

Jessica Polacek  
Narrator

Andrea Jenkins  
Interviewer

The Transgender Oral History Project  
Tretter Collection in GLBT Studies  
University of Minnesota

August 17, 2016



The Transgender Oral History Project of the Upper Midwest will empower individuals to tell their story, while providing students, historians, and the public with a more rich foundation of primary source material about the transgender community. The project is part of the Tretter Collection at the University of Minnesota. The archive provides a record of GLBT thought, knowledge and culture for current and future generations and is available to students, researchers and members of the public.

The Transgender Oral History Project will collect up to 400 hours of oral histories involving 200 to 300 individuals over the next three years. Major efforts will be the recruitment of individuals of all ages and experiences, and documenting the work of The Program in Human Sexuality. This project will be led by Andrea Jenkins, poet, writer, and trans-activist. Andrea brings years of experience working in government, non-profits and LGBT organizations. If you are interested in being involved in this exciting project, please contact Andrea.

Andrea Jenkins  
[jenki120@umn.edu](mailto:jenki120@umn.edu)  
(612) 625-4379

1     Andrea Jenkins             -AJ

2     Jessica Polacek           -JP

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5     AJ:     So, good afternoon. My name is Andrea Jenkins and I am the oral historian with the Tretter  
6             Collection Transgender Oral History Project at the University of Minnesota. Today is August 17,  
7             2016, and I am at The Center in LaCrosse, Wisconsin and I'm here today with Jessica, and I hope  
8             I don't butcher your last name – Polacek.

9     JP:     Po-la-check.

10    AJ:     Po-la-check.

11    JP:     Yes, one of those good Irish names.

12    AJ:     One of those good old Irish names. How are you doing today, Jessica?

13    JP:     I'm doing very well, thank you.

14    AJ:     Great. Can you just state your name, spell it – particularly your last name because I've already  
15             butchered the pronunciation and I don't want to mess up the spelling, and your gender identity  
16             today, your gender assigned at birth, and what pronouns do you use?

17    JP:     OK. I am Jessica Michelle Polacek. I was born male, I currently identify as trans woman but look  
18             at myself as being female.

19    AJ:     Yes.

20    JP:     Preferred pronouns are she, her, and hers. What's the other . . .?

21    AJ:     That's it. I find it interesting that you made the little distinction that you identify as a trans  
22             woman, but you consider yourself a woman. And that's a beautiful thing – I have some of the  
23             same thoughts and ideations, but I'm wondering what is your rationale behind making that  
24             distinction?

25    JP:     Well, I jokingly say that I'm a woman of transgender history.

26    AJ:     Yes.

27    JP:     Is actually the way to put that.

28    AJ:     OK, OK.

29    JP:     I have 45 years in which I lived in a male embodiment and there's really no way for me to escape  
30             that, especially when you've done some of the things I have. People can look me up online very  
31             easily. In the past it would have been OK you would have had to scour the newspapers or a  
32             magazine or something like that. But the advent of the internet and everything, if they type in  
33             my last name and type in US Army they're going to find it and I'm not going to hide from my  
34             history. I have felt like a woman for the longest time, since I was 4-years-old was really the first  
35             time that I had an inkling that something wasn't quite right. So, you know, I've always, in my

- 1 heart and soul, known who I was – it just took me a while to get there, to be the embodiment of  
2 it.
- 3 AJ: To be visibly Jessica.
- 4 JP: Exactly.
- 5 AJ: How did you come to the name Jessica?
- 6 JP: A couple different reasons. I have three friends who have been very supportive named Jessica  
7 and so I wanted to honor them.
- 8 AJ: Really? That's fascinating.
- 9 JP: It was really wonderful, especially . . .
- 10 AJ: So when you guys go out, are you like the four Jessicas?
- 11 JP: Sadly, all in the military so we're kind of all different corners of the world. One is in California,  
12 one is in Florida, and . . . I'm trying to remember where the third one is right now. But, in either  
13 case, we're . . .
- 14 AJ: She's not here in LaCrosse, Wisconsin.
- 15 JP: No, sadly they're not. But again, I hear from them every once in a while. Thank goodness for  
16 Facebook and email and all that stuff. So yeah, again it's . . . you know as well as I do that this  
17 can be a very tough road to walk.
- 18 AJ: Absolutely.
- 19 JP: And we experience times where people are going to walk away from us. So, to have people that  
20 stand by you and still treat you like nothing has changed is very, very uplifting. And then the  
21 geek side of me, when I was growing up movies that I remember, the very first Jessica name that  
22 I ever remember was *King Kong* – Jessica Lange.
- 23 AJ: OK, I didn't know that.
- 24 JP: Oh man, this was shortly after the World Trade Centers had been built and yeah, that's one of  
25 the things that I remember. And then Jessica Tandy from *Driving Miss Daisy*.
- 26 AJ: Yeah.
- 27 JP: Those were two names that just kind of stuck with me, especially Jessica Tandy – the person  
28 that she was, both in real life and the characters she played on screen really seemed to strike a  
29 chord with me.
- 30 AJ: Not Jessica Rabbit?
- 31 JP: Jokingly people call me Jessica Rabbit, especially my landlord loves calling me Jessica Rabbit or  
32 the saucy wench upstairs.
- 33 AJ: Well you're kind of a strawberry blonde there – a little bit.

- 1 JP: A little bit. I am very blessed to rent from a married gay couple that live . . . they live in the main  
2 portion of the house and then I live in the apartment above them. They converted the upper  
3 floor of the house into an apartment and so . . .
- 4 AJ: Nice. It's a pretty nice space? You like it?
- 5 JP: Right place, right time. It's in a very beautiful part of LaCrosse. It's by Myrick Park so it's right  
6 on the Black River. Great neighborhood. From the time that they first met me I've been able to  
7 be myself without question. I've disclosed to them and they're like, "OK, so."
- 8 AJ: That's so important – particularly where you live. That is the most . . . that's your sanctuary, if  
9 you will.
- 10 JP: It is.
- 11 AJ: You don't want to be uncomfortable in the place where you have to go rest your head. So that's  
12 just so special, I'm glad to hear that. Jessica, tell me what is your earliest memory? And you've  
13 already talked about knowing your gender identity at four, but I'm just really curious, what's  
14 your earliest memory? It doesn't have to be about gender identity, even though if it is that's no  
15 problem. What's the first thing you remember in life?
- 16 JP: That's a hard question because I've had to piece back together a lot of my childhood. If you're  
17 familiar with the term ACE, Adverse Childhood Experiences.
- 18 AJ: What's the term?
- 19 JP: ACE. A-C-E, Advanced Childhood Experiences . . . or, I mean Adverse Childhood Experiences.
- 20 AJ: Adverse Childhood Experiences – I'm not familiar with that term.
- 21 JP: A lot of trauma when I was growing up so for many, many years I blocked out a lot of . . .
- 22 AJ: A lot of your childhood.
- 23 JP: Yeah.
- 24 AJ: Understandable.
- 25 JP: But as I've gone back through and tried to gather those, I can remember living in . . . really the  
26 first house I was ever cognizant of was in Muskego, Wisconsin, which is a suburb of Milwaukee.  
27 And I can remember that house. In fact, my last six years I was in the Army I was a recruiter and  
28 I had opportunity – I was in Muskego meeting with somebody and after I'd finished that meeting  
29 I called my dad and said, "What was the address of our old house?" And so I drove by it and as  
30 I'm driving by in this government car, the family was out in the driveway and the kids are playing  
31 basketball and mom was out there and so I stopped. I'm in uniform and I say, "Hey, I'm Sgt.  
32 Polacek, this may sound kind of weird but I used to live in this house many years ago." I  
33 described the house to them in vivid detail and the wife and mother just kind of looked at me  
34 and said, "There's no doubt that you had lived here." To be able to go through and remember  
35 the fireplace and the mantle and to be able to say, "OK, if you go in the front door, here's the  
36 living room and if you go to the left there is a hallway and the first door on the right is the  
37 bathroom," and all of that.

