

[00:00] *Kimmi Ramnine*: All right. So today's date is April 16th, 2019. Um, your name is Erika –

[00:08] *Erika Melder*: Yes.

[00:08] *Kimmi*: Yes. And you are a – well, I don't have to say that. And then I'm Kimmi, and the interview location is in the Equity Center, the LGBT Equity Center. Could you tell me a little bit about yourself and say your name again?

[00:25] *Erika*: Sure! So my name is Erika. I am twenty-one years old, I'm a computer science and mathematics double major at Maryland. I am a transgender woman, and I'm also a lesbian. And those two things have been very impactful in my life very recently. I came out a year ago.

[00:45] *Kimmi*: Okay.

[00:46] *Erika*: And I've been transitioning since then, and it's been, uh, a very interesting experience getting to do that, in the context of staying in my major, staying as a, uh, you know, a student, a college student, a teaching assistant, and trying to reconcile those roles in my life with my identity as it evolves.

[1:04] *Kimmi*: Cool. Can you tell me a little bit about what that coming out process was like for you?

[1:09] *Erika*: Sure. So I realized that I was trans in March of 2018. I didn't tell anybody. I went to an informed consent clinic in Washington, D.C., and I got a prescription for hormone replacement therapy when I was there. I started in May. Still didn't tell anybody. I didn't tell my parents, I didn't tell my friends, or anyone. I just did hormone replacement in secret for about six or seven months, until I finally had to tell people because my insurance mistakenly sent a bill to my dad, instead of to me.

[1:46] And then I got a very, very interesting email that said, "Why are you on feminizing hormones? What's going on?" And that's when I told him. And he was supportive, which was good. And he said, "You should probably tell Mom and your brother at some point."

[2:03] So I did. I drafted up this long, ten-page letter and I sent it to them, and I published it on Facebook, and I changed my name on Facebook. And that marked my coming out. It was kind of rushed, I was not planning to come out at that point. But I did. And I got my name changed with the University, I got a new ID card, and I got my name changed on the staff roster as well, because I'm a teaching assistant. So that was an awkward experience, having to tell my class, "Hey, by the way..." [*Laughs.*] "I'm changing my name."

[2:36] But it went pretty smoothly, all things considered, which is really good. And I've continued hormone therapy since then, I've continued teaching, and everything has been mostly the same, it's just I'm on hormones now. That's the only real difference.

[2:53] *Kimmi*: That's really cool. I'm glad that it's been a mostly smooth ride for you throughout that. How has – where is the question? Sorry. What impact did coming out or being LGBTQ have on your social or professional life here at UMD?

[3:11] *Erika*: Socially, I lost several friends. A lot of them didn't want to talk to me anymore after I came out. A lot of them were super supportive, though, and they wanted to take me shopping, they wanted to sort of to induct me into their world, and teach me everything that I need to know. They've been really helpful to the whole process. So I lost some friends, but I gained others, and that has been a theme of this whole process, that you lose some things and you gain other things.

[3:40] Professionally, I would say that it has definitely impacted the way that I'm perceived as a teaching assistant. Not being trans so much as being female. Because it's computer science, I TA over at computer science, and that is a very male-dominated field. So femininity in that field is kind of...It's lower, in a sense. People treat women in compsci very differently than they treat men in compsci, and it's been a shock realizing that, as I came out, as I navigated transition.

[4:14] When I teach sections, the work that I do on the board, students will have a lot more challenges to it, they'll have more questions to it. Whereas before I came out, when I was teaching, they would accept whatever I wrote down. They would treat it as fact. Even if it was wrong, they would not question it.

[4:31] But now, even if it's right, I'll get a lot of emails, I'll get a lot of people raising their hand, "Are you sure this is right? Are you sure? I don't think so." And at office hours, people used to walk past my friend – she is a female TA – they would go to my office hours. And now they'll walk past me and go to a different male TA's office hours. And then he won't be able to answer it. He'll turn to me and be like, "Hey, can you come and look at this?" So – *[Laughs.]* Joke's on them, I guess.

[5:00] But yeah, I'm starting to see the sexism that's inherent in the field, that I knew was there, but didn't really understand it until now. And I say that, more than coming out, has really impacted my professional life.

[5:15] *Kimmi*: That makes a lot of sense. And it's really horrible, at the same time.

[5:19] *Erika*: It is! *[Laughs.]*

[5:20] *Kimmi*: What brought you to the University of Maryland?

