

Transcript oral history interview with Margaret Brownlee by S. Rhule and G. Muehle

Gretchen: [00:00:01] All right. Here we go.

Shelice: [00:00:05] Okay. So today is Wednesday, November 23rd. 22. My name is Shelice Rhule. S-H-E-L-I-C-E R-H-U-L-E and my pronouns are She/Her/Hers.

Gretchen: [00:00:23] My name is Gretchen Muehle. G-R-E-T-C-H-E-N M-U-E-H-L-E and my pronouns She/Her/Hers.

Shelice: [00:00:33] So before we get started. Or before we start to ask any questions, we've just got to let you know that you can feel free to not answer any questions that you're not comfortable with. So now could you please state and spell your name?

Margaret: [00:00:48] Margaret Brownlee. M-A-R-G-A-R-E-T B-R-O-W-N-L-E-E.

Shelice: [00:00:57] Thank you. And can you also tell us what pronouns you use?

Margaret: [00:01:00] She/Her/Hers. Sometimes Ella. The Spanish pronoun.

Shelice: [00:01:09] Okay. Thank you. Can you please tell me what words you use to describe yourself?

Shelice: [00:01:20] For example, Gay, Lesbian, Asexual.

Margaret: [00:01:25] Oh, okay. Okay, yeah. Yeah. So my sexual orientation. So I identify as lesbian, sometimes lipstick lesbian because I like lipstick and they have a certain flag. Which is like pink, orange and pastel.

Shelice: [00:01:43] And would you mind also telling us your age?

Gretchen: [00:01:48] Or the decade you were born.

Margaret: [00:01:50] It's fine. I was born in 1981. Uh, I'm 41-years-old. I call it 40. Wonderful.

Shelice: [00:01:57] Oh love that.

Margaret: [00:01:58] Yeah. It makes me feel better.

Shelice: [00:02:01] Now. Could we start with your family of origin? Like, where were you born?

Margaret: [00:02:09] Okay. So I was born here in Portland, Maine. But no one else in my family before me was born here. So my mother was born in Boston, Massachusetts. My father was born in Boston, Massachusetts. My brother was

born in Boston, Massachusetts.

Gretchen: [00:02:28] And you grew up here?

Margaret: [00:02:30] I did. I went to school. K... So kindergarten through 12th grade.

Gretchen: [00:02:40] Can you tell us a little bit about your family of origin? I don't want to mispronounce your last names. Irving and Piasta, is it?

Margaret: [00:02:46] Oh, yes. Okay. So my mother's family is Piasta. So her mother's maiden name is... she's probably pissed. Clair Ann Marie Piasta. And she changed her name. so that she doesn't have that name anymore. And then my father's name is Walter Irving. I-R-V-I-N-G. And the Irving side of my family still lives in Massachusetts, all of them. I would say maybe a couple in California, but mostly Massachusetts. And I have a lot of brothers, uncles and aunts on my dad's side... 12, actually. And then I have three half-brothers. One lives here, and then two of them live in Massachusetts. And then the Piasta side of my family is all split up. They started off in Massachusetts, but now they're kind of like West Coast-East Coast mix. Do you want me to talk more about my family of origin? Okay, so my mother and my father moved to Maine from Boston because my dad, my father, enrolled in college. At the time it was called SMTTC. So Southern Maine Technical College. It's now called SMCC. So he moved here with the intention of going to school while my mom was pregnant. A couple of years into the marriage, my dad moved back to Massachusetts, but my mom decided to stay. She did a lot of really good connections and ties to people here in Maine so she stayed, but all the rest of my Irving side of my family is gone. Then I got married, which is why my last name is Irving Brownlee. And so I married into the Brownlee side of the family, and there are about five of them in Maine. So. Oftentimes I get asked, like if I'm part of the Brownlee family because they have a basketball name. All three of the brothers and sisters all play basketball. So they think I can play basketball, but I don't know how to.

Shelice: [00:04:53] Okay.

Margaret: [00:04:54] And that should be on the record. No, remove that from the record.

Shelice: [00:05:00] So you said your parents, your dad, moved back to Massachusetts, Did you grow up with both parents?

Margaret: [00:05:06] No. So when my dad left Maine, he pretty much abandoned me and my family. So I didn't see him much. I would say growing up, I probably saw him about ten times. Yeah.

Gretchen: Was that really hard for you?

Margaret: It's a soft spot. It's a hard... it's a difficult piece of contention for me because there was domestic violence in my family. And so even though I was sad that he was gone, and he wasn't there, in a way, now that I'm older, I can recognize that it was healthy for my parents to split up if there was violence in the home to keep the children safe. And so it's kind of a catch

22, I guess. But I do see that my Irving side of my family occasionally, actually, I'm traveling. No, that's the Piasta side. Never mind. I see them frequently. So now that I'm an adult.

Shelice: [00:06:05] So in addition to your family of origin... well, I guess you said that.

Gretchen: [00:06:18] Do you have other people that you consider family other than like Irving,

Piasta?

Margaret: [00:06:22] Yes, definitely. So let's see. Growing up in Maine... This is hard to remember. So growing up in Maine. Hold on. Try not to cry. My mom was very close to a woman named Diane Clark. Diane Clark is her name and she was well, really well connected to the community more so than my mom, because my mom, I think, is kind of shy. So, she didn't really do much. But Diane Clark passed away last year, last Halloween, and she started... She did a lot of activist work in the community and she started the *Survivors' Speaks* for women who suffered from sexual violence and sex trafficking. So, my mom is like... we really leaned on their family like that was my second family. We were always with them. And she had three children, which I still talk to a couple of them. And then there was a couple more families, I just remember because my mom stayed here in Maine. It was hard for her to get connected to the community with, like, biracial children. My brother's Puerto Rican, so we look very different and my mom looks very white. And so it was very confusing for people in the eighties to be like "Why is this woman have all these kids?" But, there's a couple more families of the Dorset family, which there's a couple of Dorset's here. They had a couple of children that they were like in the family. So. Yeah, I would say, I mean, I left Maine for 11 years and decided to come back because my mom was still here. That was one of the reasons I decided to come back. But she's yeah. She's really well connected, I guess to other people.

Gretchen: [00:08:14] Would you mind really quickly just spelling Diane Clarke?

Margaret: [00:08:16] Yes. So Diane, D-I-A-N-E. Clarke, C-L-A-R-K-E.

Gretchen: [00:08:24] And when you left Maine, where did you go?

Margaret: [00:08:28] So originally. So, I immediately went to college in upstate New York, Ithaca, New York, which is like, very far from New York City, even though it would be like, "Oh, you go to school in New York?" And I'm like, "It's not even close". Like, not even close. There were cows. More cows than Maine. And at first, I was like, "Why am I here? Why am I doing this?" but the natural beauty of that college was very similar to Maine, and so it reminded me of home. It was right on the lake. And I stayed in Ithaca for about two, so six, six years and worked at Cornell University and like stuff. And then I moved to Worcester for one year because that's where my dad lives. So, my dad, I like... For some reason thought I was like a bad ass and said, "I'm going to move in with my dad at age 25". But then I got kicked out because he knew I was a lesbian, and he was not happy with that. And then the cops got called and that was a big scene. If you want to talk about that, we can. But. I don't even know why I went off into that conversation about that. I just like totally lost track of thought.

Gretchen: [00:09:36] No, keep going with it.

Margaret: [00:09:36] Yeah. I didn't see her much. And so. Yeah. I moved to Worcester for a year or two, then I moved to Boston for four plus years. I went to grad school at Lesley University, so that's where I went to grad school and stayed in Boston for like six years or so. Um. Yeah. And then I fell in love and moved back. So that was kind of a bummer because I kind of wished she had moved to Boston with me. But, you know, here I am.

Shelice: [00:10:12] So you got married into the Brownlee family? Can you tell us a little bit about how you met your wife?