- 1 AJ: So that made a huge impression on you.
- 2 JP: It did, apparently. Like I said I think it may have been the last place that I was really honestly  
3 happy in my childhood, which is why it stuck with me. But I was about four or five years old. I  
4 do remember that I had started kindergarten in that same house. With regard to my gender, I  
5 can remember sitting around and every year, right around fall – shortly after school started, you  
6 got the JCPenney catalog, this big honking book.
- 7 AJ: Right.
- 8 JP: You'd sit there, and I could remember – we had a ledge off the fireplace and I could fit  
9 underneath that ledge and so I'd sit there with the catalog. I can remember looking at Girl Scout  
10 uniforms. They had Halloween costumes back then and looking at all the fairy princesses and all  
11 these different female, stereotypically female, costumes and saying, "That's what I'd really like  
12 to be." Or looking at the Christmas section and saying, "I would like an Easy Bake Oven," or, "I  
13 would like Barbie Dolls." Meanwhile my brothers are all, "We want Tonkas and we want Legos,"  
14 and all of this stuff. And so, again, I knew that something wasn't quite right, but at that age you  
15 don't have the vocabulary for it so you can't really put a pinpoint on it. But, it was just that  
16 feeling of unease. Somebody had asked me in one of the training sessions that we'd done is,  
17 you know, "What does that feel like? Does it feel like wearing two left shoes?" And when they  
18 said that I was like, "Wow, that really is an apt description because . . ." The only difference I  
19 would say is, "OK, with two left shoes or putting your shoes on the wrong feet you can look and  
20 you can see." In a lot of ways what it felt like for me was having a pebble in the bottom of my  
21 shoe and you'd walk and you could feel that pebble grating on the bottom of your sole and  
22 you'd take the shoe off and you'd shake it out and you'd think, OK, and you'd put it back on and  
23 you'd start walking . . .
- 24 AJ: And it's still there.
- 25 JP: It's still there. So again, you couldn't . . .
- 26 AJ: I like that analogy better than the two left shoes even.
- 27 JP: That's really how it felt most of my life.
- 28 AJ: Just something small but just always there.
- 29 JP: Exactly.
- 30 AJ: A little irritating – yeah, that's a great analogy.
- 31 JP: I hear stories of other trans people who just hate their bodies. I don't know if I've ever had that  
32 kind of dysphoria. I felt uncomfortable with it but that really didn't start until about age six  
33 when people started telling me, "Well that's not who you are, that's not how you're supposed  
34 to act. This is the way little boys act."
- 35 AJ: So you did sort of express different gender at an early age.
- 36 JP: Oh yeah. My grandmother, by the time I was six years old, had pulled my mother aside one day  
37 and said, "I think there's something wrong with him. I think he's going to grow up and be gay."

- 1 AJ: Wow.
- 2 JP: And it's like, "OK, grandma – close but no cigar . . . oh wait, I transitioned and now I'm a woman  
3 but I'm attracted to women which makes me a lesbian, so yes grandma – you got it right, I am  
4 gay." But yeah, I was showing signs. My grandfather, my mother's father, was very much a part  
5 of the sports leagues in the Milwaukee area, he was in fact the first employee that Bud Selig  
6 hired when he brought the Milwaukee Brewers to Milwaukee.
- 7 AJ: Oh really, wow.
- 8 JP: So there was a lot of pressure from grandpa to . . . I'd be hanging out with my aunts and my  
9 grandma in the kitchen and I would want to be there connecting with women and talking - the  
10 place where I felt most at home, most comfortable, most like myself, but then to be grabbed  
11 and said, "You don't belong in here, come in here and sit and watch football or basketball or  
12 whatever with your brothers and your uncles and me," and all of that. I'm like, "But I don't want  
13 to." It wasn't something I was interested in, and again that may seem stereotypically masculine  
14 or feminine, I just knew where I belonged.
- 15 AJ: Right, exactly.
- 16 JP: But it didn't take long to figure out that despite how I felt about myself, if I wanted to get along  
17 without too many complications in my life, then you learned to tow the line.
- 18 AJ: Did you ever play sports?
- 19 JP: I did. I was never really good at it. In fact, one of the most embarrassing stories of my  
20 childhood and one of these memories that kind of just come back and get you was when my  
21 father was teaching me to play softball. He bought me a ball and a glove and I had no natural  
22 athletic ability whatsoever and I can remember him tossing . . . you know, a good arching ball,  
23 and I go for it and wap – I catch it right in the face. That was pretty much it for any type of  
24 softball or baseball. As I got older, especially junior high and high school, realizing again that  
25 you've got to fit into certain norms, I was involved in track and I was involved in basketball and  
26 stuff like that.
- 27 AJ: Wow. Where did you grow up? You mentioned Muskego outside of Milwaukee.
- 28 JP: I was born in Milwaukee and moved around quite a bit. My parents got divorced when I was  
29 seven. Even before then, I think we moved three or four times. We'd moved from Milwaukee  
30 to Wauwatosa to Muskego and I think the final place we lived before they got divorced was  
31 Johnson's Creek/Watertown area, which again . . .
- 32 AJ: All in Wisconsin?
- 33 JP: Yes, southeast Wisconsin. And then after they got divorced, my mother and father seemed to  
34 want to play a Midwest game of chess with each other. My dad actually got custody of us, which  
35 was unusual. But before that was finalized, my mother took off with us to Chicago so I lived in  
36 Cicero – Chicago.
- 37 AJ: Cicero, Illinois – yes.

- 1 JP: And lived there probably for about six months and then it was finalized where my dad got  
2 custody and we were living in Eagle . . . like I said, we bounced around quite a bit. It seemed like  
3 my dad would move, my mom would follow; my dad would want to move away from my mom  
4 and my mom would follow. So we eventually wound up . . . we were in the Quad Cities for a  
5 while, we were outside the Quad Cities for a while, and then finally just before I started junior  
6 high, my dad wanted to live closer to his mom and dad who were getting older and needed  
7 some help, so we moved to a small town called Merrill in northern Wisconsin.
- 8 AJ: How do you spell that?
- 9 JP: Merrill. M-e-r-r-i-l-l.
- 10 AJ: OK.
- 11 JP: It's right around north central Wisconsin, if you know where Wausau is – darn near middle of  
12 the state, slightly north of Wausau.
- 13 AJ: Is that the shoe . . . do they make the shoes there?
- 14 JP: Weinbrenner – yes, they do. Well, I don't think it's Weinbrenner anymore, I think it's  
15 Milwaukee Boot Company or something like that. But it used to be called Weinbrenners when I  
16 was in junior high and high school. So I finished up junior high and high school in Merrill.
- 17 AJ: So your family – your grandmother was sort of recognizing these tendencies and I know you  
18 tried to do a lot of things to fit in, but was there any bullying in school for you?
- 19 JP: Well I talked earlier about the traumas. It was kind of funny, in grade school – not so much. I  
20 remember sitting out on the playground and I had long hair – probably almost as long as it is  
21 now until I was in . . . maybe all my life, I don't remember. I'd have to look through pictures. I  
22 usually kept my hair long, it was just one of those things. It was something I could get away with  
23 it.
- 24 AJ: Right, the 1980s and the 1990s – long hair was . . .
- 25 JP: Well, my father was a product of the 1960s so your flower child, hippie type of thing. So I guess  
26 it didn't really bother him that I had long hair. But again, in grade school, there would be female  
27 classmates who would comb and . . . brush and braid my hair on the playground. Or, we'd be  
28 playing jump rope or hopscotch, and again stereotypically female but again it's the 1970s. And  
29 so, those were the norms, those were very solid gender stereotypes. It was toward the end of . .  
30 . probably about 6<sup>th</sup> grade that I started realizing or being told again, "You don't hang out with  
31 the girls all the time," "You don't let them braid your hair." And all of this different stuff. And  
32 again, one of those really solid memories that I have from childhood was when I was living in  
33 Cicero. The teacher I had while I was there used to take and acknowledge a student of the  
34 week, and I can remember for me – again, I don't know if she was so tuned in to who I was, but  
35 she would take and give us a star on our forehead, one of those glittery/glossy stars, but then  
36 she also took and spritzed perfume on me. I'm kind of like . . . I'd never seen her do that with  
37 any of the other boys. And so . . .
- 38 AJ: Air quote "boys".



