Lisa and Traci Sudduth

April 20, 2023

Lafayette, LA

Interviewed by: Gabrielle Hoffpauir-Rosatto

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Ethnographic Preface:

As part of the ongoing LGBTQ+ Archives Project, Special Collections of Edith Garland Dupré Library and the Guilbeau Center for Public History are collecting oral histories documenting the region’s LGBTQ+ community. Undergraduate Research Assistant Gabrielle Hoffpauir-Rosatto, with the help of Head of Special Collections Zack Stein, met with wives Lisa and Traci Sudduth about their experiences growing up LGBTQ+ in southwest Louisiana and pursuits in education.

TRANSCRIPTION

Interviewer 1 initials: [ZS]

Interviewer 2 initials: [GH]

Interviewee 1 initials: [LS]

Interviewee 2 initials: [TS]

ZS: This is an oral history as part of our LGBTQ+ Archives project. My name is Zack Stein; I am the Head of Special Collections. So basically, this oral history will be made available for researchers, and the idea is to make the recording and the transcript available for research on an unrestricted basis, and we would like to put it up on our website and perhaps the Louisiana Digital Library and our institutional repository. This will be a part of a collection of other oral histories based on this project. So, Gabby will be asking you some questions. You have every right to, if you don't feel comfortable about a particular question, you don't need to answer it. If you want to end the interview, you may do that as well.

TS: Will it be edited?

ZS: No, we're just going to be …

TS: Roll flat out.

ZS: … Yeah, just like that. Now, if there are certain parts that you wish to be edited, we can certainly work with that. Once this is done, and once we transcribed the interview, we will send you a copy, and we'll give you the opportunity to look it over. So, if there's anything that might be inaccurate or whatever, you can correct that. If there's any part of the interview that you don't wish to be there, we can also work with that as well. So, if both of you wouldn't mind giving your consent to the interview, we can get started.

LS: Yes.

TS: Yeah!

GH: Okay, today is Thursday (I was about to say January) Thursday, April 20, 2023. We are with Ms. Lisa and Traci Sudduth. So I'm going to start off by asking you to describe what it was like growing up LGBTQ+ in Southwest Louisiana. I'll let you [Lisa] start.

LS: So, I grew up in the ‘70s and the ‘80s. I was here—from ‘81 to ’85 at UL—or USL at the time, and then later [I got] my graduate degree from here as well—my master's. And during that time, literally, I purchased a rainbow sticker and put it on the back of my little Pontiac T-1000, and thought a rainbow was just a rainbow. And I grew up where within my family dynamic, you knew that to be gay was not an acceptable behavior. My dad would use slang words that would indicate that clearly there was something not okay with this. And I was a tomboy, right, and pretty athletic and did all things that revolved around sports. I went to a very small school through middle school to ninth grade. And my first indication that there was something not okay with being gay was I went into a West Brothers Department Store with my mother to buy a flannel shirt, just like all of the other girls on the basketball team—none of whom that we knew at the time were gay. Subsequently, I do know one who is, but anyway, I digress. So, I was looking through the flannel shirts and found the one that I liked. And I brought it over to my mom. And I showed her, and she looked at me and she said, “That is a man's shirt. What do you want, your friends to think you're a homosexual?” And I was in the eighth grade—twelve, well thirteen fourteen—and I don't think I even knew what the word “homosexual” meant. But I got the message loud and clear right there that day that this was not something that was acceptable behavior. And then, I really don't think that I've thought too much about it overall because they did a very good job of letting you know that this type of behavior is not okay. Slang phrases like “Oh, so-and-so, you know she's queer as a 3-dollar bill,” and that kind of thing. So, that's kind of my experience through that aspect of my life. And then, I remember reading a book, probably after college before my master's degree, where I was reading about latent homosexuality and that kind of thing, and I thought, “That's kind of interesting.” And had my first experience after a night of drinking margaritas with a friend [laughs]. And I still thought, that's probably not quite the right thing. But I knew at that point that tequila is very enlightening at times, you know. I was gonna say alcohol in general really takes all of the inhibitions away, and the truth about life frequently can be revealed with that libation [laughs], shall we say. The only other encounter I had was as a grad student. I was a, Guidance and Counseling was my major for my master's degree. And I was in a group, and we were having a great deal of conflict within our group, which was actually what needed to happen within the group. But she gave us this little project, and it was to make a box that shows the outside of who you are and have the inside of the box show the inside of who you are. So, I'm kind of a type-A personality—I don't know if that label still exists—but you know, the teacher said, “Do this.” So, I was trying to be as true to the assignment as I could. So my outside matched what I thought people saw of my outside, my inside revealed what I thought of my inside, but I put a box within the box. And I wrote a little message on that, which at the time, I was 25ish, I guess, and I wrote in that little secret box that what I wanted was the white picket fence and the 2.5 children and blah, blah, blah. But I didn't think that's what people thought of me. And so I took my little box, and we went to share our little box, and I shared everything about the box. And then I foolishly kind of pulled out the little inner box and said, “This is one little piece of me that I'm not willing to share.” And a girl that I recognized I thought … because there's a reason that stereotypes are stereotypes—I was pretty sure that I thought that she was gay, and I found out later that she was. Well, she thought that my secret was not that I wanted 2.5 children or white picket fence [GH coughs], a little puppy dog, and a husband, but that my little box was that I wouldn't talk about was that I was gay. And she became irate in the midst of this thing. And I didn't reveal what was in the little box until we got to the end of the course. And the professor said that we needed to bring something to share with the class that described our experience. So I felt personally that I had grown enough with the little group that I was in, that I symbolically gave them my box, and I opened it and I revealed it. Well, that made her [laughs] even more [GH coughs] frustrated because I think she probably recognized in me the same thing that I recognized in her. But I still, I hadn't had my tequila experience yet. So that's kind of what it was like growing up. I was a bit oblivious, in part because I think my parents did a good job of conditioning me to believe that that's not acceptable behavior. And then, as about a 30-year-old, I started to put the pieces together but literally, did not literally come out of the closet to my parents until I was 58, which was a couple of months ago. There you go. I've been out to other family members and friends since I was 30. And I'm 59.

