



Library podcast

Samantha Allen discusses "Real Queer America: LGBT Stories from Red States"

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[00:00:36] Hi everybody. Hello. Welcome. Thanks so much for being here tonight. I'm Stesha Brandon. I'm the Literature and Humanities Program Manager here at The Seattle Public Library and as we begin this evening I would like to acknowledge that we are gathered together on the ancestral land of the Coast Salish people. We honor their elders past and present and thank them for their stewardship of this land. Welcome to this evening's event with Samantha Allen presented in partnership with Elliott Bay Book Company. Thank you to our author series sponsor Gary Kunis and to the Seattle Times for generous promotional support of library programs. Finally we're grateful to The Seattle Public Library Foundation private gifts to the foundation from thousands of donors help the library provide free programs and services that touch the lives of everyone in our community so to library foundation donors here with us tonight. We thank you very much for your support. So tonight's program will be a talk by Samantha Allen followed by Audience Q&A and then a book signing. So without further ado I am delighted to welcome Karen Maeda Allman from Elliott Bay Book Company who will introduce Samantha and our program tonight.

[00:01:49] So we were delighted when we got the call that Samantha Allen now lives among us in our area and that she was interested in doing a book talk with this with this new book of hers. Samantha Allen holds a Ph.D in Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies from Emory University. And also she's a recipient of the John Money Fellowship for Scholars of Sexology from the Kinsey Institute. She's currently a GLAAD award winning journalist and a senior culture reporter for The Daily Beast where she covers many issues having to do with the LGBT community including the process of legislation the progress of legislation to ban conversion therapy for minors in Utah not passed yet still working on it and also legislation proposed in California to protect intersex minors from unnecessary surgery. She's also written about the reception of drag queens story times something that we enjoy in the Seattle area. Expanding gender up gender options for airline passengers and other topics and her writing has appeared in Rolling Stone the Jacobin The Advocate Huntington Post and many other places. She speaks to us tonight about her book Real queer America LGBT stories from red states.

[00:03:11] And this was published by Little Brown in this book. She shares many stories from her life and also from a red state road trip that will up in many people's notions about what life is like for queer people in states far away from the coasts. She finds many activists and many open hearts along the way. She also makes the case that cities can be far colder and more hostile places for us than the communities established in people's home states and home cities. One particular strong point of this book for me was her focus on LGBT people. It's not lip service. She really brings and transgender people lesbians bisexuals people of color and also allies in towns like Johnson in Tennessee. She's not finding utopias here just home community and people fighting the good fight. It's a thoroughly enjoyable book and I also want to acknowledge that there's friends and family in the audience tonight and also at least one person she spoke with and doing research for the book. So with that thank you for joining us tonight. And please help us give Samantha Allen a warm welcome

[00:04:30] Thank you so much for that really kind introduction and thank you to the Seattle Public Library for hosting me in this beautiful strange building that was apparently designed by M.C. Escher. It took me forty five minutes to find this room and thank you to Elliott Bay for putting on this event. Elliott Bay I've been going to Elliott Bay before I moved here every Christmas for about five years now it's my favorite bookstore in the whole world. Five years ago I kind have imagined I would be writing a book much less speaking at an event hosted by Elliott Bay so this is really surreal for me.

[00:05:04] Dream come true and I'm really grateful to you for having me so I'm gonna share an excerpt of my book with ya. But first I want to tell you just a little bit about where it came from and how I came to write it. In many ways I think the story of my my 20s. I'm 32 now was a story about being constantly surprised by the vibrancy of LGBTQ communities in red states and sometimes being disappointed by certain aspects of LGBTQ life and larger blue state cities. So when I came out as a transgender woman in 2012 I was living in Atlanta Georgia attending graduate school at Emory.

[00:05:44] And even though I was ensconced in this very liberal academic environment and I was surrounded by legions of queer women I still had trepidation about coming out in the American South. You know up to that point I had primarily I'd primarily lived in California and New Jersey. A little stint in Utah and I'd internalized kind of the notion that the South is like a hotbed of prejudice and homophobia that it wasn't it wouldn't be safe for someone like me. But I came out anyway because I felt like I had no other choice had reached a point in my personal story where that just had to happen and I was blown away by the support that I received not just at my school in Emory but from the Greater Atlanta community. Now I came out to a student affairs official at Emory and you know within half an hour he had told me here's where you go to get hormones here's where you go for therapy here's where you go to talk to the insurance about getting procedures covered and that kind of thing. It was all just kind of laid out for me. Bullet point by bullet point and I can believe that this was happening to me in the middle of Georgia right.