Margaret: [00:10:19] Morgan? Yes, my wife's name is Morgan, and the story is great. So, I'm going to be brief with the story because it can be like, really long. And I don't like to tell a lot of details. So, my mother, Claire, and her mother, Cindy, were friends in the eighties. Like they used to go out to the clubs and like... And they were friends. They would, like, they were like they relatively were single, I guess. I don't know. I don't want to know. And when they would go out, they would bring the kids together. So it was me and my brother and then Morgan, my wife, and her brother and sisters. So the five of us would like kind of pull money together and have like one babysitter with like 12 kids or something and I don't fucking know. And so Morgan and I were like four or five years old, like playing with blocks at the same time, okay? So our families knew of each other growing up. We were the same exact age, actually. Technically, she's four months older than me. But so I'm dating older woman. And... So we knew of each other and we were like pseudo friends, but we didn't go to the same high school and I was a big, huge bitch back in the day. So we didn't talk. And so anyways. My brother celebrated his 30th birthday party at Port City Music Hall, which closed, I think. Yeah, it's now Arcadia. Or Acadia. Whatever. So, he had this big 30th birthday bash and he invited all of his friends growing up to this party, Morgan and I included. Well, I didn't really know Morgan very well. This is the juicy part. And she friend requested me on Facebook. Well, back in the day, Facebook used to be, really, like the only thing to connect people besides MySpace, which you know how that goes. Like, what is that? So... We were at the same party at the same time and I am very aggressive. I sometimes consider myself an aggressive femme that could be very aggressive. I'm like a black widow spider if I want someone I like. So... and they won't even know it's coming. And I'm not only that, my birthday's in October, and I mean, I'm not a Scorpio, so. Basically I was like, "You should date me". I was like, "You should, yeah. We should go on a date". And she was like, "I'm not really looking. I don't know". Blah, blah blan. And I'm like, "No, like yeah, you should go on a date with me. When are you going to be here?". And so we had one date and then we got married. Yep. Three years later. I'm going to skip that part and just... *whoop!*

Gretchen: [00:13:12] Um. Excuse me. So you, um. You mentioned earlier that, um. You. Your

dad had kicked you out for being a lesbian?

Margaret: Yes.

Gretchen: Was he the first one that came out, you know, first.

Margaret: [00:13:23] So I... What year was it? I'm pretty sure I came out when I was 16. I think that's when it happened. 15 or 16 years old ish. I did not have a Quinceanera, but my my brother's father could have thrown me one and that would of been really nice. Anyways.

So. Let me think back. So in high school I was in... I was a... I'm the girl from American Pie that said "That one time at Bandcamp" so that one time I'm like the girl band camp. And I met the first like lesbian out lesbian girl that I knew when I was in marching band and this was in high school. And she was actually dating someone else like, they had, like, officially, like, been like, we're a couple. And everybody was like "gasp". But they were the first ones in, like a whole entire school and... I sound so old. Jesus, that's horrible. Because I knew she was a lesbian, immediately I was like, "Oh, if they break up, like, I can just like slide into her DMS", right? Even though Instagram didn't exist. And so. I don't really know exactly how it happened, but somehow we were a couple and I remember one time coming up... my mom found a hickey on my neck. That's actually how it happened. Yeah, that's how. Yep, yep. That's it. The memory just got retrieved. So we were driving or something, and I was in the passenger seat, and she saw the hickey on my neck and she's like, "Where'd that come from?" and I was like, "Well, Laura and I..." you know, and she's like, she literally had to, like, pull over. So my mom was very upset. Very upset. And she told me the reason why she was upset was because of the age difference. So I think I was 16 and I think Laura was 19 or 18 or something. Actually, I think she was 19 because my mom was like, "This is statutory rape" because a 16-year-old and a 19 year old can't technically date. So that's what her thing was. But I also think she was... she was scared. She was homophobic. She grew up in a mostly Catholic home. And so to her, it was like an abomination. Right? At first. But then she's like, the fear, she's like, "But you're going to get beat up" because during the nineties, like, gay men were getting beat up and gay women were getting beat up all the time, like, all the time. And so she was nervous. But then I ran... I actually ran away from home because I was so angry at my mother, which literally was down the street. But it doesn't matter. Um. It was hard. Eventually she did end up accepting it. She was actually at... I have a picture of my wife, myself and my mom at the marriage, the passing of the Marriage Act in Maine, which was in 2013. And my mom going from like, like me living like almost running away from home at 16, like my life could have been very different versus in 2013 celebrating like my engagement to my wife. Like my wife, my future wife. That was. It was a big deal. I don't really know what, why or really what transition happened for her. Like, I never even asked her about that. That would be an interesting thing to ask her someday.

Shelice: [00:16:48] Would you like to talk a little bit more about the reason why you ran away because you felt you had to run away from home?

Margaret: [00:16:54] That's a good question. Let me see what was going on in my life at 16. So. So my mother... When I was, okay, when I was 16 years old, I lived on Mellen Street here in Portland. My mom, my brother and I lived in a three bedroom apartment on Elm Street. I remember at that time feeling really pressured to date boys because when you become 16, it's like prom and bullshit. And so you feel this like pressure, right? So I actually dated a few boys. I had horrible experiences of which I don't want to talk about, but... So I tried so hard to be a good daughter, you know what I mean? And to prove to her that, like, this is what I should have been doing. And when I eventually came out and I said, "I actually think I, like, love her", and this is like my really my first relationship, and, I don't know if at 16 you know you love someone but maybe. Right? It was hard for her to be rejected and also 11 years prior to that, so when I was five, I think four or five, maybe five or seven, I can't really. My mother caught my friend and I like in a lesbian act and I got... she got her ass beat. So I witnessed that happen. I didn't. My mom was like, "Don't do that again". But she did. And I think, also, I was like, "Is that going to happen to me?" Right? Because like, it already happened to us five. So immediately I went back to that fear of like, "I'm bad. I did something wrong". Even though

it felt so right, it also felt like I did something wrong. Um. And because I guess my girlfriend at the time had her own apartment and I'm pretty rebellious in general, so. [00:18:59][1.0]

Shelice: [00:19:00] Oh, so you moved in with your girlfriend when you ran away from home?

Margaret: [00:19:03] No, we. I ran away from home for like two days to her house, to her apartment, but I only left for, like, two days. And then my mom and I talked and she's like, "I love you no matter what". Like, I wonder actually if in that moment of 16 she was like, "Holy shit. I could actually lose my daughter over this". Um. Because I remember, like, Glisten and Pflag. A lot of those organs- And I was part of outright at the time, a lot of those organizations were really trying to make sure that, like, LGBT youth didn't, like, commit suicide. So I think she was also worried that, like, I could actually take this pretty far. Lots of reasons. Lots of reasons.

Gretchen: [00:19:42] Um, going back to that experience you said that you have over five, is that the first... We don't know a lot about sexuality, but how old were you when you first started to, like, identify as something other than heterosexual?

Margaret: [00:19:57] So I don't think I really thought about 16. I honestly don't. Um, I. Because I had that moment when I was so young of, like, witnessing her getting, like, I don't even think we were able to hang out with each other anymore. Like we were really close friends and then they did not allow us to ever hang out. It never happened again. And so I kind of like, and I still do this in my current life, but like I. What do you call it? I like develop this defense mechanism in my life of like, compartmentalizing, like who I'm with and what I'm doing all the time. So, like, I was like I threw myself into the arts. Like I threw myself into music and dance and sports to, like, get away from relationship and emotions and like connections because I got in trouble. Yeah. That was hard. [00:20:54][34.6]

Gretchen: [00:20:58] So of course, we know, when you came out to your mom and your dad did, like, how did your brother react? Like, your friends?