- 1 JP: Exactly. So again it was something that kind of . . . what am I projecting here? As a child, no – I  
2 didn't really think of it, but I know my mom, when I got home, she was like – sniff, sniff, "Are  
3 you wearing perfume? Why are you wearing perfume?" Again, it was one of those questioning  
4 moments where it's like, "Well, OK, maybe this isn't right or maybe this isn't acceptable." It was  
5 when I was in my teens that things got to be really, really bad. The first time my father caught  
6 me wearing any article of female clothing, again – like I said, it was 6<sup>th</sup> grade probably. We  
7 owned horses and I had gotten up on the horse and I think my pants had ridden up and I was  
8 wearing a pair of red cable knit tights and my dad noticed those. "Are you wearing tights? I  
9 better not catch you . . ." That was the first really harsh thing that I had heard.
- 10 AJ: Hard . . . "Don't do this."
- 11 JP: Yes. As I got to junior high, different things that made it tough. First off, being a new kid in a  
12 strange town – a small community in rural Wisconsin. I was an outsider anyway, so that's  
13 always tough to try and break into the social groups, but for me – just to give you an idea, you  
14 may be able to tell now, but I've always been slender framed. When I joined the Army at age  
15 18, I weighed 118 pounds soaking wet.
- 16 AJ: Is that right?
- 17 JP: Yes, I've always been small boned, small framed, made a very easy target for somebody who  
18 wanted to bully.
- 19 AJ: Bullies and . . . yeah.
- 20 JP: Yes. The thing that really got me in trouble was I played flute. I had started playing flute when I  
21 was 10-years-old and it wasn't just the guys that gave me grief, some of the girls that I played in  
22 the flute section with were brutal about it as well.
- 23 AJ: Really?
- 24 JP: Yes. Not all of them but there were . . . I can think of two in particular that were really, really  
25 hard to deal with and would find ways to get their digs in. Before a concert we'd have dress  
26 rehearsals and they'd comment, "Don't forget, Polacek, band director said make sure you wear  
27 a dress." Yeah, I would love to if that were socially acceptable but I can't talk to you about it –  
28 you're close-minded about it and everything like that. So there was that. I can remember  
29 experiences where . . . this was before the days of backpacks and all of that and so there are  
30 certain social cues, again the way I'm sitting now is considered to be a more feminine way.  
31 We're supposed to take up less space, we're supposed to be less imposing. In school it was how  
32 you carried books and I can remember . . . nobody ever taught me to do this, I naturally carried  
33 my books up here. That was just something that, for whatever reason, that was automatic to  
34 me and I can remember guys walking up to me and smacking the books out of my hand and  
35 watching them go sail across the hall and being told, "You don't carry your books like that,  
36 you're a guy – you're supposed to carry your books like this and you're supposed to walk like  
37 this." Again, those social cues, that reinforcement that I wasn't right.
- 38 AJ: You weren't doing it right.

- 1 JP: Exactly. Socially unacceptable really is what it comes down to. So there were a lot of lessons  
2 like that in school. A lot of physical altercations. I can remember one night after track practice,  
3 some kid decided he wanted to go underneath the bleachers and have it out with me. There  
4 were always names – again, nobody had . . . this was the late 1970s, early 1980s that we’re  
5 talking about here, and the word transgender, or even transsexual, really wasn’t in vogue.
- 6 AJ: Yeah, wasn’t widespread.
- 7 JP: I know, for me, trying to figure out these feelings I had – it wasn’t like I could go to the public  
8 library and pull a book off the shelf. I wouldn’t have known where to begin. So there were a lot  
9 of . . .
- 10 AJ: There wasn’t Snapchat or Facebook or Instagram – none of that existed.
- 11 JP: Again, we’re sitting here at The Center, and this is why I’m working here is because I believe in  
12 what we do here at The Center. I wish there was some place like this available to me when I was  
13 growing up where I could come and go into the library and find a book on what I’m feeling. I  
14 knew I wasn’t gay. By the time I hit 14 or 15, I knew I was attracted to girls. But people made  
15 the automatic assumption. I was called fairy, faggot, gay, homo – all of these epithets that they  
16 throw at you. Well no, that wasn’t the case at all.
- 17 AJ: Did you have girlfriends?
- 18 JP: I did. My first, her name was Kelly, and this was . . . again if you can call it girlfriend, it was  
19 puppy love. We used to go to horse shows and do different . . . I used to barrel race and stuff  
20 like that.
- 21 AJ: What’s a barrel race?
- 22 JP: Barrel race is . . . if you’ve ever watched rodeo – again, this is funny but it is traditionally a  
23 female rodeo sport. Barrel racing is where they put three barrels out in this pen and you do  
24 different things – like you can do the clover leaf, so you ride your horse in as fast as you can go  
25 and you go around these barrels. We’d do other races – like monkey in the tree. They would  
26 have a tire, an old tire, hanging in a tree and you would take and ride in with your house and  
27 you would have somebody behind you and they would grab on to the tire and hold on to the  
28 tire, and then you would race around the pen and then you would come back, you would pick  
29 them up, and then you’d race back out. And all of these events were timed. Another part of  
30 that was pole bending. Pole bending is where they would have seven poles and then you would  
31 take and do figure eights through the poles and try and get in and out as fast as you could.
- 32 AJ: So women did the . . .
- 33 JP: In traditional rodeo, yes.
- 34 AJ: And the guys rode the broncs and the . . .
- 35 JP: The broncs and did the steer roping and all of that stuff.
- 36 AJ: The bulls and all of that stuff.

- 1 JP: But this was something that was just open gendered, but again one sport that I really  
2 participated in wholeheartedly was considered . . .
- 3 AJ: Sort of feminized or gendered . . .
- 4 JP: Traditionally – yeah. So she was one of the . . . her family, if we would take . . . it was an over  
5 the weekend camping sort of thing, so yeah – her family would be there, my family would be  
6 there and we’d just kind of pal around. It was really puppy love, but that’s the first one that I  
7 remember.
- 8 AJ: Oh, very sweet.
- 9 JP: I had . . . when was it? Ninth grade – 8<sup>th</sup> or 9<sup>th</sup> grade, must have been the summer before 9<sup>th</sup>  
10 grade, Lisa was one of my girlfriends. Again, it was a summer romance, it came and went and all  
11 of that. But I learned again, really quickly, that having a girlfriend was a good smokescreen. It  
12 got rid of some of the accusations of me being gay and all of that – so it toned that down a bit,  
13 there was still some of it. But by the time I got to high school, it started going away a lot more.  
14 Definitely by the time I graduated, it really wasn’t a thing because I’d started dating the person  
15 who would eventually become my wife when we were 16.
- 16 AJ: OK, so you’ve been married?
- 17 JP: Yes.
- 18 JP: We dated for four years, got married when I was . . . just before I turned 20, and then we were  
19 married for 18 years after that – together for 22 years.
- 20 AJ: Did you guys have children?
- 21 JP: Four.
- 22 AJ: Four children. Wow.
- 23 JP: Yeah, three boys and one girl.
- 24 AJ: So they’re all adults now I would suspect.
- 25 JP: All but one. The youngest is . . . is he a junior in high school this year? I know he turned 17 in  
26 October. But yeah, the older three are all adults. My daughter is married now. Sadly I do not  
27 have any communication with them.
- 28 AJ: Oh, I’m so sad to hear that.
- 29 JP: It’s hard. I don’t know exactly what it was that I did. I know that there are some things that I’ve  
30 done as a parent that could have been better. Being in the military most of my life, I imagine in  
31 some ways I did come off as very authoritarian, almost like I was a drill sergeant. I did have high  
32 expectations for my kids.
- 33 AJ: Absolutely.
- 34 JP: I did expect them to keep their room clean, I did expect them to do their homework, I did expect  
35 them to take the garbage out when asked, or unload the dishwasher and stuff like that. But I

1 don't . . . the majority of what I did was well intentioned, but as goes hand-in-hand again with  
2 some transgender people is that there were outbursts of anger and there were times that I  
3 became so frustrated that while there wasn't anything in particular they did, it was just the  
4 pressure of pretending and all of that. So I imagine that that is part of the reason but if they're  
5 angry about that, they don't want to hear about it. If they're angry about me transitioning, they  
6 don't want to hear about that either. They really shut me out in every way possible. They have  
7 me blocked on Facebook, I can't have their phone numbers, I don't know where they're living so  
8 I can't send them anything like birthday cards or Christmas cards or anything like that.

9 AJ: I'm so sorry, Jessica. That's so tough.

10 JP: I appreciate it. I've come to accept it for what it is, especially three of them are adults. Three of  
11 them are at an age where they're going to have to start making their own decisions and one of  
12 the forms that I'd filled out it asked what my religion is. My religion is Christian and I think of  
13 the story of the prodigal son – the prodigal son came to the father and said, "OK, dad, I want my  
14 inheritance, I want everything I have coming to me – give it to me now and I'm taking off." And  
15 the lesson I take away from that story is the father honored the son's request, gave it to him, did  
16 not chase after the son, did not send servants out to go watch the son or anything like that. He  
17 did what he needed to do to live, he continued tending the crops or herding the sheep or  
18 whatever it was that the father was responsible for – he kept living his life. But as you read that  
19 story, you also know that he kind of kept his eye on the road coming to the house and the day  
20 that he saw the son coming back was a day of great rejoicing. And that's really the way it's  
21 going to be for me – my door is always open, I will always welcome my children back, and it will  
22 be a day of great rejoicing for me. But I can't continue to reach out to them and spend energy  
23 where it's not going to do any good.

24 AJ: Yes, because you have your own life and health and mental health to consider as well.

25 JP: Exactly. I love my children and I wish I had a solid relationship with them – I want that more  
26 than anything in the world. When it comes, wonderful, but I can't chase after it.

