Begin Recording

AM: Today is July 25, 2018. The name of the interviewer is Alex Mielcarak, and the name of the narrator is Lee Anne Leland. Ready to start?

LAL: Ready.

AM: Okay. First couple of questions are just some warm-ups. What is your name?

LAL: Lee Anne Leland.

AM: My pronouns are she/hers. May I ask yours?

LAL: Mine are she/hers.

AM: How long have you lived in South Carolina?
LAL: Not counting four years in college, sixty-two years. I've been here for sixty-six years, basically.

AM: Wow. What do you do for a living?

LAL: I am currently employed as a maintenance person at Costco Wholesale in Mount Pleasant.

AM: The next couple are about family and childhood.

LAL: Okay.

AM: Do you have a long-term partner or partners and, if so, for how long?

LAL: Yes. I've been married to my wife for twenty-one years this November. She knew about me from day one, so that wasn't a problem.

AM: Fantastic. Describe the place where you grew up. What was it like?

LAL: First nine years was in Mount Pleasant, which was very rural, surrounded by tomato fields. We moved into downtown Charleston because Mount Pleasant was too far out in the country. In both of them, I was kind of like a loner because I didn't fit in anywhere. I would tag along with my older brother. When we moved into downtown it was like everybody went their separate ways because, all of a sudden, we all had our friends, only I didn't have very many friends. I would just be the tag-along, the one who hung out and came along with my older brother or my older sisters. I preferred playing with my sisters. They used to play dress up with me when I was little, and then when we moved into town they had friends, so they didn't need me anymore. That's when I first discovered the closet. [Laughs.]

AM: You kind of started to answer this, but what was your family life like growing up?

LAL: Difficult. My father was an alcoholic. Eventually, my mother became a born-again Christian, and the two did not really mesh, so there was a lot of tension, a lot of arguing, a lot of physical punishment, mainly towards me because I was not gender conforming and they didn't understand why. I didn't understand why. Things were difficult, and I was never close to my parents. I have never cried since—when they died I didn't cry, and I haven't cried since.

LAL: The funny thing is is that, as siblings, my three sisters and brother, we were intense sibling rivalry. We were five kids in seven years. We really
haven't been a close family. My coming out has brought us closer together, which is very odd.

AM: Yeah, but it's good.

LAL: Yeah.

AM: What are some of your earliest memories?

LAL: Growing up in the country on a pond, swimming with the ducks. At age five, my mother asked me what I wanted to go for as Halloween, and living in the country, we had to drive from house to house. I said a princess, and she let me go as a princess dressed in one of my sister's long gowns, one of my sister's shoes. My mother did my makeup, put a tiara on my crew cut head, and we went trick-or-treating, and I loved it. That's the only costume from my childhood that I remember.

LAL: First day of school, first grade, 1958, I dressed in one of my sister's clothes but my brother made me change. I have never forgiven him to this day. [Laughs.] My mother told one of my sisters that I was always a free spirit, and I think it wasn't that I was a free spirit, I was just running away from who I was. I could not be the person that they expected me to be, but yet, I did not know who I was, because there was nothing. There was no information about someone like me. Very rapidly, I discovered that I better not let people know about me. Although, I kept getting caught by my parents, and kept getting disciplined, and sent to a psychiatrist, and sent to boxing lessons, Outward Bound, nothing worked.

AM: Yeah. Do you consider yourself to be LGBTQ?

LAL: Yes. As I tell people, I'm a nonconforming lesbian transgender woman. Whatever that means to you, you can have it. For a long time, I thought I had to be completely fem in order to be transgender, so thank God we have the gender queer and all now, because I live on both sides. I'm more fem than masculine, but I do have masculine qualities. That's where the nonconforming comes in, but yes, I am a member of the LGBTQ community.

AM: What does being LGBTQ mean to you?

