

Angel Collie: An Interview by Ethan Dominic

Conducted on October 23, 2023 via Zoom

Angel Collie graduated in 2022 from the Doctor of Ministry program at Duke Divinity School where he focused on providing spiritual and pastoral care within transgender communities. In addition to his professional and academic work, Angel serves on the Center for LGBTQ and Gender Studies Transgender Roundtable, the Freedom Center for Social Justice board, and is co-faculty for the Transgender Seminarian Leadership Cohort. In his free time, he is probably catching a flight somewhere, in the middle of the ocean on a cruise ship, or chilling with his pup Scout and his adorable but mischievous kitties Suki and Saint!

Ethan (00:00:00):

Awesome.

Angel (00:00:02):

Let's see. Alright, I think it is recording.

Ethan (00:00:06):

Nice. Okay, great. So hello Angel. How are you doing?

Angel (00:00:13):

I'm doing good. Monday.

Ethan (00:00:17):

Yeah. Yeah, Monday always are—it's the beginning of the week. But yeah, I'm feeling pretty great as well. I'm really looking forward to this interview. But thank you so much for taking the time to share some of your experiences with us today, and I appreciate it and I'm sure that the viewers of this interview are going to be grateful as well. So before we get started, I'm going to review some of the ways we will handle the information you shared with us. So first of all, please stop me if you have any questions. I want to make sure that you are clear at all times during the interview. And if you have any questions that I can't answer, Leslie, my youth Justice teacher can, and simply put, Angel, your interview is yours. So at the end of our time today, I will upload the recording of this interview to a safe Dropbox within Duke¹, and I will then transcribe it over the next four weeks and send it back to you for review. And once you get the transcript, I'll ask you to edit it for two things. One, accuracy in case I misspelled a name, got a date wrong, and two, if you decide that there are parts of the interview, you'd like to edit it out. And once we've completed the interview transcription process and I have your permission to upload it, the interview and transcript will be uploaded to the public site at Duke. And I'll quickly go ahead and link that below in the chat. If you could just give me a second.

Angel (00:01:41):

¹ Duke University: A private research university located in Durham, North Carolina, USA. Known for its rigorous academic programs and research contributions, Duke offers undergraduate and graduate education across various disciplines.

And so this is a class you're taking?

Ethan (00:01:43):

Yes, yes. This is for my Youth Justice Movements class. Okay, cool. Did that link show up in the chat by any chance?

Angel (00:01:59):

It did.

Ethan (00:02:00):

Awesome. Yeah. Thank you very much. So yeah, there will likely be things today that you share that are very important, but that I don't know enough yet about yet to form good questions. And this is not unusual for oral history. Sometimes interviewers need time to think through powerful testimony and circle back, and I'd like to be able to ask any follow-up questions I may have after this interview via email. Is that okay with you?

Angel (00:02:24):

Yep.

Ethan (00:02:26):

Awesome. Yeah. And yeah, it's great that you were able to send me the consent form. So yeah, thank you again for sending that to me. Yeah, I'll definitely save time later on. Okay, great. Awesome. So I want to begin by asking you questions about your work, if that is all right with you? Yeah,

Angel (00:02:47):

Absolutely.

Ethan (00:02:48):

Yeah, thank you. So first of all, I wanted to ask how is it being the assistant director of the Center for Sexual and Gender Diversity at Duke University²?

Angel (00:02:58):

Absolutely. So I was the assistant director from 2016 up until I think for about five years, and then was promoted to associate director, then became interim director for about a year and was officially named director in December.

Ethan (00:03:19):

Nice. Cool.

² Center for Sexual and Gender Diversity at Duke University (CSGD) : An organization at Duke University that strives to create an inclusive climate for students, staff, faculty, and alumnx with marginalized sexual orientations, romantic orientations, gender identities, and gender expressions through education, advocacy, support, mentoring, academic engagement, and providing space.

(00:03:23):

Did it feel pretty good being—oh, sorry, go ahead.

Angel (00:03:25):

Yeah, so in terms of being director, I'm a new director and I feel like I am learning a lot about the role. I'm learning, how it's different from what my roles were and duties were as an assistant or associate director and really even interim director, I think, sorry, supervision is an important piece of that that I didn't do in terms of supervising professional staff as an assistant director. And then the strategic oversight of the center is a big part of that. I spend more time on budgeting and assessment, so I'll say that it's a more administratively heavy job.

(00:04:17):

And then personally, because the student facing piece is so important to me, I try to ensure that I am taking the time to just be in the center to be present with students and to show up for campus partners. So whether that is being a volunteer to make sure that LDOC³ goes well or the other day helping out with Blue Devil's Market⁴, the new farmer's market initiative. And I try to show up in those ways as well. I love it. I joke, not joke, but am kind of serious when I say I have the best job in the world and that I get paid to hang out with queer⁵ people and talk about what it means to be affirming or being an ally or how to get pronouns.

(00:05:17):

So it's a pretty fun job. I mean, there are times that it is hard. There are times that is stressful. I think especially currently with what's going on politically in the world with all the anti-trans bills⁶ that are coming up. Obviously I'm trans, so that's something that hits home. And yet knowing that I can be in a supportive role for folks who maybe haven't experienced this type of thing before, I've been out as trans⁷ for a long time. And so for some of our students who are coming out⁸, maybe they haven't this kind of attack on their identity in the same way. And so being able to be there for them to support them, to create spaces that affirming, to create spaces of queer and trans joy, really, yes, it's a job, but it's also a calling and a passion for me. So even when it's hard, it's still meaningful, I guess.

Ethan (00:06:23):

Okay, yeah. Well, great. Yeah, thank you very much for sharing. As a follow-up question to something that you were saying earlier. You said that definitely the current political situation, especially with the whole Israel-Palestine conflict⁹ happening has affected your situation right

³ LDOC: "Last Day of Classes"

⁴The Blue Devil Market: is a program that brings an inclusive, supportive, and local produce to the Duke University community.

⁵ Queer: A term that has been reclaimed by the LGBTQ+ community and is used as an umbrella term for sexual and gender minorities. It can encompass a range of identities beyond traditional categories.

⁶ Anti-trans bills: Legislation that is perceived as discriminatory or restrictive against transgender individuals. These bills often aim to limit the rights or protections afforded to transgender people, particularly in areas such as healthcare, education, or public facilities.

⁷ Trans: Abbreviation or colloquial term for transgender, describing individuals whose gender identity differs from the sex assigned to them at birth.

⁸ Coming Out: The process by which an individual openly reveals their sexual orientation or gender identity to others, often involving family, friends, or the broader community.

⁹ Israel-Palestine conflict: Tensions between the nations of Israel and Palestine especially grew in 2023.

now, if I'm not mistaken. So if so, would you be able to elaborate on that a little more if possible? Yeah,

Angel (00:06:55):

I think that as a center, I have to be really mindful about how we're supporting queer and trans students. And so I try really hard to position us to serve both queer Muslim students, queer Palestinian students, as well as serving queer and trans Jewish students. Realizing that when you hold multiple marginalized identities coming out as queer or trans is often compounded with other forms of oppression or marginalization. And so to me that means that it's even more important to make sure that we're providing a space where students feel like they can be seen and supported. And so I think that is consistent in the work that we've been doing. It's really important to us that students feel like they can come to the CSGD. And so that's the stance or how I feel about how I approach this work. That's really important that we can position ourselves to be able to support students around their identities.

Ethan (00:08:19):

Yeah. Awesome. Yeah, thank you very much for sharing. If you don't mind, I'm just going to transition to our next question, and I guess this in a way sort of relates to whatever you've discussed in terms of providing the spaces to queer and trans students, but what leads you to want to provide spiritual and pastoral care within queer and trans communities?

