

**LGBTQ+ Center Oral History Project
Queer Public Histories – Spring 2022**

Interviewee: Kayla Lisenby-Denson

Interviewer: Alex Purcell

Date: 3/4/2022

Location: Kayla's Office – Office of Diversity and Inclusion

SPEAKERS

Kayla Lisenby-Denson, Alex Purcell

[Beginning of Audio File]

Alex Purcell 00:04

All right, well, thank you so much again for meeting with me. So, the history you're providing here about yourself and your involvement with the LGBTQ+ Center will become part of the Wake Forest University Archives, and will be used in a class exhibit. It may also be used for future scholars in their own work. And at the end of the interview, I will ask for your signature on a release form. At that time, we can discuss any restrictions or limitations that you'd like to cover in relation to your interview. So, do you have any general questions about the interview? How it will be used, what the project's about?

Kayla Lisenby-Denson 00:40

No—[coughs]—excuse me, I think I'm good.

Alex Purcell 00:41

Okay. So first, I do have an Informed Consent form. They said to do at the end, but I think it would be better to do it first. It just tells you the purpose of the history, your rights as a participant, and essentially that you can stop at any time. Any question you don't want to answer, you can just not answer it. This interview is not confidential, so your name will be included and made available to the public. And while this interview does not benefit you directly, it does significantly benefit the library and the research community at large. Once you've read this over and feel good about it, you can just sign and date it. And then at the end, like I said, I have a Deed of Gift agreement, which will transfer the ownership of the history to the University for historical and research purposes [sounds of shuffling paper at 1:30]

Kayla Lisenby-Denson 01:52

There you go.

Alex Purcell 01:52

Thank you, and then one more thing really quick before we get started. I have an intake sheet - it's just some short questions that I have to ask for the spreadsheet.

Kayla Lisenby-Denson 02:03

Yeah.

Alex Purcell 02:03

It's mostly just your preferences. So, what name do you want to use?

Kayla Lisenby-Denson 02:08

Kayla, K-a-y-l-a.

Alex Purcell 02:12

And I don't know why they need this, but what is your age?

Kayla Lisenby-Denson 02:16

Oh, what is my age—33?

Alex Purcell 02:19

I feel the same. Your current town of residence?

Kayla Lisenby-Denson 02:23

Winston Salem, North Carolina.

Alex Purcell 02:31

How many years you've been at Wake, including the class year if you came here?

Kayla Lisenby-Denson 02:36

Um, let's see. I've worked here for six and a half years. And I'm also a graduate of the 2021 MBA program.

Alex Purcell 02:53

Congratulations.

Kayla Lisenby-Denson 02:54

[laughs] Thank you.

Alex Purcell 03:01

What is your official occupation?

Kayla Lisenby-Denson 03:05

Inclusive Practice Manager. I don't know if that's an occupation but it's my job title [laughs].

Alex Purcell 03:14

I think it is. What are your pronouns?

Kayla Lisenby-Denson 03:18

They/them.

Alex Purcell 03:24

I think the rest of this I can fill out myself. Thank you for that. Alright, so the first few questions I have are kind of just general, big questions. Tell me about your connection to the LGBTQ Center. What was your relationship with it?

Kayla Lisenby-Denson 03:45

Um, so until about three or four weeks ago, I worked for the LGBTQ Center. So, I came in in 2015. In August 2015, I was hired as the Program Coordinator. Um, and then while I was there, I was promoted to Assistant Director and then Associate Director in 2021. And then I left in February of 2022 to take a new position at Wake. So I worked there for over six years in, technically, three different role capacities.

Alex Purcell 04:36

And so how, and I guess when, did you hear about the Center?

Kayla Lisenby-Denson 04:42

Um, I—let's see. I guess I heard about—so, I worked in LGBTQ Programs and Services, which was my job title, and then I was situated within our Office of Multicultural Student Affairs at the University of South Carolina before I came here. And I was looking to leave that job and had a—was basically just looking at, like, LGBTQ centers in higher ed. And it's kind of a funny story because it was, like, literally a Friday afternoon and I was sitting in my office, which was in the basement and it was awful, at my old job. And I was applying—I was writing cover letters. Because you know it's bad when you're writing cover letters [both laugh] at your current job. And I applied for a job at Vanderbilt and their, like, LGBTQ Center at the time. Then I also—I read over the job description for the Wake Forest job, and the jobs were super similar, so I just changed the names in my cover letter [laughs] and applied for the Wake Forest job, too. I knew nothing about Wake Forest University. I knew nothing about Winston Salem. I grew up in Alabama and then had spent, at that time, four years in Columbia, South Carolina. So I had never visited—like, nothing. I never heard from Vanderbilt. But I did a Skype interview. That was probably in, like, May of 2015. I think I came up in June to do my interview. And I did my Skype interview and then was offered a visit to campus and just felt like I loved it. Like, I loved everybody I met, I loved the campus. And so yeah, I really found out about it through a job posting, and ended up just kind of taking a chance and moving.

Alex Purcell 07:03

What were your first impressions of the Center?

Kayla Lisenby-Denson 07:07

Oh, my gosh. Um—

Alex Purcell 07:08

You can be honest.