27 AJ: What about the rest of your birth family? I didn't ask – do you have brothers and sisters?

28 JP: Get your score card ready because holidays around my family is always a joy. I am the oldest of  
29 nine.

30 AJ: OK.

31 JP: So I have eight younger siblings. From my parent's marriage, there was me and two brothers.  
32 My parents got divorced, got re-married. From my mother's second marriage she had two  
33 daughters; from my father's second marriage he had one daughter. They got divorced again,  
34 got re-married. From my mother's third marriage, she had another daughter. From my father's  
35 third marriage, he wound up . . . we adopted my cousin, so she's my sister and he had a son.

36 AJ: Oh wow.

37 JP: The youngest son was born when I was 16. My youngest sibling and my oldest child are closer in  
38 age than I am to my youngest sibling. There's only four years difference between my youngest  
39 brother and my oldest son. So yeah, it's kind of crazy. As far as acceptance goes, I mentioned

1 before . . . you asked about bullying. There was as much bullying at home as there was at school  
2 – probably more so. You always hurt the ones you love. There were things I could hide in  
3 school that I may not have been able to hide at home. And so there would be times where  
4 maybe I got home before my brothers and I tried putting on make-up and I wasn't watching the  
5 clock and didn't wash my face fast enough and so they came in and found me like that. Or that  
6 they'd find clothes tucked away in a closet somewhere. So yeah, there were times where it was  
7 . . . again, pretty brutal at the house. There was at some point in time that my brothers had  
8 outed me at school – again, they didn't have the terminology so they didn't get it quite right, but  
9 they went to school and said I wore girls clothes and I wore make-up and all of this different  
10 stuff. So yeah, there was that. Physical abuse and emotional abuse.

11 AJ: Oh, I'm so sorry.

12 JP: Again, not to make my dad sound like an awful person, I think he was doing the best he could at  
13 the time, but part of the problem was first off, I'm the oldest child. Second off, I strongly  
14 resemble my mother and third, even though he got custody of us, I would defend my mother at  
15 every turn.

16 AJ: Created some friction I would bet.

17 JP: And so that brought down a lot of animosity between us. I love my dad, I really do. I respect  
18 him for what he's accomplished in life and what he did for us growing up. It was just really hard  
19 to be in the midst of that and trying to figure out who I was and then being beat down for it.  
20 Moving forward to today, both of my parents knew . . . they had intercepted letters . . . as I said,  
21 I had started dating my girlfriend, or the person who would be my wife when we were 16. I had  
22 told her within our first six months . . .

23 AJ: Is that right?

24 JP: Yes. Again, in the best way I knew how – the movie Tootsie had just come out and so we went  
25 to see it.

26 AJ: Dustin Hoffman, right?

27 JP: Yes, exactly. I had kind of told her, I said, "You know, I'm kind of like that – but not." Again, I  
28 didn't have a word for it per se, I just described what my feelings were. So yeah, from the first  
29 six months of our relationship – yeah, as we were passing notes back and forth to each other . . .  
30 there wasn't texting, there wasn't email, it was fold a note up and pass it in class or stick it in the  
31 locker in-between class or whatever. So yeah, I probably still have every letter that she wrote to  
32 me.

33 AJ: Is that right?

34 JP: When we were in school – yeah, I'm sure I have them sitting in a box somewhere. I'm terribly  
35 nostalgic and dreadfully sentimental in that fact. Again, another stereotypically feminine  
36 attribute but that was me.

37 AJ: I don't know if that's true or not.

- 1 JP: Yes, I'm making a gross generality. There are guys that will cry at the drop of a hat easily as well,  
2 but I just know for me, I felt really tied . . . we talk about being asexual, I don't necessarily define  
3 myself as being asexual, but for me a relationship has to be about an emotional or a spiritual  
4 connection, it has to be a relationship before there's anything physical.
- 5 AJ: Before it can be physical.
- 6 JP: Yes, exactly. So yeah, there was a lot of that building . . .
- 7 AJ: There's a name for that, I think it's a demisexual or something like that.
- 8 JP: I'm not sure. There are so many terms out there. You think about when we were kids, there  
9 was L and G and maybe the B, I don't know if T had even made that out there. There was gay  
10 and lesbian – so yeah, and now we've got LGBTQIIAA – whatever. But anyway, when I  
11 committed myself to this person I said it was for life. A lot of it also had to do with the fact that  
12 I'd seen my parents divorced so many times. I didn't want to get divorced. If we had children I  
13 didn't want our children to have to go through that. But anyway, we kind of followed the rabbit  
14 trail . . .
- 15 AJ: But she knew you though, she knew who you were.
- 16 JP: She knew from the time we were 16.
- 17 AJ: And she . . . 24 years she stayed in this . . .
- 18 JP: 22 – yeah, we had four kids together and she knew. Throughout our marriage I re-affirmed my  
19 feelings. While I wasn't ready to jump into transition, I was thinking about her, I was thinking  
20 about the kids, I was wondering is there a way to do this without causing so much turmoil.  
21 When I read Jenny Boylan's book I was like, "Oh my goodness, how wonderful that she and her  
22 wife and their children stayed together." I wish I could have had that. Sadly, when I went to  
23 Iraq I got a message six months into my tour that my wife was sleeping around with some other  
24 guy – she had found herself a real man.
- 25 AJ: Oh boy. From her or from somebody else?
- 26 JP: From somebody else. There had been a series of events that had been building up to this – red  
27 flags that went up. So when I finally got this message . . . yeah, it was really tough. I was sent  
28 home on two weeks of emergency leave because apparently I was told that she had taken off to  
29 North Carolina to be with this guy and had left our kids unattended. My mother was watching  
30 them as often as she could but . . . my oldest was maybe 16 at that time. He couldn't reasonably  
31 take care of three younger kids, make sure they had meals and clean clothes and they got to  
32 school on time. So, anyway. I got brought home for emergency leave and then I filed for  
33 divorce. It was tough going back. While I was there, part of the trauma that I've experienced  
34 throughout my life was we had . . . I was the driver for our commander, the unit commander,  
35 and while I was home on emergency leave they'd gone out on a mission and while they were on  
36 that mission, they were attacked by a vehicle born IED, improvised explosive device. Lost three  
37 vehicles, three people were severely injured one of them being the commander, the other being  
38 my roommate. My roommate nearly lost both of his legs.
- 39 AJ: So you would have been driving at the time?

1 JP: I would have been driving. I was very angry about that. I was having a terrible case of survivor's  
2 guilt, even though nobody died. I couldn't help thinking to myself I should have been in that  
3 seat, that was my responsibility – I was supposed to be the one driving. Who was in my seat?  
4 Was it my roommate who had nearly lost his legs? So that weighed heavily on me because why  
5 was I home? Why was I going through this? It was around about that same time while I was  
6 home I had my first flashback and it had nothing to do with what I experienced the first six  
7 months in Iraq. What it was was I had fallen asleep and I was dreaming that it was a beautiful  
8 summer day and I was out in the backyard and the kids were playing and I was at the barbeque  
9 making dinner and all of a sudden these rockets and mortars come in to the backyard and I am  
10 hearing my kids screaming. I'm running around the yard trying to find them through the smoke  
11 and the carnage and I'm finding their torn little bodies and all of this. Being able to look at it in  
12 retrospect, it was my mind processing the idea of my kids are going to have to face this divorce,  
13 they're going to wind up being hurt by this – that's my best guess why I was having that  
14 particular nightmare. When you combine what I had experienced my first six months in Iraq and  
15 what I was going through with the divorce and then finding out about this IED. I think that had  
16 much to do with what I was experiencing. So anyway, after filing for divorce after the two  
17 weeks of being home, I was sent back to finish my last six months in Iraq. I volunteered for  
18 every stupid mission I could, it wasn't . . . it wasn't anything I was cognizant of. I didn't feel  
19 suicidal, I just know that I didn't want to come home and if something bad happened while I was  
20 out on a mission, so be it. It would just save me the pain of having to come home and watch my  
21 family disintegrate and having to divide our possessions and stuff like that. So yeah, the last six  
22 months were interesting. And not to make it sound all doom and gloom, I don't really want to  
23 because people ask me about my military experience. I was in the military for 23 years and it's  
24 like any job – there are good days, there are bad days, and then most days are just kind of  
25 Mmeh, whatever. But I had some really great days while I was there. I was able to . . . our  
26 commander realized that he was short staffed, that he didn't have enough people to do the job  
27 we needed to do because we were covering nine different areas within Iraq – Mosul and  
28 Baghdad and Abu Ghraib and Babylon. And so we were . . . we had like 90 people in our unit  
29 and we were scattered all over the place.

30 AJ: You were in the heat of it, in the thick of it.

31 JP: Yes, this was 2004, so it was some of the worst fighting since the war had started. But, what he  
32 did was he took all of us senior people who, he says, "If you're willing to learn how to do what  
33 the docs and the PAs do, we'll train you." And so most of my year while I was there I functioned  
34 as a PA. I did minor surgery, I did sutures, I was able to do patient examinations, I learned how  
35 to do casting and all of this really wonderful stuff. So again, I don't want to make it sound like it  
36 was all doom and gloom.