Angel (00:08:45):

So this is part of my work, but also separate from what I formally do as the director in the CSGD. This kind of intersects with my own personal story and upbringing. I was raised in a conservative, rural North Carolina, Southern Baptist¹⁰ Church was kicked out when I came out. And so faith has always felt like an important part of the conversation, at least for me. And I feel like a lot of the homophobia and transphobia that you experience in the south is often rooted in faith in some ways, or at least much of it is. Anyway. So for my doctoral work and things like that, I got my master's in Divinity and then got my doctorate in ministry where I looked more specifically at spiritual and pastoral care for queer and trans people to look at that intersection of faith, sexuality¹¹, gender¹², and when I think I about my work at the Center, I really do see my role as someone who is there to extend care for community, a community that often experiences oppression, marginalization.

(00:10:08):

And so that's a little bit about how I frame my own personal drive and approach to this work, is how, one of the things that I often think a lot about or that I say is how do I create a soft landing place? So how do I create a place where people can come and be authentic and get the support they need? And that's really my hope for what the center is and what the center does. One of the things, first things I did even before becoming a director was to get rid of the giant front desk,

¹⁰ Baptist: A Christian denomination characterized by the belief in adult baptism and the autonomy of individual congregations. Baptists are part of the larger Protestant tradition.

¹¹ Sexuality: The complex interplay of biological, psychological, and social factors that contribute to an individual's sexual orientation, attraction, and behaviors.

¹² Gender: The social and cultural roles, behaviors, expectations, and attributes that a society considers appropriate for men and women. It is distinct from biological sex.

you walked into the center and there was this giant desk there, and so I would see folks walk in and stop and not really go further. And so we got the desk removed, we got a couch and a TV¹³ and a Nintendo Switch¹⁴. And when I really tried to set it up to be a little bit more like a communal living room type of space because I really want people to have a sense of they belong there. It is a little bit of a home away from home for them. And probably my favorite thing is to go in the center and hang out on the beanbags with students. I'm not very good at playing Switch, but I enjoy that they get excited about it.

Ethan (00:11:43):

Yeah. Awesome. Yeah. Thank you for sharing. Yeah. So actually I was going to ask this later in the interview as well, now that you kind of touched on the fact that you did grow up in rural North Carolina. Could you elaborate more on what that lifestyle was like and how you believe it affected you as a person as well as your work moving forward, even though you kind of already touched on that?

Angel (00:12:10):

Yeah, of course. I am grateful for where I grew up for the people that were my community and instilled the values that they did into me. I went to grad school in New England and that experience really helped me appreciate the way that folks operate in the South. I think while it can be challenging, it is an area which I kind of understand as well, if that makes sense.

(00:13:00):

Anyways, I think one of the things I learned about living in the South is that it's some level of cognitive dissonance. So it's like I have people tell me all the time, they'll say something that's transphobic¹⁵ or homophobic or post something that's politically conservative to our community. And I'll say to them, that doesn't sit well or ouch kind of situation. And they'll say to me, oh, but I love you. You're different. And often that creates an opportunity for me to have a different kind of conversation and say, I literally am professionally in a role where I support and represent and advocate with queer and trans people. I am a leader in the community and have been a leader in different movements throughout my life.

(00:14:17):

And so it's like I am THEM, right? And so helping people to have that conversation to think a little bit more critically about it is, and that relational aspect of growing up in the south and in a rural town is something I really appreciate. PFLAG¹⁶ used to have this marketing campaign that was, be careful who you hate, it could be someone you love. And I've found that being able to listen to people, to hear what their concerns are and to be willing to engage in that conversation actually is fruitful in helping people to shift their perspective. And I've seen that because I've been out, gosh, I came out at 14, I'm 38 now. So having been out for so long, I've seen that make a difference and have an impact later when their grandchild or their kid came out, they're able to have processed some of that and to approach that very differently. Whereas I found living in

¹³ TV: Stands for television.

¹⁴ Nintendo Switch: A gaming console created by the video-game company Nintendo.

¹⁵ Transphobic: Refers to attitudes, behaviors, or policies that display a strong aversion, prejudice, or discrimination against transgender individuals.

¹⁶ PFLAG: Abbreviation for "Parents, Families, and Friends of Lesbians and Gays," an organization that provides support, education, and advocacy for LGBTQ+ individuals and their families.

New Haven or in a different context, it was kind of this like, go be you over there, right? Go have your rights, just you. And for me, it's at least being invited into the conversation or it makes a difference. It is a way that I'm more comfortable or I'm used to operating. So that was a little bit of my experience, I guess, in doing this work in the south, in North Carolina.

Ethan (00:16:14):

I see. Yeah. Awesome. Yeah. Thank you very much for sharing. If you don't mind me asking, I did have a couple of follow-up questions on what you just said. So for one, you said you came out at 14, right? Would you be able to elaborate on what that experience was more if you feel comfortable in doing so?

Angel (00:16:39):

Yeah.

(00:16:45):

So coming out, I would say, I talked a little bit about this earlier. Faith was a big part of my story and experience, So I was 14. I came out and when my mom found out, one of the first things my mom said was like, well, I came out to a friend of hers who when I got home was on the phone with my mom. I go in the door and hear my mom say, oh, Angel's here, I got to go. So obviously I came out and then they immediately outed me thinking that my mom was more supportive and she was a hairdresser, and this particular friend identified as a member of the community. So I think that what they didn't realize is it's a little bit different when it's your child.

(00:17:41):

And so I go in my room or whatever, after getting home that night, my mom comes in and says, if you're gay¹⁷, you're going to hell, period. And that kind of started a series of things. She tried to take my computer away so I wouldn't go to LGBTQ¹⁸ websites and stuff like that. Not that a lot existed at that time, and church was where things really got bad and school was not a great experience. After that, after a little while, I got a little bit more empowered. I got these rainbow¹⁹ earrings and I kept going to church until once a day. They basically pulled me aside and was like, you're making a mockery of the church by praying on the altar with your piercings and homosexual²⁰ colors. And eventually talked to my mom into putting me in handcuffs and taking me for a psychiatric evaluation at a religiously affiliated mental health hospital, I guess facility.

(00:18:54):

And they did want to hospitalize me. However, I didn't have insurance at the time, which I didn't realize was a gift, but it was, so they referred me to the state psychiatric facility where we had a very different response. They pretty much laughed at my youth minister who was asking for Christian counseling and congratulated my mom on having a normal teenager. And I am thankful because for my mom though, that was a real kind of awakening for her that maybe she was causing some of the harm. And that's when she began to open up a little bit more to the idea. So

¹⁷ Gay: A term used to describe individuals who are attracted to people of the same gender. It is often used as an umbrella term for the LGBTQ+ community.

¹⁸ LGBTQ+: An abbreviation for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning, and other marginalized sexual orientations.

¹⁹ Rainbow: A symbol for the LGBTQIA+ community.

²⁰ Homosexual: A synonym for the term gay.

coming out again, it was pretty rough at school, I was getting picked on. I went from being a straight A student and three sport athlete in middle school to getting picked on pretty heavily and failing in high school because of getting picked on and bullied so much, getting super glued to my chair.

(00:19:58):

And the person who did it really didn't get in trouble. I got put in in-school suspension, because I wore a T-shirt that said, "Tinky Winky made me do it." And the teachers were like, well, it's easier to remove one person than the whole class. I was going to drop out. I was just waiting to turn 16 to drop out, but my mom found a private LGBTQ High School in Texas and sent me to it.

