NEW YORK CITY TRANS ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

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INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

T. MIKE ALTAMAR

Interviewer: Lorenzo Van Ness

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Lorenzo Van Ness: Uh, hello, my name is Lorenzo Van Ness, and I will be having a conversation with Mike Altamar for the New York City Trans Oral History Project in collaboration with the New York Public Library's Community Oral History Project. Um, this is an oral history project centered on the experiences of trans-identifying people. This is March 23, 2017, and this is being recorded at Mike's home. All right, great. So, Mike, would you—well, will you tell me your name and age?

T. Mike Altamar: [chuckles] Sure, my name is Mike Altamar, and I'm 25 years old.

Van Ness: Okay, and what are your gender pronouns?

Altamar: My pronouns are he/him/his and ze/hir/hirs.

Van Ness: Okay, and, um, how would you describe your gender?

Altamar: Um, [chuckles] it's been a process. Um, usually I call myself a trans man, but I also identify as bi-gender because I feel both male and neutral.

Van Ness: Okay, cool. And, um, where—uh, when and where were you born?

Altamar: I was born right here, Queens, New York, uh, 1991.

Van Ness: Okay, cool. How long have you lived in Queens?

Altamar: Mm, my whole life. [chuckles]

Van Ness: [chuckles] Um, how has it changed over the years?

Altamar: Um, it's been—it's been interesting. Um, you know, people—people come, people go, um, but you still see a lot of the same, you know, families from when I was growing up in the area too. Um, obviously, like, the stores have changed. This year we've started getting some, like, bigger, you know, name-brand stores, which is kind of scary, feeling the, you know, the pre-effects of gentrification. Yeah.

Van Ness: Yeah. What, uh—is there, um, something that you miss about, like, the way your neighborhood used to be or something like that?

Altamar: Um, yeah. I mean, I feel like when I was younger, people talked to each other more. And I think people still sometimes do, but some folks just kind of, like, stay in their house and kind of isolate.

Van Ness: Mm-hmm.

Altamar: Yeah.

Van Ness: Why do you think people isolate?
**Altamar:** Um, I mean, I think people sometimes are, like, you know, worried about safety maybe, or, um, they just don't know who, you know, who's on the block sometimes.

**Van Ness:** Mm-hmm.

**Altamar:** Um, or, you know, different things that have happened in the neighborhood. Um, and sometimes I think the white people are afraid to just go outdoors [laughter] at night.

**Van Ness:** Yeah.

**Altamar:** Yeah.

**Van Ness:** That's real. Um, are there any, like, characters from the neighborhood that you remember...

**Altamar:** Oh Lord.

**Van Ness:** ...that are to be noted?

**Altamar:** Of course [laughter]. Um, I feel like in certain houses, no matter who moves there, they're like always [laughter] that character, and I don't know why. Um, like people on one side of my house have always been like really religious, like there's been a pastor, and there's a family that, like, you hear them playing, like, choir music like every day, like on an actual piano. And like no matter who lives there, they're always religious. And then [clears throat] on the other side, you have people like—who are kind of scary and, like, watch you all day [laughter], and you don't know about them, but they know about you.

**Van Ness:** Oh. Sounds creepy.

**Altamar:** And then there's other—yeah, a little bit [chuckles]. There's been, you know, a wide range of characters too.

**Van Ness:** Is there anyone who's lived on the block for a long time?

**Altamar:** Um, well, me. [laughter]

**Van Ness:** Ah. Anyone else?

**Altamar:** Um, yeah, so there's somebody across the street that, um, I think my father was his best man.

**Van Ness:** Cool.
Altamar: And the mother—the mother of the guy, you know, still lives there, has been there my whole childhood. And, um, a couple other people. Yeah.

Van Ness: Mm-hmm. And how would you describe your childhood?

Altamar: Um, a roller coaster. [chuckles]

Van Ness: Mm-hmm. Tell me more.

Altamar: So there was a lot of ups and downs, you know. It was kind of—I kind of always felt like I didn’t really fit in anywhere. Um, so like on the one hand, I did fit into my neighborhood because, you know, there’s, like, the bodegas and then you have, like, the Arab delis, and you have like all these people and very close family connections. Like the one bodega owner, his sister’s child, my mom is the godmother. So, like, there’s [clears throat]—there’s a lot of like very close connections there. People, like, recognize me and stuff. But then I also felt like I didn’t fit in a lot because of how I expressed myself as a kid, in terms of my gender. Like there wasn’t really any space for me to express that. And, you know, especially with all the churches and growing up in a religious environment, like that was kind of a—you know, it was a tension.

Van Ness: Mm-hmm.

Altamar: Yeah.

Van Ness: What’s, um, one of the earliest things that you remember, like earliest memories?

Altamar: Oh Lord [chuckles]. Um—some of my earliest memories, I think, was me arguing about what clothes I wanted to wear. Um, and I know that might come off as like a little stereotypical or whatever, but like, that’s—that’s just how it was for me. So like me wanting to wear, like, boys’ Halloween costumes, and then getting in trouble because I wanted to run around, you know, with my shirt off, and [clears throat]—and then also like, you know, spending birthdays and holidays with my family in Colombia and—and my grandparents, you know, my grandfather, who was a big role model for me when I was a kid. Yeah.

Van Ness: Tell me more about your grandfather.

