

Vanessa Visquerra Youth Activist Interview Transcript

Vanessa Visquerra (she/her/hers or they/them/theirs) is a services coordinator at Pride for Youth (PFY), a service and advocacy organization for LGBTQ+ young people. Vanessa oversees all aspects of PFY's Coffeehouse and Queer Connect programs, in addition to overseeing individual therapeutic counseling programs.

CARLEY GENSER: I'm in a class called us youth movements since 2010¹. We're trying to build up our archives on youth activists. We don't have enough information on youth activists from the perspective of youth activists. We want students 50 years from now to be able to look at the archives here at Duke and look at your interview and find out what young people were doing back in 2021 to improve the world. This is just for educational purposes. You're going to have total control over the material. You can edit the transcript that I'll send to you when I complete it, everything like that. Is it okay if I email you with follow up questions when we're done with the interview?

VANESSA VISQUERRA: Yes, of course.

GENSER: Of course, if you feel uncomfortable with anything I ask, just let me know and we'll move on from the topic. I just want to preface the interview and say that stories are very much welcome. No detail is too small, so please tell me everything. Any questions? Anything like that?

VISQUERRA: Nope, not on my end.

GENSER: Could you just tell me a little bit about Pride for Youth?

VISQUERRA: Pride for Youth is a non for profit organization. We're located in Bellmore, on Long Island. We were actually the first suburban LGBT drop in center on Long Island. It was the first LGBT friendly space, I believe, in suburbia in the United States period, but I can fact check for it. We came out of a need. Our parent organization is the Long Island Crisis Center. It's a 24/7 crisis hotline where folks can call and get help with any problem, big or small, or just to talk to a counselor if they're in crisis, suicidal ideation, things of that nature. In the 90s, they found that they were getting a lot of calls from LGBTQ youth who had nowhere to go, who felt lonely, who wanted to meet other LGBTQ people. Specifically youth were looking for this sort of drug and alcohol free spaces because we found a lot of LGBTQ youth in the 90s had nowhere to go that wasn't a bar or a club. Very often LGBTQ folks develop habits that are not so great at a young age because this is how they bond with their peers. They decided to open a space and create a space for LGBTQ folks. They opened the center and the first group was a group that I happen to run. We call it "Coffeehouse," because it was

¹ Freshman class within the Envisioning Human Rights Focus Cluster at Duke University in the Documentary Studies department

supposed to be kind of like you go into a Starbucks and you (indiscernible). Pride for Youth offers no cost, six month counseling. All of our staff are either mental health counselors, social workers, or interns. They see clients. We do drop in counseling, so if someone wants to walk in and talk to someone, whether it's about a program, or whether they just need to talk to somebody for 20 minutes, we try to make ourselves available for that. If they're ever having a bad day, going through a crisis, anything like that, we do that as well. We offer free HIV testing and rapid syphilis testing. If you are a person living with HIV, we provide HIV navigation services. That means we provide you a case manager to talk to you about going to the doctor, keeping yourself healthy, things like that. We have a whole bunch of different social groups for a variety of demographics. We have a social group for gay, bi, queer men. We have a social group for just trans women, a social group for just trans and non binary folks, a social group for LGBTQ folks and allies. We try to really make these spaces educational. We talk a lot about sex and sexual health. A lot of our brands are funded with HIV prevention and getting that knowledge to the community, because LGBT sex ed is really not talked about in schools. We want to be safe people for kids to come to if they have questions, because I know as a child, I had a lot of questions, but I didn't have anyone to ask them to, so we make ourselves available. We consistently talk about it so that they know that if they have a question, we prefer them to ask one of the staff members rather than someone who does not know what they're talking about. We consistently provide free condoms. There's condoms around the office, lube, dental dams, things like that. Something cool about my role is I get to go to schools and teach about either gender or sexual orientation or being an ally. We get contracted by schools in Long Island and I think part of Queens to come in and talk about what gender is or what sexual orientation is and how you can support members of those communities in your classrooms. We do a lot of advocacy work. Tonight, for example, I was contacted about speaking on a panel about LGBTQ homelessness, (indiscernible) about LGBTQ homelessness and that sort.

GENSER: That's an incredible organization. I am so happy that Long Island has something like that. I'm from Cold Spring Harbor myself, for context, but I'm here at Duke University². So I'm in Durham at the moment missing home a little bit. I was actually going to ask you about the workshops that you've done in schools and colleges. Have you had any questions from students that have surprised you or any stories from students at any of those workshops?

