

Transcript – Rowan Potter, class of 2019

Narrator: Rowan Potter

Interviewer: Mary Murphy, Nancy L. Buc '65 Pembroke Center Archivist and Amanda Knox, Pembroke Center Assistant Archivist

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Mary Murphy: Good morning to our listeners. My name is Mary Murphy, and I am the Nancy L. Buc Pembroke Center Archivist. I am joined today by Amanda M. Knox, who is assisting in the interview today with a soon-to-be Brown University Alum, Rowan Potter. We are in Alumnae Hall, Room 205. It is April 23, 2019.

So, I would like to begin by asking Rowan to say hello and step back and introduce yourself to us and our listeners who are coming in from all over the world. If you can share with us a little bit about your background. We like to run these things chronologically. If you're comfortable sharing a little bit about your upbringing, where you are from, the beginnings before your [1:00] relationship with Brown University began.

Rowan Potter: Hello there. I am Rowan Potter. I use they/them pronouns. Before I came to Brown, I am originally from New Jersey—Richmond, New Jersey. I lived there my whole life until coming to Brown. Really, my experience in high school was very much shaped by my mother. Yeah, my mother really taught me a lot about leadership is a lot of where I found myself coming to Brown from. My mom was my brother's Boy Scout leader, and then when I reached kindergarten, I joined the Girl Scouts, and I had a different Girl Scout leader who is fine, but when I got to first grade, I went to my mom and I said, "Mom, you are my brother's Boy Scout leader, so that means that you have to be my Girl Scout leader." I kind-of strong-armed her into that, but then I was in the Girl Scouts for my whole all twelve years of primary school, and really worked with my mom in that [2:00] I think I learned a lot about leadership and sort-of just exploring myself and I found that a really opening experience. My mom said one year when I was at Girl Scout camp over the summer, sleep-away camp, she said that I learned to "fly my freak flag high," and I think that really sort of just empowered me to embrace all the weird things about my life in a way that got me to where I am today.

Yeah, and through high school, I sort-of, I didn't have very many close friends, but I had a lot of weird friends, so that was sort of an ongoing theme where I just sort-of explored a lot of different directions and just sort-of moving through life.

MM: What type of schooling did you attend? Were you in a public school system, a private school system? Tell us a little bit about your educational upbringing.

RP: Yeah, so I was in a public school system, but in New Jersey in a fairly affluent area, and so it was fueled by property taxes. It was, very much considered itself like a private school because [3:00] of that, which was like an interesting social and economic dynamic. But, yeah. That's –

MM: Were your parents' college educated? We like to situate our interviews around generational education –

RP: Yeah, for sure.

MM: So if you could share with us about that, and a little bit about what they did if you care. You don't have to share, but if you can...

RP: Yeah. Both my parents were college educated. They both worked in tech. My mom worked for IBM, and then when she sort of stopped working in order to have my brother and me, she likes to say she trained her replacement because my brother later grew up and worked for IBM. Everyone else in my family is in the tech world. My mom went to Bryn Mawr College.

MM: Oh OK. That's a beautiful campus.

RP: Yeah, definitely. I have fond memories of going to reunions there, and I think that sort-of ethos of a women's' college was definitely part of how she was raising me in terms of leadership, and connecting to Girl Scouts and all that stuff. [4:00]

MM: Did you ever make a pilgrimage to Savannah with the Girl Scouts?

RP: We didn't. We considered it. We sort-of planned it out, but then a couple things fell through, so we never made the trip, but yeah, we were definitely in the Girl Scout zone.

MM: That's interesting. So, OK. So you – so your mother attended Bryn Mawr, which was fascinating, so then as you come of age in high school, situate us into your life at the time when you begin to think about colleges, and whether or not being educated through a women's college was ever on your mind.

RP: Being educated at a women's college wasn't really on my mind. I had some interesting conversations with my mom about it. Because by sophomore year of high school, I was very much identifying as a lesbian, and I was interested in going into sociology and my mom's thought about going to a women's college was that if I did that, I would never ever talk to men. She thought that going into sociology, [5:00] I would have to deal with men at some point. So that was kind of her perspective. And I thought that was an interesting approach, but probably not entirely wrong. I still don't talk to men very much here, so I'm not sure if that worked out for her. I think I had an interesting approach to college. I wasn't really sure what I wanted out of it—part of me was like, “What if I'd go to like a really conservative school, and I'm like the worrier there?” I definitely had that kind-of mindset until I started visiting those schools, and I was like, “Hmmm. What if I didn't do that?” I think Brown, I was interested in the social aspect, and the sort-of social justice atmosphere. Now that I'm at Brown, sort-of looking back on that, I think that was definitely a good choice because I had so much more growing to do, and so the idea of being a worrier at a place I don't think I would have been ready to do that well, and so I'm glad that I didn't let that sort-of hubristic approach take me [6:00] elsewhere.

