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A Conversation with Emily Breakell

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Interviewee: Emily (Em) Breakell

Interviewers: Emma Powell and Nora Grimes

Date: June 28th, 2018

Location: Podcast Room, Multimedia Resource Center, Holy Cross via Skype
Weiss Summer Research in the Humanities Associate and Advisor Yuhl

Em: Hello?

Emma and Nora: Hello!

Em: Hey, how's it going?

Emma: Good, how are you?

Em: Good. Should I see you guys, or is it just audio?

Emma: Um, it might just be audio. They were saying there was an issue with the, like, with the camera in here so it might just be audio.

Em: Oh, okay. No problem at all.

Emma: Alright, sorry about that.

Em: No, it's all good.

Emma: Um, okay. So I'm just gonna like read the consent statement really quick. Um, so, uh, today is June 28th, 2018. I'm Emma Powell.

Nora: I'm Nora Grimes.

Emma: And, um, we're here with Em Breakell, and, for the LGBTQ Holy Cross alum project. Em, can you just, um, consent to being recorded, like on the recording.

Em: Yes, I consent.

Emma: Awesome. Okay, so we can start with our questions.

Nora: Yeah, so, our first question is how did you decide to come to Holy Cross?

Em: Uh, the question.

All: [Laughs].

Em: Um, honestly, I, um, I identify as like first generation college student. Um, so none of my family members went to a four year school. Um, my mom got an associate's degree before she became a hairdresser and she, like went to hairdressing school. My mom's super dope and she's my inspiration.

All: [Laughs]

Em: But, they're all very...trades oriented. Um, like my dad is a construction worker and my brother is an electrician. And, as I mentioned my mom's is a hairdresser. So I was very lost in

my college search. Um, we didn't have much money so I was just like, oh, I'll just go to, I'm from Connecticut, so I was like I'll just go to UConn or like you know community school for a couple years and figure it out. Um... 'cause I was always really nerdy, like definitely knew I wanted to go to school. And then I had this really awesome high school English teacher that was like you definitely should go to a liberal arts school, let me help you find some. And so it was sort of through her guidance that I ended up looking at lots of smaller schools like Holy Cross and I decided to apply ED to Holy Cross because, um... Well I was deciding between applying ED to Holy Cross or Vassar which are like radically different schools and it made virtually no sense but I decided on Holy Cross because I had had very little exposure to any kind of like religious influence and I thought it would be kind of cool to see what it was all about. Um, and, I also frankly heard that they gave really good financial aid...

Nora: Yeah.

Emma: Mmhmm.

Em: ...so I was like, hoping for the best with that. Um yeah so it was a really haphazard process and I was really lucky to end up at Holy Cross.

Emma: Yeah, awesome. So like what was your transition once you um came out of high school and started going to Holy Cross like?

Em: Um, it was tough. I... I think everyone's freshman year is hard and I don't wanna say like, "Oh because I'm gay it was, you know, I have this unique experience." But, um, I definitely think that there are elements of Holy Cross culture that make the transition tricky for someone um with my identity. So, I remember like suddenly being very aware of my wardrobe freshman year, and like trying desperately to like find some money somewhere like, um, to get different clothes because so many of the friends that I was making, like in my hall and like in um house council and in acapella, were like very well dressed people and like I, through my whole life, just wore like, you know, like Kohl's clothing...

Emma: Yeah.

All: [Laughs]

Em: ...like jeans and t-shirts and nothing fancy and nothing fancy and I just suddenly felt really underdressed for life...

All: [Laughs]

Em: ...um, so, I remember that being a weird part of the transition that I wasn't expecting...um. I remember feeling like I was a fraud at Holy Cross, like I was meeting all these people that had really successful parents who were like checking up on them all the time and knew when they had a quiz or like a... um some big paper due and I always tell people this story of like the first time my dad tried to come visit me at school he accidentally went to Sacred Heart in Connecticut...

All: [Laughs]

Em: ...because he didn't know where I went to college. I don't know it's just this really like weird gap between where I felt like so many of my, um, my peers what their relationship with their family was like and how they presented themselves in school and like what their priorities were and yeah I don't know there's just this whole mess of things that I had to negotiate right off the bat and figure out, alright how am I gonna make this work like what is my, what am I gonna tell people about who I am and where I come from and all of those things. So it was definitely a messy time.

