Simone Angelle

September 11, 2023

Lafayette, LA

Interviewed by: Zack Stein

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Ethnographic Preface:

As part of an American Rescue Plan Humanities Grant from the American Library Association and National Endowment for the Humanities, Special Collections of Edith Garland Dupré Library and the Guilbeau Center for Public History are collecting oral histories documenting the region’s LGBTQ+ community. Interim Assistant Dean of Technical Services Zack Stein met with Simone Angelle, who spoke about experiences and perceptions as an LGBTQ+ individual and the importance of Pride in southwest Louisiana.

TRANSCRIPTION

Interviewer initials: [ZS]

Interviewee initials: [SA]

ZS: Today is September 11, 2023. This is Zack Stein getting an oral history from Simone Angelle. And just before we start, I just want to let you know this is voluntary. So, any question that you do not feel comfortable answering, you don't need to answer. If you want to end the interview at any time, you may. And also, just let you know that this finished recording will be made available on our oral history digital library on the UL Lafayette website. So, before we start, could I get your consent?

SA: Yes, my consent.

ZS: All right. Thank you very much. Okay, so just to start, describe what it was like growing up LGBTQ+ in Louisiana.

SA: Like many others in South Louisiana, I was raised Catholic in the Catholic Church. They made it very clear that being LGBTQIA is a sin and that you would go to hell. I grew up watching my family and friends and members of the Church strongly believe in these ideas. I watched how they ostracized the members and community and would hear their homophobic comments. I felt really closeted. I had to suppress my true feelings because I knew how I would be treated by the people that I loved. And so, I would say it was really hard and that I did not see any representation in my community, and I felt alone in my feelings.

ZS: When did you come out?

SA: I came out in 2020. So, I was 26 years old at that time, and I was living in Denver, Colorado, away from this environment.

ZS: What was that experience like for you?

SA: It was great. I really needed to get outside of the bubble of where I was raised. And in this like sheltered mindset. And so, being able to move away and be around my own friends and create my own community allowed me the comfortability to truly express myself and then come to terms with my own sexual identity, or the fact that I'm pansexual.

ZS: And what do you feel has been and is the best part about being pansexual?

SA: I think that it just is a clear representation on the fact that I love people for who they are on the inside, and not for their gender, or their sexual preferences or how they identify, but how I connect with them emotionally, as a person.

ZS: Can you talk about some of your experiences at Pride festivals?

SA: Yeah, so I experienced Pride in a little bit while I was living in Australia, which was more like Mardi Gras. And so, it's more like a Gay Pride Festival. And that was really unique and different to see how that obviously Mardi Gras here, and what that represents in our culture and what that represents in Australia. And then I went to Pride festivals in Denver, and in Oakland, California. And it was really beautiful to see such a big turnout and such a great community. At the time, we had not had any Pride events in Acadiana. So that was great. And I was really excited about attending Pride Acadiana. And this was the second year that they did it, and it grew so much. And it was a really special experience to be proud about who I am with others who understand the unique experience of being raised in the South, especially people who were raised Catholic as well.

ZS: And then off of that, what does Pride mean to you? And why do you feel it's important, especially in Acadiana? Or Louisiana in general?

SA: Pride to me is about loving people for who they are, like I said, not by their gender, or their sexual preferences, or how they identify. And I show up as my most authentic self, and I no longer feel the need to worry about other people's opinion about me. I think it's very important to show Pride in Louisiana because of the fact that you don't see it that often. And others who are questioning need to see that we're not alone in our feelings and to normalize LGBTQIA and other queer members to be able to show the community that we aren't going anywhere, and that they won't scare us into the closet any longer.

ZS: And I'm just curious--you mentioned Australia. Can you mention what was going on there and how things were different for you there than they were here?

SA: Oh yeah. So, it was two weeks after I turned 19. And I went to Australia with a one-way ticket and 40 American dollars. And I went as an au pair, so an overseas live-in nanny, and obviously, I knew at the time that I really wanted to leave South Louisiana. That there was more than just this little city that I grew up in, and I kind of chose where's the farthest away that still speaks English on the world, and landed in Australia. And over there, everything's really different, just in the way that people communicate and the way that they dress. There's a lot more women that dress androgynously and gender-neutral. And they have like no makeup on, and their hair will be messy. And there's not any type of judgment there versus here; that’s a big thing. I mean your hair and your makeup as being just as presentable as a Southern woman. That's what is expected of you. And then, like I said, for Mardi Gras in Australia, it's not the Mardi Gras that we have here. It was everything being gay. Like so the ATMs were bedazzled all around and cool things, and it would say "GayTM" all around the city. So that was really fun and unique. And then being able to see such a community come together all to support a bunch of people on floats that were dancing and fun costumes and loud, fun music. And it really allowed for me to see that you don't need to be closeted about your pride and your sexuality, like it was where I grew up. I lived in Australia for 12 months, and then I went to New Zealand for two months in Auckland. And those 14 months changed me for everything about who I am now. And I'm really thankful for that experience.