LAL: Well, given the present situation in this country I'd say it means being an outcast. It means not fitting in. It means having to survive in a world, in a country where it's not the majority, but the most vocal do not like you, do not want you. I don't let it stop me. I go wherever I want. But it also gives me a great sense of community with the LGBTQ. I know people who I
never would have met if I hadn't come out, wonderful people, talented people. I would have kept my distance from them before I came out, number one, because I would be scared to death that they'd find out about my secret life and, number two, because it was foreign to me because I was trying to be the male that society assigned me at birth. Since I embraced who I was, I found freedom to be me, freedom to have friends who I normally would not have had friends growing up. It's kind of broadened my horizons a great deal despite being a minority in a country, especially South Carolina—ughhh. [Laughs.]

LAL: Charleston's good though. Charleston's a good place to live if you're LGBTQ. It amazes me that they say Columbia is more LGBTQI friendly than Charleston, because when I graduated from college in 1974, there were five gay bars in Charleston. There's only one now. Charleston's always been a wide-open city because it was a port city. It's always tolerated people. It was—the basic philosophy in Charleston was you do what you want to do, let me do what I want to do, and as long as we don't get in each other's face about it everything's cool. That was Charleston. You were able to fit in, but no one would talk about it.

AM: Then what was the coming-out process like for you?

LAL: The coming-out process was—it was long. Basically, I tried to come out in the mid-1990s, about 1996. It was either that or I was going to kill myself. Those were my two options. I did not even know that coming out was an option. I was going to kill myself. I was a sea kayak nature guide and instructor. I was no longer working there. I was standing on the banks of a creek about to paddle out into the ocean in my kayak. I had a chain wrapped around my body. I had a Demerol, Seconal milkshake that I had made up. I was going to paddle about three miles offshore in the middle of the night, drink it down, go to sleep, fall overboard, sink to the bottom, and no one would ever know what happened to me.

LAL: I was literally standing there getting ready to launch when a feeling came over me of try it, try to be yourself, try to live your authentic life. So I did. I decided to come out. I still didn't know who I was. A friend—because computers were not really prevalent back then. A few people had them, but not everybody. A friend called me over to his house, sat me down at his computer, had me type in the word transgender, which I had never heard of. The search engine popped it up, and I read the definition and, all of a sudden, my entire life made sense.

LAL: I knew who I was, and I wasn't a stranger to myself anymore. Because I thought that I was the only one like me, that there were no other people like me. Very early in life, I got a vasectomy because I did not want to
take a chance of having a kid who was like me, because you didn't know. You didn't know who you were. The medical literature at the time was no help. Basically, I had four choices. I could be a drag queen, which I was not. I could be a transvestite, someone who dressed for sexual gratification, which I was not. I could be a transsexual, but to be a transsexual woman I would have to be attracted to men and I wasn't. That left cross-dresser, so for about thirty, forty years I said I was just a cross-dresser because that's the definition that fit.

**LAL:** Then my friend showed me the term transgender, and I realized I could be me, that there were people like me out there. I found a group online, a chat room, found some people, and came out for six months, and went back in because I couldn't find a job. Working construction in Charleston and being transgender in the ‘90s was not compatible [laughing], but in that brief moment, that brief six months, I met my wife. We met in Rockville, South Carolina, a town of a hundred seventy. Eight months after we met, we got married. She saw me across the room, had a mutual friend introduce us because she found me interesting. [Laughing.] We had a lot in common. We've been married twenty-one years now. Haven't killed each other yet. Come close, but *every* marriage has its ups and downs.

**LAL:** My going back in the closet for work almost destroyed my marriage, because growing up, when my being transgender would manifest itself—and keep in mind I had no clue why it was doing it—I would withdraw and I would put that wall up. Despite Cindy knowing about me, despite our being married—and she will tell you that she did not fully understand what it meant to be transgender. She thought I could turn it on and off at will. My going back in the closet, that wall came up, so I was distant from her.