Margaret: [00:21:06] I was like my dad. My dad didn't know until I was like 25 or like, really like face to face. Like, he knew on the phone, but he didn't care to know. My brother. Let me see. I always felt like his friends were, like trying to hit on me, and I always would get so angry. And I remember, um. I mean, I remember him openly, like, telling his friends I was a lesbian, like, "My sister's a lesbian". Like, "It's not going to happen". But still, he had to repeat that over and over again. He was very kind and open and welcoming to my girlfriends. I've had many. A lot. I guess. I don't really know what the normal number is, but like if you tell me, then maybe I can say higher or lower. But, sorry. You're really not going to get that on the transcripts. You were like, "What the fuck is she saying?" Yeah. So he was pretty much welcoming and open to, I would say, all of them. And then I have two younger half brothers. One is named Tad. The other one's name is Nick. Tad has gone through ups and downs because my dad, the Irving side of the family, is very religious. So I've gone through a lot of ups and downs. My dad is also very homophobic, like doesn't talk to me. So. I think Tad has been like, loving and confused at the same time. And then my youngest brother, Nick, actually came out to me and said he was bisexual but was really afraid to come out to our father because of what he witnessed with me. But... Yeah, and then friends. You know with that

experience in marching band where it's like I kind of knew. And then I started to gravitate towards communities that I knew was accepting of me. So I spent a lot of time in Outright, Portland Outright. And then when I joined college, I joined like, uh, it was called a Sex Collective, but it was trying to be as open and inclusive as about sex and all like, yeah, spectrum of sex. And so that was a good group for me to be part of that were like, open and inclusive and then, um. As an adult. I mean, it's changed because Portland has changed, but I've always like gravitated toward like, like queer spaces or communities that are welcoming and open and you don't have to, like, explain yourself.

Gretchen: [00:23:43] What... Is there any particular moment of a really positive response to coming out to anybody that you knew? Or, like, a very supportive response or, like, anything like that?

Margaret: [00:24:01] I think. I think because the way I look the way I do... that doesn't make any sense. I don't know, actually. I mean, maybe when you're at Pride events and you can, like celebrate your sexuality on a yearly basis, that's good. But for me, like a personal, exciting coming out story, I don't think... mine's probably bad. It's not the worst, but it's not like "Hurray!" Now, like we hugged or whatever, you know, like, my, I probably shouldn't talk about my wife, but she said like she never had to come out, like people just knew. So it was like, "Okay", I have to come out on a daily basis to people. You know, like, "Yes, I'm a lesbian". You know? I don't know. I don't have any fun when. [00:24:51][2.8]

Shelice: [00:24:55] You said you feel like you have to come out on a daily basis?

Margaret: Yeah.

Shelice: So like, how do you decide...

Margaret: Who to come out to?

Shelice: Right.

Margaret: [00:25:04] As many people as possible. Um, I, there's, there's a old school belief of what a lesbian looks like. And when you don't look like that, people assume you're heterosexual. So. I... the way I take it, the way I equate that with is like, which is, I think... Maybe I'm like educating people on a daily basis, I guess, but when my wife has short hair, they automatically assume she's a man. When I have long hair as lesbian, they automatically assume I'm heterosexual. It's like that people can't break free of those stereotypes. It's really hard for people. And so. I mean, literally every day. Like, I just, people assume, "Oh, your husband. Oh, what's your husband's name?" Or maybe not every day. Maybe not every day. But it's, it's frustrating for me. And sometimes I get really frustrated because why do I have to, like, fit people's expectation of what a lesbian looks like? Like, why can't I just be myself? Yeah. I hate it. And sometimes I get angry.

Gretchen: [00:26:27] Going back a little bit earlier, you said that your father is very religious.

Margaret: Yeah.

Gretchen: And you also mentioned you kinda said you were pagan. How you identify, do you want to speak about that a little bit?

Margaret: [00:26:40] Sure. Yeah, it's. Oh, my God. It's so funny because I was talking about that at work today. So I'm helping to plan a holiday event. And when you think of holidays, usually think about religion. Right? So I'm trying to help the event to be as inclusive as possible. And so I tried to think of myself like, "What's my connection to the holidays and religion?" Because usually they're connected. So growing up, I went to... I didn't really go to church at all. But I do remember my mom asking me to go to her church frequently, which was the Zion, the Zion Methodist Black something church here in Portland. I can't even remember the name of it. It's been there forever and it's mostly like a black church. And so she was like, "Come to the church. Come to the church. Come to the church". Mostly, I think because of our racial identity, right. It's like there's not a lot of black people, come to the church. This is where the black people are. But I knew the church was very homophobic. I knew it like, I actually was rather rude to the reverend a couple of months ago, and so I probably should apologize. But. It's hard for me because there's been a lot of hatred towards the LGBT like queer community and specifically Christianity that I sometimes can't get out of that box. So I was very like agnostic, almost like Antichrist growing up. Like, way to the left and then I started to believe that I needed to focus on like, healing because I had a lot of anger and frustration and hatred and just evil, like it just was building inside me. And so I slowly started to focus on like, being outside in nature, connecting to the seasons, like connecting to, honestly, this might sound a little bit cheesy, but, like connecting to the moon because of my cycle. And I have a like, I'm kind of hormonal. Like, my hormones can go like, woah! Like off the chart sometimes. And so I started to pay more attention to, like, health in the seasons. And then I started to realize, "Oh, this is actually kind of connected to like, solstice and paganism because they start they celebrate nature". And I didn't really realize that, that's like... and so I wouldn't say that I'm pagan because, like, I don't even really know what that means. But that one definition of like, celebrating nature, if that's what it is, that's what I do. I don't have any like, rituals that I do besides like the fact that I carry rocks everywhere from. I have a couple on my back. But yeah, I was never raised and I wasn't really raised Catholic. Even though my mom was raised Catholic, I wasn't Christian. I did one year like, think I was going to become Sufi because I went to like, Harvard Divinity School for this workshop. And I was like, "I'm going to be a Sufi". But I didn't do that. But I think I appreciate some Buddhist beliefs in terms of, like, meditation and calming the mind and like, visualization. But I don't really have a religion per se. It's hard to describe, but I hope that's okay.

Shelice: Do you want to talk about the rocks at all?

Margaret: [00:30:14] Oh, yes! You want to? Okay, hold on. Hold on, you'll see. Thank you for asking. That's the whole reason I came. Hold on. Let's see. Which pocket did I put it in? This pocket has a hole, so I really hope it didn't fall out. They say when you lose them, it's like not needed anymore. It might have fallen out of place. I have a ton. Okay, I have one on my keychain. So recently I bought that because I knew I wouldn't lose it. Because I lose them frequently. So here's one that I have. It's almost like a bunny rabbit, you know, like they have the bunny foot or whatever it's called, that's creepy to me. So... but I really love rocks and crystals. So this I'm won by them if they're fun looking. The color is in the iridescent. And then sometimes if you can touch it, if you want. Sometimes I'll buy them based... oh, here it is. I'll

be by them based on like, certain attributes like there's some help of being light calming like a smoky quartz helps the folks that have, like, anxiety, which I have have anxiety.

Shelice: Who doesn't today?

Margaret: No shit, right? This one, which is called Citrine, focuses on like, success. Mostly wealth during the waning moon. That's when you're supposed to ask for it. They should ask for it now. How much money do you want? Just say it out loud. I would say million. Then someone told me to say 13 million because of inflation. And this one. So this is called a shiva's eye, which is like, my friend's name is Shiva, so it very much reminds me of her. I also got this in Salem, Massachusetts, and because my family from Salem, I mean from Massachusetts. And then I don't know what this is. I just thought it was cool looking. It looks a little bit like a dagger. I could cut you if I needed to. So, don't. Um. But I do love them.

Gretchen: [00:32:15] So would you say it's kind of more spirituality then? [00:32:19][3.3]

Margaret: [00:32:19] Yes.

Gretchen: [00:32:20] Sounds like what you're describing. Do you think that that's kind of helping you, like with your like, grounding yourself in like things like being who you are in your identity?

