Peyton Rose Michelle

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Lafayette, LA

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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. Undergraduate Research Assistant Gabrielle Hoffpauir-Rosatto, with the help of Head of Special Collections Zack Stein met with Miss Peyton Rose Michelle, speaking with her for about an hour on her experience as a trans woman in Lafayette, LA.

 TRANSCRIPTION

Interviewer initials: [GH]

Interviewee initials: [PM]

GH: Today is Wednesday, August 10, 2022. We are interviewing with Miss Peyton Rose Michelle. So, to begin, I'm just going to ask you to tell us about your childhood in South Louisiana before and up to middle school.

PM: Okay. Before middle school, I did not know I was a trans person, so I was just living my life. And you know, by first grade, my peers decided something was different about me. And they would ask me if I was gay and this slew of other questions. So, from first grade, I was like bullied, essentially outcasted. So, my life up until middle school, up until high school was a depressive blur where I suffered depression, anxiety, eating disorder. All the fun things [that happen] when put under that amount of stress. But I came past that at this point. But yeah, I lived in the middle of two cane fields. Very chill, just different.

GH: Yeah. And in middle school, what was that like for you?

PM: I honestly don't have a lot of memories.

GH: That's fair. How would you describe your experiences as an adolescent?

PM: Adolescent that's like, 12 to 15?

GH: Yeah, around 12 to 15.

PM: Yeah, that was probably the hardest part of my life. It's so hard to like, quantify between… (tears up)

GH: Do you need to take a second?

PM: (smiling) No, I’m a professional. It's hard to quantify how bad things were. And when I was an adolescent, it was the worst. Like, at that point, kids at that age are already mean. So, it just amplified it. They were all just mean to me. And I wasn't very good at being mean back. So, I was not empowered.

GH: Describe your relationship with your family and friends during this time.

PM: You know, it's weird to say because I generally always have had good relationships with the people in my life. They've never been the ones to judge me, really. You know, my family might not have known or understood things about me, but that didn't stop them from loving me. And I would say the same of my friends. I just didn't have a lot of room because I was in an ostracized place.

GH: If you don't mind me asking, who did you find yourself finding friends in or finding comfort in during this period?

PM: People online. Online video games were my escape at that time. Maybe more around 15, I would stay up literally all night talking to people from across the world, which have different time zones than us and literally live on whole different schedules than us. Which was so mind-blowing to me at the time. And they lived in places that didn't care, so they surely didn't care; they were way over there. So that was where I found most of my friends, in online gaming and, you know, creating that world. And I don't think any of it translated into real life, like ever.

GH: Do you find that you still have those friends that you made online?

PM: I mean, I'm friends with some of them on Facebook. You know, I see them living their lives. And I assume that they see me living my life, but I'm not connected with any of them in any more capacity than being friends on Facebook.

GH: Gotcha. What community groups were you involved in, if any, during this period? And what role did they play in your coming of age, so to speak?

PM: You know, I didn't have community at this time. I mean, I had my online community. But they didn't know me—I didn’t know me, to be fair. But no, I really didn't have community. I found bits and pieces of community enough to sustain my life force, I guess.

GH: Oh, I had a question. And I lost it… You said that you think that your online friends didn't really know you, do you feel like you were able to confide in anyone about, not just your transness, but who you are as a person?

PM: Not at that age. I was so far from expressing myself, I didn't even know is what I would say. So no.

GH: And what point do you think that you kind of began to come to terms with who you are and start to explore that side of yourself, of the authentic you?

PM: Right after 15, like 16ish, 16 to 18, I realized what life I was living, I realized how fucked and how depressed I was, I realized so much. And I didn't know why at that point. I think that just kind of sent me into a kind of state of trying to figure it out. And you know, I didn't even know that people could be transgender. So that wasn't an idea to me, like I didn't get introduced to the idea until I watched RuPaul’s Drag Race on TV. And then, I realized that I just wanted to be a full-time drag queen. And then I saw trans people and kind of was like, “Well, that seems more aligned.” And of course, you know, hormones can be scary. So, then I was like, “Well, maybe I don't want hormones.” But within those years, I decided that being trans and transitioning, you know—whatever that meant for me—was what I wanted to do, and so I did. And in doing so, I decided to no longer take anything from people at school. I think when I was 15—I don't know, age is so hard for me—but around that time for freshman year, I did virtual school all year, and I did not do well in school that year. But I did get to be released from being bullied every day. And like I said, I didn't do very well in virtual school, so other issues arose that I needed to address, but I addressed that by going back to school my sophomore year and being like, “No, you might want to bully me, but I'm not going to let it enter me and affect me.” Then I became kind of a bitch, to be nice. But I survived.