Kayla Lisenby-Denson 07:09

—I mean, honestly, like, I was a little bit in awe that, like, a center even existed. Because I mean, at South Carolina, at the time, I was one staff member for 35,000 students. And even my budget, like—

because it was a very conservative state, my budget was separated out from the rest of my office's. And it was like, I had \$10,000, exactly. And then about \$2500 of that automatically came off the top to pay for the subsidies to have a graduate assistant. So I guess we were one-and-a-half people. And so I have, you know, this really limited budget. I didn't, like—we didn't have a lounge or a physical space. And at Alabama, which was my undergrad, there was nothing. When I graduated in 2011, it was the first time they ever held a lavender graduation ceremony. And like, that was a huge deal. And so to like, even see—I had done a summer internship when I was in grad school at the University of California, Riverside's LGBTQ Resource Center. And so I knew about centers and we visited all—like, many of them in California. So it wasn't like I've never seen one. But I was just kind of in awe, like, "Oh, here's this, like, we have this space, we have a budget." When I was hired, they also hired—the Women's Center also hired a program coordinator. And it was the first time since the Women's Center had started that they were hiring separate program coordinators. So there had been—it had been shared beforehand. And so I think my impressions were like, "Oh, this is really exciting, there's a lot of like, institutional support for this kind of work." AJ, like, hated the space that we were in downstairs and was, like, so apologetic about everything. They were like, "Oh my gosh, I'm so sorry. We don't have any light in here" because the windows were their big, like, crowning achievement of their career at the time. And they're like, "We're just shoved away, we don't have enough room" and they were like, "I'm sorry your salary isn't more." And I'm like, "My salary is, like, almost \$10,000 more than what I was making at a public institution in South Carolina [laughs]... like, wow." And they were so apologetic about everything. And I was just like, "Oh my god, I have made it in the world... like, what?" So I was like, really—I was really excited and just impressed by what was already going on and what had been built in the few years before I got here. It—I mean, quickly, I was also like, okay, yeah, I can see that we have some opportunity here. But initially, I mean, and I think that is still a really pervasive, like, part of just doing LGBTQ work in higher ed. It's so differentially, like, committed to by different institutions. And so I used to look at other schools and be like, "Oh my God, I want to have what you have," or I'd be really like, upset that we didn't have that—those kinds of resources. And then to, like, be at a school that had them and still sometimes feel like, "Oh, my God, we need so much more." So, yeah. I got a little off track. Sorry. [laughs]

Alex Purcell 11:26

No, you're good. Actually, some of those kind of responses will come up later, because I think I have a few questions asking about that general sense. But I have like, kind of a fun question before we get into the nitty gritty. What is your favorite memory from being at the Center? Or experience?

Kayla Lisenby-Denson 11:45

Oh, my God. There are so many. Um, let's see. [long pause] This question feels, like, impossible because I'm just like—and I was such a mess when I left—[uses air quotes] "left" the job. Um, because I did not leave because I was like, not happy there. It was like, "Okay, it's time to do something more in line with my long term goals." And also, I just got this whole graduate degree that I would like to put into use. Um, so I had so many like, great memories. And it also like—I mean, my life is so much better after coming to Winston. Like, this is not part of the Center's history, but I mean—it is because it's my history—anyway. It's like—so, I moved here, and I was like... 24? No, 26, I think? I was in my like, mid-20's. Staunchly in my mid-20's. And I was like, "Oh, my gosh, I'm gonna go to the big city," which I

still—I hate when students are like, "Winston is not a city." And I'm like, "Let me show you some places. Okay?" Like, no, it's not the biggest city, but it is city enough.

Alex Purcell 13:21

It's got some tall buildings.

Kayla Lisenby-Denson 13:23

I mean, it's bigger than Columbia, which is like, the biggest in South Carolina. So I was moving into the city and I've got this new job, and I'm gonna, like, date around and have all these like, just—I don't know. I'm such an introvert. I don't know what I thought I was going to do. But I, um, I was on Tinder. And I met my now-wife, like, literally the first week I lived here. We met on Tinder.

Alex Purcell 13:54

Aw.

Kayla Lisenby-Denson 13:55

And our first date was the night of Campus Services Day, like, when all the First Years move in. So we had our first date, like, basically on my first, you know, kind of in-the-semester day at Wake. And, um, we've been together ever since. We got married in 2019. And, like, I don't think I would have ended up going to the—doing the MBA program here if I didn't work here. So anyway, that's all to say, like, a job that I took kind of on a whim really had a big impact. But if I had to choose, I'd probably say my favorite memory related to the Center was in 2018. We took—so we've had this Change Agents program, where we took students to the national Creating Change Conference, and then worked with them throughout the year to develop their leadership skills. And in 2018—it's held in January every year. And it was held in D.C. that year. So it was close enough that my wife was able, well, my now-wife, was able to take off work and actually come, which was super exciting because she, like, never gets to do the fun parts of work. And it was—my birthday was also at Creating Change that year. And we had this really great group of students like, oh my God, so many. I don't know, we probably had 18 or 20, but a lot of them were returners that I knew really well. And like, everything was just like, really great. And Ape ended up proposing to me at Creating Change.

Alex Purcell 15:42

Aw!