MM: Can you, if you're comfortable, speaking to us, I'm 40 years old—I'm generation X—and so the idea of being out in high school is to me still something that seems like incredibly brave and like on the edge you know of what would have been possible when I was coming up through high school, so can you share for the people fifty years from now what that was like? Did you come out in high school? Were you always out—We like ask interviewees who are comfortable sharing that about that element in their life. What was that story like for you? Again, only share what you're comfortable sharing.

RP: Yeah. I guess I didn't really come out in high school until probably junior year, when I had a girlfriend, and so that's kind-of the way that I went about it was just talking about my girlfriend was a way to come out—which was interesting because my girlfriend didn't go to the same school as me [7:00] and so it was kind-of how do I bring this up? I never really like found a good way of coming out. My high school also was very much considered itself accepting or tolerant, but there weren't many people who were out. There was like the one guy who was in the theater department who everyone knows because he's flamboyant and then they're like, “Oh, so we're a really accepting school because he's here,” which is not entirely true, but mostly what I found in coming out was just sort-of no one really knew how to respond, and then just kind-of moved on. At one point, I had stolen a bracelet from my girlfriend and was wearing it, and I don't really wear much jewelry, and

so one of my friends was like, “Where'd you get that bracelet,” and I was like, “Oh, I stole it from my girlfriend” just as a casual way of coming out, and there was like double take like “What?” I was like, “I stole it from my girlfriend,” and there wasn't really any follow-up of like what that meant for me. I didn't really feel like I engaged very many people about it. It was just kind-of a thing that then like I guess people [8:00] knew. It was an interesting... I think I had the most conversations about it at my graduation from high school. We had like one of those parties where everyone talks about I don't know what we talked about, but sort-of on the eve of graduating high school sort of reflecting, and a lot of people were kind-of like, “I always thought it was weird that you weren't more open about it. We didn't care like whatever.” I was like, “Why didn't you show that in some way or like showing support?” So I think it was very much kind-of like a weird awkward quiet zone about it, but I didn't really experience much active homophobia and difficulties. I was more just like a quiet like I guess that's a thing.

MM: So was there an alliance at all?

RP: There was. Yeah, and my friend and I ran it for two or three years. It was a fairly just like small group. We would hang out and sort-of have that lunch time to ourselves. It didn't really branch out much more than that, though.

MM: Was there teacher involvement, or student – guidance counselor involvement at all?

RP: Yeah. We had a teacher adviser. [9:00] She was cool. She was one of the health teachers, and our sex-ed curriculum was pretty good and did talk about LGBT identities in it, which is not true of many public schools I know, and so I think that was sort-of the general baseline was “Oh, we talk about that. That's accepted. That's fine,” and not really going for anything more than that in high school.

MM: So, you turn your attention to Brown University as a potential option, right? What was the, do you have memories about the admissions process or visiting campus before you made that decision? Did you visit campus, and what was that process like for you? Brown is not an easy school to get into, so just kind-of that experience for you.

RP: Yeah, I guess I was in an interesting place. I've always I've always been very good at academics, and never really had to study about it, which left me a really interesting sort-of social position because I was at this public high school that considered itself [10:00] private. Everyone

felt very competitive, and so as I was applying to Brown and other places, and getting into them, everyone around was kind-of like, “Oh my god,” and I was like, “OK” because it was just the way that I was moving through things. I did visit campus. I visited three different schools that I’d gotten into and was sort-of deciding between them and they were all...

MM: Which were the other schools?

RP: Can I say that?

MM: Oh Yes, oh yes, oh yes.

RP: I was choosing between Brown, U-Chicago, and Stanford. I think all in one week, I flew just like from here to U-Chicago to Stanford.

MM: Across the country.

RP: Yeah, which was really fun to do just sort-of like, senior year of high school, getting a little taste of being out on my own flying around traveling. Yeah, and I think that’s where I sort-of realized the social component was going to be important to me—sort of talking to people on Brown’s campus and hearing about sort-of the context of activism [11:00] here. Yeah, and I actually made the decision to commit to Brown while I was at Stanford’s accepted student’s weekend.

MM: Oh God!

RP: Which really felt like a power move. I just found that the attitude towards feminism even and other kinds of activism at Stanford was not what I was looking for to sort-of support me and help me grow in that and challenge me in that. I felt more like I would be challenging things there. It was really fun to go to like the Stanford Admitted Students Dinner, and people were like, “So, have you committed yet?” and I was like, “Yeah, but not to here. To Brown.”

MM: So now tell us. So you make the decision. . . Do you remember when you got the acceptance letter from Brown?

RP: On my birthday. That’s when all of the Ivy letters came out that year.

MM: OK. Fun.

RP: Yeah.

MM: So you decide to come to Brown.

RP: Yes.