TS: I guess that means it's my turn. I think that I, not I think, I know that I always knew that I was gay. From being a young kid. Probably TMI, but growing up we used to go to this guy's house that lived across the street. We were latchkey kids, you know. And so, if my mom was going to be exceptionally late, we would go to Toby's house across the street, and he was my brother's age. And one day, I’m meandering around the house, and I go into Toby's restroom. His parents allowed him to have lots and lots of magazines that were not okay for young boys to you know. Anyway, I found his stash of magazines. And I can remember being probably 10 years old sitting at Toby's house ravaging through these magazines, just so entranced by what I knew I could never be entranced by. And so, I always thought there was something kind of wrong with me. Like, I didn't know what the deal was; there was no word for it. But I knew what I was attracted to and what I wasn’t. And definitely, those magazines did it as a young kid. But my family was very, very Catholic. And so we were told from very early on that that was—much like your [Lisa’s] upbringing—that was not going to be acceptable. So, I became very good friends in high school with a young lady whose name is Monique. And we're gonna call her “Mo” because that's what she went by. Everyone kind of knew she was a tomboy, she played softball. I was a dancer; I was not the quintessential, I had long black hair and wore lots of red lipstick and did pointe and tap and hip hop [laughs]. And so, I was kind of a girly girl and always have been. So, Mo and I became best of friends. We were just inseparable. And I always had boyfriends because my parents were always rigid about “This is an acceptable life. This isn't an acceptable life.” And so, when I was a freshman in college, I broke up with my high school boyfriend. And I was reading a copy, I don't know how I got it, but someone gave me a copy of *Rubyfruit Jungle* by Rita Mae Brown, and I had it in the back of my car. And I picked Mo up one day, and we were gonna go out near the Bulldog or something. And she looks in the back of my car, and she says, “What is it?” And I just kind of snickered, you know, I was like, “It's a gay book.” And she was like, “Really?” And I said, “Yeah.” She was like, “Well, I'd like to read that book.” And I was like, “Well, I'm not done with it, chief. Like, this is not gonna happen. You’re gonna have to wait until I'm done.” And she was like, “Okay.” And then she reached over, and she grabbed my hand, and she said, “I've wanted to do this for a really long time.” And my insides just went “bluah”, like every bit of hair on my body stood up, and I didn't know what in the world to do with that information. And from that moment on, Mo and I became just … I mean, we went out. I would steal my daddy's Levi's and his white V-neck T-shirts, and I had some combat boots that I would keep at Mo’s house because my mother would never let me wear boy clothes. And so I'd have my stash, and we used to go out to … it was Images at the time—it was a nightclub. And Mo and I would go out, and then I would stay in her dorm after, and all the dorm people would tell her, “You can't come in; boys aren't allowed after whatever time.” They thought I was the girl in the girl's dorm, and she was a boy. And we had lots and lots of fun. And then our parents found out about it. And we were each other's first partners. And she proposed to me—we were just talking about this—underneath the oak trees behind between Griffin and the Library; we just passed by, and I was like, “Oh my gosh, this is crazy that this is happening here.” And so her parents found out about it. And my parents found out about it, and they had a coup. And suddenly Mo, who was the, I think she was the president of our student class in New Iberia, fell off the face of the planet. Her parents enrolled her, I think in Alabama somewhere they lived … Tillman's Creek, what's that place? It was the Tillman’s Creek exit. Mobile! Her family lived in Mobile, Alabama; they had transferred her or something. And so, they transferred with her, and they never allowed us to see each other again. And to this day, we have reunions, and everyone's like, “Anyone know where Mo's at?” No one has heard from her. So we have no idea. But that was our first little story. Anyway, so it was all our own big secret because in a little town—even when I really came out, my mom said, “If you're going to be this way, I need you to not live here.” And to this day, like [she says], “I'm going to ask you to not put it on your Facebook,” and like she wants it to just be a secret. And she introduces Lisa to people as my friend, you know and the story is that in the flood[[1]](#footnote-1), my house had a whole lot of damage, and so I had to move in…

LS: The Great Flood of 2016 caused her to rent a room at my house.

TS: Right. And so, here we are. I'm sure people are asking why I'm still renting that room. But you know, whatever. Anyway, and so part of my family's reaction to them finding out about Mo is that I said, “Okay, I'm not going to live that life; I'm not going to embarrass you. I'm not going to do all the things.” My mom suffers from a lot of mental illness, and it kind of perpetuated her into just this really awful spiral of depression. And she did not react well. It was a hot mess. So I said, “Okay, so I'm gonna be straight.” So I attempted to live the straight life; I got married. I thought that, certainly if I got married to a guy, then I was going to be straight, and not this big gay-wad that they thought I was, that they hated because of that. And then that didn't work out very well for me. So I had a kid, thinking that that would fix it. And that still didn't fix it. And so I had a second kid. And so my marriage lasted two and a half years, and I had two kids in that time. And by the time my youngest was six weeks old, I was divorced—or separated, because it takes a little while for that process to happen. And I moved in with another lady. And so, at that point, my parents didn't speak to me for 11 years. And they do now, but out of necessity, I think [laughs].

LS: As long as we are within the family structure, they're perfectly okay with the two of us being together.

TS: Yeah, they love Lisa because Lisa is very safe. And she is equally, not closeted, but we don't walk around waving Pride flags. They would be absolutely appalled, knowing that we were doing this because this is on the record. And we [whispers] said the word “gay.”

LS: Scandalous.

TS: Scandalous, right. Absolutely.

LS: Literally, my mother, from the time she told me that as a young teenage girl, she said the other day—when I did get outed at the ripe old age of 58—she did say, “I knew you'd always wanted to be a boy,” which really speaks to that generation. And I genuinely feel like, out of respect for my parents, I really did not say anything. I lived my life, but I didn't feel the need—I’m not a flag waver. I mean, I am who I am, and it doesn't take a genius to figure out who I like or don't like or what have you. But I'm not waving flags and anything, and so my mother could live in that world where she believed that I couldn't possibly be gay. My grandmother once asked me if the person that I was emotionally intimate with, I'll say—we were not really physically intimate, although our tequila did allow for some physical intimacy at one point—but we were more emotionally intimate than anything else. My grandmother called the house, and she [my mother] answered the telephone. It’s seven o'clock in the morning. And then the next time I saw my grandmother, she said, “Is that girl gay?” Which I thought was an interesting way to kind of put out feelers as to whether I was or not, you know. But she too, made it clear when I was growing up. We were in a little restaurant, I was 21, and I had just driven her to and from her daughter's house in Louisville, Kentucky. And we were sitting in this little restaurant in Hattiesburg, Mississippi. And she looked over at this table and she spied these two ladies that she knew from her little town in Louisiana. And she said, “See those ladies over there? They're queer as a 3-dollar bill.” So that was a very popular phrase for what was taboo, I suppose. And really, I've lived my life. Like Traci said, I think I’ve always known, but when I think back, I remember encountering, and it sounds funny because I remember being in first grade and encountering a young female teacher and literally having little butterflies and not knowing why I had little butterflies, but I was incredibly attracted to this older teacher. And I’m a first-grader and I'm thinking, “That is so weird,” but I didn't have any idea what that was. And that continued to happen to me throughout my life; I would always be drawn to women. And my thought would be not “I want to know this person intimately.” That wasn't ever a thought, I think because I did have very good parental conditioning. But my thought was always, “I really feel like I need to know this person.” And those people that I needed to know were always women, which is how I always knew. But you're young; you don't have words for that, especially during the ‘70s and the ‘80s. Like I said, they did a very good job with conditioning to make sure that you didn't you know … “We can't have that in our family,” you know that kind of thing.

GH: So did y'all both grow up in Lafayette, or where'd you grow up?

TS: I grew up in New Iberia.

GH: New Iberia, okay.

LS: Franklin, even smaller.

TS: From the parish [laughs].

LS: I do know lots of people now who are my age who have come out. And the funny thing is you know even as kids, like I knew they, you know that proverbial “gaydar” that people talk about? Like I knew, even when we were 8 and 10 running around together that this guy was gay and this girl was gay. I think I did know the word, but I didn't know it for myself. Because my parents were good about the conditioning part [laughs].

TS: It's funny, because the majority of the guys that I dated in high school have now come out. Like I dated four guys in high school; three of them have come out and now have husbands. So, my mom says that I've changed them, and it's my fault. It's also my fault that Lisa's gay, because I'm just that good. I'm talented.

LS: She’s got the power.

TS: I just turn all the people you know. But when we were little, my mom said I had “stray dog syndrome,” which is probably not politically correct. But she said every little girl that was in my class who had a traumatic upbringing became my best friend. And so, she always threw that out as why I befriended girls who potentially looked like they might be gay later on in life. And so she’d always use their trauma as the reason for why they might be like that, and “You don't have that trauma. And therefore, you're not that way.” She always conditioned us, as being gay was a trauma response, and not just who you are.