Kayla Lisenby-Denson 15:42

And so like, AJ was the first person who knew that I was engaged besides my, like, immediate family because we called them but like—and then I saw some of the students and was able to tell them and then celebrate. It was just a really, really fun, like, sweet—just like, memorable part of the work. Yeah, I don't think most people, you know, get engaged, like, technically at work. [laughs] Well, not working when we were like—it was at night in the hotel. And we weren't like, in front of everybody. But yeah, it was kind of a culmination of all the things that I loved about being here and this, like, part of my life. Wow, I got really sappy.

Alex Purcell 16:34

[both laugh] No, it was really sweet. Where does your wife work?

Kayla Lisenby-Denson 16:38

She works for Publix currently, but she owned a bakery when I met her. And our one day goal is to own a bakery again.

Alex Purcell 16:46

Oh my gosh.

Kayla Lisenby-Denson 16:47

She's a cake decorator—well, baker and decorator.

Alex Purcell 16:53

That's so sweet. I mean, I can imagine why that would be your favorite memory. So what was it like working at the LGBTQ Center here? Can you describe some things that you liked? Maybe some things you didn't like?

Kayla Lisenby-Denson 17:13

Oh, goodness. I'll start with some of the, like, really great things. [long pause] I mean, it was always an adventure. So there was never a time when I didn't feel like there was lots of work to do. But—which sometimes was really overwhelming, but also it kept things interesting. It felt—I mean, working with AJ was the highlight, getting to like, know them and work with them. We worked really, really well together, as a team. And I think we had a lot of fun while also doing really important things. And it was also really nice to like, see change happen, whether that was like, individual students, say like—I remember we had this one student who I later found out was, like, terrified to walk into the Center for the first time in their first year here. They seemed super, like, confident, like, I wouldn't have guessed. But they ended up—they served as President of Spectrum at one point, they were a Change Agent, like every year, they were super involved. They planned the Queer Prom, like, the first ever Queer Prom that we did right before the pandemic. And to just, like, watch them grow into themselves. And then also to see, like, institutional changes, like the introduction of gender-neutral housing happen, or the ways that campus partners and, like, colleagues in other areas have, like, really started to think about and center LGBTQ work, or student experiences. Yeah, I think those are some of the really great aspects. It was also—I mean, it was a constant challenge. Like, there was never a time when my to-do list was empty. Um, I am now three or four weeks out of that job and still have a to-do list—like, items to finish. And also a bunch of items—things that I just finally gave up on. Like, okay, it's time to start a new never-ending to-do list. And like, while there was—there's been some gains, like, institutionally. It's also like, it's slow moving, it's sometimes frustrating. And it can just be really hard—with students—to be on their journeys with them, and when bad things happen, and like, there's nothing you can do or like, change situations for them. And it's also just hard that it's not like—I think in other types of work, and even here, in the job I'm doing now, like, it's less so—I mean, it's still applicable, because I'm doing like diversity, equity and inclusion work. But specifically being in the Center, anything—like, it wasn't just a job, it was like, this is my identity. And I'm performing and doing work with my identity at work. So there was very little like—it has always amazed me that my wife can be like, "I'm not at work so I'm not thinking about work." And that changed a little bit, like, when she became a manager. And so—and also, she has

worked with crappy people, so—oops, probably shouldn't put that on the record [laughs]. Not that they're probably going to listen to this, but just what I believe.

Alex Purcell 21:39

It was vague enough.

Kayla Lisenby-Denson 21:42

She—but like yeah, she could very easily—and she never understood how I, like, couldn't do that. And I'm just like, "Because it's not just, like, a job. It's people's lives and lived experiences and my lived experience." So that was a challenge sometimes. And just always, like, you know, being—having ideas and knowing that we could be doing so much more, if we had like, the people or the money or the—just time in the day. But it was always, always interesting. Which I think also, after a while got kind of, like—I'm ready for something that's less—like, I don't want every year to be like the first year where I'm trying to figure out what students want and how we're going to engage with people. Like, I want to go for slower, you know? And I think that the students really—like, I'm excited that somebody new will come in who's like, excited to be here - I mean, hopefully - and connect with them. Yeah. I just like working with students. And how do Wake students, like—that was such a thing, in the beginning, I had such Imposter Syndrome. I was like, "Oh, my God, look at me with my public school degree. Like, what am I doing at Wake Forest?" And I would listen to students talk in the lounge, and they'd have these like, academic debates, and I'm like, "I'm not sure I understand all the words that you're saying." And so I get like, really in my head about it, but then they just—I mean, they still have the same issues that like, any college student has, or queer—young, queer person, like navigating identity stuff. So that over time really faded. I definitely had that in the beginning, where I was just like, oh my gosh. And I mean, Wake is just—it's not a public school. It's not my experience in the past. So there's a big learning curve.

Alex Purcell 24:02

I actually think that leads to another question. So how do you think that your background affected the way that you approached the Center and your work there?