MM: Can you please tell us—I often ask our interviewees to tell us their first memory [12:00] or their earliest memory that you can that you can recall of being on campus and coming to Brown.

RP: Yeah. I guess I did TWTP—the Third World Transition Program, and so those were my earliest memories. Really something I find really amusing about that was so there's three days, and of those three days, I spent two of them pulling all-nighters just like talking to people. I have one friend that both of those nights, we just like were talking and didn't want to go to bed and just kept talking, and then the sun came up. It was kind-of like, "That's a concept." And I think that really, just like that ability to engage with someone and talk on a way more personal level than like anything that I had experienced in high school. While in this context of the TWTP program, and talking about social justice and different dynamics of power and the world around us, it was just like a really it felt like a really big shift from the way I'd been able to engage with the world and with people in high school, and I think that definitely set the tone for my experience at Brown of like, [13:00] "We can engage with people in a real way here now." Yeah, so that was my first experience.

MM: We've had a lot of interviewees talk very highly about the Third World Transition Program. Just more broadly, what was your experience participating in that program? Did you, can you tell us for the listeners your experience of doing that program?

RP: Yeah.

MM: What is its purpose if you could share for our listeners?

RP: For sure. Its purpose is sort-of to... I think it has a couple purposes. It is one of the pre-orientation programs so it's sort-of getting you into the kind of way we talk about things at Brown,

and it's specifically around different social justice topics—learning about oppression so it structures – there are a number of workshops. There'll be like a workshop on racism, a workshop on homophobia, and sort-of each of those topics to give you some historical context, and thoughts about how those things operate in the world, and how they might be studied in college as one part [14:00] of it, and sort-of giving you that introduction so that as you're coming into this new place, you have those thoughts of power and how you might be interacting with people sort-of on your mind, as well as giving you some tools to work with them and talk with them throughout your life.

Amanda Knox: Can I ask really quick—are you asked to join that program, or are you given different kind-of orientation opportunities, and you can choose to join things or not?

RP: I think it's technically an application. There's like three different pre-orientation programs from what I remember, and TWTP is one of them. It is again the more social justice focused one—some of the others are more academic focused, or like brushing up on your paper-writing skills and that kind of a different tool set to get you in. One other interesting thing about TWTP that I didn't actually realize until later after I'd gone through it was that It had only recently been opened to white students attending. . .

AK: That's why I asked because we have a history of many students [15:00] speaking so highly of this program, but as in a moment, it was kind-of geared. . . it used this term Third World to identify people of color who just came from different backgrounds.

RP: Yeah. That was something that I didn't know at all when I was applying to it. I just saw the sort-of like social justice thing, I'm a lesbian. Yeah. And I think, since I became an RPL, Residential Peer Leader, after attending TWTP, I saw a little bit more of the back side. They did some interesting things of like in some workshops, separating white students—having one workshop for white allies, and another for people of color, and I think that was an interesting way of sort-of tackling that issue. Yeah, and thinking about what does it mean to enter this space that is traditionally for people of color and sort-of with that mindset as a white person. I think that was not something I had the tools to do as an incoming freshman, and so it is an interesting sort-of [16:00] touch point for my experience to start that way, and then realize looking back like “Oh, I was in an interesting position in that space that I didn't realize but I'm sure that people around me did.” and sort-of moving through that.

MM: And now that that program has also been renamed is that Third World Transition Program is

now?

RP: I don't think it has. The Third World Center was originally what the Brown Center For Students Of Color was called, and that was renamed also recently to [identify TWTP?], but I think that the program is still called that.

MM: So you have joined the campus. So tell us--I always think that it's helpful to ask people for snapshot memories right because sometimes there are these Polaroids of memories stand out—so I'd like you to—I'm just checking our time—I want to hear snapshots, highs and lows. I often ask highs and lows. So, and maybe thinking as you join the campus [17:00] and maybe anytime along the route, but as we're running kind-of chronologically, tell us some highs and lows.

RP: Sure. Probably a mixed time during orientation—so that's after TWTP now everyone's on campus, I was sort-of hanging out with different friend groups—mostly from TWTP, but also sort-of now there's new people here, and one of those groups of friends winds up going to a party at one of the sports houses I don't really know, and I am not someone who goes to parties—I don't enjoy them. I don't drink. It's not really my scene at all, but you know, experiences, and so we went to this party that was—there were probably about six of us who were just sort-of running around campus and we went to this party. We went through the drive way and to the back of something it was completely packed with people and liquids, and about 30 seconds [18:00] into that adventure, I turned to the person next to me who was also kind-of in this group and was also clearly not really feeling it and we were just like, “Maybe not” and so we just completely booked it and left. That was the last college party that I went to. We wound up going to the sort-of cheesy orientation events that are like little carnival games and stuff that like other people aren't really into, but we had a great time. We were just like, “This is silly. Let's be silly.” I think that was sort-of I had a lot of fun in that arena just sort-of talking to new people and hanging out. I think a lot of those people I don't really talk to anymore and am not connected to as freshman year friendships move on but yeah, It was definitely it felt like a really free time on campus sort-of to be running around.