Altamar: Um, his name was Edgardo, which I chose as my middle name [chuckles]. And, um, he and my grandma met, you know, when they were living in Colombia, in Barranquilla. And he definitely spoiled me. You know, he died when I was like maybe 9 or 10. [clears throat]

Van Ness: Oh, wow.

Altamar: Yeah. So that was really rough, but I felt like he was a big role model for me because he was very, like, sweet and gentle. He wasn’t, you know, kind of the way my father was sometimes. So he had like, you know, a hidden, like, treasure trove of candy or different things
that he'd give out to me, um, you know, whenever there was something tough going on, so that was very helpful.

**Van Ness:** Great. Um, what are other memories that you have of your grandfather?

**Altamar:** Um, well, there were times that, like, my father would leave the house and he would tell us, like—tell my grandparents that they couldn't—you know, they had to watch us; we couldn't leave the house or anything. But he and my grandma would still, like, sneak us out and drive us, like, to the Burger King, um, and just not tell anybody. Yeah, I remember him like always laughing, and he talked like kind of funny. He had like this kind of like stutter thing, and, uh... And he smoked cigarettes, so it was kind of weird, like after he died, sometimes we'd still smell cigarettes in the house, and like, my mom and my grandma would say that it was his spirit, like, watching over us, so...

**Van Ness:** Hmm. And did he live here, or was it your other grandpa?

**Altamar:** Yeah, he lived here.

**Van Ness:** Okay. Wow, cool. Um, what was the rest of your family like? Like your parents, your siblings, your other grandparents...

**Altamar:** Yeah. Well, all my grandparents are from Colombia, and, you know, my mother's parents, like I said, moved over here, but my father's parents are still over there. Um, my father’s mother came over here for like a year, but then she went back to Colombia. And my father's father, I met once when I was 3, I'm told. Um, my father didn't want me to meet him, but my grandma on my mom's side, like, snuck me out to meet him [chuckles], because she felt like no matter what, people should know their, you know, know their family and their grandchildren. Um...

**Van Ness:** Do you know why he didn't want you to meet them?

**Altamar:** I think there's like—there's daddy issues that run in the family [chuckles], so...

**Van Ness:** Okay.

**Altamar:** It's kind of funny how history repeats itself, but yeah.

**Van Ness:** [chuckles] Yeah.

**Altamar:** Yeah.

**Van Ness:** And what about your parents and your mom and your siblings?

**Altamar:** Um, well, my mom still lives in the area. I—you know, we moved out of my grandma's house when I was around 17. I was the last person. I was like the holdout, but I finally moved
out, you know, with her, my younger brother, and my father. Um, and, you know, it was kind of hard for my mom when I came out, because I’d come out multiple times as, you know, different things while I was finding out, like, all these shiny new words that existed for what I could be. So by the time I came out as trans, I think it was kind of hard for, you know, for my family to believe that I was X, Y, or Z, because I had already, you know, said that I was bi and then said that I was gay and then said that I was a cross-dresser, but... You know, there was a lot of stuff about religion that would come up, but I think—you know, my—one of my aunt and uncles had a really hard time with me coming out as trans, and I think it was after that happened that my mom, you know, kind of started to change how she—how she felt about me transitioning, because she felt the need to, like, defend me.

Van Ness: Mm.

Altamar: Um, so, you know, she would ask questions, and I think the more that my family asks me questions and tries to understand, like the more they become sensitive to it. Um, [clears throat] my father, I don’t talk to as much. He was born in Colombia, and then, you know, he lived here until I was like 17 or something, and then he moved back to Colombia, and I didn’t talk to him for like five years, you know, up until like relatively recently. Because there was just like a lot of issues that are going on, and there’s, you know, a lot of stuff that happened like in my childhood and when I was older that was pretty messed up, so I just didn’t really feel the need to interact with him.

Van Ness: Mm-hmm.

Altamar: Um, so it’s been weird, like now that I’ve started to occasionally, like, go down to visit or whatever. Um, and my younger brother is—he’s always been accepting of me being trans, like to the point that—because like, I came out 10 years ago, so I feel like I’m a million [laughter] in, like, trans years sometimes, but... He was a little kid, and apparently, like, his pediatrician was telling my mom that it wasn’t normal how easily he was accepting my gender, which was kind of frustrating to me. But you know, he uses my pronouns and he uses my name, so we have our differences, but it’s unrelated to my gender.

Van Ness: Hmm. Mm-hmm.

Altamar: Yeah.

Van Ness: Um, what was it like growing up with your brother?

Altamar: Um, can you curse? [laughter]

Van Ness: Or what is it still like? Yeah, you can curse. [laughter]

Altamar: Um—[laughter] He—I mean, I think we’re both kind of a pain in each other’s asses, so...
**Van Ness:** Yeah.

**Altamar:** Um, we would fight all the time, like sometimes play-fighting, but sometimes it would get out of hand, like, you know, being little kids. He's like four years younger than me, so, um... But we still, like, found a lot of things to get along about, and we have, you know, similar interests and... But then I also feel like it was—it's been kind of hard sometimes because he had to deal a lot more with, like, you know, the abuse when we were younger, so I feel like that's taken more of a direct toll on him. And in like really complicated ways, I feel like that pushes us apart sometimes.