Nora: Um, so, the next question is kinda like what were some things that were going on in the news or the world that...while you were at Holy Cross.

Emma: It's like, I guess it's just like global context and how it affected your experience.

Em: Mmhmm. Yeah, yeah that makes sense. Are you like interviewing alums from like a whole range of years?

Emma: Yup. [Laughs]

Nora: [Laughs]

Em: Um, okay, cool. Well obviously really notably in my senior year, um, Trump was elected to the Presidency. Um, I think that...was one of the most, kind of, important shifts in Holy Cross culture that I saw during my time there.

Nora: Yeah.

It felt like suddenly a lot of people who I had perceived as being on the fringes were suddenly "oh, no, actually, I'm a neo-con". Especially in my political science classes I just saw this more, cause I was a political science major,

Emma: Yeah.

Em: ...um, I saw like this greater presence or greater willingness for people to say things that maybe I didn't hear as much of before. But also I often self-selected into like hippy dippy classes...

Emma and Nora: Mmhmm.

Em: ...so it could have just been by virtue of taking a more diverse class my senior year. But anyway. Another sort of huge current event, cultural phenomenon during my four years was the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement.

Emma and Nora: Mmhmm, yeah.

Em: Especially seeing that my sophomore and junior year, that was, was really interesting and my first kind of introduction to like campus activism and community activism and what that looks like. I wasn't, like, heavily involved in planning of that or anything along those lines and I shouldn't have been cause I was not educated enough, um, but I was able to participate in some things and support. And then, finally I would say the Obergefell decision happened the summer before my junior year so, gay marriage was made legal in the United States.

Emma and Nora: Yeah.

Em: And that obviously was a pretty landmark decision, and that was right before I spent a semester in DC where I worked at Human Rights Campaign. Um, and, that for me, like that semester was sort of the most important semester in terms of, like, solidifying my like sexual political identity

Emma and Nora: Mmhmm.

Em: and it gave me energy to come back to Holy Cross for the rest of my junior and then my senior year with kind of passion to do more LGTBQ activist oriented work.

Emma: Mmhmm. Awesome, so kind of moving from that to your personal experience recognizing that coming out is obviously not a one-time event, when and how did you first come out at Holy Cross, or in general, I guess?

Em: Hmm, yeah, I feel like my coming out process at Holy Cross was very piece meal...

Nora: Mmhmm

Em: ...and then it was like, um, I don't know it was like turning on a faucet just lightly so it was like drip, drip, drip, drip, drip...

Emma and Nora: [Laughs]

Em: ...and then just like suddenly turning the handle and it's like pouring out. Um, because... Yeah I mean when I was establishing myself at Holy Cross I was very hesitant to tell people. I didn't know if my roommate would be comfortable with it. I knew she was from a wealthy Catholic family.

Nora: Mmhmm.

Em: I, that's pretty much all I knew about her. So it wasn't like until probably second semester that I told my roommate that I was queer or gay. And even some of my closest friends. Um, I participated in Odyssey... um, which is, well do you guys know what Odyssey is?

Emma and Nora: Yeah.

Em: Okay, cool. Um, so I found myself like being close friends with a lot of um, students of color in my first year because I knew I felt like out of place somehow, and I had that fraud syndrome. And, that was the experience of a lot of students of color too. And, not to say that my experience aligns at all with theirs but I just kind of found myself feeling comfortable in those circles and connecting with them. Um, and as some of like, some of the students of color, alumni of color may have told you, often being black or being Latinx, is complicated when you are also queer. So I was very hesitant to tell, um, some of my closest friends at that time too because I didn't know what that would mean for their communities or for churches they were coming from. Um, so, I think freshman year I kept it pretty close to the chest and like only told people I was really, really... I really found trustworthy. And then I did summer Gateways after my freshman year and, um, Sam Zurn, who I hope you interview, he was the Head Orientation

Leader and he came out to the group and just was like this amazing mentor to me, um. And it was kind of through the rest of my sophomore year that I started building up the courage to be more open about it. Um, and then I decided to intern at Human Rights Campaign. Um, and so in Summer Gateways after my sophomore year when I was an OL again, um, er at that point I was like an, um, I don't know whatever the step above OL but above HOL is, um.

Emma: Yeah.

Nora: Mmhmm.