[00:06:55] You know and a year after coming out I found myself exploring outside of Atlanta. I went to a college well outside the city limits in rural Georgia and met with this group of queer and trans students who had been there the whole time I just hadn't bothered to notice that they were queer folks living outside of Atlanta. So I should have learned my lesson that I should have been like oh I should

stop prejudging red states but I didn't. And so when I had friends invite me to go to see them in Johnson City Tennessee friends I had only known online. I thought I was headed into hostile territory going to a place like Johnson City in East Tennessee. It's a four hour drive from Atlanta north through the smoky mountains and you know it was still pretty early in my transition. It was a time when if I was going on a road trip I plotted out where to go to the bathroom in advance like I was like planning an elaborate bank heist or something I'd be like. This exit this Panera like it's exactly equidistant between Atlanta and Johnson City you know and I thought Johnson City was going to be just like all churches and pizza places and there were a lot of churches and pizza places in Johnson City but it was like so much more than that it had this lively little 1920s style downtown that sort of evokes like yester year Chicago this is all night diner the train depots had been converted into breweries and restaurants and there was this adorable little LGBT nightclub there called New Beginnings which locals shortened to newbies which I think is really cute.

[00:08:33] But most importantly I met a lot of bisexual people in Johnson City Tennessee including my now best friend Jennifer Culp. Like I met hordes of bisexual people in Johnson City Sara collective noun for bisexual people like a murder of crows. Probably should be anyway. But Johnson City became this like LGBT home away from home for me and I started going there.

[00:08:59] I have read chance I could get every weekend I got free. So you'd think I would have learned my lesson. By that point about prejudging LGBT communities and red states but I didn't.

[00:09:11] And so when I got accepted to do this summer fellowship at the Kinsey Institute about six years ago which is located in Bloomington Indiana maybe seems like an unlikely place for the Kinsey Institute to be I sort of had that talk with people when I told them I got in. They're like Where is that again. I'm like Bloomington Indiana and they're like what. So you know I thought I was going to spend this real dreary summer in Bloomington you know well-known a little known figure out by the name of Mike Pence was the governor of Indiana at the time. And while his reputation hadn't quite like reached national consciousness in 2013 Indiana still seemed from the outside to me like a very LGBT unfriendly place. But I go to Bloomington and the first place I have lunch is this cafe owned by an older transgender woman named Rachel Jones who's since become a friend of mine and there's this amazing bar in Bloomington called the back door that has zebra print walls in this gilded portrait of Dolly Parton. And like an Angela Davis mural and in the restroom and I saw this amazing drag show there my first night. And then as if to further drill this lesson into my head I met the woman who would later marry me in an elevator at the Kinsey Institute.

[00:10:33] Like we were in some kind of rom com like a. Queer trans Nora Ephron situation. Her name is Corey. She's here tonight. She made me promise not to draw attention to her so you could be sitting next to her right now. And not even know it. So after that I started connecting some dots. You know I looked up some facts and some figures I realized that almost half of LGBT Americans live in more conservative states. And yes LGBT Americans in these places are fighting off a lot of anti LGBT bills in state legislatures combating prejudice at home and faith communities among friends but there they're not in a constant state of abject misery right. LGBT folks in these places are building really vibrant communities that often go unnoticed by the coasts or specifically by a media

environment that really only focuses on two or three major cities you know and you can look at demographic data and see that millennials who are the most LGBT identifying generation in history so far moving to the south and the West and really kind of shifting the countries like queer center of gravity toward toward the middle.

[00:11:48] And you know I realized and felt firsthand over the course of my time these places just the warmth and welcome of LGBTQ life in these places there. The threats were undeniable but they bonded folks together in ways that that felt unique or special. You know we would go protest at the State House in Georgia but then we'd all go have dinner together or something like this.

[00:12:10] They go hand in hand the protest and the party right.

[00:12:15] So after I've spent a lot of time in blue states cities too since coming out I received and recovered from sex reassignment surgery in the Bay Area and although I had financial help from friends for the procedure itself I nearly wiped out my very small savings account convalescing for 30 days in such an expensive part of the country. You know I'd been primed to believe San Francisco you know this is the heart of LGBT history and it's going to be like the heart of LGBT culture in the U.S.. And what I found in the San Francisco of 2014 was like a tech dystopia where a plate of chicken fingers cost 20 dollars. I'm not there are good things about San Francisco too. But I should say that disclaimer disclaimer and you know I was found I often find myself in New York to visit my then fiancée who I grew up in Long Island and you know I encountered similar sorts of issues there. There are a ton of LGBT people in the big city but the scene felt more nightlife focused than it did to me in a place like Johnson City or Bloomington or Atlanta. We can really afford to do very much there beyond driving around the Long Island Expressway and going to see a movie every so often the Long Island Railroad cost keeps going up.

[00:13:33] Subway fare keeps going up. Wages are not going up and you know there are a lot of benefits to being surrounded by like incredible diversity in a city like New York and I understand why some people still feel the need to get to a place like there to live more authentically. But overall you know I it's has started to feel to me like some of our traditional 20th century pillars of LGBT culture are turning into places where a cost of living is starting to pose a huge barrier to entry. It's stressful to live there. The sidewalks in New York are lined with full trash bags. I call it carpet island and I know March to Broad City for any fans in the audience.