GH: You survived. Describe some major events in your childhood and adolescence that you think have shaped your worldview.

PM: Being bullied. I'm a fairly privileged person, White, my family is okay. You know, I've always had school. Never ever in my life have there ever been like an “I'm not going to eat” scare. Like, I live a very privileged life, so much as it sucks to say. And bullying taught me to be empathetic, you know. Maybe I would have been empathetic without the bullying; I will literally never know. But it sure ensured that I would be empathetic to other people and has really driven me. I mean, I'm an advocate now because injustice annoys me to no end. And I just don't understand why people that claim that they're doing God's work, but they're hurting people, and I just don't understand how those things are in alignment. So, bullying was significant. Just being introduced to the LGBTQ community, you know. I had been bullied my whole life; I heard a lot of words that I googled and learned what they meant. So, I was introduced to these things… You know, I was never called trans slurs, I don't think. Maybe that's why I never learned about it. Anyway, those just weren't a part of our lives, I guess, where I grew up. But yeah, being introduced to the LGBTQ community allowed me to express myself and that allowed me to find who I was. Both of those things still very much affect me today as a trans advocate, I guess.

GH: Speaking of God, if you don't mind me asking, do you feel that religion has impacted any of your life?

PM: You know, I never got…yes, it has, but now. But I never, growing up I didn't really… like I was told I had to do communion. And after that, it was up to me. And so, I did. I didn't have a necessarily bad experience. I was a nerd. I learned. I passed. Did what I had to do. And then I didn't continue, and that wasn't any point of contention in my family. So, I never really got religiously traumatized directly. I did feel like some kind of secondhand religious trauma from knowing other people's trauma and things like that. And it did scare me from interacting with religion for a long time. And in my process of self-discovery and expression, I re-found religion and spirituality, and those I would consider to have been really empowering. Which is why that I think, if anything, that is a goal of religion, is to empower. And that is not some people's intention with it. Well, they’re empowering someone, just not other people. But, yeah, so, no, not directly, but well, I guess directly.

GH: So, what drew you to working with LGBTQ+ organizations like PFLAG and Louisiana Trans Advocates?

PM: Survival. I've been working with Louisiana Trans Advocates since 17ish, 18ish. Back then, I obviously wasn't doing what I'm doing now. But I was learning and developing my advocacy skills and as of a couple of years ago, I think, it’s weird to say, but I guess I really stepped into that role. And in doing so, I've just kind of been connected. But yeah, it was all survival. I mean, frankly, if someone isn't fighting in Louisiana, they're just gonna pass bad bills. I mean, they file them every year at this point. And if it weren't for people like me being in that building, saying something about it, we would have “Don’t Say Gay” Bills[[1]](#footnote-1) here and we would have trans healthcare bans here and other things probably. So yeah, survival. We're really good at what we do because we need to survive. We do it for free. That's important too, something I'm trying to change.

GH: Yeah, that would be a really big and amazing change.

PM: I don't understand why queer people have to do queer work for free. Like I get it: survival; that's why we have to do it for free, it’s because if we don't, we won’t survive… But like, from a systematic, funder sense it's like, why is it so hard for y’all to fund us? That is a conversation I’ve been dealing with these past couple weeks.

GH: I'm about to get into your politics. But before I ask that, I'm very curious, because I'm not sure if you stated this openly or not, but you made it a point to not run on the basis of your queerness; you ran with actual policies, with actual stances. So, what brought you to that decision? Like what's behind that, you know?