Kayla Lisenby-Denson 24:13

Oh, well, number one, Imposter Syndrome [both laugh]. Um, I felt really strong in like, the work part. I knew I had really good experience with like, putting on programs and delivering workshops. And when I was hired, I had already worked for two years as a program coordinator. So when AJ brought me on, I mean, they were very clear, like—they really—for the job they asked me to make a portfolio of my work, which I vowed to keep up and definitely did not. Um, but I basically took everything I had done in the two years and some stuff in grad school and like, put it in a binder and was like, "Alright, here's what I can offer." And they were like, super impressed. And so they were very much like, "That's why you were hired, we—this is what we need." And so I felt really good about my experience in terms of like, doing the work, but I definitely—I struggled to just like, understand Wake Forest, as I imagine many do. Like, that first Campus Services Day, I'd like, see people walk by with family members who are wearing outfits that are double my, like, monthly rent payment. I'm just like, "Okay, this is where we are." So trying not to let that like, impact how I worked with students, but it's certainly kind of present. And then I also think, I mean, navigating my own, like—I've been out as queer for like, a decade, but was still navigating different aspects of that, particularly around like, gender and relationship style, or orientation.

And so I think those aspects definitely impacted—like I was—it wasn't that I was like, "Okay, I'm the guru of all things," but I was working through stuff, like, with students. And not in the sense of like—they're not my, like, therapists but it just was a different level of like, empathy and connection. Because it's like, "Oh, yeah, I'm—I don't know what I want to wear to that event either," because, like, you know, here's the gender feels and the body feels and all the things. And so I think that definitely informed a lot of it. I also was really conscious of like, myself as a white person, particularly given that we really strive to center LGBTQ students of color. And often our student staff were primarily students of color. So being really intentional and thinking about like, how my presence as a white person is showing up, and how to moderate and effectively engage with students and also just how to lead but also dismantle some of that like, social privilege so that we can have authentic working relationships and collaborative team spaces. So yeah, a lot of that.

Alex Purcell 28:21

I have like, totally skipped around now [both laugh]. Okay. So shifting gears a little bit, did you experience either support or opposition from colleagues or other people at Wake? By working at the Center?

Kayla Lisenby-Denson 28:42

I mean, for the most part, I always felt really supported and I think people had a generally—like, I can't really think of any negative experiences on the basis of my working in the Center. I also think that was a big part of like, what I was—what I've processed a lot around leaving that job and moving into this one, and just generally leaving a job where LGBTQ work is like, in my title is like, I feel like people approach differently and show up differently. If they know that like, that's your work and kind of like what you're—you're about, people are gonna be like, more guarded or moderated. And I'm like, what will that be like when that's not my job title anymore? So for the most part, I felt really supported. And I think the community really does come together. When HB 2 happened in 2016, we—like, the next day, there were—we did a big solidarity moment in front of Wait Chapel and like, a ton of people came out. When the Pulse Nightclub shooting happened, even though that was over the summer, like, our colleagues in the Chaplain's Office, like, immediately reached out and they held—they basically brought like, snacks and coffee and just held space for us. You know, people like checking in when different things happen. So I think there is generally a lot of support. I think when the rubber meets the road in terms of like, okay, let's—let's fund things, I'm not always convinced that—at least in the past—that our work, and really any of the DEI work was, like, a priority area. I was, I mean, frankly, I was really excited to see Dr. Wenthe come in, and I'm—part of like, why I was happy to take this role was to be like, "Alright, we'll see what happens." I've got—I mean, her work at Vanderbilt with developing the Center for Inclusive Teaching—like, okay, this is, this is promising. So I hope that that will shift in the future, to be more kind of institutionally centered and supported. But personally, it was a really, really positive place.

Alex Purcell 31:59

Were you kind of surprised by that, given the school and like, the location?

Kayla Lisenby-Denson 32:07

[Laughs] One thing that was super surprising—and this is also based—I mean, not to like, generalize about any group, but we had a Baptist Student Union, or—we had the Baptist Student Association. I

still, it's been like, almost seven years, and BSA versus BSU is still hard because it's backwards from what it was at South Carolina. But the Baptist student group in South Carolina was a very, very, very—not an LGBTQ-friendly place. And that was kind of like, a big issue that we ran into sometimes because they were very, like, they were really visible on campus. And so it was probably my like, second week here and Chris Towles, who's still the, like, minister—campus minister for Baptist students and advises the Baptist student group here, he came by the Center to introduce himself. And he was so nice and just, like, welcoming and I was just like, "What is this, what are you doing? Is this a trap, like, what's going on?" Um, so that was—but no, I mean, like, and we've, like, had—I've spoken to the group before. And, you know, he used to come—like, when we would do coffee hours in the Center, he was a regular, like, visitor and fixture at those. And so I did have a little bit of like, "Okay, let's not judge, like, let's practice what I preach and not judge people based on their job title or whatever." Um, and, I mean, I really—I didn't really have any like, preconceived—I didn't know about Wake being on like, the negative—the "bad campuses for LGBTQ students" until after I worked here. And then—also, like, that instrument is really dumb. And not like, very sound in terms of its process. So I don't really put a lot of stock in that. And I know from our students that like, they—I mean, frankly, my experience of this campus was much more positive than theirs because I was in my enclave in the Center and like, I didn't interact with a lot—if students weren't coming around to the Center, or I mean, occasionally I'd do something with like, student engagement and you know—but really, I didn't interact a lot with students who weren't intentionally seeking us out anyway. And I think higher ed is also just kind of a bastion of like, more supportive views than one might find in other areas. And that was definitely the case in South Carolina. All of my friends there were people I knew through work because queer people flocked to the university. And so—also, I mean, just coming from places where it is objectively still worse for LGBTQ people, like in Alabama and South Carolina. I was like, pleasantly surprised of—I was like, "Oh, it is better here." Not always. But on a—like, if you look at everything as a whole, it is better here.