Ethan (00:20:39):

Oh, I see. Yeah. Oh, wow. Well, first of all, I just—that sounded pretty rough. Yeah, I'm speechless. So first of all, I apologize, but second, thank you very much for sharing. I know that must have been pretty tough for you to share, but thank you anyway for sharing. I really appreciate it. That's another follow-up question to what you were saying earlier. I did want to ask, I believe at one point in your response, you did mention that in terms of the homophobia that was going on, that there'd be some people that would say that would kind of say homophobic things and then to you specifically, they'd be like, oh, okay. It's okay. Did you say something like that?

Angel (00:21:35):

Yeah, I think mean it happens, unfortunately, it still happens all the time with how politicized trans identities are right now. I'll see folks who I grew up with. I mean, even the guy who's a principal of my elementary school will post these really transphobic posts and I'll be like, Hey, what's up with that? And other people like them who I know and just it opens up the opportunity to engage in a different kind of conversation. And being able to talk about how this is really harmful. This is some of the facts. Folks always want to come in with the kind of faith aspect of it just based on the community I grew up in. And that's something I can actually speak to pretty well. Having a master's in divinity and having my doctorate ministry. So being able to talk a little bit about some of the misinformation that exists and ways in which scripture has been incorrectly used and interpreted, I would say, to cause harm. And being able to have those conversations with people based on they know me, they know I'm a good person. And I think what it does is it breaks down some of that misinformation. If some of those stereotypes or some of those things that are so deeply rooted in fear, when I can come in and say, wait, let me create a little bit of cognitive dissonance for you because the beliefs that you have just aren't rooted in reality. And because they know me, they're able to see the conversation in a different way, I believe.

Ethan (00:23:23):

I see. Yeah. Yeah. Thank you very much for elaborating. Yeah. So kind of just transitioning back to questions regarding your work based on previous communication that we've had with each other, you did indicate that you were pretty invested in Duke's National Coming Out Day²¹ this

²¹ Duke's National Coming Out Day: An event or initiative at Duke University commemorating National Coming Out Day, which is observed annually to celebrate and support individuals coming out as LGBTQ+.

year. So would you be able to elaborate on that? How did you feel on that day and what do you find was most special to you about that day?

Angel (00:23:58):

It's just like that, the importance of coming out, the importance of relationship of visibility, I mean, I want to say coming out is not the end all be all. There are lots of reasons why people may or may not come out. Coming Out is also not like a one-time event. It's like often LGBTQI+ people are having to come out all the time in different ways, anytime you're meeting someone new, when you talk about your identity, your family, things like that. So I think that what's most important for me about coming out day on campus is our campus partners. We invite many of our campus partners to come and to table and to be visible and support of students. So students knowing that someone in those offices in those areas support them, have their back is so important and that students can begin to get to know them and build relationships with them and break down some of those barriers and to entering into that space.

(00:25:05):

I think often for marginalized folks, the assumption is it can be, am I going to be safe to come out in this situation? And so it's kind of like assuming it's not safe until somehow proven otherwise. And so the other piece of that, other than that building relationships piece is the visibility piece. We typically, in the past, we've just kind of given them (the t-shirts) out, but we wanted to create a little bit more meaning behind it. And we wanted to ensure that our campus partners were getting good interactions for participating. And so we instituted this quest this year where you had to check in using Duke groups, and then we would give you a little business card, size card and you had to go to at least three tables. And each of our campus partners had stickers. And so for each of the campus partner tables that you visited, you could get a sticker and you had to get at least three to get a T-shirt.

(00:26:12):

It was really cool. I think our record was someone got 21 stickers, that's a lot. I know. So they went to every single campus partner, and then most people went to five or more. Over half of the folks went to at least five tables, which was really cool to see that folks went above and beyond for the most part what was asked of them in order to get the T-shirts, which to me shows this level of engagement and shows this, we're able to actually count how many interactions as a whole our campus partners had as a result of instituting that where we had not been able to count or really keep track of that in the same way before. And then students are given a T-shirt. And then that T-shirt is really, we talk a lot about in our trainings, the power and importance of visibility, having a rainbow flag up or having some type of ally pin or pronoun pin that goes such a long way in communicating to someone, oh, I'm someone that is supportive and affirming so folks don't have to wonder or don't have to guess, is this going to be someone that I'm going to be safe or it's going to be a good idea to come out to in whatever shape that takes.

(00:27:36):

So that visibility piece is really important. And I've worked at Duke for eight years now, and I've been in the airport at RDU²² and saw someone wearing a coming out day t-shirt we gave out. I've been in other cities and have seen someone wearing them. And this kind of amazing what

²² RDU: Abbreviation for Raleigh-Durham International Airport, serving the Research Triangle Region in North Carolina, USA.

happens when you year after year for eight years now have given out almost 1200 or at least a thousand t-shirts every year. You continue to see them in different places. So to me, that is a really powerful reminder of the importance of that visibility and creating that visible sense of community belonging.

Ethan (00:28:24):

Nice. Yeah. Yeah. Great. Thank you for sharing. I did actually have a follow-up question regarding the visibility aspect that you're talking about earlier. Yeah. So as you discussed earlier, you did have a pretty rough experience growing up in terms of coming out and whatnot, but would you be able to elaborate on the relationship that you personally had with visibility between that point and then moving forward? When did you feel like you really embraced that visibility aspect of coming out, coming, if that makes sense?

Angel (00:29:01):

Maybe early on, I remember my mom or people in my life saying, did you have to break the closet doors down in the sense that I was so gay and super proud of it. I'm pretty tattooed and I have rainbow stars on my arm. I have a trans symbol tattoo on my arm. And just being very loudly and openly queer was something that was really important to me because of what I experienced from the beginning. My personality is a little rebellious. I sometimes define myself as feral in a joking way, but not so jokingly. And so it was kind of like, you're going to tell me I can't be queer. I'm going to be super queer.

(00:29:59):

And I think that's always kind of been my personality a little bit to be pushing the boundaries. And so I was pretty visible and out pretty much once I got outed. For me, it was like I was sitting there, I remember very distinctly in middle school just sitting, waiting for my grandma to pick me up after practice. And even before I came out, I was very athletic. I was always a tomboy. I was the only girl back then on the football team. I fought to be able to play football in middle school. So I was always queer even before I had a personal realization that I was queer. So I remember very distinctly after football practice waiting for my grandmother to pick me up and just being like, oh, I think I'm gay. I think I like girls.

(00:31:00):

And looking back now, I called my mom and told her: I want to talk to your friend Katie. And so I got outed pretty quickly after my own realization of it. So in some ways I was just doing the best I could to figure it out. And I'd say, looking back, I think I was trans, but growing up without a lot of access to information and without people being visible, when I came out as a lesbian, back then, I didn't know anyone who was trans. I didn't even really know that that was a possibility until I got involved with a queer youth organization in Durham. Unfortunately, that doesn't exist anymore. It was called NCLYN, North Carolina Lambda Youth Network. It was based in Durham and actually was where Zen Succulent is now across from the Marriott on Chapel Hill Street is where it was located.

(00:32:07):

And it wasn't until I got involved with them that I went to a trans 101 training where I met someone who was a trans guy. And I was like, the minute he was telling his story, it was almost like everything just kind of opened up. And I was like, oh my gosh. It's almost like someone was

saying some of my deepest thoughts and feelings, and all of a sudden I had words for them, and a community and a possibility. And so that experience as well, really for me, it was formative. And knowing the importance of visibility when I came out and was growing up, there was no Laverne Cox²³ or Janet Mock²⁴, or even Chaz Bono²⁵, if you ever saw anything that had to do with trans people, and I even hesitate to say that I even hesitate to say this, it was this very caricatured, highly dramatic made for TV.

