NEW YORK CITY TRANS ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

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INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

MARGARET BERG

Interviewer: Rafaela Anshel

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Rafaela Anshel: Hi, this is Rafaela Anshel, and I'm interviewing Margaret Berg for the New York City Trans Oral Project, um, which is in collaboration with the New York Public Library. And um, we feel that it's important to have trans histories and oral histories. So hi, Margaret.

Margaret Berg: Hi.

Anshel: How are you doing today?

Berg: Good, good. How are you?

Anshel: I'm okay.

Berg: [Laughter].

Anshel: So um, uh, you want to start with introducing yourself?

Berg: Um, yes. Um, my name is Margaret Berg, I am um 46 year old uh trans woman, and, yeah. I'm, yeah. Sorry.

Anshel: Okay. You want to tell me what pronouns?

Berg: Oh, I only, I only do she and her. Uh, so female pronouns.

Anshel: And how would you—you said already you describe your gender as—

Berg: I identify, I mean, I identify as a woman. Um, I also identify as a transsexual.

Anshel: Okay. Great. Uh, you want to talk about where you're from?

Berg: Sure. Um, okay, so I was born in southeastern Ohio, um, in farm country. It's the part of the Appalachian Mountains. Um, and my family owned um a farm, actually a couple of adjacent farm properties and um so I grew up in a very rural uh setting.

Anshel: What year were you born?

Berg: I was born in 1970.

Anshel: Okay.

Berg: Um and it was in many ways it was very idyllic. Um, I was in a school with, I think I had like 89 people in my graduating class. Um, we had lots of woods and we grew our own food and grew our own vegetables, and you know, we had farm animals. In a lot of ways it was a great experience, and it's not an experience too many people get to have. Um, but it was also kind of backward. Um, you know, people were not very open-minded and um they were not very uh you know anyone who was different was kind of looked down upon.
Anshel: Did that impact you in any way?

Berg: Oh, of course. Yes, definitely. Um, so I actually came from a pretty large family. I had four sisters who were born before I was. Um, cisgender uh women, girls, and um they were all one year apart or less, so uh there were some Irish twins in the family, and um I was born 10 years after the last of them. And so when um when my mother had me and they said that oh, you know, you have a boy. First of all she was completely surprised because she thought, the whole time she was pregnant, she thought she had a girl. And um and just sensed that she was carrying another girl. And um so uh I was this big surprise in a lot of ways and um continue to surprise people. So um because obviously that was not what I felt like I was.

Anshel: Uh-huh.

Berg: Um, so I was raised um there was a lot of pressure put on me um as the “only boy,” um, that I was going to carry on the family name, um, that um you know I was just reminded that I had this special status because I was the only boy, and something about it just always didn't feel like I knew that I didn't want whatever that was. Like it didn't feel like it was right. Um, but it also felt like to say something about it would be like stepping on a puppy, you know? Like it would disappoint the people around me to say, you know, that's not what I think I am or that's not what I want for myself. So mostly I kept quiet about feeling like um like I didn't belong with the boys.

Anshel: So you felt that at a young age?

Berg: I felt something at a very young age. I mean, you know, I don't remember much of my childhood, but the things that I do remember are like at age five um I remember playing dress-up and um I had like some of my stuffed animals, and I think we were having a tea party or something, it could have been a board meeting or I don't know what it was. But we were sitting around in a circle, I'm dressed up, I have taken an apron that belonged to my mother and wrapped it around my body like a dress. And I'd taken a wig that one of my sisters had used in a high school drama production, my mom's sunglasses, um, and probably some other things. And I had basically dressed up and I was just playing, um, and my father came home from mowing the fields that we had, and it was, I remember it must have been like August or something but I remember that he came in and I said to him like, um, I said my old name, which I won't say here, but I—and I said that that person was gone. And I had a new name, and it was going to be me from now on. Um, I think I chose the name Kimberly at that point. And he got very, very upset and uh screamed and yelled and told me to take the clothes off and never do it again and um so I got the sense very quickly that like there was something shameful about this, and that I would get punished if I allowed myself to be caught um acting like a girl. So there was—so it kind of drive things into the shadows.

Anshel: Did your mother have any response? Did she know?
**Berg:** My mother wasn't there. As far as I remember my mother was not there at the time. Um and I don't think she figured out, I mean, she says that she knew um she's told me since as an adult that she always thought there was something wrong with me hormonally.

**Anshel:** Huh.

**Berg:** That she thought that somehow or other you know, in some way I was intersex or something like that because of how feminine I always was. Um and I wasn't exactly like, I wasn't like a girly-girl, like I didn't want pink, frilly things or Barbie dolls. But neither were any of my sisters, you know? Everyone was very clear that they were a girl, but it was like, they rode horses, they climbed trees. My youngest sister played with trucks, you know? They had stuffed animals but not really dolls, you know? Like so they were pretty clear in their identity as girls, but they weren't, you know, they weren't into a lot of stereotypical girl things either. And that's kind of also the way that I was. So I liked to climb trees. Um, uh, I did have a lot of very feminine uh things that I liked to do, but like I wasn't like uh you know like I said, asking for Barbies or um you know asking that my whole room be pink and with unicorns and sparkly things all over it, you know? Um, but I was also very clear that I was not a boy. Like that was privately inside of me like that just always felt somehow false or wrong, and it felt like I was like, that I'd gone to a Halloween party and wasn't allowed to take off my costume. That's kind of how it felt to me.

**Anshel:** Did you get along with your sisters okay?

**Berg:** I think so. I mean, it's odd because our household was so, my father was an alcoholic, and he was an alcoholic who stopped drinking just by digging his nails into his palms basically, and he was very angry. And he—our house was very chaotic. We couldn't have people over because we didn't know if they were going to just get bodily thrown out of the house for no reason. Um we all tip-toed around very quietly trying not to make him angry. Um, and we all sort of isolated each, you know, it's like you would think that we would all stick together in that environment but in fact what mostly what we did was keep to ourselves. And um so I was very close with one of my sisters, the second oldest. Um, I mean, this gets into a lot of generational trauma stuff, but like my father lost his mother at a very young age to suicide, and he was very angry with her. He really didn't like women um after that because they were very close and he felt betrayed. Um but my second oldest sister resembled his mother very closely and so he really hated her. And he hated me I think because he thought of me as he was going to have this son to like do boy things with and I basically just rejected all the things he wanted me to be. And it wasn't like I could even fake it. I couldn't, I just couldn't fake interest in baseball or playing with pocket knives or you know, carpentry or any—I mean, that stuff just didn't interest me, you know? So um so my sister and I really, she and I stuck together. Um, she always loved me very deeply, and I her, and we still do to this day. Um, but the rest of my sisters I'm not very close with.

**Anshel:** So I was going to ask you if there was somebody in your early life who you are, who you did feel comfortable and close to and who made you feel better about yourself or—
Berg: There was no one that I could tell what was going on until I was in high school. I didn't tell anyone what was going on with me. Um, you know, I for one thing I didn’t have words for it, really. Um, I mean, I crossdressed in private after this incident with my father. I crossdressed in private and only when I could manage to do it without too much fear of being discovered. Um, so I could do it when my grandfather was babysitting me and he took naps because you know, he was, you know, he was in his late 60s, early 70s, and he would take a nap every afternoon. And so when he was—

Anshel: He lived with you?

Berg: No.

Anshel: Oh.

Berg: He lived across, he lived on the other—we had a second farm and we rented it to my grandmother and grandfather.

Anshel: Oh, I see.

Berg: And so he would come over and babysit me and he was very kind and very loving and patient, and um and he died when I was six, so he never knew. Um, I just instinctively knew to keep quiet, you know? And so even though like there were times when I couldn’t really restrain myself like, um, I was extremely feminine and there was just no like, there was no like pretending any differently. Like it wasn’t like I know some people who are able to sort of like you know, oh, I'm going to go be a fireman or join the army or I'm going to be on the football team. That stuff was totally impossible. It was just not even, my mother once took me to Little League, to a Little League game and she was hoping that I would see these boys playing Little League and want to do it. And so she took me to this Little League ball field and we were standing there watching them play, and I just instinctively knew why we were there, and I just started sobbing because I was so afraid that they were going to make me play Little League. And so she just put me back in the car and took me home and we never talked about it again.

Anshel: You never talked about it again.

Berg: Yeah. So I didn’t really talk—like I said I didn’t tell anyone. I really discovered, I really put a name to what I was, some time around the time that I was hitting puberty, because things started to happen that I wasn’t—like I always anticipated that I would grow up and just look like my mother. Like that’s what I always thought would happen. I didn't know how it was going to happen but I just kind of like, I never envisioned myself wearing a suit and wearing a tie and going off to work like my dad did. It was, I thought you know, I'm going to be a teacher like my mom and I'm going to wear pretty dresses and you know, and my hair is going to be nice and you know, I just thought I'm going to be like my mother, you know?

Anshel: You said you never put a name, you didn't put a name to it. What name, when you did find a name, what name did you put to it?
Berg: Well, what happened was uh that we had a lot of books. We had—my parents were very um into reading and wanted their kids to be into reading, and so we had a library. And um you know, floor to ceiling bookshelves filled with books, and books in the library, and books in every bedroom, and there was a reference book that I was reading one day, and it actually talked about Christine Jorgensen.