**Van Ness:** Mm. What, uh—what kind of things were you into or interested in as a kid?

**Altamar:** Um, I was really into writing. I thought I was going to be an author somehow, even though I have like no attention span. [laughter]

**Van Ness:** [laughter]

**Altamar:** Um, I was always really into music, into like trying to predict who was going to blow up and whatever. I wanted to be random stuff, like I wanted to be a DJ; I wanted to be a professional checkers player; I wanted to be a teacher, because, you know, my mom's like, um, a day-care teacher. And mostly I wanted to, like, be a counselor and be a therapist and, like, help other people deal with things that I was going through at that age and help families. But yeah, I was, you know, starting to learn guitar at one point and trying to learn piano. I feel like doing things with my hands was really helpful to me.

**Van Ness:** Are you really good at playing checkers?

**Altamar:** I was. [laughter]

**Van Ness:** [laughter]

**Altamar:** I mean, I need to find out again, but I used to, like, sit down with my grandma in her room, you know, every night, and we would, like, play each other, and I was—I was very intense about that, and chess sometimes, and—yeah.

**Van Ness:** You said you wanted to, um, be, like, a counselor so that you could help other folks who might be going through similar things. Did you have someone who helped you or someone who helps you now or, like—yeah. Who were—who were some of those people in your life? Who were Mike's? [laughter]

**Altamar:** [laughter] Oh, that's a great question. I feel like, you know, it's been a lot of people. Um, it hasn't just been one person. Um, because I've been a part of like a lot of different youth programs in the city...

**Van Ness:** Mm-hmm.
Altamar: ...so I met a lot of really great, you know, adult role models, um, going to places like HMI [Hetrick-Martin Institute]; the Door; um, at the Center when it was called the Y.E.S. [Youth Employment Services] Program formerly; now it’s Center Youth; New Alternatives; [clears throat] the HOTT [Health Outreach to Teens] program at Callen-Lorde [chuckles]. So I definitely—well, I’ve had great therapists. You know, at first I didn’t have any faith in counseling because, first of all, like, you know, cultural values about therapy, and like, I was raised to see that social workers are there to, like, take kids away from their families, so don’t talk. But when I started to, you know, be old enough to, like, travel to the city on my own and see what resources there were outside of my area, because I didn’t really feel like there was anything, you know, here... [clears throat] You know, I also had like this Christian therapist that was trying to tell me that I was a sinner or something. It made no sense. So I've worked through a lot of that with this really great counselor from HMI [laughter] who, you know, helped me deal with all types of things—with homelessness and with dropping out of college and with, like, substances and with depression and, you know, with my, like, PTSD and all—you know, things like that. It was also really great to see sometimes when there was a trans person working at one of these agencies, to see that, like, we could have a place in helping others, you know?

Van Ness: Mm-hmm. Um, in terms of like, uh, I guess your relationship with other, like, transgender or non-conforming people, how would you describe it, or what is your relationship with other TGNC folks?

Altamar: Um, I feel like I only know trans people. [laughter]

Van Ness: [laughter] Hi, everybody. [laughter]

Altamar: I feel like I don't really know any cis people, especially, like, straight cis people. Um, it wasn't really intentional; it's just how it's, I guess, happened. I don't know. Um, [clears throat] but I think it's happened that way because it's nice to see yourself reflected in somebody else and not feel like you have to justify or constantly, you know, defend yourself. So it's just like a family, like anything else, you know. You have your family of origin sometimes, and then you have your chosen family and then people that are—you know, like you have to be there for each other when there's all these gaps in services and gaps with your, you know, your given family and everything else. I feel like you have to help each other, you know, survive, so... I also feel like I have a lot of role models in my friends group [chuckles]. And it's nice to, like, be able to work on things with each other. Yeah.

Van Ness: Um, let's see. What does it mean for you to be yourself, or to be, like, authentic or whatever?

Altamar: Um, I think it means to not give a shit about what other people think, but also keeping in mind, like, to not feel guilty if there are certain things that you can't express at certain times, like for safety and, you know, employment or being on the street or whatever. Um, but I think that ideally, like all of that aside, being yourself means that you feel happy and that you feel
like how you see yourself on the inside is reflected on the outside and reflected in other people's perception of you.

Van Ness: Mm-hmm. And, uh, how do you think other people perceive you?

Altamar: Um, that's been a trip [laughter]. I think it changes all the time. It's really funny, like [clears throat]—like before I went on T, um, some people, you know, would see me as a dyke and would, like, make all these comments and think that, you know, because you're speaking Spanish, I don't understand, but like, I understand everything [laughter]. So like—like one time somebody was talking about like the marimacho over there, and I'm like, "I know exactly what..." you know? So I would get like a lot of harassment sometimes—people perceiving me as like a masculine female. But then after going on T, like I would have people calling me a faggot on the streets, so it's like I couldn't, you know, win either way. So that's been kind of frustrating. Like there's still a lot of gender policing either way, and I've also in the past, like earlier on on T, had people standing right next to each other and using different pronouns for me. So I think, like, it really—it depends on the person. You know, a lot of times I get called "he," but then sometimes I get called "she" even by other, like, queer, gender non-conforming people. So I feel like it changes all the time. I do know, like, it's—like I started hormones low dose because I needed to know how to adjust, you know, to, like, receiving more male privilege or whatever, and it was kind of sad for me to see, like, myself being perceived as a threat more and more, like people looking over their shoulder if I'm walking behind you, and learning how to cope with that more. And then also learning, like, if I'm painting my nails, there's going to be a problem with that, you know. So there's like so much to be on top of. Yeah.