(00:33:21):

Yeah, caricature, I guess is the best way to say it. Jerry Springer was the only other example I had. And it's hard to see yourself reflected in something that is made for TV drama and isn't actually reflective of real people's lives and experiences. And so I've always kind of held onto that as why it's so important to be visible and why visibility and having role models and possibility models is important. And I've kind of lived through and grew up in a place where there were not and still things aren't great, it's getting better, but there still aren't great representations of queer people in media, right? Often when you see queer and trans people in TV or in media, often it's tragic. It's filled with drama, they're bullied or it's like the butt of the joke. We're seeing that change. But especially when you think there's a documentary with Laverne Cox,

(00:34:38):

*Disclosure*²⁶, that looks at the representation of trans people in media. And it's often terrible, right? It's like often we're portrayed as either we're murdered or we're sinister and our motives, and you very rarely see healthy, thriving representations of trans people and queer people and relationships and things like that. So I think that's another reason why visibility is so important. It's another reason I'm really grateful to be at Duke. It's really changed in the eight years that I've been here looking around now at student affairs. It's a very different place. Many of our senior leadership identify as queer and trans or have loved ones who are openly queer or trans and their supportive, and that's been a real gift. I don't know. A lot of people can't look at their supervisor and their supervisors supervisor and see those kinds of queer role models, and I'm really grateful for that.

Ethan (00:35:57):

Yeah, I see. Yeah. Thank you for sharing. I had a follow up question to what you were saying earlier. So you said in your opinion, you believe that representations of queer and trans people in general throughout media isn't, they portray queer and trans people in a very negative, almost kind of mocking kind of way, right? Yeah. So how do you believe those representation should change? I do understand that you were talking about how that should change and how definitely

²³ Laverne Cox: An American actress, producer, and transgender rights advocate, best known for her role in the TV series "Orange Is the New Black."

²⁴ Janet Mock: An American writer, director, producer, and transgender rights activist known for her advocacy and work in media, particularly in promoting transgender representation.

²⁵ Chaz Bono: An American transgender advocate, actor, and writer. Chaz Bono is the child of entertainers Sonny Bono and Cher.

²⁶*Disclosure: Trans Lives on Screen*: is a groundbreaking documentary that examines the history and impact of transgender representation in film and television, exploring how media portrayals have shaped societal perceptions of transgender individuals.

queer and trans people should be portrayed in more of a positive way. But how do you believe personally they should be changed more specifically, if that makes any sense at all?

Angel (00:36:49):

Yeah, sorry, I don't mean to sniffle, I get allergies. Yeah, I mean, I think that one, I love that there's a show that I super love called *The Fosters*²⁷, and it's this interracial lesbian couple. I don't love that. One of them as well, one of them doesn't have my favorite career path, but whatever. But they are this healthy interracial lesbian couple who foster children. And you get taken through some of the dynamics of that. And I think I like that show because you see this healthy, supportive, queer couple who's negotiating life and family and career.

(00:37:52):

And I think there are so few good representations of that in the media. And I think that's not just true for queer people. I think if we think about a lot of marginalized folks, media often tends to reflect stereotypical tropes about folks. I think we're moving towards a time where we're doing better about folks being authentic and not having folks who don't hold identities play those roles. There's a history of non-trans folks playing trans characters. And I think that in some ways there's been more of a recognition of the importance of authenticity and not putting on identities that don't belong to you.

(00:38:45):

Yeah, I don't know if that answers the question, but I do think it's important that there be more healthy and authentic representations of queer people. I listened to a book recently that I've been listening to. I do audible, I tend to do audiobooks when I'm driving. And so there's been a couple recently that I think did a really, really fantastic job of written by queer and trans people and representing queer and trans people. One is *Felix Ever After*²⁸, which is kind of a young adult novel of this young black, trans masculine kid trying to figure out high school and what they're going to do for college and dating and relationships. That does a really great job of representing, at least what I've heard folks who hold similar identity share what some of their experiences are. There's another book that I listened to with my partner who's a trans woman called *Detransition Baby*, which I think does a really fantastic job of, I did not like how it ended, but does a really fantastic job of representing trans women and the experience of being trans femme²⁹.

(00:40:00):

And so those things are just so important. I know for my partner, having listened, it was a really beautiful experience listening to it with her because as a trans woman, she felt so validated that she heard some experiences that resonated or hit home so deeply with her. And not all just deep intense stuff. We always joke, there was one part of the book where the main character says what every trans woman wants is to just be positioned properly in the right lighting, which is a joke, and it's light and funny. And we joke about that all the time, and my partner's like it's the lighting. And so even the humor in that of being able to see yourself reflected is really, I think, is

²⁷ *The Fosters*: A compelling family drama series that explores the complexities of love, identity, and social issues as it revolves around a diverse family, including foster and biological children, raised by a lesbian couple.

²⁸ *Felix Ever After*: A heartfelt coming-of-age novel, "Felix Ever After" follows the journey of Felix Love, a transgender teen, as he grapples with love, self-discovery, and acceptance.

²⁹ Trans femme: A term used to describe individuals assigned male at birth but who identify with femininity. It is often associated with transgender women and other gender identities on the feminine spectrum.

meaningful and validating. And it's really, people always ask me in trainings to do a lot of Trans 101 trainings.

(00:41:01):

We have one coming up in November. And the thing that always say is, listen to people's stories, right? Educate yourselves. Don't expect marginalized people to educate you, right? It's very different asking like, oh, what does queer mean? I don't get it. Which if that's a question you have, that's fine. Maybe ask someone who like me, who gets paid to take on that labor and work, but ask a different question. Something that I always say in our trainings is like, do your homework, educate yourselves, know in general what those terms mean. But asking what does queer mean is very different than saying, oh, thank you for sharing your identity with me. Can you tell me a little bit more about what it means to you as an individual? So getting to know someone's personal story and what's meaningful and important to them is a very different question than asking folks to educate you. And I think that in the world that we live in and with the intersections of identities, all of us have multiple identities. Getting to understand the nuance of being invited in and being curious about that is really important.

Ethan (00:42:13):

I see. Yeah. Yeah. Thank you for sharing. So overall, you believe that representation should be changed to be more authentic, so to speak, right?

Angel (00:42:25):

Yeah,

Ethan (00:42:26):

I got it. Yeah, that definitely makes sense. Thank you. So as for my next question, I'm aware that even though you are interim director of the Center for Sexual and Gender Diversity at Duke University, I am also aware that according to my research that you are also the secretary for the Freedom Center for his Social Justice board according to Duke's website. Would you be able to elaborate on your role and work as secretary?

Angel (00:42:57):

Yeah. The Freedom Center for Social Justice is an organization based in Charlotte. It's a QTPOC led organization. It's led by Bishop Tonyia Rawls. She is a lesbian-identified black woman, bishop and pastor retired now, and she founded the Freedom Center to be a culture-shifting organization that really works at the intersection of faith, social justice, gender and sexuality, really social justice, pretty broadly defined. And they've done a lot of different things. There are three things that they do that resonate the most with me out of the many things that they do. So for example, one of the things that they did was called the Do No Harm campaign, which is where they went and just tried to have conversations with conservative Christian pastors in more rural parts of North Carolina. So this not necessarily right in Charlotte, but in some of the surrounding areas.

