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A Conversation with Connelly Akstens

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GLBTQ Alumni Oral History Project
Conversation with Connelly Akstens (Class of 1968)
March 20, 2017

Conducted by Michael DeSantis '18

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Transcript

Michael: Alright, so today is March 20th, 2017. I'm Michael DeSantis and...Class of 2018...and Connelly can I just get your acknowledgment that you're being recorded and that you are consenting to do this interview.

Connelly: That's right I am being recorded and I consent to that.

Michael: Fantastic. Alright, so welcome to your interview for the Holy Cross GLBTQ Alumni Project. Before we actually get into discussing your experience could you please briefly introduce yourself.

Connelly: Yes. My name is Connelly Akstens. I graduated from Holy Cross in 1968, and I was an English major. And after my graduation, I went on to the University of Pennsylvania to study for my doctorate in English. I completed that in 1972. I am a musician, a writer, a gardener, and...uh...what else? I don't know.

Michael: *laughs*

Connelly: I am now a resident of Rhode Island which is nice.

Michael: Now, that's good, that's perfect. So, our first question is...uh...about Holy Cross. How did you decide to come to Holy Cross?

Connelly: Well, I came to Holy Cross to play basketball. And my last two choices for colleges were Harvard and Holy Cross. And I went to St. Sebastian's, which is a private school now located in Needham, then located in Newton. And in my graduating class we sent, our graduating class was 55, we sent...I think, 7 people to Harvard and 9 people to Holy Cross out of 55, and I decided on Holy Cross because it had a stronger basketball program. My parents were not happy with that decision, I will say. And the irony of ironies is our first game when I was a varsity player, you couldn't play varsity until you were sophomore back in those days, was against Harvard in the Worcester Auditorium and I don't think I have to tell you who won that game. It was not Holy Cross and my parents took me out to dinner afterwards and they had a very kind of "we told you so" attitude. That's why I came here and it was a family tradition as well. My father

was a graduate. My uncle was a graduate. Two cousins were graduates. My grandfather had an honorary degree. So there was quite a family tradition of Holy Cross.

Michael: Cool. And you talked a little bit about your...your high school experience and your transition to Holy Cross but could you just tell us a little about what your transition from high school to Holy Cross was like.

Connelly: I was very well prepared to make the transition, actually. St. Sebastian's was a very demanding secondary school. And it was a small school that placed a great emphasis on a feeling of community, and "community" is a word we use a lot now, we didn't use it a lot in '65 or '64. But that's really what it was and we had a very...a very..."supportive" is another word we use now that we didn't use then, a very supportive environment in terms of intellectual and academic growth, in terms of athletics, and in terms of socializing.

Michael: OK...gotcha.

Connelly: So I did not have much difficulty with the transition here. I did very little academic work. And I managed to skate by just because I knew how to do that. I knew how to show up when I needed to show up and say the right things and so forth...and I was very disappointed in myself after one year. I had an English professor named Tom Lawler here as a sophomore and I got a paper back from him at the beginning of my sophomore year and he obviously put more time into evaluating the paper than I had put into writing the paper and I felt very much ashamed by that. And it changed my attitude completely and I became very dedicated to academic work and to intellectual growth.

Michael: Cool. Alright so you were Holy Cross student from 1964 to 1968, just for some global context: what was happening in the world then and how did this impact your experience at Holy Cross.

Connelly: Well there was tremendous upheaval in the world, absolutely monumental. And in high school, I have been a professional musician since I was 15 and I still am actually, and I spent a lot of time in Cambridge at a place called the "Club 47" which was very well known as a folk club back then. And there was a lot of change going on and my parents when they listened to records they put on My Fair Lady or they put on Perry Como or something like that, you may not even know who Perry Como is.

Michael: No. *laughs*

Connelly: Let's see...Tony Bennet, ok?

Michael: Name's familiar.

Connelly: Alright, they put on those kinds of records, I played Howlin' Wolf albums, and things like that. So there was a lot going on politically in terms of the civil rights movement. In terms of people individually and collectively finding a voice to express themselves. And to simply not be complacent about the status quo with regard to what the government was doing or what was

going on in terms of civil rights and in terms of ultimately women's rights. And that was reflected in terms of what was going on on this campus as well. There was a fair amount of anti-war activity with regard to Vietnam. I know we would gather in the lounge, which was the only place there were television sets back in those days, in Mulledy or someplace and would watch the news and they would have the, you know, the weekly body count, how many people, United States service people had been killed in Vietnam that week. And I remember very vividly watching Johnson's speech where he said that he was not going to run again for President in one of those lounges and people just standing up and yelling and screaming and cheering when he made that surprise announcement, took everybody by surprise. And, of course, the draft was looming over everyone's head which was a very significant thing and caused a tremendous amount of concern. One classmate of mine was a Marine and he was killed in Vietnam.