PM: You know, a handful of things. My top two issues were racial justice and government accountability, kind of widely. And this was in 2020: the year of COVID, the year of the Black Lives Matter movement formation in its current state, our previous president. So much was happening, and I opted out from putting that I was trans, partially out of safety. But also, partially because—I don't know how to say this in a PC way—LGBTQ issues were not the most important thing happening. They're very important, obviously; I need to fight this fight to survive, I get that. I'm not saying that it was unimportant, or not a focus of my life. But at that time, it just felt really pertinent that the conversations I had and the things I created for my campaign were focused around those issues. I mean because that was one thing that was important to me. And I guess that's not to say that being trans wasn't important to me, but like, I don't know. I guess as a trans person, I don't walk around being like, “Ooh, I'm trans,” and I don't bleed the trans color flag; I only wear it on my nails. You know, in a sense, it didn't feel like it needed to be a policy thing at that time. Like, I never did any kind of like, complete… What do they call that? Like all of their policies, how they feel about all the different issues—I never did anything like that. I did not run for something that was, that needed anything like that. I just picked like two or three issues I focused on that were timely and important.

GH: You are obviously passionate about these topics. What do you think your personal experience has to do with your passion, with these issues?

PM: Like I said, being bullied really ingrained a deep understanding of injustice, and a deep resentment for it. So, you know, before graduating high school—like from being 16, 17, 18—I always wanted to be an advocate. I went through different phases. Like at one time, I wanted to be a lawyer, which was similar. You know, I wanted to do different marketing, which is similar. Like I had different ways of doing it at different periods of my life, but I always kind of wanted to be an advocate and in the ways… And I did it by just being in the room when no one else was sometimes, trying. I mean, I guess that might be dismissive, but that's how I did it. I had the privilege to be in the room, I guess is maybe a better way to say it. So I did. And that just led me to here where now I'm like, trying to create a job out of advocacy, I’ve already done consulting work, but differently.

GH: Yeah. So, you've already accomplished so much as a young person. What's your goal from here? Like, where do you want to go, best case scenario?

PM: I have learned that I can't really plan my life past a couple years. You know, one day I'll probably run for something big; I don’t know what this is. One day very soon, I hope to go to create jobs for trans and queer people doing not just advocacy work, but work for LTA in general, because we do so much important work that is completely volunteer, and it's really frustrating to me now. I don't know, continuing to try to liberate trans people through policy at a local and statewide level. I have so many… The thing is, there's constantly so many ideas happening. It's just kind of like to see which ones stick and sprout. I don’t know, I just hope that over the next year, I can kind of rebuild LTA. People see us as this big, massive nonprofit. We've never had a big budget; we've never paid anyone. We've never have actively fundraised. We're actually a very tiny organization. But I kind of want to realize that; like, people think we're so big and massive and I want to, in my way, or in a way that I can, maybe a better way to say is I want to try to realize that and be a powerhouse. The state of Louisiana doesn't really have a statewide equality organization like most states have, like Equality Texas, Equality Ohio, Equality California. And there was Equality Louisiana at one point, but it turned into LTA through drama. And so, I don’t know it's weird I guess that we don't have a statewide Equality org like that. But for me, it only really emphasizes the need to do that work. I mean, there are Equality organizations all over the state: Shreveport, Monroe, Alexandria, Lake Charles, Acadiana, Baton Rouge. You know what I mean? Houma, Mamou had a Pride; these things are happening all over the state, and there's no… there's no Equality Louisiana to hold them all together and support them all and give them a statewide org… I mean, in nonprofit work, we have like local, state, and national, and after that, it's crazy. But we don't really have that kind of flow here. Because there's just disconnects in all of those places right now. And I'm seeing them kind of create connections at this point. I'm just hoping to keep that happening. Because we're all doing great work. And we all should be uplifted to do the great work. And I don't want to be telling anyone how they should be doing their great work. I just want to go to hear what their ideas are and support them in a way that I can. And vice versa. I mean, that's what makes us powerful. In Louisiana, where we are, where we feel like the minority—though voting-wise, we are not. So, I think it's important to make those connections and empower us now. If we start this work 10 years down the line, we're only delaying it. So, yeah, this is a skill set I somehow have managed to have. So, I hope to utilize it effectively.