MM: Do you feel that Brown, the culture, that there's room for that—for different types of social lives?

RP: Yeah, I think so. It's always interesting to be talking about social scenes because I think a lot of people do talk about the party scene, and that's obviously [19:00] like a big part of a lot of people's social experiences, but I've never really been part of that. I've just sort-of had other friends. Yeah, I

think there is room for it. They feel pretty separate. I feel like I don't really have a lot of friends who do the party thing. I was also so, my Freshman year, I was on a substance free housing floor, so I think that's part of where I found a lot of that sort-of alternate social experience, and then after that, no longer living in a quiet house substance-free floor, I sort-of found those people naturally and would hang out with them in other contexts.

MM: OK. Other snapshots.

RP: A low snapshot was definitely having a panic attack on the Main Green at about three in the morning. So I'd mentioned that I was always very like effortlessly good at school and at Brown I didn't find that change in terms of like rigor of material, but suddenly, as a lot of people find, I no longer had a structure [20:00] for doing that work, and so I was having a rough time just like getting work done and was sort-of faced with the "I don't think I can complete this course so like now what?" moment.

MM: Was it a specific course you were struggling with, or across the board?

RP: It was pretty much across the board. I think it was mostly like, "I have a paper due, and it's overdue now, and it needs to be done in order to finish this course, but I don't know if the professor will let me do it" kind of that thing of like, "I know that I could do this, but I don't know if I will be allowed to and able to," which is how most my Brown career has gone of like "if a professor lets me do this, it will be fine," and I've been lucky to have professors who do let me do that. So I was on the Main Green and, something else that I found Freshman year was there wasn't really much alone space on campus because I was in a double—I had a roommate and I love her very much, but that meant that, you know, sitting in your room crying is a little bit awkward when there's also someone else in the room, [21:00] and so I took to just sort-of wondering the Main Green at all hours of the night, which has actually been a really positive experience for me when I'm not having panic attacks because it's just sort-of like I'm free, I'm out in the world, it's night time, it's kind-of cool, it's sort-of a contained, but also free space, but this is also interesting there was like an art exhibit, in the, on the quiet Green that was like a tangled yarn in like a loop, and I was like, "That's just a weird art exhibit but it also meant that I could go in there and be like completely alone, so that's where I had my first panic attack, and then that sort-of jump started me to actually like start thinking about mental health and things, and so I made my first CAPS appointment. Actually I was really entertained by the way that went because I had my panic attack, and then I was like "Hmmm. I need to do something about this now," and so I like called the 24/7 health advice, and just sort-of

like told [22:00] the person I was like, “Oh I had a panic attack. I might have a concussion. What should I do now,” and she was kind-of like. . .

MM: Slow down for a little bit and explain to us what – so you find yourself kind of you're on the Green like walking, it's night, and then are you thinking like classic symptoms like “I cannot breathe,” “I'm going to fold down,” or “I'm going to pass out,” or what you know?

RP: I went into that weird yarn art exhibit thing and I sat down against a tree and then was just sort-of like thinking and getting caught in that cycle of “I don't know if I'll pass this class,” but like and then all the things that come along with that.

MM: Like compulsive thinking?

RP: A little bit, yeah, and more just like realizing the implications of every thought and those spiraling in different directions, and then just sort-of like physically like sort-of like rocking trying to like parse those feelings I think and so and since I was sitting against a tree, that wound up with my head hitting the tree as I was experiencing that. So that's where the “this might be concussion” [23:00] kind of thing happened, and once I'd come out of that panic attack, it was very, very calming because I was like, “Oh, this a very concrete thing, like I hit my head against something, and I have to see if that's a concussion, and I am no longer responsible for anything else like the paper does not matter right now because all I have to do is figure out what to do about this thing that just happened, and so having that very concrete like this is a clear thing that I can act on instead of like “do I graduate from Brown,” which is not something you can act on as a freshman. Yeah, so doing that, I just found myself reaching out to the health line and then making an appointment with CAPS, and sort of...

MM: How did you know how to find the health line? We had an interview with Yemma Yang the other day, and she said two things. She said that—I don't want to quote her—but on the back side of an event like a panic attack, there is clarity right?

RP: Right.

MM: There's like a sudden calm. [24:00] But I want to know about how you got that information because a lot of our interviewees have talked about the fact that access to mental health resources on campus is not necessarily right in front of you, or easy to connect with. So what was, how did

you even know where the phone number was?