Van Ness: Can you talk more about that, like in terms of, like, things that you've perceived about before you were on T and after, and like when you're perceived masculinely and when you're perceived femininely, like how people react to you differently and stuff like that? I don't know.

Altamar: Mm-hmm. Um, I mean, even before being on T, like I would, like I said, get a lot of, you know, like anti-lesbian harassment.

Van Ness: Mm-hmm.

Altamar: Um, and that's on some days, and then on other days I would be perceived as a guy, so it was really like a case-by-case basis. Um, I—like one time I was in a store, and somebody was, like, asking me for my bag, like to check my bag at the door first, and then they were like, "Sir, sir," and like, I was afraid to respond because I was with my mom, and she was, like, mad still, you know, about me coming out. And then like, I had medium-length hair, so, I don't know, he then started calling me ma'am, and then like, him and the other person were laughing about, like, I guess, you know, the difference and not knowing what I was.

Van Ness: Hmm.
**Altamar:** Um, [clears throat] I had one—these two guys on the train, before I was on T but I still, like, had short hair and everything, kind of sexually harassing me, like rubbing their genitals and everything, like thinking that they were being cute. And, um, you know, I'd get yelled at if I was walking with a partner, like “Who's the man, who's the woman?” like all those types of things. [clears throat] And then being on T, like, has, I guess, given me—made it a little bit easier for me to blend in sometimes when I want to. So like if I feel that I won't be respected somewhere if I express myself more feminine now, like I still have the option to not paint my nails; I still have the option to, you know, to cut my hair short even though I've been growing it out and... [clears throat] It kind of feels like it's always a balancing act and—which is kind of sad, because I've only felt more comfortable expressing my femininity, like, since being on hormones longer. But now like obviously there's still, like, repercussions for, you know, having a mustache and then wearing bright colors or whatever. And I've had people perceive me as a trans woman or, like, as a gay cis man and then, you know, get comments based off of that. So it's just really frustrating, like I would like to express myself however I feel that day and... But there's also nothing wrong with doing what you have to do in certain situations, you know.

**Van Ness:** Um, when did you, like, first start questioning, like, gender, and also just when did you start thinking about social justice and, like, you know, impression and all these things. Like you mentioned you came out a bunch of times. [chuckles]

**Altamar:** Yeah [laughter]. Yup. Um, I guess I first—well, I kind of always felt weird in terms of, like, how I wanted to express my gender, and like I didn't understand why I was getting so much pushback for it, like even as a little kid. Like I said, with Halloween costumes, if I wanted to be Zorro or I wanted to be Harry Potter, like “No, you have to be, like, Hermione or Harriet Potter” or like some shit that made no sense. And—[laughter]

**Van Ness:** Harriet Potter.

**Altamar:** Yeah. Or like, um, [clears throat] when I was a little kid, I would fight a lot about Easter, and I wanted to wear pants and not a dress, and like, it took me years upon years of arguing to be allowed to wear pants, so... Like definitely, maybe when I was around 8, I know I started, um, telling my mom that I wanted to be a boy, and she didn't understand why. And I didn't understand why, but you know, those types of comments would just fly out of my mouth sometimes, because I just—it just felt right. And I think when I was in eighth grade, I started doing research, and there was so much less information back in like 2004 or whatever, [chuckles] you know? So I saw, like, “cross-dresser” and, you know, I would try on my little brother's clothes, because I was really thin and I could fit into his 4-year-old clothes. Um...

**Van Ness:** [laughter]

**Altamar:** [clears throat] And I just noticed, like, how much calmer I felt.

**Van Ness:** Mm.
Altamar: Um, and I don't know, I was really worried, like, that Jesus was going to hate me [chuckles]. Um, because like, I was seriously religious as a kid, but...

Van Ness: What, uh, religion?

Altamar: Catholic.

Van Ness: Mm.

Altamar: Yeah, I wanted to, like—when I was in second grade, I wanted to be a nun. Like I would—I wouldn't play house; I would play church. Like, it was a lot, you know? [chuckles]

Van Ness: Whoa.

Altamar: So for me to feel like—like “Oh, now I'm going to get hit with lightning” was like, you know—was really hard. Um, and then like once I was in high school, I think I started to find these other words like “transgender” and “transsexual” and was like, “Oh, maybe I'm not just a cross-dresser. Like maybe, like, I'm trans. Maybe I'm a boy.” And then in high school, too, like—I went to a Catholic school, and you know, seeing all this stuff, like learning about religion but they would leave out the Crusades—like, that brought up a lot of issues for me and my friends, because that made me realize that, like, history can be selective about, you know, about its viewpoint. Um, and that also—you know, in addition to not understanding, like, “Why do I like girls? Like, why do I like wearing pants and whatever?”—like made me realize that there was so much out there, you know, outside of my immediate 10 blocks that I spent my whole life in, you know.

Van Ness: Um, wow.

Altamar: Yeah.

Van Ness: How would you say you understand gender right now?

