

Edited Speech to Text

AR: This is Alexis Rivers, interviewing Danielle Bergan from Lahaina, Hawaii, over Zoom on July 17th, 2020. So, Danielle, where and when were you born?

DB: I was born in Auburn, New York. And I was born on August 15, 1953.

AR: Can you tell me a little bit about your family?

DB: Sure, you know growing up in the 50s, my mom was a stay at home mother. My dad worked at the prison as a prison guard. I have an older brother, Timothy, and I have two younger sisters, Debbie and Maureen. My sister Debbie passed away in 1997 from cancer. But there was, basically you know, in a neighborhood with a lot of big families, ya know? It was the baby boomer era. There was always lots of friends to meet and things to do. It was a good time.

AR: Can you describe your house growing up? What was it like?

DB: Sure, uh we lived on North Hoopes Avenue, which is in the East End. 113 North Hoopes Avenue. It was a 3-bedroom house; small 3-bedroom house. It had a winding wooden staircase that went up to the center of it, we had like a little landing, in the center of it. So you had to take, if you went to the kitchen you had to take two steps down. If you went into the, which we called the television room, you took two steps down, so. And of course when you went up the stairs, it just creaked cause it was old. Ya know, it seemed old, but I can't imagine the house was all that old, it seemed that way. It seemed really big as a child. My brother and I shared a room, my sisters Maureen and Debbie shared a room, and my mom and dad of course. We had a kitchen and then a, like back porch. It looked like an addition that had been built onto the house, but uh, it was always fairly, it felt pretty roomy growing up. We spent a lot of time in the kitchen. We, ya know, we always had dinner together at five o'clock. We had a nice, beautiful apple tree in the backyard, so in usually late August or September when the apples were ripe we'd, my mom and my aunties would come over and my uncles would pick apples and my dad. We would have, make apple preserves and apple pies. And then we had a little garden out back of the garage. It was, it was a pretty good place. Oh! And a big fir tree in back as well.

AR: Did your family follow a particular religion growing up and do you still follow that religion?

DB: Um, I was born Catholic, my family was very religious, my mom especially. Uh, we all went to church on Sundays as a family. I went to Catholic school at St. Alphonsus and went to Mount Carmel High School and St. Bonaventure University, so I grew up Catholic, yes. As far as following the religion, I would have to say I'm not really Catholic anymore. I don't, I don't

subscribe to any particular religion. I consider myself a spiritual person. Although, occasionally I do like to go into a Catholic church and maybe every once in a great while go to one of the masses or part of it. I think because I like the ritual of it, and there's something about that ritual that uh, that calms me, I guess. But I would not say that I'm a practicing Catholic these days.

AR: What was school like for you growing up? Did you have any hobbies or special interests as a child?

DB: Uhhh, school was, we walked about, with my sisters, we could walk about three, four blocks to school every day. I enjoyed school, I was a pretty good student. I did like to talk a lot, disrupt class a lot. I enjoyed actually stopping at the little branch of Seymour Library on the way home, because I was an avid reader. I used to love to just go into that tiny little library. And I was fascinated with history. My father was a veteran of WWII. And I liked to read a lot of history books. Sometimes, um, mystery books and I also, one of my hobbies, which I love to do in the wintertime, was skating. We used to always go down to Hoopes Park and I became a really good skater, in, during the time of growing up. In fact, when I was in college, when I came home from college for like a month or so, I used to work down at Casey Park as an ice skating director.

AR: What were some of the popular books, music, movies, sort of social things growing up?

DB: Um, lets see so... growing up, music I mean rock and roll at 10 years old, right? Beatles came to America *chuckle* on the Ed Sullivan Show, so I was really big into a lot of rock and roll growing up. The Beatles are my favorite, and still are my favorite band, but I also got into a lot of um, the heavier rock with The Doors and Cream. I used to love the, I'm guessing they call it acid rock or whatnot so. But I also enjoyed when I was probably 12 or so, you know like a lot of us, you know like garage bands, like they have in the 80s and 90s that were forming. Many of us liked to learn how to play an instrument. So I learned to play the guitar and so guitar was also one of my hobbies. I would just a lot of times sit there and play it endlessly, especially after my dad died when I was 12. I would... that was my go-to, just to escape from the world, just to try and make some sense of it.