RP: Yeah that's interesting. I feel like—I really like systems, and part of that is later in my Brown career, I realized that I'm autistic and so that's like I just like knowing how systems work. Even like during before orientation there is an online portal that like tells you lots of information you supposed to like go through and there's like a quiz that you have to like say that you read it but most people don't read like all the documents basically terms of service, but I found it really interesting and so I did read through all of it—things like the rules for like what kind of posters you can put up and stuff like that I was like there's no reason I need to know this as a freshman. So I was sort-of reading those for fun I think that's probably part of where it came from. We definitely like got that information in unit meetings [25:00] as freshman, and I think it's just like that's the kind of thing that does stick in my head because I'm like, “Oh, that's a good thing for Brown to offer. I'm glad they do that,” not realizing that I would need it, and take advantage of it. What I found later, I became an RPL, a Residential Peer Leader, which is Brown's version of an RA basically who works with first-years, and in that role, I was responsible for giving resources, and that's a lot of why I know resources know was because I was giving them to other people. I think probably freshman year I was already considering that kind of role. I hadn't had the number access to it memorized or anything like that for myself I was more thinking like, “Oh, like this is a resource that other people might need,” and then when I also needed it, I was like “Oh,”

MM: Here it is.

RP: Yeah.

MM: So you make an appointment.

RP: Yeah. I don't fully remember the order of things, but at some point I had also been talking to a friend who I met through the Queer Alliance who recommended [26:00] me to one counselor in particular Laura Silvick as the person to see for anything for any queer people like if you're going to CAPS like only see Laura Silvick was the advice at that point. There are more. . . I've found that CAPS has improved their . . .two people I would recommend people to at CAPS now. . .

MM: Oh Good.

RP: Yeah, so I think at that point, I think I must have already gotten that recommendation when I

had this experience where I was like, “Oh. I'm going to CAPS. I should go the lesbian, and so that. . . Yeah. That was a very helpful sort-of grounding experience for me I think even though panic attacks on the Main Green aren't the most fun thing, but it was sort-of the “Oh, I need to actually pay attention to my mental health, and how I'm moving through the world and sort-of make that be an intentional part of my experience instead of just like powering through.”

MM: So [27:00] you become involved with health services, mental health services, on campus, and then how does that change your experience of being on campus and moving through your studies? You are an activist on campus around a number of different issues, so kind of can you share with us about maybe how that event effected other areas of your life or like how you engaged with the campus and with your studies?

RP: Yeah. So, as I mentioned, in high school, I never really had close friends or many friends, just weird friends. In college, I found myself with a few close friends who I could talk to about this kind of mental health thing. So I was having this experience with the panic attack and going to CAPS for the first time and two of my other good friends were also sort-of dealing with “OK, now I'm a first year in college and like I have control over these things with my mental health,” and sort-of thinking about it, and so I had [28:00] a strong friendship group there that was talking about mental health, and I think that also helped integrate you know I wasn't just going to CAPS and doing things, it was also that my friends were talking about this, and we were thinking about how this relates to Brown, and I think that—not with the same friends—but that trend has continued of finding other people who are also having this experience with mental health and really being real about the fact of like, “Maybe I can't turn in this paper because I need to have a panic attack” or “Maybe I can't turn in this paper because I need to hang out with my friends and have like a good positive healthy experience” and sort of figuring out how to prioritize those things for ourselves even if it meant neglecting some kind of course work because living is more important—you know, having a life. There's more to life than school. Yeah, I think that in terms of academics, what I wound up doing was taking a lot of incompletes. I think I did that even my first semester with the main course that I was overdue on papers. I took an incomplete, [29:00] which at Brown means you just have more time to finish. You can turn in the final paper whatever overdue assignment after the semester ends, and you still get credit for the course if it's before a certain deadline, and that really helped me to spread out sort-of the work load. I took at least one incomplete for like four or five semesters running, and also dropped at least one for four or five semesters running, until finally I sort-of interrupted that and was like, “Why don't I do something proactive instead of reactive?” I wound up registering with SEAS, and getting on a reduced course load I think my third

year, and so that was sort-of also a turning point for me of taking control not only of how I relate to myself and my mental health but to how I make that impact my academics. Yeah, and sort-of. . . I have to remember what I was going with that . . .

MM: Yeah. So if you're willing to share, [30:00] I want to hear more about your relationship with the queer community on campus. Tell us where that started for you, where it took you. So, I'll start there.

RP: OK. Yeah. So, the Queer Alliance has gone through a couple sort-of structural changes in my time at Brown. When I first came to campus, the Queer Alliance was structured into many different subgroups, and so there were sort-of individual basically individual clubs that provided different communities—there was like Quest, the Queer and Questioning subgroup was one I had a lot of fun in. I wasn't really questioning very many things, but other people would come and have questions, and then I could talk to them. That was always fun. My main orientation with the Queer Alliance was that I knew that I didn't want to run it because as I'd mentioned with my mom sort-of teaching me a lot of leadership skills through the Girl Scouts, I wound up running pretty much everything [31:00] I did in high school, and often times, I didn't really like that experience.