VISQUERRA: To be fair, I've only run the workshops virtually. But I have heard that when we used to be in person, students used to be a lot more coming forth. The first thing they want to know is if you're a member of the community and how you got into this work. Students very often come out to us. They'll come up at the end of the workshop and say, "I identify this way. Thank you for doing this. Thank you for making my class a little bit safer." My advocacy looks a little bit different. I've gone into schools and defended trans youth if their rights are being violated and things of that nature, and so does my supervisor. We all try to do our part just to help our community locally as best we can.

² Cold Spring Harbor is a town on the North Shore of Long Island, in New York state.

GENSER: What's your emotional reaction like when a young student comes up to you at the end of these workshops and comes out to you and is vulnerable with you in that way?

VISQUERRA: I think it's awesome! You try really hard. You can never take emotion out of this work because we all got into this work because we're passionate about it. It's wonderful because I consistently see these youth and think, "Wow, I wish I had someone like me to tell me that being a part of this people, education, and opportunity, and we let the kids know we're going to be like, "We want you, whatever the heck it is that you want to do and we got your back here." It's always super emotional when you get that chance to bond with a queer child, because sometimes they have never met a person in their life who is LGBTQ or someone who is out. It's always a rumor or someone they think might be, but very often, do they not meet someone who says, "I'm proudly out, and this is okay if this is something that you want as well."

GENSER: That's incredible. Going back a little bit to your younger self, growing up, who was most important to you that helped you gain the values that you have or made you want to fight for justice?

VISQUERRA: Wow! That's a good question. I come from a family of mostly women, really strong Latinx women and they never really enforced gender roles on me³. Instead, it was like, "No, you have to be better," "You have to go to school." Nothing is good enough for them, but in a good sense of, "No, reach for the stars. You need to have all the letters at the end of your name." Then, I had my dad's side of the family that did the exact opposite. They wanted me to find a partner, be a housewife, settle down, cook, clean. That's their idea of success, but that was not my idea of success, and I figured it out pretty early. My dad always said, "You're such a pain in the butt, you should be a lawyer." And I was like, "No. I want to do something that I'm passionate about so that I could make consistent changes, not just doing something like this." It was always that drive in me to fight for people who very often don't have a voice and people who are often overlooked in the community. That was really important to me.

GENSER: How did you fight those differing views between mom and dad? You said you figured it out pretty early on that you didn't want to conform in those certain ways and didn't want to be a lawyer. Can you tell me a little bit about what that was like?

VISQUERRA: It was definitely hard, because at a young age, in certain cultures, I'm not going to say that this is like a cultural norm for everyone, you try to please your parents, but in real life I would go to my room and read books. In the fifth grade, I knew things that I wasn't supposed to know, because I was very good at listening and paying attention. And I was always a well behaved child so I got to hear a lot of adult conversations that maybe I shouldn't have. But a lot of things I was exposed to, from early on, and I knew like, oh, my gosh, I have to help people with all of this knowledge. I knew that from pretty young.

³ Latinx is the gender-neutral term of Latin American cultural or ethnic identity.

GENSER: A lot of what we do in our class is deep listening exercises trying to turn off that internal voice in your head and just listen to the other person with an unbiased point of view. Can you tell me what it's like for you to listen to someone else with these great listening skills that you mentioned you have, or any advice you have to people struggling to stop listening to what's inside their head?

VISQUERRA: Sometimes it's hard when someone tells you that they're asking you to turn off what makes you you. Something I learned in school, when I got my master's in mental health counseling was just you're doing everything that you can for the benefit of the person who is expecting you to listen to them and help them make the decision that's right for them. I've carried that even in my everyday life, because something *I* would do is not something my friend would do, or my dad would do, or my mom. That's a part that you can turn on and off and realize, "How can I give the most unbiased opinion or piece of advice when it's called for?" because counseling is not always opinions that will help this person better themselves. It's more about giving them the tools to make decisions for themselves because I can't be there with you 24 hours a day. It's giving you the tools to make the decisions that are good for yourself. They might not always be right or beneficial, but things that will help you learn at the end of the day to live your most authentic life.

GENSER: You mentioned giving these people the tools that they need to navigate; it's not about your opinion, but helping them. How have you navigated instances in maybe not mental health, like physical health? I know you guys do HIV screenings and advocate for health like that. How have you navigated situations where a child might be resistant to getting some of those physical health needs, where it's not necessarily a matter of opinion, but it's health related?