[00:14:18] Ap It's last season right now and so you know I had all these experiences and seven years after coming out and so after the 2016 presidential election I started seeing you know some segment of liberal folks starting to dump on red states in that immediate kind of anger and confusion in the aftermath of the election results and that sentiment didn't sit right with me. I saw calls for California to secede. I watched folks on my social media feeds say A. Blue state taxes are going to pay for these red states who keep voting against our country's best interests and we'd be better off without them and that kind of thing. And to me it just felt like ratio like erasure of all of these progressive folks in red states LGBT people included who are really changing the country from the inside out rather than the outside in. And just because that process isn't happening as fast as some folks on the blue states

would like doesn't mean that it's not there and that it doesn't deserve to be honored documented noticed.

[00:15:27] And that's why I wrote the book. You know I am a national LGBT reporter for The Daily Beast and I felt kind of constrained by what I could do from my keyboard. I could just kind of sit there and type up things about oh this bill is getting passed or this bill isn't getting passed. And I wanted to actually take some time and go to these places.

[00:15:51] Many of them places I had lived in or have some kind of personal connection to but also new places I had never really spent much time in Texas before writing the book and I met some amazing folks in Texas three of whom are in the audience and I apologize in advance that my excerpt will not mention you tonight. So if folks want to hear about you they have to write read go and by the book.

[00:16:16] Yeah but thank you for being here. So I spent two months in the summer of 2017. I went from Utah to Texas to Arkansas to Indiana to Tennessee to Mississippi to Georgia. I wrote down what I learned on a computer and then a publisher put those on pieces of paper and put them between two pieces of thicker paper. And they tell me that it's called the book and that I should sell it and read it.

[00:16:44] So if you'll indulge me I just want to read to you a little portion of the book about one of my favorite places in the world which is Johnson City Tennessee.

[00:16:55] I have never been to Paris but I have been to Johnson City and that feels good enough for me. This is my faraway land of artists and libertines and weirdos in the week that my road trip buddy Billy and I spent here. We attend to figure drawing party held above a storage unit where my pansexual where my pansexual illustrator friend Brett Marcus Cook poses nude with a bunny mask held over his crotch and where the bisexual manager of a sex toy shop puts on a Wonder Woman costume and whips a transgender woman any frilly Victorian dress. I tried to sketch them but scrawl might be a more apt for given my skill level. We hang out in Joe and Hannah's loft drinking Lacroix and eating cat praising crackers topped with Basil grown on the balcony all while playing with their tail this cat. How do whose name means Walnut in Hannah's native Korean. We scale Roan Mountain near the North Carolina border under the full sun a thin line of clouds. The only interruption in the blue sky. We have dinner with Jen's eccentric parents and Jen's mom Jean Pepe Culp compliments Billy on finishing his slice of key lime pie as if he had just brought home a report card with straight A's. We talk loudly about our formative queer experiences about Billy and my best friend Jen shared love of a shot at love with Tila Tequila for example over enormous frozen margaritas at my favorite strip mall Mexican restaurant El Shiro L.A.

[00:18:27] we're talking a little too loudly judging from the uncomfortable stares of the other patrons. Time is time is mostly measured in dog walks. By day we take Jen's dogs Doc red and Lily around the neighborhood in the musty aftermath of the summer rain. By night we go to the flooded quarry and neighboring Elizabeth 10 under an overcast sky illuminated by a full Aquarius moon. Sometimes I wish I could put this life in a bottle and send it to my career friends in New York or they could just

move here and save for retirement in 2017 Johnson City made wallet hubs list of one of the 100 best small cities in America out of a pool of over twelve hundred. Based on affordability and quality of life it is now ranked number nine on the Forbes list of best small places you could put a down payment on a house here for a year two's worth of rent in a big city. And believe me I've considered doing just there's a house for sale on Corey drive that literally has my wife's name on it but it's not just the financial cost of living in Johnson City. That makes me want to staple flyers for it all over Brooklyn. It's the emotional cost of not living here or at least somewhere like it.

[00:19:43] When I ask people what they like about New York I hear that it's the cultural capital of the world an inexhaustible fountain of unique experiences. But what good is the city that has so much going on. If the people who live there are miserable. I'm generalizing here but there's solid data to back me up. In 2014 the National Bureau of Economic Research declared New York City the unhappiest city in America. Based on answers to the question in general how satisfied are you with your life. That study puts a quantifiable cap on a qualified sensation. I have always felt when hanging out in big city queer circles not ennui not mere sadness but what Thoreau might call quiet desperation. Yes I may be surrounded by masses of like minded people when I visit an LGBT friendly megalopolis like New York City. But because no one besides millionaires can really afford to have a stable long term existence there. We all end up spending money that we don't have at bars where the booze is marked up 400 percent all because we can't properly host each other and tiny shared apartments full of laundry that we haven't done yet. So why should I get excited about the prospect of a gay bar on every corner when I can just roll up to new beginnings in Johnson City with a car full of my ride or die friends.