Michael: And so I guess you've sorta talked a little about this but what was Holy Cross like in your time here from 1964 to 1968?

Connelly: Well, it was I would say it was an, an odd combination of...um...a very demanding academic environment, a very high-level athletic environment, and a very strong dose of *Animal House*. Holy Cross back then was basically a prep school for medical school, dental school, law school, MBA programs, and academic PhDs. And when I look at my classmates from that era, there are enormous numbers of doctors and lawyers and business people. Very few people involved in the creative arts because there was almost no arts program here at all back then. In terms of athletics and basketball, we played kind of a strange hybrid of a Big East schedule and an Ivy League schedule. We would play BC home and home, UConn home and home, Providence home and home. We'd play St. John's down in the Garden. And we'd play Brown and Harvard and Dartmouth and Yale, those four pretty much every year. And...um...so it was athletics on a different level than Holy Cross has a basketball program now. I'm a big fan of Holy Cross basketball, but we, we really played on a different level, I would have to say. And then there was the *Animal House* aspect and being an all-male college, I sometimes jokingly refer to myself as the first woman basketball player at Holy Cross, being an all-male college there was the kind of all-male hijinks going on all the time. There was a lot of drinking. There was a fair amount of pot smoking, particularly the last couple years. And people were listening to Doors records and all that kind of stuff. But...ummm...in *Animal House*, I don't know if you remember the film, one guy has a, a white Lincoln Continental...

Michael: Yeah, yeah I've seen it...

Connelly: And I actually had a classmate at Holy Cross who had a white Lincoln Continental that we used to take on road trips and go to places like Bennington and it was exactly the same kind of thing. Food fights in Kimball, really all this kind of stuff. It was a little crazy I have to say.

Michael: Gotcha. Alright, so now moving into, moving out of some of the context and moving into some of the questions more specific to the LGBTQ part of the project, where you out during your time at Holy Cross?

Connelly: No.

Michael: Ok. Cool. And since you weren't out at Holy Cross, what do you think kept you from being out?

Connelly: Nobody was out.

Michael: Gotcha. Yeah.

Connelly: Quiet simply. There was a group of students who it was commonly known were the quote "homosexuals" at Holy Cross and they had a faculty, unofficial informal mentor who was a professor at the College. And they would kind of go on outings together and you know they'd go on road trips together and so forth. And it was kind of a "don't ask, don't tell, leave well enough alone" situation. I was not aware in the four years I was here of any harassment that went on. Some of the words that we don't tolerate in public discourse anymore were quite frequently used in a derogatory way but most of the time not directed at those students but directed at one another as high school kids might say now, "Ah you're being so gay." That kind of thing. In terms of trans people, I didn't know what I was to be honest with you. I, I knew there was something going on but I didn't really, I thought I might be the only person in the world, I didn't know anything. There was no information. And so I survived by compartmentalizing myself and not having the slightest suggestion, if possible, of any kind of femininity. at all.

Michael: And so this question, this is sort of going beyond your time at Holy Cross, and it's fine if you're not comfortable sharing but for the...recognizing that coming isn't a one-time event, when and how did you first come out?

Connelly: Well, that's interesting, too. And it certainly is not a one-time event, although it's kind of portrayed that way sometimes in popular media, you know the..umm...the gay son or lesbian daughter sits down with mom or dad and says "I have something I need to tell you" and they're "Oh no, we had no idea..." You know, that's just ridiculous. Although I do know a story in the trans community. I was at a conference once and there was a woman there with her daughter and they had been father and son and the father had sat down with the son to have a very serious discussion at one point to say that he was transgender and that he was considering a transition. He said, "I have something very important to say to you and I want to know if this is a good time for us to talk." And the son said, "Well, could I say something first?" And the father said, "Certainly." And the son, said, "Dad, I'm transgender and I'm considering..." So they're both, they both had the same thing to say and they're both shocked!

Michael: That's amazing!

