

Nicole “Nikki” Leonard

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Transcript

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VOICE RECORDING

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JUSTIN BAXTER

So, my first question is, what is your name? And do you like a nickname that you like to go by, or—?

NIKKI LEONARD

My name is Nicole Leonard, Nicole Elaine Leonard, and I go by Nikki. N-I-K-K-I.

JUSTIN BAXTER

Cool. And when were you born, and where?

NIKKI LEONARD

(laughs)

JUSTIN BAXTER

(laughs) We kind of started a bit more basic first.

NIKKI LEONARD

I was born in ‘55 in Anchorage, Alaska.

JUSTIN BAXTER

Nice.

NIKKI LEONARD

Yeah. So, I’m old.

JUSTIN BAXTER

Nice. Did you grow up in Alaska?

NIKKI LEONARD

No, my family moved a lot when I was growing up. So, we just stayed in Alaska for a while after I was born, then we moved to California, then we moved to Colorado, then we moved back to California, then we moved to upstate New York, then we moved back to California, and then we moved to Texas. And then I went to school, my freshman year, at University of Arizona in Tucson. And then I went to Southern Methodist University in Dallas. And then I moved around, and I moved to Wyoming for my Master's, and then I moved here. I've been here for – goodness, 16 years now, in Idaho.

JUSTIN BAXTER

Is there any of those places that you like more. Or something you like the most?

NIKKI LEONARD

Well, I really like Boise. When I was here, after a few years, I decided that I would like to try and retire here. I really like it. Growing up, I was really very much California, very much a California girl.

JUSTIN BAXTER

Nice.

NIKKI LEONARD

Yeah. Or, I wanted to be a California girl.

(laughter)

JUSTIN BAXTER

I have some questions about identity. How do you identify as far as your race or ethnicity?

NIKKI LEONARD

White.

JUSTIN BAXTER

Okay, and your gender?

NIKKI LEONARD

Female.

JUSTIN BAXTER

And sexuality?

NIKKI LEONARD

(pause)

I haven't dated since I had my surgery. So I guess, I don't know. I've never dated a guy before. I've never even really kissed a guy before. But I like to think that if somebody came along that I really liked, that I'd be open to that. But the odds are I'm less than. But maybe bisexual, if I met the right guy.

JUSTIN BAXTER

And if there are any questions that you wish to pass on, just feel free to okay say "pass."

NIKKI LEONARD

Okay.

JUSTIN BAXTER

How would you describe growing up, with your family and community?

NIKKI LEONARD

Umm. We have a lot of questions?

JUSTIN BAXTER

Kind of. We don't have to go through all of them.

NIKKI LEONARD

Okay. Well, I grew up in an upper-middle class family. And my dad was the project manager engineer. So, we did okay. That's why we moved a lot, was he was working in the Defense Program and in the Space Program. So, as far as gender goes, I knew I was different than my brothers from a pretty early age. But I didn't really put it together, I just knew I was different. I have two younger brothers, and I'm the oldest. And I knew I was different than them from a pretty young age. But I didn't know why. And then it was in 5th grade, when I was like 10, that I figured out that I wanted to be a girl. And it was in 6th grade that I found out that that was possible.

I was really clear that, biologically, I was a boy. I was really clear about that, which some trans people aren't. They expect, magically, that something's gonna happen at some age, and they'll become their appropriate gender. But that wasn't the case for me. I found that about transgender

people, except they weren't called that then. They were called transsexuals or transvestites, which is kind of not a very nice name. But found out about transsexuals or cross-dressers when I was in 6th grade. And I knew instantly that that was what I wanted. But I also thought it was impossible, and I also thought I was really sick for wanting that. And I was terrified (*choking up*) that somebody would find out. I was terrified.

That's when I started dressing in women's clothes, and they were my mom's, because that was the only source of clothing I had. It didn't have some weird, "I want to be my mom," kind of thing, or something like that. At the same time, I was a really big kid. I'm 6-foot, and I grew as tall as I am now by the time I was like 13, or something like that. I was one of the biggest kids in school all along. And so, that made it even more impossible that I could become a girl, because I was huge. I still am huge. And I was really angry. I played a lot of sports to compensate. Plus, I liked playing sports. But I played a lot of sports. So, I played football for two years of high school. I played a lot of basketball, and I swam, and I played water polo, and (*pauses*) this whole thing.

So, I don't know. I can remember a lot of bad times, because of the gender thing. I was really unhappy at times because of it. Really unhappy. And nobody knew. I didn't tell anybody, Oh, this one time I dressed – it was when I was in 7th grade, 8th grade. My brothers and I were playing by ourselves. And I don't know, my parents were gone somewhere, and I dressed up in my mom's clothes. And we're all laughing and playing. And then all of a sudden, my brothers just freeze and they're staring at me. And I'm like, "What? What's the what's the matter?" because they just got quiet and started staring at me. And my one brother said, "You look like a girl," which really thrilled me. And at the same time, just sort of terrified me. And that was the last time I ever dressed in front of anybody, until I was in my 20s.