Alex Purcell 35:59

Yeah. I guess I'm curious on that front, how do you feel about the representation of the LGBTQ community in Winston Salem? So do you think it kind of mirrors that of the university? Or do you think it's a little different?

Kayla Lisenby-Denson 36:22

I think in Winston Salem, things are changing around like, kind of what the LGBTQ community looks like. Um, I think there's been a challenge of like, building some sort of cohesive community. There's kind of different pockets, and they have different objectives or like, kinds of views or stances. So like, I was on the board for Pride Winston Salem for a couple of years. And I joined both to, like, be a part of the organization but also kind of—once I got in I realized, like, okay, there's some possibilities to make a little more inclusive understanding of pride. Like, what does access for queer folks of color look like if we have the police readily, you know, featured? Or like, how are trans and non-binary folks welcomed? How are low-income folks like, having access to events if we have cover charges? Things like that. And I spent a lot of time and energy really trying to work within the organization to change things. And ultimately, like, I was so burned out, I just was like, "I gotta walk away." And I think the—I mean, from what I've seen, they still have a lot of those challenges. Like, they're doing some positive things. They're doing the first Trans—like a Trans Pride festival that's focused on, like, trans experiences. But we'll see how that is—how trans experiences are actually showing up there. But then there was also

like, this whole situation on social media where one of the bars in town that—so there's no LGBTQ bars in Winston currently, um, and hasn't been one in a really long time. I mean, there's definitely places that queer people hang out, but there's not any specific like, "This is a queer space." And so one of the bars that is sort of queer-friendly and where Pride hosted some events before got like, wrapped up in this like—the bar says it wasn't their event, or that they didn't have anything to do with it. And they just got like, roped into it but it was like—there was like, I don't know, misinformation that they had evidently hosted a fundraiser for like, a bail fund for one of the January 6th protesters who got arrested. And then the—it comes out that they like, supposedly hosted this and the bar is like, "No, we didn't." But it was really fishy. I still don't know what the actual event was, but the whole thing was like—there were some Pride board members who like, really, really doubled down on like, "Oh, no, they couldn't have done this, they're a wonderful organization." And people in—LGBTQ people in the community pushed back and were like, "Well, even if this is not the case, you still hear voices of queer and trans folks of color talking about not feeling welcome there. How do you respond?" And like, there was just no recognition that there were other experiences. So, all of that to say, I think things are just like—now that we're moving to, theoretically, a post-COVID time, like, I'm interested to see how the Northstar Community Center gets back going. They were really picking up a lot of steam pre-pandemic, and have continued to do a lot of great work during the pandemic. But like, what that looks like, and then there's this, like, social media—this Queer Winston Salem group that kind of started just on Facebook but now is like, doing events and has merchandise, and like, okay, so what's this gonna be? And I think in some ways, that is similar to campus. Like, there's definitely different pockets of LGBTQ community. Apparently, there's like, eight or nine that have names—I mean, or like, can be named off. I learned that when they—I was like, in my office and the students were out talking, and they were like, "Yes, Center Queers, we're just one group." And I'm like, what? What does that even mean? I mean, I think all of the like, drama is probably pretty pervasive—or like, not even drama, just people finding their own people. But Winston is definitely like—it's big enough to have multiple competing groups or leaders or whatever. But it's not big enough for all of them to like, stand alone collectively. So it's like, okay, where—who's going to win out here? We'll see. To be continued.

Alex Purcell 42:01

That's really interesting. I've only lived in Winston for a year-and-a-half. So, I'm so unfamiliar with most—I think I've been downtown like, three times.

Kayla Lisenby-Denson 42:16

Oh yeah, I never go downtown because I can't park there. It's too hard.

Alex Purcell 42:20

[Laughs] I know! I hate parallel parking.

Kayla Lisenby-Denson 42:23

I don't know how to parallel park and I get so lost. Such a mess. Where did you move from?

Alex Purcell 42:28

Austin, Texas.

Kayla Lisenby-Denson 42:29

Okay, so like a real city? Okay.

Alex Purcell 42:33

[Laughs] I get your argument, though. I get it.

Kayla Lisenby-Denson 42:38

I mean, yes, it is not that size of a city. It is a lot bigger than Columbia, South Carolina.

Alex Purcell 42:45

I get that. I went to UT, which is right in the middle of the city. So yeah, it's very different here. It's—it's a little baby city.

Kayla Lisenby-Denson 42:56

[Laughs] When I went to the University of Alabama—so I know—I know the size, the UT size, but I mean, Tuscaloosa exists because the University of Alabama is there. That's a little different. But yeah, with the—it's a little all over the place. But hopeful.

Alex Purcell 43:21

Yeah. It surprised me in a lot of ways. And not in all the ways [both laugh] but in some ways it has surprised me. It's cute. So how would you describe the students who spent time at the Center?