Anshel: How old were you?

Berg: I don't exactly remember but I know, I couldn't have been older than 14.

Anshel: Okay.

Berg: Possibly 13, maybe 14. But I ran across this book and as soon as I read what had happened to Christine Jorgensen, I—something clicked in my mind. It was like a lightbulb went off. And I said oh my God, that's what I am. And I just knew, and it was like this enormous relief because I said well there's a name for what I am.

Anshel: What was the name?

Berg: Transsexual.

Anshel: Okay.

Berg: And I know that's not a PC word anymore.

Anshel: Yeah.

Berg: But it's really what I—it's what I still choose to identify as because there's so many degrees on the spectrum now that there didn't used to be, and I really believe that what I am and what has led me to this point is really a medical condition. That my brain and my body were not matched.

Anshel: Mm-hmm.

Berg: And that I needed medical intervention to correct that. Some people don't need that, and you know, some people can just you know say I'm a woman or I'm a man or I'm genderqueer, and they don't even need to medically transition. Um, and for me that was just never even a possibility. Like as soon as puberty hit, I was like, I don't want this beard. Um, I don't want this hair on my legs and arms. I don't want any of these things that were happening to me. It was just horrifying, and nobody told me that it should be horrifying. I just felt it was horrifying because I was like, this is not what I am or who I am. Um so finding that information was just like, well it was incredibly liberating, and then it was incredibly frustrating because I didn't have any way to act on it. You know, I didn't have the power to act on it, so.
Anshel: During high school, what was it like? I mean, did you, were you still crossdressing privately?

Berg: Yes. Yes.

Anshel: And were you bullied in high school?

Berg: I wasn't, oddly I wasn't bullied as much as you would think. I think in high school everyone just thought I was a nerd. Like a really, really nerdy nerd, which I was. But um, but I was also very feminine, and there were a few people who thought I was gay.

Anshel: Uh-huh.

Berg: Um, but now my closest friends at some point I told them. I had a friend who was a gay um, a gay boy. Very close friend. And I told him in the middle—in typing class, we were passing notes back and forth. And I had kind of been subtly dropping hints to him about um about how I was feeling about myself. I hadn't come out and said it, but I'd been dropping these various hints. And at one point he passed me a not about something else, and at the end, he tacked on P.S., I won't tell anyone you're a transvestite. And I crossed out the word “vestite” and wrote “sexual” and passed the note back to him and he just smiled—

Anshel: Wow.

Berg: And nodded, you know?

Anshel: Wow.

Berg: Yeah.

Berg: What happened to that friend?

Berg: I'm still friends with him.

Anshel: Really?

Berg: 30 years later, I'm still friends with him, yes. So I did have a small support network. I also told my mother around the same time, and uh she was not very supportive at the time. She was freaked out. She didn't understand.

Anshel: Did it take her a long time to come around?

Berg: She never exactly came around until, I mean, my story is really complicated because I've gone through different phases of my life where I acknowledged and didn't acknowledge that I was transgender, and this was kind of the first episode. And so during that episode, no, she
never got right with it. She always, you know, she would tell me that I was going to be an ugly woman if I transitioned, um, and that I shouldn't do it um because I would be an ugly woman.

**Anshel:** So she knew what transitioning meant?

**Berg:** Transition the word wasn't around. I don't believe the word was even around at that point. She just called it having a sex change, which is something we don't really say anymore.

**Anshel:** Yeah.

**Berg:** Um, because it's, as we know, it's much more complicated than that, you know? Um but she basically said don't try to become female, you know? Don't—in our language, don't transition, because you're going to be ugly.

**Anshel:** Right. Right. So as you moved into—when did you, uh, like what happened after high school?

**Berg:** Well, um, okay so in high school like I, my senior year I attempted to kill myself. It wasn't just my gender issues, there was a whole host of other things going on, but um you know my father had become so abusive that like, I was just in terror all the time. My mother refused to do anything decisive about it. Um, I just felt like I was completely without options, and I didn't see how I was ever going to transition. Um, there was a lot of stuff going on in school at the time, like most of my close friends my senior year were gone, they were in the class ahead of me. So I didn't have anybody to talk to. They were all off at college and so um, but that's when my mother outing me to my father was after my suicide attempt, which obviously wasn't successful.

**Anshel:** How old were you then?

**Berg:** I was 18, maybe 17, going on 18. And um, so basically they sent me to therapy, the therapist said after several weeks and some psychological tests, the therapist wanted me to go see um a doctor at Columbus Medical Center's Gender Clinic because she thought that I should, she thought that I should be transitioning. Um, she was pretty convinced by everything that she had seen that I should not be living as a boy.

**Anshel:** So now we're talking in the 1980s.

**Berg:** We're talking '87. Um and of course the problem was I had no—practically had no way of following up on that advice. It was not covered by insurance. My parents were not going to pay for it. Um, the school I was going to was like, an hour and a half drive from where this clinic was. And so I really just didn't have options. Like I didn't have a way of following through on that advice. So basically everyone just swept it under the rug and acted like it had never happened, including me.
Anshel: So, okay, my question was when the therapist said that you should be transitioning, how did that feel? What was that response in your inner self? Was that liberating?

Berg: You know, I don’t remember. To be honest that whole period of my life is kind of a blur. I can tell you in really broad strokes what happened but I was really dead inside at that point, you know? I went off to college and I was very you know, I wasn't very socially well-developed. I was a very smart child, you know? But you know, academically I was very smart. Um, but emotionally I was just crippled, and I had such shame about my body, I had such shame about um about being trans, and at the time I remember one of the other things that kind of factored into this was you know the model of what it was to be trans at that time was kind of still the Harry Benjamin model.

Anshel: Yes.

Berg: You know, all transsexuals despise their genitals and they can’t function sexually, and that wasn't exactly my experience. And so part of me was, I wasn't exactly lying, but I was like, feeding that therapist information that I’d read, um, in the hopes that she would approve me. So—

Anshel: Who is Harry Benjamin?

Berg: Oh, I’m sorry. Harry Banjamin—

Anshel: I know, but I want to, that’s—

Berg: So he was, in the 60s, you know, in the 60s he was the first doctor to take transsexualism seriously. Um, and really try to approach it from a point of empathy and not pathologizing people. And he helped people transition and no one had ever really systematically done that before. I mean, it had happened on a couple of occasions, but. So—but there was this narrative that was supposed to be the narrative like that got you approved for medical transition, and some of those things didn't fit me exactly. They fit me mostly. But um they didn't fit exactly. And so I had told some, I stretched the truth a little bit in some of the things that I said with this doctor. And so I started to also just question well maybe I'm not transgender. And again we didn't have that word at all, but like maybe I’m not. Maybe I’m just crazy. Which ought to have been something I should have been exploring with a therapist, not deciding on my lonesome. But that's what I did. Um, so by about my first year, the end of my first year of college I started to identify myself as a gay man, and it never quite felt right. It didn't feel, I didn't really fit in with the gay men that were going to school, and we had an LBG organization—

Anshel: Was this in Ohio also?

Berg: This was in Ohio, and we had an LBG organization. It was very different than anything you would see now, like it was very secretive, like, you know, it was a support group. Um, so people came to kind of talk about how shitty it was to be gay or lesbian, and many of the people were in the closet and there were no trans people.
Anshel: That was, yeah—

Berg: I didn't meet a single person, really the entire time I was in college I never met a single person who identified themselves as trans. Um and so like I went in thinking well, I'm just going to try it this way. At least I'll date who I'm attracted to. Um, and it just didn't, it never really worked. And I started to drink, basically in order to be, in order to simulate what the gay men that I knew were doing, or how they were interacting socially and stuff. I really had to be drunk.

Anshel: In order to—

Berg: In order to have sex, in order to pick people up at dances or bars or whatever. Like I really had to be anesthetized.

Anshel: So you could deal with it.

Berg: So I could deal with it. And I will say, most of the time I dealt with it by just dissociating. So like I would be having sex with someone, my body would be there, I'm might get some physical pleasure out of it, but most of the time like I would be floating on the ceiling kind of watching it happen. Like it never felt right. I would always feel not exactly guilt afterwards, but almost like I betrayed myself. Um, and so I would have to drink more to cover those feelings up. And pretty quickly I became an alcoholic. Um, I drank very excessively and um had major, major, major problems as a result of it.

Anshel: Was—did you remain an alcoholic for a long time?

Berg: For 10, I guess about 12 years I drank um very heavily, and um—

Anshel: So this puts you in your 30s now?

Berg: I was 30 when I stopped.

Anshel: Okay.

Berg: I was 30 when I stopped. I was about 18 when I started. Maybe 19. Maybe it was 11 years. But um so yeah, you know, everything kind of got subsumed under alcohol, like it was just like nothing else was that important. And I did continue to crossdress, um—

Anshel: Privately?