Connelly: Yeah. It was amazing listening to them tell that story. I came out to close friends starting probably about 25 years ago.

Michael: Ok

Connelly: But very, very close, select friends. And interestingly, only to genetic women.

Michael: Gotcha. Ok.

Connelly: Not to any people with XY chromosomes.

Michael: and was that intentional or....

Connelly: No, it just happened that way. I guess I didn't trust any...any people with XY chromosomes because once again there was no understanding, there was no information. This was something that kind of came from outer space at people. And about 25 years ago, I guess just in terms of personal history, I discovered I was born with some intersex characteristics.

Michael: Ok.

Connelly: I found this out later on when I had to get a birth certificate, and my birth certificate has no first name and I wasn't christened until about a month after my birth. And I remember having some sort of surgical procedure or probably a couple in Boston's Children's Hospital when I was probably 4 or so, which is about when you can remember things. And I remember that the, I was looking up at the big light, laying on my back and there were three adults around me and they had surgical masks on and so forth and so on and they told me not to be frightened because they were just space men. You know, there's a way to calm a child down: "Don't worry, little child, oh we're just from outer space." Anyway, so I put two and two together, something was going on back then. And I just didn't know how to process it, but I had obviously crossdressing behavior when I was a young child and intermittently at times through my life, an interest in things that would conventionally things that women would be interested in I suppose in some conventional archaic sense. And when I was 55, I said to my spouse, "You know, I've kept this under wraps for 50 years, and I think that's long enough." So I started to seek out community, and when I started to seek out community it became easier to be out. Now I'm fully out in my employment now for just about a year.

Michael: Ok.

Connelly: So, I'm kind of a late bloomer.

Both: *laughs*

Michael: And so this is kind of to bring focus back to Holy Cross...who was your support system at Holy Cross, if you had one?

Connelly: Around transgender identity?

Michael: Umm, I think that's sort of what the question is asking about, but it could be related to any type of support system that you had.

Connelly: Well, there was none, basically. Because it was completely invisible.

Michael: Yeah.

Connelly: And...ummm...I don't...the gay students and their own support system that seemed to be centered around this one professor who was a Housemaster, I don't know if they still have Housemasters here?

Michael: No...ummm...maybe in a different sense. Not quite the same way, yeah.

Connelly: But the only thing I knew about anything transgender was that there were people someplace in New York or something that were known as female impersonators and that was like the only thing I knew.

Michael: Ok. Gotchya. And so you've already talked about your involvement with basketball, could you just talk a little about that involvement and then also were you involved in any other clubs or campus organizations while you were at Holy Cross?

Connelly: I...there's a bunch of things in the yearbook like you know Yacht Club and that kind of thing, I think I probably went to like three meetings and went sailing once. And I was very interested in theater and there was a really strong theater program which was just getting going as a strong program but I never got involved in that because I became so dedicated to academic work. The end of my freshmen year in basketball, I tore my ACL and back then they didn't have any surgeries or anything they could do, so they put a brace on me, they put a cast on me for three months. They took the cast off and they did that test where they pull the bottom of your leg and it still moved and they said, "Sorry, it's torn." So, what do we do? So I tried to play my sophomore year with a brace and icing it and taking fluid out and everything and then basically that was obviously not worth it, so that was the end of that. The basketball experience was...was extraordinary, I mean, it was so much fun. It took so much time that it was absolutely insane.

Michael: *laughs*

Connelly: How much time it took. We spent so much time on buses, I can't believe it.

Michael: Was that primarily how you got around to games?

Connelly: Yeah, we took, we flew to a couple of things, and we went on the train a couple of times in these overnight compartments, that was really fun. But it was...the...uh...the team was a bunch of...just crazy characters...that you couldn't make these people up. And I'm still very close with Keith Hockstein who was one of the major players. He played varsity for three years, obviously, and is a Hall of Famer and he said that that team was his favorite team. We weren't the best team but it was just so much fun, there were so many crazy characters that we really had a good time. And I'm very glad I did it. But I'm very glad, it seemed awful at the time to have to move, but I'm very glad that I was able to move on and that I had a reason to move because they had an incredible recruiting class. I probably wouldn't have made the team.

Michael: And so, you only played your first year and sophomore year?

Connelly: Freshman year and sophomore year.

Michael: Ok.

Connelly: And most of sophomore year I had what I called “the best seat in the house” you know but we had a lot of fun. It was a good experience.