Altamar: Um, I don't. [laughter]

Van Ness: [laughter]

Altamar: I mean, I feel—I feel like gender is what you feel and is how you see yourself. Like to me it's frustrating when people say that gender and gender identity is separate, because it makes it sound like—like when it comes to laws or whatever, like gender identity, separating that from, like, just gender makes it sound like “Oh, it's just an identity. It's just, like, in your head.” Um, but I feel like gender is just how you see yourself, and like, maybe it's not how other people see you, but it's what you know yourself to be. And I also know that gender is different in every culture, in every place. Like I would teach, um—you know, in my last job I was doing health education. And before starting, like, the actual sex ed and harm reduction with drugs and whatever, I would talk about, like, “These are the words I'm going to use for bodies,” and
like, you know, “Gender isn't necessarily just binary. Like there's cultures and countries and societies with three, four, five genders, like there's so much more.” So I feel like we can't just say, you know, “It's man or woman.” Like that's really Western perspective to me. And I know, like, some people feel like gender does not exist, but I feel like the repercussions for it are definitely very real. But I also feel like we need to be careful when we say things like “gender doesn't exist” or “gender is over” or, like, you know, “eliminate all gender,” because there's people that I've seen who gender's spiritual for them, you know, in other cultures and in places where it's not coming from a Western perspective. So to me sometimes when people say, like, eliminating gender, I kind of see that as like almost colonial, like eliminate, you know, this society's perception of their place for all these different genders, you know. So I feel like gender should be expanded; there should be more options for everybody. And it’s okay, like, if you don't feel that gender fits for you, but it’s very—it’s very individual. Yeah.

Van Ness: Can you tell me more about—you mentioned your old job. What did you do? Who are you?

Altamar: [laughter] Who am I? Uh, my old job, I was a community health educator and parent-engagement specialist.

Van Ness: Whoa.

Altamar: Yeah. Um, so, what that means is mostly I was teaching sex ed, um, grades 6 through 12, talking about, you know, anatomy; harm reduction with drugs; you know, stress; like, quote-unquote, “life skills”; “here's how to do your résumé”; “here's how to use protection.” But also, I was very focused on specific resources, because I feel like the curriculums we had to use were just like, you know, “shake your finger at these kids,” and that's it. But I did a lot, I feel, as far as, like, resources and connecting kids to resources. Like I also did a lot of clinic escorts, so I would make, you know, young people’s appointments and go with them if they were scared. You know, made sure they had a ride. I would stay with them until the end, like, schedule their follow-ups. I made a lot of, like, linkages and MOUs, so I was—I did a lot of, like, partnerships with other clinics and agencies to make sure that, you know, these young people had a path to whatever services they needed, and like even if my program ended—which it did; we lost funding—they would still, you know, recognize the space if they went to the clinic. And I did a lot of, like, random stuff outside my job description too. Like I was the main person who ordered, you know, condoms and dental dams and made safer-sex kits. And I would also order random stuff for the parent-engagement side of it, like these coloring books for kids, like activity books about, like, HIV and AIDS, you know, for third graders or whatever, and distribute those. Do parent-child communication workshops bilingually, English and Spanish, for parents at high schools or, you know, parents of the Early Head Start programs. Sometimes doing mediation between, you know, parent and child when there was a conflict about their relationship or if a kid was worried about coming out. And I worked very closely with the LGBT program there because, you know, that's where I started as a peer educator, in the same agency, and we worked in the same room, so I also helped develop a program for trans youths of color, trans and gender non-conforming youths of color. You know, I developed the draft budget [chuckles] and program proposal—you know, schedule, job descriptions, et cetera. And
then, you know, they received the grant, which was exciting. But since I don't have a college degree, I wouldn't be able to eventually go on to be a full-time manager, so, you know, I decided to not stay to run the program, but I'm still there, lurking in the shadows, [chuckles] you know, helping to figure things out and doing outreach for it, and I definitely feel like that program is my child. And it's been really exciting and validating for me to see, like yeah, I'm the only person at my job who didn't have a degree. You know, I felt like I was really uneducated sometimes or like I didn't know what I was doing or have a place there, but seeing, like, little projects that I would do come to life, especially something like a whole new program, like first of its kind, to me, like, it makes me feel like life experience is more valuable than, you know, a degree sometimes. Like no, no one taught me anything about grants, but I have been in 9000 programs and, like, I know what it's like to need services. So I think I definitely, you know, grew a lot from that program even though I also felt like I was, you know, kind of alone at times, or didn't want to be, like, the annoying trans person who's, like, you know, causing problems or whatever, but every now and then, you know, somebody has to be that person, so—yeah.

Van Ness: Cool. Um, what does community mean to you?

Altamar: Um, I think what community's supposed to be is a group of people that—that have something in common with each other and hopefully can rely on each other, um, when they need help, and it's people that are supposed to have an easier time understanding what you're going through. So it's not just like one thing. Like you could have the community that you live in, like my neighborhood, which, I don't tell anybody where I live, because gentrification is near [chuckles]. But then you also have, like, the various religious communities. Like here in this neighborhood, you know, there's churches, like storefront churches, like bigger churches; there's, like, a synagogue somewhere; there's, you know, mosques; there's lots of different, you know, spaces for people of different religious communities. And then you have, you know, the schools, and like those are a little community in themself. And, um—and there's like obviously, quote-unquote, the “LGBTQIA+ community,” but then we see like so many differences within it, and then things that don't even relate to, like, gender or sexuality, like race, like who's the face of the, quote-unquote, “LGBTQ community”? It's like always a straight—uh, ha!

Van Ness: [laughter]

Altamar: I do this all the time. Not straight. A gay white cis man, [chuckles] um—whew.

Van Ness: That would be awful.

Altamar: Yeah.

