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A Conversation with Alisha Thompson

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GLBTQ Alumni Oral History Project

Conversation with Alisha Thompson (class of 2014)

April 19, 2015

Conducted by Angela Conley '16 and Hannah Carey '16

Location: Phone

Length: 25 minutes

Keywords: closet, college, coming out, family, Jesuit, professional life, study abroad, support

Transcript:

Alisha: Hello, is this Angela?

Angela: Yes, hi. Is this Alisha?

Alisha: Hi, yes it is.

Angela: Hi, nice to talk to you.

Alisha: Nice to talk to you too. Are you all ready?

Angela: Yes, we're ready. Hannah and I are here,

Hannah: Hi, how are you?

Angela: um, so we have our recorder ready. Are you, um, are you ready to go?

Alisha: Yeah.

Angela: Ok, um, I guess we'll get right into it. Um, so you graduated in 2014? Correct?

Alisha: Correct.

Angela: Um. And what was your major?

Alisha: I was a Spanish major, Latina Studies concentrator, and I was also pre-dental.

Angela: Ok. Um, so I guess we'll start with- How did you decide to come to Holy Cross?

Alisha: Um, well when I was in high school, I was on the track team and I did shot put and discus. And my coach had contacted the coaches at Holy Cross and had got me interested in going there. So I went to the school for a visit and I just really loved the campus and the environment and decided that it was a good fit. I had applied to, I think, about five different schools, but Holy Cross was definitely my top pick.

Angela: Cool.

Hannah: So what was like your transition from high school to Holy Cross like?

Alisha: Um, my high school was..., I went to a Catholic high school as well, uh... Kellenberg on Long Island. It was also fairly, uh, conservative, but I felt like when I was in high school I had actually...if you want to know more about, kind of focusing on, like, LGBT issues in high school versus Holy Cross?

Angela and Hannah (in unison): Yeah, sure.

Alisha: So, when I was in high school I had actually kind of come out senior year to my close group of friends and felt a bit comfortable, um, just kind of, I had come out as being bi, and I felt comfortable in that aspect. But when I got to Holy Cross, I definitely had heard a few comments, a few homophobic comments in my first, kind of, week there. I remember I went to the, what is it? The extracurricular extravaganza with a few friends and there was the ABiGaLe and Allies table in the corner and someone had made a comment like, “Oh good thing they squished them in the corner because no one wants to see that.” And it made me certainly very uncomfortable and I think kind of unconsciously I made the decision to really not, not come out at Holy Cross at all. And somehow decided to even lie kind of to myself about my own identity. I felt like it was a very closed environment, um, and it was certainly something subconscious because there was no moment where I was like “I’m not going to tell anyone. I’m going to make a decision to make this a secret.” It was something that I just felt uncomfortable about and I think that [I] subconsciously convinced myself that I was, you know, just like everyone else on campus. That image of just like kind of the preppy, wealthy, straight, like Holy Cross-like crowd. And of course wanted to fit in. So, freshman year I got this odd, um, kind of, reputation from people. People had made some assumptions and I remember talking to a friend and she was like, “Oh, I don’t know if I should hook up with this guy...” and blah, blah, blah and I was like, “Well, if you want to...like, I don’t know. That’s up to you.” And she was like, “Oh, but I’m not like you! You’re just so experienced with men!” And I remember being like...well part of me being like- “That’s completely untrue. I don’t know where this girl got this information from.” And then the other part of me wanted it to be true, I think. Um, so I just kind of went with it and didn’t, hadn’t come out at all. And then, sophomore year, I actually quit track and joined rugby. And I was on the rugby team all year and started to feel, uh, kind of, I think, just more comfortable. And really was enjoying being at Holy Cross in general. And it was certainly a different crowd, a different environment. And it was the end of my sophomore year that I started coming out again to a small group of friends and realized, kind of, what, the progress I already started to make at the end of high school—that had completely disappeared freshman year at Holy Cross.

Angela: Cool. Um, so, so I guess you kind of just explained how you first started coming out. Was that moment, um, sort of after joining the rugby team, when you had first come out to friends, was that sort of like your first coming out or was it like maybe like one friend in

particular that you had talked to before? Was there sort of like anyone that you had opened up to before that point or was that sort of the first coming out?