MM: Yes.

RP: I felt like I didn't really get to participate in things. And so when I came to Brown, I was like, "I don't want to just run everything. I want to experience things." So, I didn't join any leadership things my first semester. My second semester, some folks on the Queer Alliance board asked me to join because they had an empty position—I think for like VP of programming, or something, and they were like, "You've been coming to things. Will you help us and do this," and I am not very good at saying no to things, and so I was like, "Just as a Vice position. This is fine." And so I did join, and I enjoyed that experience sort-of working with developing programs, meeting lots of people that way. Unfortunately, the next year, most of the leadership of the Queer Alliance was graduating, and now I was the Vice President who was not graduating, and so they [32:00]. . . I sort-of wound up in a position where I was going to be leading everything, but the way it was meant to be structured was there would be two there would be basically four of us—two actual co-chairs, and then two sort-of the assistant co-chairs. Two of them were older than me, and so I was like, "This is still fine. I'm not going to be the main one," but then, for one reason or another, all three of those people dropped out, and it was just me—not only in charge of things, but one of pretty much the only person now running the Queer Alliance as a sophomore.

MM: Oh no.

RP: I was like, “That's a really interesting concept.” I think our secretary was still around and very helpful, but I was also the one running things, so that was kind-of a mad dash of a year. I think that has effected how I've interacted with the Queer Alliance community in terms of holding that and dropping that in a lot of ways. It was definitely a rough [33:00] year, and I wasn't able to run the whole thing on my own. What wound up happening is that part of how we got there was because the Queer Alliance was structured as the subgroups as sort-of individual clubs—each with its own leader—and then the Queer Alliance was an overarching umbrella that sort-of dealt with all of those logistics. At the same time as everyone was dropping out of the Queer Alliance leadership, a lot of the subgroups were finding that their leaders were graduating, and no one was stepping up to take those places either, and so there was just sort-of burnout across the board. In the Queer Alliance, is was what we were experiencing. I was talking to one of my friends at one point who was saying, “I think maybe the Queer Alliance just needs to like crash and burn, and then phoenix rise from the ashes,” which is an interesting concept when you are holding up the Queer Alliance that is going to crash and burn, but that is more or less what happened, and as it sort-of became clear that whatever was happening with the Queer Alliance wasn't going to be sustainable, [34:00] a couple of other folks sort-of stepped in in that spring semester and were like, “How can we actually revitalize this? How can we make this something that will last longer?” In various conversations over the summer, it sort-of was reborn from the ashes. I guess that was a couple, two or three years now. Instead of taking that subgroup approach, it is now more an integrated thing to sort-of utilize that energy in a bit more of a centralized way.

MM: And de-siloing.

RP: Yeah. Exactly, and I think there's pluses and minuses to that—I think a lot of the subgroup idea was to make sure that specific communities within the queer community are represented in various ways, and now it's just sort-of like there is a Queer Alliance, and that sometimes there are individual events. Yeah.

MM: So let's talk about gender identity.

RP: Sure.

MM: Right?

RP: Love that.

MM: So, in high school, [35:00] you identified as a lesbian?

RP: Yes. I still identify as a lesbian.

MM: Tell us more about that.

RP: Sure. So I did actually come to that a lot at Girl Scout camp, which is a very gay place.

MM: With a gay founder.

RP: Juliette Low. Not straight. Yeah. Sorry.

MM: Yeah, we love her. That's the secret history no one's allowed to talk about, but everyone knows, right?

RP: Right. I found a book in the Queer Alliance library. It's called "On My Honor," and it's all about lesbian experiences in girl scouting. I'm thrilled about it. Yeah. But I guess for gender identity, I really just assumed that I was a tomboy or like a masculine lesbian. I guess I started questioning that at TWTP, which is interesting. One of the workshops is about sussexism, [36:00] and sort-of the machismo privilege of cis-gendered people. "cis-gendered" meaning someone who identifies as the same gender they were assigned at birth. I found. . . I think one of the questions in that workshop was sort-of think about the first time you identified with your gender as sort-of a reflect on your privilege, but then as I was thinking about it, I was like "Huh. I can't really think of a time when I identified as a woman"--and not so much in a "that's just always been true way," but like, maybe that's never been true, and I was starting to realize that whenever I thought about, because I did and do identify as a feminist I guess, whenever I thought about the oppression of women, I was always thinking about other people. "Oh that effects other people who like are women and who like get oppressed for this." I still do definitely experience misogyny, but whenever I thought about "Women need better treatment," it was never me, and so that was sort-of an interesting [37:00] . . . And I think that's been true for a lot of my life because I tend to be more other-oriented than self-oriented, and so that was sort-of another prompt to stop and think and reflect on myself. And then, a month or so into college, I was at a student group meeting that was