Berg: No, publically. So, well, semi-privately. I mean, I was kind of a late bloomer, and so I was still going through adolescence probably into my senior year of college. I mean, I wasn't fully developed. And—

Anshel: Emotionally?
Berg: Well, physically. And so like my, what my mother had always tried to tell me that I would be an ugly woman was not true. Um, I would put on girls clothes, which I bought for myself and I had my own wardrobe, and um every so often I would just go out to the bars in my college town um and I’m not talking about gay bars, I’m talking about straight bars. I would go out and I would sit at the end of the bar and I would drink and I would wait for men to come and start flirting with me and buy me drinks. And I would talk to them and they would flirt with me, and the intention was always, um, I’m just going to like, at some point during the evening I’m just going to book it, I’m going to leave. And it’s going to go nowhere, but I will have gotten something out of it. And only a few friends really knew that I did this, and the few of them that ever saw me were like, oh my God, you’re glowing. You’re like, so happy. This is so natural. Like, you’re like a totally different person. Um, but by that point I was just so, I was so unclear about my identity that what’s clear to me now about what they said was not clear to me then. So I got in a lot of trouble, I was almost raped at one point.

Anshel: That’s what I was going to ask you, what were the safety issues of going into straight bars?

Berg: Um, the safety issues were mainly from the fact that I was so drunk. I mean, it was um, and this one occasion like I was, it was on New Year’s Eve, and I had been dancing and making out with this man all night, and he had no idea you know, that I was a transgender person, you know? He thought I was just a cis girl, and like, he um he at some point I was so drunk that he just sort of wrapped his arm around my shoulders and dragged me out of the bar. And I was in a state of almost complete paralysis. I was aware of my surroundings but I couldn’t move or I couldn’t fight back, and so he was dragging me back to his house and people were stopping and I remember people staring and him saying oh she’s just drunk, I’ve got to get her home so she can sleep it off. And I just thought, I remember the thought going through my head, I’m going to die. He’s going to get me home and he’s going to take my clothes off and he’s going to kill me. And um when we got back to his house, he took all his clothes off, well he threw me on his bed, he took his clothes off, and he passed out. And so I ran. I got my legs back somehow and I just ran and I found a—I ran out into the street and someone was coming by in a car and they said are you alright? And I said no, I need to get home. And this man drove me to my apartment building.

Anshel: You were living alone?

Berg: I was living with a roommate, but um I the next day, I gathered up all my skirts and dresses and blouses and makeup and wigs and shoes that were women’s shoes, and I put them in garbage bags and I threw them in the dumpster in our apartment complex. And that was, actually that was the last time I dressed in female clothes until I was in my 40s, and I was maybe 21 at that time.

Anshel: Wow.
**Berg:** But I just said I can't, you know, this crossdressing thing is the problem. It never occurred to me that drinking was the real problem, you know? That the moments of like real joy that I had were when I was at that time I was Vicki, and when I was Vicki like, at least you know when I wasn't getting dragged off by scary men, like, I was this really happy socially bubbly person who like could interact and not be so awkward.

**Anshel:** And the alcohol helped that?

**Berg:** I think the alcohol helped me get out the door because obviously I was terrified that I would be discovered. Um.

**Anshel:** And you were happy when you with the men, were you?

**Berg:** At first I would be but you know, it's like, I don't know like when you're drinking and you have a problem with it, it's like you're constantly wanting the next drink and worrying about where it's going to come from and how am I going to get it, who is going to buy it for me if I'm out of money? Like, is there empties I can drink. You know, so there comes a point where there's this obsession going on with that, where I'm losing my inhibitions and maybe like not being as careful as I should be. A couple of times I did get discovered, and it's just luck that nothing happened, you know?

**Anshel:** Yeah.

**Berg:** Um so yeah, it was a real mess. My life was incredibly messy, and it continued to be messy. It just didn't involve like—Vicki wasn't part of the picture.

**Anshel:** So you threw your clothes out.

**Berg:** I purged everything.

**Anshel:** So did you, what did you—you were still drinking.

**Berg:** Yes.

**Anshel:** And did you present as gay male again, or?

**Berg:** I mean, I was presenting as gay male by day anyway.

**Anshel:** Okay.

**Berg:** By night, again, this is sometimes not every night, but sometimes I would just be like I have to do this. I didn't even really think about it, I just did it.

**Anshel:** Did what?
Berg: I dressed as Vicki.

Anshel: So you got more clothes?

Berg: No! Oh, no.

Anshel: Oh.

Berg: No, before that, before this happened, this is what the pattern was.

Anshel: Oh, okay.

Berg: I'm saying it wasn't every night, and it wasn't during the day.

Anshel: Yeah.

Berg: After this happened, after the great purge I like to call it—

Anshel: Yes.

Berg: Um, then it was full-time gay male. Or at least that was what I told people.

Anshel: Yeah.

Berg: And that's what I told myself.

Anshel: Yeah.

Berg: I just told myself I was incredibly bad at it.

Anshel: At being a gay man.

Berg: I was incredibly bad at it.

Anshel: Yeah.

Berg: It just was crashingly, awfully bad.

Anshel: Yeah, I hear that.

Berg: Um, I did not understand the way they thought, I didn't like—and I don't want to tar all gay men with the same brush, but like—

Anshel: Mm-hmm.
**Berg:** There's a lot of misogyny in the gay community, and a lot of it gets expressed when there are perceived to be no women around, let's put it that way. There are perceived to be no women around. Um, and so these things would, misogynistic things would get bandied around, and my feelings would be like really deeply hurt. And not in an oh, you're being so politically incorrect kind of way, but like this hurts me personally. Um, it makes me deeply uncomfortable and I feel really threatened, and I didn't—at that point I was so out of focus and out of touch with who I was that I didn't understand why I felt that so deeply anymore, you know? Um and so I think after that where my transgender feeling manifested themselves was with giving myself like, at this point like there was internet, I can totally feel so old saying that, but there was internet, there was e-mail, there were chat rooms, um, you know, there were gaming spaces online, and I would always choose a female name. Um, I did a market research you know where you dial people at dinnertime and try to get them to do surveys about razors and things like that and I had a job doing this, and I called myself Joyce. One day I just picked up the phone, I made a phone call.

**Anshel:** So you were doing marketing in a way?

**Berg:** I was doing marketing research.

**Anshel:** Under a female nam.

**Berg:** Under—and I didn't plan it, it just like, this man answered the phone and I said hi, this is Joyce from ABC Market Research. And I was like, where did that come from?

**Anshel:** [Laughter].

**Berg:** You know, I didn't even know any Joyce. But you know, it was like it felt, I remember on that phone call, the man was—it wasn't flirting with me exactly, but you know, he definitely talked to me differently than I was talked to when I like purposely made my voice deeper and used my male name. Even then I used to get you know gendered female, but like you know it was like this guy was treating me like a woman, and I remember just feeling so amazingly wonderful, and I just couldn't—like I had to keep doing it. So I don't think I ever gave my male name again on the phone. So I had these different identities that were kind of just like these ghosts. They would just sort of like, you know, materialize out of the wall, and then like, walk back into the wall when too many eyebrows got raised.

**Anshel:** Yeah.

**Berg:** Um, and I would, you know, I would just do things like I remember, I was living with these two gay men in Cincinnati who were friends of mine, and I was at the grocery store and I bought women's formula vitamins because I thought, I remember standing there in the vitamin section thinking I wonder if these have estrogen? And right after that thought I just plopped them in the basket and bought them with the rest, and my friend was like looking in the cabinet and said, you bought women’s formula vitamins. [Laughter].
Anshel: This was a female friend?

Berg: No, this male friend.

Anshel: Male friend.

Berg: It was like, why did you buy women's formula? And I tried to pretend like it was an accident but they could see right through me. And my friend was like, why don't you just go have the operation? You know you want to do it?

Anshel: So these were gay men?

Berg: And they were half joking, and I was like, playing along.

Anshel: And had you talked about—

Berg: No.

Anshel: They just kind of knew?

Berg: They, I don't know that they even knew, but they were joking about it and they were saying that, you know, they would say now Nellie I was, and the other one would say like, you know, he's not Nellie, he's a woman. [Laughter]. You know? Like.

Anshel: Interesting.

Berg: Um, so people were clocking me, and I found out later that other friends, like my friend of 30 years what I told you about?

Anshel: Yes.

Berg: Had private discussions about me with other friends, and would just say—

Anshel: Oh.

Berg: I wish that he would just transition.

Anshel: What's clocking?

Berg: Clocking?

Anshel: Yeah.

Berg: Like, just like figuring out that you're trans, or figuring out, um—
Anshel: Yeah.

Berg: So anyway, you know, there were other people around me who were seeing through this façade and I was just sort of like, partly blind to it, you know? I was trying really hard to not feel these feelings.

Anshel: Yeah. So you purged.

Berg: Yes.

Anshel: And you weren't crossdressing.

Berg: No. In fact, you know, I had friends who tried, who were drag queens, who tried to get me to do drag. And I would actually get angry and yell at them and say I am not a drag queen. And then I remember one of them saying but it's only for one night, and I just blurted out, if I put a dress on, you'll never get me out of it.

Anshel: Oh.

Berg: And I don't know, I mean, at the time I was like oops, I'd better stuff that back in, you know? Like, [Laughter], yeah, so you know, I'm just sort of interacting with all these gay guys, and this is like after I quit drinking and got a lot more clear headed and, you know, my life started to go a lot better. But it's like I would be with these big groups of gay men, and out to dinner and you know, at various events, and they would be you know talking about it and I was just thinking, I don't think they want vaginas, [Laughter].

Anshel: [Laughter].