So, growing up, I don't know. There were really good times. We moved a lot, and so that made it really difficult, just for the way it would have made any kid's life really difficult. We moved in between my sophomore and junior year of high school from California to Texas, which sucked really bad. I mean, California was wonderful and Texas wasn't. And I was about to have the best summer of my life, and I knew it. (*pauses*) But I did have a pretty normal childhood. Money wasn't an issue. I did fine in school. I got my varsity letter in swimming, when I was a sophomore. You know, (*rapidly*) da, da, da, da, da, da, da. I didn't date a lot, but part of that was the moving situation, because I knew I was going to leave Texas as soon as I could. So, I don't know. Is that—?

JUSTIN BAXTER

Yeah. (*clears throat*) Do you identify with a religion?

NIKKI LEONARD

Well, I go to church now. I'm a Christian. I'm a real progressive Christian. So, the church I go to is open and affirming towards lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people – very much so. And our church is all about social justice. So today, when I was teaching adult Sunday school, we were talking about income inequality, and about greed in the marketplace, and things like that. It's pretty progressive, really progressive church. I also, I study a lot about Buddhism and Hinduism, and I don't think that those are– (*pauses*) I don't think that those preclude being a Christian, and I don't think being a Christian precludes following other spiritual paths at the same time. I think we can learn from all sorts of other different faiths.

When you come up with these basic, you know, what the radical right has taken as being these “Christian truths,” I mean, I disagree vehemently with them. Like, for example, the idea that the only way to God is through Christ. I think that that's wrong. And the fact that God's going to send people to hell if they don't do these certain things, which I think is ridiculous, some of these basic ideas I think are. And I think, in fact, that they don't have very much biblical support, actually. So, I have a varied, but really active spiritual path. Yeah, I believe, obviously, in God. And God's a major part of my life.

JUSTIN BAXTER

And you said you teach Sunday school?

NIKKI LEONARD

For adults, and I substitute for children.

JUSTIN BAXTER

Awesome. How long have you been doing that?

NIKKI LEONARD

Well, just for this year. I just started this year. I've been the head of the Christian education program for– (*pauses*) Wow, a year and a half now? Two years, year and a half – something like that.

JUSTIN BAXTER

Nice, cool. How do you like that so far?

NIKKI LEONARD

I like teaching adult ed. It's fun. And my one experience with teaching. Well, I've taught twice with kids, and that's been good, too. I like to teach. I like to teach. It's fun.

JUSTIN BAXTER

Are there any certain, like, subject matter you try to teach? I've never been, so.

NIKKI LEONARD

Oh. Well, we're doing two things. One we're doing, our church is going through a process right now, investigating becoming a "just peace church." So, when we became open and affirming towards the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender community, that was a whole process that the church went through, before I got there. But they went through this whole process, and everybody talked about what that would mean, to enthusiastically welcome LGBT people into the church. It's not just saying, "Yeah, it's okay if you come to church." It's an enthusiastic welcome. And I go to, it's part of the United Church of Christ, which is nationally very much at the forefront of welcoming LGBT people in.

Now we're going through this process on becoming a "just peace church," which, what we're talking about is peace in the marketplace, peace in the community, peace in the environment, and peace among peoples. So, it's about finding social justice in all of these areas, and we're discussing it as a church – what that looks like, what that means. And so, half of our Sunday school program this year is about this process of becoming a "just peace church." So, two weeks ago, and then this week, we were talking about peace in the marketplace. We talked about the Occupy movement. And then today, we talked, like I said, about income inequality.

So, that's half of our school year. We're alternating every other month. Our other half is a Bible study, and we have this DVD program that's called *Uppity Women of the Bible*. And it's out of the Old Testament. And so, we're studying the Book of Ruth now, out of the Old Testament. And it's really fun, actually. I'm learning a lot. And it's fun, actually. *(laughs)* It's some stuff that you just never expected to see in the Bible.

(laughter)

Seriously. So for example, they use euphemisms that we just don't understand. So for example, sometimes – not all the time, but sometimes – when they wanted to say "genitals," instead of saying "genitals" in the Old Testament, they would say "feet." So like, "She covered her feet" would mean, "She covered her genitals." And stuff like that. And you know how they thresh wheat? They have like a threshing floor – a place, a room, or something like that. Well, that was also a place where a lot of action took place. So, it wasn't like a good place for all these things. It wasn't a good place for a woman to go. There's all these things that I had no idea were in the Bible, that once you start learning some background about them, they're really interesting, and also give you a completely different flavor of the Bible than what some of the right-wing Christians would have you understand about the Bible. So yeah, I like it.