[00:21:04] And why should I care about which cool people are going to hear even cooler friends show. If the people I'm going to meet there are also unhappy denizens of the same godforsaken asphalt island. So little harsh I apologize to New Yorkers and the audience. Big city LGBT life to me is proof that more can sometimes be less as pop legend and gay icon Britney Spears famously told Sabrina the Teenage Witch in 1996. Being surrounded by people is sometimes the loneliest place to be. New York City may have four times as many LGBT people as Johnson City has people period. But finding happiness is a queer American is not a mere a numbers game. And yet the sheer inertia of a place like New York City can make it feel almost inescapable. There is a gloom hanging over Manhattan but so many people I know are unwilling to get themselves out from under it is the National Bureau of Economic Research noted one obvious but depressing conclusion we can draw from their study is that quote individuals do not aim to maximize self reported well-being. In other words they care about something else more than happiness. Often I found my big city acquaintances are looking for a job title a boost to their social capital or most vexing of all a certain sense of being in the middle of everything.

[00:22:28] I have almost been pulled into New York City's gravity despite my loathing for it. A good chunk of LGBT media jobs require you to live there even in an age when I can write anywhere with a Wi-Fi connection. But the last time I was offered a job there I considered it and then turned it down. World renowned museums and Zagat rated restaurants are great and all but there is no sculpture on inspiring enough. No top a tasty enough to persuade me to move into a glorified shoe box of an

apartment and ride to work every day and a dysfunctional system of underground tin cans as long as I can figure out how to make a living literally anywhere else. I will stay away. More and more LGBT people seem to be operating on a similar wavelength. I asked Gary J. Gates the most widely cited demographer of the American LGBT community. What evidence he's seen of queer demographic shifts away from coastal big cities over the last decade. He pointed me to his recent Williams Institute analysis of U.S. Census and Gallup polling data which compared the concentration of same sex couples living in American cities in 1990 to the percentage of their LGBT population from 2012 to 2014. It's an imperfect comparison but given how hard it is to gather data on a small population like ours it's one of the best available and the results are striking.

[00:23:54] SALT LAKE CITY leapt up 32 spots in the overall rankings between 1990 and the 2012 to 2014 period. Louisville Kentucky rose 30 slots over the over the same period Norfolk Virginia in New Orleans Louisiana. Both jumped more than 20 places. Meanwhile San Francisco remained static. Los Angeles fell two slots and New York had a staggering eleven place slump. Gates believes that this discrepancy he speaks to the social change happening in many red state cities as he wrote quote substantial increases in LGBT visibility and more socially conservative places like Salt Lake City Louisville and Norfolk likely mean that these areas are not as different from cities like San Francisco Austin and Seattle all with long histories of fostering social climates where LGBT people felt more comfortable in their acceptance of the LGBTQ many community today than they were 20 years ago. So in other words Cates is saying Salt Lake City is a lot more like Seattle than you might think it is. And that helps explain some of the population shift that we're seeing an important another important explanatory factor in the data is Gates acknowledged is the increased willingness of LGBT people in conservative areas to come out of the closet. In other words although there is probably a large degree of population shift it doesn't mean that every queer person in New York City is packed up and moved to Norfolk instead.

[00:25:25] It means the folks living in Norfolk are also coming out in the deep. This data also fits in with general U.S. migration patterns toward the south and west and given the fact that only 12 percent of LGBT adults say that they factor levels of LGBT social acceptance into their moving decisions. Less and less is stopping us from moving south or west and plenty of attractive midsize American cities are calling our names the emerging truth is that LGBT people have been building beautiful lives away from the coasts for years in places like Johnson City. Progressive laws and policies may help queer people thrive but they are not on a gut level. What keeps us going friendship is our fuel. You could read banned same sex marriage in Tennessee and make it illegal for me to use the women's restroom here but I would still probably choose it over New York. I'd be a lawbreaker sure but at least I would have fresh air to breathe and pleasant company to share it with because love is what does the heavy lifting and queer survival. It may not be all you need is the Beatles sang or is Ewan McGregor once crooned over Bass Lawson's computer generated Paris but it's pretty damn close. Thanks

[00:26:44] How should we handle questions. Yeah. Mm hmm good question.

[00:26:53] So the question is what is my impression of Seattle. I moved here about seven months ago because her family. Spend more time outdoors that kind of thing and it's weird. It's weird coming from you know five years in Georgia and three years in Florida. You know when you're in when you're in a place like Georgia and you see another transgender girl there's kind of this not like hey like I see you in Seattle it's just like on another one of you like. Get out of my way. This is my turf now. I mean I'm exaggerating like Seattle is you know on its face. Good place to be LGBTQ but I miss that feeling of like solidarity.

[00:27:38] You know one of the dynamics that I explore in the book is you know in a lot of a lot of the blue states cities kind of gay rights issues traditional gay rights issues like same sex marriage got out way ahead of the game compared to transgender rights like a place like Massachusetts is a great example of that where same sex marriage was legalized a long time ago and you can see in a place like Massachusetts how that kind of leaves the community feeling disjointed sometimes.