Michael: Cool. So did you...did...how did your involvement in either basketball or some of the other things that you alluded to impact your experience of being transgender at Holy Cross, if it made any impact at all since you talked about...

Connelly: None.

Michael: Ok, yeah, yeah...

Connelly: None. No.

Michael: So moving on, did you have any romantic relationships while at Holy Cross.

Connelly: Oh yes. Yes. Many actually.

Michael: Ok,

Connelly: Or so I would say several...many sounds...I would say several, yes.

Michael: And so is there anything that you like that you found about the experience that you consider noteworthy or not really?

Connelly: Well, they were the sort of conventional relationships that any Holy Cross student had at the time. They were with young women at women’s colleges primarily. And they tended to be sort of short-lived, serial monogamy I suppose.

Michael: Ok.

Connelly: I had a girlfriend and then something happened and she met somebody else or you met somebody else or she went to junior year in Salzburg or someplace like that and she met somebody over there and you met somebody over the summer...you know? It was that kind of thing.

Michael: Ok. Cool. And looking back is there you wish you had known about romantic relationships is there anything you wish you had known in you time at Holy Cross?

Connelly: I’m sorry. Could you repeat...

Michael: Yeah, so looking back, is there anything you wish you had known in regards to romantic relationships, during or before your time at Holy Cross?

Connelly: How would I answer that? I wish I had known...that it is always best to put aside shame and replace it with truth.

Michael: Ok.

Connelly: Which I didn't know then.

Michael: Gotcha.

Connelly: I carried a lot of shame because I was this strange person and I felt in these relationships, "My God, if she ever finds out, well then what?" If she ever finds out and decides, "Well, I don't...this isn't for me." Well, that's alright, yes, I could go on from there, but people took the kind of pairing off as a couple very seriously back then...

Michael: Really?

Connelly: Yeah. Very seriously and I have...I came here for this seventieth birthday thing, I think it's like a Development Office invention: "Let's not wait to get these people back for their fiftieth because they'll be 72 and we might lose a few between now and then." So they had this seventieth year birthday thing at homecoming and I came back and I didn't know what to make of it and I was out at that and it was very funny because they had some sort of gathering in the room. And I came with my friend Richard Ferrone, who I went to both college and high school with, and we were standing in the middle of the room talking and I realized that there was a kind of a perimeter around and there were about 40 or 50 people in the room but the closest person was about 12 feet away. And then gradually people started coming in because they realized who I was and everybody was very friendly and...there was one person who gave me the cold shoulder out of everybody who was there.

Michael: Just one?

Connelly: Yeah. but the amazing thing is that most of those people are married to women who they met when they were students at Holy Cross and the girls were students at typically Manhattanville or someplace like that. They paired off and they have been married for 50 years, that kind of thing, or 45 years. I haven't had that kind of experience.

Michael: Gotcha. And so, do you think that the Jesuit identity and environment of Holy Cross affected your identity of your transgender identity...ummm,,yeah?

Connelly: I don't think it affected that directly but I will say this: I very pleased to see that Holy Cross is number two among Catholic, religious affiliated colleges and so forth. I think that's terrific and I think that...I am not a practicing Catholic and I have not been since my graduation from this College. But I'm dismayed to the extent to which things associated with Catholicism are a convenient punching bag for the media or progressive institutional thought. I think it's grossly unfair. Sitting down to have dinner with Keith Hockstein a few years ago, he said to me, "Do you remember a moment at Holy Cross that was really life changing for you?" And I said,

“Yeah, I can remember something, something that a professor said in a class that really changed me. I mean, absolutely hit me like a bolt of lightning.” And I said, “Do you?” And he said, “Yes, I’m thinking of something a professor said in a class.” Now, this is 40 years later and we’re thinking of the same things it turns out. There was a philosophy professor named John Walsh, he was a Jesuit, who taught a course in Nietzsche, Hegel, and Feuerbach. Now this is interesting, you’ve got two basketball players taking an upper level elective Nietzsche, Hegel, and Feuerbach, I don’t know how often that happens anymore.

Michael: *laughs*

Connelly: But which is a kind of characteristic of the College at the time, I mean really, we had a lot of people on that team who were pre-med... Anyway, to complete this story and not take forever. He said, “It is the responsibility of every educated person to challenge orthodoxy.” Which is pretty extraordinary thing, from an outside perspective for people who don’t know the Jesuit tradition of free inquiry to put their heads around, and then he went on from there, and this is what absolutely blew my mind and Keith’s mind, “It is the responsibility of every educated person to challenge orthodoxy. *Start with your own.*” Wow.