37 AJ: Right, no.

38 JP: It was a very positive thing and I learned some wonderful skills.

39 AJ: You were in the US Army, right?

40 JP: Yes.

41 AJ: Wow.

1 JP: But yeah, there were the times after I came back where it was . . . I just didn't care. I had no  
2 concern for my wellbeing and so I just kind of . . . OK.

3 AJ: I'm just interested, and I want to talk more a little bit more about your military experience too.  
4 So let me phrase it this way. So your wife knew about your gender identity and how you were  
5 feeling and stayed in the relationship for quite some time. Do you think the marriage ended  
6 because of your gender identity? Is that why . . . I mean, who knows why people do what they  
7 do, but do you think that had anything to do with her seeking out . . . ?

8 JP: I'm sure that had to do with part of it, no relationship ever ends just because of one thing.

9 AJ: Sure.

10 JP: And like any other relationship, yeah – we had our challenges, we had our arguments and our  
11 disagreements, and there are things that just didn't go right. But before I left for Iraq, we had  
12 been seeing a counselor and we had been discussing things and we had made a mutual  
13 agreement between ourselves that while we were apart we were going to work on our  
14 individual things that we needed to work on – whether it was how to be more loving toward  
15 each other, how to temper anger, how to communicate better, whatever it was we needed to  
16 do so that when we came back together we could work on becoming a better team, a better  
17 family. And we had grand plans – we were living in a house that we were looking at buying and  
18 we were going to take the kids to Disney World and all this different stuff. So yeah, that kind of  
19 went . . . it all went away.

20 AJ: Do you think the reason why the kids aren't interested in being in a relationship is because of  
21 the things . . . some of the ideas that their mom may have created or told them about you?

22 JP: I wish I could say for certain. I can't, it would be mere speculation on my part because again the  
23 kids have never told me she said anything about me. I've heard through second and third-hand  
24 sources that yeah, she has. But again, I've never heard it out of the horse's mouth per se. To  
25 say that she has, in some way, slandered me, I don't know. I would hope that she wouldn't. I  
26 would hope that as a mother she would realize how important it is for a child to have a  
27 relationship with both parents.

28 AJ: Right, exactly.

29 JP: And I know. I had problems with that initially. I really was angry about everything that  
30 happened and so there were times where, yeah, I may say something not very nice or very  
31 pointed about their mom. But I learned to temper that. After about the second year of our  
32 divorce I invited her over for dinner if the kids had something – because I lived closer to the  
33 school. And so if the kids had a band concert or something going on, sports, I would have her  
34 over for dinner and then we'd go walk to the school and see the kids do whatever we were  
35 doing. I was trying to bridge that gap that had been created. Yeah, I wish I knew what  
36 happened.

37 AJ: I'm just . . . I'm just curious. I certainly am transgender and I have a daughter. I'm just trying to  
38 see if there's any way to understand why children would completely cut their parents off. I do  
39 have a sense but I guess I just want to try to hear it from you.



- 1 JP: Until the kids come back to me and they start talking to me, I will only be guessing. I know we  
2 all say . . . we're human beings and in the heat of anger we say things that we probably  
3 shouldn't or that we maybe don't mean but because of where we're at at that moment in time,  
4 we lash out.
- 5 AJ: Yeah.
- 6 JP: So again, I wish I could offer a solution to other trans people out there that are going through  
7 the same thing. The same thing with . . . one of the things we're looking at doing here as a  
8 center is creating a group for spouses and significant others of transgender people because . . .
- 9 AJ: It's a difficult road for people who love transgender people too.
- 10 JP: It is. I know with my own experience . . . we're kind of bouncing around here but you asked  
11 about my family. Where I'm at now with my family is . . . my sister, Christiana, has been  
12 wonderful. She's known . . . again, she probably knew since I was about 16 or 17. I don't think  
13 she understood because she's about 10 years younger than me, but she knew. As she got to be  
14 older, as she got into college and we started conversing more, she began to understand more  
15 and she was really my strongest advocate, my most avid supporter – and to this day she  
16 continues to be. We're talking about bathroom bills now and for me, my first experience in a  
17 public bathroom . . . I'm sitting there and I think she could tell because I'm tapping my toe and  
18 gritting my teeth and it's like, "Sis, do you need to go use the bathroom? I'll go with you." And  
19 so, I had her there for that very first experience – scared out of my wits. Again, it's part of that  
20 experience – do I pass or don't I pass? What's going to happen when I go in there? I realize it's  
21 just a bathroom, I'm not worried about the facilities. I'm worried about who I run into in there,  
22 what they're going to say.
- 23 AJ: Right, who's in there, who's going to be standing outside when I come out?
- 24 JP: Exactly. So she was there for that. So she has always been there for me. My siblings really . . .  
25 not all of them have come out and said, "Yeah, we support you." My sisters more so, then again  
26 I think that's just kind of that masculine/feminine thing – guys don't talk about their feelings,  
27 they don't discuss unless it's sports or grunting at each other or whatever. So yeah, with my  
28 sisters I have been able to talk to them about it and they're all understanding. With my brothers  
29 . . . my youngest brother and his wife have been very supportive, they are totally on board.  
30 Another brother has had me over several times, whenever I'm up in that area, "Hey, you need a  
31 place to say, sis?" He started calling me sis right away.
- 32 AJ: Very nice.
- 33 JP: There were a few times he slipped with my birth name versus my legal name. OK, I accept that.  
34 My mom, it has taken her longer and . . . she is very religious and again, the summer before my  
35 senior year in high school I got placed into foster care and then from foster care I got moved  
36 down to Illinois to live with her. While I was there living with her she took me to church and  
37 practically tried to have me exorcised.
- 38 AJ: Oh wow.

- 1 JP: Laying on of hands, speaking in tongues, and casting of demons and all of that. Again, I'm 16-  
2 years-old and didn't really understand. Yeah, I'd seen The Omen but . . . so she knows, like I  
3 said, but she didn't really wrap her head around it until I transitioned, until the first time that  
4 she had seen me and that was Thanksgiving probably four or five years ago, that was the first  
5 time she had ever seen me.
- 6 AJ: Right, seen Jessica – yeah, absolutely.
- 7 JP: Yes. With my dad, it was harder. I knew growing up with dad that this was completely  
8 unacceptable. I was raised Catholic and so this goes against . . . you know, you look at what the  
9 Pope is saying about us, even today.
- 10 AJ: What, something today?
- 11 JP: Not today, but earlier this week he said something about . . .
- 12 AJ: It's a sin to teach kids in school that they can become women and women can become men –  
13 yeah, I heard that.
- 14 JP: And it's typical for religion. People ask me how I can still be Christian, and we'll talk about that  
15 in a little bit maybe.
- 16 AJ: Yeah, I want to know. I want to hear your thoughts around that.
- 17 JP: Sure. But being raised in a Catholic home – a staunch Polish Catholic home, it was a situation  
18 where I was really afraid to tell dad. I guess that's kind of a good segue to my coming out – if  
19 that's one of the questions you ask.
- 20 AJ: Yeah, please.
- 21 JP: As I said, I was in Iraq from 2004-2005 and saw quite a few ugly things. I kind of described some  
22 of the PTSD symptoms. Came home and starting putting my life back together, continued doing  
23 my job and the things that I needed to do. I tried to keep focused on that but after I got home, I  
24 was having more problems with it. Again, because I was a medic I guess . . . they say health care  
25 professionals make the worst patients. To a certain extent that is true, so I kind of swept it  
26 under the rug and when these symptoms started cropping up – nightmares and not being able  
27 to sleep and all of that, I was like, "Oh, I'm going to tough it out, I'm a soldier and dependable  
28 and strong, I'm independent." And all of this. I just kept pushing through all of that. It was five  
29 years later, 2009, when the cracks in my psyche started showing and so I went to the VA and  
30 started getting counseling. I was on meds, was following through on therapy and everything like  
31 that. Anybody who has been through any type of behavioral health or mental illness issue  
32 knows that . . . it's difficult finding your way on that medication merry-go-round. They had me  
33 on nine different kinds of pills and none of them were working. They either had horrible side  
34 effects or they just didn't get the job done, all of that. So I had to go through about a half dozen  
35 different counselors before I found one that I really felt connected to and that I could discuss  
36 things openly. That was about . . . late 2010 when this finally started happening.
- 37 AJ: OK.

1 JP: January of 2011 was when I had my psychotic break. I had come home from work, by this time  
2 the divorce had long been finalized. I was dating a girl up here in LaCrosse. I had come home  
3 from work on a Friday night and was going to get in the shower and pack my bag and head up  
4 here. When I was in the shower I broke down, started crying and to illustrate how out-of-  
5 character this was, up until that point I could count on three fingers the number of times I had  
6 cried as an adult – between the age of 18 and the age of 40.