GH: So, when did you stumble on LTA?

PM: Around 17, I stumbled upon them, thanks to our social support groups. We have monthly social support groups for trans and gender non-conforming or questioning people around the state. For me, it was the first time I had ever been in a room of trans people almost exclusively. And there were 10-15 trans people, and that’s a big deal for a young, queer person. And I hear that our meetings have that effect on a lot of people. So that was kind of my entry into LTA. Not super long after that… so at points, LTA’s board has kind of went defunct and not really been active, but LTA has always survived from the support group meetings; they just have happened regularly and require literally no oversight. And because the meetings kept going, eventually the board or literally one person would be like, “It's time to bring this all back together” in the board. And I got on the board right when that happened in its last time. You know, and they made some kind of a call, like trying to build people and make people come. And at the time, they were meeting monthly in Baton Rouge, and I would go. That's how I got involved; I just showed up to board meetings. And I didn’t talk a lot at first; I started to talk more, I understood things more. And eventually I just kind of fell into becoming like the Lafayette Representative and then the Board Secretary. Now, I'm basically the Executive Director. So, it's been weird, but validating.

GH: Absolutely. So as many now know, you’ve become the first trans elected official in Louisiana[[2]](#footnote-2). So, describe your interest in politics, and what led you to want to seek political office.

PM: This is a funny answer because I didn't. I didn't seek it. I had thought about it at that time, but I was twenty-two or three. So, it wasn't like on my radar like that. It was literally qualifying time. And someone texted me and was like, “Your seat is vacant; you should run. You might run unopposed and just get it. It costs this much money. And if you want to do it, you need to go tomorrow.” And I had my dead name, and my gender marker was wrong. And I was not prepared. But I said “Okay,” and I did it. I went to qualify, which triggered me to need to change my name. I'm so grateful that the people at the clerk allowed me to run for—the position I wanted was the Democratic State Central Committee, of which there are two representatives from each House District, which I believe there are over 100. So, there's a seat for men and women. And I'm really grateful that I got to run in the women's seat, because at the time my gender marker did not align with that. And they told me that that was what they had to do. And I was like “Well, here's the process for changing it. I have the paper at home, can you please do it? And I promise I'll change it.” And they were like, “Yes.” So, I’m really grateful; I had my dead name at the time. So, I had to do some weird stuff with what my name showed up on at the ballot, you know, all these weird things. But after I left, at that point, I had qualified, and come to find out I did have an opponent. So, me and the opponent met for coffee one day…or lunch. And we talked, and at some point during the conversation, she told me that she wasn't going to really try very hard because she wanted God to determine the winner. And in that moment, I knew I’d win. So, I maintained my belief, and I said, “Thank you so much, you have a great day.” And then, I won—with, I think 66 percent of the vote, maybe 65, somewhere around there. So, no, I didn't really intend to be in political office; I was not prepared in terms of my ID document situation. But I did have a marketing job. And I did know how to campaign, and I did know enough to win. So, I did, apparently. And I don't know if I'm technically the first trans person elected. But I am the first openly trans person. It's my understanding that there is one other person that ran for something, and they won. But they were not trans when they won; like they were not out as a trans person when they won. They came out later. So, it's one word, but it might matter to some one person.

GH: That's good to know. Yeah, thank you for the correction. So, what do you do in your political office?

PM: (whispers) Nothing. Not very much. So, I am elected to the Democratic State Central Committee, which is the Board of Directors for the Democratic Party. And it's our task to vote on Democratic Party matters. You know, literally Saturday, this weekend, I'll be going to Baton Rouge to vote on the party’s endorsements for our upcoming election. But we don't do anything; like endorsement means nothing. We have no money. We're not going to help anyone; the party is not a useful power or entity at this time in 2022. I hope that that is not the case later, but yeah, we don't do very much. But it helped people recognize me, I guess.

GH: How do you feel that being a trans woman has affected your politics?