**LAL:** This has been a reoccurring pattern throughout my entire life, from one failed relationship to the other. Things would go great at first, and I would suppress who I was, and then it would start to creep back in. Eventually, I would distance myself from whoever I was seeing at the time. I have only broken up with one woman in my entire life. All the rest have broken up with me—and they will tell you—because I wasn't the person who they met. I had shut down. Cindy will tell you that I shut down completely. She would ask me what was wrong, and I'd say, "Nothing," because I thought that she was not happy with who I was, she did not want me to be transgender. I just shut her out. To this day, I have no clue why she stayed with me, but she did and we made it.

**AM:** When you first came out, did you get any advice or feel pressure from others on how to act?
LAL: No. It's funny because, number one, I didn't know anybody in Charleston who was transgender. I didn't even know there was a community, and there really wasn't one. The few people I knew I found online, and they were basically cross-dressers. We had nothing in common. I hung out at Deja Vu, which was a lesbian bar. It was West Ashley at the time. Then Cindy and I met and I moved to McClellanville and quit hanging out downtown, so that pretty much cut me off. I didn't progress past a certain stage of meeting people. The only people who I knew like me were online, and we were all trying to figure ourselves out, so no one was saying, “Well, you”—

LAL: Well actually, someone did tell me that I couldn't be transgender because I was not willing to prostitute myself to raise money for surgery. I thought, "No, I'm not doing that." That's not me. It's not that I didn't want surgery, but I did not want to not be who I was, to give up a core part of me. I can understand why some people feel that way, because they are suffering from intense dysphoria. My dysphoria is not intense. It's more of a sense of unease, of not being satisfied with how I look. I realize now that I can't change that. This is who I am. My wife finds my voice sexy, so I'm not going to change that, although I'm thinking about it.

LAL: If I obsess over something I can never be, I'll never be happy. My happiness is more important than dysphoria. It does hit me once in a while, usually when I'm driving, but it's not severe. I don't have this, "Oh, my God. Give me a knife. I'm going to cut something off." No. [Laughs.] I thank goodness that in the twenty years since I first tried to come out that the scope of the transgender population has broadened immensely to where I can be like I am and still fit in. I don't have to be completely fem. I don't have to wear dresses all the time, which is what I used to think I had to do. I had to look as fem as possible. It's not going to work. [Laughs.] You don't have to agree with me. [Laughing.]

AM: No, I understand though. Yeah.

LAL: Yeah, anyway. Yeah.

AM: Okay. Have you ever been treated differently because of your identity?

LAL: Yes, I have. Going to Walmart is an experience sometimes. I've had people stare at me, people whisper. They nudge whoever they're with and kind of point. I've had clerks in stores ignore me, but that's rare. I mean the stares and the whispers are not rare, but they're not common either. In terms of just existing in the world, no. I think it's because I have confidence in myself. Cindy actually notices more than I do. I don't even pay attention anymore, because why let it get to me? I have a feeling that
it's not as prevalent as it once was because I do exude that air of confidence in who I am.

LAL: That being said, my previous job, they knew about me, but they wanted me to stay in the closet at work. I was mainly Andrew at work. I had to go by Lee, and they put Mr. in front of my name, because this was a school, Mr. Lee. That's why I left them, so I could be myself, and Costco allows me to do that.

LAL: I mean look at me. I'm not glam made up. I tend to wear a long sleeve T-shirt to work, so I'm not wearing this. I just feel free. I feel happy. I can have my nails purple. I wasn't asking my former employer to give me the world, to let me come to work in a mini skirt or something, which I wouldn't anyway because I had to get up on a ladder half the time and who knows who'd be looking up my— [laughing] But I think they were so scared that people would find out, even though I'd say probably eighty percent of the parents of the kids at the school knew. The ones who didn't were just in denial, because I certainly haven't kept quiet about who I am outside of the school. I'm an activist. I speak before groups. Articles—I was in the paper, so people know.

AM: This leads me into another question. What types of LGBTQ-related activism have you participated in?