7 AJ: Really?

8 JP: I can tell you the events – yeah.

9 AJ: Funeral, maybe. Divorce.

10 JP: Yeah, different things. And again, not healthy. If I'd really been in tune to who I was, to sit  
11 there and think only three times – that's just not right. But anyway, I get home and I break  
12 down. I curled up in the bottom of the tub with the shower running on me and I'm bawling my  
13 eyes out and I'm trying to catch my break and I finally . . . 45 minutes later, I do this and I pull  
14 myself together, I get out and I dry off. I'm going, "What the hell is going on?" I said, "OK,  
15 everything is good." I went, got dressed, started packing my bag and it all started again and I sat  
16 there and said, "Maybe I forgot to take my meds, I'll betcha that's it – I forgot to take my meds  
17 this morning." So I went and took meds. Well, part of my issue is OCD. I am very meticulous in  
18 almost everything I do. So chances are I didn't miss my medication that morning. It would have  
19 bothered me all day long, that something wasn't right. So chances were I probably doubled up  
20 on my dose and it wasn't getting any better. I waited an hour to see if it kicked in, it wasn't  
21 helping. So my decision was, "Well, I'll just stay home tonight and I'll go up tomorrow. I'll have  
22 myself a drink and watch TV and relax." That was really the last cognizant thought I had.  
23 Apparently what had happened was one drink became three, three drinks became me  
24 wandering out in the worst snow storm of the year with all of my medications and a full bottle  
25 of Jim Beam and they found me three hours later, 40 miles from nowhere. I was hypothermic, I  
26 was toxic, I was . . .

27 AJ: You walked?

28 JP: I wandered in the middle of a blizzard. Friends that were worried about me came to my house  
29 and said I'd left the back patio door wide open. I had a snow drift in my house – yeah. Again, it  
30 wasn't a cognizant I wanted to end my life but what it was, looking at it in retrospect . . .

31 AJ: It was a call for help.

32 JP: It was, it was. I was in so much pain at that time between what I was going through with my  
33 children and my ex-wife, between the pressures of being a recruiter and between having to live  
34 the lie. By that time it was 21 years that I'd been living with this mask where I'd had to tell  
35 people, "This is who I am. I'm this rugged individual, I'm this manly – hyper-masculine in a lot of  
36 cases." I couldn't do it anymore, I couldn't lie – not to myself, not to other people. I was hurting  
37 and I wanted the pain to stop. That's what it was really all about. And I was out of my mind. So  
38 I woke up the next morning at the hospital, had no idea how I'd gotten there, had no idea what  
39 I'd done to get there. The stories I'd heard afterwards were awful. I like to think of myself as a  
40 kind person. I guess I was taking swings at the EMTs and the police officers. I was being verbally

- 1 abusive with the nurses. When I became fully awake I was in five-point restraints. It was not  
2 me - it was not me. I got to spend some time in in-patient psych.
- 3 AJ: So part PTSD, part . . .
- 4 JP: Stress of work.
- 5 AJ: Stress of work.
- 6 JP: Financial stress, family stress.
- 7 AJ: Divorce, that had been a little while.
- 8 JP: But still back and forth.
- 9 AJ: But the gender dysphoria was probably a big piece of that as well.
- 10 JP: Oh yeah. And that was part of what I discovered when I was in-patient was being able to talk to  
11 the medical staff there and having them peel away these layers of childhood trauma and  
12 combat trauma and gender identity and the self-doubt I had. I hated myself, I really, really did.  
13 My inner monologue was constantly, "You're no good, you're stupid, you can't do anything  
14 right." Every time I'd turn around, it didn't matter how successful I was – it didn't matter what  
15 I'd accomplished in life, I was no good. It wasn't until probably a year ago that I could, for the  
16 first time, say . . . I don't know if I'm quite to the point of I love myself yet . . .
- 17 AJ: Oh, you've got to get there, Jessica.
- 18 JP: I will get there. I'm still in counseling, I'm still working on putting those pieces into place. But  
19 I'm at least to the point where I can say I like myself. I like who I am as a person and a lot of that  
20 has to do with having transitioned.
- 21 AJ: So you started this whole thing about the coming out.
- 22 JP: What had happened was with . . . my mentality was, "OK, I've been in a psych ward for a week  
23 now, I've hit bottom, what is the worst that people can possibly think about me? They're  
24 already probably looking at me like, 'She's nuts'." So what I did was . . . I actually started  
25 penning it before I left the hospital, but continued writing it and refining it and produced a six or  
26 seven-page coming out letter that I sent out. I sent it to immediate family . . .
- 27 AJ: Do you still have the letter?
- 28 JP: I do, I do.
- 29 AJ: It would be so fascinating to have a copy of that letter in our archives.
- 30 JP: I can see if I . . . yeah, I can do that. I can email it to you.
- 31 AJ: That would be so amazing.
- 32 JP: So yeah, I wrote that and I gave it to everybody. In the midst of all of this, I'm back at work and  
33 I'm getting better, I'm continuing my counseling. Don't Ask Don't Tell was repelled shortly  
34 thereafter, I think it was like May or June of 2011. So I'm sitting here thinking, "Wonderful,  
35 finally. I can stop having to hide." One problem.

- 1 AJ: Were you still in the military at this time?
- 2 JP: Still in the military – yeah, even with having been in the hospital.
- 3 AJ: Sure.
- 4 JP: The problem is, don't ask don't tell had nothing to do with being transgender.
- 5 AJ: Right, nothing whatsoever.
- 6 JP: Nope. And so, I was going through an annual physical and I described to . . . you know, they ask,  
7 "Have you been hospitalized in the past year?" I was honest with them, I told them, "Yeah."  
8 And they asked for what and at that time they said, "Well, we're going to need your medical  
9 records from the VA." I'm like, "Why do you need my medical records?" "Well, we need to see  
10 if you're recovering, if you're making progress." I said, "Well, I will get a letter from my  
11 physician, from my counselor and my psychiatrist stating that but you're not having all my  
12 medical records." Because, again, as I said, even though Don't Ask Don't Tell had been repealed,  
13 it had nothing to do with being transgender. In my medical records is all of the discussions I'd  
14 had with my providers about being transgender.
- 15 AJ: Oh boy.
- 16 JP: And I fought tooth and nail – from March, 2011 until November, 2011 . . . yeah, from March to  
17 November, fought it, fought it, fought it. It finally came down to one day I was ordered into my  
18 commander's office and as I go in there, the assistant surgeon, battalion surgeon, the  
19 commander were seated at the desk and the sergeant major was standing at the door, closed  
20 the door behind him and stood guard at that door – like he thought I was going to try to escape  
21 or something. I had pushed across the desk . . . the commander says, "Sgt. Polacek, I've got two  
22 forms you can complete here. The first one is a dishonorable discharge for failure to follow a  
23 lawful order because you are not willing to submit your VA records. The second is a medical  
24 release so that we can have access to all of your VA records." I figured either way it's a losing  
25 proposition but if I signed the permission . . . the release of information, it would at least buy me  
26 some time. I could maybe negotiate my way through the process.
- 27 AJ: Sure. So it was an either/or – you didn't have to sign both?
- 28 JP: I could take the dishonorable discharge or I could release the medical records and maybe be  
29 dishonorably discharged for fraudulent enlistment.
- 30 AJ: Wow.
- 31 JP: Yeah. So either way it was a losing proposition but I went with the lesser of two evils. Between  
32 November and February my records were scrutinized and evaluated and by January of 2012, I  
33 was told that I was being discharged, medically discharged, and by February of 2012, I was out.
- 34 AJ: So medically discharged. Do you still get your benefits?
- 35 JP: I do.
- 36 AJ: You served 22 years . . . 24?