[00:28:10] Whereas in a place like Georgia where everyone has to kind of come up together at the same time there's a little more stickiness in adhesive ness between the A I and the G and the B and the T and you know I I worry about places like Seattle or New York or Boston where you can kind of get lulled into this complacency like feeling like Oh we've we've got it all figured out. And then you know you see in Massachusetts like an anti transgender ballot initiative show up. I know folks who've tried to put anti transgender initiatives on the ballot in Washington state as well. Yeah those are those are kind of my political level concerns. Socially it's it's strange. It's harder to find friends I feel less of an immediate kinship with folks. I think they call that the Seattle Freeze. Yes. I'm still learning. Does that answer your question at all.

[00:29:11] Yeah it is. It's pretty expensive here. Do a lot more cooking at home than he used to that's for sure. Yeah I mean it's it's the No it's a tradeoff. I think ideally we'd like to get away and go somewhere like Montana and like five years 10 years. That's that's the goal. Yeah it's a place with this kind of cost of living. It doesn't feel like it can go on forever. Ryan. Yeah

[00:29:51] Yeah. I mean I it's not as emphasized in the book as I would want it to be. Oh yes sorry. I'm supposed to repeat the questions for the benefit of our podcast listeners. Hello podcast listeners. So the question is. Oh what role does the Internet play and LGBT people being able to find each other or find social acceptance in these places. The answer is a huge influence. You know I think we are seeing a lot of LGBT people people move to from coastal cities where they felt comfortable to places they can afford. I was just in St. Lewis yesterday. A lot of LGBT people there had come from more costly places but as far as folks who grow up like in the outskirts of these cities or in red states the Internet has played a huge role in their ability to come out find information and find resources or even look up like where's the where's the bar or cafe. I can go to the next time I can get into St.. Lewis from my small town you know two hours outside of San Luis. I think it's just an enormous role in people's increased comfort and coming out in places that might feel kind of hostile on a skin level. But once you get online you start to kind of demystify that and be like wait there are a lot of other LGBT people around me. Yeah I think he can't stress enough the role that that digital kind of culture formation has been playing.

[00:31:21] Well let's go this direction. So what would you say to someone who's actually doing a reverse. Smaller see to say. I'm moving. Pennsylvania. Scranton Pennsylvania

[00:31:34] To San Francisco yeah wow. So the question is

[00:31:40] What advice or what what would I have any commentary on someone moving from a smaller city to a bigger city like Northeast Pennsylvania to San Francisco. Gosh I hope you kind of really cringe and say this is good. I said. I would be scared for you to the answer now. I mean I I am not going to judge anyone's individual decisions. You know I moved to maybe the most stereotypical blue state LGBT city a few months ago. Yeah everyone has a complicated array of into individual factors that determine where they want to be. You might find after some time in San Francisco that right now some of the things you were getting away from in northeast Pennsylvania maybe weren't as bad or you might love it in San Francisco and decide to stay forever or at least as long as your rent will allow you to stay. I think it's interesting because as you point out it's you the person that's important to know the place you know these roles in a place like everybody looks at the soul but if you've ever been there or live there I live in Texas where. Despite the red quality. There are some wonderful except the beautiful people everywhere. And it's you adapting to it that you got so much. That you could do that. It's a. Wonderful one. Yeah. So the comment is about how how people can matter more than places and about how in a state like Texas you can find amazing acceptance or friendship in these communities.

[00:33:29] I actually three of the Texan interviewees in my book are in the audience right now two members of the band giant Kitty and Nicole and Perry is here and I've made amazing friends in Texas. A lot of the places I had been to before in the book I was working off of previous connections that I had built. I kind of showed up in Texas not knowing anyone and two years later here you are at this book Creating and I'm very flattered that you would take time out of your evenings to come but like it's something that Sandra Hughes here Jane Kitty actually mentioned to me in Texas is this this kind of guilt by association effect where people say they just hear Texas and that brings all sorts of instant associations with it. And Texas is a big place with a lot of people. It's becoming more and more purple as time goes on. And when you have that you've got to get past that instant reaction of like Texas Tennessee because when you go there you see it from the ground level instead of a bird's eye view and it looks like a very different place.

[00:34:39] Well we had one over there and then we'll go back there. Yeah.

[00:34:44] So the question is about how how to find queer space in the cities and red states or small towns in red states. You know I write about this in the Bloomington Indiana chapter of the book there. I'm a ex academic recovering academic. I like to say. And there's a queer theorist named Lauren Berland who along with Michael Warner wrote this paper about queer world making and it's about how queer worlds kind of are in the shadows. They're less visible less intelligible and you kind of have to find a couple of points of entry and then things start cascading from there and suddenly you have this amazing like homemade map of the place right. So the answer. Is often find an LGBT person who

lives there and say Where do you get coffee where do you eat. Where do you drink. Where do you hang out during the day. You know in Bloomington Indiana I I emailed Lauren brilliant actually because I met her at a conference and she teaches two hours north in Chicago and I was like I'm going to Bloomington for a summer like how do I do this. And she is very busy and just wrote back like Rachel's cafe like said and then I show up at Rachel's cafe and then suddenly it's like oh have you heard of the back door. The bar in Bloomington Indiana. Have you heard about Uncle e's the now closed lesbian bar.