Alisha: Um, so, I think that kind of the first possible, like, kind of just knowing that I felt like I was interested in girls was when I was probably in about 8th grade. I remember kind of having a crush on one of my friends and I told one of my male friends, who was also in that group, that I thought I liked one of, the female friend and he then told her and then no one wanted to be my friend. It was one of those like petty, childish situations. So I think after that, I also kind of, due to the negative feedback, clammed up and really just forgot. Because when I think back, I don't remember in any moment being like, "Oh, this is bad. I can't tell anyone." I just remember, kind of, wiping it out of my, I think it was so traumatic that I just completely wiped it out of my memory and convinced myself that it didn't happen. And so then I started high school and was dating guys. And, um, it wasn't until about, I think, junior year, that I started to recognize the feelings for girls again. And finally decided to start coming out to a small group of friends, but wasn't, I wasn't completely open at all in school. But it was just that group of friends that I felt comfortable being open with. Um and so then, again, it was when I went to Holy Cross that I felt like I was thrown back into the closet and again pushed away, forgot about it, and tried to pretend like it didn't happen. Um and then after, it was really all of sophomore year, playing on the rugby team. It's not like, uh I think people have this image of rugby like, "Oh you join it and you become a lesbian immediately." Um, but it was definitely something, I had a crush on one of the girls on the team, and I really felt it was kind of hard to deny the feelings, so then um, I finally, towards the end of the year, around May, had come out to a small group of friends again. And then that summer, um, had come out to the rest of the team at a tournament. And then, I went abroad junior year. So, while I was abroad in El Salvador, my fall semester, in the CASA program, I completely felt a lot more comfortable. Um, the program helped me to feel comfortable in myself, just as a person, and then, um, with my sexual identity. Then, I ended up coming out to my roommates and pretty much was open by the end of the semester with the program. I'd say the first time I felt like I was 100 percent out and open to everyone was when I then came to study abroad in Peru and when I got here, I kind of decided right off the bat that I was going to be me and nothing was going to stop that. So, I was out from day one and that just since that was the identity that I had here, even with one of the... there was kind of a moment of kind of uncomfortableness with one of the Holy Cross girls, who was studying abroad with me, and within the first, I think, the first night that we were here, she had made a comment like- "Oh, did you guys see that there was a Smith girl on the list. Oh, we know what that means." And of course, knowing Smith College, I knew what she was referring to and kind of took it as a negative, sort of homophobic comment. And felt, really, the first couple of weeks in Peru were quite difficult because I did feel like I didn't really know anyone and I didn't know where to turn to. And after having come to a point where I felt comfortable and open in El Salvador, I was now in a completely different environment and felt like I had to keep starting over again. And then, I don't know, I started playing rugby here and I actually met my current fiancé on the team. And we started dating and I think just that relationship forced me to come out because it was something that I certainly couldn't deny. And I came out to the girls and felt more comfortable and more acceptance even from all the Holy Cross girls that were abroad with me. And then by

the time the rest of the study abroad group had come here, I was completely out and really comfortable. So when I went back to Holy Cross, senior year, um, you know I was in a serious relationship with a girl and I knew that and was comfortable with that. After being in Peru, and really had found a very strong crowd here, in terms of just LGBT being the norm. Uh, pretty much all of my girlfriends' friends were lesbians, so it was something that for, it seemed like while I was here, that it wasn't something that was out of the ordinary or something that you should have to hide. It was just completely normal inside our bubble. So when I went back to Holy Cross, I mean, I know people, I definitely felt negative feedback in terms of people, not, not, no one ever made any hateful comments to me, but I knew and heard from friends that people were talking about me. "Like, oh what happened? She went to Peru and became a lesbian? What's that about?" Um, but, at that point, I just didn't really care what people were saying [laughs]. I was very happy with my life, with my relationship and didn't feel a need to defend myself. So, I think that was when I was able to get more involved in just LGBT groups on campus and was able, I joined the Chaplain's group. And was really just able to talk, I joined to be kind of a mentor to some of my friends that I had met during one of the retreats. I was a retreat leader for Manresa in the fall and one of my co-leaders had come, approached me, to, after hearing my story. And um, my personal story in Manresa where I kind of talked about the coming out experience and everything and was actually approached by a lot of people who were on the retreat who were, did identify as gay and wanted to kind of discuss that and feel open at Holy Cross. So, I kind of started to find a lot of people coming up to me looking for assistance. And, and I don't know if I would have been able to get to that level of comfort if I hadn't left Holy Cross.