Kayla Lisenby-Denson 43:39

Oh, Lord. Um, I often—when I talk about the students who kind of make their home in the LGBTQ Center, I often say they're like, "LGBTQ...And." So like, we mostly see students who have intersectionally marginalized identities, or just somehow don't fit into the like, Wake aesthetic, as they say. All of that to say we don't have very many like, white cisgender, you know, rich students who come around. I think they tend to find community a little bit easier in other places. But we have a lot of mostly like—a lot of queer trans students of color, low-income and first generation students, and just students who are interested in and passionate about equity and thinking intentionally about identity, and kind of how that shows up. So I think that's a lot of the folks. And it has changed over time, like it has definitely become a more—almost like, concentrated group in terms of like, who—like, what it means to be a Center Queer, as they say. I think it also has a lot to do with who is on our student staff at the time, since our student staff are really like, kind of the faces of the Center. They're out in the main lounge, at the desk if they're working, like, it's usually—like, their friends will come by and hang out with them. They help drive our programming. So I think that also had a big impact on who found community in the Center. Which is, I mean, both can be really positive, but can also be really challenging, because it's like, how do you—how do we cultivate a space and also hire students that we need to be on our staff? If everything—if our ideas and who is like, wanting to work for us or with us, isn't always in alignment, that can be a little challenging. Especially after Spectrum, which was the student group—the student organization around LGBTQ identities, dissolved in like 2018, or 2019, probably. And so like, we don't even have a student organization right now. So it's interesting, and a little challenging, that there's, like, this identity of, or this perception of, what the space is and who it's for. And I think that kind of self-replicates. So that's kind of who has been there, at least in the last couple of years. I'm interested to

see how that changes moving forward, especially in this like, weird time after COVID. Because we basically went like, two years without students in the lounge and like—okay, so now we have juniors who came back and are like, "Oh, yeah, we're back, this is our space, this is how we live here, and this what we do here." And then first and second years, who are like, "We want to be here, but we don't like, know your norms and culture." So I think there's some shifting underway. But yeah.

Alex Purcell 48:02

I guess on that note, have you noticed, like, big changes from the beginning of when you worked at the Center to the end, in terms of the students that came in? Like were—you know, was it kind of linear, or were there more or less? Were they the same kinds of students?

Kayla Lisenby-Denson 48:22

That's a good question. Time all just like, melts together [both laugh]. Like, I think about who—when different—and AJ and I were laughing about this recently, because—so we have our first new like, staffline since I started. Um, we have a shared program coordinator with the Women's Center that was—we hired for last fall, and we hired Antayzha, who is in the role now. She is a, like, 2021 Wake grad who served on the staff at the LGBTQ Center all four years, and it was amazing. We had a very competitive search and she was selected for the position, and shortly after we hired her, an alum, who was also on staff and was like, deeply engaged with the Center, came back to visit and we made a comment about like, "Oh, we just hired Antayzha, it's so great." And they were like, "Who's that?" Really? Wait, how did y'all not overlap? Like, what? We had to do the math like, okay. And they didn't, like—the alum graduated the spring and Antayzha started that fall, and AJ and I were like, "We've been here too long." [laughs] And they've definitely—I mean, they've been here longer than I have. Um, so I think to some extent, it did. It's really hard to say. I think it has—we've had times where we've had like, more, kind of, mainstream students. We had a time, or like—earlier when I was in my earlier years, I guess, we had more of a connection with Greek life. But that was mostly because we had one student who didn't work for us, but was really involved with the Center and really involved in her sorority. And so she, like, drove a lot of that. You know, at one point, we had more international student engagement, but I think that was mostly because we had an international student, and then later two international students, who were Change Agents with us. So I think it's just interesting how it is very connected to who's engaged with the Center, and then how they get their communities kind of involved. I would definitely say what changed, not necessarily from like a "who," but like a—well, I mean, I guess an identity, but also like, just temporality of things, like, very few students coming in anymore, or in the last few years, who are like, "I think I might be queer." Very little—I mean, still a few, but often more so students who are at the very beginning of questioning their gender identity. But students coming in, like, having been out, you know, even if not out to like, their family or community but to themselves, and like, on the internet, or whatever, for like, years. So that has definitely shifted. Fewer—like, there are definitely—there are students who are navigating like, coming out journeys. But I'm also not sure they find the Center as their support place for that. Like, the Counseling Center runs a group—a therapy group for coming out. And, like, we don't know who was in that group. But we have worked with the facilitators in the past. They've kind of just—like, at one point, they invited, I think, AJ in to speak at the group, because the students in that space were not the students hanging out and like, coming to the Center. So just some really different kind of shifts around what kind of support people are looking for, what their needs are, and a lot of shifting around like, gender and lots more students using non-binary

pronouns, or changing the pronouns that they use, or changing the names that they use while they're students. And also, it's like—they've cycled back around to everybody just uses "gay" as like, an identifier label. We went from, like, "gay" is the only word to like—now we have these whole, like, this whole dictionary of identity terms that have come out. But now it's like—the youth are like, "Now we're just all gay." And then they'll clarify or go into detail if it comes up. But it's been really interesting to watch that come around. It's like, we had to get people away from that because it was so presumptuous of like, the singular narrative. And now it's like—the students are like, "Nah, it got too complicated" and were just, like, "Let's use this and then go from there," which has been interesting to see happen.