LAL: [Laughs.] Well, number one, just being myself, just going wherever I want to go. I mean there are bars that I will not go into, but then I wouldn't have gone into them before I came out anyway. Walking down the street is an act of activism, because it is evident that I'm transgender or gender nonconforming, whatever. Just being out there is an act of activism, I guess.

LAL: I am the facilitator of the Charleston Area Transgender Support Group, which is the adult support group. We meet once a month. I am on the board of We Are Family, which is the only LGBTQI support group for youth in the state of South Carolina. In fact, after this I get to go to a board meeting, so I'll get home at ten o'clock tonight.

LAL: I have put together and led the Transgender Day of Remembrance services for the past three years. I have helped organize a trans women of color memorial. I've spoken at both Charleston women's marches, which is weird because I used to stutter before I came out. My stutter disappeared after I came out. I've spoken before three thousand people and it didn't even phase me. I spoke at the Steve Bannon counter-rally, and I've been interviewed by the Post and Courier, interviewed by the Daily Mirror in
London. I am going to be on *Lowcountry Live* in late August, so be sure to tune in.

LAL: I'm doing a— it's called “Conversations with a Trans Person” with the Johns Island branch of the Charleston County Library. I'm doing that in October. I have tabled events at all kinds of places. There's a funky little farmer's market on James Island called Sunday Brunch Farmer's Market, and I used to table events there. I table at Charleston Pride. I march in Charleston Pride.

LAL: But I'd say that the most impact I have is just walking down the street. I live in a town of four hundred and fifty, and I've opened some eyes there. I know people talk about me behind my back, but they know me. They know who I am. They can talk about me, but yet, I'm there, so it may make it easier for somebody else who comes behind me.

AM: What do you think are some of the most significant challenges facing the community today?

LAL: Schools, the youth. The youth in schools, especially in South Carolina, the opportunity to be themselves without the schools—and it’s really hit or miss. It depends on the principal of the school that the kid attends as to how accepting or non-accepting they are. Bathroom access for kids and for adults. Pronoun and name respect for the youth is huge.

LAL: I don't know whether you know the stats, but without parental and societal support, upwards of fifty percent of trans youth will attempt suicide, not might, but will attempt suicide, and that number's probably small, low. With support, it drops down to below five percent, which is more in keeping with the national average, something we don't talk about that almost five percent of our youth will attempt suicide. Why? Why aren't we—because we don't talk about it. Suicide is something we don't mention.

LAL: That and just civil rights, the same—I can be fired tomorrow because I'm transgender. I can be fired because now, legally, according to the state of South Carolina I am in a same-sex marriage. People can refuse to rent to somebody who's LGBTQI. We're not asking for special rights. We're asking for the same rights that everybody else has. That's the difference. The people who are anti-LGBTQI say that we're asking for special rights, but if you were to tell them, "All right, you get the same rights as the LGBTQI community," they would scream, because we don't have any rights. We don't even have the right to life, liberty, or the pursuit of happiness, and that's sad.
AM: Have you ever experienced anxieties over potential discrimination?

LAL: Over potential what?

AM: Discrimination. Like you said getting fired or rental.

LAL: Yeah. I'd say more so when I first came out, because it was new. We're talking in the ‘90s when I first came out. It didn't stop me, but I knew that it was there, that it would probably happen. It didn't happen as often as I thought it would, but then again, I didn't place myself in situations where it could happen. I would go grocery shopping at four in the morning, so I wouldn't run into people. Slowly I gained confidence, especially when I came out the second time about four, four and a half years ago. I just go. I go wherever I want, do whatever I want to do. I don't worry about it anymore. To me, if somebody wants to discriminate against me, that's on them. I'm not going to confront them. I'm not going to get in their face and yell, but I will assert myself. I will stand up for my civil rights, as few as I have. [Laughs.]

AM: Yeah. Where did this sense of confidence come from?