LS: I think that was the thing of the time, though, because I do remember one other—I’m gonna call her an older girl—who was very much into basketball. And she went to college and came back as a coach. And there were all the signs. And someone said, “Well, you know, either she had been attacked or molested or …” and therefore, that's why she was afraid of men and she was in a relationship with a woman. And I remember thinking, “Well, that's kind of weird, but couldn't she just you know?” I think that was the thinking of the time for a lot of parents.

TS: Right. I was gonna springboard from that. In that time period, that was the thought because there was this movie that came out called, *But I'm a Cheerleader.* And it was ‘90s, 2000s, you know, early, like… I think really ‘90s. But the whole idea is these gay kids get sent to a camp to “un-gay” them. And the first part of it was, they had to find their roots and the roots were why you were gay, or like, what traumatic experience did you have? And so I'm pretty sure the writers of that were our age and maybe experienced that same, “We're gonna find out why this happened, so that we can un-gay you.” You know, that whole train of thought.

GH: Do you think there's a reason why your parents’ generation feels that way, that it's a trauma response?

TS: I think that my parents think it's because they screwed up parenting me. They think of this as a mistake or a trauma response. But my parents also won't own any trauma that they may have caused in the same breath, so I don't know why.

LS: I think my mother's first response, had I not been 58 at the time and she was 86 at the time, probably would have been, “Oh, what did I do wrong?” As though somehow it was a parenting problem, as opposed to this is just who I am. I think now to an extent, as I said, she says, “Well, I knew you always wanted to be a boy,” which I said I think that she totally misses the whole boat. But I think that that was her way of thinking of that at the time. But, most definitely, had she been a little more cognitively sound than she currently is, I think she probably would have said, “How did I fail you as a parent?” Because they thought it was about them, as opposed to it's about me. This doesn't have anything to do with anybody or anything else; it is just simply who I am. As I said, I think I've always known that but for a very long time, they allowed me to keep it suppressed, or they enabled me or conditioned me to keep it suppressed. And even getting to college didn't really … I mean I did have the cute little rainbow sticker, but I genuinely really naively still believed that it was just a rainbow that I have on the back of my car. And it was simply that, and it wasn't something that had been co-opted by the gays to tell people, or putting your bandana on the rearview mirror as a signal that you are, like, I had no idea about that.

TS: Did you have a carabiner? [Laughs]

LS: No, I did not. But I must have been the quintessential gay who was so naive that she didn't know that she was because I was doing all of those kinds of things. It was funny. I mean, I think it was kind of funny, kind of cute.

TS: We were stealthy. I had a big sign across the back of my car that said YAGA at the time, and that was the Young American Gay Association. But no one knew that’s what it was.

LS: I had that keychain.

TS: Did you? [Laughs]

LS: I thought YAGA was just YAGA.

TS: YAGA was Young American Gay Association, or at least that's what we were told.

LS: I still have that keychain.

TS: Do you?

LS: Yes, it’s the one that has the house key on it.

TS: Oh, funny times!

LS: I’ll have to look at it. That’s funny.

TS: I bought a rainbow sticker for my watch, but I told my parents it was because I went to this Catholic retreat, and I did, called … oh goodness, what was it called? I don't know, but the theme of it was De Colores, and so it was a Catholic …

LS: … The Cursillo?

TS: The Cursillo, that's the one. Yes.

LS: I’m not Catholic, so.

TS: So, I attended a Cursillo. And I told them that I was wearing the rainbow sticker to remind me of all that I had learned about all the beautiful colors of Catholicism. And so I kept that on my watch.

LS: Ouch.

TS: I know, gosh, that's horrible, but oops. But at the Catholic Center here—at the Wisdom Center—people would ask, “Why do you have that rainbow on?” and I'd be like, “De Colores.” [points with three clicking sounds] Like, we were not coming out to the people here. Oh, it was scary.

GH: Onto the next question. How much do you think the environment, particularly being from Southwest Louisiana, affected people coming out in your day, like at the time?

LS: I think it probably impacted it a lot. Because I think there was a lot of, I'm gonna call it “fire and brimstone.” You know, this is a surefire ticket to hell if you do this because the Bible says [spreads hands out on table], so the Bible has spoken. And, you know, I think it probably did do that.

TS: I think every parent's aspiration growing up in that day and age was that your kid would have a doublewide in your backyard. And so, you kept things secret that were secret. And so, I think that it made people fearful of coming out because it's not like you can move to New York and come out there, and your family not know anything about it. That was before any kind of social media existed, and so, no one would have found out if you would have moved away, but your parents kept you there. They wanted you in their backyard, they wanted you with them. You went to Mawmaw's house every Sunday. And so if everybody was there, then the idea was that they were going to keep you scared of being who you are.

LS: I think they wanted convention.

TS: Yes.

LS: They wanted a conventional life for you. And if you are going to be gay, that's not conventional. You're not having the 2.5 children and the white picket fence that I said in my little box that I thought I wanted. You're going against the tide, and I think that was scary for them, and even growing up for me, I don't think that I thought it was scary, but I think I felt like it would disappoint my parents. So, for the longest time, I just lived a life of solitude. But I mean, college is that experience so that you have, like I was so relieved when as a 17-18 year old reading in a psych book about the word “androgyny,” and I thought, “Well, I haven't been a tomboy all my life. I've just been androgynous.” It was just fascinating to me that there was this whole world that knew all about this, but hey, in my little community of Franklin, Louisiana, people didn't talk about that kind of stuff. “Oh, you're a tomboy, you are this”; there's a label for everything and try to make sure you have the right labels on.

GH: Describe the cultural environment, both friendly and hostile attitudes toward LGBTQ+ individuals at the time.

LS: Well, I've said, it was very obvious that “queer as a 3-dollar bill” was not okay. And even my 13-14 year old self knew that, “Hey, if that shirt buttons opposite way, people are gonna think you're a homosexual.” That was pretty clear that that's not acceptable behavior.

TS: My mom didn't want to let me play softball in high school, because people might have thought that I was gay. I think she put me in ballet because she knew when I was young, that that was going to be a thing. I remember people absolutely, we had a transgender guy in high school. He was a couple of years older than me; his name was Woody. And they really struggled with Woody and his identity. He was just ostracized completely. I think there were many fights in the boys’ bathroom. But when he came back to school, I remember feeling just this like, “Yeah, he did it to ‘em; he stuck it to the man!” He showed up to pick his yearbook up the year after he graduated in fishnet stockings and Daisy Duke shorts, and a tube top, and he was just like “heeyy!”, and it was just fabulous. Like, inside, I was like, “Get it, get it, get it!” And it just made me very happy. But for those kids, we had one girl that I'm almost positive was and was having relationships at the time, and people just ridiculed her. So I mean, we were afraid of our parents, but we were also afraid of how other, because otherness was not a thing when we were growing up; if you were “other,” then you were a target.

LS: Oh yeah, because even all the girls on the basketball team—all of us who are very athletic and very sports minded, and everything—everybody, probably except for me, had a boyfriend. Actually, I had a date to the homecoming I guess, and showed up in conventional, you know bought your long dress, did all the things that you were supposed to do, and all those things. And there's an 11-year gap between the two of us, so mine was even a little more austere; it was like, nobody's gonna say anything about this at all.