- 1 JP: Twenty-three. Yeah, technically I only get 17 years of my retirement because, as we talked  
2 about before we came in here, I had a couple years where I served on what's called the IRR,  
3 Individual Ready Reserve.
- 4 AJ: That's right, you stepped out for a little bit.
- 5 JP: So you don't accrue time for that and then I had another two years where I was not in service at  
6 all, and then I'd had another two years – I'd broken my leg in January of 2000 and it took me  
7 two years to recover from that.
- 8 AJ: And they don't . . .
- 9 JP: It doesn't count as time.
- 10 AJ: What?
- 11 JP: No. And so I lost all those years. So even though . . . if you look at my records.
- 12 AJ: Did you hurt your leg in the Army?
- 13 JP: No, I did not.
- 14 AJ: Oh, OK. You were on a leave? I mean, that's still . . . even on leave, you're still in.
- 15 JP: Doesn't matter. So, yeah . . . if you look at my records it says, "Twenty-three years for pay, 17  
16 years for retirement." And that's why the difference, that six years differentiation.
- 17 AJ: But you do get benefits, you do get medical.
- 18 JP: Yes. I go for a lot of my care through the VA, obviously. I'm a combat soldier so . . .
- 19 AJ: For your transition care?
- 20 JP: Partially, yes. I was rather pleased to find out that the counselor that I'd had was actually very  
21 instrumental in . . . he started a transgender support group at the Madison VA Hospital.
- 22 AJ: Nice.
- 23 JP: Yeah.
- 24 AJ: Is it a pretty big group? Is there a lot of people?
- 25 JP: It started out . . . we had anywhere from six to eight people every meeting and it never really  
26 got much bigger than that.
- 27 AJ: That's pretty decent sized.
- 28 JP: It is. When you understand the mentality of a veteran or a soldier, again – my situation  
29 demonstrates this too well. Who wants to come out and have this information in their VA  
30 records if it's going to cost them their career? So, I imagine that there were a lot of people in  
31 Madison who would have liked to have attended these meetings but couldn't.
- 32 AJ: Let me ask you this, Jessica. How did you manage your gender identity for 22 or 23 years in the  
33 military? Did you . . . ?

- 1 JP: This seems to be a similar tale for people of our generation. I turned 50 in July, so people 50  
2 and older, what we did was, again, we talked about going into hyper-masculine careers as part  
3 of the smoke and mirrors that we used to hide from society.
- 4 AJ: So you think going into the Army was a part of your . . . it was sort of related . . . like, "I need to  
5 try to become more of a man."
- 6 JP: I'm going to prove my masculinity, I'm going to try and . . . yes, I can beat this thing. I'm told  
7 that it's wrong so because it's wrong I've got to try and fight against it. "The military will make a  
8 real man out of me."
- 9 AJ: Sure.
- 10 JP: Yeah, right. Didn't happen. But that's why I love some of the stories – like Sherry's or . . . Lady  
11 Valor . . . I'm trying to think of what her name is . . . Navy SEAL. I'm drawing a blank. But in  
12 either case, there's a lot of us in the military. If you look at the trans feminine population,  
13 anywhere between 30-40% of us have served in the military.
- 14 AJ: Is that right? Wow.
- 15 JP: And don't quote me on that statistic, but if you were to talk to TAVA, Transgender American  
16 Veterans Association, I'm sure they could give you a much better statistic on that. But anyway,  
17 I'm definitely sure that that is part of the reason I went in. And the other reason is, you know –  
18 I'd love to say I went in at 18-years-old as a flag waving patriot and all of that, but they waived  
19 \$5000 in front of my face and said, "Come here, come here."
- 20 AJ: Exactly.
- 21 JP: So that was part of it as well. There was the college fund and different things.
- 22 AJ: Yeah, it's a secure future for your family – there's a lot of reasons why people go into the  
23 military.
- 24 JP: There was. Another part of it is I'm an oldest child and so I'm very responsible, I'm very  
25 respectful, I like having authority figures, I like knowing where I fit into the hierarchy – within  
26 the structure. And that's what is great about the Army. I joke about, "Well, now that I'm a  
27 woman I'm subject to the wage gap – yeah, for womanhood." In the Army it's not like that. You  
28 wear your status on your chest and you can look up where you are in comparison to your co-  
29 workers and anybody else and you knew exactly where that was – not to say that there isn't  
30 some sort of a glass ceiling or discrimination or anything like that in the military.
- 31 AJ: No, you're kidding – that is there.
- 32 JP: It's there, I don't fool myself. Compared to the civilian world, there's less of a chance – you at  
33 least know where you're at, whereas if you work in a large corporation chances are . . .
- 34 AJ: You're kind of guessing.
- 35 JP: You're not supposed to talk about . . . all of that. But anyway, so yeah – a lot of different  
36 reasons. And honestly, I wouldn't have stayed with the military if I didn't find something that  
37 appealed to me. A lot of it had to do with the things that I learned, the experiences that I had,

- 1 the places that I got to go see. I've been to San Francisco, I've been to Boston, been to North  
2 Carolina, I've been to Florida, been to Texas, Colorado – all of these wonderful places. And  
3 Baghdad, Iraq.
- 4 AJ: And Baghdad – wow, OK.
- 5 JP: But anyway.
- 6 AJ: Did you cross dress while you were in the military at all?
- 7 JP: Yeah, I did. That is something, again, I saw it . . .
- 8 AJ: Which is risky business, right?
- 9 JP: Yes. When I read through Renee Richards books, when I read through Jenny Boylan's book.  
10 There is a lot of binging and purging – you go and get yourself a collection of clothes and then  
11 you start feeling guilty and you go and give them away or you burn them or through them in the  
12 garbage or whatever. There was a lot of that – even back to my early teen years.
- 13 AJ: Did you have like your own place when you were in the military?
- 14 JP: I did, because I was married I lived in off-post housing.
- 15 AJ: OK. And most of your service was stateside?
- 16 JP: Yes.
- 17 AJ: Wow. Thank you for your service, first of all.
- 18 JP: I appreciate it.
- 19 AJ: I really do mean that sincerely. What do you think about the new regulations around  
20 transgender identity in the military now? I think they have lifted the ban on service – the  
21 Department of Defense lifted the ban?
- 22 JP: They have – January 1<sup>st</sup> . . . or, I'm sorry, July 1<sup>st</sup>. Ash Carter, Secretary of Defense Ash Carter,  
23 announced that they were removing the ban to open trans service. Between then and last  
24 week, we've kind of been waiting with much trepidation to find out what exactly the guidelines  
25 were going to be. Don't get me wrong, I am ecstatic that they've finally moved forward with  
26 this policy, it's long overdue. There is room for growth though. I can't be 100% behind it  
27 because . . . I look at my situation. When I'd reached a point where I was maybe ready to  
28 transition, if this policy that they now have would have been in place, I wouldn't have been able  
29 to transition in the military. I would have had to leave the military, transition, and then re-apply  
30 for the military after that.
- 31 AJ: Why?
- 32 JP: Because the . . . at least the documentation that I've been provided says that you have to be  
33 surgically . . .
- 34 AJ: You can't transition . . .
- 35 JP: You have to fit within either gender binary, you can't be in flux.



- 1 AJ: So it's very binary, this new policy.
- 2 JP: It is. And again, I understand it. When we first went to Iraq, when my first unit went to Iraq,  
3 they stuffed, like I said, 90 of us into a single tent – males and females both.
- 4 AJ: So what difference does it make then? When you're in a co-ed thing, it doesn't matter.
- 5 JP: That blows my mind, it really does. But then again, the females were very quick to hang  
6 blankets – get a piece of rope and hang blankets and they stayed to one side of the tent and  
7 then the guys stayed to the other side of the tent.
- 8 AJ: Did you guys all go to the same bathroom?
- 9 JP: Blue porta-potties, yeah.
- 10 AJ: So yes, you did.
- 11 JP: We did, we didn't go together though – that's the difference, individual units. And we could talk  
12 all day long about stuff like that. One of the biggest things that weighed heavily on me was after  
13 this decision had been made about me being medically discharged because of . . . and again, you  
14 look at my records it says because of my depression, chronic depression – that is why I was  
15 discharged.
- 16 AJ: So it's not necessarily transgender . . . ?
- 17 JP: The official transcript says that I was discharged because of my mental illness. Take that for  
18 whatever it's worth. At that time being transgender was still considered gender identity  
19 disorder, it was still considered a mental illness. But in either case . . . but the thing is at that  
20 point in time I knew three individuals who were in transition in the military, one of them was  
21 serving in Afghanistan, I was friends with them on Facebook. Their commander was perfectly  
22 fine with them transitioning and . . .
- 23 AJ: Was it a female to male?
- 24 JP: It was male to female.
- 25 AJ: Male to female – oh wow.
- 26 JP: I had another friend who was in Kentucky who wound up . . . I think she had served 12 or 13  
27 years and lost her military career because of it because her commander was totally dead set  
28 against it. The third person was, again, they were OK – they were still stateside but they were in  
29 transition, their commander was OK with it. There was this arbitrary application of the  
30 regulation, which really stuck in my craw because here my commander is saying, "Well, we've  
31 evaluated your records . . ." And again, he never came right out and said it, but it definitely left  
32 room for interpretation.
- 33 AJ: You could tell – yeah.
- 34 JP: Yeah, I could have done any of my jobs. I was a medical laboratory specialist, I was a medic, I  
35 was a recruiter, I was a readiness NCO. Any of those jobs, I could have done in either of the  
36 binary positions.