AR: You mentioned earlier that you went to college, uh, what was that experience like?

DB: College was *laughs* pretty interesting. I, uh, I got there 1971. I had started drinking on a regular basis to try and cope with the fact that I'm transgender. I never understood those feelings inside me in wanting to be a girl so I started drinking at an early age. And by the time I got to college, probably the first couple years of it were a blur. I spent a lot of time drinking at parties, not going to school very much. I got into drugs, pretty much started with smoking pot and I got into some heavier drugs at the time. I used to like to do amphetamines so I could drink more. And you know, while I had been a good student in high school, grammar school and high school,

I found the college experience difficult for me until I, I finally started coming around when, my junior year, I met a young lady who I fell in love with, and she was a really good student and kind of put me on the right track so by the time I, my last two years were completely different than my first two years for grades. But, I worked my way through school. I worked in the university dining hall, I started as a freshman washing dishes and by the time I was a junior I became Assistant Student Manager. They used to have students work in the university dining hall and when I was a senior I was a Student Manager. So I actually ran the breakfast, lunch, and dinner with all the students that worked there, I was their supervisor. And going to class full time, so it was pretty, pretty busy but I really enjoyed it, I think that gave me the basis for probably getting into the restaurant industry later, but. I got a degree in History, um I graduated close to 3.0 after a few years, but I did enjoy my college days and I often refer to them as “daze”, like D A Z E, so *laughs*.

AR: So you mentioned having the job in the dining hall, what other kinds of jobs have you had, either before college or throughout college, now as an adult?

DB: Yeah! Well currently I’m a community coordinator at Mental Health America of Hawaii and I manage the Maui office. It was quite a long road to get there but when I was growing up, my first job was at the YMCA in town and I worked as a locker room attendant, uh I think when I was 14 years old. And I used to work in the summers. I worked for the city of Auburn, and I also worked for Cayuga County. My mother was into politics, into the Democratic Party, and usually those were jobs you’d get if you knew somebody. You could get a job that way for the summer. So working outdoors pretty much. Uh, you know after college, some of the other jobs I had, I worked in the restaurant industry over here [Hawaii], managed several restaurants. And was a bartender for 25 years. I worked at Kapalua Bay Hotel for 20 years as a banquet bartender there. I was in the service industry 25 years and then by the time I was 50, I thought I’d try and use my college degree and get a more professional job. I started working at the Maui Chamber of Commerce first, and became their Director of Sales. And then I moved to a couple different HR companies that I worked as a salesperson for, trying to sell their services for businesses. But I also learned a lot about human resources as well. Um, I was a Human Resource Manager for a homeless shelter here in Maui for a little while. And then I got on the Board of Directors for several different nonprofits. But the one that got me the job I have now, I was asked to be on the Board of Directors of Mental Health America of Hawaii and they needed a interim person back in 2017 and I met with the then, uh, Executive Director and I told her, I said “I think I can do this job, I know a lot of people on the island. The only part I don’t know is the mental health part.” I said, “But I’m very teachable and I can learn.” So, that got me hired there temporarily and then they hired me full-time later on after a few months and that’s where I’ve been ever since, and done a lot of studying during that time to be able to do the job successfully, but I love it.

AR: You grew up in Auburn, but you have since moved to Hawaii. When did you move and why did you move?