VISQUERRA: Definitely, we believe everyone has autonomy over their body. We can just give folks the facts, we can give folks the education, but we have often been met with a lot of resistance, because sometimes for other folks, we represent something in themselves that they don't want to see or something that they bury, or don't want to think about. Something that I've learned is just, you might not be ready for it now, and that's completely okay, but I'm still gonna be a safe person, whether you need me in a year, or whether you need me in two years. I think that showing that you're really present and showing up and willing to listen and be patient is something really important when you're working for the community.

GENSER: Yes, definitely. Going back a little bit, I want to know your roots and how you got involved in this kind of activism. What got you so involved? Was there a specific event or campaign or movement or something?

VISQUERRA: Growing up I've always had LGBTQ friends. It was something that I was always exposed to. I want to say, in high school, Facebook was popular and things like that, so I remember seeing a lot of, transphobic and homophobic memes. Memes still exist, right? (GENSER nods). I remember being like, "Why isn't anyone else bothered? Why aren't people

allowed to be who they are? Why doesn't it have to affect you?" Then, I remember the Pulse shooting happening in 2014, I believe it was⁴. I remember being so deeply affected and so upset that this happened and it should be 24/7 news coverage. It should be the only thing that people are talking about, and it wasn't. I felt like I saw from that moment on I know why it's being covered, we just don't speak about it. After that, I became pretty vocal on my own social media and throughout college. I took a lot of political science courses, and for the most part, looking around the room, I was one of the very few women of color, so I felt myself slumping down in my seat not to get called on. It wasn't until my junior or senior year that it brought that out of me like, "No, I don't have to be quiet. My opinion matters just as much as someone else's who is not a person of color." That real activist started to come out of me. I sought my own counseling, and I thought that it was really important for everyone to go through it at least once in your life to talk to a therapist and advocate for your own issues and things of that nature. So mental health also became really important to me in college. I was actually inspired in high school. I had a mental health counselor, and she worked for the school. They had bought her in for substance use to be a substance use counselor, but she was kind of like an overall counselor. I thought, "Wow, this feels good to just go in there and talk to someone whether I'm having a great day or a bad day." A person listens to me and cares, and it's not just high school nonsense. Then, from one day to the next, they took her away and it really devastated the school. We've just lost this person who helped us throughout our day and that was really impactful for the school and I didn't realize how much it affected our mental health. Because of her, I remember Googling, "What does a mental health counselor do?" Then, I pursued psychology in my undergraduate and then from there, I was like, "I got to help people. I have to do this." St. John's was the first one out of two schools that I applied to and I got the interview and I was accepted like two days later. From there, we got to pick our internships a year later. Pride for Youth was one of the first places on the list. I had asked around about them. Not a lot of people knew them. I was the only person with LGBTQ interest in the class, so I felt kinda by myself. Everybody wanted to be in a hospital or in a substance use clinic. I felt like this work is important. How come no one wants to do it, but everyone wants to say they're an ally, and in June dress up in rainbow and go to the Pride Parade but how come no one wants to fight? I was always ready to fight. So, I went on an interview, and I never say this about some place, but it felt like home. I walked in, and I was like, "Okay, I can be here. The energy is really good." I started volunteering; I was offered the internship position, and I never left.

GENSER: Amazing! I was looking at the website and looking at all of the amazing people that you work with. Can you tell me about some of your co-workers and what they're like and your relationship with them?

VISQUERRA: Yes. So, they are all freaking amazing people. Aiden was my internship supervisor, and he still manages the current interns like the current masters level interns. So, I

⁴ The Pulse nightclub shooting was a mass shooting at a gay nightclub in Orlando, Florida in 2016. The gunman killed 49 and wounded at least 53 in what is thought to be the nation's worst terror attack since 9/11. Find more information here: <https://www.cnn.com/2016/06/12/us/orlando-nightclub-shooting/index.html>