[00:36:14] Unfortunately in Bloomington and yes. So he you know it's hard it's hard sometimes but it's worth the labor that you put into it. I mean some really practical suggestions like Yelp now allows you to filter by where has a gender neutral restroom which is often a good indication of like a small business that's on the up and up go to yeah go on line google around you know Louisville LGBT cafe.

[00:36:48] That kind of thing. Thank you Heather.

[00:36:57] So the question is about how growing up in a Mormon family and having once been a Mormon missionary myself before a transition kind of intersected with some of the work I maybe did in the book where I found myself talking to a lot of strangers.

[00:37:13] I felt like I was spreading the gospel of Johnson City Tennessee. But yeah you know. Yeah. My own faith journey is is a big part of the book.

[00:37:26] I think one thing that I really took away from my time in Mormonism and I resigned from the church about eleven years ago is the idea that family is forever and family is really important. And I think you can kind of put a really clear spin on that idea. You know LGBTQ people have a concept of chosen family that you know our relationships with friends can really kind of take on the urgency of blood bonds.

[00:37:56] And I think building that chosen family is so important. And part of what I love about that is how instantaneous queer chosen family can feel like you meet someone at a protester at a party and suddenly it's like now we're friends forever now like you don't understand it but we're gonna see each other for forever from now on. So I really took that away from Mormonism along with a certain degree of of shamelessness when life demands it of going up to people and being like Hey I want you to talk to me. It's not it's honestly knocking on doors is a Mormon missionary is a million times more terrifying than showing up at a protest and trying to get people to interview thinking this guy here and then there were very very small times when I when I found out long ago what we have here is people say

[00:38:52] Oh let's go out with you and things along those lines getting a very good use of the question where I'm going with this. Is that how or where in your travels are the people that you've met. How aware of you that they are what living breathing you know. People that they give a face to the spectrum. And where. In. Other words what is wrong. For

[00:39:21] Them. I'm here because. I don't have the spirit I want to hear it. Yeah. I won't. Allow. It. I'm okay with that. Yeah well when I go back to the article I am. Anyway. You know it definitely is not possible. So how

[00:39:44] I get it. Oh. Yeah.

[00:39:47] You know gosh I think part of what what I saw on my trip and what I wonder document in the book is is the LGBT community in these places is is becoming. I don't want to say like Frankenstein monster but new things keep getting attached to it. Right. So a huge effect and like someplace like Texas is I what.

[00:40:13] I met a lot of parents of transgender kids who who would never have been familiar with the LGBTQ community before who might have said some of the misguided comments before who might have seen LGBTQ people as is somehow like other like fetishized exotic sized creatures but who by virtue of having their kids bring them into the fold have had this huge learning process. You know I also saw that in like faith communities to not every faith community but but some like I found myself at a in a Baptist church in Waco Texas and you told me five years ago I would be sitting as an openly transgender woman in a Baptist church in Waco Texas I would be like who was kidnapped me. Like. What is the ransom. But this congregation had just voted to like affirm LGBT members of the congregation. And I believe they actually got kind of kicked out of the Baptists larger Baptist Conference for doing that. So I think part of what I'm seeing is like you know the 5 percent of LGBT people who are LGBT in these spaces are pulling in friends family co-workers. It's not going to be perfect but I think the consciousness is growing and some that discomfort might be starting to fade. I also want to say you know you talked about like the effect of going back and feeling like you're shining like this beacon in a in a place like Idaho.

[00:41:48] Coming from a big city. And a lot of the people I met in the book feel like I respect everyone's decision and comfort level some people went back to places they had grown up specifically because they liked the feeling of being like this the stand out beacon. You know one of the one of my favorite people I interviewed her name is Smoove S M O V and she manages the back door in Bloomington Indiana and she had come from like living in San Francisco. She had had a career in the banking industry and she was just like gosh I can make like a huge impact in Bloomington like San Francisco doesn't need another me like I can go you know be the hero. And yeah everyone I yeah I respect everyone's journey and where it takes them. I totally understand wanting to kind of just get lost step back. I remember when I first transitioned I was like I don't really want to be out or visible I just kind of want to fade away and you know circumstances in life change my comfort level with that may grow and shift over the course of my life too.

[00:42:54] Yeah things are here and then back there.