JUSTIN BAXTER

Cool. How was your beginning of understanding and coming out as a trans person?

NIKKI LEONARD

Well, it took me a very long time to come out, obviously. Well, you don't know that. So, like I said, I figured out that I wanted to be a girl when I was like 10. And then I found out that there was such a thing as transsexuals when I was 11. And for all of my life, up until— (*pauses*) about when I was 40— (*pauses*) Yeah, about 40, 42, something like that. It was mostly a process of hiding it. And trying to hide it from myself. Well, I used to live in Dallas. That's where I got my bachelor's degree from. And yeah, I went through this process that a lot of male-to-female transgender people go through – that are my age, at least – of you acquire clothing and stuff like this, and then you freak out about it. You just go, “Oh my god, I'm so sick. This is so wrong. And it's never going to make me happy.” And you throw it all away. It's called “purging.” It's really expensive, because you might spend – even in those days – a couple hundred dollars. Then you freak out and throw it away. And then there's just something where you can't help but do it again, and then you throw it away, and then you do it again.

So, I went through that process all the way through my 20s – well, my teens and 20s – but especially once I started working and had my own place. I only came out to two people during that whole period of time, and I told them about me. They were some friends, and it was just really weird. And so, I went back in the closet. I just said, “Oh, this was all a mistake,” and I just went flying back into the closet. I really wanted to get rid of this. And I also always wanted to be a writer. And so, I picked a writer to emulate, as somebody who I could read all of their books, and then I could do some of the stuff in their books, so I could understand their writing better. And of course, I picked Ernest Hemingway – about as masculine an author as you can get. And so I read *Oliver and His Coming Way*. I read, I don't know, as many biographies as were out about him, up until that time. This is, then, up to '88.

And I worked as an accountant, and I was single, and I didn't have any debts. And I'd been going to the Rockies on my vacations, and I'd taken up fly fishing – because that was something that Hemingway did – and I ended up really getting hooked on fly fishing. And so, I was going to the Rockies and fly fishing for trout. And I quit my job in '88, and I went to Yellowstone for summer to try and figure out a way to make a living in the west. And I had a big beard, a big, full beard. And I had this beat-up old pickup truck, and I lived in a tent for the summer, and went fishing, and had to fix my shitty old truck. And then I decided to become a high school biology teacher. And I moved to Wyoming, and went back to school to become a high school biology teacher.

But very much, big time of my thoughts was this idea that I was leaving all this gender stuff behind. I was going to become a guy. So, I moved to Wyoming, which is a pretty rugged place. I spent a lot of time fishing. I tried hunting. I shot a few things. Didn't like it. But I got married. I was married. And I was really trying very hard to put this all behind me. Then I ended up getting into graduate school and became a fish biologist. And I didn't dress this whole time that I was married. And I lived in Wyoming, and I didn't dress the whole time. I picked my name, then, which was really interesting. I picked my name. But when I got divorced, my trans stuff came out in a roar. It just came flying out.

And, I went through a process where I bought some women's clothing and some stuff, and then I went my usual route of freaking out and throwing it all away. And I didn't do this consciously, but within a week or two, I had replaced every single one of those items, exactly. Exactly. Every single one of those items. And that's when I said to myself, "This is ridiculous. If you want to throw this stuff away, that's fine, but you have to put it in your storage shed and keep it for six months without getting into it, and if you do that, then it's okay to throw it away." And I never did.

And I found a transgender support group here in Boise. I actually lived in Emmett at the time. I was working for the Forest Service as a fish biologist, and I found a support group down here in Emmett. And so, that was one of the first times when I started actually going out in public as a woman. I bought some clothes. I got some makeup from a Mary Kay lady. I bought a wig, started going to the Emerald Club when it still existed. And that was in my— *(pauses)* that's like in '96. So, I was like 41 years old when that started happening.

And I never really completely came out. I went back in the closet. I was in the closet at work for a long, long time. I didn't transition at work until— *(pauses)* like eight years ago, or something like that. Yeah, that's about right, about eight years ago. I transitioned at work eight or nine years ago. And so before then, I lived a mixed life. I would go to work as a guy, and then I would come home and sort of change identities. What happened was, I kept running into people that I knew from work around town. So, that kind of expedited my coming out process.

I'm still in the closet to my parents. They don't know about me. They live in Texas, and so I go home every year for Christmas. And I go home as my old self, which just sucks. It's really bad. My brothers and their families know about me, but we all just kind of keep it a secret for my parents, because they're elderly, and we don't want to freak them out at this point in their life. Which is sad, actually. It's really sad, because I just can't spend as much time with my parents as I would like to. I really love them, but. *(sighs)*

JUSTIN BAXTER

How were your brothers when you first told them?