Em: I kind of assumed that role of Sam where I was just like "Hey, I'm really gay"

All: [Laughs]

Em: Hey everybody. If you're working with any orientees who express concern about having an identity in the LGBTQ community like I would love to talk to them because...I didn't participate in Summer Gateways when I was an incoming freshman but even fall gateways I didn't feel like there was much, like, strong acknowledgement that there is an LGBTQ community on campus. So, it was really in summer gateways that I like, um, I felt like I was responsible for my identity in some way. That like, now that I was comfortable on campus being myself that, like I owed it to incoming students to like, be like "hey you don't have to be afraid to like talk about this" or, there are at least communities where you can feel open to be yourself. So yeah, I think that's where I would mark like, coming out. But I also, like, I feel like I'm just perpetually coming out because, especially...well, not so much anymore cause I like chopped off all my hair and I wear mostly men's clothes so,

All: [Laughs].

Em: ...but like especially at Holy Cross I was pretty straight passing. I had long hair and wore pretty femme clothes so, the assumption was always that I was straight. So yeah, it felt like I was always just coming out which didn't super bother me, just, other than in my freshman year.

Emma: Yeah

Nora: Yeah. Um, so who was your support system at Holy Cross?

Em: Hmm. Definitely the Counseling Center.

Nora: Mmhmm.

Em: I saw a, like a therapist counselor person in the Counseling Center consistently throughout my time at Holy Cross and that was like huge for me. I think...my, you know...two or three closest friends um. I only really had two friends, two really close friends throughout my whole time at Holy Cross but they were like, incredibly strong support to me. And one of them was queer, or is queer, so...that was helpful, um. I think my mom is a like 90% of my support system

Emma: Yeah.

Nora: Yeah.

Em: Yeah. I, to be honest, I think part of the reason that I was, like, so all over the place at Holy Cross in so many ways was because I didn't, um, I wasn't intentional about establishing a strong community to root myself in there. Even... I didn't even identify that much with the Pride group while I was at Holy Cross. Um, I went really intermittently to the Chaplains' Group. Obviously, well not obviously, but I didn't situate myself in like a religious community. So, yeah, I think my support system was this sort of patchwork of cool people that I've been lucky to meet and lucky to be related to.

Emma: Awesome. Um, so I know you already touched on being an Orientation Leader, and I obviously know you from SGA, but um, can you kind of talk about sports teams, clubs, or campus organizations that you were a part of while on campus?

Em: Yeah, sure. Um, yeah so I was involved with Summer Gateways. Um, I was an RA my sophomore year to first year students and then when I returned from DC in fall, oh, or the spring of my junior year to seniors. Um, I was in the all-women's acapella group Off the Record for like, three-ish years at Holy Cross. I had to like step away from that because, um... I had a health issue that, like, pretty dramatically affected my esophagus and vocal chords. So that was a big part of my Holy Cross experience in some ways and in other ways...like, I couldn't really complete that. But I also did the Spring Break trips. I went to El Paso one year, um, Wheeling, West Virginia another year, and then I went to and led the Guatemala Immersion Trip. I also went on a trip to the Dominican Republic with, um, a class with Rosa Carrasquillo. Um, I was in the Honors Program at school. I don't know, random stuff. I did like Vagina Monologues...

Nora: Mmhmm.

Em: ...and helped out PRIDE events. I don't know, I started a food recovery network.

Nora: Oh my gosh.

I don't know if that still exists.

Em: [Laughs], Yeah we tried to recover food, or, wasted food from Dining Halls.

Emma: Yeah.

Nora: Yeah.

Em: Um, and then obviously my involvement in SGA was one of the most important parts of my college career, and I started out as an intern with SGA my freshman year. And then sophomore year I was a cabinet member, um, and that's when I started Agape Latte. And then senior year I was Co-Pres with Ed.

Emma: Yeah.

Nora: That's amazing, wow.

Emma: [Laughs].

Em: [Laughs], [Inaudible].

Nora: So, if you could do your Holy Cross experience over, would you do anything differently? And if so, what?

Em: Oh my god yeah I would do so many things differently. I would tell myself to calm the fuck down.

All: [Laughs]

Em: Like, just every day.