(00:44:16):

And based on the shared commitment to their faith, where could they align? And so the campaign was Do No Harm. And so the goal was like you might not be able to get someone to

show up at a Pride Parade and March. You might not get someone to even perform a wedding for a similar gender couple, but you can maybe get them to commit to not doing harm. So if someone comes out in your congregation not telling them they're sick and sinful and going to hell, not putting them in handcuffs perhaps, and trying to take them to get a psychiatric evaluation, not encouraging their families to kick them out or take this tough love approach, maybe you could recommend them to a congregation that would be more supportive and more affirming of them and their identity, for example. And so that was one program where I saw Make a big difference, and again, do that kind of culture changing work.

(00:45:22):

Another thing they do is they have this yearly retreat called the Trans Faith in Action Network Retreat, and it's a retreat that centers trans people of color, who are also people of faith. And that's faith broadly defined. And unlike many other conferences, they build in a lot of time for Walking Labyrinth, going on a nature walk. They have someone come in and do massage for folks. They create opportunities for self-care, for healing, and they make sure that folks are fed really well and have really good food. And so not like these conferences where you go to where it's like you're in session, in session, in session, in session. So that is a really beautiful and meaningful space that centers the experiences of trans people of color, who are also people of faith, and that I think is such a rare space for people to get. And then another thing they do, which I've been really involved with is the Transgender Seminarian Leadership cohort. And what that is, it's a year long experience for five to six transgender, gender nonconforming, non-binary folks in religious leadership formation, typically seminary or rabbinical school. We've had folks who were in formation to be a kind of multi-faith chaplain or folks who were Muslim, who were in working towards being a Imam, for example.

(00:47:22):

And what we do is it's actually a partnership between three organizations, the national LGBTQ Task Force, the CLGS, which is a center for LGBTQ and Gender Studies in Religion and Ministry, which is based out of the Pacific School of Religion and Berkeley, and then the Freedom Center for Social Justice. And so basically these three organizations come together to fund this year-long cohort experience where we pay for travel and all expenses to go to each of their national gatherings. So the Taskforce Creating Change Conference, the Trans Faith and Action Network retreat, which I talked a little bit about. And then for the CLGS portion, we do a retreat for the cohort to get to know one another at the beginning and build relationships and share each other's, we call it their spiritual autobiography. So we just spend three days together on the weekend, and folks talk a little bit about who they are, their identities, how they got their calling, and what their kind of vocation or calling is.

(00:48:31):

And it tends to be a deeply meaningful year. And I think we're in our 11th cohort, so there are approximately 65 people who have been through this experience now. And it's amazing to have this alum network of folks who have been in the cohort who are doing things in nonprofit organizations, who are pastoring churches, who are working in higher ed. It's kind of cool to see so many and be connected to so many trans people who are doing work from a faith-based perspective. And we run into people all the time and we make connections and network. And it's like often what the cohort has done for folks is create community where folks just often did not have community. Maybe I'm the only out trans person in my seminary or in my rabbinical school or in my faith formation program. And so thinking about what it means to do this work as a trans

person, what it means to get and provide spiritual care for folks who are working with queer and trans people able to make those connections and be supported.

Ethan (00:50:04):

Oh yeah, no worries. No, no. This interview is yours. Yeah, go ahead. Sorry, I cut you off.

Angel (00:50:09):

Yeah, I've been on the board way longer than anyone should ever been on a board. I think I've been on the board for 11 years now. So one day, I guess I'll roll off, but it's been a really meaningful part of my ability to give back to and be led by and support a QTPOC led organization. And one of the things that has really been apparent to me is the challenges of being an organization that is led by a woman of color and some of the challenges that she shares openly with us about the struggles of finding funding, of getting and securing grants. It's harder as a black queer woman to secure those things or to be taken as seriously. And so to be able to support her and to support that work has been meaningful to me and also eye-opening in so many ways.

Ethan (00:51:16):

Yeah. Well, thank you for sharing, and thank you for your explanation. Yeah, you really got on a lot there as well. I appreciate how you really touched on your role as secretary for the Freedom Center for Social Justice Board and how you even also even elaborated on the transgender seminary and cohort. I actually wanted to ask about that as well. Yeah, yeah. Thank you for sharing. Yeah. So if you don't mind, I'm just going to transition to questions about your personal life specifically. So according to my research, you live with your partner, cat and two Australian Shepherds named Scooter and Scout and Chapel Hill. I know you did mention your partner and a scout earlier in the interview, but I wanted to ask you if you're comfortable, would you be able to talk to me more about your family?

Angel (00:52:12):

Yeah, yeah. I do live in Chapel Hill. I now have three dogs. It's been a little bit of a rough year for me. My mom passed away from cancer. She had cancer, and then when she was in the hospital after having surgery, caught Covid. And so ultimately passed away from Covid in February. And then my stepdad passed away in March. They've been married for like 33 years. So I now have three dogs because I am stuck with her giant, giant great Dane that is eating me out of house and home. Literally, he is 160 pounds. And I say that jokingly, and not so jokingly. My dog food bill has increased exponentially also, he has literally eaten all the pillows, decorative pillows I had on my couch. Why he thinks pillows are evil and all need to be destroyed is beyond me, however, that is his thing. So yeah, so I have three dogs, two cats live in Chapel Hill. My partner, I talked a little bit about her, she's lovely. She has three kids. They live with their mom. So that is interesting and always a little bit of a challenge navigating and negotiating all of that. Recently she came out as trans in December to them, and we've been dating for about a year, a little over a year now.

(00:54:02):

And we kind of maintain when she has the kids, she has a house. And so it's been interesting to kind of negotiate that. Her oldest is coming around, but the other two are having a harder time

with her being trans and with me being queer. And so it's a challenge, and I think it's interesting, right? Because it's like they're negotiating and navigating what it means that their parent is to them, whose dad to them is transitioning slowly, but definitely. So it's been interesting. It's always something with kids. They're 11, 13 and 15. Other than that, in terms of my personal life, my work is my life in some ways. So that is a big part of what I do when I'm not doing stuff for Duke or the Freedom Center, I, I'm traveling quite a bit to do. I do presentations often, sometimes get invited to speak or whatever, and do trainings in other places.

(00:55:28):

And then otherwise, travel is my, I would say travel is probably my favorite thing to do when I'm not working. And I love when I'm able to combine the two. So whenever I can get away and get time off, usually in the summer I try and I try to travel as much as possible. And actually over Thanksgiving, I'll be visiting Country number 61, taking a cruise that'll go from Miami to Panama and go through the Panama Canal, which I'm super excited about. I've never been to Panama. I've never been through the Panama Canal. I cruise a lot though. Love cruising. So that's a little bit about my personal life, I guess.

Ethan (00:56:20):

I see. Yeah. Well, thank you for sharing. Also, thank you for talking about your passion for traveling as well, because I was actually going to ask you about that as well. But that's really good to know. Yeah, thank you. As a follow-up to what you were talking about earlier, you did say that your partners kids are still kind of getting used to the fact that she is trans. If you feel comfortable, would you be able to elaborate on how you personally are navigating the situation?

Angel (00:56:54):

Yeah, I mean, it's hard. I definitely, I have built a life where I often don't have to be in homophobic or transphobic situations or deal with that. And so it's been really interesting to navigate. Their mom is not supportive per se. She's not supportive, but she's also just not going to do anything to be helpful. And they live and go to school in Alamance County, which is not known for being a progressive area. And so I think that it's really hard for my partner, my partner's not out at work as trans. The kids have varying degrees of comfort with being with their friends knowing, or her oldest has told his friends. And I think that it's been interesting for me because I've been out for so long and had been so comfortable in my identity to kind of be front and front and center in this dynamic where it is pretty hard. The kids, they're wonderful and they're a product of the environment that they've grown up in Alamance County, which is not a progressive place. Their grandparents, and I get the sense that their mom is not super supportive. So we deal with things like just this past weekend with my partner's daughter being like, I really don't want to be seen out in public with you.