Hannah: Nice, um, so who was your main support system at Holy Cross when you were here?

Alisha: Um... I guess I would have to say my friends. I think definitely freshman year I didn't feel that I had, um, any support in terms of being like LGBT. I didn't really, I knew that there was the ABiGaLe/Allies group, but I wasn't quite ready to get out there and join that. And I wasn't even sure of my own identity to be able to declare it. Um, and then sophomore year, I really just looked to my close friends to accept me. By the time I got to senior year, I really felt that while I didn't need the support groups anymore, I did feel like they were more visible to me. And I don't know if it was because the campus was changing. I mean, I think it was. I did see it, kind of, becoming something more open and even, looking, I mean since I just graduated, I'm still in touch with a lot of underclassmen, and I do kind of think that the campus in general is becoming more LGBT friendly. Um, but, I thought that the Campus Ministry group, um, was probably the best support system.

Angela: Great, great. Um, so I guess, looking back on your Holy Cross experience, um, if you could do it over would you do anything differently?

Alisha: Oh yes [laughs]. I really wish that I could... um I mean it's a lot to even ask of myself, but I wish I could go back to freshman year and just be out and happy. A lot of people commented to me senior year that I was much nicer and much happier and I know it was

probably because I had a lot of suppressed feelings, um, and was really lying to myself for about a year and a half at Holy Cross. It was all of freshman year and most of sophomore year, so I really wish I could go back and change that and just be me from the start, um, but of course you can't.

Hannah: So yeah, um so, do you think that the Jesuit identity and the environment here at Holy Cross affected your view of sexuality?

Alisha: I don't think so. I think that for me, um I think the Catholic Church in general does express, um a lot of kind of negative feedback and opinions on LGBT community but for me the Jesuits have always been very accepting. I always felt, I remember actually I went to a Jesuit priest in high school when I was in maybe my second coming out experience, um, and he told me as long as you're being loving and kind, you know, its ok and God loves you and it meant a lot to me to hear that from a priest. I was very religious and to not have the Church telling me they hated me, but rather that everything is ok. Um, so I really always thought that the Jesuits more focused on humanity and less on the bible itself and I felt that a lot in Holy Cross and the way that the teachings were just that Jesuit identity for me means solidarity, community and that involves every, every group including LGBT.

Angela: Great, um, so I guess sort of looking back based on your experience, do you have any advice to give to LGBTQ students who are sort of struggling out, to come out at Holy Cross right now?

Alisha: Um, yeah. I think that it's important for students, LGBT students, one, to support each other. So I think groups like, for me, the Chaplains group was an amazing support group. You know it wasn't like, I think a lot of people who aren't religious or kind of have this negative relationship with the church think, "Oh I don't want to go to prayer circle." But it was really was just a really great safe space for people to come together and discuss LGBT issues on campus. Um, and I think getting involved with groups like Pride, something that I really wish I did more. Um, but also just not fearing the feedback you're going to get back from others. I think that it would be great for LGBT students to realize that it is kind of part of their mission, personal mission, to open up the minds of the people around them. I think that, I mean I've seen an amazing amount of progress in just the world in general and in the Holy Cross community throughout the past few years um with respect to LGBT issues and I think that taking that on as sort of a mission to teach others and just through example, make people realize that maybe the close-minded ideas they have are wrong. And I've seen that personally, um, and yeah, that would definitely be my advice.

Hannah: So now that you're in the real world, um, is there any advice you'd give to LGBTQ seniors who are about to transition from college to the professional world?

Alisha: Um yeah, I would say definitely don't be scared. I think there's like when you finally get to that point, if you ever do at Holy Cross, where you feel comfortable coming out and being