developed a close relationship with him. Maria, the current community mobilization coordinator had the position I had now when I was an intern. It was really wonderful. I got to watch her do this job. I pissed her off because I asked her so many questions like, “Why do you do this? What does this look like?” I felt like I was always looking for that connection with them to pick your brain and well, “What’s going on here? Why do you make the clinical decisions that you make? Why do we make the decisions for the agency that we make?” Lauren is basically the equivalent to Aiden, but on the other side of the agency, so the side of the agency that deals with all HIV prevention. They accompany folks to hospitals if they've been exposed to HIV, they help folks get connected to prep, they do a different type of counseling, they do HIV navigation services. They're always like running around like a chicken but for a great purpose, and it's been really awesome to watch them take that role. Everyone in prevention is really wonderful, especially the folks who I've learned a lot from, like Dervis and Lester. They are both bilingual. That's something that I didn't think that I would do in this line of work or would be valuable that I was a bilingual person. I was lucky enough to get to watch our Spanish speaking LGBT group, because that was not something that I thought would ever exist, or a part of the community that would be so out and proud. I was always like, “I'm scared, so I can't imagine that anyone else could be scared.” I've learned so much from them and their patience and just the way that they truly care for their clients and that's across the board, including our director. Our director has been here for a whole bunch of years, and he's really super knowledgeable, always calm. A lot of the staff that we've hired is pretty recent after me. But everyone, because of their passion, seems to want to learn everything right away. That's something that I admire about the entire staff.

GENSER: That sounds like an absolutely amazing environment to be a part of. I definitely have to come visit sometime when I'm back home.

VISQUERRA: I take volunteers!

GENSER: I would love to! When you mentioned college and realizing that you did have a voice and that your opinion needed to be heard, did anyone in particular help you come to that realization? Was it all on your own? Can you talk me through that process a little bit? Maybe a professor or someone that really challenged you in a way where you knew you had to speak up.

VISQUERRA: I think what inspired me most honestly when I was going through that phase of my life...I went to LIU for undergrad, Long Island University, and Professor Hyatt, with the history department, he taught a lot of the history of Latin America and how it relates to certain American history. Just the way that he taught was so intriguing. He always thought very highly of his students. I never had a professor like that, think so highly of me and know that we were all knowledgeable and encourage discourse in his class. So even though it wasn't a psychology course, I felt that I applied a lot of that, “Okay, I'm strong willed. I have an education. It's just as good as the person sitting next to me. My voice is valuable. My opinion is valuable.”

GENSER: Yeah, definitely. There's certainly a lot of imposter syndrome when someone goes to college. I'm only a freshman, so I know my friends and I often talk about that feeling of, "Everyone else around here is so smart," but then it's like, "I belong too. My voice deserves to be heard. I'm here for a reason." That's such an important thing to have. It's such important knowledge to know. I know that you advocate for racial equality and LGBTQ mental health. Can you talk about the intersection between your advocacy for racial equality and LGBT rights, specifically like when you talked about the LGBTQ youth that speak Spanish and come in, those sorts of things?

VISQUERRA: For me, it's a lot about intersectionality. I keep everything intersectional. I make the decisions that I make when I'm allowed to make decisions for the agency with everyone in mind. I want to be the voice on the staff, and I usually am, that makes sure that all of our services are accessible in both English and Spanish, whether that's forums, groups, whatever we can, but just making sure that all of our representation, whether it's staff-client representation, anything of that sort, is fair and brings awareness to multiple issues. We're not just an LGBTQ agency, we're far beyond that. I want to make sure that everything gets talked about, everyone has a voice, everyone has a say. I try to translate that into my groups. Not only do we talk about being LGBTQ or sex ed, but there's so much intersectionality that goes into that. We try to cover being LGBTQ and being Latinx, being LGBTQ and being black, being LGBTQ and being Asian, and things of that nature, so that everyone feels seen, heard and important. I also think that we continue to advocate for more people of color on the staff because everyone deserves to look at a staff member or their counselor, their (indiscernible) or their doc, and say, "I see part of myself in this person." I realized that I'm a Latinx person. I'm not Asian, I'm not black. I try my best in a situation not to over educate myself, but not to let a client educate me. I should come with that education, but I also should be prepared to learn from someone who has life experience and to support them in a way that keeps all of their intersectionalities in mind and their minoritized status. Someone could be LGBTQ homeless and Hispanic. All of that has to be kept in mind whether you're interacting with a person or just doing therapy. It's very different to realize how much someone can bring with them and why they are the way they are and how trauma presents itself in certain ways.

GENSER: That's amazing. Do you find that the staff is very diverse because this kind of work attracts a more diverse set of people or do you find that Pride for Youth sometimes has to seek out diverse groups of people in order to have these different identities so the students that are coming to you can identify with who they're getting help from?