PM: Yeah, I mean, I'm grateful to be trans because it gave me a scope to empathize with basically everyone, and I'm really grateful for that. I often wonder what my life would have been like if I was a cis[gendered] boy or cis[gendered] girl, and I definitely imagine it would be drastically different. I don't imagine that I'd be in the same career. Calling it a career is so weird, but at the same career path. I think I'd be different in a lot of ways. So, I think being trans has set me up for maybe the only opportunity that could have been possible across universes for me to have the emotional capacity to do this work, but also, it kind of allowed me to get the harder skills that are needed.

GH: Describe any pressure or intimidation you received from those who opposed your campaign.

PM: Honestly, no one really did. Every once in a while, on my Facebook posts—I paid for Facebook ads—every once in a while I would get like “communist” or something in my comments, but I never ever got any hate for being trans. I got called a communist, but I didn't get called any slur related to being queer. So I don't know, I would say almost none. Yeah, I just I don't know. I don't know how I successfully managed to do that. Maybe it was because I didn't openly say I was trans. Maybe, I have no clue. But I didn't get much hate.

GH: Do you feel that becoming an elected official has changed others’ attitudes towards you, whether in your life or from the outside?

PM: Probably. You know, it's interesting because I also do this nonprofit work where I try not to bleed them into each other because, of course, as a nonprofit person, you have to be nonpartisan. And I’m elected to a partisan position, it’s for the Democratic Party. So, it's weird. Usually, I kind of live in bubbles. Like when I'm doing advocacy work, I don't really talk about that I'm elected. So, most people, I don't want to say they don't know, but like, if they do know, it's not a topic of conversation. So, I don't know if it's super affected that side of work. But being an elected official has allowed me to get invited to things that I might not have been invited to otherwise. And that helped a lot. Like I met the governor this year because I was given a free ticket because I was a trans elected official in the party, and I did some work for them. And I told them that they needed to give me a free ticket to this event. That was a very expensive event to attend. And they said “Okay,” so I got to go and accidentally met the governor. So, yes, it probably has definitely helped me. But it’s interesting, because I feel like I'm Hannah Montana, living two different lives. Then at home, I wear sweatpants, and it's a whole different person.

GH: Describe your views of the current political climate for LGBTQ+ individuals in Louisiana.