Berg: I really just don't think that they're—and I didn't say anything. But I couldn't participate in the conversations because they would just interrupt me constantly. Uh, I just felt so unheard, you know? And I couldn't participate because I would always get talked over. And it's like when I was with women I could have conversations, participatory conversations, and it felt so much more natural um and so like I just—you know, they would tell me things like you need to go on Grindr, you really need to get laid, and I'd be like, I don't want to go on Grindr, and um and so I basically just kind of became celibate, virtually celibate. I had a couple of boyfriends, but they didn't—there was just something missing, like, and they would sense something missing.

Anshel: They would say something.

Berg: They would sense, I think they would sense missing things and I mean, they just knew that I wasn't that into them, or wasn't that into the relationship, and I wasn't that into it. Like I would, I could maybe physically enjoy some of the lovemaking, but there was just this psychological component that wasn't right. Um, and you know the flipside of this is that I had a lot of straight friends over the years, like straight male friends who I would form these really deep, intimate friendships with, and this happened over and over, where I would fall just deeply
in love with a straight man. And you would start to have feelings for me and would freak out
and just be like, I can't deal with this, and sort of leave my life.

**Anshel:** Because you were a gay man.

**Berg:** Because they thought of me as a gay man and they weren't attracted to men, but they
were attracted to me.

**Anshel:** Right.

**Berg:** Um, so there were like all these things happening that like, that should have been like
really, really you know, I feel like the universe was hitting me over the head with a brick and I
wasn't getting it.

**Anshel:** So now you're still living in Ohio—

**Berg:** No, I'm actually—at this point I'm in New York.

**Anshel:** When did you move to New York?

**Berg:** When I was 30.

**Anshel:** And what led you to move to New York?

**Berg:** I think it was just boredom. I was living in Columbus, Ohio, with a female friend, and you
know, we were basically drinking buddies and we just wanted this Laverne and Shirley type
adventure. We're going to move to New York City and we're going to make it big, and um, we
didn't know our ass from our elbow really but like we just—this is what we thought, that it was
going to be this big romantic adventure.

**Anshel:** So when you moved to New York, um, you were still presenting as a gay man.

**Berg:** Yes.

**Anshel:** And you moved with a friend.

**Berg:** A female friend, yes.

**Anshel:** A female friend, and you were roommates.

**Berg:** We were roommates for awhile, then I—New York is really what got me to stop drinking,
because my drinking really escalated when I got here because I didn't have to drive anymore.

**Anshel:** Okay.
Berg: And so I could do it every day. Um, and I just became pickled all the time and completely, you know, I was starting to become non-functional really, and at some point I just had had enough and I just threw up my hands and went to rehab. Um, and um and joined a 12 step recovery, and I'm still in 12 step recovery, almost 17 years later. Um, but yeah at that time I was still presenting as a gay man.

Anshel: So were you in the gay male scene?

Berg: On the periphery. I mean, when I first got here I went to some of the bars. Most of which don't exist anymore. Um, and I was really, I was playing up the role. Like I looked at what everyone was wearing and I got those clothes and I got that haircut.

Anshel: What time are we talking about now?

Berg: We're talking about 19—no, it must have been, it was 2000. It was 2000 when I moved here. So you know, and I tried to drink the drinks I saw everyone else drinking and um and my outsides looked good, you know? My outsides looked good. I had a good job, I bought an apartment pretty soon after I moved here. So the externals looked good but I was a complete mess. Um, and I got, I mean, it's really—I don't know if I would call it dumb luck or something protecting me, but I really had a lot of incidents where like, I put myself in very unsafe situations with people that in the cold, hard light of day I probably would have crossed the street if I'd seen them coming at me, you know?

Anshel: What kind of people?

Berg: There was a guy who um you know there was a guy who I met at a bar, I don't even remember the name of it because it's not there anymore, but um basically I just wanted someone to take me home with them because it was snowing. There was a blizzard that night, and I hadn't been able to tear myself away to go back to New Jersey. And there was like at least a foot of snow on the ground. And this person told me that they had a really nice apartment in Chelsea and it turned out that they lived in a basement that was not an apartment, but just a corner of a basement where they had been evicted and had all their stuff thrown. So essentially I spent the night with this person on a pile of trash, and um when I woke up the next morning I just couldn't—and there was no heat. You know, this was like in the middle of a blizzard and it was freezing cold, and um I remember that was one of the milestones, if you will, you know, that I really said you know, this just isn't sustainable.

Anshel: This life.

Berg: This life isn't sustainable. And that wasn't the tipping point.

Anshel: What was scary about him?

Berg: I don't remember, but I just remember like when I woke up in the morning I was like oh my God. This person does not have their shit together. [Laughter]. Like, you know?
Anshel: Did you feel in physical danger?

Berg: I don't remember. I mean, I don't think I felt in physical danger, I think more than anything I felt this sense of just overwhelming shame.

Anshel: You said it was a tipping point.

Berg: It was one of the tipping points. I mean, there were a lot of things. The actual last night that I was out, um, I was thrown out of a bar, and before that what happened before I was thrown out I couldn't tell you because I was in a complete blackout, but I woke up and was being asked to leave. Um, and that was really, I've been thrown out of many places before that, um, but I was thrown out of this place and um and it was just really humiliating. Um, and the next morning I was just, it was like I just was done. Like I knew I couldn't live this way anymore and that if I ever, I very clearly knew in my mind that if I ever drank even a glass of wine or a glass of beer that it was going to kill me.

Anshel: Okay.

Berg: Like I had this really clear sense that it was going to kill me. And so I stopped. And I stopped with help obviously, but I mean, I've not wanted to have a drink since then. But one of the things that, I mean, people have asked me before if I regret that I didn't transition younger. And in a way yes, but in a way I'm really glad that I did it later in life, because I think if I had done it earlier, I wouldn't have been able to handle it, with my substance abuse and my psychological problems. I've really, like, I did a lot of work on myself that led up to me transitioning. Like finally starting to consider it again and take steps again. You know, it took a long time of uh a) just not putting substances into my body and my head being somewhat clear, and it took a lot of therapy and it took a lot of um just self-exploration and self-introspection. It really, I did it when I was ready to do it.

Anshel: So therapy helped you, and quitting drinking helped you?

Berg: Yes, yes. Therapy helped me tremendously. I mean, I had to work through—I wasn't working on being trans for a really long time. I basically shelved it, and um, but I had a lot of issues just with the way that I was raised, um, with religion, um, because—

Anshel: What religion?

Berg: Well, my family was really, really religiously diverse. I mean, my father and mother both had really strict religious upbringing, and they rejected that. My father was essentially an atheist, and my mother had a belief in some higher power, but didn't really want to go to church because of the experiences that she had had as a girl. She went to the Pentecostal Holiness Church when she was young and wasn't allowed to wear makeup or pants, and she wasn't even allowed to go to school assemblies, like bookfairs and play go fish. You know, she couldn't do anything really. Um, so she rejected that. My father had a very abusive Catholic school
upbringing and didn't want any part of that. But my sisters and the rest of my extended family became fundamentalists, and um so I knew from pretty much puberty on that like whatever it was that was me was rejected by a lot of the people that I loved.

Anshel: Okay.

Berg: And even though I didn't hold those beliefs personally, um, and I didn't think that I was going to hell if there was such a place, I didn't think that, but I knew that they thought that about me, or would think that about me if they knew all the feelings that I was carrying around inside. Um, so I felt very separated not just from most of my sisters, but also from my extended family which was really important to me on my mother's side. You know, they were from um eastern Kentucky, and I was very steeped in like oral tradition of my family. It was, I knew genealogy, I knew family history, and I felt very much a part of all that. And when I started to wake up to the fact that okay, they really think that whatever I am, be it gay or trans, that I'm an abomination to them.

Anshel: Right.

Berg: Um, and so I felt very separated from these—I felt torn out by the roots, really. I also am figuring out now that like I have a lot of baggage um about God and about religion. Um, it's really hard for me to go to church, and I've tried to go to church a few times. Very liberal, Christian churches, and um, a couple of Buddhist communities, but I just have hang-ups about it. Like so a lot of this was this stuff I was working that in therapy, like a lot of these resentments and um hurt that I honestly still carry around but I'm much more aware of what they are and have ways of coping. Uh but it’s really hard. My family is a really hard subject for me, like um they all voted for Donald Trump, um and that for me was kind of the breaking point. Um, I'm partially estranged from um a good portion of my family now because of—not just, I mean, just the years of trying to be acceptable to them uh and working really hard to like get on their good side and um they're nice people but they're never going to change. And um, and it hurts me very deeply to interact with a lot of them, and so I have minimal interaction with my family now. My mother and my one sister that I mentioned earlier that I'm close to are really the only two people that I interact with on a regular basis.

Anshel: Do they know you've transitioned?

Berg: Yes. And they were actually surprisingly good about it. Um, and we were working towards like, some kind of acceptance. I mean, I'm unconvinced that like, they're full on board with it and fully welcoming. Um and that's the thing. It's like when I walk in, I think any of us when we walk into a space, we can tell the difference between when somebody is just being polite and doing their duty and when they're genuinely happy to have us there. And for the most part when I would go to family gatherings, I never felt that feeling that they're genuinely happy to have me here. I felt like they were being nice to me because I was a blood relative and they had to be nice to me.

Anshel: This is after transition?
Berg: Before and after.

Anshel: Before.