VISQUERRA: For staff, I feel like our staff has gotten to a point where we have pretty okay diversity. For participants, we have a lot of trouble very often because we're located smack dab in the middle of Bellmore, which is an extremely white town. A lot of folks come because they're like, "I heard of this place because I go to school around the corner," or "I've seen it," or "I was curious about what your sign meant." That's a lot of what our population is, and those folks tell their friends. We tried to do outreach for that reason in different areas across Long Island that have heavy POC populations to help them realize we're here for everyone, everyone deserves these services, you can all come in for these services, we just

happen to be located in this town⁵. We try our best. Pre COVID, we had a van service that would go to Hempstead, Freeport, Uniondale to pick up kids because we realized they might not have this resource, or they might not be out, and it might not be safe for them to get dropped off in the front of our building, even though we try our best to disguise ourselves. It's just a regular building, we don't put any rainbows or anything because we never know who's out who's not.

GENSER: That's really interesting. Speaking of a white town, I'm from Cold Spring Harbor, as I mentioned, and in my grade of about 130 kids, two people were openly part of the LGBTQ community. So can you talk a little bit about the struggles of advocating for LGBTQ+ rights in the political climate of Long Island?

VISQUERRA: It's been tough. It's really tough. It was definitely a culture shock for me, because I'm from Queens. Everyone is different everywhere. I didn't understand at first the microaggressions, I didn't understand the consistent hate, I didn't understand overall what has been branded to be like the Long Island lifestyle. It's tough because there's been protests down the road from us, just about the current political climate within the past year, and one of our directors sent us home just out of fear that anybody could walk down the street, and, "Why would I put my staff in jeopardy?" It's very apparent. We have folks coming here sometimes to do the darndest things like electrical repairs, if a fire alarm goes off, a police officer of some sort, people deliver food, and it's really interesting that they're kind to you on the phone, but then when they walk into our building and see a bisexual flag, a rainbow flag and any sexual flag, sometimes you can just see their face drop, sometimes you can just feel them stiffen and then you see them looking at you and realizing, "Is this person queer? Do I now hate this person because they're queer?" It's something that makes you feel almost unsafe, that change and watching. People do that. Why can't folks be called whatever name that they want? Why is a name change so hard to get? Why is a gender change hard to get? Why do people make (indiscernible) and we practice in our organizations, but there's organizations that are light years behind us that don't do the work that we do. It's unfortunate that someone can come here and feel affirmed and feel like they have a safe place in Long Island. But really, our goal and my goal in general - You could go anywhere and feel affirmed, let's say, especially if I'm giving my money or my time to a service, you know?

GENSER: How has that affected you? Or how have you overcome these situations where someone will walk in and you can see their face drop or the thought that "Do I now hate this person because they're queer?" How have you overcome those feelings and what have you learned from that?

VISQUERRA: We definitely lean on each other as staff, because very often non queer people might not get it, we call it *it*. It's just something that you feel that you can't describe and handling it through self care, because most of us are therapists and do therapy. We still want to have that positive outlook, even though we seem so much ugly, because it's what our

⁵ POC is an abbreviation for the term "persons of color."

clients deserve. Even though we all carry our own baggage and have our own experiences, it's not something that I can bring with me to session, or it's not something that I'll share with a client. I think we're responsible for our own self care, which is like going to therapy ourselves, like taking time away from this work.

GENSER: Is all of the staff in some sort of counseling and whatnot? I know most therapists do counseling on their own.

VISQUERRA: I believe most of us are. I don't know. We'll tell each other if it comes up in conversation, like we have been in the past. Some of us fluctuate between going to therapy and not, like myself, but it's something that's commonly talked about because we are therapists, and we hear things that are really hard. In order to unpack that, that's not the responsibility of a friend, a partner, our parents. It's something that we're responsible for. Therapy sometimes is the best way to get that out.

GENSER: Yes, definitely. I want to circle back to some of the children or kids that you've interacted with. You mentioned being there for students now, in two weeks, in a year, in two years. Have you ever had someone come back many years or after a prolonged period of time to check in or anything like that? Have you ever had any prolonged stories?

VISQUERRA: One of the best ones actually doesn't come from me so I'm not gonna take credit for it. My supervisor actually had a youth who had been coming to our programming for a while. Unfortunately, the youth, I believe, was either thrown out of their home or left their home because it was unsafe. I'm not sure either way, but it was not a safe place for them. So, they would come here just to spend some days to be warm and then leave at night. The student was really, really inspired by what we do here, worked their butt off, got into a university with a full ride (they paid for his apartment), and is doing very, very well. As a graduate he lives on his own and is doing extremely well. Every so often, he comes back and really thanks my supervisor for being there, like coming in on a Saturday just so he could have a warm place to hang out and charge his phone, is what he really wanted. Stories like that, even though they're not our own, they tend to stick with us.