Van Ness: I mean, it's still awful, but... [chuckles]

Altamar: I mean, sometimes—yeah, like when I went to the, um, the rally for Orlando, I didn't know, like, it was like the government that—like the Democrats or something that were putting that on. And fucking Nick Jonas was there, like, I think. I'm pretty sure, because, like, I was way in the back and I couldn't hear anything, but like, I was like, “Why the fuck is Nick Jonas at this
rally?” when these were all, like, LGBTQ+ Latinx folks, black folks, like nothing—like people who are undocumented, people who don’t, you know, necessarily have that type of money, who don’t have family support, and here’s a, you know—this cute celebrity bro. Like no, what are you doing? And the other thing was like, their—from what I heard. I might have heard wrong, because like I said, I was in the back, but I heard somebody saying that, like, that it was a trans night or something at the club, and it wasn’t, you know. It was Latin night at the club, and it was like all people of color. So to me I feel like there’s a lot of erasure even within the trans community and even within the, you know, LGBTQ+ community. So I feel like sometimes you have to redefine it and you have to set up your own community. You have to do that, you know, with your friends or with other people that you work with, and make your own subcommunities to help you survive, you know, the stuff that you’re getting both from mainstream society and from the mainstream, you know, LGBTQ movement. Yeah.

**Van Ness:** What are some, uh, I don’t know, experiences that you’ve had with, like, communities? Um, either good ones, bad ones, both. Yeah. Or like—yeah.

**Altamar:** Hmm. Um—well, I used to volunteer at this radical bookstore when I was younger, and that was really helpful because when, um, when I became homeless, I didn’t know where I was going to stay. And even though I wasn’t like actively volunteering, I still was on, like, the e-mail LISTSERV, and I reached out asking for housing, and you know, there was a lot of people that were willing to take me in for free. And then, you know, there was also when I was going to Hunter, before I dropped out, in the Queer Student Union, you know, there was a lot of people that I was close with. And one of my friends, Marty, who raised money for me also when I didn’t have money to eat, was really, you know, amazing and... Like when I was in the mental hospital under observation, having, you know, parents to come visit me—[chuckles] trans parents to come visit me [clears throat] and check in on me was really important too. Negative experiences, of course, is like, uh, one time I was at the Center, and there was somebody I guess they felt like because we were all under the LGBTQ, you know, umbrella, like even if they weren’t trans, they could still ask all these really invasive questions. So they’d be like, “Oh, your name is Mike, so you used to be Michelle, right?” And I’m like, “No,” but they were like—you know, there were a lot of people that were hell-bent on figuring out, like, what my old legal name was. And for that exact reason, like, you know, I didn’t change my name to, like, a more masculine-sounding version of my birth name, because I knew that was going to happen, you know. [clears throat] I would have a lot of people be like, “Oh, you’re cute, but you know, I don’t—I’m not attracted to trans people.” Or one time I was on the pier [Christopher Street Pier], because I practically used to live there [chuckles] and seen all types of shit there, and then this one guy, like, started talking to me, telling me these kind of like really alarming stories, but I just—I just listened to him, because that’s, I guess, what I would do. And he told me that he was bi, and then he was asking me questions, because of course, you know, I look a lot younger than I am, and predators, I guess, are into that. And he was saying that I was really cute, and I mentioned being trans, because sometimes—like, it’s really sad, but that would usually make people go away. And then he said that I was cute but I was confusing him and he wanted to just throw me into the river, but that I should wear the same shirt at Pride so he could recognize me. And I was like, “I don’t even know what the hell is happening, like...” Like I had some things like that happen that were kind of scary. Like how are you going to tell me I’m
cute and you’re going to throw me into the river, like off the pier? I just had like so many weird moments like that on the pier. I don’t know.

**Van Ness:** Tell me some more. Tell me some more stories about the pier.

**Altamar:** Oh Lord.

**Van Ness:** What were some other things that happened? Good things, weird things, sad things...

**Altamar:** [chuckles] Um, I mean, I don’t know how much I can legally say [laughter], but you know, I—

**Van Ness:** Yeah, summarize.

**Altamar:** [chuckles] You know, I’ve been there, you know, with friends who needed to do things they needed to do, and I would have to be a lookout. Um, just kidding. That’s a story I read. [chuckles] What lookout? And, I don’t know, I feel like it’s where I went to calm down. Being on the pier, like, you can see like just the water and feel—like you just look around you and everything looks so—the world looks so much bigger from that point of view for some reason. And it’s just so calming, like, when you see other people who are trans and trans people of color and gender non-conforming people, and everybody’s just kind of living, you know? Like that being our space, that was really powerful. Um, I’ve been on the pier in all types of situations. I was caught there during a blizzard, like under the canopy thing. I ended up one night—I was with somebody, and we had to go—there was a situation. We had to go in an ambulance from the pier. And then I have other moments, like the Youth Pride Fest that I, you know, helped volunteer with, and seeing all the kids there, like, having fun in the same space where I’ve seen all types of other things happen, you know, it’s like—I don’t know. I just miss being there because really anything could happen, any day. A few months ago I had somebody stop me on the street asking for resources for a trans person that he knew who was coming out and was having issues at home. And he recognized me from my pier days, which was like years upon years ago, so I feel like, I don’t know, that’s also kind of like a testament to community. Even though people don’t always talk to each other, like apparently they, like this person told me, watch you transition throughout the years, and like, you have no idea. But I think it’s really affirming to me, like, that I’ve been like, you know, in the background long enough that people I don’t recognize anymore myself, like, recognize me even though I’ve been on hormones for six years, because that happens a lot, and you know, it’s kind of sad. So when somebody does recognize you, you feel valuable, like “I can help you,” like “I’ve been around, you know, all these places enough to tell you this is what you have to do.” And I feel like that’s community too; it’s not just something that you get paid for, you know? Like clinic escorts and stuff, that was my job, and helping to get resources for trans people and stuff, like, wasn’t part of my job, but I turned it into part of my job. And like, that’s also something that I did before. You know, I was employed to do workshops or whatever and some—you know, I’ll continue to do after. And I feel like not everybody has the capacity to, like, be the educator or to be the whatever, but I
think it's also about what you do when no one's looking, you know? I feel like that says a lot about how your community actually is and how your peers actually are.