Berg: Before and after.

Anshel: Um, you said something before, I’m going back a little bit—

Berg: Yeah.

Anshel: But therapy helped you transition.

Berg: Yes. Well okay, like I said, my path to transition is very messy and meandering and kind of doubles back on itself a lot. But like basically what started to happen, and really medical problems are the reason I started to transition, because um at about 38, maybe mid-30s, sometime in my mid-30s, um, I started to really start to age noticeably. Up to that point, you know, I think I’d mentioned that I’d been a slow bloomer.

Anshel: Yes.

Berg: And so up to that sort of mid-30s point I’ve been able to—I have this identity as like a twink, you know? And people thought of me as that. And then I started to age, and also to masculinize, and I think part of the reason I was able to somewhat embrace being a gay man was because I had this identity as like sort of an androgynous person, androgynous boy. And I started to masculinize more in my late 30s and into my early 40s. And I just remember, it drove me crazy. Like it hurt so deeply, and at first I thought I’m having a mid-life crisis. Um, and so I said let me throw myself into like really butching up, which is laughable in my case, but like I tried. I really tried. I grew a beard.

Anshel: Mm-hmm.

Berg: I cut my hair really short. I’m starting to get [inaudible] I can’t believe this is [inaudible] me tear up.

Anshel: It’s okay.

Berg: But like I cut my hair really, really short and I grew a beard.

Anshel: Yeah.

Berg: And I started to work out, and I thought I was going to bulk up but it never worked. I could just never get the bulk. I could never get the muscle, and I was just always really rail thin. But I lost a lot of hair in the front, and I went and had a hair transplant and fixed that, but for the most part I was trying to like, I said let me just throw myself into this one more time, you
know? And what ended up happening was that my body started to fall apart. Physically I started to fall apart. Um, I had um severe, severe pain in my pelvic region. Unexplained, crippling pain that at first um the doctors were saying oh you know, it's your prostate, you've got an infection in your prostate, and then they would do these tests and they would say well there's no infection. Uh, go to this other specialist. So I'd go to a different urologist, and people were like sticking their fingers up inside me, and like, and in the meantime I would be trying to function and having really severe, severe pain. And there was just no relief, no relief from it at all. Um, and then at some point somebody said maybe it's stress. Look and see how stressed you are. And um and uh see if the pain tracks the stress, and I started to notice that it was somewhat tracking the stress. It wasn't like a perfect one to one mapping or anything like that but it was pretty—there was some correlation. So at this point I'm in my 40s, I'm in my early 40s, maybe 40, 41, and um sort of unconnected I had the thought of like you know, I'm sick of this, having a beard, and I just you know, let me just stop cutting my hair. And so I stopped cutting my hair and my hair started to grow, and this doesn't make much sense unless I think you were in my shoes, but like my hair grew long enough that I could tuck it behind one ear, and I remember just sitting there staring at myself and just giggling that I could tuck one—my hair behind one ear.

**Anshel:** So it felt good?

**Berg:** It felt so good, and I wasn't thinking oh it feels good because I really think of myself as female. But it just felt so good. And the next time I needed glasses I said, I saw these women's glasses and I said I really want those glasses, and I got these glasses and so I was letting myself like have some more expression of my femininity and at the same time I was dealing with these like major unexplained medical issues.

**Anshel:** So were the medical issues influencing you cutting your beard and all that stuff?

**Berg:** At that point I wasn't making the connection.

**Anshel:** Yeah.

**Berg:** But it's just, like at some point I said you know, this isn't me. This whole beard thing, it's just not me. Like it's not me, I kind of want to have longer hair, let me just grow my hair out. So I was allowing myself these little expressions of femininity. My hair kept getting longer. The pain was really bad. Um, at one point I was doubled over at my desk at work and I was like screaming and had to go home. I started missing work because of the pain. And I decided already that I was going to quit my job because I was burned out and I had a decent amount of money saved.

**Anshel:** What kind of work were you doing?

**Berg:** I was working as a legal secretary at the time. And so I did that. I quit my job, I left work, I was writing a book at the time.
**Anshel:** You were writing a book.

**Berg:** I was writing a novel, which is kind of a side thing. I can come back to it, but um the stress stayed with me and I thought okay, the job is—if I quit the job the stress is going to all go away and I’ll be fine, and it didn’t. And around this same time you know, I had a lot more free time, I had this woman friend that I was hanging around with a lot. My hair was really long like I said and I started wearing a barrette sometimes. And my excuse would be like I’m going to yoga class, I have to pin my hair back in yoga class.

**Anshel:** [Laughter].

**Berg:** And then I would just leave the barrette in, you know? And um one night I was with this woman friend of mine and we were in front of my building saying goodbye. And this man that lived in my building walked past and said good evening ladies, and I remember I just had this jolt of something like just total elation went through my body. And I started to also notice that it really bothered me when I would go into a store and somebody would say what can I do for you chief or dude or bub or you know, mister, or sir. And it was just like these things, I think they've always bothered me, but like, I really started to notice, because I started to get gendered female when my hair grew out. Just randomly it would just happen sometimes, and so—and it would just make me so delighted with happiness. And so I started to think well maybe this issue isn't gone. But I didn’t want it to be there. And so I took the COGIATI Test, which is—

**Anshel:** What’s that?

**Berg:** It's an online psychological test you can take. And it's total BS, it's not really that accurate, but I took it and I was thinking well this is going to tell me that I'm not really trans. And I took the test, and one of the questions was, when you see yourself aging, how does it make you feel to think that you're going to be an old man basically? And it made me feel horrible. Like I just imagined myself getting lowered into a box in a suit, and I just, I couldn't stand the thought. And so I finished up this test and it said, you're a probable transsexual, you need to get immediate assistance with your gender identity issues.

**Anshel:** The test said that?

**Berg:** The test said this. And so I went to a friend of mine who was—not a friend, but an acquaintance, who was a trans woman. I kind of stayed away from trans people because I was afraid of them for a long time. And so I went to this woman and I said can I go to lunch with you? And she said—

**Anshel:** This is a friend?

**Berg:** Sort of. More of an acquaintance.

**Anshel:** Okay.
**Berg:** But yeah, we were friendly. Weren't close, but friendly, and I said to her, I think, I'm not sure but I think I might be a transsexual. And she just looked at me and she said honey, if you think you're a transsexual, you might be a transsexual. You're probably a transsexual. [Laughter]. She's like this is not a club most people are clamoring to get into, so like, she said you know what I would do, she said I would just go to the Gender Identity Project at The Center.

**Anshel:** At the LGTB Center on 13th Street?

**Berg:** Yes. Get a free session, you can explore it with them, but she said I'd say—and she asked me you know, well how is being a gay man for you? And I said I guess it's sort of okay. I guess. She said well that's not exactly a ringing endorsement. [Laughter].

**Anshel:** [Laughter].

**Berg:** And uh, so that's what I did.

**Anshel:** How old were you at this point?

**Berg:** 42.

**Anshel:** 42.

**Berg:** And around the same time my nephew was, uh, my 22 year old nephew was killed in an accident, and it just made me start like realizing that life was really short, you know? And um I was still very nervous about all this. Like I really didn't know at this point that I was really trans, but like I knew that I had to like, follow the breadcrumbs basically. And so that's what I did. I went to the Gender Identity Project and probably by the third session I knew that I was going to start to transition. And I didn't know where it would exactly lead, but I knew that because by this point I'd bought a couple of outfits, and what had miraculously, what had started to happen was that I would go home and I would put a dress on, um, and as soon as I would put a dress on just to hang around in the house, this pain that I'd been suffering would instantly go away.

**Anshel:** The pelvic pain?

**Berg:** The pelvic pain. It was like taking a pill.

**Anshel:** Wow.

**Berg:** It was really fast and complete. And the minute that I would put on men's clothes again and go out into the world, the pain would come back within an hour.

**Anshel:** Wow.
Berg: Um so more and more of my time at home was spent dressed in female clothing, and then occasionally I would go out in public, and the times that I would go out dressed in guy clothes were just unbearable. And it’s like I couldn’t put the genie back in the bottle.

Anshel: When you were um, so you said you went to sessions at the Gender Identity Project—

Berg: Yes, mm-hmm. Eight of them.

Anshel: Right, so exactly, you went to sessions with a particular person.


Anshel: Did you go to the drop-in group?

Berg: No. I went to—initially I didn’t go to any group. Um, I went to the therapy sessions, then she recommended me for the closed group.

Anshel: Yes.

Berg: And I went to that, and I also went to Apicha and got on hormones.

Anshel: Mm-hmm. What’s Apicha?

Berg: It’s a clinic in lower Manhattan.

Anshel: Mm-hmm.

Berg: Um and I got on hormones—

Anshel: For trans people?

Berg: Yes. Well, it’s not just for trans people, but they have a really good program there.

Anshel: Right. Okay.

Berg: Um, and I got on female hormones, and for the first time in my life I felt some calm and some peace.

Anshel: So you started hormones with, you had your own doctor?

Berg: Mm-hmm.

Anshel: At Apicha.

Berg: Under the supervision of my doctor, yes.
Anshel: How did you find out about Apicha? Through—

Berg: Through the Center.

Anshel: Yeah. So that's when you started hormones, so how old were you at that point?

Berg: 42. I was still 42 at the time.