Alex Purcell 51:21

I don't want to keep you forever. So I have a few more for you. This one I kind of want to, I think, phrase together. You can tackle it how you want. But how did you see the Center impacting things on campus? And then, in the same vein, how do you think the Center is perceived on campus by people who are not involved in the Center? So I guess you could pick that apart.

Kayla Lisenby-Denson 54:42

Let's see. I mean, in terms of how the Center like, drove change, I definitely saw a lot of change happen. Like I mentioned earlier, I mean, we—gender-inclusive housing was launched, I think, in 2016, followed by gender-inclusive housing for first years in 2017 or 2018. A lot of policy changes, and the, kind of, updates that AJ has really been the lead person on. We spent the last 18 months working on names and gender markers within data systems, which I think will be a huge change once all of that work goes live. Because right now, you know, Wake loves their homegrown systems and like, nothing talks to each other. So if a student or faculty or staff member uses a name that's different from their legal name, they have to change it in like, 1000 places. But ideally, once all that work is done, it will be like, one place. And we'll also have a standard of how we use people's names, that we're not publicizing legal names unless it's absolutely necessary for the person given their role, which I think will have a big impact because right now, if a faculty member has a trans student in their class and they see their legal name and associate their name with a particular gender identity, like, they do worse than honoring the student's actual name and gender identity or pronouns, or they often do. And I think that like, the LGBTQ concerns are just more—they're elevated in ways that I imagine also have to do with the changing times. Like it's still wild to me that the summer I moved here is the summer of the Supreme Court decision that allowed me to then get married here, like, what? That is—that's so, so weird. So the history, like—I don't know how much of it was the Center and how much of it was just the changing of like, attitudes and kind of, elevation of queer experiences more broadly. I think that the Center, and the Center's presence, helped direct that, like, positively. And then for perceptions, I mean, I'm obviously biased because I am, like, I'm still at the Center, like, in my soul. I hope that the perception is great. And I do think it's—I do think it is, like, particularly with colleagues, like faculty and staff. I think I had a really hard time with once my position change was announced, and then we had like, this little transition farewell party thing. And I got so many notes and emails and stuff from people like, "Oh, you've done such great work," or like, "Your partnership was the best," and like, "We're glad you're staying here." And like, I was processing with—I have this little Discord group of friends, and I was like, "Y'all, I cannot—like, all of these compliments are making me very uncomfortable and I cannot deal with them." [laughs] And they were like, "No, you deserve them." Okay, fine. So I do think we're perceived to be like, knowledgeable and committed to making positive change while also meeting

people where they are and not expecting people to just suddenly know everything they need to know or be able to do everything they need to do. Having high expectations but also willing to, like, walk with people to meet them is at least, I hope, the kind of identity we built for ourselves. And with students, I have no clue. Apparently—I mean, I don't even think most students, if they haven't—like, if they're not here, I don't think they know that we exist. I've definitely gotten that a few times like, I'll be serving a midnight breakfast during finals week and sometimes they'll be like, "Oh, where do you work?" and I'm like, "At the LGBTQ Center." And they're like, "I didn't know we had one of those!" And I'm like, "10 years. 10 years and counting."

Alex Purcell 59:45

Oh my gosh.

Kayla Lisenby-Denson 59:45

Or like, at one point I guess the student advisors were like, presenting to each other on things that they might want to tell their advising groups about and somebody said, "Oh, the LGBTQ Center is great. They always have Starburst, you can just go in and get a Starburst." [laughs] So I'm like, okay, well, at least they know we're here, even if our reputation is that you can hop in and get a Starburst. And like, you know, that is a value. Like if somebody needs a little candy for their afternoon, and they think, "I'll pop in here." At least they know we're here whenever they have, like, some concern. It's kind of all over the map. But mostly just like, unknown. I don't know that we have—I mean, I'm sure there are people who are like, "Oh, I don't like the Center," or like, "I don't go there." But I feel like that's more of like, an interpersonal or—that's less pervasive than just the general like, "Oh, I didn't know we had one. That's cool."

Alex Purcell 1:00:55

Mhmm. Should be the new tagline: "Known for the Starburst."

Kayla Lisenby-Denson 1:01:02

[Laughs] I did say that, like, some of our students were really mad. They were like, "They should know more about us, like, that's not it." And I'm like, yeah, but y'all. I mean, it's not great. Yeah, I wish they said something else about us. But we're on the map. Which, you know, for like, orientation and stuff, it's just like being hit with a water hose of information, that's the first year. So if that's all you remember, at least we're in your brain somewhere. You know, you'll find us when you need us. And I definitely think that's also a place where there's a lot of opportunity to grow. And what I'm excited about, like with the new—as they're hiring for a new assistant director, I think there's a lot—like, a focus on somebody to really build out what student engagement looks like and think about, like, what are we doing and how are we doing it? How do we get diverse student voices connected with the Center? So I think there's a lot of exciting opportunity in that realm as well.