DB: Well, I moved to Hawaii in 1977. And growing up in Auburn, while it was a small town and there was a lot of things that were, you know, very quaint about it and whatnot, there was just also, the group of friends I guess that I hung around with, we always had visions of leaving. It was just, we didn't want to *stay* in Auburn. And I think a lot of it was because we didn't see very many opportunities. We all were going to college, probably some of the first kids from our parents to have been in college. And so we wanted to get out, and explore more opportunities. The last thing I wanted to do was to stay in Auburn and to be a prison guard like my father. Uh, but to me there was also a reason to leave, because as I mentioned earlier, being transgender, I often had, uh, struggled so much with my mind to tell me that I was female but my body being male. And I kept trying more and more and more to be a male. I was an athlete, a big athlete in high school. I played football, basketball, ran track. You know, oftentimes people who are trans try to do more and more things. But, uh, at the time I was working in '77. I was working for the New York State Thruway and while I may have had an opportunity to move up and move forward because I did have a college degree, I kept, you know, on days off or on weekends where nobody was home and it was difficult to be around my house when no one was home, I would often crossdress and then go out ya know, into Auburn, downtown in the daytime. It was to me, very risky, and I felt that Auburn was such a conservative place that if I was ever found out, they might walk me up and put me in an asylum or something like that. I, I, didn't know, I just knew I needed to leave, and that, I came close to getting caught a few times in '77 by being out. And that prompted me to, in the spur of the moment cause I had friends from college here in Maui, decided to move to Maui, I tried to get as far away as I could.

AR: Do you think that Auburn, and more or less Cayuga County, has changed at all in that sort of regard?

DB: You know, I really hope it has. Uh I mean, I was really thrilled when I heard about this project with marginalized, you know that Seymour Library is doing, and Lithgow Osbourne giving me a call. Um, you know I like the fact that they have a big theater program working in Auburn now. That seems to be really successful. I know it's gotten a lot smaller from when I grew up. It was close to 40,000 people when I was there. I think it's about 25,000 now. I still see some parts of it being conservative. I also thought that it was racist as well. Um, I grew up pretty liberal, my dad was pretty liberal. My mom advocated a lot of being liberal but. You know, that I could see some, just some systemic, I don't know what you know, if, racism. Not overtly, but it's just been ingrained in so much of the culture for so many years, that it was one thing that never really made me feel very comfortable there. And then after being in Hawaii for a few years, we are very, very open here. We have so many different races, we have so many different nationalities, and religions, and you know it's a wonderful place. Very. . . very liberal place,

very welcoming to someone who's transgender, even though I wasn't out when I first moved here. But I could just not see myself staying in Auburn.

DB: I'm really blessed, it was a long, long way to get here. As I mentioned earlier, I struggled with alcohol and drugs for many years, became addicted to both and after they didn't work anymore, I struggled with being transgender. Uh, there were times when I wanted to take my life, and if it wasn't for the miracle of finding a very good therapist and helping me get sober. Actually, ironically, it was, the turning point came in Auburn back in 1997. I went back for a short period of time. The hotel I was working at over here, actually '99. The hotel I was working at over here in 1999 was doing a renovation. I went back to work in Auburn for about 6 or 7 months and I, uh, hit my bottom there. I almost took my life one night and then 2 good friends of mine, one who I grew up with, a very close friend of mine. She and her friend Sally from Ithaca, they had both been nurses actually, Sally had been a psychiatric nurse and was retired. They talked me into seeing, you know getting help. And I actually saw a psychiatrist in Auburn and was diagnosed officially with gender dysphoria and at that point I started to do some therapy and take some antidepressants. And when I got back to Maui, I eventually, in a year or two got sober from there and my life started to change. So... I don't think I could have transitioned unless, unless I got clean and sober.

AR: I know that you mentioned, um, some sort of not-so-blatant racism and homophobia and things like that growing up. Is there anything that you feel like is missing from local knowledge, common knowledge, published history about Auburn or the area?

DB: You know, I mean, what I'm really glad to see is, you know, in the last couple of years, is Harriet Tubman being recognized as an Auburnian, and the fact that she settled there after the Civil War. I went back for my 50th grammar school reunion in 2017 and one of the highlights of my trip was going, going to the Harriet Tubman House and going through there. And uh, it really, you know I knew of Harriet Tubman cause I was a student of history and I knew who she was, but I didn't know specifically all her ties to Auburn at that point so I thought it was, I thought it was great that that happened. You know, I... I really dislike the fact that when I grew up Auburn was so... compartmentalized is I guess the word I'm looking for. Uh, you know, in the East End where I grew up, you would see a lot of Irish or English, and the West End it would be more of the Ukrainian or Polish or Italians and then of course in the South End, just pretty much Fitch Avenue and I can't remember the name of the other street there, was really, that's where you know, all the blacks in Auburn lived. And I just thought it was just so separating. And I had been to Mount Carmel for 3 years but probably one of the best things that happened when it closed, which I didn't think was a good thing, but, because I played sports and I had gotten a chance to know a lot of black athletes that became good friends of mine. That summer, in I think it was '69/'70, I moved over to Kearney Avenue and I used to try, used to go down there and play little pickup hoops down at Herman Avenue, which I really liked and I got to know Howard