TS: I think it's almost shameful for our parents, whereas now, my daughters are members of the LGBTQ community, and it's nothing for me to talk about them or their partners. I've kind of prided myself in the fact that all of their friends come over and have since they were in middle school, and they were like, “Your mom is so accepting,” and it was a kind of a safe place for them to all come and be themselves. But it wasn't that way when we were growing up.

LS: Or even kids today who are coming out who have parents that are roughly my age—so mid-50s, maybe to 60. For those parents, it’ still, many of them struggle with this. They're not as open; the kids are all good with it. My nieces and nephew could not care less. They love her [Traci] as much as they love anyone else in the family and have since day one. It's never an issue for the youth. I have two sisters, one who's 56 and one who's almost 50. And the 50-year-old who has the children has some concerns when the kids are little because she doesn't know how the kids will handle it, and the kids never miss a beat. And then the one who's closer to me in age, she had a lot of that same good parental conditioning, so she also absorbed that, and she struggled with my identity for a while. If I felt the need to have a conversation with her, she didn't really want to talk about that, like she just wanted to shove that in that little box. She wanted that little inner box, and she wanted to stick that all back in the little inner box that I was talking about. She didn't really want to. Now, they're much better about it to an extent, but there are still little quirks that they're not, you know happy with.

GH: What do you think causes that generational difference? Like with young kids being so much more accepting and the older generation? What do you think is the big difference?

LS: My gut says that a lot of it is when we were growing up, you had three television stations, and you had a lot of commonality around life experiences. Like you would go to school, “Oh, did you watch the show last night?” “Oh, we watched that show, too.” And you would talk about those things. And there were lots of similar experiences, because the media that you saw was so nominal; literally Franklin, Louisiana, had three whole channels. Two, most days—the third one came in if the winds were just right, and the station could come in clearly. But today, kids have access to any and everything on demand, and they read voraciously—not that we didn't, but also, like I didn’t, it sounds silly, I didn't have any idea there was gay literature until 10 years ago when I met Traci, and she shared some of these authors with me. And I was reading this and I'm like, “Oh, my goodness, where's this been all my life?” You know, other than that, you had to read, I mean I thought you read just the conventional …

TS: … We never saw us in a book growing up… or on TV. There was no *Grey's Anatomy* or anything. There weren't gay characters, other than *Tootsie*, and that wasn't really gay. That was you know…

LS: Right. I remember some of the female athletes, tennis players coming out and the scandal that that was. The palimony—like I really am dating myself—the palimony suit that was filed whatever year that was between Billie Jean King and her assistant—you know, her “assistant.” And that was a big thing. And then, I remember listening to Billie Jean talk about how she had married and then I guess also had this affair of sorts with her assistant at the time. I'm guessing that's what it was because of the palimony suit. And then she talked about her own evolution where she was heterosexual, and then she was bisexual, and now she is homosexual. And that kind of evolution over her 70+ years of life. I think there is a lot of that, and I think it is probably because the world seemingly is so much more open now. On any given day, I start to think that we are not even open, but we have been transported back about 100 years to the Dark Ages, where everybody wants you to go back to your little corner and keep your mouth shut. But I think that's probably why, because you just didn't have the exposure, if you will, and the progressiveness of life that we sometimes seem to have today, depending on what you're watching [laughs a little] and intaking.

TS: There were no commercials …

LS: … Goodness no.

TS: …commercials of these people, female and female and male and male getting married. There was none of that.

LS: As I said, I remember the big Billie Jean scandal, and the palimony thing, thinking, “How did that happen?”

TS: “What do you mean?”

LS: “What do you mean? She had a girlfriend on the side, what?” All those little things that also cause you to sit up and go, “What does that also trigger in me and make me feel?” Trigger has such a nasty connotation now, but “what does it make me feel?”

GH: Do you think there's a difference in attitude towards LGBTQ+ women than men in the time?

TS: Yes.

LS: At the time? I think so. I think in part because for many guys, they had a very—this is definitely stereotyping, I'm probably showing my own age—but I think they had a much more difficult time hiding who they were, and it was more acceptable for a girl to be a tomboy than for a guy to be gay.

TS: And even with older people, it was totally acceptable for you to be… What do they call them? An old spinster woman who lived alone. And people just didn't talk about your things. But then the AIDS epidemic made things crazy for the male population, because if you looked gay, people assumed that you were HIV-positive. And that became a whole different negative. I think there was more of a stigma with the AIDS epidemic that people would assume that a guy would get AIDS and not a female.

LS: I do think, I know it sounds funny using the labels, but I think it was more acceptable to be a tomboy than it was for a guy to look like he was a sissy.

TS: Yeah, right.

LS: And a girl was also to an extent showing traits that are more acceptable, because you're showing if you're an athlete, and you're good at what you're doing, you're strong, you're confident, you're maybe dominating in a sport or whatever. But a guy who is a sissy--what's he doing? He's being weak like a woman, that kind of thing. There's all that weird dynamic that happens with that. So, yes, I definitely think it was much more difficult for a guy if they were, in fact, the guy that I was thinking about that I know, subsequently, who has a husband, and I remember, it sounds silly, but I remember watching him run, and I thought, “Oh, goodness, he runs like a girl!” in my head. But his dad was a state trooper. And so as he grew up, he was a state trooper. And then later I saw he was no longer a state trooper, I think he does some sort of design or something. So, I mean, he went ultra-masculine as a police officer and that kind of thing…

TS: I think today too, though, I think people when you speak to just in general, I teach middle school and so I’ll overhear conversations about we have several young ladies who identify as gay now, or are even trans, and the boys typically say, “I don't really have a problem with girls kissing girls; I have a problem with boys kissing boys.” And I don't know what that's about. But it seems to be more like, straight guys kind of think it's hot for girls to kiss. But straight girls don't think it's hot for boys to kiss. I don't know what that is. But that is a social …

LS: Well, I was gonna say, because the guy can impose himself in that thing. And he can see, “Oh, wouldn't that be fun,” but a female is never going to look because a guy who is more effeminate is feminine. And that's not the …

TS: Yeah, stereotypically …

LS: … Dominating.

TS: Right. Stereotypically, that’s not what you want.

LS: Right, you don't want a weak woman. So, you certainly don't want a weak man.

GH: Yeah, that makes sense.

LS: I mean, it probably doesn't make sense, but I think that’s kind of …

TS: Know that this is a disclaimer, we're talking about what we think other people think. This is not our like you know [laughs a little].

LS: Yes, our perception of …

TS: … of stereotypes, right.

GH: So, were you involved in any—well, I guess I probably know the answer—any LGBTQ+ community initiatives or any that you're familiar with?

TS: When I was in college, I was in GALA. And we would meet in the conference center, and we would always have people from the gay-affirming Christian churches come to talk to us, and they thought that it was the craziest thing. I don't remember the lady's name, but she was a pastor—which was crazy because I was Catholic and that was not a thing. But they wore rainbow, the collar what is it called, the vestment, they wore a rainbow vestment and I thought that was the bomb dot com. And so I had a little coin from GALA. And I think one year actually I even took a picture with the GALA club in a USL yearbook. I don't know; I'll have to go through one. I seem to remember taking a picture with them. But we really didn't do anything. Like now, kids protest and all that stuff; we were very quiet. We were not out and about and proud group; we would meet in a secret corner in the convention center and that was it. But that's the extent of it. Our church has an ALLIES group, but we really don't participate. As a seasoned couple—I’m not going to call us older—we have a lot of life happening. We have two kids who are in college, and our parents are elderly, and so, we don't have a whole lot of time investment to spend doing a lot of that. It's just not a part of who we are. We just live. I mean, if I were a man, or Lisa were a man, our lives would look just like it does now. Our life isn't different because we're gay, for sure. It's very small part of who both of us are, I think.