NIKKI LEONARD

That wasn't very smooth. That wasn't very good. It didn't go well at all. One of my brothers, he's a pretty macho guy, and he was basically leaving, well, really unpleasant messages on my phone. I wasn't answering it. But he was like, "I don't know who you've been hanging around with up there," as if I'm going through gender changes because of peer pressure. "All my friends were doing it, so I decided to change genders!" But then my other brother, he just wouldn't talk to me for a while. He was really freaked out about what I might say to the kids, or something like that. But bit by bit, it has just changed, over the years. I still wouldn't say that they're comfortable with it, but they do love me, and so they want me to be. And their kids, all my nieces and nephews, are cool with it. They're really pleased to have an Aunt Nikki in all of this. And so, yeah. Yeah. But it wasn't good with my brothers at first, but now it's okay. It's not great, but it's okay.

JUSTIN BAXTER

How were some of those first experiences, going out in public for the first time? Was that an exciting thing?

NIKKI LEONARD

Oh, it's terrifying. No, it was terrifying. Going to the E-Classroomclub is pretty safe. That's pretty safe. And then afterwards, a few times, we went out to restaurants and stuff like that. And we'd go in crowds, and there might be other trans people, and there might be a few drag queens along, or something like that. So, there was this security in numbers. But, there were some times where it's really scary, walking around downtown, or something like that. And people would shout something at you, or something like this. And I was worried for my safety. It was scary.

It's not easy. I don't think I pass that great. I don't. I think I still get read, sometimes, which is sad. It's sad for me, but it can also be scary. I don't think I get read nearly as much as I used to. But at first, it was kind of exciting, especially afterwards. But it was also really scary, really. And it took me a long time to get over this idea that there was something wrong with me. That took a long time, to finally accept that, this is I'm who God created. This is how I'm supposed to be. And that took a long time. When I was that insecure within myself, it made me even more insecure when I was around people. (*chuckles*) I wouldn't do it again.

This one time, I had this apartment over on 10th street when I moved into Boise. And so, I picked it because there were two doors into this apartment. And one was on Ridenbaugh. And so, it's sort of like a back door, almost – a side door or something. And I went out this one time, where,

I went out, and we got dressed up and made up somewhere else, and then went out for the evening, and then came back. And I had a little pickup truck in those days. So, I'm sitting in my truck, and I'm looking around to see if anybody's watching so I can run into the apartment. It's like two o'clock in the morning, and I think I see somebody in my neighbor's window, across the street. So, I sit in my truck for like five minutes, and I don't see any movement, but I could have sworn I saw somebody looking through the window. And finally I said, "Okay, this is ridiculous." I jump out and I run into my apartment, and I forget about it.

And then, about a year later, I came out to my neighbor across the street. She had moved to New York for a while, and then came back. So, it's about a year, or a year and a half later, I came out to her and told her about myself. And I said, "There was this time when I could have sworn you were watching through the window, and then I finally realized that was ridiculous, and I ran into the apartment." And she's like, "Well, actually, I wasn't sure if you had lent your truck to some really tall woman, or if that was you. But no, I was watching." I was like, "Oh my god!" (*laughs*) But, anyway. Yeah.

JUSTIN BAXTER

Cool. How was your experience transitioning while at work? You said you did it eight years ago?

NIKKI LEONARD

Yeah, that was okay for the most part. It's a good story though. So, like I said, I was starting to live my life away from work as a woman, and I was going to work as a guy, and nobody at work knew. And then I was at Starbucks this one time, and I ran into somebody I knew from the office. And she's married now and everything. But she was with a woman, a lesbian, and they were in a relationship. And so, she and I got talking, and I explained about myself, and we became friends based on that. And then— (*pauses*) I think one or two other people found out about me.

And I work for the federal government, and so I work with other agencies. And this one woman I worked with from U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, I worked with her pretty close, and she knew. And we traveled a lot together, and so she knew. So, what happened was I was in Hyde Park. It's when Tripp Taylor Bookstore was there. And I took a bunch of books in and I got this huge amount of trade credit. I was really stoked. And I come out, and I run into this other woman, who works for U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. And I just, like, say "Hi," and she recognized me. But I was clearly dressed and made up as a woman, so I was a little worried about it. But I didn't really know what to do.

Then my first friend, who I told you about, she and this group of people went to McCall for a field review of some field – a work trip. And she came back, and she's like, “So and so, who saw you in Hyde Park, told everybody that they saw you in Hyde Park dressed as a woman.” I’m like, “Oh shit. The cat's out of the bag.” And so, I started coming out really fast. And what I did was, I took everybody in my office that I cared about out for “the walk.” And so, I just took them out for a walk, like a 10 minute walk, and I explained about myself to them.