Margaret: [00:32:30] 100%. Yeah. Because... so I think at first he was like a collect over rock collection. Right. I've had this since I was like 15, so ah, 16. I had it at 16. And it was one of the things for me that was very like... to me, it's ritualistic. So no matter where I go or where I am, if I have, like, the same exact rock, it's very grounding for me. I can be like and sometimes actually, if I work at home, I'll, like, lay out my rocks in front of me. Or if I go to the office in Augusta and like, lay out my rocks in front of me and I feel like I'm ready. Like it doesn't matter what the day is. My body can be like, I'm ready to go. Um, also, they're pretty. Some people like shoes or bags that I'm like, I mean, I have one bag, one, but I don't care about bags, but I like rocks. I like a little too much. I just stuff I'm a little obsessed with. And I spend a lot of money. I have a problem.

Gretchen: [00:33:39] All right. I'm going to backtrack just a little bit. So when you were talking earlier about, of course, your Mom wanted you to go to her church and everything. Yeah, kind of how you said like, "Oh, that's where the black people are". How would you like, say that? Like we like as a church in racial identity like, correlated for you or is your racial identity kind of an entirely separate spirit in your life?

Margaret: [00:34:04] So my racial identity is separate than my religion. One, because I don't really have any religion. And I wasn't like, my mom didn't force us. Right. Like, if she had forced us, yeah, I would've had a religion. But because she was kind of like, do your thing, I kind of picked and gathered different things that I like from different religions to create one. For my racial identity, that's complicated. So I'll go back to the Irving, Piasta thing. So the Irving side of my family is African-American. Um. My grandmother's name is Margaret, and she, yeah, is African-American, but I'm not sure like, which country, continent, I'd say Africa, but I don't know. I don't know. I guess it's better both on the on the Irving side and I've asked, which is really hard for me because I'm like, "How the fuck do you not know?" But, you know, that's, you know. That's a lifelong goal. Then on my Piasta side, my mother's... my grandmother, my maternal grandmother, she was biracial and she looked a lot like me. And

that's hard because that's someone that's biracial and that... And then my Piasta. So my maternal grandfather is unknown. So, hold please. My mother doesn't know if, his name is Frank Piasta, with her father or a stepfather. Because my maternal grandmother died really early. So she's not sure if he's Polish. The name is Piasta Polish or there was another man in the picture her, they're not sure who is Portuguese or Mexican, so they're not sure. The hard thing is when people look at me, they don't know. And the hard thing is when I look in the mirror, I don't know. So that's difficult because at first I was like, "Oh, I'm biracial". Like, "I'm black and white". But that's not necessarily true if my mother doesn't know who her father is. So it's been complicated. I think when people look at me, they're really confused. Some people think I'm Hispanic. Some people think that I'm Puerto Rican. Some people think that I am Cape Verdean. So I get a lot, I get a lot of, someone asked me if I was white, which I was very confused by. And so, I mean, I know I'm really light skinned in the winter especially. I get really pale, but you know, so it's hard for me. It's one of the things that I've realized more and more that I need to do some digging. It's just like, how do I get that information for my families? Or do I take like, a test, DNA test or both? I don't know. It's complicated. For me. [00:37:03][179.9]

Gretchen: [00:37:07] So you also wrote your background sheet that you would define yourself as Afro-Latina?

Margaret: [00:37:12] Yes,

Gretchen: [00:37:13] Do you want to talk about that?

Margaret: [00:37:13] Sure So more and more, I'm starting to think that I identify as Afro-Latina and... and I wonder if this is like racially, ethnically, culturally. So growing up when I was between the ages of, you know. Three. Let's just say when I was born to 18, like you're my whole adolescent years. I was raised by an African-American side of the family and a Puerto Rican side of the family. So my mom, which I guess she, yes, she has African-American mother, so she's African-American. And then my brother's dad was heavily involved in our family and he's Puerto Rican. So, and they're Taino, so they're very like very connected to the land of Puerto Rico. And so all growing up, all I attached to was Puerto Rican music, Puerto Rican food, Puerto Rican language, Puerto Rican culture. But he was not my father. So I was like, "I'm not like I'm not Puerto Rican". But because people look at me and assume I am and I very much attached to it, I'm starting to be like, well, I need to know more about this. I mean, if I... yeah. So I'm still exploring this more and more. And I, I feel like I, I'm at the point where I really need to... I need to know. And I'm wondering... I think my my mom, my mother, it took like a DNA test or whatever it's called, the ancestry test. And it came out as Portuguese. And so I'm like, if I come out as Portuguese... like, pretty sure I'm not Portuguese. So, but I honestly, it's it's been hard for me, yeah, to figure that out. Uh. I went to the Dominican Republic in 2013. My wife and I went for a honeymoon and we're eating breakfast and this guy behind me is eating breakfast and he has like, a spitting image of my father. And he's Dominican. And so my wife, like, takes a picture of it because I was like, this is, like, insane. How, how, how much he looked like him. And to this day, I'm like, I need, I need to know. That was ten year, ten plus years ago. I don't know what I'm waiting for, but that's one of the things maybe I should put in my 2023 New Year's list, because I need to... I need to know. Is that the last question? [00:39:54][51.8]

Shelice: No.

Margaret: Wrapping it up!

Shelice: [00:40:01] What was the effect on you of like, growing up multi-racial. What effect did that have on your life?

Margaret: [00:40:13] Yeah, oh. Um. Let's see. Okay. I'll start, like, chronologically. So, growing up in Maine, I was like one of very, very few people of color. I would say in my high school, I could count five on my hand. And I went to Deering down the street. Deering, which people like, the most diverse school of Maine. And I'm like, okay. Yes, today. So that was interesting because immediately I stood out in a crowd, in the class picture, I immediately stood out like a sore thumb. I also, because my dad had left, I was a very angry teenager. And so I still do, but I used to wear a lot of black, like Marilyn Manson, Nine Inch Nails, Black. Ok, like... So not only did I stick out as a person of color, I was also like this weird goth girl, right? And so I accepted that as my identity. I was like, If people think I'm weird and I feel weird, like I'm just a weird... the weird girl. And so I kind of like, adopted that as like, all right, I'm going to stick with this identity. Then I left Maine, so I graduated. That was my identity in Maine. Right. Then I left Maine and went to a predominantly white institution. Where like in 99% of the students were white. Not even realizing to myself feel like, I actually could have changed that. Like, now in my like, all old age, I'm like, oh, I actually could have, like, changed that for myself, like not placing myself in the same environment I was already in, even though it was very different, but it felt similar racially. So still, I was like, stuck out like a sore thumb. I less and less became like the emo girl, and more became like the artist. And that was very freeing for me to have to... kind of shape my own identity. And then moving to Boston, it felt so much better. But I still been in predominantly white spaces like my whole life, I think there was probably the first time I ever noticed like it was like, jarring was to me... was when I lived in Brooklyn, New York for three months during a college internship in 20... I remember like yesterday... 2003. Where I did an internship with a dance company called Urban Bushmen, and it was an all... all black like all African-American dance company. And all of a sudden I switched where I was no longer the one, but I was like the lightest one. And that's the first time I ever got called light skinned girl when I was in Brooklyn. So all of a sudden I was like, "Wait a minute, what?" I had never heard that term before. This is like 2003. Yeah. And I was like, light skinned girl. Like, what's what's that? And then my wife uses terms like team light skin. And I was like, Wait, I don't... what? So that was a little bit jarring for me to go from being the darkest to the lightest. And then I slowly started to realize, like, I, I don't know. It's been a it's been a... a journey. I went to... in October, yeah, in October of this year, 2022, I went to an all black New England conference, which was in SNHU. And that was the first time in New England I'd actually been in a room full of all people of color. Like the first time in New England. So I still feel like that weird girl that sticks out here, even though Portland is becoming more and more diverse. It's still, to me, not diverse enough. It needs to be at least 50%, at least, you know. Yeah. It's really hot in here. I hope I don't pass out from the heat. Wendy is going to be like, why did you choose her?

Gretchen: No, you're doing amazing.

Shelice: [00:44:33] Yeah, I think I have a question. How was that for you when you became the light skinned girl. It's like. You didn't feel like you fit in in Maine because there are mostly whites.

Margaret: [00:44:46] Yeah.

Shelice: [00:44:46] Now. You're in an all black dance group which should be like "Oh yeah, I'm finally home" or something.