ZS: How do you feel you changed?

SA: I was able to get out of the bubble of my family and my community in the South and be able to experience the world in a completely different way. I met so many travelers; I probably met more people from around the world than I did of actual Australians. So, this sense of community and understanding that in order for you to know more--you don't know what you don't know, and you have to really put yourself in a position to be able to learn from others in other countries and other relationships and experiences. And I didn't get that type of diversity as I had whenever I was growing up in Lafayette.

ZS: And then kind of transitioning there. Do you see like a difference in the way LGBTQ+ individuals in Louisiana live now versus when you came out?

SA: Absolutely. So though technically I came out three years ago, I've always been questioning and had those feelings inside of me. And because of the fact that I didn't see any representation of people holding hands, or displaying Pride flags or meeting with more allies, I didn't really think that we had any kind of community here and that it was definitely not accepted. And nowadays, obviously now that I'm out, I can spot and see more people that are like me, but I'll go downtown and people are hugging and they're kissing. And there's so many businesses that are willing to be able to support not just in the month of Pride month in June. And so, it's great to see that there's been some growth in it; we have a long way to go. But in the day-to-day life, there's been a lot more representation in our community.

ZS: You mentioned some businesses and stuff... What can you share about your experience in queer spaces in the Acadiana region?

SA: Yeah, I don’t think--there's not that many. I've been to the Whisper Room once and Bolt a few times, and both of them are unique spaces of their own. But they both center around drinking and more of the downtown partying vibe. And though they are like queer-owned and labeled as being queer spaces, a lot of straight people go there. And so, it's not necessarily a safe space where you can feel like nothing bad's gonna end up happening to you, or you can authentically be yourself. So, coming from cities like Oakland and Denver, where there's--especially Oakland--where there's queer spaces around every corner, I think that Lafayette has a long way to go than just like two or three spots.

ZS: What kind of examples have you seen, be it in Australia or New Zealand or Denver, what have you seen that you would like to see here?

SA: Definitely more coffee spots, more third places or like third homes where you don't need to be spending money to be able to hang out there, where there's lots of [queer people], where it's not centered around the party scene, more like day-to-day life and being able to co-work with others. So, I do know that there's Five Mile Eatery, and I believe they're queer-owned, and I love that they label themselves as a sober place. Or also Farm to Table, so the fact that they're locally-sourced, so things that are queer-owned, queer-labeled, and actively being inclusive with their language and their surfaces so that way it accommodates everyone and makes them truly feel safe.

ZS: Now, I'm sure you're familiar with a lot of recent political actions going on. What have been your feelings about that, especially the actions taken against LGBTQ+ people in Louisiana?

SA: I think all of it is absolutely awful. The members of the LGBTQ community are all just people like everyone else. And the government and society shouldn't be trying to control us and how we live our lives. I feel like we're going back in time after we've had so much growth in this movement. And it's sad to see that the next generation is going to lack any of the resources and the support that they need to come out and be safe.

ZS: And also, in your experience, what support have you seen from schools and other educational institutions?

SA: So, for me personally, growing up, I went to Woodvale, LJ Alleman, and Lafayette High--all public schools that are highly rated on the education system and public school standards. However, from my experience, there wasn't really a great representation of queer community, of acceptance, of inclusivity, and support from not only the students, but especially from the staff. There was not a lot of groups that you could be a part of, and if you were, you were still on the outcast in the social norms of school. I've been a career nanny for 13 years, and I'm normally with younger children. But I've worked with children that are in school, and I know that they're probably queer and they obviously are struggling with it, but they don't have the resources, even in school nowadays, to be able to make sure that they can be educated and supported. So, I feel like we haven't made any progress from whenever I've gone to school when I was younger, and what we have right now, which is sad.

ZS: That kind of transitions to the final question. What's your hope for the future of the LGBTQ+ community in Lafayette?

SA: I hope that it grows with pride and with allies and that more queer-owned, safe spaces open up in Lafayette. So, more education about being inclusive and support towards one another, and watching Pride Acadiana grow and gather more attendees. And just have more representation so that--and education that--ally, even if you’re not being allies, but the acceptance and the understanding that we're all people, and we all deserve respect and safety.

ZS: Okay. Was there anything else you wanted to talk about regarding this subject?

SA: Yeah, so I just recently lived a year in California and came back. And during that year, I was able to really dive deep and love myself for who I am and be unapologetically me. And I was already feeling a lot of resistance and being afraid of coming back home, understanding that even though that we've made a lot of growth in the process, our community is still a bit closeted. And being able to connect with other queers in the area, and specifically meeting new ones at Pride Acadiana, it really hit home and helped a little to heal a part of my heart to feel validated and understood by others who, like I said, have the unique experience of being brought up Catholic and in Lafayette. And now I definitely don't feel as alone. And I think that's a really beautiful takeaway. And then one of the main reasons why I love that we're doing this so that way more people can hear everybody's experiences and know that they're not alone in all of it.

ZS: Thank you very much.