Michael: Wow.

Connelly: Wow. I say that years later, I get shivers on my arms and up and down my back. Just the, the intellectual courage and absolute total conviction to honest, unvarnished, free inquiry is stunning and inspiring. So, indirectly, I’m sure it’s informed almost everything I do or think about.

Michael: Gotcha. And if there, can you share a story about a moment when being trans impacted an experience that you had at Holy Cross?

Connelly: No.

Michael: Oh really. Yeah...

Connelly: Because I was so compartmentalized, you know, it didn’t...it was just completely invisible really.

Michael: Alright, so now we’re gonna move into talking about some questions that are more asking you to reflect back on your Holy Cross and less about the Holy Cross experience directly, unless, is there you’d like to share about your Holy Cross experience that we didn’t cover in some of the other questions?

Connelly: I don’t think so, other than to say, just recounting that story about John Walsh, I definitely made the right decision to come here. You know, I would not, would not make a different decision if I was out back in that place and time.

Michael: Alright, so if you could do your Holy Cross experience over, would you do anything differently?

Connelly: I would.

Michael: Ok.

Connelly: I would be kinder with myself and with other people as well. I don't think I was such a great friend sometimes. And...people got along as they probably still do here by knowing one another on a rather superficial level, which was great for me back then because nobody got to know me. You got to know a little piece of me over here. Someone else got to know...but nobody gets the whole picture ever. But I think I could have been a better friend to other people. I could have been kinder to myself. If I had the knowledge that I have now and if I was beginning an experience at Holy Cross now, I would still hope to play basketball...I would be out. And people would have to make whatever they would make of it and I would help people to try to do that. But I would be more authentic. I was not an authentic person then. I was a role player. I played a role. and that worked for me. The role of the athlete, the role of the English major, the role of the boyfriend, the role of whatever it was.

Michael: Cool. Thank you. And then so kinda going onto the subject of authenticity and being out at Holy Cross, based on your experience, what advice would you offer to LGBTQ student who are struggling to come out at Holy Cross?

Connelly: Find a way to do it.

Michael: Yeah...

Connelly: Find *your* way to do it.

Michael: Ok.

Connelly: Don't let anybody tell you how to do. Find your way to do it and get all of the help and support that you can possibly get. I didn't come back here very much for a long time. I was living in Woodstock, New York and the College, what was going on, was not really that important to me, I'll honest with you, but I've reconnected in the last five, six years. Part of it was K.J. [Rawson]. I saw the article about the Archive and connected with him. And so one of the things that really struck me was at this homecoming this year and in the quad in front of Kimball there was a rainbow kind of coalition type of table.

Michael: Yeah, probably for PRIDE or Outfront. One of those groups.

Connelly: Yeah, one of those groups, I don't know which one. And they had these very funny T-shirts, I couldn't get one, they didn't have any extra large. But they had two Crusaders, you know typical Crusaders with the armor on and everything and they were holding hands and there were big flowers or something and I thought that was very funny and I thought that was wonderful. That doesn't mean there aren't problems. it doesn't mean that there are...you know, you're going to have unpleasant experiences and experience rejection and suspicion and you will lose friends but they always say, "Well, those are the friends you don't want anyway," and I'm not sure that's

the case but you will lose some friends. But I think you will gain a sense of peace in your own heart and in your own mind and you have a chance to be a whole person. Authenticity to me means being a whole person because I was not a whole person at, for decades and decades and decades of my life. I was very successful. I had an Ivy League PhD when I was 25 years old. I had university fellowship. I was a very high-achieving person. I had a recording contract. I had all these things. I've written many magazine articles. I got an award for, you know, for one of the articles. A high-achieving person but I was not a whole person. I functioned very well as a compartmentalized person. I think try to be as whole and authentic and genuine as you but do it your way. Do it safely. And get all the help and support you possibly can.

Michael: Great. Thanks. Just for, cause I'm aware of some of what you're talking about with K.J. and the Digital Transgender Archive that you're alluding to but just for anyone else who's reading or listening to this who's not as familiar with that, could you talk a little but about how you found out about the DTA and your relationship with K.J. and also how that sort of relates to you finding your way back to Holy Cross?