Margaret: [00:44:53] It did not feel that way. Not at all. I was the odd person out. I think... okay. Here's how I make sense of it. And I don't really know if this is true, but... so I'm a, I'm a doctoral student at UNE. I just finished writing my dissertation like it's done, but it has to be edited. So if you want to help me, that's great. It's a hard 145 pages. So my research is on sense of belonging for queer women of color. Because I felt like I never belonged. I still, okay, the beginning of the four year journey that I did, I never felt like I belonged anywhere. Ever, ever. I was like, I'm not black enough. I'm not white enough. I'm constantly told that I'm not black enough. Constantly. I'm. I'm, I'm a lesbian. I'm not heterosexual, but I look like a heterosexual. Like I look young. But I'm actually old. Focus. So. But through my research, I realize, like. Why do I have to like, why do I have to feel like I need to belong somewhere? Like, why? Why? Like, if the human need to feel like you belong. But, like, I think the rebel in me was, like, fuck it. If I don't belong, fuck it. Like, if I'm in a space where I don't feel like I belong, then I just leave. Like I'm sorry. Probably not a good strategy when you are in the workplace. Because when you switch your job too much, they think that you can't hold a job. But anyways. I just slowly started to accept it, like, I just have to be me whether or not people like it or not. Like, I just... maybe it's because I'm old, but I started to like, give zero fucks about life. And I watched a video this morning on how you can care less. Just kidding. I didn't watch. I didn't watch it. You can erase that from the transcript. Please. reset!

Gretchen: [00:47:07] So you said that your dissertation about sense of belonging for queer women of color, is that something you initially went into your college and the universities and stuff? Is that what your initial focus was?

Margaret: [00:47:20] No, it wasn't. No, it wasn't. So when I first decided to go back to school again for the last time, I knew that I wanted to get an advanced degree because I had like, hit a glass ceiling where, like, folks are like, you're smart, but you don't have that piece of paper. And I was like... So... and plus I was working here and so they were paying for your college. So I applied to their public policy program because I love, I love college, to be honest. I would take, I would go back. I would do college forever if it didn't cost much money. But. I slowly started to realize, like, in order for people to take me seriously as a woman, as a person of color, as a lesbian, like I needed to have that piece of paper. And I could clearly see it. It was very, very obvious working in academia. You're just treated as like, you don't matter. And so because of that, I said I need to get that piece of paper. At the time in 2018, we were like, just coming out of the recession. Like things were looking really good. And I started to study workforce development. So unemployment rates went from like 3.1% to 30% after the COVID. But I was noticing like, this was the best time, like economically. And I was like, Ooh, what is it? So I was looking at trends in data and statistics and policy, and after that one, after one year in my program, I said, "This sucks". Because we hit COVID. Because the world had this racial reckoning, because we were working from home and I was taking care of a small child and working, which was really fun. To do home, school and work full time and be in grad school, I said whatever I do for work And what my future, like, life and career is going to look like, I have to do it not just for that piece of paper. I need to do it for, like, a legacy. So I did it like, my, I told my daughter, I was like, "I'm working on my dissertation and Mommy's is going to be working on a dissertation". My goal was for her, to for me to finish by the time she's in kindergarten. But she's now in first grade. But she knows. She's like, "Mommy's working on her dissertation. Mommy smart. Mommy's talented. Mommy can do this". And for me, I was like, okay, rather I should focus on women because I'm very much a feminist. Like, a lot like,

I'd kill you. Remove that from the transcript and. I'm also, like, very pro, like... *it's true... like* LGBTQ. Like, queer. Like, I'm very strong with that. And then as a person of color, I've realized more and more that like, people look to me as the expert and I'm like, "That's really sad". Like, I'm not even that good. Like, no, I, keep that in. So they, they said, like, "Margaret, you're the best". And I'm like, "Seriously?" No. Like, there are people that have done this work for, like, 20 plus years than me. And it's only because I know how to navigate the system. Like I'm book smart, but, like, I probably don't even know how to tie my shoes properly. Like, I don't even know how to tie my shoes. I don't even know how to get dressed. I basically don't know how to dress myself. And you can ask my wife if you're like, "She puts her clothes on backwards all the time". But like, I slowly started to realize, like, in order to help with racial equality, if they think I'm the expert, I have to step up to the plate. Like, so that's when I started realizing I need to study specifically marginalized communities. So queer people, women, and people of color combined and the intersectionality of all three. Yeah. And so I switched. I remember like it was yesterday, I said to my friend Melissa, I said, "I don't want to do workforce development any more for my dissertation. I don't want to do four years of studying statistics and trends and graphs and data. I want to talk to people and I want to hear about their experiences just like this". I interviewed people, but it was on Zoom because some of them were in Australia. I probably shouldn't have said that. Yeah, I can say that. But it slowly made me realize, like, I became so much more empowered to, like, talk about my gender, to talk about my sexuality, to talk about race because a lot of people are really afraid to talk about it. But speaking with them and like some. So I interviewed eight women and they were all Afro-Latina. All of them. Which was interesting because I was like, "Why? That's ironic" but that's for it, my recommendations. You'll have to read that on nine ProQuest Download for \$65.95. Probably not. I'm not going to make any money, but I really wish Biden would release my student loans. \$145,000. I'm pretty much going to have to sell both kidneys, probably both of my lungs and my heart. [00:52:54][4.2]

Shelice: [00:52:55] No.

Margaret: [00:52:56] I could probably still live. Right? My ovaries. Okay. Sorry. I just went off a tangent.

Gretchen: [00:53:05] No, that's totally fine, but we'd love to hear about it. [00:53:07][1.6]

Shelice: [00:53:12] So you did mention you love college. and you could go to college if it didn't cost a lot of money.

Margaret: [00:53:18] Forever

Shelice: And now we know you owe a lot of money.

Margaret: [00:53:20] I owe a lot of money. Well, I don't even want to look at it. You can get maxed out of student loans Yeah. I don't know what the ceiling is, but I can get maxed out. They'll be like, "No more college for you". [00:53:32][12.1]

Shelice: That's a thing.

Margaret: [00:53:36] Yes, it is. It.

Shelice: [00:53:39] Would you mind telling us why you attended each of the colleges that you

Did?

Margaret: [00:53:45] Where I worked?

Shelice: [00:53:46] No the colleges you attended.

Margaret: [00:53:47] Oh, where I was enrolled. Okay. Yeah.

Shelice: [00:53:50] Wells College and Leslie.

Margaret: [00:53:52] Lesley. Yeah. So when I was in high school and actually still to this day, they have a college fair at the Sullivan Gym here at USM and they have one in Gorham, whatever the name of the gym is. I can't remember. Costello? Even though you took away my card. So my mom brought me to this college fair and she's like, "You want to go to college? Here's the college fair". My mom never went to college. So I was a first generation college student and I knew I wanted to be a dancer. I don't know why. To be honest, if I could go back to my 17 year old self, I probably would have been like, "Choose something more practical". But here I am. So I went to the college fair looking for colleges that had dance. I also knew that I was a big homo, so I went to a women's college because that's where it's at. And I, I'm serious. I applied to Simmons, Mount Holyoke. Well, at Wellesley, they're just too prim and proper. I couldn't deal with that bullshit. And they're bitches. So I didn't want to go to Wellesley. You can keep that in the transcript. Bitches. But I only got waitlisted for like, Simmons or Smith. I never know the difference. And in Wells. So I only applied for, like, three schools. And to be honest, I was like, "How motivated was I?" So I visited Wells College because I was the only school that I applied to that actually was accepted. I only applied to like three schools. I was like denied, waitlisted, and accepted. So I went to Wells College for a visit. They, you know, I, from here to there is 8 hours. It's really far. Far. Far, far, far away. My mom drives me crazy. Even to this day, I always get as far away from her as possible. So I left and went there, and the college just blew me away. It was so beautiful. It was just so beautiful. The buildings, the trees. It was right on the lake. My dorm. Like, if you look at the college dorm, you could see the lake. You could see the entire lake. And I was like, This is it. This is it. I had a dance program. It had a swing program because I was a swimmer, too. I love libraries. I'm a huge dork. And so I was like, If the library is nice, remember how they took away my card? At Glickman? I fell in love. I mean, I spent, I would say, like 75% of my time at the library. Like, I didn't have any friends. Still don't. So I stayed there for four years. A couple of my friends transitioned out or transferred. Like, they were from Long Island and they were like, "This is bullshit". So they left. But I stayed because I had opportunities I know that I wouldn't have had. So like, the college paid for me to do an alternative spring break in Cuba for, like, a week. All expenses paid. And as a person that potentially looks Cuban, I was, like, coming home. And it was incredible. Then I also did that three month program in Brooklyn where I was called the light skinned girl. That was all expenses paid. And I just felt... it's a sister school. So they have like, a very strong culture there. Like, not like any schools I've worked with in Maine. They're just like you're like, I mean, you might as well just get, like, tattooed because it's like a cult. So it was amazing. And I don't endorse cults. You can remove that from the transcript. And then Lesley. So I moved from... hold on. Where was I