[00:43:01] Yeah. So the question is did it did I get a chance you know. Are there a lot of small and mid-sized cities in the book. And did I get a chance to kind of go outside the cities in the more rural areas. Yeah. You know one of the smallest places I went is a town called New Hope Texas. The you

may remember from certain national headlines that they had the first transgender mayor in Texas history and new hope. My friend Jess Herbst and I had just really fascinating conversations with just about being closeted and LGBTQ in a place like New Hope and you know I know for just like before she transitioned she would really only feel comfortable being her authentic self in Dallas which was like two hours to the south and it was this thing of like am I going to see people like I need to go with these you know special set of friends who I feel comfortable among that kind of thing.

[00:44:01] A lot of researching like a bar or restaurant in advance where she would feel welcome.

[00:44:07] Yeah you know I think I think you still see that for sure. Part. Of

[00:44:14] The progress that I think is happening though is you have to you don't have to go as far as you may be used to like 20 years ago. You know the local LGBT hub is closer than the era when folks felt the need to get on a bus from Kansas City and go to the Big Apple. Right. S. Lewis is down the road here in Missouri. Eric that kind of thing and I think you see these LGBT kind of local hubs popping up everywhere.

[00:44:44] And I know folks in more rural areas are still really struggling with feelings of isolation which can cause all sorts of deleterious effects on folks mental health. And I I think what's going to really help bring progress to those areas is kind of those cities drawing them in.

[00:45:02] Yeah and I saw another question back there.

[00:45:09] Yeah yeah. So the question is about like how was surprised in my by recent like LGBT electoral victories like lesbian Native American woman who won. I wish I knew her name off the top of my head. Sure Davids Yeah who was elected to Congress from Kansas. I mean I think in the 2010 midterms you saw a lot of it LGBT candidates breaking lavender ceilings and I guess from places like Kansas to right.

[00:45:39] And I think it speaks to the fact that folks in red states today sometimes care less about someone being LGBT than than maybe in the past or also than the media can can make it seem you know anti LGBT groups are very vocal. They're very efficient at fundraising messaging. They've got the pundit on the cable news show like that. It makes it seem like there's this huge groundswell in red state America for like anti LGBT issues rather than a really vocal minority that's still clinging to the past which is I think what's happening. So I'm I'm heartened by it after after travelling the country to write this book though I like I'm not I'm not surprised by it. Now my friend Jess Herbst who I mentioned earlier she was like the people in this town don't care where I go to the bathroom.

[00:46:33] They they care about like the car on blocks on their neighbors yard being like a public eyesore like you know in traveling country at the time I wrote this Texas was considering a anti transgender bathroom bill. Everyday people in Texas are not out there clamoring about transgender people using their bathrooms right. There is a very effective anti LGBT fundraising machine that's made it seem as though that's the case but it's it's just categorically not. So yeah.

[00:47:05] Thank you for your your question over here.

[00:47:14] Yes. The question is about coming from a small town to a larger city encountering some of maybe the problems or the complacency or wanting to look progressive versus actually doing progressive things. Dynamic that we discussed a bit ago and I suppose do I know solutions or that kind of thing I wish I I wish I knew the solutions I'm trying to figure that out here too. I mean the dynamic that you described is a really familiar one. One of the people that I interviewed in the book my my mentor at Emory. His name was Michael shot. He's this gay man who grew up in the Midwest. You know I came out in the 90s. He went to Washington D.C. to work at a large HIV AIDS advocacy organization. He was like This is it for me I'm going to change the world here in Washington D.C. like I'm bright eyed bushy tailed. Like let me move in with my partner and watch the cherry blossoms bloom and change the world and that kind of thing. And what he found in D.C. was that a lot of folks at this organization cared more about job advancement.

[00:48:24] Their title looking good than they did about actually doing this work. And he he moved away to Atlanta as soon as his internship at this organization was was over. I I don't know the answer except like what are the kids say don't sleep right. We have so many good examples of how complacency can come to come to bite like LGBT people in blue states in the butt. We have Proposition 8 we have that ballot initiative in Massachusetts that I mentioned earlier like folks trying to pass an anti trans ballot initiative here like we have so many historical examples of what happens when you kind of sit and say we've got it all figured out that we should start moving to a space where we accept we don't we don't have it all figured out. I guess my advice would be to challenge that attitude when when you encounter to say like look look in your own backyard tend your own garden kinda thing. Yeah. Yeah. So the question obviously is about like the effect of gentrification on it on Gaber hoods and like big cities like Seattle with Capitol Hill is the example.

[00:49:43] I mean gosh we got to like Capitol Hill on a Friday night. It doesn't it doesn't really feel like it gave her a hood right. Yeah. Gentrification is really changing cities and it often comes for LGBT neighborhoods first because we're like really cool and we open cool restaurants and stuff and then everyone else wants to come and then they prices out of it because we often make less. So it's like this really messed up dynamic.

[00:50:13] I mean I I really explore that in the book in the chapter on Atlanta because I lived there from 2010 to 2015 and then even going back two years later in 2017 to write the book Atlanta had to change like some of my favorite like one of my favorite like dive year stretches of Atlanta. There was now one of these big like monstrous like live work play like you know market things that were like What is this even for and how much is the parking here going to cost like kind of thing.

