. It was really just fucked up. Now, those poor men, half of them just wanted to serve their country and get a college education. It's pretty much what everyone goes in for.

So, I'm happy with the evolution of it, but I think the older I get, I get a little pissy about stuff. But I'm like, you know, you just got to be patient and keep pushing the envelope. Like, being an openly gay stand-up comedian, I've never once, from day one, ever pretended I was anything but what I was. Because I felt like, I'm one of those weird guys, where some people either have no idea that I'm gay, or they see it from outer space. So, I figure I might as well just put it out there, so you know the jokes are coming from the point of view of a man who is gay. So, I think I'm part of the evolution, too. By, they don't necessarily see me walk on stage and expect that they're gonna get 20 minutes of a gay guy talking to them. But I have a unique position to be able to change people's perceptions about gay people, in a funny way, that's non-threatening.

DAVID COWAN

And that's definitely one of your goals with your comedy?

MATT BRAGG

Yeah. It wasn't when I started. I didn't want to be an activist. I just wanted to be a comic, once I really started getting into it. But I just sort of have become an accidental activist.

DAVID COWAN

An accidental activist? Isn't that—

MATT BRAGG

I think that's the name of Candace Gingrich's book – Newt Gingrich's sister. She's a lesbian. But it's sort of how it happened. Now I know I have to take responsibility for it. And it's a good thing to be able to push things forward, to see that guy in the front row that, the second I say I'm gay, is not having it, at the end of it go— I always get these weird compliments after shows. “You're one really funny fag.” It's like, well, okay, that's fair enough.

DAVID COWAN

(laughs)

MATT BRAGG

Hey, you know what, look – he's not beating me up. Maybe he's not going to go out and beat up a gay guy tonight, because some funny fag made him laugh. Fair enough. It's part of the process, it's part of the evolution, where gay people are still allowed. Like, we all know – everyone knows – you cannot make a racial joke anymore. You just can't do it. You'll get nailed to the cross on it. Gay jokes are still okay. People can still say “fag,” and people don't necessarily get as upset about it.

It's evolving towards that, where people are like, "Hey, that's not cool." We're sort of the last minority group that it's acceptable to openly make fun of – which most people do, until they realize that you are, in fact, gay. And they're like, "Oh, I'm sorry." It's just so funny to watch them be completely uncomfortable. Like, really?

DAVID COWAN

And I happen to know a little about you personally, that you bartend at a local gay bar, Pitchers and Pints.

MATT BRAGG

Right.

DAVID COWAN

So, what is that like for you, as far as seeing the community here? What do you think of the community? Because you probably get to see a good majority of it.

MATT BRAGG

The community here is very small. Like, I came out in San Diego, which is a really – looking at a hundred-plus, thousand people at the parade every year – it's a big community. You can go weeks without seeing the same person again. Here, it's a little bit high school-ish. There's a little bit of drama. I notice a lot of that, because everyone is up in everyone's business. Like, I pretty much know everybody in town. If I don't know them personally, I know them by face. It's a little bit high school-ish, but in a way, there's a certain – and I don't know how other people feel about it, and maybe it's from being in the military – but I sort of feel there's a certain brotherhood level to it. Where, like, when I was in the Navy, there'd be a guy I couldn't stand. And we're out in the Philippines, and I see he's in trouble. I don't like this guy, but he's my shipmate. I'm gonna go and pull him out of the situation. Probably beat the shit out of him when he gets back to the ship, for putting me in a dangerous situation. But there are gay men in this town that I might not particularly like, but if I saw them in trouble, I would definitely jump in. It's just what you do. So, that's kind of what I like about this. Everyone knows each other enough to kind of look out for each other. Certain– (*audio cuts off*)

END OF TRANSCRIPT.