[5:23] *Erika*: So I grew up in Maryland. I grew up in Gaithersburg. And I went to Maryland because I wanted to stay close-ish to home. I didn't want to go somewhere that was super far away. And I didn't want to go somewhere rural. That was definitely a big factor. I wanted to be near a city. I wanted to be near somewhere where I could go and have some space to explore and be on my own, but still be around other people, and talk to people and meet people.

Because I'm a social creature, I need to meet people. Location is a big factor in that, for me. And it's also a big school, so there's a lot of different people that you can meet.

[6:01] And I definitely didn't want to go to school somewhere where it was less – I want to say diverse, but that's a loaded sort of term. I didn't want to go to a homogenous school. I wanted a variety of different experiences, and a variety of different interesting people – because people are so interesting! And Maryland is a school that gives me a lot of that, that I crave. And their compsci program is very well-regarded. I actually came as an engineer, their engineering program is very well-regarded. So that was a big factor in the decision to go here, as well.

[6:36] *Kimmi*: That makes a lot of sense. What's your definition of community?

[6:42] *Erika*: To me, community is a group of people that you have some common bond with, where you can retreat to the community for support, and for acceptance, and for people who you know are on your side when you need it.

[7:00] So I always consider – I have a lot of different communities, and some of them overlap and some don't. The major, computer science itself, I would say is a community. It has its flaws, it has its struggles, but compsci majors have a bond, where if you meet somebody, and you say, "Hey, I'm a compsci major." "I'm a compsci major too!" Well, you have that common bond with one another. You're already related in some way. And it's much the same to me with the queer community. Like if I meet somebody else and say, "I'm gay." "Oh, I'm a trans lesbian!" Well, we're friends now.

[7:32] Just based on that. We have that in common. We've been through struggles together that are parallel. We've been through experiences that are parallel. We can relate to one another, and we can support one another. And that, to me, is the foundation of community.

[7:44] *Kimmi*: That makes a lot of sense. It segues really nicely into our next question, which is: What was your first contact with the UMD LGBT community, and what was the nature of that contact? Was it an event, a private party, something else?

[8:01] *Erika*: Well, I had two – I know people who are LGBT at UMD, but I wouldn't say that they participate in the wider community. My roommate that I've had since freshman year is a gay cis man, and he and I have been best friends ever since – and even before I came out we were still like best friends. And he told me he kinda knew the whole time. So we were pretty close. But he's not really in any LGBT orgs, he's not very open about it or very vocal.

[8:31] But in terms of the established clubs and organizations of the LGBT community, I only really started interacting with them after I came out, and I was looking for somewhere to go that gave me support and resources and a sense of community with other trans people. So I found the TransU student group in the Equity Center, and I started attending their meetings. And from there, it sort of branched into more involvement with the Equity Center, and with Pride Month

events – because that’s happening right now. And from there, it blossomed outward. But TransU was the real starting point of my involvement in that community.

[9:08] *Kimmi:* That’s really cool. What changes have you witnessed or participated in with respect to the LGBT community at Maryland?

[9:17] *Erika:* It’s gotten bigger.

[9:18] *Kimmi:* That’s awesome.

[9:19] *Erika:* Like very, very slowly, more and more people are coming out and saying “Hey, you know, this affects me, this is part of my life, and I need to be visible and represent that, and normalize it, and push for change.”

[9:30] And people are less scared, to hide those sorts of things now, in general. Because there’s a shift towards polarization, but that polarization brings with it some high level of acceptance from a lot of people. So there’s no longer this just hush-hush sort of, “We’ll accept it but we’ll just sweep it under the rug” sort of thing with regards to the LGBTQ community. There’s a lot of vocal support, like, “I’m an ally, and I have a pin on my backpack that says my pronouns, and it has a Pride flag on it, so you know I’m an ally.”

[10:05] And that sort of thing has made a lot of people realize, “You know, these people really don’t care, and they’ll be supportive, and they’ll help me. So I can come out safely, and I know I have a safety net of friends.” And that’s contributed to the growth, I think, of the LGBTQ community. Or at least the increased visibility of it. And from that, there’s a lot more Pride Month events going on now than when I was a freshman. Which was a while ago. Because there just wasn’t the community to sustain it. TransU didn’t have the member base that it has now. So many more people are coming out and joining the community, and I think it’s great.

[10:41] *Kimmi:* That’s really cool, that is really great. Has being an LGBTQ employee and student on a college campus been different than you expected?