**Van Ness:** Um, can you tell me more about some of the other experiences you mentioned? You mentioned stuff about, like, being homeless. Like, what?

**Altamar:** [laughter] Yeah. So I had been having issues with my brother, and like, things were getting like pretty intense at home, so... Um, there was also, like, other legal issues going on, so I couldn't—you know, I wasn't necessarily allowed to wear, like, quote-unquote, “men's clothing” [clears throat] at home because, like, my parents were worried that it would affect this, you know, this case that my father had. And I just felt like I didn't really—I couldn't express myself at home, and I also couldn't deal with, like, some of the issues I was experiencing with my brother. So I was looking to move out anyway, but then some of the issues just kind of blew up, and you know, my mom gave me this ultimatum: like, I was the older one; my brother couldn't be the one, you know, to leave, because he was still a minor. So I had to find a new place, which, I was already, you know, looking into, like, housing and shelters and stuff like that, so [clears throat]—so I left. Like I said, I found, you know, found some help on the LISTSERV for the place that I was volunteering at, the bookstore. And you know, this one person was really great, took me in for two weeks because her lease, you know, still had two more weeks, but she had already gotten a new place. So I got really, really lucky with that. But I was kind of couch-surfing a lot. And then, you know, I didn't have a job. I was still in—still going through a lot of mental health things, and I wasn't in a place to hold down a job either. You know, and I also hadn't changed like some of my documents, and I also had like lots of dental issues that made my face look busted, so it's not like I could, you know, easily just go out and, you know, just work somewhere. Because I did apply to places, but, um—you know, so... [clears throat] Being homeless was hard. Like I was trying to get benefits, but you know, that's also a pain in the ass—you know, traveling into West Bumblefuck to get this appointment, and then they tell you you're not old enough to get, you know, food stamps or whatever, but your mom can open a case, but I'm not living at home, so it's like, what—you know, shit like that that makes no sense. So I didn't have any income, and then this ex took me in, which was also kind of like an uncomfortable, you know, situation even though we were dating at the time. And mostly I was making pins, I was making buttons to get income. So I would go to, like, the Philly Trans Health Conference and sell pins of, like, the trans flag or, you know, pins that were in Spanish or pronouns, that my friend designed, to get some money. But mostly I relied on a lot of these youth programs, you know, that let me shower there [chuckles], that did my laundry, that gave me groceries and soap, so—and obviously mental health care, because going through something like that when you already have all these preexisting issues is like a lot, so... I really attribute, like, my survival and me having the jobs that I've had so far to these youth programs and to the community I've made with my friends. But it's also hard because, like, I feel like—I'll try to use “I” statements. So when I was homeless, I kind of felt like I was at people's mercy, or like I had to do a lot to prove that, like, okay, I'm worthy to stay here on your couch. I'm going to, like, try to earn my keep. So, what that ended up feeling like for me was that, especially, like, with my ex, like I was like the Latino housemaid and that, you know, I had to keep my head down and had to accept certain things being done in order to not ruffle any feathers and, you know, be kicked out onto the streets. So that was definitely stressful, yeah. [clears throat]
Van Ness: Um, what does—I mean, I guess in terms of, like, talking about relationships, like what does companionship, what does a relationship, what does that mean to you?

Altamar: Um, so I'm going back to like all the stuff that I would teach in my classes. [chuckles]

Van Ness: Sure.

Altamar: Um, but a relationship could be anything. So a relationship could be one that you have with yourself. It could be, you know, a parent-child or employer-and-employee or doctor-patient. Um, [clears throat] so, like, because of the experiences that I had and the things that, you know, that I put up with in my last relationship, I haven't really been on top of the whole dating thing. I also—it's just, like, stressful trying to date and then telling people that I'm trans and they don't understand. Like I'll have people tell me, like, “Oh, so when do you think you'll be able to come out?” And I'm like, “No, like, I'm already out.” [chuckles] Like—or some people who think that, like, I'm a trans woman or that I'm—one person thought I was a drag king, and I was like, “I don't even understand—you don't understand me,” you know? So mostly I've only dated other trans or genderqueer people because I feel like in that aspect, it's easier to not have to explain my body, explain, you know, all these appointments, or explain the importance of, like, pronouns or, like, “Don't use those words for me” or whatever. Like, not to say that there won't be other unrelated issues, but—but yeah, I feel like I want to start dating again. I've been single long enough, but [chuckles] it's kind of hard being out of practice and, you know, figuring out, like, if I do want to date people who aren't trans, like, how do I navigate that? Because I haven't dated a cis person since my first girlfriend in high school when I was like 14, [chuckles] so... Ah, there's a lot to figure out with that. I think my biggest fear is also making sure that I don't get hurt in the same ways that I've been hurt in the past or be trapped in some of the same dynamics. And I know that, like, with my last relationship, like, I'm not homeless anymore; like, there are certain things that are not going to happen again. But I think, like, it took—it's taken me, you know, these past couple years of being single to realize the effects of certain things and—but I also have to recognize, like, I'm older; I'm a little bit more, you know, secure in my place in the world, and that I'm able to identify these issues now more so than I was back then, you know, before it happened, so... I guess sometimes you have to take a chance, but it's definitely, you know, scary. Also, not knowing, like, if I have surgery, what's this person going to think about that? Or—yeah.