GH: So, you are both educators, correct?

TS: Yes.

LS: Yes.

GH: What inspired you to pursue education?

LS: So, I think I do vaguely remember reading in your question something about, “Did being gay alter your life plan?” And as a kid, I was very athletic; I enjoyed all those things. And I really did want to be the quintessential basketball coach. But I had gotten to high school, and you know the slang phrases used by family members. And I've always had short hair, and I matched up every stereotype of every gay female ever presented right at that point that I knew. And so, what I really wanted to be was a basketball coach, but I decided that I couldn't do that because people would know [laughs]. And I would have to figure out how to navigate that. So, I did the next best thing. But I always felt like, I come from a family of educators; my dad has 10 cousins within their family structure and eight of the 10 cousins are all educators. So, a long line of family educators; it's really the only thing, other than for a brief period, I thought I wanted to be a vet. And then I read James Herriot novels about assisting a cow to deliver their calf. And there's something about having your arm up to your shoulder, and I was like, “Oh, I can't do that.” So, I decided that, even though I wasn't going to pursue the whole “I want to be a basketball coach” realm through college, I still wanted to work with children because I really felt like—and I kind of try to live by, “To whom much is given, much is expected.” And I felt like I had a lot that I could share with kids just in general. Like, I was smart enough to do X, but I really wanted to do this—I really wanted to teach, I wanted to show up in a classroom and be a brain that functioned and not some of what I was—that sounds like a bad endorse-, not an endorsement but a bad commentary on education at the time—but I didn't have the greatest of all experiences in high school, especially about teachers seeming to teach and really care. I think it was a byproduct of the late ‘70s, the early ‘80s, and there was a lot of craziness that went on at that time. And I just felt like I could be a good person who was smart and capable, and instead of being an engineer or a doctor or this, I can share my knowledge of math or social studies or whatever it was with kids. So, that's how I became an educator. And then subsequently, as life evolved, I kept being drawn back to my love of sports. And I did actually, I coached the basketball team, but I did it as the math teacher or I did it as the social studies teacher. And so, I wasn’t the…

TS: You weren’t the P. E. coach.

LS: … [sarcastically] I wasn't the *homosexual* coach, you know, who's in the locker room looking around and lurking at all the 13-year-olds because, you know, that's what we do.

TS: That’s what people thought.

LS: And I mean, that sarcastically.

GH: No, right.

TS: Just like the heterosexual women are doing that, right? No, no one's doing that. You want them in the locker room, out of the locker room, and let's go and that's the extent of what you're doing. There's nothing else going on there.

TS: I always wanted to be a teacher. When I was a little kid, I'd have all my baby dolls lined up, and I made fake report cards in my novels that I didn't want to read. And I had report cards and roll books written over novels that my mom purchased for me as a little kid. I didn't know what I wanted to teach until I got to high school and I met Miss Louviere, Jocelyn Louviere. And she introduced me to poetry and man that was some crazy stuff. I learned about language and creative writing, and that words could do amazing things. And I always wanted to be—we called her Groovy Louvy—I wanted to be the Groovy Louvy for all the little kids that I would teach. And so, I did. I've taught English forever. I started out at Northside High School, and I got a job there coaching softball. So, I taught English half the day, and I coached softball half the day. But before I got my job, the volleyball girls were in the gym. And so, I signed on with them. And I was moving my stuff into the coach's office there. And I had a big “Dyke” written across the door, because the coach before me was a man and so they didn't know what to do with a female coach.

LS: That’s right; that was the other slang phrase that was … You don’t want people to think you're a dyke. What is a dyke? Isn’t that the thing that holds back the water?

TS: Yeah, what is that? And so that was my first, I got a job finally teaching English, but I took the position as a softball coach as well. And that's what came of that. You know, whatever.

LS: I think it was in my blood. Somewhere along the line, I've always wanted to do that. But I always thought it was important to be able to give back, and as cheesy as that sounds, that's kind of why. I did my 33 years, and I'm out of there.

GH: Were there any stigmas whenever you began teaching about being a teacher identifying as LGBTQ+?

TS: Oh yeah [laughs].

LS: Oh, I hid that for the longest time. Like my first year, I went out and I bought all the cute little plaid skirts [TS laughs]; people would really laugh now. The cute little plaid skirts and the little white shirt with the pop collar. And the cute little multicolored vest and everything. I was the quintessential girl-next-door, minus the fact that I had super short hair. And then I ran with a crowd who when I looked around, I thought, “Ooh, these are women that I want to know” [laughs]. I have a picture of a friend; we were out at a pool, and I really did believe that we were really just friends, and we were just friends. But I didn't realize until later, when I had my epiphany, how much I really was drawn to her. Like I took a picture of her out of the pool in her great little black bikini, and it's just like a friend, but man, she was a good-looking friend who I just had to know. We spent all of our time together riding bikes and everything. And I would be the third wheel with her and her boyfriend who subsequently became her husband and that kind of thing. Where are we going with this? [laughs]

TS: Stigmas as teachers.

LS: Oh, stigmas, yes. Like I didn't wear slacks quote unquote, until I think the second year and then, when I transferred to Lafayette Parish, I still wore skirts and blouses for the longest time. Like I'm sure if some of my friends went back and looked at old yearbooks, they would be like, “Wait, is that you?” looking at it, because you tried to dress the part, because of course you can hide that in that elaborate costume, no one will think. As I said, my mother would have a fit because Heaven help you if that shirt buttons the opposite way. My mother would examine every single shirt that I owned to see whether it buttoned the right way or not. Like what the heck? And then there was a lady that taught down the hall from me, who is absolutely fabulous. And she always wore a very tailored men's shirt because the sleeves were longer, which is really a problem; women's shirt sleeves are always too short and you put your arms out when you're tall and it's like this, but my mother always thought ironically that it had something to do with me being queer or gay [laughs a little].

TS: I know that, as far as stigmas concerned, when I first started teaching—and I was out at the time; it was after I was married—I was warned that there was a teacher at another school who had been fired because her classroom was in an upstairs building, and there was no faculty bathroom upstairs. And I don't know if you know about how teachers do things, but when we have to go to the little girl's room, we have to run to a faculty bathroom and then run all the way back. And there wasn't one, and she had an emergency. And so, she went into the girls’ restroom, and she was [quoting with fingers] out, or people suspected that she might have been gay, and she was actually fired for going into a student restroom because what would people think? And so …

LS: Predatory behavior.

TS: Right. They assumed that if you were a lesbian and you were teaching, that you were a predator. And so, there was always, I didn’t come out as an educator until, goodness …

LS: Not as an educator. Came out as an…

TS: No, came out as being gay while being an educator. And I mean, still today, I don't have a picture of my wife and I in my classroom. If people ask, I don't hide it, I do go by Mrs. Sudduth, but we got married last year, and I didn't change my name until this year, so that in the middle of the year, it wouldn't be any kind of an issue. But there are stories and whether they are true or not, I don't know, or if it was just people saying, you know, “You have to be very careful,” because of their own preconceived notions of what may or may not happen. But we knew that it was not okay to come out as an educator, while being an educator, I guess.