Richardson, Buddy Hardaman and Larry Ellison and you know, they all became good friends. And to me, that was, that was something I really enjoyed and so I always would have a hard time with people who had narrow or racist attitudes and I saw that unfortunately a lot in, even in my family, you know, aunts and uncles and I don't think they were bad people, I just think that that's how they, how they had been brought up. And I'm not making an excuse for them. My dad didn't seem that way but I didn't have enough experience with my dad growing up. But I'm hoping that Auburn has changed more. I really can't honestly say now, because I've never really spent any more time there than just vacations. But at least the changes that I've seen. That Visitors Center I went to in 2018 when I came back for Christmas, I love the statue of Harriet Tubman there. I think that, I think that everything is moving in the right direction and I was so happy to hear that when Seymour Library and Cayuga Museum were gonna be doing this, this history of marginalized Auburnians growing up, I think it's just so important, it's just such an important part of history that we have missed in our city, of growing up, my hometown, and I think just missed in our country.

AR: Shifting gears just a little bit, do you remember any like, significant world events that you experienced?

DB: Yeah, well probably the most significant event as a younger person would have been the day President Kennedy was shot. I was 10 years old. We were all told at St. Alphonsus that the president had been shot and he was brought to the hospital and we put our heads on our desks and prayed for him and then we got out of school a little bit earlier that day. So I remember that being a significant thing. My mother had been a big admirer of Kennedy and the whole nation was shocked. And then of course the Vietnam War. And the Vietnam War was really difficult I think, family-wise. We, you know, I grew up probably, because my dad had been a veteran in WWII and you know, going through the beginning of high school and whatnot, I was, I was probably pretty pro-war until I guess maybe my junior year or so. I started really seeing it differently when my brother almost got drafted. You know, seeing it on the news every night. I can remember going to my uncle's house, my aunt and uncle's and my uncle, my Uncle Chip was a veteran of WWII. He worked, he was in the army, he marched with Patton. And he was a veteran. And I had told him, I said if I ever got drafted I'm going to Canada and he would get so angry to the point of like you know, and he would never hit me, but you know, you could just see the steam coming out of his ears. And I would get in arguments with him and then other uncles and even my mom. By the time I was a senior, I was very anti-war. So those are the two significant ones growing up. Of course, everyone is affected by 9/11, I think no matter where you are. The whole life, it changed for everything. I would say, yeah, those are the major events.

AR: Life is also changing for everyone currently, with the Coronavirus pandemic that's going on right now in 2020. So how has the pandemic affected you? Did you have certain plans that may

have been cancelled or postponed? How is your day-to-day life different now than it was, say a year ago?