Anshel: So that was when—

Berg: No, actually maybe I was 43. I think it was actually three days after my 43rd birthday that I started.

Anshel: What year was that?


Anshel: Okay.

Berg: Yeah.

Anshel: So that's about 14 years ago?

Berg: No, it's—

Anshel: Oh no, it's—

Berg: It's more like four years ago that I got on hormones.

Anshel: Four years ago. Four years ago. Yeah.

Berg: So it was just like, it was at that point, um, I would say by march or April, I think probably by April of the next year I was living full-time as Margaret.

Anshel: And you started, that was with—so like three months after you started, or? Hormones, or?

Berg: Well like I said, it was um, I mean there was a situation, I had a part-time job for a little while that I was—and it was where I worked previously, and so I was trying to sort of pass myself off as oh, my hair is long because I'm kind of a hippie. And it just was, it was horrific. Like it was once a week and the time that I spent there was like excruciating. And so I just knew I couldn't ever do it again, so at that point I did another purge and I just purged all my clothes that were from my previous life as a boy.
Anshel: Oh.

Berg: I got all, I did the reverse—

Anshel: The reverse purge.

Berg: The reverse of the great purge. Yes, yes, yes. [Laughter]. Um—

Anshel: You’re smiling, [Laughter].

Berg: Mm-hmm. It felt so good to get rid of those clothes.

Anshel: Yeah.

Berg: Um, and so you know, pretty soon after that I did have um, I had facial feminization surgery.

Anshel: Mm-hmm.

Berg: I’m talking a lot—I feel like I’m talking a lot about the medical transition but like—

Anshel: No, you’re talking—

Berg: You know, the social transition I think, see this is the thing that I don’t think I was—I mean, I was somewhat prepared for it, but not really. Was, you know, popular culture really talks a lot about the physical, the surgeries, the medical stuff, as if you just like you sort of like get fed into the machine and you come out like looking like Barbie or something. And like and it’s really very—it’s a messy process and like um and the social parts of it have been for me the most difficult. Like I’m still, I’m still adjusting to and figuring out what it really means to me to live as a woman in the world, and have the world see me as a woman. Um, I don’t know exactly, you can prompt me if you want to, I don’t know exactly where I want to go with that. But there’s so many nuances to like, being accepted into the world of women that like, that just hadn’t really occurred to me because I wasn’t allowed access to those things.

Anshel: How does it feel when you’re in LGBT settings?

Berg: I don’t like it, to be honest. Um, I don’t feel a sense of community that much. Um, I’ve been treated really badly, um, with maybe one exception or two. And you know, again, I don’t want to hate on gay men because I have a lot of gay men in my life that I love, but what happened when I transitioned, when I really started like, it became obvious that I was transitioning and I started telling people that I was transitioning was that doors were kind of quietly closed in my face. And it wasn’t like anybody said we don’t want you around—

Anshel: Who was closing the doors?
Berg: Most of my gay male friends.

Anshel: Okay.

Berg: Just lost—seemed to just lose interest in interacting with me or they started to treat me like um like a doll that they were going to dress up. Like they were trying to get me—tell me what I should wear or shouldn't wear or what kind of makeup I should have on or that I should wear more makeup or less makeup. Um, or they would send me like the latest article about a supermodel who was trans.

Anshel: So they were focusing on the physical.

Berg: They were focusing on the physical, and it's like there was this pressure to adhere to a certain kind of femininity that wasn't me. I mean, they would say things like you dress like a kindergarten teacher. And I actually kind of took that as a compliment, you know? Um, I mean, I liked my fashion sense, I think I dress well and appropriately for a woman my age, um, and whatever that means, I mean, I just dated myself with that whole phrase, but anyway you know, I feel comfortable in my clothes, and I wear what I feel reflects my personality. Um, but when I rejected that advice or like said I don't really want your advice on what to wear, that was—I don't think they took that very well. And some people just disappeared. They didn't even like go that far, like they just sort of disappeared out of my life. Or you know, I would see them in a place where we would normally make plans and go out and I just wouldn't get invited to dinner by anybody.

Anshel: Did you lose anybody really close to you?

Berg: Well, I lost a lot of people who we had been calling ourselves close friends, but some of them were honestly people that now that I look back were really toxic. Like people who were very misogynist and whose misogyny like had hurt me very deeply and who then started to just treat me in ways that I didn't like. And the thing about transitioning, one of the things about it, there are many things about it. But my tolerance for being a doormat has gotten a lot less. And my tolerance for pretending like I like somebody when I don't like them is so much less. If I don't like somebody I just don't even have time for them anymore. Like I mean some people think I'm a little bit too blunt, or that I'm kind of a bitch. But like—

Anshel: So when you say—

Berg: But I actually feel like I have a voice for the first time in my life.

Anshel: Okay.

Berg: You know? In some ways I feel like I'm less stereotypically feminine than I used to be because I used to be very passive and very you know, sort of not speak up. And if I was, you know, if people were cutting me off and interrupting, I would just go oh well, I guess I'm not going to get to say anything. And now I'll be like did you know you just interrupted me? I wasn't
finished talking. You know? I've gotten a lot more assertive, um, because I think I just feel, generally I just feel better about myself than I used to feel.

**Anshel:** You found your voice.

**Berg:** I'm still finding it.

**Anshel:** Yeah.

**Berg:** I mean, I still think I have work to do, you know? Um I'm still finding what my voice is and I'm still figuring out you know who is this person that I am? Like I mean, you know if I'd been born cisgender like my sisters, I would have had some kind of person that I could have called a role model from very early on. But like you know so much of the things that they were learning I wasn’t, I was shut out of. Um, and so I feel like at 42 I just started to figure out what kind of woman I am, you know? Um—

**Anshel:** What about the women in your life? Like lesbians or—

**Berg:** You know, um, I have really deep, close friendships with a lot of women now. Um—

**Anshel:** Lesbian? Cis?

**Berg:** Both.

**Anshel:** Both.

**Berg:** Um, my closest, my best friend, um, probably my closest friend is a lesbian who is cisgender, um, and her partner, I would also call her partner my friend although we're not as close, um, and I also have like, there are two or three women closer to my age um in my neighborhood who are straight, cis women who I’m really deeply close with. Um, and I have a few close trans friends as well.

**Anshel:** That's what I was asking next.

**Berg:** Not a lot, not a lot. Um, you know, I—what I found is that it's hard for me to form friendships. I know a lot of people who form friendships that the glue that holds it together is that they’re both trans. And for me that’s not enough. There has to be like, there has to be more of a clicking that's happening on more levels than just that. So like, I've had friendships that lasted through early transition because we were both helping each other through the process of it, and then once that process was substantially over, then there wasn’t anything left of the friendship. Like, we didn't have anything to talk about. Um, and you know, so I would say more of my friends are cisgender than are transgender.

**Anshel:** Okay. Women.
Berg: And more women than men.

Anshel: Okay.

Berg: Yeah.

Anshel: Yeah.

Berg: Um I found myself, you know, especially in my neighborhood like I found myself really accepted into the fold, like I'm just treated like um like another one of the girls most of the time.

Anshel: So do you, so do you feel part of a community?

Berg: Yes, very much so.

Anshel: What's the community? The trans community?

Berg: No, Inwood.

Anshel: Inwood.

Berg: Inwood Washington Heights, which is where I live.

Anshel: Okay.

Berg: Yeah.

Anshel: So you feel like you fit in in that neighborhood?

Berg: I feel like I fit in, I feel like I'm accepted, in my building, you know? Um, people were incredibly accepting in my building. Um, you know, at first I think they didn't quite know what to think. You know, I was sort of like, very sheltered and very like, I didn't interact with anyone before. Um, except that I had a few unpleasant interactions with one of my upstairs neighbors. I got very angry about the noise that they were making. So their only real exposure to me was this anger that I frequently had when I was pre-transition. You know? I was very like angry and also very I guess the testosterone was like fueling that um as well as just not being—this is pre-transition—

Anshel: Oh.

Berg: I saw you get a puzzled look on your face.

Anshel: Did you transition when you were in Inwood?
Berg: Yes.

Anshel: Oh, okay.

Berg: So like, um, you know, so yeah, people in my building saw me transition.

Anshel: Where you live now?

Berg: Yeah. Mm-hmm.

Anshel: And was it—so you feel comfortable in Inwood, so basically—

Berg: I feel largely pretty—

Anshel: Was it an easy place to transition?

Berg: I mean, I feel as safe as I can feel. I mean, I think the times when I have felt really unsafe have been times when I think any woman would have felt unsafe. Like you know, creepy, kind of stalkerish guys or guys making like lewd comments about you body and things like that.

Anshel: How do you feel on the subways and streets?

Berg: I mean, it's pretty disgusting. Like I think very early on I enjoyed it a little bit because someone would catcall me and I'd realize oh, you know, they see me for the female person that I am.

Anshel: Right.

Berg: Which felt good. But that didn't last. I mean, pretty—and this is one of the social transition things that I was talking about was like that presenting as male, a lot of the things that happen to women, even though I was aware on some intellectual level that yes, these things happen, then when it starts happening to you it's different. And it's really yucky and threatening, and I mean, I've been harassed online, you know, I'm involved in um a sport that is very um male-dominated.

Anshel: May I ask you what sport? Do you want to talk about that?