All: [Laughs]

Em: Um, until it sunk in. I think, uh, oh gosh. I don't know on the one hand I'm like really grateful for my Holy Cross experience on the one hand as it lays. And on the other hand I think I, yeah, as I mentioned before I came into Holy Cross with this feeling of being an imposter, of like I don't really deserve to be here or like, I'm not really going to succeed here that just like constantly throughout my time at Holy Cross I was trying to prove to myself that I was actually making it to the point that like I just did way too much stuff and, like, I was getting constant affirmation from people at school that I was doing fine but I still was like they're gonna find out that like, that I'm from this working class family...

Nora: Mmhmm.

Em: ...or that, like I'm not. You know, like, I don't know, it's just this weird thing I built up in my own head. But I think that it's also encouraged by the culture at Holy Cross which is very much like do as much as you can, work as hard as you can, and get as little sleep as you can...

All: [Laughs]

Em: ...you know, it's very much engrained in how people tend to operate I would say. Or at least how...a lot of students are...a lot of students skew towards that behavior.

Nora: Mmhmm.

Emma: Mmhmm.

Em: And then there are also a lot of students who are just like I'm just gonna drink a lot and you know, pass my classes. And I think I wish, um...when I was at Holy Cross I would've like been able to find some middle ground there, find some moderation...Spend more time with really cool mentors. Like, Mary Beth Kearns Barrett was this incredibly inspiring person for me at Holy Cross and I would've loved to have learned more from her while I was there. I think... yeah just like, cooling it...

Emma: Yeah

Em: ...a little would've been really good for me. And like, spending more time building up relationships with people who really cared deeply about me, um, and about my well-being, rather than seeing all of these problems in the community and feeling like I had to try to fill those gaps all by myself.

Emma: Yeah.

Nora: Yeah.

Em: Or that I had to, like, prove to people that they were problems. I think I like, I just became so, um... activist minded that it like, totally overtook, um, a lot of who I was as a person.

Emma: Yeah.

Em: So, when I left Holy Cross, um, I had to go through this whole process of being like, okay, who am I when I'm not just fighting for this cause...

Emma and Nora: Yeah.

Em: ...or just like trying to build up this organization or what have you. And, I think that's you know, something that all post-grads deal with is okay, who am I when I'm not at Holy Cross, um... But I think for me it was a really aggressive transition because I had like, just submerged myself so much in community. Um, but, sorry that was a really long winded answer.

Nora: No that was great.

Emma: No, that was awesome. Um, do you think that your, like, your experience in all these groups and all this activism affected your experience of being LGBTQ at Holy Cross, or?

Em: I, I think so. I th- I think one of the... most beautiful and most difficult parts of...of being like a more public figure on a very small campus, and I don't wanna make it seem like oh I was like a, a celebrity, but like, there came a point in my Holy Cross career where like people knew who I was before I met them, and that was like really weird for me to, um...yeah, to deal with. And in some ways it was positive, like... there were especially, like... freshman and sophomore queer kids that I was able to connect to because they were just like, hey I heard you're gay and you're okay here. But like, um, it also meant that I would go to a party of campus and some jock would come up to me and be like "You're, like, ruining Holy Cross." Like, he'd be, you know, like, just like, you know, dumb drunk kids that like don't know what they're doing. Or like, especially when I wrote things for The Crusader, like I would get, um... even sometimes just like, passing comments in class of like oh there's that like liberal bitch or whatever.

Nora: Mmhmm

Em: But... And I think like being openly queer definitely like shaped that...

Nora: Mmhmm.

Em: ... image for people of me being like this typical social justice warrior or whatever. Um, and not seeing me as a complicated person who has like a Trump supporter for a dad.

Emma: Yeah, [Laughs].

Em: But...yeah I think that one of the real gifts of being queer and being involved on campus was like, um, especially in Summer Gateways, um, I was able to like, yeah, really connect with students who had similar feelings as I did when I was coming into Holy Cross, um... And one of

the relationships that I had treasured most was, um, the brief relationship I had with [name removed] who committed suicide at the end of his first semester of freshman year.

Nora: Yeah.

Em: Um, but he was one of my orientees, and, um, I was in DC for his first semester but we, like talked on the phone pretty regularly and...he unfortunately had [name removed] for his first political science class and like just...It was, yeah again, following the Obergefell decision

Nora: Yeah.