(00:59:19):

And then really wrestling with some of that, we've been dating a year, and it's still pretty hard for me just to, I don't stay the night when the kids are there. I think we've been bowling once. It was out in public. That's the thing with the kids, teenagers who are also coming into their own identities. And so they can be very insecure about what their friends think or what people think and stuff like that. So it's a reminder of what people really have to go through. And it's an acute reminder of how much harder it is for us as a couple because we're queer, right? Because we don't have the support that we would have if we weren't queer sometimes, because before me,

Val³⁰ hadn't come out publicly as trans. I mean, I knew she was trans when we met and we started dating as part of how we got to know each other and stuff like that.

(01:00:37):

And still, her kids in some ways, I think blame it on me a little bit that I'm the bad trans influence and her parents even aren't super supportive of us or of me and always will make digs at our relationship or not see us as valid or tell Val, well, maybe you should just wait and date. When the kids are older kid, her youngest is 11, she's supposed to wait how long. The reality is, it's never going to be a convenient time. That's the conversation we have because it's always going to be like, well, don't transition now because the kids are still in school. Just wait. And then it's going to be like, oh, well, the college graduation, you can't. Or it's going to be, oh, now it's like their weddings. And so there's always this resistance to Val being herself authentically and to our relationship that is uniquely rooted in the fact that we're queer and trans. And so we talk about that a lot. We really love each other. We really care about each other. We really want this relationship to work. We really want to make it. And sometimes it feels like insurmountable.

(01:01:57):

And we sometimes say to each other, gosh, we love each other. We are so compatible, and there's all of these influences outside of us that make it really difficult. And so for me, it's been a real reminder of what kinds of stuff people have to go through. It makes such a big difference if we have a little argument or if we're having a rough day. And it's a big difference when you call your parents and they say, oh, y'all really care about each other, and they encourage you to turn towards each other. Versus when she calls her parents and they're like, oh, well, you probably shouldn't be doing the dating thing anyway. Maybe you're just not compatible. And kind of puts in those seeds of doubt the difference between having support and not having support and the double-edged sword that that is, right? Because it's not only Val needs support and encouragement in those times, but it also can mean it feels like, I know you're not supporting me now because you have this agenda that I not be queer or I not be trans. And so it just kind of compounds the effects.

Ethan (01:03:20):

I see. Yeah. Yeah. Thank you for sharing. Yeah. Even though, as you've already indicated, this is a pretty tough situation on your end, I appreciate you sharing. Yeah. It seems like your situation is something interesting that you're having to navigate, but yeah. Yeah, I hope at the end everything goes well.

Angel (01:03:44):

Me too.

Ethan (01:03:47):

Yeah. Awesome. So as another question about your personal life in general, I guess we are kind of shifting more towards your education specifically. According to my research, I see that you obtained your VA and religious studies with minors in both women's studies and sexuality

³⁰ (Unknown), Val: Angel's partner.

studies at NC Chapel Hill and Master of Divinity from Yale Divinity School³¹, and now you're enrolled in the DR of Ministry program at Duke University and at Duke Divinity School. So what do you just pursue these different programs at these specific colleges? Because I think you have for a great part, explain why you pursued the programs you may pursued, but I was just also curious about why you chose those specific schools.

Angel (01:04:43):

So I graduated with my doctorate in ministry back in May of 22, so I may need to update my bio somewhere it sounds like. Oh, wow. I think it goes back to what we started with, which is talking a little bit about my experience in that very formative time in that small Southern Baptist church. Because in many ways the church had been such an instrumental part of my growing up, and it was so devastating to have something that had been what I believe is supposed to be rooted in love and fellowship, be used in a way that was so harmful and to incite harm and violence. And so I think at a very young age that happened and then about, I kind of tried to turn my back on faith, and I always joke that I never could fill that God-shaped hole in my heart and ultimately found a church, metropolitan Community Church, MCC, which is a Christian Church that was founded in the sixties as by a gay man who was disbarred from his congregation and grew into a global movement of over 200 churches.

(01:06:08):

It's declining a lot in these days, it's becoming almost not irrelevant because you see that so many churches and congregations and faith communities are having these conversations and have become affirming, even if the whole congregation or tradition isn't affirming, they are more and more like they're affirming Baptist churches. They're affirming temples, they're affirming mosque, they're affirming Buddhist communities, affirming Hindu teachers, affirming Catholic ministries, and many of these folks are going to want, I think, often to stay within the tradition they were raised in. And so when you have affirming faith communities popping up that are more closely aligned to what folks know, they're going to be more likely to stay in those instead of finding a whole other church altogether. So all that being said, I found an affirming Christian Church, and I remember that experience so acutely of being able to be back in a faith community and embraced and welcomed and how transformative that experience was for me, I really thought I was going to go into ordained ministry. I was a first gen college student. I really didn't know anything about college. And so I did religious studies because I knew I wanted to go into ministry, so it seemed to make sense to study religion and obviously my sexuality and gender was a part of that. So I did women's studies and sexuality studies. I was one class from being a double major. It was a capstone class. You couldn't take it in your last semester. It was so frustrating.

(01:08:02):

I just realized too late that I didn't know what I was doing. So I'd realized too late that I was that close to being a double major. Anyways, that being said, so I kind of went to college because it was what was required to go into ministry and to be a pastor, at least in the denomination, it required that you had a master's degree in divinity, you went to seminary. And so that was pretty

³¹ Yale Divinity School: A professional school within Yale University that offers theological education and training for individuals pursuing ministry, religious leadership, or academic study of religion.

much what I did. It was actually, I think, a God thing. When I was at UNC Chapel Hill³², I was in a religious studies class. I met two friends who were a year ahead of me and were going to Yale. And I had gotten this award, the Boyd Prize for religious studies, and I was at the reception and I was meeting the donors' wife of the Dr. Boyd for whom the award was named after.

(01:09:07):

And I don't know, I had always wanted to go to Duke and people have been like, you probably don't really want to go to Duke Divinity School as an out queer trans person. And this was back in 2010. So Duke has always been pretty aligned with the Methodist Church. Right now, it's kind of the congregation, it is the epicenter of figuring out, being affirming. The Methodist Church is basically splitting over the issue now. And Duke is very rooted in the United Methodist³³ tradition. So anyway, so my friends had just gotten into Yale and I don't know, I was super nervous and anxious talking to this lady, and she was like, so what do you plan to do next? And I was like, oh, I'm going to apply to go to Yale Divinity School. And I was like, I don't even know where that came from. I think I was just nervous, and had that conversation, and then I was like, wait, maybe I will apply.

(01:10:04):

And so I applied to Duke, I applied to Yale because a lot of my mentors and faculty were like, you really should apply somewhere else too. You really don't put all your eggs in one basket. Kind of knowing the atmosphere of Duke Divinity School at that time. Funny story, I got waitlist at Duke Divinity School and I got into Yale Divinity, so obviously that was the right choice. It was actually the perfect community for me. There were certainly folks who were more religiously and politically conservative. Some of them I ended up becoming great friends with, but it was a place where I was also taken seriously. And there was a queer theology³⁴ course. Even now it's not easy. I think they only offer a queer theology course at Duke. And, I think they only offer it in the spring.