Berg: I don't really want to talk about that, because I don't want to—I'd rather not go there.

Anshel: Okay. That's fine.

Berg: But this particular competitive sport is very male-dominated, and women that get involved in it frequently deal with a lot of harassment and a lot of discouragement and um both subtle and overt. And um and that's been hard, because this is really part of my identity is my involvement in this activity, in this hobby, and it's like, and so I'm now like just sort of dealing
with like okay, if I'm going to continue doing this, I can't change the way the world is. I have to basically learn to not like necessarily knuckle under to it, but to have some acceptance that this is the way it is right now. But it feels really yucky to be harassed.

Anshel: How were you harassed? Verbally?

Berg: Verbally.

Anshel: Do you feel—

Berg: Online, you know? Verbally.

Anshel: Online.

Berg: Yeah, mm-hmm.

Anshel: Um, do you feel that um, do your worry about being clocked? About being harassed as a trans person?

Berg: I don't, very much.

Anshel: [Inaudible].

Berg: I mean, obviously we all think about it. We all think about it to some degree. I haven't really had that experience very much, like um most of the time I just kind of blend in and people don't notice me. Um so I worry less about being clocked as trans. I worry sometimes about being outing as trans. Um, because that has happened a few times where people have just kind of blundered into outing me, um, in spaces where it's not safe. Um, but as far as me walking around, the biggest worry that I really have is that as a woman, um, people are going to victimize me.

Anshel: Yeah.

Berg: That's the biggest worry that I have.

Anshel: So in terms of uh—so it's basically the kind of oppression you feel is as female.

Berg: Essentially yes.

Anshel: Essentially.

Berg: Which I mean, I realize that in and of itself that is a predicament that a lot of people would like to have. But it's still a predicament, and I—but I do have to say that it comes with it's own problems. I mean, initially when I started to transition I thought I would be stealth.
Anshel: Mm-hmm.

Berg: Um, and I've come to realize that's really a trap of sorts. So I'm not exactly stealth, but I'm very selective about what environments I'm out in. Um and who I choose to tell. Or share it with.

Anshel: Is dating hard?

Berg: It's very hard. Um, I haven't figured out how to do it. Um, I've tried a couple of different ways of doing it. Um, and I'm not very good at online dating period, like it's not a thing that I was ever, I mean, people tell me that I should have been born in 1890 but like, I try to do these modern things and it's like really hard. So like I've tried the tack of like putting it in my profile and trying to just get people who are interested in trans people or who are accepting of trans people, and what I find is, when I did that, what I found happened was that I got a lot of abuse, and I also got a lot of people who were fetishizing me and that didn't feel good. So then I tried not putting it in my profile and taking a policy of I'll go on a date with this person, and if I feel safe enough and if they want a second date, then I'll disclose this and see if they'll, you know, see if they'll have it. And um, and also equally so that I can decide if they're good enough for me, you know? Um, but my experience with that hasn't been great either. Um, I've had a couple of guys take me out on dates and really like me and um have a good time and want to see me again, and then um they disappear after I come out to them. Um, which doesn't feel great, you know? Um, so you know, honestly I've kind of put the whole dating thing on the back burner for now. Um, I don't feel a sense of urgency about it right at the moment. Um, I do definitely want to settle down with someone.

Anshel: You do.

Berg: Um for sure. I've always seen myself as eventually getting married and building a life with somebody. Um, but I'd rather not build a life with somebody than build a life with the wrong person, you know? So I'm kind of just like in a holding pattern right now.

Anshel: Yeah. Do you feel seen by people? As who you are? Do you feel like people see you as you are?

Berg: I feel like people see me as I am. I mean, I think this is the first time in my life when I'm really the same person everywhere. Like, the me that you meet at work is the me that you meet on the street on the weekend, you know? Or—but I think people see me as who I am. I still have a lot of fear of not being seen at all, or not being heard at all, and a lot of that I think comes from a lifetime of being somebody that gets interrupted a lot or talked over a lot. Um, or not listened to when I talk. Um, and that's old stuff to some degree but I think it's also just part of being female is that like people interrupt you and talk over you and don't listen to what you have to say, or people repeat the same thing that you just said and act like it was their idea, you know? So I struggle with that part of being seen, like it's difficult to be in a meeting at work and be trying for like the whole hour to get more thought out and having been cut off the whole time. Um.
Anshel: And you think that's because you're a woman?

Berg: Oh, for sure. For sure. I mean, I think it happened to me before, um, it certainly happened to me in all-male spaces before, but like it happens a lot more now that I have to make a choice between um do I make waves and insist on claiming my part of the conversation? It's this calculus that always has to happen of well, do I want to like rock the boat? Is it worth it? And often I don't. But more and more often I do. Like, I'm doing it more often when I do claim my space, you know? In a conversation.

Anshel: And that has something to do with being more you?

Berg: I think it does. I mean, as I've gained more confidence, um, I've just felt like you know, I need to speak up. Because a lot of times what would happen to me if I don't speak up um you know I'll give you a for instance that like, there was this um indivisible group, so we're politically organizing, this group of women and a few men, and we had our first meeting and I just kept trying to say something and I just kept getting interrupted and I just kept getting interrupted and I just kept getting interrupted, and I never, ever got to say what it was that I wanted to say. And I went home and I just cried. And it hurt for awhile. And um and I realized it sticks with me. When I don't speak up for myself, it sticks with me. And it hurts. And so I'm getting to the place where I'd almost rather have that moment of like risking being seen as like a pushy lady.

Anshel: Mm-hmm.

Berg: Or you know, there's the whole thing of like humorless you know feminist and all that stuff, and it's like you know what? I think I'd rather be that than feel like I didn't claim my space.

Anshel: Do you identify with other movements? With like the feminist movement?

Berg: I very much identify with the feminist movement. I mean, I'm angry. I'm very angry about a lot of things. Um, and I've been angry about a lot of these things for a long time, but I'm just now finding like a voice to say a lot of the things that I'm angry about. Um, you know, I'm very angry about the way that women are being treated you know, by our government and by state governments and um and I'm very fearful about us going backward, you know?

Anshel: Are you worried about um the hatred in the government of trans people?

Berg: Oh yes, everyday. I mean because I can, you know, and the thing is like I can look as inoffensive as I want, and as unobtrusive, but if the government has all my paperwork and they want to create a database of trans people, I'll be in that database because I've changed all my paperwork and documents. And I tried to explain this to my family who voted for Trump.

Anshel: Yes.
**Berg:** You know? And they just, they can't seem to see the danger that they placed me in. You know? With their vote. Um, so I worry about you know, I worry about my safety as a trans person, and I worry about my safety as a woman, and I worry about all the women that I love. You know?

**Anshel:** How about um in the medical world? Do you feel worried?

**Berg:** Hmm?

**Anshel:** How about—do you have good health care and all that stuff?

**Berg:** I mean, at this point I do. Um, but I feel very constrained. Like I have health care through work, and I would honestly like to be a freelancer. There's a lot of uh things that I do on the side that I would like to turn into money, and it's hard because I have to make a decision, well, do I want healthcare? Um, and in a civilized country I just feel like that's ridiculous for a civilized country to be like an artist or a creative person and to not feel like you have the choice to pursue your talents and your gifts that you have been given that you should be giving to the world, you know? Um, to not have that be taken seriously enough so that you don't have health care, you know?

**Anshel:** And that's as a woman and a trans woman.

**Berg:** As a woman, as a trans person, and as an artist, you know? Um, it's you know, I worry about a lot of these things. I thought about leaving the country, to be honest.

**Anshel:** Yeah.

**Berg:** Seriously thought about it, yes. And may still do. Depending on what happens politically here, may still do.

**Anshel:** So economics plays into this too.

**Berg:** Economics plays into it. I mean, I've been blessed in a lot of ways. I mean, I'm not—I struggle financially, but I have enough uh left over from my previous life that if I have to get out I can get out. Um—

**Anshel:** You have skills.

**Berg:** I have skills and I have a little bit of money left, you know? What I would call like my retirement funds that are left over. So that if I really did have to leave I could leave. Um, but you know, that's another whole thing is like, you know, when I transitioned I lost any access to my previous career.

**Anshel:** You did?
**Berg:** Um, I mean when I really announced—when I let my previous employer know that I had transitioned, you know, they toyed around with hiring me back and then they sort of just like went radio silent. And I never could prove that it had to do with me being trans, but in my bones I know that it did. Um, and I lost a large network of professional contacts and um, so the likelihood is I'll never be able to make the kind of money that I used to make or be as economically sound as I used to be. Um, I'll probably always just get by. Um—

**Anshel:** Because?

**Berg:** I mean, I don't know, of course you can't really say that. That's kind of projecting, but um I don't see, because I don't think—I don't see myself rejoining the corporate world, you know?

**Anshel:** I was going to ask you, do you want to go back to what you used to do?

**Berg:** I don't want to go back to it.

**Anshel:** What do you want to do in your life? What do you see yourself doing? You talked about—

**Berg:** Well, I work in music, and um, music is my real passion.

**Anshel:** Uh-huh.

**Berg:** And um—

**Anshel:** As an artist, then?

**Berg:** Yes, um, music is my passion. And I have actually, you know, I have done some work in the music world and I do have contacts in the music world, but my um my field is very specialized and it's hard to just make a living at it, you know? Um, I've definitely done some lecturing and things like that and I've had some things published, um, but I haven't really like figured out how to make a living at it.