LS: I think for me, it just kind of happened organically. It really wasn’t, I mean, I didn't have to wave any flag or tell anybody. If the issue ever came up in class, like, I'm gonna say I was type-A personality: “We're not talking about that today; today we're supposed to be factoring these polynomials. So that polynomial has nothing to do with my personal life. Here we go.” And I was just all about the business, right. But kids know, and they didn't care. So, I didn't need to make any statement. I feel like that line from that movie, “We're not making statements about making statements.” I didn't need to make any statements; I just went about living my life. It's kind of the same thing I said, I don't really feel the need to wave a flag or anything; I'm just going to live my life organically. People are going to know who we are, and that to me is the best way to do it. Because then, people who might be offended, maybe they're not because I'm not preachy or waving any flag. I do feel it's important if someone has an opposing view, I don't want them to feel uncomfortable with something that I feel okay with. So, I'm not going to be in your face about it, or anything like that. You do you, and I'm going to do me. And we're going to live by example, which I think is the best way to do it. And every administrator that I've ever had—well not everyone—by the time we got to a certain point somewhere around—this sounds silly—but somewhere around 2008, because before that, I did encounter some administrators who had a problem with it. Not that they personally had a problem with it. But things got said, and they had to react to it and then they didn't like having to do that. Because much like what I said, they knew me for who I was. And it didn't bother them, but it bothered other people. So I digress. But somewhere around 2008, when I moved to a new school, that administrative team really knew me. They didn't know anything about my personal life; they just got to know me over time. And they knew Traci, and they got to know her over time. And then one day, they put two and two together, and they knew us. And they could care less. They don't care. I mean, they now recognize her as Mrs. Sudduth. And they know how she's Mrs. Sudduth, and they don't care. You know, they don't care in a negative way anyway.

TS: When the girls would have sleepovers, I've never put the business out there. Like you said, it just wasn't a place to do that, but when our kids were in middle school, and we taught middle school, like my niece was in Lisa's class when we first got together, and then Lisa came to Easter and that was like, “Oh, what?” My kids came to the schools that I taught at, and so they would have friends sleep over. And we [referring to Traci and Lisa] were together.

LS: So just very organic.

TS: Yeah, we never had a moment where we like came out as being gay. But it happens.

LS: Occasionally, you have had to, I think you've said to me, you've had to tell parents when the kids were much younger, because you didn't want anybody to subsequently find out like, somehow you were hiding this, right. So you were proactive instead of reactive.

TS: So when the girls would have sleepovers when they were little, I would say, “I need you to know that we are two females in the house.” And some people did not want their children to spend the night because they didn't want to see it. And one point, I became very vindictive with my ex-husband, and I got a bumper sticker. And it had to stick figure moms, and three stick figure daughters and a bunch of dogs. And I put it on the back of my truck. And one of my kids said that they absolutely were brutally picked on about it. And so, we removed it. But I really just wanted my ex-husband to be driving behind me and see it and I’d be like [waving] “hey”, but all the wrong reasons. But I think that's it.

GH: Do you think there are still stigmas about being a teacher identifying as LGBTQ+?

LS: I think the news media would say that, yes, today, there is a …

TS: … Ask Florida.

LS: Right, I was gonna say, just look at what you see coming out of Florida with the Don't Say Gay bill. I think it's so weird for me personally, because I waited so long. I mean, I had my first real experience at 30. We got together when I was 50. Right? I finally feel like I'm completely comfortable out there in the world, and I don't really feel the need to go and hide. And suddenly, when I am feeling okay with it, then there's a whole part of the world that seems to have just risen up, and they're like hunting me. Not me personally, but hunting me down, like they want me to go back 100 years, put on my bonnet, keep my mouth shut, keep my head down. And you know, say “Yes, sir,” to the man. It is kind of weird, but here where we are working with the people that we've known forever who know us, nobody cares.

TS: None of the adults care.

LS: No, none of the adults care. But when you look more globally, I do think it's kind of a scary thing. I hope that locally, we don't end up there. But I mean, you hear people starting to talk. Like I'm on a women's tennis team, and for the longest time, I was the token gay. And then one of the younger women recently came out, and she talked about how hard that was. And she's only 37. But her parents are a little bit older than I am, and they're very Catholic, and they're struggling a lot. And even her siblings are struggling with it. I think there's maybe one or two younger than she is and one or two older than she is. And they're having a hard time. She says her nieces and nephews are just rocking on and rolling with it. They couldn't care less. But their parents, I think it's societal conditioning, parental conditioning, that kind of thing. So, it's not like it's gone away. There are some pockets that are more accepting and couldn’t care less

TS: As an educator, the kids that we teach are also like, I can tell whose parents sway what way with the government. I have a young boy who loves to tell me all about … he wants to try to bring it up in class like, “Hey, can we talk today about how you're confused about the Bible?” And I'm just like, “No,” and we just move on. But you know that he has some strong parents in there that are saying some things to him. And so, anytime, if we're looking at this from an education perspective, I haven't had one single issue with an adult that I work with, but you can see in the kids that they like to spit the same fire that their parents spit. They listen to a lot of what happens in their household.

LS: And that's true about whatever; it doesn't have to be about being gay. It can be about anything.

TS: Who they're voting for…

LS: And a lot of that is just the arrogance and innocence of youth. Like I remember being 13 and spouting off like I knew what it meant when I went to a little church camp and they said something about abortion is murder. And I was like “abortion is murder,” and I remember strong conviction and we had, sounds crazy, but we had made some obstacle course. And we had all this spattered blood in it and everything, I know it's crazy. And then the kids went through it and everything I remember popping off about that. And in retrospect, I don't think I even knew what abortion was, but I knew it wasn't okay. Because at church, they were telling us in this little youth group that it wasn't acceptable. And that's when I get kind of frustrated. And I know the power of—I don't want to say indoctrination—but indoctrination. Because I know that at that very tender age, I was soaking up all, and these were not adults, these were like young adults, college-aged kids telling us that kind of thing.

TS: The most narcissistic adults there are. [laughs]

LS: That's what I was gonna say. So then they create this little narcissistic 13-year-old who goes off popping off about that. So, if they had only said that thing that being gay is a sin, I probably would have been popping off about that too because I thought I knew all that. When you're young, things are black and white, and you don't see any of the gray that, hopefully, as you grow, and you gain some wisdom and life experiences, there are all sorts of shades of gray, and there are no absolutes about this, at least from my perspective, there are no absolutes.

GH: What opportunities and challenges have you seen for LGBTQ+ educators and youth?

TS: Well, I don’t think that there are very many, especially here. I know that in the North, where things are a little less conservative, there are LGBTQ educator groups; I don't really see that here just because I think we all just kind of live under the radar. I would not want to put a target on my head in that way. I don't know that there would be a group of us just willing to put ourselves out there in that way.

LS: We don't want to give credence to anybody's thing. So, if I play it close to the vest, and I don't allow you to know my sexual orientation too much beyond my physical presentation, which I'm just allowing you to guess then, right. I'm not really wearing a sign even if I'm wearing a button down and a pair of khaki slacks, right, as opposed to my plaid skirt, and my cute little pastel sweater.