yourself, there's this fear that you're not going to get a job if you tell them that you're gay or anything like that. I decided coming into my current job that I was going to be me no matter what. And my girlfriend's mother had actually told me like, "That's a terrible idea. You're never going to get a job, don't do that." But one thing that I did notice and look for was in the, on the website, they had kind of one of those clauses about not being, not discriminating against people based on gender, color, and they had listed sexual identity/orientation. And just knowing that they even put that onto their website and included that especially being in Peru that's something not common to being included, I knew that it was going to be a safer space. And day one when I came, after being already hired, they invited me to the office to just come and kind of look around. And I came with my fiancé and kind of presented her and was like, "Hi, this is, meet my fiancé," to my boss and he was like, "Hi, nice to meet you. Do you want some water?" And it was awesome not being afraid. Realizing that people are way more open I think than we give them credit and most of my fears that have held me back from coming out to people and feeling comfortable was me thinking they're going to hate me for it and not really the hatred that they do have. Um so it's amazing being completely out and open in the office environment and being able to go to gatherings with my girlfriend, or fiancé, and not being afraid that people are going to be judging me because I've honestly never felt judged here. Everyone has always been very accepting and um, never treated me differently. Never like that kind of "oh moment" when they're like, "Oh wow... it's, um, it's a girl." And even those kind of awkward moments when people ask you like, "Oh do you have your boyfriend?" Or people asking me "Is your boyfriend Peruvian?" And you have to correct them in terms of gender. To not be afraid of that moment and just do it because that is well worth feeling comfortable to just take the stand and be like, "Oh yes my girlfriend is Peruvian. Thank you for asking." And not just kind of saying "Oh yeah," and ignoring. And then also there's some of those moments where you need to accept the fact that it's not always worth it to kind of take that stand and not feel offended. Um, working with clients- I work in a travel agency so, you know, if a client asks me like, "Oh what brought you to Peru? Or is your husband Peruvian?" There's no need for me to be like, "I'm dating a woman." Like this is my client and they're really honestly are just making small talk and don't care about my personal life. So I'll just usually go along with whatever their assumption is and just be like, "Oh yes. Thank you," and keep moving on with the work because it's not worth it for me to, kind of, involve other people's prejudices, possibly, um, in the workplace. So in terms of colleagues, I think it's important to be comfortable and be yourself and come out as long as you're ready. But I think in terms of clients or anything like that in terms of short-term professional moments that for me I don't think that it's too important. Um and then, I also, my last bit of advice would be to not lose hope. I know a lot of people, in terms of like depending on their background they're parents might not be accepting or their significant others' parents might not be accepting of it and they kind of think oh they're never gonna change or this world is never going to change. And I can tell you that is completely wrong. My girlfriend's, well my fiancé's, parents kicked her out of the house when they found out that she was a lesbian. They immediately cried and said it was the absolute worst thing that she could've ever done to them in this world and disowned her and didn't talk to her for two years. And to think that that happened and now they know me and love me and come over all the time. Talk about when we're going to have children and are a huge part of our lives. It's a huge change and of course it

didn't happen over one day, but I just think people, especially when someone they love makes them realize that maybe their ideas and their prejudices are wrong, that they are capable of change. I think that just being patient with people that do reject you and keeping in mind that it is possible that they can realize that they were wrong.

Hannah: That's great. Thank you, you seem so happy down there.

Angela: Yeah, congratulations, by the way, on your engagement! We had heard that you were living in Peru with your girlfriend, so now that we know that you're living with your fiancé. That's awesome, so great.

Alisha: Thank you!

Angela: So I guess, I don't know, we have some last basic questions, if you feel comfortable sort of self-identifying some of these categories-but um how do you, how does your sexuality, like how do you identify your sexuality?

Alisha: Um, I identify myself as a lesbian, I think. Um, it was something where even my mom actually questioned me about this because I had initially come out to her as bi and I have dated guys and been in serious relationships with men. Um, but I'm not sure if my, if I ever actually am attracted to men or if it was kind of just society making me feel like that's how I had to be and me wanting to have that be my reality. Taking kind of the easy way out. So I did like come out to my mom as bi initially, come out as bi, but now I'm not so sure about it. I'm, I don't know if I'm actually interested in guys at all, but I more so know that I am not going to be with anyone else. So um, yeah, I'm comfortable identifying as a lesbian.

Hannah: Cool. Um, how would you identify, like your race or ethnic background, if you don't mind answering?

Alisha: I'm biracial. So my dad is black and my mom is white.

Angela: Cool. And do you identify as a female, male, other gender identity?

Alisha: Female.

Angela: Female.

Hannah: So, I think that's about everything, right?

Angela: Yeah.

Hannah: So yes, we covered about everything, so thank you so much for doing this.

Angela: Yeah, thank you for sharing so much.

Alisha: You're welcome. I'm glad that it worked out and that this class even exists. It's completely awesome.

Hannah: Yeah, it's great.

Angela: Definitely, it's been awesome. So thanks for sharing with us and we're really excited to share with the class.

Alisha: Well, thank you guys and good luck with the project! And let me know if you need anything else.