GENSER: That's got to be so inspiring to know that the services that you guys have provided have impacted someone so greatly and to see how well they're doing right now. That's really amazing. Could you share with me some of the failures and successes that you've had? I want to know about the struggles that you've had and how you overcome them to get where you are today.

VISQUERRA: I'll start with the failures. It's hard doing this work. I don't know why I chose it. I'm sometimes like, "I'm a Pisces moon⁶, how are you doing this?" It's hard because you tell yourself, "I don't care," or not in the sense of you don't care, but in the sense of like, "I'm

⁶ A Pisces moon is a zodiac sign. Characteristics include being highly emotional, taking things personally, sensitivity, compassion, and creativity.

not emotionally attached to the work that I do, or the clients that I have.” But at the end of the day, for most people, you are. You go home, and you give it a second thought, especially if you've said something and you don't know if it hurts, or if I'm running a group and someone didn't have a good time. I take those things personally, because this space is so sincere to my heart that I want everyone to have a positive experience. And sometimes, I have to take myself out of the equation and say, “People just aren't ready. Some people aren't ready for therapy. It might not be me.” I consider it a failure to be so emotionally invested sometimes and to relax and realize, all right, you have to take things as they are. I think that that's one of my biggest failures. I wish I had the space earlier. I didn't come out until I took my internship here because I still didn't believe that being LGBTQ was a part of me. I thought, “Absolutely not, no.” And then when I got here, it was imposter syndrome in another way, because I felt like you're just surrounded by queer people, you feel the need to fit in⁷. Sometimes I still ask myself that like “Am I? Am I not?” It's very much imposter syndrome that also makes me feel like a failure because I'm like, “You knew, you knew in high school. You just chose not to embrace that part of yourself.” It almost feels like a failure because I wonder what kind of advocacy I could have done in high school and even before that to be myself and to not only fight for other people, I was consistently fighting for things that were unfair. I was a royal pain in the ass to all the teachers, so I wish that I could have brought that part out of myself and changed a couple of lives maybe before I turned 18 or even before I turned 21. That's something that I wish. Did you say strengths, failures and strengths?

GENSER: Sure, anything.

VISQUERRA: Are you asking for strengths of me as a person, what I do, my advocacy?

GENSER: What are your strengths as an advocate, or advice that you would give to some youth that are starting out a journey in activism?

VISQUERRA: I would say your voice deserves to be heard, every opinion matters, things take time. I know that I'm not in it for overnight success. Advocates are in it for the long haul. We might not see change, and the change that we do in let's say two years might not be enough for us in 10. Every advocate is valuable so don't give up. Overall, don't give up, you can do this.

GENSER: Speaking to that, what do you see as the most prominent pathway forward for LGBTQ rights?

VISQUERRA: Continuing to unify within the community. I think that sometimes there's a lot of discourse in what we call “The Oppression Olympics,” like, “I have it worse,” “This person has it worse.” We know that there are so many members of the community suffering and dying and living in fear. We don't really have time for that discourse. We have time to

⁷ Imposter syndrome involves feelings of self-doubt and incompetence despite one's accomplishments and experience.

start fixing things that need to be fixed so that every single member of our community is saved and valued, and given the proper resources in order to thrive. I don't think that we are very unified as a community. I think that we need to come together a little bit more, and fight for each other. We might have problems. If you have a battle over here and the battle over there, why can't we fight both at the same time, one or the other?

GENSER: Yes, definitely. If you don't mind, I'd like to ask some very open-ended questions to round out the interview. What inspires you to do anything in your life? Activism or to do anything that you're passionate about?

VISQUERRA: Good question. I think just fighting for human rights inspires me. I think that, in a sense, I grew up pretty privileged and I know that not everyone is going to be given that same opportunity as me. I don't feel like there's enough people fighting for equality. When I get tired, I say to myself, "Alright, you're doing everything that you can for a reason. There is an end goal. There needs to be people like us, whether we just educate one person, that's good enough for me." All of us might not be able to change the world at the same time, but if you can change one person's mind, that's much more than I did yesterday. It motivates me to keep going, to keep educating, to keep inspiring, and to let folks know that there is someone like you and someone that cares about you and that someone's always available to listen and that your life is valuable and being different is okay. Because I wish I was told that, that you don't have to fit into this box, that you're wonderful and amazing and that you should be celebrated.