(01:11:04):

And it's a visiting faculty member who only comes to campus for two weeks and the rest of it's virtual. So they still don't have a queer theologian who is a full faculty member at the Divinity school. Whereas at Yale Divinity, Lynn Marie Tonstad, who has written scholarly works on what is queer theology and is really at the forefront of the field at this point, was a faculty member there. So it really was like a community where I could be comfortable to study and explore at the intersections. And then from there, my first two years, I worked at UNC Chapel Hill as an assistant director. But because faith had been so important to me, I'd really wanted to work on a campus where religious life was a little bit more incorporated. Whereas with a state school, it's kind of literally relegated to off campus, so the margins of campus.

(01:12:12):

³² UNC Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, a public research university in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, USA.

³³ United Methodist tradition: Pertaining to the religious and theological tradition of the United Methodist Church, a Protestant Christian denomination with Wesleyan roots.

³⁴ Queer theology: A theological approach that explores and reflects on religious and spiritual themes from the perspective of LGBTQ+ individuals, addressing issues of inclusivity, acceptance, and the intersections of faith and sexuality.

And so I wasn't able to do some of that more formally. A position opened up at Duke. I applied, it's like eight years ago now, in hopes that I could do more with the chapel, do more with the Divinity School, and with the way that the doctor of ministry program works, they typically require you to be doing some type of formal work or ministry for about five years after your MDiv to be considered. And so I did my five years and applied and was admitted and graduated, and it was actually kind of really cool how it all worked out. So one of my favorite professors at Yale, Jan Holton, who taught pastoral theology³⁵, actually ended up getting a faculty position at Duke and she was my advisor for my thesis. So small world.

Ethan (01:13:20):

Oh wow. Yeah. It sounds awesome. Yeah. Thank you for sharing your story in terms of your education. Yeah, I think it is pretty amazing that faith was still the thing that drove you to all these of programs. Yeah. I found that pretty interesting. Yeah. So thank you for sharing. So now I wanted to transition just to bring what we talked about to a full circle. I wanted to ask you a couple questions specifically about your identity as you revealed in this interview. You did say that you were trans man. If you feel comfortable, I wanted to ask if you'd be able to talk to me specifically about how you've navigated your identity as a trans man and de be sexual throughout your life, aside from what we've already talked about, if you're feeling comfortable.

Angel (01:14:20):

Yeah, I mean, so yeah, I was assigned female at birth. I identify as trans guy. I was pretty lucky in that once my mom became more supportive, she was super supportive. I started transitioning and taking testosterone³⁶ when I turned 16, honestly, when 98% of the time I pass as male. So to be honest, it's not really something I think about a lot or have to think about a lot. I realize I've had access to transition related care and worked for progressive institutions like Duke that covers transition related care in it's health plan, and it's insurance. So it really is often not the part of my identity that I think about the most. Right. It's something that I do a lot of education around, and I think that it's important for me to not just center the identities that I have that are marginalized.

(01:15:41):

I also think it's important to make sure that I'm doing the work of also recognizing the privilege that I have. What does it mean that I transitioned into a place of privilege, like being socialized and perceived as female, obviously a very different experience than being now most often socialized and perceived as male. And so how am I using that understanding and that access to not replicate those systems Similarly, my whiteness, my access to the educational institutions like Yale and Duke that I've been able to be a part of. And so I think for me, it's just as important to think about places where I hold privilege as it is to think about places where I have experienced oppression. I think often when we think about identity, it's easier I think in some cases to center those places where we have internalized oppression or experienced harm. And it is important to do that and to get healing around those places and seek liberation around those places. And in the same way, I think it's important to recognize and name the places where I have

³⁵ Theology: The study of the nature of the divine, religious beliefs, and the practice of religion. It often involves exploring the relationship between humans and the divine or the ultimate reality.

³⁶ Testosterone: A hormone primarily associated with the development of male reproductive tissues and the maintenance of male secondary sexual characteristics.

caused harm and been a part of the problem and doing that work as well. And so, yeah, I don't know if that answers the question.

Ethan (01:17:25):

Oh, yeah. Yeah, it definitely does. Yeah. Thank you for sharing. I'll say though that yeah, I do appreciate your explanation on this because I do find your take on this question pretty unique because throughout my youth justice movements class, we have studied a few L-G-B-T-Q, youth organizers and activists, and I would just say the way that they view their identities are definitely different from yours. So I really appreciate you sharing your perspective on that. I really do. Yeah. So you did mention the concept of internalized depression throughout that process. Would you be able to elaborate on that, please?

Angel (01:18:11):

Internalized oppression?

Ethan (01:18:13):

Yeah. Yeah.

Angel (01:18:15):

I think about allyship in the same way. When I think about as individuals, we hold multiple identities and many of us hold a mix of both privileged and marginalized identities. So there are ways in which, in the places where we hold marginalized identities, we often will internalize those negative messages and stereotypes and assumptions about those identities, and we begin to maybe believe those things without meaning to, I think about the current context that we're living in as trans people. There is literally over 500 anti-trans bills across 49 states. We have three that were passed in North Carolina. It's really hard when you hear on a daily basis that politically and socially people don't believe in your right to safety or to exist or that you are sick or a threat to society or humanity, which is what is basically being said all the time about trans people in the media, and these bills being written and being passed and legislated.

(01:19:54):

And I think it is hard to not take on or feel the impacts of that knowing that there are enough people in the world who are in this country right now who hate trans people enough, that they're spending their time and energy and money to literally legislate against our ability to just be authentic and exist in the world. And it's not just trans people. We've seen reproductive rights under attack. We've seen these racist anti-intellectual movements seeking to ban critical race theory. Obviously we see the ways in which black and brown bodies have always been legislated and have been under attack through policing and sanctioned violence. So it's that, when I think about all of that in many ways, so many of us are under attack right now. And I think it's hard not to internalize those things and begin to take them on, and I talked a little bit about this earlier. For many queer and trans people, we have to move through the world assuming we're going to not be safe until proven otherwise because that's the current culture and context that we live in. And so how do you not in some ways take that on? How do you not in some ways move through the world in a way that's suspicious of people's motives and intentions when that's such a significant part of the population is investing so much energy into harming you?

(01:21:35):

And so I think there's some level of healing and liberation that has to be sought when you hold marginalized identities. For me, that's my trans identity and my queer identity. And I know for other folks, there are other identities that there's similar oppression and fear and legislative attacks on. And so for me, there's real healing work that has to be done to get to figure out and negotiate and navigate safety and authenticity in a world in which it's often literally not safe to be yourself or be authentic in. And I know that's not an isolated experience around trans identity, it's just one of the focuses right now. And in the same way, I think we have to have a balanced view because of the way that many of us hold a mix of both marginalized and privileged identities. In the places that we have privileged identities, we have another type of work to do because it means acknowledging, yes, we have both experienced harm and have healing to do, but we have also reinforced and caused harm to others in the places that we have benefited at the expense of someone who isn't.

(01:22:56):

Right. And the thing that I always try to talk about and when it comes up is that is privilege is inherently seen as a bad word maybe, right? And when you think about what privilege affords you, it's often not bad, right? It's like safety and security and opportunity and being validated and having representations of you or having support and mentorship or people who look like you, who's got your back. It's like, I think what people get kind of caught into this trap of guilt around privilege as opposed to recognizing what privilege affords you is not inherently a bad thing. What is bad is that Not everyone has access to that. And so reframing it in a way to say, in the places where I do have access, how can I create wider and greater access for others? And then in the places where I don't have that access, how do I work in coalition or how do I navigate that? I guess that's how I think about privilege and oppression and identities and all of those things.

Ethan (01:24:17):

Yeah, it's really interesting. Yeah. Yeah. Thank you for sharing. So—

Angel (01:24:25):

We're coming up on an hour and a half. I don't know if you had somewhere you needed to be or anything, but —

Ethan (01:24:29):

Oh yeah. No worries on my end. I'm doing good. I was a little bit concerned on your end if you had somewhere to go as well.