Em: ...so S [name removed] was just saying a bunch of dumb shit all the time. And, yeah [name removed] like definitely felt pretty isolated in his hall and, um, I remember one night him asking me when does it get better, like when does it feel like it gets better um...And, he was connected with the Chaplains' Office group. And I really encouraged him to connect with a counselor 'cause that was a saving grace for me at Holy Cross, but... Yeah, and I, you know I only knew [name removed], like, from our phone calls and from being his Orientation Leader and I, I don't know enough about him to say anything about why, um, he made the choice that he did but, um, that was also, that was the reason that I decided to run for co-president was because I couldn't believe that something like that had happened on our campus.

Emma and Nora: yeah.

Em: ...and I felt just completely destroyed, um. So I was like, here's this like really smart kid who, you know, was gonna like bring so much to our community and now he's just gone. So, literally I like drove to the vigil thing, um from Connecticut cause I had just finished my semester in DC and after the vigil I like pulled Ed aside and was like hey I really wanna run for co-president. And it was, I was like I didn't before because I thought co-presidents were kinda dumb.

All: [Laughs].

Em: But now I feel like they can make actual changes because I basically reamed out Byron – poor Byron. I was so mad at the world that I just took it out on Byron. I was like I can't believe that you're not making President Boroughs say his name, I can't believe you're not talking about some of the things that led up to this, like, I don't know. I just had so many feelings about it, but, yeah, I think...In short, being queer definitely um, shaped what I became involved in and why and, um...who my friends became, and who I was not close with on campus.

Nora: Thank you for sharing all of that with us, um.

Em: Yeah, sure.

Nora: No, thank you. Cause that, yeah. Um–

Emma: Yeah, it gives context to me, too, being a student here now.

Nora: yeah, it really does. I agree.

Em: Yeah.

Nora: So earlier on you mentioned being drawn to Holy Cross kind of because of the fact that it was a religious school, that it was a Jesuit school. Do you think that the Jesuit identity and environment of Holy Cross in any way influenced or, like affected your view of sexuality?

Em: Um, so, my grandma is also one of the more important people in my life.

Nora: Mmhmm.

Em: ...and she's just very vigorously anti-Catholic...

Nora: Mmhmm.

Em: ...like, um...She loves Pope Francis, but...um, when the prior Pope, whenever he would come on the TV she would like, shut it off, and say something...

All: [Laughs]

Em: That scumbag, like, he's letting people violate kids and like, so I have this very like negative idea of what, like who Catholics were.

Nora: Mmhmm.

Em: I just thought that like, that the Catholic Church was all like child molesters, basically, um...And, so when I decided to go to Holy Cross, my family was like really confused, like what, I don't understand this, like, we're not Catholic, this is a clearly very Catholic university or, college, and I was like no, you know it's Jesuit they're cooler. Um, I think, so Mary Beth Kearns Barret started like an interfaith counsel in my freshman year, and I don't know how, I don't know if it was from like our first year surveys or whatever but we, anyone who didn't identify as Catholic basically got this invite to come to interfaith council and so I went to that and I think when I realized that the Chaplains' Office had the LGBTQ group and later the like, gender non-conforming group, um, when I realized like that they had an interfaith minister, um, who at the time was Virginia Coakly, I realized that there was this sort of home on campus for really like progressive Catholics.

Nora: Mmhmm.

Em: Um, and, yeah I just like didn't engage much with like, I didn't go to mass or anything, um. And then in my sophomore year I took Liberation Theology, which was like a huge, cause I was like I gotta get my religion requirement over with, [Laughs], and that was a huge game changer for me as it is for many students. And, that also, like, kind of sparked my, um, desire to be more of a campus activist, um, because Matt Eggemeier just has that effect on people.

Nora: Yeah.

Em: Yeah, so I think learning about Catholic social teaching in that context, um, and also like some of the amazing Jesuits who did work in Latin America, that gave me a more positive look. I didn't engage a ton with the Jesuits on campus, I don't know that many Holy Cross students do, um. And I think...especially living in Portland now, people are like shocked when I tell them that I went to a school called Holy Cross.

Emma: Mmhmm.

Em: And, um when I talk about The Crusader, or mostly complain about The Crusader...

All: [Laughs]

Em: ...situation, um, they're like amazed that a school mascot could be a crusader.

Emma: Yeah.