LAL: Well, I think it just came from admitting who I was, that this person—that I hid myself for so long that the persona I had adopted, the façade was insecure because they knew they were hiding a secret. Hiding something this big—because this is big—is going to affect your psyche, is going to make you tentative, because what if somebody finds out? What if somebody finds out that I like to dress in women's clothes, that I want to be a woman, that I am a woman? Basically, that was my progression was that I dressed in the clothes, I wanted to be a woman, I am a woman. Each one of those, I gained more confidence.

LAL: Now, the cross-dressing, which is what I'll call it, for most of my life that did not inspire confidence at all. In fact, that kind of hindered me in terms of confidence, made me very insecure, because I didn't know why I did it, why I felt almost a compunction. I had to. It wasn't something that I could just forget about. It was a part of me.

LAL: When I came out the second time, I had a crisis one night, and it was pretty bad. I think it was my finally discarding the façade I'd built, but the façade was fighting back. It did not want to let go, did not want to be cast aside, but I cast it aside because it was either come out or I couldn't go on living in two worlds. It wasn't going to do.
AM: How might your views and your generation's views about gender, sexuality, and reproduction compare with those of your parents' generation?

LAL: Oh, completely different. That being said, I'm a Baby Boomer, born in '52. My generation basically, probably [laughs]—thinking about it now, they're probably the same as my parents. It's changed a little bit, but most of them have that same attitude. I mean hell, the Baby Boomers gave us Donald Trump. Think about that. That's who gave us Donald Trump, people my age, and it's because they don't want change. Whereas me, I mean look at me, I came out. Changes are what I'm all about.

LAL: The youth of today—and by youth, I'm including Millennials even though the oldest Millennial is in their thirties now—they give me hope that things will change. I just pray that our society lasts that long to help them achieve the positions of power to effect that change, because we're still dealing with the Baby Boomers and then I don't know what you'd call the people who were born in the '70s, but that's the generations that we have right now.

LAL: The weird thing is is that the Baby Boomers, we were the hippies. I mean our parents just thought that we were all going to hell in a handbasket, a bunch of potheads, and wanting to upend the government, social upheaval. What happened to us? Where did my generation lose that sense of empowerment, that sense of we can change the world? They got married, had kids, got jobs and, all of a sudden, material things became more important than liberty.

LAL: I tend to paraphrase a quote by George Orwell in 1984. I add a word to it. The quote with the word added is, "Given the choice between freedom and the illusion of happiness, most will choose the illusion." I added the word illusion, because he just said happiness, because it's not happiness. It's an illusion. I lived an illusion for most of my life. I didn't find happiness until I threw it aside and found my freedom. You ask how I gained confidence. I quit living the illusion and became free.

AM: That's very powerful.

LAL: Thank you.

AM: What do you know about the history of the LGBTQ community in the South Carolina Lowcountry?

LAL: It wasn't talked about. Only when it was, it was scandalous. My father and my mother were part of Charleston society because my father's family
came here in 1695, my mother's in 1710. I'm related to all the families in Charleston, the old families. They were a part of that social circle. In the early '60s, a gentleman moved here from England—Gordon Langley Hall—and he was welcomed with open arms, and feted, and they threw parties, he threw parties, everyone came. Then he went to Europe and came back as Dawn Langley Hall, had had gender confirmation surgery, only back then they called it sexual reassignment, and announced that she was marrying her chauffeur, black chauffeur, which set Charleston on its ears. I mean the tongues were wagging and everything, because before then it hadn't been in your face. It had been kept quiet.

LAL: There was a couple in town who ran a school. They were spinsters, old maids. They lived together, but they were just friends. They may have been, but the odds are they were not, but that they knew they couldn't be open about it. Society politely ignored the fact. They made excuses. They are old maids. They're spinsters. Their work is their life, but they lived together from in their twenties until they died. To this day, people who went to the school that they founded, they go, "Oh, no, no. They weren't. They weren't gay." I think they were, and I think a lot of the so-called lifetime bachelors, spinsters, they didn't get married for a reason, or if they did get married, they got married for the wrong reasons, to prove who they were.