talking about trans issues, and a lot of people in that room didn't have any exposure and didn't really know what cis-gendered meant and so I was giving an example—I was like, “Oh cis is when you know you identify with the gender you were assigned at birth, and so like when I was born, you know the doctor said 'This is a girl,' and now I'm still like. . .;” and I paused, and I was like, “I don't know if I would say that I was a girl.” In this room where I am explaining to a bunch of cis people like what cis-gendered means, I was like, “I might not be the best example of this.” I had that sort-of realization out loud, and no one in that room knew how to respond, which was also my experience when I was coming out as a lesbian in high school, and so I was kind-of just like, “That's fine. We'll just run with that,” and my gender journey through that [38:00] has actually been pretty similar. So, in that student group, Feminists at Brown, there weren't, there still aren't, there are a couple more non-binary people involved in it now, but I found as I was questioning things that I was able to sort-of control my narrative in that space because no one knew anything about trans things really, and so when I changed my name to Rowan, I went to that space. So we do like a check-in that's catchings and grievances like good and bad things, and I knew that I wanted to introduce myself as Rowan now, but I wasn't really sure like I knew that no one else would know how to react if I didn't give them something, and so the way that I said that was like, “Hi.” Like “My catching is that I changed my name to Rowan.” and like, “My name is Rowan! Yay!” and like because I framed it that way, everyone in the room like paused for a second, and was like, “Oh, Yay!” “So that's good thing. That's how we respond to that,” and so it was a really cool way to sort-of be able to control my narrative of discovering those gender things by explaining it—which I know is not the experience that all [39:00] . . . I've had worse experiences with that in other places, but I've found that being able to like sort-of capture that positive energy even though it was very confused was like a really interesting way to sort-of develop my own control over my identity.

MM: Yeah, that's really smart. Good call.

RP: It worked out well for me.

MM: Have you experienced difficulties on campus—from people, or shitty situations that are I mean that, not you don't need to go into it, but where you're like “That is not OK.”

RP: Yeah. I feel like mainly. . . So I do major in gender and sexuality studies, and I pretty intentionally choose courses that have professors who are cool about things—both for my studies, and just for me personally—because I don't have to take classes with professors who don't understand gender, so why would I? So I found that a lot of the difficulties I face are more like . . . I

don't have, I haven't had professors who like refuse to [40:00] call me my name and things like that, but I do find slips happen in ways that reveal like, "Oh, you are actually still thinking of me as a girl." And I had a couple of experiences where I was like, meeting with a professor one-on-one who I really enjoyed the class and I was like really having a good time, and then they would say something that was just clearly like "When you emailed me, I was like "Oh, I hope she's okay,"" and it's like that's not me, and then it was just sort-of like a "Oh" pausing "I thought that everything was fine and that everyone was on board with how I'm moving through the world as a non-binary person, which was clear to me, but actually, that's not the case for the people around me necessarily, and sort-of having to pause and separate "OK." like "People are trying like the base level of respect--'Okay, I should use this name'--but really not getting to the underlying understanding of "Oh, like you use they them because of how you move through the world That's not just a surface-level thing. [41:00] That's part of who you are and how you, yeah, how you move through the world."

MM: Thank you for sharing that. OK, so we're running up on time a little bit, but I want to make sure because I know that you have been active across campus in a number of different areas, we want to make sure that in this interview, you get to share what you want to get preserved for the record, so don't let my questions stop you from sharing. Please tell us some other areas or some other anecdotes or stories, memories that you want preserved.

RP: Yeah. I guess maybe actually jumping off the idea of moving through the world, I think that's a big part of how my thinking has shifted through Brown. I think even in Freshman year, I took Intro to Ethnic Studies and Intro to Africana Studies, and something that changed my thinking there around oppression was realizing that it was a lot deeper than identity—it wasn't just like, "Oh if you have a [42:00] marginalized identity like people are mean to you" or if you have negative experiences with depression—it was really particularly the idea of indigenous research methodologies was something that I encountered in Ethnic Studies, which was really talking about a whole world view, a way of interacting with the world, and sort-of yeah like a very cultural experience that because you are interacting with the world in a different way, you face these systems of oppression that it's not just an individual thing, it's a whole way of moving through the world, or a way of being, that gets attacked or marginalized. That sort-of shift away from identity and into power and thinking of oppression as something that is embodied in experience and in the world has been I think a grounding thread through my experience at Brown, and something that is reflected in my personal experiences too. Thinking of gender identity in that way, of it's not just a matter of changing my name, [43:00] of changing my pronouns, but it's I'm interacting with the world in a different way, and that's something that's sort-of a different framework for it. And even

then for mental health and I mentioned I came to understand myself as autistic as well as having ADHD and I think that's something that I was only able to realize and think about because I was thinking about how do I move through the world, how do I interact with the systems around me because I never had a professional diagnosis of autism, and this is fairly common for women and non-binary people because of the diagnostic criteria, but being able to think of things in less of a "What is your identity like" "What are the words for you" and more of a "How do you interact with the world" really I think opened my doorways to a more expansive sort of view of myself in relation to Brown, in relation to classes, in relation to the world. Yeah.