Em: But... I think uh, that I came out of Holy Cross with much more like, warmth and appreciation for Jesuit spirituality. I don't know how much appreciation I have for, like, the Catholic Church itself, but...yeah going on spiritual exercises my senior year also was pretty formative for me, and I think. Yeah, I'm never gonna be like Catholic and I...have a lot of problems with you know, the Catechism for example, but um... I am grateful to have had that exposure and I hope that the Catholic roots of Holy Cross isn't, like, continued to be a point of leverage for like, not being welcoming to all different kinds of students and people.

Emma: Yeah, awesome. I guess getting even more personal, as if we haven't gotten personal enough.

All: [Laughs]

Em: Yeah, we got deep.

Emma: Did you have any romantic relationships while you were at Holy Cross? And if so, how'd you find that experience?

Em: I did. I, um...I...it was a mixed bag...

All: [Laughs]

Em: ...as with most college relationships. Um, I mean, part of the challenge for me was that I was still very much negotiating my sexual identity. When I first came out to people I mostly came out as queer or bi because I thought that's what I was at that time, and then...kind of slowly throughout college I realized like, oh no, I really don't like boys.

All: [Laughs]

Em: So, I had a pretty serious relationship with a guy in my sophomore year of college, um, and just to be really candid I like wouldn't... yeah I like wouldn't go down on him basically

All: [Laughs]

Em: and he was like that's weird, like why aren't you willing to do that, and I was like I don't know, im not sure.

All: [Laughs]

Em: ...And then, so we broke up in a terrible way and it was very sad and whatever. And then I started dating this girl who was not out to anyone, um, except for me and that was a radically

unhealthy relationship, um. And it was just like a lot of sneaking around and both of us were RAs and it was just a very, like, yeah it was very weird...And when she eventually did come out to her parents they were like really disapproving and um...And her mom like yelled at me that I was ruining her life um.

Nora: Oh my god...

Em: Yeah, it was like, pretty horrifying. Um, so...yeah, after that I like tapped the brakes on relationships in college. I, we broke up just because we were at such different points in our, like, journeys of being queer, like I...yeah, I care about her a great deal still, but um, yeah it was... It's tough when you're someone who's like, been out to your family, is like coming out to people on campus, like, you know, doesn't have to deal with much shame, to enter a relationship where there's so much shame and so much fear and so much, like, secrecy, um...so. And it's not, it wasn't her fault or anything like that but it's just kind of timing, so, yeah. Then, um, my junior year, or for the rest of my junior year and senior year I just really focused hardcore on, like, the causes I cared about, for better or for worse, I just like abandoned my personhood. I was like, eh, I'll get to like the whole taking care of myself as a person later.

All: [Laughs]

Em: So, yeah. Those were like the two major things. And I had little stints with people, as like, as that happens in school.

Emma and Nora: Mmhmm.

Em: But, those were the two most important relationships for sure, or, like romantic relationships.

Nora: So, based on your experience, what advice would you offer to LGBTQ students who might be struggling to come out at Holy Cross?

Em: Mmm...that's a really great question. I don't think I have any, because...for as much as it was, it felt tricky for me to come out at Holy Cross, and also to come out about like, you know, who my family was and, or who my family is, they're all still alive [laughs], um, like who my family is and where I come from, I also carried a lot of privilege at Holy Cross too, right? Like, I'm white and, I was pretty straight passing during my time at Holy Cross, um...and so I wouldn't wanna...try to say to like, and you know, I didn't come from this like fiercely religious family also, I think that's a privilege, so, I wouldn't wanna tell someone who is risking like their parents not paying for them to go to school anymore, which is a reality for some kids. Or like, who, you know, comes from a community that won't, won't accept them. I don't wanna say to them "Just come out anyway". Because that's like a highly personal choice. Um, but, I guess my advice would be to just like, work hard to establish relationships were you feel...supported and loved for exactly who you are. And, um, yeah to just like create that net for yourself so that if there does come a day where you're like "I can't stand not being my full self anymore" you have arms to fall back into...because, you know, that day does come along for some people, and if they don't have that net it can be incredibly hard.

Emma: Yeah. So, um, I guess based on your experience and being sort of like a year out from Holy Cross, um, what would be some advice you would offer to LGBTQ seniors who are about to make the transition from college to professional life?

Em: Mmm.

Emma: I guess like the real world.