living? Ithaca. To Worcester. Worcester. I only lived there for a year. And then... because my dad. And found... teach her... found AmeriCorps. So AmeriCorps is a program that has like, Teach for America 30th year, all these programs, Job Corps and I applied for that program so that I could get paid, so I could work full time and get paid. And then they'd go to, they pay for you to go to school part time. That was part of the tip, the package. And I was like, I don't really know what to do with my life. Basically just got kicked out of my dad's house. Like, I'm literally living like a halfway house. I was living in a halfway house. Yeah. I was living in a halfway house and I was like, "I don't know what to do with my life". So I did that, moved to Boston. Lesley had a cohort program where they brought in 25 graduate students to live in the dorms for the summer. Which automatically I felt amazing. Like my group of people I even still follow on social media and that was like back in 2009. So that's a long time ago. And I love that program. I love the students. I love the classes. I love the model. It was wonderful. And then because I worked in higher education here and they said, "You probably should just get your next degree. Like, you're just..." like, I'm just, I was taking classes to defer my student loans. That's what I was doing here. And then they were like, "You should just apply for a program if you're smart". Like, if you're smart enough. Someone told me to get a second master's, and that's bullshit. Never do that. Never get a second master's or a second bachelor's. Don't do it. It's bullshit. Don't do it. Such a waste of your money.

Gretchen: [00:59:27] I'll take the advice.

Margaret: [00:59:28] Why would you do that? It makes no sense. Yeah. UNE has been.

Interesting. Um, but hopefully I'm almost done. I just need someone to edit this long document that I don't even want to read.

Gretchen: Well congratulations.

Margaret: Yeah. So excited.

Gretchen: [00:59:51] Um, so, I mean, clearly you've enjoyed having spent a lot of time in school and college and everything like that. Were you in any like, active LGBTQ organizations in college or like, any, like, on campus activities going on that you were involved in?

Margaret: [01:00:07] Sorry, I'm just going to text my wife. She's probably like, "When are you coming home?" At 6pm. Marriage. Don't do it. It's a trap. At Wells College. I was in their Sex Collective because it was an all female space college. My third year, second, third year, I can't remember. There was a woman there that identified as trans. And all of a sudden in 2003, 2004, they were like, they were like, "Oh my God. This is really odd. Like, what do you do?" And I remember it being this huge thing because, because the college was a women's college. It like, threw everything on its head. Eventually, they ended up becoming coed because financially they couldn't afford to be single sex anymore. But that club was really good for me because... I have to get home soon. Sooner. It really helped me... How do I explain it? It was different. So in high school I was part of Portland Outright, which was kind of

more just like show up and eat snacks and watch a movie or whatever. I don't even know what we did, just stare at each other. But in college, it was like a time where every single week they could talk about a topic that was related to sexuality. Which was really empowering for a young woman. Right. Like the college I went to was actually a seminary school for nuns. So that's the history of that college. And then to have the sex selective was, like, transformative. So they invited, like, drag kings to come. They invite, they did like, all kinds of workshops on, like, sex toys. They showed porn, like. And, like, you could opt in or out and they would tell you what it was before. They would talk about like BDSM and like consent and they would talk about all of these healthy relationships versus unhealthy relationships. There was a lot about domestic violence that was good for me because I had experienced it in the home and it was good for me to hear and learn healthy ways for relationships. And I, I remember that being transformative for me because I have never talked about this. This is weird. I, all of a sudden, felt like. I am. I've become of age. Like I was, like, between the ages of 19 to 22. I was like, by the time I was 25, I was completely open and confident in my sexual identity and then I didn't understand why others weren't right? I was like, "This makes no sense. Like, Why are we not talking about this?" I ended up joining two dance companies at the time. One was a burlesque troupe in Boston that was like, obviously burlesque is very sexual. And then another one was, what was the second one? Oh, it was a performance group called The Fem Show, and they did performances for LGBTQ youth. So we, and it was specifically on feminine identity, so I remember we did a performance at UConn for their LGBTQ conference one year, and I was able to talk to younger kids, students. They were probably like five years younger than me, about being empowering and consent, which I would say didn't really come. That conversation about consent didn't really come to like ten years ago, like ten years prior. Like people were like there were still high levels of sexual assault on college campuses because there was no conversations about consent. So. But yeah, I guess I didn't even realize that that experience from Wells College helped me so much. Um.

Gretchen: Seems like a really good moment.

Shelice: [01:04:35] USM seems to come out a lot during the conversation. Is there anything else about your affiliation with USM that you would like to talk about?

Margaret: [01:04:47] Um. So I started off here. I had four different jobs here in eight years. So I started off, um... I started in 2011 or 2012. And I had no connection to USM at all. Like I knew no one that went to USM.. I knew nobody who worked at USM.. And actually when I moved back to Maine, so I moved back to Maine in 2011 or 2012, and I was gone for 11 years. And so when I came back, Portland looked very different from when I was a high school student, right? I left when I was 18. I came back when I was 28. Like. Different, right? Not that I had never been back because I came home for Thanksgiving and things like that to see my mom. But it just wasn't. It was different. So I got a job here. Finally, after months of applying for jobs in Maine. I couldn't get a job when I moved back even with a master's degree. Well, don't talk about that. But the unemployment rate was really low, right? It was very low. So there are barely any jobs available and I worked two years at one job and then a friend of my mother's said, "I didn't know you worked at USM". I didn't even know she worked here. And she said, "You should work with us". And that was when I worked in Admissions and I loved it. I. It was the best job. My job in admissions was the best because I traveled all the time and I loved traveling, and USM paid for it. I was like, go to Boston, New York City, Philadelphia. You can remove that from the transcript. Just kidding. They don't do it anymore

because they had to restrict their, had to restrict their budgets. Plus, you know, there's been a lot of issues since Covid, but. Uh. And then I got pregnant. So my wife and I had been trying to get pregnant for seven years. No, sorry. For two years, we tried seven times. And, um, once I had a baby, I knew I needed to make more money. Like, since I was like I'm showing, I'm due, I need to provide for this child inside my belly. And had been trying to move up the ladder to make more money. So at the time I was only making \$35,000 and I knew I couldn't afford, like, to have a family with that money. So I had been trying so hard. That's another reason why I went to get my degree, my doctorate, because I knew I needed to make more money. Yeah. I liked working at USM and I even applied to work back to work for a job here. Um. But. Yeah.

Gretchen: [01:07:40] Um, so you mentioned obviously you're like your wife and you try to get pregnant having, you know, obviously have a daughter now. Yeah. You did mention in your background that you guys are monogamous and that he kind of you mentioned not being poly. I was wondering if you want to speak about that.