And especially the women, because one of the big problems with transitioning male-to-female in the workplace is the bathroom. And the women in my office were all really cool. They said, “Well, that's ridiculous. They're stalls. We could care less if you're in the restroom,” which was really, really nice of them. Because I have another friend who transitioned in a state agency, and they basically assigned her her own bathroom for a number of years, which is ridiculous. It really makes you feel ostracized or something.

But anyway. So, I work for the National Marine Fisheries Service, and so I told everybody in my office. And then I also did a lot of work with Idaho Transportation Department of Federal Highways, and yeah. So, I went to the head environmental guy at Idaho Department of Transportation, and I came out to him. And I said, “I'd like a chance to talk to all of your people individually. So, can we go really slow on this?” And he's like, “Yeah, that's a good idea. I'll just leave it up to you. You can talk to them one-on-one,” because I think that made a big difference. I took the trouble to talk to people individually, so they could see that there's nothing really weird going on.

Anyway, so, I had told this woman who worked for Federal Highways about me before, but she moved to Washington state. And so, I told the head environmental guy with Idaho Transportation Department. Nothing happened for a week. And then another week later, all of a sudden I get a call from this woman in Washington state saying, “Denn—” or, this guy that I know, at Idaho Transportation Department, “just announced at a staff meeting this morning that you're coming out.” And so, the whole state knew about it instantly – all of Idaho Transportation. It was, oh my god, all of the environmental people did.

And I had to give a talk in front of all these people on like Thursday of that week. And I’m going, “What am I going to do?” And so I decided – and this woman with Fish and Wildlife Service helped me – that I just have to go for it. So, I went out, and I had a nice silk skirt suit, and I went out and (*voice shaking*) got my makeup done, and my hair done that morning. Excuse me. And went in to give this talk. And I just walked in and said, “You may notice a little bit of a change with me.” I said, “From now on, you can call me Nicole, or Nikki, or Miss Leonard. Thank you.”

And then I gave my talk. I was terrified. I was so afraid. I'm standing up in front of like 40 people, and a lot of them don't like me in my old identity anyway. But it went fine. Part of what happened was, people recognized that it took a lot of courage to do that. I had this one woman who, we had been sort of opponents. She worked for Federal Highways before this, and she just said, "You have so much courage." And after that, she and I had this great relationship. It made our relationship better. But now, it's just not a big deal. But it's been quite a while. It's been eight years. So, it's just not a big deal anymore.

JUSTIN BAXTER

That's awesome.

NIKKI LEONARD

Yeah. I'm lucky I didn't lose my job.

JUSTIN BAXTER

That's really good, especially in this state.

NIKKI LEONARD

Yeah, it's completely legal to fire somebody for being transgender.

JUSTIN BAXTER

Mhmm.

NIKKI LEONARD

That's not against the law. Yeah.

JUSTIN BAXTER

Have you always been really active in the Boise community?

NIKKI LEONARD

Oh, I'm not so much anymore. But I was.

JUSTIN BAXTER

Yeah.

NIKKI LEONARD

I kind of retired. It really was stressful. I used to be the head of the Transgender Support Group, and so I did that for a number of years. And then I was on the board of the Community Center, and I was the managing board member over *Diversity News Magazine* for a few years, and wrote

some articles for diversity. And then I left the Community Center, and I went to volunteer with Your Family, Friends and Neighbors. And I became co-chair. And then I took a break for about a year, or something like that. A year and a half. Then I came back to YFFN, and I ended up becoming co-chair for another couple years.

I was in charge of organizing Pride, twice. So, I was the person that was in charge of it. I had a lot of people helping me, but I was in charge of Pride, twice. And then YFFN, when we closed our doors, that took it out of me. It was really, really, really sad. And I kind of had to do it all by myself. So, I've taken a break since then. When I went to the Transgender Day of Remembrance ceremony, I started thinking, maybe I should get back into it again. And I don't know, we'll see. I don't know. I am active in my church, and I don't have a lot of free time. And plus, I really struggle saying "no" to people. So, I end up with these huge amounts of responsibility. And it's hard. I mean, organizing Pride— Whoof.

JUSTIN BAXTER

How were those experiences organizing Pride?

NIKKI LEONARD

It was stressful. I mean, it was really stressful. And you have to get all the parade permits, the liquor permits, you have to arrange to get the liquor, you have to find a place to have Pride, you have to get vendors, you have to get advertisers. There's just a lot to do. And there's some things that, if they mess up, then you're not having Pride. So, I got some people to go to get the parade permits. You have to go to the City Council meeting. And so, you have to go a couple months before, to this private City Council meeting. Ha! So, I had to travel for work. So, I got these two people to go to the meeting for me.