Connelly: Yeah. I was reading a copy of the *Holy Cross Magazine* and there was the article about K.J. and about the archive. And I was interested in it on an number of levels. One of which is, I think the whole concept of the digital humanities is a concept that's kind of...as Richard the Third says, "I run before my horse to market." In other words, it's getting ahead of itself. People don't even really know what it is. Everyone has an idea of what it is, I suppose, but it is something on one hand trying to keep up with the digital world. And on the other hand, trying to define itself as it does that. So when you go to the MLA convention or something, there's a lot of kind of hubbub about digital humanities and it's just something people are talking about because its important to talk about that kind of thing. Now this is actually digital humanities in a way that is...you can...how ironic to say, "Hold it in your hand," but you can't. But you can see it on your laptop so it's there. It is something, it's not just a lot of talk or theorizing. I think that's very interesting. And also the subject matter is very attractive. When the internet came along and you found out that there were things being posted about transgender experience and transgender identity....everybody that I know in the community has used that as kind of a lifeboat really. And it's fun to look at the stuff.

Michael: Yeah, yeah.

Connelly: And I particularly, I like the historical stuff. I've a collection of ephemera at home, I'm a bit of a collector and you know it's, it's just so much that is...some of it's heartbreaking. Some of it's fascinating and weirdly amusing and it can be all those things at the same time.

Michael: Yeah, yeah, I know what you mean kind of going through the materials myself, yeah.

Connelly: Yeah. You know these old magazines that used to be out. One was a pun on *Izvestia* which is, which was the German...the Russian newspaper in the Cold War. *Izvestia* means truth. No, pravda means truth, I don't know what *Izvestia* means...anyway, somebody published a magazine for a few years called *Transvestia* and it's all these pictures of businessmen in you know makeup and frumpy clothes and stuff. And it still goes on. I have a wonderful friend named Tracy who is a real estate developer in Boston and she and I joke because you go on the

internet and there are certain genres of photographs. One is, our favorite genre is the abandoned parking garage, right? Where somebody dresses up and they're afraid to go anywhere so they go and they park their car in a parking garage somewhere and they put the camera on top of the car and they take a picture of themselves. And so there's...you could really do an exhibit on abandoned parking garage photographs...so when we see one we send it to one another...So it can be sad and funny and kinda goofy all at the same time. And also highly informative. And it serves to say, ultimately, "Yes, this is real. And these are people."

Michael: And then I guess, one final question that we have listed is here is, thinking sort of beyond the is, based off your experience that advice would you offer LGBTQ senior who are about to make the transition from collegiate to professional life?

Connelly: Well this is very interesting...I don't know that I'm the right person to give advice in that area. I went to a couple of career development things recently and...umm...I was thinking of, you know, looking for other possibilities and so forth. And I was probably the only trans person there and you start thinking immediately, "Is this an asset or is this a liability?" And you do kind of a cost-benefit analysis, "Asset-liability? What's going on here?" Well, you don't know. I don't know if there is a change in the academic world. A friend of mine who is formerly the department chair at Amherst, told me, "You know, what's working against you is your age. What's working for you is your transgender identity and your transgender identity is what's going to make people want to hire you." Well, I pushed that possibility for a couple of years, very openly transgender in my application letters and I've done a lot of outreach so it's all over my vita. And nobody was, you know, beating down the door. So I don't really know, and that's in the academic world where you'd think that would be...you know, a tolerance, at least. In business, I don't know. I'm active with a group out of Boston and it's called Speak Out! and it's a speaker's group and I haven't been to a corporate setting yet. I've been to a couple settings, educational settings for them, youth groups, and so forth. But they do send a lot of people to compare settings and there's a real interest in the corporate world in...I don't want to say "incorporating"...in welcoming in people in the workforce who are identified LGBTQ whatever. So that's, I think, a reality, and the other reality I think is there are still haters out there and that can't be legislated away. And the haters may be under the radar but you're still going to encounter bias, there's no question about it.

Michael: And so I guess before we do, we have some logistical questions more at the end, is the anything you would like to talk about more with regards to your experience at Holy Cross or some of the work you've done more of with regards to outreach and activism since, since you graduated?

Connelly: Ok, yes...I'd be glad to talk more about that particular point. I mentioned Speak Out! I've also done outreach and education at a number of college campuses from Connecticut out to Illinois. I've read papers on trans topics, particularly, particularly interested in the ally movement of five, six, seven, eight years ago. Which has kind of morphed into "safe space" which I have issues with. I...are you familiar with the notion as college students being referred to as teacups?