Em: Yeah...I mean, just like go somewhere that's fun.

All: [Laughs]

Em: Like, it's been a huge blessing for me to be in Portland this year. Even as a JV, this is just a, an incredibly welcoming city for queer folks. Um, and there's just so many opportunities to like, be affirmed for who you are. And I have a friend who, I know this probably doesn't like help you in terms of things you can write. But I have a friend who is gay and lives in Salt Lake and, like, Utah. And that's a very different experience for him and I feel really bad, but he doesn't have the kind of access to just like, queer support, that I do here. And, I think for a lot of queer kids Holy Cross can kind of take a toll on you because queer culture is so underground in a lot of ways it's so, like, subversive in light of the, a pretty dominant mainstream culture. Or mainstream straight culture at Holy Cross, or at least when I was there... Yeah, so I think like, if you have the privilege of mobility, if you have the privilege to like, go to a place where you might, where things might get a little easier for you, I think that's a wise choice because it's been really healing for me and it's made me a lot less jaded and I think it's made me a better more, like, tranquil person than when I graduated a year ago. And even on my graduation day, um, I was mad because, um, historically they had like a multicultural graduation ceremony where they invited queer students too, um. And for my senior year they decided to make it POC only, which I think is valuable and important, um, but they didn't offer an alternative for queer students. And that just felt really, like so, um... I don't know it just broke my heart because I felt like I had worked so hard with like administrators and other students to try to, um, foster more queer visibility on campus throughout my time here and for that to happen it was just this huge let down, um... And, you know, not just for myself but for other queer kids in my class, it was like, you know, we... fought hard to like make it to this day...

Nora: Yeah.

Em: ...We experienced some shit that straight or cis students don't, and like that, you know. I just, I was frustrated that I don't, like, no one cared about that, um. So me and, um, my friend Keith Plummer, who I hope you're also interviewing them, um, made a bunch of like rainbow ribbons and asked a bunch of people to wear them in solidarity, so. It felt kind of like up until my last day I was a little dissatisfied, a little upset. And like part of that is just my personality, that I'm always like, looking for what's missing. And..., yeah that sometimes it can be for better and sometimes for worse. But I think moving to a place where the glass feels half full a little more often has been really, really helpful for me.

Nora: So you've shared many, um, of these moments, I guess, throughout, um, this session, but can you share a story about a moment when being LGBTQ impacted an experience that you had at Holy Cross? Is there maybe something that you didn't mention so far?

Emma: And it can be positive or negative, it doesn't...

Nora: Mmhmm.

Emma: ...it doesn't really matter.

Em: Okay, cool. Um, hmm. I mean, the first one that comes to mind is...like kinda negative, so I'm sorry I'm just telling a lot of sad stories.

Emma: No, it's fine.

Nora: It's okay.

Em: Um, I would say that like a really landmark moment for me at Holy Cross was the first drag show so chops to Keith for making that happen. But, there was this really like beautiful moment at Holy Cross that felt really, that feels really, um...filtered through, um...this lens of like, I don't know, it felt like a metaphor for me of a lot of different experiences at Holy Cross. So, I mentioned that I was a RA when I returned from DC as a junior to seniors. Um, and that was, according to Res Life, who does not have incredible historical documentation, it was the first time that they had put a junior RA in a senior building, and it was because a senior RA like got fired or something, or couldn't finish the year. And so it kind of fit in perfectly that I was returning. And so I became incredibly close with my roommate Meg, um...and, like loved living in Figge with her and it was super fun. And so I became a graduation usher, just so that I would be able to go to graduation and like, see her graduate and like hang out with her in the days preceding graduation, um. And the night before graduation often people go down to Freshman Field and drink and are problematic.

All: [Laughs]

Em: It's like a fun Holy Cross tradition thing. So, I went down there with her and we spent the whole night just like talking with people and having fun, and, um...Ed was actually with us, too. And, when, like, whatever it was, five or six am rolled around we were like "Let's walk to Miss Woo's and have breakfast." So we were the first ones to Miss Woo's. And an important detail of this story is that I wore my Pride flag down to the field, um, just because we were drunk and I was being a menace.