Van Ness: Mm. Um, if you want to be remembered for one thing, what would that be?

Altamar: Oh man. [clears throat] That's a great question. I guess I want to be remembered as somebody who tried to help others. So for all the things I've done, you know, even in the background, to help other people in tough situations. Yeah. I don't—I'm not trying to, like, be a movie star or anything like that, you know. But I think it's been a process for me to learn and to accept and be okay with other people when they tell me that, like, that I have had a positive impact on their life. So I feel like in whatever form that is, whether it's like the person on the street who randomly recognizes me and asks for resources, or whether it's, you know, a young person at my old job in the program that I created, or friends that I've, you know, taken to the
clinic and all of those things—like, for me I feel like that's what I needed in the past, and that's what has helped me to get to where I am today, and I feel like that's kind of like my purpose in life, is to do the same for others. Yeah.

**Van Ness:** So we're creeping up on an hour.

**Altamar:** Okay.

**Van Ness:** Um, so is there anything else that you would like to add, or is there anything that we're missing that, you know, people need to know to really know Mike?

**Altamar:** [laughter] Um, I don't know. I mean, I feel like I'm kind of a mess, but it [laughter]—but it kind of, like, works out sometimes, you know? Like I—I feel like sometimes those things, like, just kind of go together, like just being a wreck [laughter] in some ways, you know. Like in terms of, like, not having stable employment because I don't have a college degree or whatever, and also like, you know, mental health stuff. I think that also complements, you know, the things that—the ideas I'm able to come up with and the initiatives I'm able to start and... Sometimes, you know, I feel like I'm more of a background person, but I think it's also exciting when somebody, you know, asks me to be part of something like the Sexual and Reproductive Justice video that the Health Department did that I was in. [clears throat] Like being given a chance to also speak directly, you know, for myself sometimes is really, um, therapeutic, I guess. And being in the Name Change Project's, you know, video also was like kind of exciting. And it feels like I'm seen, like all the hiding I had to do when I was a kid and, you know, through high school and everything, like I don't—I don't need to do that hiding anymore. I can go, you know, into this video, or I can go be part of some other project, and I don't have to worry that, you know, this nun is going to go call my parents or that I'm going to be kicked out anymore. You know, especially at this point in my transition, like, I'm glad to be able to have an opportunity every now and then to remind the world that, you know, that I'm me and, like, despite all the BS and all the judgment and, you know, not having any trans services or trans-friendly doctors or hormones in my neighborhood or whatever, like after all that, I'm finally—I finally feel like, you know, I've kind of—I've kind of made it [chuckles] a little bit.

**Van Ness:** You've arrived.

**Altamar:** I've arrived. Yeah, I don't feel like—you know, even after having been on T for a few years, I felt like I just came out yesterday, just started T yesterday. But now, having been out for a decade and having been to all these marches and having, you know, been on advisory boards and making a program and stuff, I feel like—I feel like nobody can take my gender or my identity away from me anymore, you know? And that I don't have to choose anymore—I'm at a point where I don't have to choose between, like, um, religion and being trans, or being Latino or, you know, being Colombian and being trans. Um, all these things can, like, coexist finally. And you know, I have tons of trans-related tattoos, as you can see [chuckles]. And I feel like now other people have to deal with it, not me, you know? And if somebody else doesn't accept it, it’s not my problem, because I do—I do have a community, and I don't always feel like I'm the only one speaking up in certain situations anymore, you know.
Van Ness: That's great.

Altamar: Yeah.

Van Ness: So I guess, uh—I guess I'd like to thank all of our listeners.

Altamar: [chuckles]

Van Ness: But, um, is there a—I want you to have the last word. So, what would you like to say to people who might have already listened to your interview?

Altamar: Um, I think that people need to know that they're valid, you know, however they transition. Just because you don't fit, you know, some of the bigger mainstream representations that we see, doesn't mean that you're not valid. Like it's okay to be—to have, like, whatever intersection of identities that you have, and that people of your specific combination, you know, do exist, which is something it took me a long time to learn. And whatever being trans or GNC or non-binary or genderqueer, whatever, agender, looks like for you, that's fine. Like if other people can't see it, that's their problem. And you know, that's an issue and that's something that we're working at actively in society, but that doesn't mean that you're not who you say you are. There's tons of people out there who are trans, whether or not they can take hormones, whether or not they can get surgery or if they even want to. Or no matter, like, what pronouns you use, like, you're still you, and the issue lays with society, and that's something that's definitely being addressed. Even if you don't feel like you can be the activist who's always out there or whatever. Not everybody has to be that person. There's—you know, we all have different levels of things that we have the capacity to do. But to just not feel hopeless. Like whether it's through the internet or through, you know, friends or through a hotline or whatever, like, there's somebody else out there who can kind of relate. So I feel like—I don't want to sound, like, cliché about it, but, um [clears throat]—but all options are valid, and no one can take that away from you.