Angel (01:24:39):

Could probably talk. It's about 1230. I do have some emails and things that are a little pressing.

Ethan (01:24:45):

I understand. Yeah, no worries. So then this is perfect timing on my last question right now. So yeah, I think that would be perfect. Yeah. So for my last question, so the Duke website describes

your work as the intersection of spirituality³⁷, sexuality, and gender identity and expression. So I know you talked about this a lot through the interview, but would you be able to walk me through your opinions and beliefs surrounding this intersection, especially as far as your identity is concerned, if that makes any sense at all, aside from everything we've just talked about?

Angel (01:25:20):

I feel like I talked a lot about the importance of faith in the conversation around inclusion in the South, especially I think in how so much is rooted or comes from a faith. So I do just think it's an important part to have the conversation. And I talked a little bit about the divinity school or the Methodist Church, and a lot of these conversations are playing out within in faith communities.

(01:26:12):

And I think there's something that's inherently queer about faith, whether it's like you're thinking about the Abrahamic view of God³⁸, we just had Dr. Raja Gopal Bhattar³⁹ come and speak about the queerness within Hinduism. There is something that is so inherently queer about this divine force that is not gendered and at work in the world. Faith is so queer and yet has been used to exclude queer folks in so many ways. One of the things in my own tradition, which I can speak to most knowledgeably, is if you look back to the early church, one of the very first people to be baptized was an Ethiopian eunuch. So a Black gender non-conforming person in their time who says, "what is to keep me from being baptized," thinking that the response is going to be, oh, well, you're a eunuch, right? You are differently gendered, and that is going to prevent you from this ritual, from the sacred ritual. And yet the answer is nothing, right? And so we have a tradition that literally Christianity is founded on this concept core to it of a Black gender nonconforming person being overwhelmingly welcomed to one that has been used to do the opposite.

(01:28:02):

So for me, I think that there's something really powerful about reclaiming our Trancestors (Trans Ancestors) and the inherently queer components or remnants that exist within our tradition, within my tradition. And I think that's true for so many other traditions too. Obviously the Abrahamic religions are all connected in this way. And then I think from other faith traditions, there's often this transcendence or these deities that holds both masculine and feminine qualities or can transgress those things. And yet we don't talk about them. And I think that is just, I personally get really interested in talking about them. Also, I believe that this is about heart work. People need to be seen and need to be validated and need to be cared for and need to know that they belong. And that to me is the essence of this kind of spiritual wellness, right? Community, and that kind of transcendence is important. And so I really do think about the work that I do as a form of caring for a community. And to me that's very rooted in my faith and in the

³⁷ Spirituality: The personal and subjective experience of connection to something greater than oneself, often involving a sense of meaning, purpose, or transcendence.

³⁸ Abrahamic view of God: Refers to the shared monotheistic religious traditions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam that trace their spiritual lineage back to the biblical figure Abraham. These religions believe in one God who is the ultimate creator and sustainer of the universe.

³⁹ Bhattar, Raja Gopal, Dr.: Dr. Raja Gopal Bhattar is a diversity and equity based team development facilitator, inclusive leadership trainer and cultural transformation consultant.

values that I was raised with. So I guess that's the connection for me, and I think it's the right thing to do.

(01:29:48):

In many ways, I think there's this misconception that because we have marriage equality, at least in the USA, that queer people have arrived. And it's just not true. Even in the time that we have marriage equality, we've seen more anti-trans bills than ever. We know that rates of homelessness is going up. We know that employment discrimination exists for LGBTQIA+ people. And every year in November, we have the Transgender Day of Remembrance⁴⁰, which is a day set aside to memorialize the lives lost due to anti-trans violence. And every year I find myself saying, this has been the deadliest year on record, and we are on target for that to be true again this year. And when we look at the names and the faces of the lives, lost is almost overwhelmingly all Black and Brown transgender women. And so you see the ways in which racism, misogyny, and transphobia make—literally living authentically dangerous, right? It's dangerous to live authentically for trans women, for trans women of color, and for trans people in general. You have not only the violence directed at trans people for being trans, but you also have, and content warning here, research shows that the rates of suicide attempts within trans communities is at 41% of trans folks have attempted suicide at some point in their lives.

(01:31:30):

And it's other research has been done to show that when trans people are accepted and affirmed, when the right pronouns are used, when folks have access to care and can identify supportive people, that drops that likelihood of a typical suicide drops to almost nothing. So we know what makes a difference. We know what the right things to do are. Research has shown us that. And it's common sense to know that if you're telling people that they shouldn't exist and are harassing and discriminating against people constantly, it's hard not to internalize that. And folks feel desperate when they face being kicked out of their homes, being kicked out of their faith communities, being fired from their jobs, being denied housing or employment.

(01:32:30):

So yeah. So it is also a community which I deeply believe needs people to recognize the impact of what society is doing. For a lot of folks, I really, and someone asked me this, I did a thing at Duke Chapel just yesterday, and someone asked me, why do you think that there's all these anti-trans bills right now? And I was like, I think it's trans people have become a political pawn for folks to get ahead. Fear is lucrative. And if you can generate fear in folks and then say that you have the answer, then that motivates people. And yet the cost of that are deadly, literally. I mean, there's research that shows that the average life expectancy for a black trans woman is 35 years old.

Ethan (01:33:46):

Oh, wow.

(01:33:52):

Yeah. I see. Yeah. Yeah. Well, thank you. Thank you for explaining. Yeah. I found a lot of what you said to be pretty interesting, and I think it has been, at least on my end, I think there's a lot to

⁴⁰ Transgender Day of Remembrance: An annual observance held on November 20th to honor the memory of transgender individuals who have lost their lives to violence or discrimination.

learn, especially on this matter, especially for students like me. So thank you very much for sharing. To conclude this interview. I just wanted to thank you very much, Angel, for all the information you shared regarding yourself as well, and additionally your work as well, but especially about the information that you shared regarding yourself. And before I sign off, do you have any other questions that you wanted to ask me?

Angel (01:34:39):

No, it was nice to talk to you today. I feel like I didn't get to know a whole lot about you. You heard way more than probably ever wanted to know about me, but I hope that you're enjoying this course and that it sounds like a really cool class.

Ethan (01:34:56):

Yeah, yeah. You're definitely welcome. Oh, yeah. And also, if you ever wanted to get in contact with the teacher of my course, I think I may have alluded to this earlier before we started recording, but her name is Wesley Hogan⁴¹, and she's one of the instructors for one of Duke's FOCUS⁴² programs, so "It's Not Too Late to Build a Better World"⁴³, and she's the one who teaches the Youth Justice Movements course. So if you wanted to contact her, yeah, then that's the person to contact for this particular course. Yeah. Well, awesome. Well, thank you again, Angel, and if I have any questions, I'll definitely be sure to email you. Thank you again, and I'll see you later.

Angel (1:35:44):

Bye. Take care, Ethan. Good luck.

Ethan (1:35:46):

Yeah, thank you. You too, Angel. Bye.

⁴¹ Youth Justice Movements (DOCST 179FS): A documentary studies course offered through Duke University's FOCUS program that attempts to immerse its students in the dangerous and contentious history of youth activism in the US since 2010.

⁴² FOCUS: A program offered by Duke University that strives to expose its students to ideas from the vantage point of different disciplines across the humanities, sciences and social sciences.

⁴³ "It's Not Too Late To Build A Better World": A FOCUS cluster that explores how we can "move the world away from dystopia and towards a future that foregrounds justice, ecological sustainability, and human flourishing."