[10:51] *Erika:* It has, in a way. I didn’t realize that there were so many safeguards put in place for this kind of thing. When I came out, there was not a lot of opposition to me changing my name. I just had to fill out one form for the student side to get a new ID card, and one form for the employee side, and my name got updated everywhere except payroll, because they have to use legal. But it was so easy to come out. And there’s a lot of acceptance among the members of staff that I worked with, and my peers, and my classmates. Professors just switched over once they saw it on the roster.

[11:29] Because it’s so far out of their minds – like, I, as a trans person, as a lesbian, I constantly have that anxiety that people are going to clock me, they’re going to see, like, “Oh, what’s she doing? What’s up with her?” But people just don’t care. They don’t. They’re not. Their first priority is not clocking you, their first priority is like, “I have a lesson plan to get

through.” “I have dinner waiting on the stove.” “I have homework tonight.” It’s not clocking me. So my anxiety is a little bit unfounded. And I kind of realized that after most people just switched over. They didn’t even notice sometimes.

[12:08] *Kimmi*: That’s great. That’s really cool. In regards to LGBTQ civil rights at UMD, what challenges do we still have? What needs to be done?

[12:20] *Erika*: I think the big, big thing to me is access to HRT – Hormone Replacement Therapy. I go to a clinic in DC to get mine, because the hormone replacement therapy offered here are a little bit restrictive in its nature. They follow the WPATH guidelines, but those guidelines are outdated, and they’re designed to appeal to conservatives, insurance companies, and psychotherapists. They’re not designed to protect the actual trans people. And the clinic that I go to in DC, Whitman-Walker, they are well-established in the community, they are at the forefront of trans rights and queer rights, and their regimen is a little more lax. They’ll provide you with more appropriate hormone therapy, they’ll provide you with progesterone, they’ll provide you with injections if you need them. They’ll provide you with all these things, and that expansive care is just not offered at the University pharmacy.

[13:13] And I’d like to see it offered here, because then I’d be able to not have to go to DC to get my meds, and pay \$210 a vial for my injections.

[13:24] *Kimmi*: That makes a lot of sense. Yeah, Whitman & Walker is really great, and it’s helpful that it’s so close to campus, but it’s not close enough. And then if you’re not a DC resident – yeah, that makes a lot of sense. My partner is actually the trans care navigator at Whitman-Walker.

[13:39] *Erika*: Oh, nice!

[13:40] *Kimmi*: If you’re ever interested in speaking with him, let me know –

[13:44] *Erika*: Definitely, I will.

[13:46] *Kimmi*: I can connect you. Um – what would you want incoming students or staff to know or understand about being LGBTQ on campus right now?

[13:56] *Erika*: I would say that the big thing that I’d want incoming students and staff to know is that it’s just accepted here. There’s a lot of acceptance here – like the Pride pins and stickers, and people put their pronouns in their email sign-offs or in their syllabi. It’s just a way of life here. That this sort of opposition, that the violent opposition that you see that’s echoed in cities, that’s echoed in more rural campuses, that just isn’t here. And we like to foster that environment where people can grow to see it normalized, and just sort of interact with LGBTQ people, and to develop that idea that, you know, these are just people. They’re not any different from us. They’re just people, and they’re living their lives, they’re getting their education, they’re teaching, and...they’re not any different.

[14:52] *Kimmi*: I'll look at the supplemental questions now. Have there been any professors or staff members that have made a particularly strong impression on you?

[15:07] *Erika*: There have been. One professor who was extremely, extremely kind to me was my technical writing professor, Dr. Patrick Nelson. He was amazing when I came out. He pulled me aside, he asked me my pronouns specifically, and he said, "You know, the community is really strong and we're out there fighting for you." I'm like, "Damn, that's impressive!" That's, like, heartwarming!

[15:29] At the end of the semester, he said "I was so happy to see all my students accepting you and it was great for me, it was kind of heartwarming." And that was so sweet of him, because most of my professors, they don't care – that means they're not antagonistic, but they're also not openly supportive. And he's pretty much the only professor I've had who's said anything openly supportive to me.

[15:59] *Kimmi*: That's really cool. That's awesome. Does he typically have that kind of connection to his students?

[16:02] *Erika*: He does. He's really close to his students. He's very passionate about what he teaches, technical writing. And he's just an awesome guy all around.

[16:10] *Kimmi*: That's really cool. Has activism been a part of your UMD story?

[16:17] *Erika*: It has, and I actually, when I was a freshman, before I came out, I was very active in MaryPIRG. I did a lot of canvassing, I did a lot of databasing and coordinating for the public interest. And I did lobbying. I worked as a lobbyist separately for – actually, for mathematics PhDs, to get them more funding. It's not really LGBTQ activism specifically, but I did do a lot of activism in general. And then it sort of started shifting towards LGBTQ rights. I went to the Women's March, I went to the Trans March, it was Trans Day of Visibility, and then all of a sudden it sort of clicked for me, you know, this isn't just allyship.