And I'm in Seattle. No, I was in Portland. I think it was in Portland. Same difference. But I get this phone call from this clerk in the city office saying, "Nikki, where are you? The council meeting's starting." And I nearly had a heart attack. I'm like, "So-and-so and so-and-so haven't shown up?" And she's like, "No." And I'm like, "Oh my god, I just sent these people. They should be there. They knew when the meeting is." And I'm talking to her, I'm freaking out, and I'm like, "Okay, I have to call them." And she's like, "Wait a second," and they walked in the door right when I was talking to them. They had gone to the wrong room at City Hall. They had gone to the old meeting room. And she's like, "Here they are." But I mean, I nearly had a heart attack.

And then the next year, this guy was assigned to get the beer. And it's a deal we did with Coors. And like two weeks before Pride, he calls me and says, "I don't think I'll get ahold of him. We don't have any beer." And I'm like, "What? No beer for Pride? (*laughing*) That's ridiculous." I

was freaking out. I was so afraid that it was all gonna fall apart. So, it's really stressful. It can be pretty rewarding. It can be pretty rewarding. And things screw up, and you just know they're going to screw up. But it can be pretty rewarding. But it's so much work. I basically ended up having to take a full week off of work both times to help, at the last minute, to put it on. It's exhausting.

JUSTIN BAXTER

Was that something you kind of just got appointed, or is that something you—?

NIKKI LEONARD

I just couldn't say no.

JUSTIN BAXTER

One of those instances?

NIKKI LEONARD

Well, YFFM put on Pride. And so usually, if you're on the board, you picked some small part of Pride that you wanted to do. So, I had some small responsibilities. And then one year, I took on getting all the permits. So I got all the permits, because I thought somebody on the board needed to know how to do that. And then we had a big transition on the board, and it just ended up that it was only logical for me to be the organizer. So, I had a lot of people helping me. But yeah, I was the one who was in charge of it. So it just sort of happened. Somebody needed to do it. What's the way I always say? "Somebody needs to do it now!"

JUSTIN BAXTER

(laughs)

NIKKI LEONARD

God.

JUSTIN BAXTER

You mentioned that you're the co-chair of YFFN? How long were you involved with that organization altogether?

NIKKI LEONARD

(pause)

Six or seven years. Yeah, pretty long. Pretty long.

JUSTIN BAXTER

(clears throat) Were you helping out with the local ordinance for the City of Boise, with their indiscrimination policy?

NIKKI LEONARD

Yeah, that was a big success. Yeah. Other people had worked with the City Council a lot, and this is when I was on the board of YFFM. And it was before I was co-chair of YFFN. But they had worked with the City Council a lot, a number of people over the years, that tried to get sexual orientation added to the employment non-discrimination laws with the City of Boise. And, so then this one poor board member came back, and he's all excited, and he's like, "We've got the City to a council to agree to put sexual orientation in their anti-discrimination laws." And I just stopped, and I looked and I said, "What about gender identity?" And he's like, "We didn't get that." And I'm like, "Did you guys ask for that?" And he's like, "I don't know." And so, I said, "This is ridiculous. We need to try and get gender identity included."

And so, I called Nicole LeFavour, because she's so connected. She set up a meeting with Mayor Bieter and some of his staff members. And so, we got a group of concerned activists to come in and talk to them – talk to Mayor Bieter and his staff. And so, we had the ACLU there, I think we had Idaho Women's Network, YFFN, Nicole came as state legislator. Anyway, so I put together these packets of information, and we made a presentation about it. And their staff said, "Okay, well, we'll give it to staff and we'll talk about it." And, I didn't have that warm and fuzzy feeling after that meeting. But about– *(pauses)* I don't know, three weeks later, or something like that, I sent an email out and asked people if they knew what was going on. And a few days later, I got an email from this woman with ACLU, and she sent me the item that was going to be voted on at the next council meeting, and it was just for sexual orientation. They were going to vote on that. And so, they had blown off the gender identity part of it.

And I called Nicole again and said, "What are we going to do about this." And I said, "We need to talk to somebody. We need to talk to somebody again, before this gets passed." Because once it got passed, it would almost be impossible to come back and do something else. It'd be really hard. And so, she set up a meeting with myself, this woman who is like a human rights consultant for corporations, and Nicole, and Maryanne Jordan, with the City Council. And we all had coffee this one morning. And, so I made our pitch about it. And Nicole and this other woman helped, and I made our pitch to Maryanne about why we needed to include gender identity. And at the end of it, she just goes, "Well, of course we need to. This is ridiculous." And so, the bill got killed. It got sent back to staff, and then they ended up adding gender identity. And so, we got both sexual orientation and gender identity.