GENSER: Do you have any people that are very involved in your life that do not agree with your views on LGBTQ rights and how have you dealt with that?

VISQUERRA: My dad and I have very different views. He says things sometimes that I don't know where on earth they come from, but I've learned in my activism that sometimes you cannot convince someone of something that is right. It's mentally taxing and exhausting. I try my best to educate, but sometimes people don't want to be educated. Why is it always up to me to educate? That's not a burden that people of color should often have to take on, which we do. We feel that we have to educate and I have to tell you when there's plenty of resources out there. If you really cared, go on Google, just like I did, read a book, just like I did, watch a movie, just like I did. I feel like my whole life I've heard him say things about the community and I've heard different people that I've been around, whether they were ex friends or old co-workers and things like that, who would say things and then I would think about the fact that, "Oh, that's not right." It is a struggle, but I accept that it's not all of my responsibility, but if they wanted that education, they could always ask me.

GENSER: That's a really interesting viewpoint that is not always your burden to educate. I might have already asked you this, so your dad didn't quite have the same views as you, but your mom did. How did you deal with those two conflicting views? Did you confide in your mom at all? What was that like?

VISQUERRA: I confided in my mom a lot. Just like the older generation sometimes or just like anyone else, she has things that she's learning, but she's more willing to learn, whereas my dad is not. I was able to confide in her and explain to her why certain things were the way that they were and why I think that certain things should change. And she very much gets it. Whereas he doesn't have it, just because he felt like LGBTQ people weren't prominent when he was growing up. But I was like, "No, they were always here. You just chose not to see them, or they didn't feel like they needed to come out to you, or maybe you lived in an area where it wasn't safe to be out." That's a really tough thing, because she's from (indiscernible), and he grew up in another country and there are two cultural stan pieces.

GENSER: You mentioned always asking your co-workers so many questions and the people that the people that mentored you, essentially, when you started working with Pride for Youth? Did you ever have any pushback internally from asking those questions thinking that it was a "stupid question" or something along those lines? Were you hesitant at all to ask those questions, or were you always just like, "If I have a question, I'm asking it"?

VISQUERRA: I think at first, it really happened to me, and they even noticed that I was very much in my shell, because I'm the type of person that likes to watch a lot, and then I interact, just because I like to know that a space is safe and comfortable for me and I learn a lot by watching other people. It came most to me in counseling, in therapy, like my own clinical judgment, and realizing eventually you have to not question yourself, you are the therapist, you need to make the decisions for your client and then after the fact it's always okay to seek guidance. I felt like I got that here, that facilitation of you are very much confident and capable, and we are also here if you need us if things do not go right or you do have questions, because everyone has questions. No one does things 110% perfectly.

GENSER: Yes, definitely. Kind of an off topic question, but I'm also a psych major. I'm really excited about it. What was your favorite part about psych in undergrad?

VISQUERRA: I'm not gonna lie to you, Psych 101 and Psych 102 are super boring and I was like, "Oh my god, do I want to do this?" I took a course, not sure what it was called, it was a lot about defense mechanisms, and why we do it. It was (the course) is personality, so aspects of a person's personality and personality disorders and defense mechanisms and things like that. And I took that class, I want to say my sophomore year, and I was finally like, "Ooh, this is what I want to know. Why do people do what they do?" But that was my question overall in college: "Why do people do this?" Then I took a gender and sexuality course and it was awful. We had to watch videos from 1994 on like (indiscernible), and I was like, "Oh my gosh, I wasn't even born when this was made." They had really inappropriate terminology about transgender people, intersex people, stuff like that. I remember the professor refusing to change it, and I remember being like, "Oh my god, I could teach this course a lot better." And now I do! That's basically it. That was the most interesting part of psychology: why people do what they do and what makes up aspects of a personality and who is a person overall?

GENSER: That's so interesting. I would love to study that myself. Do people come to you with just straight mental health questions or problems, as opposed to maybe an intersection between identifying in the LGBT community and how that has affected their mental health? Do you find that sometimes people aren't in both areas that come to you for help?

VISQUERRA: I've had both. I've had clients that their LGBTQ identity has been either figured out or is currently taking a backseat to some of the presenting mental health problems. Then I've had folks who can't move forward with their mental health problems until they've addressed their identity. I think it just depends on the person, because for some people, they're like, "No, I'm queer. I'm a lesbian. I'm gay. I'm bisexual. And that's fine. This is what I come in for." So it's been both. It also very much depends on the age as well, it depends on who brought them in for counseling, if they came for themselves. It's a bunch of different factors regarding identity.