TS: They knew then. [pats Lisa’s shoulder]

LS: Right. You know what I'm saying? So, if I just don't talk about it, and I really stick to what I'm supposed to be doing, then that's a kid problem. It's not an adult problem. And then I don't have to contend with that too much. Only one time, and some kid—and I’m not sure why they even brought it up, but apparently they brought it up—they did an anonymous tip to the I guess the gay hotline or whatever that school board had at the time. And I got called in, and we had a conversation and a chat. Anyway, I was told, “If you're doing anything, don't be dumb.” And that was kind of the end of it from the administrator’s perspective. From the person who received the call, who is in the upper echelons, his view on homosexuality was very clear because I happened to, I got called in because apparently somebody did an anonymous tip. And I was told that there was going to be an investigation. Well, that scared the bejeebies out of me. I'm like 20 years into my career and you have visions of “Oh my god, what am I going to do if I get fired?” You know, that kind of thing.

TS: For being gay.

LS: Yeah, so, the report was that I had been seen hugging a female teacher. Well ironically, my mother had had surgery, so there was very likely a legitimate reason if that had happened, but it hadn't. So I don't know why this tip was made or whatever. But anyway, in the upper echelons, I happened to run into the guy who was in charge and had received this call, right. And he lived in the neighborhood next to mine and I bumped into him on a Friday night and I said, “This is really killing me. I'd really like to ask you about this.” I said, “I'm very concerned about this.” I said, “Absolutely nothing happened. But could you tell me some more about what this is?” And so he says it was an anonymous tip. And so, I looked at him I said, “On an anonymous tip, you feel the need to put a letter in my personnel file to do an investigation on an anonymous tip. You're gonna put a letter in there that says that I did XYZ on an anonymous tip?” And his response is when I knew that things were not okay. He said, “If someone had called in a tip that said they had seen you doing drugs, wouldn't we be required to investigate that?” And I thought, “Doing drugs is an illegal activity; somebody hugged me in the hall is not an illegal activity.” But he had already had his trial, put me before his jury, and convicted me of being guilty of something. And fortunately, my administrator couldn't find it in this heart. He said, “Look,” he brought me and the other teacher in, and he said, “I don't know if y'all got anything going on, or not.” He'd only been two weeks on the job. He said, “But if you did, could you please cut it out? And if you didn't, I'm really sorry because I don't even know how to write this up.” And we were like, “Yes, sir.” And we moved on. But I still harbor intense dislike for this supervisor, who convicted me of what? Hugging someone? Which never even happened. I mean, that's the kind of stuff that was still going on in the early 2000s. It wasn't a witch hunt because they weren't looking for me; they just happened to find me because some kid picked up the phone and called in and said this, but it was very disconcerting. And yet again, very reinforcing that to be gay and be an educator is not acceptable behavior. I don't find that in the administrative teams that I've worked with since that time, but I do know that when he left the district, I was very relieved because I thought, “I'll never have to encounter him ever again.” And then he came back.

TS: When we got married, I asked my administration, “How do we want to handle this?” If any other teacher on the hall talks about, “My husband and I went this and this,” and they said, “It would probably be most safe for you, if you would refer to Lisa as your spouse rather than your wife,” and it wasn't a “You have to do this,” it was just a suggestion in order to keep things gray.

LS: And I understand where they're coming from.

TS: Yes I agree with that, we’re not putting a target.

LS: I don’t feel the need to, probably because of that incident, I don't feel the need to put myself at risk for losing my job just because of who I happen to love and live with. I mean, goodness, like, you want to spend your life with someone, and you want to love them. I mean, I'm not whipping out an AR-15 and planning to plot to take someone out or anything like that, which that apparently is not horrible behavior.

TS: But loving someone is. Man.

LS: Love someone. I always find that fascinating. The Bible says, “Thou shalt not kill,” but we're going to do this, but the Bible says, “We shouldn't love someone of the same sex,” so we're gonna follow that one, but we're not gonna worry about this one. And so, it's okay to kill someone, but it's not okay for me to love someone … like that is so twisted and messed up.

TS: It’s that Pride T[-shirt] that says: “Be careful who you hate. It might be someone you love.” It’s one of my favorites.

LS: Yes. My mother made some comments, she had made some comments within about three weeks of us being outed. And I really felt like out of respect for her, she was almost 87, I don’t need to rock her world. She loves me, she loves Traci; there's no reason for us to put a label on this. But we were inadvertently outed, and she was still struggling in the two or three weeks before that. There are the rumblings about this church is going to separate because they want to move in a more progressive way and be more inclusive. And there's the old guard that doesn't want to, and she would make derogatory comments about how, “The gays are messing up my church,” and that kind of thing. So, for a whole population, and it's young and old, but it's more old. And by old, I do mean my age and the generations above me, at 59 and above, but I don't know some of the younger ones, but fewer of the younger ones.

GH: Do you see a difference in the way that queer folks live now versus when you came out?

TS: Oh, yeah.

LS: Yes.

TS: We were all closeted when I came out. No one wanted anyone to know; it was a secret. And if people did find out, it was a dirty secret. Now, my two kids are gay, and I have one who's all protesting and all this stuff. And then the other one just kind of lives her life. And if people find out and they ask her, then she's kind of like we are, if they ask, then she's like, “Yeah, I'll tell you.” And then the other one is, “I identify as,” but people have the courage and they've been emboldened. And I don't think it's as fearful for the younger generation, because it's more widely accepted.

LS : For some.

TS: Yeah.

LS: I like that one about the little kid who—I’m sure it's more of a legendary thing—but the little kid who supposedly musters up the courage and goes to his mom and says, [whispers] “I really have to tell you something; I've got this secret.” And he says, “I'm straight.” [GH laughs] And it makes me laugh, because it's like, a straight kid doesn't have to come out to their parent; why does a gay kid have to come out to their parent or to anybody else? I love that there is a population of children who don't feel the need to come out and have to say, “I'm gay.” They just go about what we're doing: living your life. And whatever people know, they know. I don't need to wave a sign and tell you anything. That's really not your business. And even in my little neighborhood that I know that there are people who look at us and go, “I don't know about that.”

TS: It might be because we have a big rainbow Snoopy Charlie Brown tree for Christmas.

LS: But I was gonna say, once they know who we are, they couldn't care less. I think it’s that thing and it could be whatever your—I’m gonna call it an exceptionality is—like my grandmother grew up during a period of time when individuals who are of African American descent, they had a certain label, except for the guy that cut her grass who she grew to love who served as one of her pallbearers, because she knew Crandall as Crandall, not as his exceptionality. And I think the same thing is true about being gay. People might have a problem with it until they really know who you are. And I think that's why I do think it's important. Like, kids knew that I was gay, because it's okay, “Sudduth’s gay; she's just kinda normal, so it can't be that big.” You know what I'm saying? Like, just go about living your life and let people do their thing. We do our thing. There you go.

GH: What's your hope for the future of the LGBTQ+ community in Lafayette?

TS: I wish that it would be more normalized. Like, our life is very easy, because everyone in our lives know that we're gay, whatever. And I think we're getting to that point where it's normalized. I teach, I don’t see very, like our gay kids don't really get picked on a whole lot. I don't know what happens in locker rooms. But as far as my world, I just feel like we're getting to a point where it's just, it's kind of vanilla to be gay. It's their normal.