JUSTIN BAXTER

That's awesome.

NIKKI LEONARD

It was a big success.

JUSTIN BAXTER

It seemed very last minute, too.

NIKKI LEONARD

It was. It was right up against the wall. It was a big success.

JUSTIN BAXTER

That's awesome.

NIKKI LEONARD

Yeah.

JUSTIN BAXTER

What do you think is the next step in Idaho, specifically, as far as—?

NIKKI LEONARD

Well, we need to have a state employment non-discrimination act, and we need to have state hate crimes language. And we need to have them both for sexual orientation and gender identity. I mean, we need that. You think about, a speech I gave at Pride a few years ago, you think about it— you're some kid that's growing up in some rural community in eastern Idaho, and your parents go on and on about how gays shouldn't be allowed to think and get married, and about how it's a sin. And you go to school, and everybody says things like, "How gay this is" or "how gay that is," or they beat up kids that are effeminate. And then you go to church, and you hear the preacher talk about how it's a sin, and how gays are going to hell. And you think about these kids— they have no place to go. Their whole world.

And it's institutionalized. It's not against the law for somebody to get up and talk about discriminating against LGBT people. It's not against the law, in most cases, to fire somebody for being LGBT in this state. It's institutionalized. And if we change those laws, at least, it's going to be an indication that it's not okay. And it's just very basic human rights. So, hate crimes legislation and employment non-discrimination, I think, are two big deals. The marriage idea is way off in the future, as far as the state goes. That's something that I think will have to happen on a federal level before it happens on the state level, here.

But pretty much the majority of people, when I tell people that it was perfectly okay – even working for the federal government – it would have been perfectly okay for them to fire me when I came out. They could have just said, “You’re fired,” and there would have been nothing, probably, I could have done. I would have sued. I would have sued. The ACLU said they would support me in a lawsuit. But technically, there would have been nothing illegal about it. So, trans people are not a protected class, almost anywhere. So.

JUSTIN BAXTER

How is the trans community in this area? Is it pretty supportive of one another?

NIKKI LEONARD

You know, I just haven't been that involved in it for a few years now. We have some wonderful trans people that are active right now. I don't know if you know who Emily is – Emily Edney Jackson. I kind of mentored Emily, when I was looking to try and step back, I kind of mentored Emily to become the leading– because I was sort of the leading spokesman for the trans community. And then, I asked Emily, and she's just blossomed. She's just wonderful at it. The support group is still going. I haven't been. I just sort of have my little life right now. And when I was at the Transgender Day of Remembrance, I saw a few people who I haven't seen for a few years there, some trans people. And it was wonderful to see them again. So, I might start participating again. I was really, really burned out after things. It just took so much of my life up, to do the work that I did. But now I miss some of the people. I'd like to get back into it.

JUSTIN BAXTER

Yeah. Do you still work for the for the Fishery Service?

NIKKI LEONARD

Yeah. I work for the National Marine Fisheries Service, yeah, for the feds. I've been with the federal government for 17 years now. So, I just have like 14 more until I retire.

(laughter)

JUSTIN BAXTER

Are there parts of Boise, or Boise in general, that has been at least welcoming to trans individuals? Or, I don't know if there is any certain location? Or the city?

NIKKI LEONARD

Well. *(pauses)* I live in the North End for a whole number of reasons. And I bought a house here – well, I'm buying a house – for a whole bunch of reasons. And part of it's because I just love the neighborhood. This house was built in '34. And I love that part of– I love the trees. But it's

also a safe neighborhood. It's safe. It would be entirely different to be living in another part of Boise, and it would be even more different to live in Nampa or Caldwell. *(pauses)* That, I don't know if I'd feel safe. Other neighborhoods in Boise probably would be fine, but it would be something that I would want to pay attention to.

Nowadays my life is so routine as a woman. I'm not so sure it would have made that much of a difference. But when I was going through a transition, it made a big difference, because even in the North End, even like the freaking postman, you know? This one time I was home sick, and he was dropping off a package for my neighbor, who lived right next door. And I could hear them talking in the hall. And my bedroom was right there, so I could hear every word they were saying. And he was cracking jokes about me being transgender. And then I just shouted obscenities at him through the door. But I mean, I was in the North End, which is as safe as you can get in Boise.

And, I think part of that's been my role. At times it's not been so easy. I think that's pretty normal for transgender people. It's not so easy. But the more of us that come out, and liberalize us being transgender, the better it makes it for future transgender people. Because people begin to see that it's not a scary thing, that we're not freaks. I told my boss – the guy who used to be my boss, when I was coming out – I said, “Trust me, this isn't a big deal.” And then about three months later, he and I are talking, and he's like, “You know, when you told me this wasn't a big deal, I thought you were crazy.” But he's like, “You're right, it's not a big deal. It's just not a big deal.” I mean, it's still me, you know? I'm still this person you know.