GENSER: Have people ever come to you that are cisgendered or are straight and have come to you just for mental health issues, they don't identify with the LGBT community? I'm going to add to that: have people ever come to you that are cisgendered and heterosexual that have come to you for help with a friend that might not come in themselves?

VISQUERRA: For our counseling program, we only serve folks who are LGBTQ identified, but at our Coffeehouse program and the Queer Connect programs, the only two programs in the building that welcome allies⁸. Sometimes someone would be like, "Hey, I think my friend needs help." That's a really big aspect of why we have that in place, because sometimes, especially as a kid, if someone can't bring a friend, they might not come, and we can't guarantee that you might have two friends in the community. That's why we open that program to allies, because people also deserve to know there are going to be allies around you and they need to learn how to be allies. But for regular counseling, no, you have to be LGBTQ identified or questioning because sometimes, like folks have gone through counseling, and they're like, "No, I'm straight," or "I'm cisgender," and that's totally fine. That's what we're here for, to facilitate that dialogue as well.

GENSER: What advice would you give to someone who is trying to be an ally?

VISQUERRA: Listen. Don't just listen to respond, listen to listen. I think sometimes we get lost in conversation about, "Oh, I heard you and now I'm going to respond with what I think or what I feel." But being an ally, overall, is giving that person space, but not requesting that you also have a seat at the table, because you might not. Giving folks that space, that equality, fighting for the right, not expecting the community to educate you, because like I said, it's not up to any individual to educate another person unless they want to, or they feel that they have to, but they absolutely don't have to, there's plenty of information available.

⁸ The Coffeehouse and Queer Connect programs are programs offered through Pride for Youth. Queer connect is a social event held montly and Coffehouse is a safe environment for LGBT youth to receive support from one another. Find more information here: <https://longislandcrisiscenter.org/prideforyouth/mission-history/#>

Whereas a person could describe what their identity means to *them*, because being bisexual to me could be very different from someone else who is bisexual, and that's totally fine. Being present, being seen, not just being an ally in the month of June. There are so many issues that are surrounding us for 12 months out of the year. We don't want fake activism. Don't just come out and march with us when there's a problem. Where are you spreading awareness 24/7? That's my biggest thing with allies.

GENSER: Yes, definitely. I see that we have hit an hour so we can round out the interview. I actually do have a question about pronouns if you don't mind helping me out. I saw in your emails closing, you had she/her/hers, they/them/theirs. I'm curious as to how to use pronouns like that when it's separated or when someone doesn't say I use she/they and they separate it as she/her/hers and they/them/theirs. I've always had a question on that, and I'd love for you to educate me.

VISQUERRA: Everyone is different. This is not a universal rule for both sets of pronouns. I put both sets of pronouns because I would like both sets of pronouns to be used. Whenever you see that, it's like, this person wants to use both sets of pronouns. It's also okay to use it in the same sentence: "She, she, she, her her her." It's like, "She is coming with me to Target because they need to purchase socks for her grandma." That was a perfect example of it's just about interchanging. But, some people are comfortable with different things. Like day to day, it could change. There are people who are like, "Today it's they/them pronouns," and that's totally fine. But for me, I put both to show that like both are interchangeable. I like the combination of both, so I'm not upset if people use she/her all day or they/them all day. I'm a fan of both.

GENSER: Thank you so much for helping me understand that. I wasn't sure. Some of my closest friends use hey/they pronouns, but I wasn't sure if it was similar to when they're separated, like how you have in your email, so I really, really appreciate that. Thank you so much for meeting with me. This was an absolutely incredible opportunity. I'm so happy to have learned about you and about such an amazing center that I have not too far from my home. I really can't tell you enough how much I appreciated this.

VISQUERRA: Yes, no problem! Please let me know if you have any questions or if you're interested in the future in volunteering and seeing the Coffee House program?

GENSER: Yes, definitely. I will reach out. I'm home over the summer, so I'll reach out then. I will send you an email with a consent form and then in a couple of weeks with my transcript for any editing. Thank you so much again. It was so wonderful talking to you. I'll talk to you soon again.

VISQUERRA: Nice to meet you! Have a great night!

GENSER: Nice to meet you too!

VISQUERRA: Bye!

GENSER: Bye!