LAL: We didn't talk about it. It was not talked about, but Gordon Langley Hall, Dawn Langley Hall, the whole transition blew the doors off for a brief period. Then they shut them back. It's something we don't talk about. When I graduated from college in the mid-70s, I was hanging out, basically, at the gay bars in Charleston, and everybody knew where they were, and it was such that I can remember the Lion's Head, which was on Hasell Street, across from where the chief of police at the time lived. He'd be out there at night and just staring across the street at all the people. To this day I wonder, because the look on his face was one of jealousy. I just wonder.

LAL: I think a lot of people of my generation are like that of they're too scared to be who they are. They don't have to be LGBTQI, but they're too scared to say, "No. I am not this person who you think I am. I'm somebody else." It's a role they play. They're acting, basically, because this is what they were trained to do, what their families expected of them. Then when they got married, had kids, whatever, they became trapped in this image of who they aren't. Then have you heard of the Garden & Gun Club?

AM: No, I have not.
Okay. This was in early Spoleto where the Omni, I think they still call—Charleston Place is now. It was an old JC Penney building that had closed, and it was vacant. One year, they opened up a bar there during Spoleto, and the bar was like a hundred feet long because this was a massive department store. It was a hit. They did it a second year, and it was such a big hit they kept it going. It was called the King Street Garden & Gun Club, and it was LGBTQI. I'd say about eighty percent that, twenty percent straight. It was the place to go. Disco was reigning, so they had disco and all that stuff, but everybody went, had a great time. You would see attorneys, judges, all these people there mixing, but yet, outside of the Garden & Gun they wouldn't have anything to do with each other. The two worlds were separate except at the Garden & Gun Club to where that was kind of odd.

I would go. I was living upstairs from two lesbians, so I would walk into the Garden & Gun with them and their friends, like twenty women and me. We danced the night away. They didn't worry about me hitting on them. I didn't have to buy them drinks and I didn't have to worry about hitting on them. We just had a good time and, for the most part, they kept the gay males from hitting on me, which has happened a few times. I was always very polite. I'd say, "I'm sorry. I don't swing that way," but some don't take no for an answer.

Of course, I was trying to figure out who I was. Because to be a transsexual, I had to be attracted to men. Well then, I must be attracted to men. I did try it twice, and it just wasn't for me. I mean it was mildly interesting, but it wasn't who I was. That's when I decided I must be a cross-dresser, because I wasn't attracted to men.

We have about five more minutes. What were some notable events in the history of the LGBTQ community that you remember?

Well, Dawn Langley Hall, that was the biggie. That was gigantic. The Garden & Gun Club, that was big. Aside from that, it really was nothing big in Charleston because it was kind of on the QT. Growing up, I can remember being told don't go to the Battery, White Point Gardens at night because that's where the, quote, faggots hang out. Everybody understood that that's what was going on. I mean people would cruise the Battery; men would cruise the Battery looking for other men. It wasn't that it was—everybody knew about it, but no one talked about it, and it was allowed to happen, but it wasn't a big thing, because everybody ignored it.

Of course, I was not—except in the '70s after college—I really was not a part of the LGBTQI movement. I was on the fringes, so I really don't know everything that occurred because I was not part of that culture,
because I was pushing that away as far as I could, even though I felt comfortable in it. I felt more comfortable in a gay bar than I did in a straight bar. There was a reason for that.

LAL: Really, aside from a few things like the Garden & Gun Club and Dawn Langley Hall, who, before she transitioned, was the godfather to my stepsister. Her mother told her that her godfather had died. To this day, I have no clue whether she actually knows who her godfather was. [Laughing.]

AM: Yeah.

LAL: Yeah. There wasn't that much. In fact, my stepsister's father killed himself because his wife came home and caught him in bed with another man, who was Gordon Langley Hall. That wasn't talked about in Charleston. That would have been big, but we don't talk about it. We hush it up. We might talk about it behind closed doors, but not in polite society. We don't do that.

AM: Well, that's about it.

LAL: Okay.

AM: Thank you very much.

LAL: You're welcome.

End Recording