All: [Laughs]

Em: And, um, it was, like it was really fun because a bunch of my friends who were queer who were graduating took pictures with the flag and it was just like a fun thing, so anyway we were strolling down, um...damn I already forgot the name of that street. But we're strolling to Miss Worcester's and I'm wearing my Pride flag and we're just like being loud and annoying at all hours. And we get to Miss Woo's we're the first one's there, they finally open, we sit down for a mea... and my friend Pat walks in the door, and he's gay, and he like snatched the flag from me

and he just like started waving it around. And...I forget exactly...how it happened, but basically this group of Holy Cross kids, um, came in and they were also all really drunk, um, and Pat like threw the flag at me and was like "Thanks for bringing it". And this guy like, turned around from the booth in front of us from the group that had just walked in and he was like "Hey, fag, can you keep that to yourself?" And one of his, one of the people at his table sort of elbowed him, as to say like, you know, shut up. And I was like, "Hey man, like, don't use that word anymore." And he was like, "You're not even a fucking senior. You shouldn't even be here. Get your fag ass out of here." And so we were like wrapping up our meal anyway, but, I just didn't know at all what to say. Because I was like...you know, this is like a kid who's graduating, like, he's gonna be gone literally tonight. Like, I don't know him. Like, if this is how he's leaving Holy Cross this is probably how he's going to be for a long time and nothing that I say to him is going to change that. And, also, like we're both not sober so his isn't going to be a really productive dialogue. So we just kind of left...and...uh, it was just a really like gross moment, and I couldn't, I didn't fully understand it at the time. But I think what made it most frustrating for me was just that no one else said anything to him.

Emma and Nora: Mmhmm.

Em: And I think that's how a lot of moments at Holy Cross felt. That it, it wasn't just like this weird straight mainstream culture, but it was this sense that like we're not gonna challenge it...

Emma: Mmhmm.

Nora: Yeah.

Em: ...we're just gonna try to find ways to survive amidst it. And a couple days later was the Pulse shooting. And so I made like a pretty lengthy post about, you know, how hatred starts within our little communities and this isn't actually something, you know, that's just happening way out in the distance, um.

Emma and Nora: Yeah.

Em: But, yeah. I think, you know, we walked away from Miss Woo's and I felt like, okay, because I was with two of my best friends who are amazing people and I never felt like, unsafe. Like I knew that they were there for me, um... But yeah, it was just this whole like complicated mess of feelings and thoughts and power dynamics and whatever, um. And, yeah, I think that, that really represents a lot of, like, you know, not that like, queer kids...not that I wanna say that queer kids at Holy Cross are like constantly facing harassment like that, but just kind of that like the layers of it I think represent some of the complicated relationships that might arise for queer kids at Holy Cross.

Emma: Alright, that was kind of like our last question I guess. So, we just kind of have to run through like a list of, um, a few things. So, uh you graduated in 2017?

Em: Yes, right on.

Emma: Okay. Um, what was your major at Holy Cross?

Em: Political Science.

Emma: Awesome. Um, gender identity.

Em: Woman.

Nora: Sexuality?

Em: Um, queer or gay.

Nora: Okay. Um, your racial or ethnic background?

Em: White.

Nora: And your current or former occupation?

Em: Um, I'm an AmeriCorps Member, Jesuit volunteer.

Nora: Perfect.

Emma: Awesome. Um, it was awesome talking to you. I feel like this is really insightful for us and for our project and for what we are trying to do this summer.

Nora: And also particularly still and current students at Holy Cross.

Emma: For sure. I feel like, I feel like a lot of my queer friends still echo the same concerns.

Nora: Yeah.

Emma: And it still hasn't...yeah.

Em: Well thank you guys for doing this work this summer. It's a really awesome project, and Steph Yuhl is the coolest...

Emma: She said to say hi to you.

All: [Laughs]

Em: Oh, [laughs]. Yeah, I'm so happy that you're both doing this work. Like I know, I only sort of peripherally knew both of you...

Emma and Nora: Mmhmm.

Em: ...but you're both really rad people and this is a really rad project.

Nora: Thank you!

Emma: Thank you so much. [Laughs]

Em: Sure thing. Yeah, and if there's anything else you need for it or if there's anything else I can help you or support you with just don't be afraid to holler.

Emma: Okay, awesome! Thank you so much, Em. This is awesome.

Nora: Thank you.

Em: Yeah, have a great rest of your day!

Nora: You too!

Emma: Thank you!