PM: It's so interesting. You know, I feel like we're going forward, I feel like we're progressing, as a person that I would consider is deeply in the work. And I know that that's not how other people feel. And I know why that's not what how other people feel. I don't know, it’s so weird because conservatives have decided that LGBT—specifically trans issues, pretty much—and a handful of other issues like abortion and critical race theory, education, are their biggest, top priorities right now. And to be literally the top priority for the conservatives in Louisiana, their top priority was getting the trans sports bill passed this year. And they would have done and probably did do literally anything that they needed to do to get that to happen. So, it's really weird. You know, like, we're the target. We are actively being targeted. But, I remind myself all the time, and I think it's important to remind other queer people. It's not actually personal. These people don't know who we are. They don't even understand this, and they don't probably even fucking care. Like it's just the crutch that they're leaning on right now to fundraise and to invigorate their base. Just like abortion, just like other things. We know that these these rich, powerful conservative people are not going to be losing their access to abortion, just like they wouldn't lose access to their kid getting trans-related healthcare, if that were to pass. And, you know, they wouldn't be affected by the laws in the same way. But they still participate in the things that they're claiming to not participate in and not support. So, I don't know, it's just the game that they're playing right now. But also, I don’t know, right now in Louisiana, it’s a really pivotal time for LGBTQ issues I think. Since LTA has been founded over a decade now, we and Forum for Equality, with the help of the ACLU and their orgs, we have been able to defeat every anti-LGBTQ Bill filed in Louisiana, up until this year, when they passed the sports bill. And it's so crazy, because you know, the governor didn't veto the sports bill, because he claimed that they would override his veto, even though they didn't actually have the votes to do so. And all the political games that are in effect, that are affected. But also, they tried to pass a trans healthcare ban and a “Don’t Say Gay” bill. And both of them failed miserably. The trans healthcare bill didn't even get a committee hearing. And then, they ended up trying to turn it into a resolution where they asked the Department of Health to study de-transitioning basically. And it passed, but the Department of Health is generally friendly to us and asked us to help get this data for them. So, it's a positive; we're going to go to show them that people don't de-transition. And the legislature basically asked for this information in an ass-backwards way. And then on “Don’t Say Gay” side, we defeated it in committee. And then, they did some unprecedented stuff to bring “Don’t Say Gay” from committee, and they recommitted it to the whole of the House Committee, which is a committee of the entire House Chamber people. And that was successful. It was crazy. We had no clue that they were doing it. It's literally something lobbyists haven't seen for forever, and they've never done it for a bill like this. Just unprecedented. And literally within 24 hours after they did this, we were all scrambling like, “Oh my god, they're gonna vote on this again; we need to do all this, blah blah blah.” We started learning the rules. And one of the rules we learned was that we would be able to speak on the House floor, which is not something people do. Like the public can speak in committees, but on the House floor, and on the Senate floor, the legislators speak. We can observe, but we cannot speak. But because it would have been a committee of the whole House, we would have been able to speak. So, we started doing what we needed to do, to be there and speak. And like I said within 24 hours, we heard that they would not be doing that, because they did not want us to speak on their floor. Probably because they knew they would have lost. But that was iconic I think. It was scary. It was so scary. But when the dust settled, and it was like, “Okay, they're not going to move this,” it was just kind of funny. I mean, it's bad that they did this. They were trying to see if they could do this, you know, whatever. But somehow, they're afraid of us. And then, they tried to turn “Don’t Say Gay” into a resolution, asking Bessie to basically enact the “Don’t Say Gay” Bill through Bessie’s policies. And that failed, even though we didn't even know about and weren't even in the room for that either. So, I think Louisiana is in this really interesting place where we have passed the only anti-LGBTQ bill that will ever pass. I don't know what else they could create and bring here that would pass if we can kill the “Don’t Say Gay” bill. And we never had bathroom bills here, which were so difficult to talk about when they were first introduced. I just don't know what else they could pass here. And I think that means that opportunities are opening for queer people to do positive things. I don't know if we can pass positive things; we've never had the opportunity to even find out if we could. But we'll see how 2023 goes.

GH: Great. Um, how do you feel that opinions have changed towards LGBTQ plus individuals since you were a child?

PM: You know, I think people understand gay and lesbian people way more. I mean, I really don't even hear people being homophobic anymore. I'm sure it happens. Absolutely. I mean, STM, God bless, whatever. But you know what I mean—it’s not as prevalent. I also don't experience transphobia in my community, obviously, but I see it existing more, especially with like the sports bill. That really invigorated people to be transphobic in a lot of ways, including some trans people, to be frank. So, you know, it's still touch and go I guess. But I definitely think people are coming around and people are understanding. We know, through data that the biggest kind of deciding factor on if people support trans and queer people is whether or not they know a queer person. So, I think as more of us come out and express ourselves, it will only make it easier, hopefully, for everyone else. But also, we're doing better, so they're fighting back harder. I don't know when the balance ends, but, yes, I think it's getting better.

GH: Yeah. That's all the questions I had, is there anything else you want to say?

PM: I hope people in the future understand that we've come a long way. It's been really bad. It's still bad. And I definitely wouldn't want to discredit and invalidate that. It's still bad for a lot of people. And there's so many things that need to be changed in our world, but we do exist; we have existed. I always think it's so weird that people will think that trans people are new or that gay people are new. You know, gay and trans people have been pretty ostracized and targeted for literally as long as governments and powers have existed, because for some reason they thought that that was the right thing to do. And so yeah, we’re not new; we’ve existed here. I just hope that more people will empathize with us as we go. Yeah, there’s so much.

GH: Absolutely. All right. Thank you so much.

1. The “Don’t Say Gay” Bill, also known as HB 837, is a bill that attempts to ban teachers from discussing LGBTQ+ topics (such as gender expression and sexual orientation) with their K-12 students. This bill did not pass in Louisiana. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. This question is framed incorrectly. While Peyton Rose Michelle is not the first trans elected official in Louisiana, she was the first trans elected official who was out as transgender at the time of her election, as Michelle will go on to explain later in the interview. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)