**Anshel:** Yeah.

**Berg:** Um and I'm not mentioning specifics because I'm not really out in the music world either.

**Anshel:** You're not.

**Berg:** I'm not. To a few people but not really.

**Anshel:** So, I hear that. I hear that. Does that—

**Berg:** It's not out of fear. It's more out of just, it's not relevant, and to an extent like when I tell someone I'm trans that becomes what I am to them.
Anshel: Mm-hmm.

Berg: And oddly enough to me it's just not that interesting. Like, it's interesting in the sense that not everybody goes that what I've gone through, but to me it's just like, oh yeah, I'm trans. I'm a trans woman. Like it's like not, it's not the central fact of my life, um, it affects every part of my life but it's sort of to me it's just like I don't even want to talk about it that much really. Um—

Anshel: So do you still feel like you're um, well you talked about being—there are some things that are a work in progress. You're still working on some of that.

Berg: Oh yes, many things.

Anshel: Inner things and outer things.

Berg: Inner things, outer things. I mean, I'm trying to figure out how I want to make my living, I'm trying to figure out where I want to live, I'm trying to figure out who I want to date, I'm just—there's so many things up in the air right now. I recently said to somebody you know, because I just had um, you know, a year ago I had um gender confirming surgery, and um and I said to someone recently like you know, I feel like I've gotten out of jail and I've just been dumped on the corner with $100 and the clothes on my back, and I don't know what to do with myself. Um, there's all this possibly but I'm also 46. And it's like, I don't have the same range of choices that I had when I was 20. Um, so I'm kind of, I mean, I'm as confident as I've ever been of who I am, but I'm also kind of a blank slate. And I don't know what I'm going to do next with my body next, you know? Like what am I going to—I don't mean medically, I mean, like, where am I going to go, what am I going to direct my efforts towards? Um, there's just a lot of uncertainty and sometimes it's a little overwhelming to be so uncertain about so many things.

Anshel: So now you're a woman.

Berg: Yeah.

Anshel: And you got there.

Berg: Well, I think I always was, but—

Anshel: You always were.

Berg: I always was, yeah. I always was. But now I feel like, you know, I'm not walking around with this lump in my pants that I don't want it to be there. Um, I mean, that was always like a distraction, you know? It was always like this thing that I was kind of like constantly aware of. Um, and it's gone, and I'm delighted that it's gone. I haven't missed it for a second. Um, and like a lot of those kind of distractions are gone. And so like now I feel like I'm working on the real problems you know? Um, what I want to be when I grow up, you know? It's—
Anshel: If there were less problems in the country, would you feel more comfortable?

Berg: Well I did feel comfortable up until November 9, basically. I felt, I really was—

Anshel: When Trump got elected.

Berg: Yes, when Trump got elected, I mean, I don’t know that any event in my entire life has traumatized me as much or more than that traumatized me. Um, because it really felt like there was no safe place to go in the world.

Anshel: Mm-hmm.

Berg: Um, and it still feels like that. It’s really the gift that keeps on giving, you know? It’s like every day some new piece of news comes out, and some of it has to do with trans people and the rest of it has to do with people I love and care about and work with and um and other people that I don’t know, but that I still care about. Um, and it all makes me very sad. Like I don’t understand the lack of empathy that a large portion of the people in my family and in this country have. Like, there’s empathy for those very closest to them, but not anyone else. Everybody else can go jump in the lake as far as they’re concerned. And I just don’t understand it. But I’m very afraid, yes. I mean, and um and very on edge all the time.

Anshel: That contributes to your thoughts about leaving the country?

Berg: Well, it’s just something that I’ve thought about and um—

Anshel: It’s in the mix.

Berg: It’s in the mix. I mean, I’ve talked about it with certain loved ones I’ve talked about it and um and made some plans for should it become necessary but not acting on it.

Anshel: So you’re figuring it out.

Berg: Figuring it out, yeah. Um, and figuring out like what country would I want to go to and all that stuff.

Anshel: Yeah.

Berg: But anyway.

Anshel: So what feels good?

Berg: What feels good? Um, there’s so many things. I mean, like using cold cream feels good.

Anshel: [Laughter].
Berg: Um, that was one of my big—I mean, I think there's a lot of like um there's a lot of focus on what's awful about being trans and to me like there's so much joy, there's been so much joy in it, and I continue to have that. Um, in-between the problems it's like I just sometimes I'll become really hyper aware that like oh my gosh, I'm moving through the world as myself, and I don't have to hide and I can you know, I remember when I was in high school, like I would wait for my parents to leave, and I would go and like, get in my mom's clothing drawers and closets and I would map everything out where it was, and then I would dress, and then I would enjoy that for like a few, you know, maybe half an hour. And I would frantically put everything back and clean myself up and be nervous for a day about being discovered and um and I remember like having this pair of shoes that when I was 16 I bought a pair of shoes at Payless and hiding those shoes all over the house, never being happy with the hiding place, and then finally throwing them in a ravine because I was just, it was like the telltale heart or something, you know? I could just hear them like pounding away. And it's like now I just get to come to work in whatever I want, you know? I get to go to the grocery store in whatever I want. And it's this beautiful feeling of just like just of authenticity, you know? Um, it's a wonderful feeling, and sometimes I forget about it. I forget, like I take it for granted sometimes now, but then other times, it's like wow, I'm living the dream in a lot of ways. I mean, it's—sometimes it's a nightmare but it's like I'm living the dream, um, and I never—if you had told me that I would be where I am 10 years ago I would have just said you're crazy. That will never happen.

Anshel: And now that it has?

Berg: I could never go back. Like I can’t. Every once in awhile, I'll be walking through the men's department, and I used to run through the lady's department like it was on fire, you know? But um I'll be walking through the men's department and I'll think huh, these clothes really suck. [Laughter].

Anshel: [Laughter].

Berg: You know? Like I can't imagine wearing these clothes. Like how did I stand it? Um, yeah. So it's nice. You know?

Anshel: Anything else? Hope?

Berg: Hope. I mean, you know, I don't even want to project because I feel like whatever, whenever I've like had hopes for myself, whatever they were, the future looked nothing like those things. In some way or another, like it just didn't look anything like that. um, and so I don't know. I'm just excited to get on with my life, you know? And um I'm a little intimidated, you know? Because it's like I have problems in areas where I didn't used to have areas. [Laughter].

Anshel: But you have—
Berg: Yeah, it's like, you know, I'm more excited but also scared, you know, of what the future holds. Um.

Anshel: What's the excitement?

Berg: I think the excitement is just like the possibilities that there are, um, the scared part is with my age, you know?

Anshel: Mm-hmm.

Berg: How much time do I really have left and can I really accomplish some of the things that would really be fulfilling in that time. I'm, I think there's a sense of like my clock is ticking. Um, I worry about finding a husband. I'm excited about it, but I'm also worried about it. Um, and one of the things that I didn't really mention was how much I was helped, um, and part of the reason I decided to do this interview at all, because I'm not usually, I don't usually like to talk about myself this much at length. But one of the things that really helped me a lot, um, when I was considering whether to transition and then starting to, and then early in the process was, that there were trans people who made like YouTube videos and who took time out of their day to talk to me, um, and give me advice and um whatnot. And so I'm kind of hoping that maybe somebody identifies with something I've said. Um, or that there's some piece of information in what I've said that somebody relates to or somebody can get a use out of, um, because I mean, I've led this really messy life. And I think sometimes the only way to redeem [Laughter] to redeem that is if you manage to make it through, you pass that on. I don't know if that makes any sense, but if you pass it on that you can make it through. Um, I mean, I've survived two suicide attempts. One when I was 18 and one when I was like 22. Um and if I had succeeded I think I would have been killing the wrong person. And if that helps somebody, like, you know, a lot of us, you, you know, we go through those times, and you know, I've gone through just a lot of difficult things and I'm on my way out, I feel like the other side of some of those things. So like yeah, I just—I really wanted to like, I wanted this to be something that maybe somebody else would find use or value for themselves in something that I've said. So that's my hope.

Anshel: So that's something—that's part of the reason you're doing this, that that's how you want to be remembered because you're sharing your experience.

Berg: Basically yeah. For whatever it's worth. I mean, somebody may, I mean, I realized that like I grew up in a different generation and that I don't have a lot of the—I don't have a lot of the language or um conceptual framework that a lot of younger people on the trans spectrum have, you know? And so some of what I say might sound a little antiquated, but it's where I come from. It's like what my experience personally is. And I think it's amazing that there are so many options available today, you know? And that people are staking out these positions that we didn't even know existed, you know?

Anshel: Mm-hmm.
Berg: Um, but maybe something I've said is going to be valuable even to somebody who is younger. I don't know. And there's a lot of older people who I mean, I'd certainly given up hope that I would ever transition, and you know, here I am.

Anshel: Yeah. Here you are.

Berg: Here I am. So that's it.

Anshel: That's it?

Berg: That's all I want to say really. Yeah.

Anshel: Okay. Thank you.

Berg: Thank you.

Anshel: Thank you for doing this. It was good.

Berg: My pleasure.

Anshel: I enjoyed the interview and talking to you.

Berg: Thank you.