Margaret: [01:07:57] Sure. So my wife doesn't know this, so we won't share this with her. Just getting you know, we have talked about this. Just kidding. It's not like a secret, like this is... would have never come up. So we've been married now... Next year will be ten years. We've been in a relationship with each other for 13 years. It's the longest relationship I've ever had. Prior to dating her in 2010. So before 2010, I had had like 15 relationships. Then after 2010, I've only had one for the past 15 years, basically. Recently, there have been... And I don't know if it's just me or life. I don't know. To be honest, there seems like there's more and more people, in my opinion, that are becoming polyamorous. Now. I don't know if I just made that up. I don't have any statistics on that. I haven't done any research on that, but I've been hearing it from word of mouth. And so, um. I met someone who said I'm married, but we have a poly relationship. And I was like, "That makes no sense". No sense. But then I met another couple that said the same thing. And then another couple. And then another couple. And I was like, Huh? So I said to my wife, I said, "Would you ever consider this?" Like, this is a thing. And she said, "Absolutely not". However, she has joked on joked on more than one occasion if like me sleeping with people that she knows and I'm like, oh, like, "Which one is it?" And so I don't. I am a monogamous. I'm monogamous. I wonder in the future if that would change. I don't know, but I'm in a very solid, committed, monogamous marriage and I wouldn't, like, jeopardize that, if, you, like, to be Polly. If I lost her, like, I wouldn't do that. So.

Gretchen: [01:10:22] You also have talked about now being a burlesque dancer and choreographer. Which I find incredibly amazing. I love that. I don't know if you want to talk about the other organizations you've worked with or any other activism organizations or any other dance companies you've worked with.

Margaret: [01:10:40] Yes.

Gretchen: All that stuff if you want to take the lead.

Margaret: Sure. So I said that I went to Wells for dance, so I started that in 2000. I started dancing in 1998. Oh my god. And went to college for dance. Then after I graduated, um, and moved to Boston, I worked at a dance studio as a volunteer in exchange for free classes. And the dance studio in Boston had all kinds of dance trips coming in and out all the time, and they had a random audition. There was a company that had a random audition one day and we were, you know, in college or trained to go to auditions. Like, that's what you do. And so I auditioned for this troupe without any knowledge of who they were, what they did. And I got into the dance company, and I was rather surprised because I had never done burlesque before at all. I was a trained, like, I did ballet, I did jazz, I did modern, so as a trained dancer and many dance forms. But I didn't really know what burlesque was. I really had no idea unless I just googled it. But the way I first started learning to dance is I would just watch it on television and just copy it. That's just the way I learned to dance. And so. I joined this dance company in 2008, I think ish. I don't know. Later to realize that, like when I moved back to Maine in 2011, there were like three or four people that were doing burlesque. And that's it. So, like in Boston, there were like, I would think hundreds. Right. Or Massachusetts. But in Portland, I think, to be honest, there probably were like eight. Like it was a very small amount. So I started teaching dance here. I started teaching dance at, um, a company on Forest Ave called Red Hot Lady Like. So they're over there. I used to teach dance. I teach vintage burlesque there. My friend Teal still teaches there. She's ten years younger than me. But we have, like, the same birthday and we still talk. And then I started my own dance troupe called Stripper Act Burlesque in 2012. Because I'm a rebel and I like to do whatever I want to do, and I'm kind of a bitch so, you know, I just started this thing and then I started producing. So not only was I teaching dance classes at dance studios and like teaching people, but then I started thinking like, we could actually perform around the state. So the one of the best performances we ever did was in 2013, just before I was pregnant. 2012. At the East Port Pirate Festival, where we all dressed up as pirates. And we did Pirate Burlesque, which was amazing and so much fun. And so I... I had a community of artists with me all the time. And it was a way for, like, because I stuck out like a sore thumb. I was like, we all just like that's the whole point of art is like, to be unique and creative and unique. What time is it? And so. It was amazing. Then I got pregnant and I felt fat. And so I stopped for a while. But I've got back into it and just started to realize that now I'm what you call thick. I guess someone called me thick and I was like, "I'm thick?" because I'm thick. I might be thick. Looking good. Good. What was the question? You reeled me in.

Shelice: We were talking about you being a burlesque dancer.

Margaret: [01:14:51] Oh, now just perform solo because it's easier and I don't have to coordinate schedules. I just started taking classes at Hustle and Flow for the first time. I haven't quite figured out if that's a good spot for me, but I'm performing on December 9th. And I'm excited about it and I feel like it still keeps me young and creative. And like, I was even dancing in the kitchen, like, with my daughter today. Just like if you're in the kitchen and it's like, 1950s, like vintage burlesque music and she loves it. So she's just like Margaret... She doesn't call me Margaret, she just calls me mommy, just, you know, do that thing that you do and put on the music. And she just. She loves it. So.

Gretchen: That's amazing.

Margaret: My legs hurt, though. From the class yesterday.

Shelice: [01:15:45] Um. So,.

Margaret: [01:15:48] All right, what.

Shelice: [01:15:49] Would you like to tell us a little bit of... well, you already talked about
Portland Outright. Equality Maine hasn't come up yet.

Margaret: [01:15:58] Okay Sure, I'll talk about that. So my involvement with Equality Maine stems from when Chris O'Connor and I used to work together here at USM. So he used to be like the director of special activities or student activities here on the Portland campus. And he volunteered to be the chair of Pride Portland one year. And they used to have meetings over in Abramson or the one that's next to it. Osher. Osher Hall. And one year they said, "We need performers for the Pride Parade as the Pride Festival. Do you know anyone?" And I was like, "I have a burlesque troupe. Like, I started my own burlesque troupe". So we performed for Pride Portland that one year. It was one, yes, one year. And that was a lot of fun. And then Pulse, the shooting at Pulse happened, which was really scary. And not a lot of people went out, a couple that year, and then COVID and no one went out and then Equality Maine lost Chris. Chris left. And I think that was hard because he planned their Gay-la. He called it their "Gay-la". And it's just like, this beautiful, fun party, but super expensive and like, nobody could go. But, you know, it was very expensive to attend. Like, I couldn't even afford tickets at the time. And, uh, but it was so much fun because it was like... so I went to gay prom back in 1999 that Outright had and it reminded me of those days of, like, going to a gay prom. And, like, it was so much fun. And I just love dressing up and being fancy and... If you haven't noticed, that's my theme here. And. It was like, so fun. And so eventually when he left and then Matt Moonen left, he was the executive director of Equality Maine, Equality Maine shifted. And then he started working at the Equality Center. And that was like a year in the making because they bought that building. That building was owned by, like, a random bank or bullshit. And then they bought that building and fixed it up and I knew that they were, like, going to start... I don't want to call it consolidating because that sounds bad, but it was like a co-op space. I guess is how I could explain it. And I started to realize it, Chris, I think and maybe Chris and Gia maybe I don't know, started to realize that they need to expand and be more inclusive of different groups. So, like, Maine Transnet now is part of Equality Center because sometimes Equality Maine focused only on the gay and lesbian population and not the trans community. And then also Equality Maine never and still doesn't focus on people of color. There's no organization in Maine that focuses on queer people of color. Maybe that's going to be me. Whenever I get a grant from Bill Gates for a foundation. So. Yeah. But I mean, I love... I actually almost went to the Equality Center today and I was like, "I'm supposed to be working. Am I really?" Race is my work, but... I love what is coming because I feel like they, Chris, and others in the Equality Center are starting to slowly shift and becoming more inclusive. And I can, I can sense it. I can hear it. I can feel it. Even with the fact that, like cross-cultural consulting is in that building, which they do DEI consulting, which is what I do and for the first time gay people and people of color in the same space, which is, like, revolutionary in Maine. It's like, woo hoo! We finally reached 2010 in California and what they've been doing for like ten years. We're like ten years behind. [01:20:01][0.4]

Gretchen: [01:20:03] And you're currently employed with Maine Department of Education.

What are, like, the, if you don't mind sharing, like, the kind of like the biggest challenges facing education right now in Maine.