[00:50:49] Yeah it's really I think sad to see the effects of gentrification on on Gaber heads at the same time.

[00:51:00] You know I don't want to kind of say that like an urban environment is the only place where LGBT people can feel comfortable. You know like like LGBT bars or in larger cities or closing and obviously like there's real strong personal attachments there. Often like historical attachments. But when you look at the social factors that are informing that phenomenon it's often because LGBTQ people are feeling more comfortable going to you know all kinds of bars and restaurants right. So I think I think we're going to see. GABLER HUD's become less important over time than we're in the 70s right. And I think it's okay to mourn that but also I don't be excited for a world where LGBT people can be in the suburbs too I guess there's hellish is that's

[00:52:00] Yeah. And one wherever over here.

[00:52:07] Audience in reading writing and for other people for not people or combination I mean from a mark. The question is did I write this book for LGBT people or for LGBT people for non LGBT people or for both from a marketing perspective this book is for everyone and all of your friends. And

[00:52:31] Buy a copy for yourself and all of your friends now. But I wanted it to be able to speak to both. I wanted LGBT people in red states to feel seen and to feel like their experiences were reflected or had some kind of larger statement they could point to. You know I encountered that over and over again in the writing of the book and just recently like touring for the book I was in St. Lewis last night. Like a lot of folks in these communities feel like gosh and like I'm I'm glad I'm glad you're coming around I'm glad you're writing about this because LGBT people in these places don't always feel like the media is like really getting to the nitty gritty of their lives. They just care about what's happening in the state legislatures. So I and then I wanted LGBT people in blue states cities to read it read about places maybe places that are their hometowns states that they had come from maybe examine some preconceptions that kind of thing. And then I wanted non LGBT readers to just be interested in all of it like the LGBT angle and also the red state blue state divide.

[00:53:41] Yeah.

[00:53:45] So the question is about LGBT ally ship and and whether it looks different and bigger cities or smaller cities.

[00:53:54] Gosh I think I think Ally ship can sometimes be fiercer and in red states. I certainly encountered that with family members of LGBT people in red states. They they will not shut up about LGBT issues they are like they're like pedal to the metal like gosh my my friend Amber Brickell. She has a transgender son. I met her for the first time at the State House and Texas Amber and she had like five different signs and life was like Here hold this one and hold this one so I can hold up these two. And it was like wow you like really came prepared for this. And I think there's there's this ferocity and passion among like really proud LGBT allies in these places that I think sometimes in a city like Seattle non LGBT people can kind of assume like oh like it's totally fine for LGBT people here. Like I don't need to like be really vocal about this or that kind of thing.

[00:54:56] Yeah what's your what's your experience like with LGBT ally ship here. Thanks a lot. Yeah. You know I totally get that. So the audience member came from Eastern Washington had a bunch of high school friends. Everybody kind of came out after leaving eastern Washington and after graduating from high school I encountered that that same thing in the book one specific place was in the Rio Grande Valley. Like I met a lot of LGBT folks specifically like a lot of gender nonconforming and non binary folks and the Rio Grande Valley who didn't feel comfortable being out in the valley and then went north to a place like Austin or Dallas or not Dallas Houston. That kind of thing.

[00:55:47] And then I saw that all their like friends from grade school were coming out but like cool thing about it is when everyone's back in the Rio Grande Valley for like a holiday or like a summer trip or something. It's like gosh like we were all here at the same time and like we didn't even know it because we were too scared to tell each other. And I think in the process of doing that we can kind of change the stories that we tell about the places that we come from. We can realize like we were all kind of struggling together in silence but like we were all we were all here. And maybe maybe we can build temporary sites of belonging here when we're all in town together.

[00:56:30] And then maybe one last question over here.

[00:56:39] Yeah. Think you saw the comments about kind of complacency in and in blue states. Yeah it's interesting. I mean yeah I I don't necessarily feel like my full queer self in a place like Seattle I feel like my best like leggings wearing outdoorsy self in Seattle and

[00:56:57] I like having like relatives close by and that kind of thing. But yeah I really I don't know I miss that feeling of like a real fire in my belly kind of thing.

[00:57:06] Yeah. My

[00:57:13] Question is about my astrological sign.

[00:57:20] Yes my wife would love this question because she is an astrology nut and her laughter may have given away her location in the audience. I am a dull and dutiful Capricorn. Career oriented very boring.

[00:57:39] Today I learned I was a Capricorn was the day Corrie told me and it was the worst day of my life because it explained all of my terrible personality traits which is just being a hamster on a wheel but a hamster that's convinced that one day I'm going to get somewhere. Except I'm just running around the wheel over and over again and my wife is a Scorpio and she is. Interesting and fascinating and passionate and and and explosive and all the best ways and. Honestly the only reason that I have joy in my life. I mean that in the Gucci romantic way but also in the stroller. Astrological sense that Capricorn s are soulless husks and Scorpios are just constantly looking for joy and irreverence. Thank you

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