LS: I think it would be that thing, like the little guy that says, “Mom, I’m straight.” That we would get to the point where a kid doesn't have to make that proclamation, that everybody would be okay. You know, do your thing. That would be my hope at some point. And then I think it is that thing, though I keep going back to like, I think we make steps, we make progress, and then it scares the bejeebies out of people and they want to drag you back. So it's like, we have to be sure that we keep making steps. And I think the more that it becomes—I don't like to use this word—but more normalized, like the more people that you know, who are out and about, who just so also happen to be gay, which is us, we always talk about, this as a small part of our lives. We're gay, we're daughters, we're mothers, we're sisters, we’re aunts. It's just a small part of who we are. It's not the totality of who we are. And I think the more that we're like that, the easier it will ultimately be. But I do understand why some individuals feel the need to wave the flag, for the same reasons that some individuals feel the need to wave the flag that they're very liberal. And some feel the need to wave the flag that they're very conservative, or they're very whatever; some people are just like that. They need to make their proclamation. “This is who I am.” But there's a whole great big population of people who doesn't have to, you know.

TS: We just want to raise kids and be good teachers, be good neighbors. Be us.

LS: Be good people. Right. “To whom much is given, much is expected.” Go out there and live your life.

TS: In 2016, when the big flood hit all over the place in the world. No one asked us if we were gay, when we were helping demo their homes. No one said, “Hey, wait,” so we went into some very conservative homes and took down drywall and did all of those things.

LS: And carried off their stuff …

TS: Absolutely.

LS: … and helped them carry it back in. And nobody [shrugs shoulders]

TS: In that moment, we were just all people, and my hope would be that that's what it becomes.

LS: And I think that's how it does become that way. You just go out there and you live your life and you do good and people go, “Okay, so gay is not some kind of weird, dirty thing. They're normal people like we are; they're doing the same kind of things. They're cooking their meals, they're sitting around the table with their children, they're walking their dogs, they're taking care of their parents, they’re living life just like everyone else does. They're not some kind of strange, queer thing” …

TS: … Otherness.

LS: … queer meaning unusual and out there as opposed to…

TS: How you identify.

LS: Right.

GH: So, tell me about your marriage story.

TS: [Laughs] So, we got together in 2014.

LS: I was 50. She was not.

TS: I was not. I was 39. And I knew instantly that this lady changed my life. And so about a month in, I bought a ring. [Laughs]

LS: The quintessential U-Haul …

TS: Yes, I was a U-Haulin’ lesbian. Oh, man, I wanted to tie that up. Anyway, and so I bought the ring. Well, you know, Lisa has always been “you know, we don’t need to …”

LS: Organic.

TS: “We're just gonna let our families meet us. We're not going to do all that.” Anyway, so time has passed. And you know, our kids have gone through middle school and high school. Now they're in college. And we were about to move Lisa's parents here. And we make a decision that we want to get married. And we had been kind of talking about it, and we went to a friend who was a judge, and we were like, “Let's try to get our friend to do a ceremony for us; we're going to do something quiet.” We wanted to do it before Lisa's parents moved here. And there were some date conflicts and stuff like that. And then we decided, well, what the hell? Let's just go talk to …

LS: The minister.

TS: The minister at our church. [to Lisa] Alright, you.

LS: No, I was saying we asked the minister. So, growing up, this was not a construct that I ever thought about. So, when this one has a ring in her pocket, two months in, three months in.

TS: [Laughs] Ready to go!

LS: This is not something that I've ever wrapped my head around, the idea of two women being married is not something that's my norm. I didn't grow up like that, and I don't think that I really embraced that completely. She would always refer to me as her wife, and a little part of me would be like hmm…

TS: “Oohh, that’s weird.”

LS: “That's kind of weird.” Probably a holdover from good behavioral conditioning. So, I think she's known all along that she wanted us to be married. And even when the Marriage Equality Act was passed, she really wanted to get married then, and I was still reluctant, you know? And then the more that we talked about it, and it sounds silly, but the older that I got, the more I thought, “These people are out here living their lives, and they're living their best lives, and they're all tying the knot and doing their thing. Why shouldn't I be able to do that?” So, I look on the calendar and 02-22-22 comes up and I thought, “That’s a Tuesday. 02-22-22, what a great day to get married!” And so, I asked my friend, the judge, and she said, “I don't know about that.” She could do the Friday, and so on a wild whim, she [Traci] reaches out to the minister and because within the church that we attend, it still isn't exactly the thing to do. So, the church edict gave him certain parameters that he has to follow in general. And I think we're the first and maybe the only couple that he has married to this point. He said he's been to a number of gay weddings, but he had never officiated at one. So, he followed the parameters that he was given. And he said, yes, he would love to do it. And I think we were his first, maybe his only.

TS: He said, “When do you want to do this?” And Lisa said, “Oh, 02-22-22!” [Laughs]

LS: “A Tuesday,” and he said, “I have a meeting at seven. But I think I can do this for y'all.” So, that's what we did.

TS: So, I went to school that day.

LS: That’s even weirder.

TS: And I got off at 4:15, and we got married at 5:30. [Laughs]

LS: Yeah.

TS: It was great.

LS: It wasn't a whim. But it was kind of a whim because we had kicked out ironically—I’m a former math teacher—so the median between my birthday and her date was Pi Day and I thought, “Oh, how apropos, we'll get married on 03-14. That's kind of symmetrical, right?” And then that just didn't quite feel right. And then I don't know, there's something weird about really having to become the sole caregiver, duo caregiver, for your parents, and I thought, “I really think we just need to do this; we're gonna rip off that band aid, and we're just gonna do it.” And so I looked at the calendar, and I was like, “02-02-22.” Then I thought, “No. 02-22-22 is a Tuesday, a great day to tie the knot.” So, that’s what we did.

TS: We did. I didn't change my name originally. And still on Facebook, I'm Credeur because that’s…

LS: That’s too bold.

TS: Right.

LS: For some of the family members at the moment.

TS: Right. And then, this year I was named Teacher of the Year, and it came out in the newspaper that Mrs. Sudduth is the Teacher of the Year.

LS: Which is how we were outed, a friend of my mother's read it in the newspaper. He is also 87. So he calls and says, “The strangest thing has happened. Lisa's friend’s last name has been…”

TS: “… posted as Sudduth.”

LS: “… posted as Sudduth. It must be a typo.”

TS: In *The Advocate.* [Laughs]

LS: Not sure how you make that a typographical error. But, then we had to go and share the information with my mother because we couldn't allow her to live in oblivion forever. Her main comment was…

TS: Well, she called us and said, “Ha ha, Traci Sudduth, that's the funniest thing in the world.” And I put my hand over the phone immediately. We were doing some construction in our closet and I said, “Lisa, she knows; what are we going to do?”

LS: How ironic, right? To be in the proverbial closet, working in the closet when we get outed from the closet and have to go and tell my mother that we actually are married. And suddenly this feels a lot like the *When Harry Met Sally* confessional. So, that was the marriage story right there. We had a very intimate affair at our house. And then had a slightly larger …

TS: … Reception

LS: … reception with a cake that slid off of its pedestal on the way home and I said, “Oh my goodness, the cake’s not even straight.” [both Lisa and Traci laugh]

TS: And I was so proud of her. It might have been her first gay joke ever. [laughs] Nine years in, and we're making gay jokes. Get it! [laughs]

LS: I've always been a little conventional.

GH: Okay, last question. Is there anything else we haven't touched on that you want to share or talk about?

LS: I think I've borne my soul.

TS: [laughs] I think we're good.

GH: Okay, cool. That's all I have.

1. Refers to the 2016 flood in Louisiana, in which Lafayette alone received more than 20 inches of rain, and about 90,000 homes were destroyed throughout Louisiana. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)