MM: When [44:00] you determined that you were autistic, was that a relief, or was it like an ah-ha moment? Tell us about that time. What year were you in that?

RP: That would have been sophomore year and I was talking with my current girlfriend who was also sort-of discovering "Oh maybe, autistic is a framework that helps explain how I move through the world." I guess it was definitely like a moment in a conversation that we had where we were both like, "Oh, Yeah," but I don't really feel that as an ah-ha moment more as an opening of exploration and I found that since then, I mean that's like four this is my fifth year of I have to take an extra yea of undergrad, so that's like four years ago now, and I feel like it's just been a constant like almost permission to explore engaging in different ways. And sort-of as I've realized like "Oh, maybe I just need to like go on reduced course load, take less courses, because my brain world in this way where if I have three things to do at once, I can't do any of them. [45:00] It's been more a process of finding moments that make more sense now and taking them as sort-of part of my holistic experience, yeah has been my experience with autistic identity.

MM: Do you have advice for students moving through the process who are also engaging with the world in that same way or a similar way?

RP: Yeah. I think really trusting yourself, and allowing yourself to prioritize that because the way that Brown is setup and probably any college is setup, is it assumes a very neurotypical experience you know you get an assignment, you do it, you turn it in. You get another assignment, you do it, you turn it in—and that was just not a way that worked with my brain and if that's not a way that works with your brain then find another way. I don't know if I would recommend my way of just dropping courses and taking incompletes—maybe find a more proactive way sooner, but definitely that shift for me from "Oh, this is how the system is, so that's [46:00] how I have to do things," to "How do I do things, and how do I make the system work for me" was very helpful. I guess also

so, that sort-of experience of moving through autistic identity is also a large part of what brought me disability justice at Brown.

MM: I wanted to make sure that you talked about that.

RP: Yes, for sure. And so Disability Justice At Brown is a new student group, formed last year or last semester, and what we're trying to do is really build community, a disabled community for disability, neurodivergence, mental illness, anything sort-of under that umbrella to come together and support each other and empower each other, and the framework of disability justice in particular is sort-of a radical revisioning of the world from a disabled standpoint that interacts with disability as social identity also connected to all of our other identities and all of the other forms of power that work on us. It comes from a particular [47:00] radical stance of color, and women of color coming together to sort-of change the way we think about community, and so Disability Justice At Brown for me has been a really powerful way to sort-of progress those thoughts of "How do I move through the world, and how do I build things around it" to "How do I share that with others?" "How do I find a way that we all move through the world," and sort-of building a community that way that can maybe change some things, and give people the tools and resources and courage and strength to move through Brown however it works for you—as opposed to the way that the system seems to be setup.

MM: And so now, the push is on to establish a site.

RP: Yes. We have a petition running for the Disability Justice and Cultural Center, which we are proposing as an identity center like the various other identity centers on campus—LGBTQ Center, Brown Center For Students Of Color—because there really isn't a site for disabled identity and community. A lot of the strives that I've made in understanding myself and interacting with the world have been individual or because I've made [48:00] friends who happen to also be disabled, and then we were able to move through these things together. There really wasn't a site to go and find that community. So we're hoping to get an identity center established to sort-of provide that resource for folks who might not have that connection already, or folks who have that connection, and want to build on it more—who want to really be able to engage with the university and sort-of push for changes that will help us as a community.

MM: I think that's a great idea. So as we wrap up, I just want to, not that you necessarily know what's going to happen with your life the second you graduate, but if you could predict, because

you are a young, you will be a young participant in this collection, which includes over, almost close to 250 interviews now—the oldest from 1907 with memories to 1907, recorded in 1911. So as you make the push past the Brown gates and into the world, where are you headed?

RP: I'm headed to Boston.

MM: Oh. [49:00]

RP: Yeah. We were just up there this past weekend looking at apartments.

MM: Fun.

RP: Assuming we get an apartment, we're headed to Boston.

MM: OK.

RP: Not really sure of much beyond that, but I'm planning to go into some kind of counseling field, probably with LGBT youth, and sort-of trying to bring all of these thoughts that I've learned at Brown—not necessarily from Brown, but from the people around me at Brown—of how to move through the world, and how to empower yourself, and empower others, and bring that into a new context.

MM: Well thank you. So, I think this is a good spot to wrap up. I want to thank you so much for your bravery in coming here today and sharing your story so that researchers from around the world for 100 years will be able to hear your story and hear about your life where it is now. Thank you, and I thank Amanda for participating as interviewer as well.

RP: OK. Thanks.

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