Michael: I've heard about it.

Connelly: Being fragile....

Michael: Yeah, yeah...the, the, the general idea is something that I'm familiar with.

Connelly: And I don't know that I, I'm not sure about this but I'm not sure about the idea that it's the function of an educational institution to protect the people who are there to seek the services of the institution. I think, going back to the Jesuit idea of free inquiry, I think you have to be able to process, cope with, come to terms with lots of different points of view. That does not go so far that people can be overtly hostile or threatening to one another. I don't think that's acceptable, but I think that, you know, part of my response to your question is that I've done outreach in what are basically safe environments and I've had the opportunity that's been raised, "Would you go and talk to a population at a prison." I'm not comfortable doing that, so I may be a bit of a teacup myself. Ok. But I've done that outreach and I started a discussion circle when I was at Sienna College on transgender topics and...you know, I'm always interested in doing more because I think it's really important.

Michael: Alright so, before we conclude, would you be willing to self-identity in the following categories, some of them we've definitely touched on but some of them go over...Your graduation from Holy Cross: 1968?

Connelly: Yep.

Michael: Your major, English?

Connelly: It was English, yes.

Michael: Gender identity?

Connelly: Well, this is interesting. I will, I will do this but one of the places that I've gone to kind of connect is a conference at the University of Vermont.

Michael: Ok.

Connelly: And there's two of them with similar names, one is "Translating Identity" and one of them is something or other. But I went about four or five years in a row and I stopped going. One of the reasons that I stopped was because for one I was chased out of a session on the ally movement because I was a person quote "within the community" and I'd just done a paper on the idea of allies within the community. That it's, I think we can do this. I think we can handle this, folks. But they chased me out of the room because it was just for people who did not self-identity so forth blah blah blah. Then I turned around and went to a session called "Trans 101" which lasted for an hour-and-a-half. And it was an hour-and-a-half of a large group of people in a room saying, "Well, I identity as bi, queer, sub-trans whatever." You know. "Well, that's interesting because I identity as gay, trans, Goth..." You know. And this went on for an hour-and-a-half. And I think that at a certain point the taxonomy of all this becomes limiting and divisive. So people say to me, well I will say, I will offer one thing, people say, "What is like to becoming a

woman?” Well, I’m not becoming woman. I’m a transgender person. I don’t think of myself as a woman. And so if I have to identify myself, that’s how I do it and I leave it at that.

Michael: So some of the other categories...sexuality?

Connelly: I've always been interested in women and I’m still interested in women.

Michael: Thank you and...

Connelly: One woman in particular, I’m married to.

Michael: Racial or ethnic background?

Connelly: Well, my ethnic background is...on my mother’s side: Irish, English though a Northern Ireland connection, and Portuguese. And my father’s side: Lithuanian, Finnish, Estonian.

Michael: And then, current or former occupation?

Connelly: I’m a professor. My employer is Empire State College, State University of New York.

Michael: Alright, that pretty much wraps up what we have so once again thank you for agreeing to be part of the project. Any final thoughts?

Connelly: I think this is very important. I hope I didn't take too much time...

Michael: Oh no, this is perfect.

Connelly: ...you know, 54 minutes or something I thought it was going to be like 15.

Michael: We usually allot an hour.

Connelly: Ok, but I think this kind of thing is important, and I think it’s important because what’s going on here at this College is obviously changing, and I think, from my perceptions changing very rapidly. And I think that’s all good. And people in my generation, I think, have got to embrace that. You know the conventional idea is the old graduate who doesn't want them to change the words of “Mamie Reilly” or something and “stop giving money if they...”

Michael: Or who doesn't want the Crusader like nickname or mascot to be dropped, which is a discussion that’s been going on recently.

Connelly: Yeah. Right, well, you know, “stop giving money” and “take my name off that building” and all this kind of stuff. You know, you’ve got to, an institution, a good institution, is a living, thriving organism and it’s very important that these kinds of initiatives go on to keep the

energy in that organism. It may be that four people ever see this interview. I don't know. If you're out there and you're one of those four people, "Hello!" But in the aggregate, this kind of initiative means a lot. So I thank you very much for the opportunity.

Michael: Ok. Great. Thank you.