DB: Well, I'm an essential worker, cause I work in mental health. So as far as work-wise, I was fortunate that I was not affected. Of course, we all started working at home. In Hawaii itself, in the middle of March is usually a very busy time for tourism. We're very tourism-dependent. And we would have 30,000 visitors a day visit Hawaii. And probably on Maui, probably someplace between 7-10,000, I would imagine. And we shut the state down. And so by the time it came to, like very much the 27th, 28th of March, within like 10-12 days, we had less than 1,000 people flying here, in the entire state. So completely locked down. A lot of people got laid off. Where I live in West Maui, unemployment is really high. They say it's 30% or 32% in Hawaii, but that doesn't even count the amount of people that are covered under like CARES funding with major restaurants and hotels that are getting some of those funds, where the employees are either on unemployment or just being taken care of. Um, you know, the thing that I probably miss the most is being able to, you know, when I was shut down like that, that isolation. Even though I'm a person who knows how to live by myself. I live alone and I have a pretty good routine. So I get up in the morning at 4:30 and I go for a walk every day. So that routine helped me keep my mental wellness through this. And then of course, working you know, I'm trying to help others who have been struggling and letting them know it's okay, because all these feelings you're feeling are very legitimate and this is a different time and none of us knows how to navigate this and it's okay to feel how you feel. I miss physical touch. I miss being able to hug somebody because I'm a big hugger. I mean, in Hawaii that's what we do. We, we high each other a lot, we're very amiable. I miss that community part of it. I miss seeing a lot of my friends, to go to events. I'm in a 12-step program and I miss going to 12-step meetings in person. Although I do go to a lot of meetings online and Zoom, which really helps me a lot. But I think like anyone else, I've been affected. I did plan on going back to Auburn actually and seeing my family at Christmas. And I since canceled the trip because I'm a pretty high-risk individual. I'll turn 67 next month. I have asthma, I have diabetes, I have the onset of COPD, and I have heart disease. So you know, pick any one of those. My thing is, I have to be super careful. I wear a mask everywhere. Even though, over here, we, you know, the mayor wants everyone to wear one outside. You have to wear one going inside any place, it's completely mandatory. And just now in Honolulu, because the cases have been going up, it's mandatory to wear a mask all the time, if you're outside, anyplace, unless you're in your own home. So yeah, plans have changed and life has changed, just like a lot of people.

AR: Have you been able to keep in touch with friends and family during the pandemic?

DB: Oh yeah, oh yeah. I talk with my sister often. Maureen and I talk quite a bit. We did a Zoom party on Easter with a lot of my cousins, my first cousins from, that live either in Auburn or Syracuse or Rochester. It was fun, it was great to see everyone. I do Zoom in with a lot of

different people that are friends. I stay in touch. So yeah, I'm reaching out, but it's virtual right? It is virtual. And while that's good, you know, keeping connected, right? As is in mental health we don't talk about socially distancing because we don't believe that you should socially distance or isolate from anyone. We talk about physically distancing, just staying 6 feet away but staying socially connected, right, for your wellbeing. And like I said, I'm lucky because I do have the routine. And so the routine has been able to help me a lot. I get up at the same time every day, I do a lot of the same things. I find myself more tired because I'm on a lot of Zoom meetings during the day. And a lot of my trainings now, that I would do. I would do a training in the schools normally called Youth Suicide & Bullying Prevention that we bring into our middle school and to our high schools to try and help kids understand bullying and the effects of it. And while bullying isn't a, doesn't cause suicide, it's a risk factor. And then we correlate that into the fact, because of so many reasons, youth suicide has gone up nationally 30% over the last 12-15 years and it's actually really high in Hawaii. You wouldn't think so but it is. So I'm gonna miss being with the students to do that, but we're working *really* hard right now to try and figure out how to do this training virtually because it's so important to be able to talk to kids and get kids to be empowered to help save someone else's life, save one of their friends' life, by giving them the resources and teaching them the questions to ask.

AR: Is there anything else you'd like to share?

DB: You know, I just feel very very lucky to be right here right now, feel very honored that Lithgow had called me and that you and I have connected, Alexis, to be part of this project. I could have never possibly come out as transgender in Auburn growing up because I didn't really know what it was until I really got to know what Reneé Richards was [former American tennis player during the 1970s who fought to play in the US Open as a woman after gender reassignment surgery] and that scared me to death. That I might actually be like that. But the fact of the matter is, is that I believe that I'm extremely lucky to have found sobriety, to find good mental health and mental wellness. I have a job that I love. I own a small condo on a beautiful island in Maui where I can walk down to the beach you know, in 5 minutes and jump in the ocean. I have a lot of things to be grateful for, so I just, again I'm very very happy to be right here right now. And I'll put one foot in front of the other and we'll get through Covid-19 and we'll see where it takes us.

AR: Well, thank you very much for sharing your time and your history and your experiences.

DB: Again, I said I'm honored.