[17:00] And I think, like, after I realized I was trans, it really clicked for me why I wanted to do all that activism. It was because I wanted to protect my own interests that I didn't even know that I had. So I definitely have been involved in a lot of activism. Especially with PIRG. That's like my big commitment. *[Laughs.]*

[17:18] *Kimmi*: Makes a lot of sense. How much are you aware of LGBT equity efforts elsewhere, and did those have any effect on your interest in becoming active in the LGBTQ community at UMD?

[17:32] *Erika*: So through Whitman-Walker, they do a lot of efforts. And in DC in general, there's a lot of Pride parades, and marches, and events that I have been a part of. It's been a tougher fight in my original home state of Kentucky. *[Pause.]* Yeahhhh....

[Kimmi laughs.]

[17:52] Erika: But I have a couple of cousins who live there, and they're very concerted in Pride efforts, but they have a lot more pushback than we do here. So I figure if we're not going to have any pushback, why not go full throttle and just embrace it here, and say, you know what, this is going to be a campus where we accept everybody, and we offer support to everybody, and we have a community to everybody. Because there's states like Kentucky where you just can't get that. There's a lot of pushback on a systemic level from the state government, from officials. And here we have officials who are okay with it. And that's something we need to take advantage of.

[18:28] Kimmi: That makes a lot of sense. There is a question about – “What is your major, and why did you choose it? And if you changed it, why did you do that?”

[18:42] Erika: So I came in as a materials science and engineering major. And I took chemistry and did not do well. So I realized that if I was going to work with polymers, I needed to know chemistry, so I changed my major to computer engineering. And then I heard from a bunch of computer engineers that they regretted it and they should have just done compsci instead. So I changed my major to computer science. And I was in computer science for a little while, and I realized that I was kind of happy with it, but also it was missing something. I enjoyed the math half of it. I didn't like the programming half. And I especially didn't like my classes, because they were all men, and it was kind of an oppressive atmosphere.

[19:30] And I'm not, I'm not ascribing it to men, but it creates that dynamic, you know, where it's like a boys' club, everyone's competing, everyone wants to be the best and to trash on other people. And that's not the attitude I want. I want something collaborative. I want something where I can meet a lot of different people and work on an idea together. And I realized the only place I ever felt that was in Linear Algebra and Calc 3, in my discussion sessions where everybody – it was a lot, a varied group of students, and they were all working together to solve a math problem.

[20:01] And then I realized, you know what, I really like math. I think math is a lot more interesting. Because it's not, it's not competitive. I'm not trying to make the best math proof, I'm not trying to make the best program. I'm trying to work together to get the answer with my peers. So I added the mathematics major in tandem with compsci, because they're sort of aligned. I'm in the theory end of compsci. I don't take any programming classes, I just take theory classes. And that for me has been amazing. I really enjoy it, and I really want to go to grad school and get my PhD in mathematics. That's my life dream, is to teach math forever, and to get to share with other students the same joy of discovery and collaboration that I discovered through math.

[20:49] Kimmi: That's amazing. Are you interested in doing that at UMD?

[20:52] Erika: Of course! *[Both laugh.]*

[20:55] *Kimmi*: That's great.

[20:58] *Erika*: I'll be a Terrapin forever.

[*Kimmi laughs.*]

[21:01] *Kimmi*: So I think that's all of the questions that I have. Is there anything else that you'd want to share, or have recorded, about your experiences?

[21:10] *Erika*: I think it's been fantastic so far. I think it's been a wild ride. The University has been a great place for me to explore who I am and come out, because home is not that place for me. My parents are divorced. My dad is accepting, but he's not supportive. Like, he'll tolerate it, but he won't actively do anything to be on my side. He's just kind of there. And then the same is true of my mom. Like, she's accepting, but she's not like actively supportive to try to get me what I want. But the University is the first place that I've found where it's like, you have a ring of people who are there to help you, like actually push for you, to say "I want this." "Okay, well we'll help you get that thing." So that, for me, has been the value of the college experience, the value of getting to live on campus, and have my own apartment, and explore all that stuff, you know? That is why I love UMD.

[22:14] *Kimmi*: That's really cool. Thank you so much!

[22:17] *Erika*: Thank you!

[*Recording ends at 22:18.*]