Margaret: [01:20:18] In my opinion the, well, the shootings in the schools. That's really scary. I mean, the shootings anywhere, it doesn't matter. Shootings anywhere. Gun laws. That's huge. Like, it needs to be, it needs to stop because, like, seriously, we'll be talking about special education and we'll be talking about improving technology and we'll be talking about helping with the teacher shortages, which are huge. And then there's a mass shooting and it shuts everything down. Right. And it's like we just went from, like, trying to go really high to *boom*, and it seems like it doesn't stop. So it's like, I'm gonna get emotional. Hold on. It's just really. Yeah, that's I think I mean, I love the work that I do, obviously. Like, it's important, but like, safety is, like, at the bottom of the list if you don't have basic safety, like you can't do anything. So. You know, the fact that, like, teachers. I have to, like, stand in front of students so that students don't get killed. Like, that's really sad. And like the shooting in Texas and then the shooting at Sandy Hook, it's just like that really hits home. I think there was a day... I think it was the day after the Texas shooting that I was supposed to, like, present at a meeting and the commissioner was like, "You're taking the day off today". And I was like, "No, I can do it. I'm fine". She's like, "I don't care". Like she said, "No, we're not working. Like, you're not working today". And that was really good for me because I do cry a lot in my work, uh, because of all the injustice that I, that I hear about. A lot of racism in main schools like. A lot. A lot. A lot of bullying in Maine schools that's not really talked about that hurts me because if that's happening to kids, I get really sad. I have a first grader. You know what I mean, like, I have a first grader. Like, she's six. So, you know, she's been bullied at school because she's black, like, already. And, um. It's hard. It's hard. I. I was in a meeting this morning with someone and we were talking about just, like, how hard it is to, like, deal with this system of injustice sometimes, but also have to work every day to try to improve it. It's like, you know how hard it is. It's like chipping away at the iceberg with, like, a spoon, you know, it's just like, why am I? It's like insanity. But at the same time, it's like, if I didn't, then it wouldn't get chipped away at all. So. Yeah. It's hard. It's hard work. [01:23:22][77.0]

Gretchen: [01:23:23] Thank you for sharing that. It's not easy to talk about.

Margaret: [01:23:25] It sucks.

Gretchen: [01:23:26] We do appreciate it. It does suck.

Shelice: [01:23:31] So let's shift for a little bit. Um, on your background sheet, you mentioned a number of businesses including Styxx Nightclub.

Margaret: [01:23:41] Oh, wait. What? What is it?

Shelice: Styxx Nightclub.

Margaret: [01:23:46] Oh, yeah.

Gretchen: [01:23:46] They Rohna beauty, then dance complex.

Margaret: [01:23:49] What did I say? What was it?

Shelice: Oh, on the...

Margaret: I can't remember.

Shelice: [01:23:55] The businesses you wanted to talk about.

Margaret: [01:23:57] Oh, the businesses I wanted to talk about. Yeah, I don't know why I was, like, trying to fill that out. I mean, how do I start? So now that I have, I make more money, I pay attention now to my appearance but before I ever did, I feel like the fact that I work at the state level, there's an expectation of like the way you have to look and this could be in my head. This could completely be in my head. But when I'm looking as an outsider from higher education, right. I mean I worked at USM and SMCC. Right? Like I only worked at colleges and then I work up in the statehouse where the... literally the governor's, like office, I could, like, look right outside my window. It just gives a different feel. And so I, for some reason, and I don't even fucking know why, I started getting my hair done. They also passed the Crown Act, which is like you can't discriminate based on hairstyles in employment. It doesn't say in schools, but it's at employment in Maine, which is... we don't have to talk about that. So I do go to a hair salon on a regular basis, like the first time in my entire life and when I got my braids. All of a sudden, people, like daily, are like, "I love your hair. I love your hair. Can I touch your hair? What's your look like?" And I'm like, "Holy fuck". I did have a woman at work touch my hair and I was just jarred back. I was like, "Oh", it's a little bit like when you're pregnant and everybody wants to touch your belly. And so, but this hair is fake, right? So. My hair is like black. So I have to take this hair out and, like, wash my hair and let my hair, like, be out. And when that happens, I can not go to a meeting because people will be like...

Shelice: "Did you cut your hair?"

Margaret: "Did you cut your hair?" And I'm like this... and so I actually started telling my coworkers, I'm taking my hair out tomorrow. Just, you know, it might look different and... but I do go there a lot. So, Rona, for me, is a little bit like therapy. She's Nigerian. She's, like, super direct. She'll tell me, she'll call me out, which is really good, cause sometimes, like, my ego gets really high, and I guess she's sort of like. So I love, I love her. She's married and she's heterosexual, of which my wife asked a couple of times. And I get my nails done a lot. I really think I have a slight OCD and so that's an issue for me. But you don't need to put that in the transcript. But like businesses, I don't know. I don't really like to shop. And if I do, it's probably, like, compulsive. It's not, like, I don't like buying things for people unless it's like Halloween stuff which I really love, or rocks. I love my rocks, but I don't know. I don't know why I wrote that down.

Shelice: Okay.

Margaret: Styx was instrumental, though. It was like the only queer bar for the longest time. And then. Then when they closed, like, there were tears out of people's eyes. I just remember being like, "What do you mean Styxx is closing?" And that was hard. I have been to Blackstones, but there's mostly old men that go there, and when I walk in there, I feel really, really odd. There used to be a lesbian bar in Portland called, called lesbian, called Sisters, but I'm pretty sure it closed before I was like 22. Like, I don't think it was even, like, when I moved

back it had been gone. So I would love to see more queer spaces like that. You can go out and have a good time and dance, but it doesn't seem like that's the case. Any more.

Gretchen: [01:27:52] Well, we are kind of nearing the end of our time. But we do want to ask you, is there anything we didn't ask that you would like to talk about? So something you want to leave the world with, leave new generations with, leave anything that you wanna talk about.

Shelice: [01:28:08] Any final thoughts?

Margaret: [01:28:10] Oh, Jesus. [

Shelice: [01:28:12] If we missed Anything?

Gretchen: [01:28:13] A note to your daughter, anything like that.

Margaret: [01:28:15] Oh, that's so sweet. Um. I do want to know... I do want to say one thing. So in 2020. 2021. No. Yeah. October of 2021, I was called out on social media for being transphobic by an individual that I will not name. And it was really, really hard because I thought that we were friends. She was invited to my house. She met my daughter, and my wife and my kids. And, like, I don't make friends very easily, so. To invite someone to my home means like they're important to me. And somehow the conversation got twisted around where she said I was homophobic. And I lost a few friends. One friend in particular that I can think of that I lost based on that conversation and it was really hard, really hard for me, because I do, I do recognize that like trans women of color, are, like, the most marginalized and are experiencing a lot of violence and hate crimes and for her, for her to say that to me... hurt. Um. And I, at first I, like, tried to prove like, "No, I love trans people". Right. Like. Girl, I was like, "Are you trans? I'll be your friend". Right. And I was like, this is ridiculous. Right. Um. So I don't know why I mentioned that, but I just. Yeah. It happened about a year ago. And Trans Day of Remembrance just came up on November 20th. And there's still a lot of issues with transgender youth. Yeah. Yeah. In terms of my daughter, I mean, I don't know. I kind of hope she's gay. Because I'm a hardcore feminist. Like, "Please be a lesbian". But I can't put the gay agenda on her, so she should choose to love whoever she wants. I used to be staring at two men like this. I'll kill you. I'll cut your throat.

Gretchen: [01:30:47] Well, thank you for sharing.

Margaret: [01:30:49] I love all people.

Gretchen: [01:30:54] We can't thank you enough for taking the time to meet with us. If you want to schedule a follow up, if there's anything else that you're like, "I wish I said that", feel free to reach out to us, feel free to reach out to Wendy Chapkis. This is an ongoing interview. So we can always do a follow up interview with you.

Margaret: [01:31:10] Okay.

Shelice: [01:31:12] Thank you so much for being with us and for being so fun. Thank you.

Margaret: [01:31:19] Are you going to walk me to my car? Because it's black outside.

Shelice: [01:31:23] Yes

Margaret: Black attack.

End Interview