Alex Purcell 1:02:14

Well, that is a perfect segue into generally, what do you perceive as the goals of the Center? I think that could be when you started. And then maybe also, I mean, since it was so recent, when you left? And—you know, I'm just gonna stop asking two questions at once [both laugh]

Kayla Lisenby-Denson 1:02:43

Um, well, I could give the elevator pitch of like, you know, "The LGBTQ Center provides education, advocacy, support, personal and professional development." Um, and I mean, I do think those are the goals. Like, I think education, advocacy, support, personal and professional development, those are all important pieces. So we're—I think the goals are both to support and develop the community of LGBTQ people at Wake Forest. So both students, but also faculty and staff, and the ways that we engage with like, the queer community and the broader Winston Salem community. But then there's also, like, a big piece of the work that is helping the community writ large, being more inclusive of LGBTQ people so that it's not, you know, our students who are educating their healthcare provider at Student Health about their needs as a trans person, or like, whatever the case may be. So I think the goals really boil down to both supporting and developing who's here, while also making "here" a more welcoming and inclusive place. Yeah.

Alex Purcell 1:04:18

I think I'm gonna—I'll ask, when you left, which was recently, what do you think, at that point, were the biggest strengths of the Center and what were its biggest weaknesses?

Kayla Lisenby-Denson 1:04:32

Oh, let's see. As of February 11th, yeah, like three weeks ago, um, I think our strengths were really—I mean, so we've been kind of celebrating the 10 year anniversary for like, a year, and it will continue into the fall. I think a strength is just like, we have been here established, maybe not always in the student mindset, but at least kind of structurally within the institution. I'm really proud of our Deac Allies program, which I mean, I built so of course I'm proud of it. But I do think we offer valuable education and consultation to people. And I think we definitely have a, like, sense of community with students as well as some faculty and staff who are just kind of—like, we have our Center family. I think AJ's leadership has been a huge strength since them founding it, and really like, seeing—I mean, really walking into a blank slate with being told to build a Center with no expectations of like, what does a successful center do or look like? Like, we never really got those set by anyone else. So it was just kind of like, "We're gonna do the things we think need to be done and hope for the best." And I think that their leadership is really why any of the other strengths exist. I mean, in terms of weaknesses or challenges, I think it really—I mean, having Antayzha come on board, even shared with the Women's Center, was a huge opportunity to expand our capacity. And I felt really bad, like, finally we're fully staffed and we're ready like, we've got all these possibilities, and I was like, "Okay, bye." Um, but you know, I had to do what I needed to do. But just that, like, not having enough. Also, you know, AJ has been—had a dual role as an Assistant Vice President for like, a couple of years now, maybe longer, not good at the time. And so a lot of their work has kind of shifted to more in that capacity. And so they like—and this is not on them, they have done everything humanly possible to do two full time jobs in one person. But ideally, like, we would have an AVP for Equitable Policy and a director for the LGBTQ Center because there is absolutely that much work to be done. And so I think that is a challenge. And then just, like I said, so much of our student engagement and community has been kind of, like, haphazard or kind of driven by the work study students that we happen to hire that year. So I think there's a big opportunity for more strategic engagement with different pockets of campus community, which I think is really valuable for both like, the other parts of the campus but also for the students who would naturally kind of find their way to us. Like, to deconstruct, or at least not allow some of those, like,

social barriers that I think often get built in our student body, to be kind of a remedy or, like, address that and keep that from getting as entrenched as I think it does oftentimes. So lots of opportunity, but a lot of good has been done.

Alex Purcell 1:09:17

My last question for you, which, you know, you can use your imagination as you will. Where would you like to see the Center grow in the next five years?

Kayla Lisenby-Denson 1:09:28

Oh, well, I have a—do you want bullet points? I got a plan [both laugh]. In the next five years, I mean, I would love to see some big stacking—not necessarily changes, like I don't want Antayzha to leave, I don't want AJ to leave. Um, I would like to see AJ be able to, if they want to, move into their AVP role like, full-time, so meaning hiring a director. I think at minimum, the Center should have a director, two assistant or associate directors, one to focus on student engagement and one to focus on education and inclusive community building. And then a program coordinator to do programming and an administrative staff person. [Laughs] I have a very specific idea. And I mean, physically we need more space. That was definitely a big issue that kept coming up, particularly right before COVID. Like, we don't have that much room and we have, you know, 20 some odd students who are hanging out like, oh my god, it's so quiet here compared to there because there's not people around here and even there, I mean, even if it wasn't crowded, there was usually at least a couple of people scattered around. So I'd love to see more space. Those are like, really tangible. I think more intangibly, just increased institutional recognition for the Center and the work that they're doing. And continuing to really impact the way that colleagues and faculty think about sexuality and gender, and how it intersects or shows up with their work so that there's more intentionality and students aren't doing that advocacy on their own.

Alex Purcell 1:11:58

Well, thank you so much for talking with me today—

Kayla Lisenby-Denson 1:12:01

Sorry if I like, talked your ear off—

Alex Purcell 1:12:03

No, no, it was perfect. I learned so much and it was amazing. Yes, thank you so much for talking about the Center and your experience. It's been so lovely to meet you officially and talk with you. I'm really excited to share your story with the class. I will be presenting it, not the week after spring break but the week after that. We'll all be talking and sharing our conversations. So if you have any questions or concerns about any of it, obviously you can email me. I can keep you in the loop about the project, whatever, you know, you want to do. And then the last thing I need from you is just for you to sign a Deed of Gift, which I have been emphasized is very important. AJ was like, "Do not leave without that." And I'll stop recording.

[End of Audio File]