So, yeah. But it's a scary thing, regardless. And there's a lot of people, a lot of trans people, are murdered or beaten up. Or, because we're so ostracized in society, a lot of trans people commit suicide. And I don't know, because I haven't kept up with the statistics, but it used to be the majority of us didn't die from old age. It used to be the majority of us died at the hands of others or at our own hands. The majority. So, hopefully it's getting better. I don't know. But it can be really uncomfortable. You can feel really alone in the world, being transgender.

JUSTIN BAXTER

Do you have any knowledge of anyone else transitioning, let's say in the government area that you work in, as well, since you've come out like that?

NIKKI LEONARD

No.

(laughter)

No. There's a number of women who work in my office, but fisheries – it's a pretty masculine world. No. And there were some pretty high level discussions about me, I found out later. I don't know what they were talking about. But I kind of threatened my boss with the lawsuit. *(laughs)* I did it sort of subtly. But I said something like, “Everybody's been so nice. I'm so glad that I don't have to tell you that the head of the ACLU here in Idaho said he would support me, if anything happened in the workplace, in a lawsuit.” And he's like, “I think you just did tell me that.” I'm like, “Oh, so I did.”

(laughter)

But no, I haven't known. There was one other person somewhere in National Marine Fishery Service, when I called our head EEO woman in Washington. She was very reassuring. She said, “Our job is to provide you with a safe workplace, so you can do your job.” She said, “You want to be careful how you do it,” because there was one other person who transitioned and they didn't do a smooth job of it, and they caused a lot of problems in the workplace. But it was somebody that was like, going out drinking with the guys one day, and then the next day just came in dressed as a woman and said “I'm a woman. Get used to it.” They didn't ease people into the idea of it. Something like that, supposedly. I don't know. I don't have first-hand knowledge of that at all. But no, I'm it. I'm it. Yeah, as far as I know.

JUSTIN BAXTER

Other than the North End, is there any specific businesses, or places that you attend, that you feel most comfortable at? Or what are some of the places that you feel least comfortable at, in Boise?

NIKKI LEONARD

(pause)

Well, I have my little world, where I feel pretty safe, in my little world. I don't drink, so I don't go to bars, because that might be one place. When I was transitioning, and I was pretty androgynous, the places I went were pretty limited. Not so much anymore. Not so much anymore. *(pauses)* Yeah, it's not so much anymore. There's some places where people are a little unfriendly, but I'm not sure that it's about the gender thing, or that they're just really not that friendly, you know what I mean? I don't know. Yeah, I don't really think it matters that much.

Back in the old days, there were some places that were definitely uncomfortable. And there were some places that sort of refused my service because I was trans. So, that happened a few times – not very many, but it did happen. And then there's just some awkward things. And it's just not easy. Gender is a very basic thing. When you look at somebody, the very first thing you register,

usually, is what gender they are. You think, “Oh, there's a guy.” And then you immediately, in our culture, you think what color they are. And then you start registering all these other things. But gender is one of the very first things you identify, if not the first thing. And when somebody is ambiguous, their gender is ambiguous, it really causes problems for people.

JUSTIN BAXTER

What do you think your next step is? Just— *(pauses)* in like life, I guess. I don't know.

NIKKI LEONARD

Ha!

JUSTIN BAXTER

You're teaching Sunday school.

NIKKI LEONARD

Yeah. Well, I just get into different things. I've let myself get out of shape and overweight. And so, I've started back into doing yoga.

JUSTIN BAXTER

Nice.

NIKKI LEONARD

And I want to go to some yoga retreats this next summer. I'm doing some writing. I'm kind of writing a memoir. So, I've been taking a break from it. But I've been getting back into it. So, it's sort of my story, or whatever. And so I'm working on that. I don't know. I've started fishing again. I got into being a fish biologist from fly fishing, and then I took a break from fly fishing for a long time. And this last year, I went fishing, again, a number of times. So, that's been fun to get back into it. I've done some bass fishing, and fly fishing for trout. And I want to do some backpacking in the Sawtooths next summer. So, that would be fun. And, I don't know. That's about it

(laughter)

JUSTIN BAXTER

I think that's about all I have. So, yeah. I want to thank you, very much.

NIKKI LEONARD

Yeah. So, did you want to see some pictures or something like that?

JUSTIN BAXTER

Sure, totally.

NIKKI LEONARD

Okay. So, you can make copies of these, but I need them back–

JUSTIN BAXTER

Okay.

NIKKI LEONARD

–if you want to.

END OF TRANSCRIPT.