- 1 AJ: Sure.
- 2 JP: I could have done it in transition, to be honest. But again, the military is very much stuck in that  
3 binary concept so when it comes to the idea . . . they don't want to create separate barracks for  
4 trans individuals, they don't want to have to worry about what could happen in a shower  
5 between trans individuals. Again, I'm trying to wrap my head around . . .
- 6 AJ: Aren't there laws against that anyway?
- 7 JP: There are. And that was a thing that was brought up when Don't Ask Don't Tell was repealed,  
8 because people said, "Well, I don't want some guy looking at me in the shower." It was always  
9 about the guys, it was never about the lesbians. But, "If a gay soldier eyed me up in the shower,  
10 I'm going to deck him."
- 11 AJ: Right.
- 12 JP: Well, you know, if there's any type of sexual contact or improper behavior, yeah – there are  
13 regulations against that. It's the same thing with being transgender.
- 14 AJ: Yeah, if you assault somebody in the bathroom you go to jail for assault.
- 15 JP: It goes back to the bathroom bill thing as well. They're singling us out – the conservative  
16 politicians who are pushing this lost on marriage equality and so now they need to find  
17 something else to be their whipping post. So it's trans . . . and not even trans men when they're  
18 talking about bathroom bills, it's trans women – yes. They're not worried about trans guys.
- 19 AJ: They don't even know who the trans guys are.
- 20 JP: And honestly, people look at me and tell me I pass very well.
- 21 AJ: Oh, absolutely.
- 22 JP: OK, how would they know?
- 23 AJ: You never have problems in the bathroom, do you?
- 24 JP: I haven't honestly – no. I use public bathrooms all the time. I'm still sensitive to the odd look or  
25 two.
- 26 AJ: Oh yeah, I always worry but nobody ever says anything. Tell me about your love life.
- 27 JP: It's non-existent.
- 28 AJ: You're not in a relationship right now?
- 29 JP: No. After the divorce I waited about six months and had put stuff out on dating sites but I  
30 wasn't really looking. And then I wound up having . . . there was this gal and we were writing  
31 back and forth. OK, I was interested, my curiosity was piqued but again, like I said – I want a  
32 relationship, I want to know a person before I jump in, especially after coming out of divorce.
- 33 AJ: Yeah, absolutely.

- 1 JP: And I also realized, like I said – we started dating when we were 16, so by the time the divorce  
2 happened, 22 years of being a couple and a family, I didn't know who I was as an individual so I  
3 needed to spend a little time figuring out who I was. So, it was in November of 2005 and, like I  
4 said, she was up here in LaCrosse and I came up to Ft. McCoy for some training and we'd been  
5 conversing back and forth for a while. We finally had our first date after several months and  
6 met each other. I thought she was "the one". Again, I'm an incurable romantic. I hear people  
7 say, "There is no such thing as a soul mate" and these different things. For me, I honestly  
8 thought that this was the one and so we dated – November 5, 2005, was our first date and oddly  
9 enough, it was also her parent's anniversary. So yeah, we'd been dating for about two months  
10 and I came out to her and I told her everything after two months. I was very straightforward  
11 with her and I said, "Look, I need to know right now if this is something that you cannot handle,  
12 if this is something that you cannot adjust to and come to terms with. I need to know this right  
13 now because before we go pouring our hearts into this, before we introduce our kids to each  
14 other and start becoming a couple and a family, I need to know, beyond a shadow of a doubt – I  
15 don't want to find out 10 years from now that you can't handle it." And this was before I had  
16 my hospital stay or my emotional break.
- 17 AJ: Yeah, this was 2005 you said.
- 18 JP: 2005, yes. So, we had dated from 2005 to 2012, so we had quite a few good years.
- 19 AJ: Yeah, that's a long relationship.
- 20 JP: We'd only see each other on the weekends, we would alternate weekends – one weekend she'd  
21 come down to Madison where I was stationed and I would go up here to be with her and maybe  
22 it was just because we were a weekend couple, but every weekend was special. Every weekend  
23 we were connecting on a new level.
- 24 AJ: Right.
- 25 JP: And for six and a half years, it was wonderful. We'd gone and done so many different things. I  
26 had taken her to Memphis, she'd never been to Memphis before. I had taken her to Door  
27 County, I had taken her to . . . all these different things that we did together. I'm a very  
28 experiential person. I would rather spend money on doing and learning and being able to  
29 experience things . . .
- 30 AJ: Than having material things.
- 31 JP: Exactly. And then when I was discharged in 2012, we moved in together. Initially things went  
32 OK but financial struggles started setting in. The Army took 18 months before they got my  
33 retirement pay straightened out, so I was living without a paycheck and it was very difficult  
34 trying to find a job.
- 35 AJ: To say the least.
- 36 JP: We lived in a small community and so even though Sheila knew that I wanted to transition, she  
37 had asked, and because we lived in a small community outside of LaCrosse, for her children's  
38 sake and because she didn't think her family could accept it, if I could go slowly. She didn't tell  
39 me don't, but asked if I could go slowly. So I started growing my hair, I couldn't afford

1 electrolysis because I wasn't getting paid but I was on hormone therapy by then. And so yeah,  
2 after a year, even in the midst of summer, I had to wear a large baggy sweatshirt in 80 degree  
3 weather because it was necessary to hide . . . you know. But in the course of the three years  
4 that we lived together . . . sorry.

5 AJ: That's all right, take your time.

6 JP: Things became progressively more difficult. I felt, for me personally, I was dealing with the PTSD  
7 and suffering from incredible social anxiety. For me to leave the house was . . . it took an act of  
8 God, honestly. It was very difficult. I had depression so bad that most days I couldn't get out of  
9 bed. If I got up out of bed and I showered . . .

10 AJ: That was a good day.

11 JP: It was a good day. And that was the better part of three years – and I tried. I tried going back to  
12 school here at UW-L, three different semesters I tried and couldn't do it. I got to mid-terms or  
13 finals and the pressure got to be too much. So, as I said earlier, there were the angry outbursts,  
14 there was the lashing out, there was . . . between having OCD and depression and anxiety, I tried  
15 to express in the best way I could that there were certain things that would be beneficial for me  
16 that apparently were too hard to do. She and her kids could not make that adjustment. After  
17 two years together I started pushing, saying, "OK, it's been two years, we haven't talked to your  
18 kids, we haven't talked to your family, nobody knows about me being transgender and it's  
19 getting to the point where it's got to be showing." And she still didn't want to. We finally did  
20 after two years, we did talk to her kids about it but by then it was too little too late. She wasn't  
21 participating in my VA counseling with me, she wasn't learning anything about . . . wasn't  
22 participating in the transgender counseling. We tried doing couples counseling but we really  
23 didn't get into a lot of the areas that we needed to. It didn't help that the counselor wasn't  
24 really good either. I just did not feel at ease with this counselor. We would leave sessions  
25 feeling worse than we did going in and that's not the way counseling is supposed to work.

26 AJ: That's not good.

27 JP: No. And so, yeah – it was April of 2015, I don't even remember what happened. I just know it  
28 was a really rough day for me. At that time my car was in the shop, she had been unemployed  
29 several times while we were living together and so I was paying most of the bills. And so I was  
30 struggling. I still wasn't getting electrolysis, I still wasn't able . . . I felt like I was locked back up  
31 in a cage. I was begging her and pleading that something – anything, and I finally got to the  
32 point, in January of 2015, I put in for my legal name change. Well, actually I had done it before  
33 then several months and in January it became official. So, then in April we wound up . . . it was  
34 a bad day for me and I forget exactly what the trigger was, but we wound up getting into a big  
35 old yelling match with each other and she told me, "You need to leave, you need to leave now."  
36 I had no way to get anywhere because . . . well, I did, I had my motorcycle. So yeah, you can  
37 imagine April here in the Upper Midwest . . .

38 AJ: It's still winter time.

39 JP: Exactly. So, yeah, I took off on my motorcycle and I had no place to go. Because of my social  
40 anxiety I hadn't made any friends in the area. If I did have any friends, they were all friends that

- 1 came from her that I had been mutually introduced to. And so, I started heading for the Quad  
2 Cities, which is where my mother and sisters live and it started pouring half way down there – I  
3 got to Prairie du Chien and that was as far as I got so I had to park the motorcycle. I’m sitting in  
4 the midst of this rain storm and I get a text message, not from her but from her pastor, that  
5 says, “I’m talking with Sheila and she wants you to understand that you’re not welcome back at  
6 the house. You can come back and get your stuff but it’s over.”
- 7 AJ: Wow.
- 8 JP: Honestly that was worse than hearing about my ex-wife cheating on me.
- 9 AJ: I can imagine.
- 10 JP: Maybe it’s just my personality or my sense of decorum or whatever, you don’t break up with  
11 somebody by text message – that alone is horrible, but you don’t break up through text  
12 message through a third person. And so that was . . . it was devastating. I don’t know how I  
13 made it, I really don’t. But I moved out at the end of May, got myself a place here in town. I  
14 talked about my landlords and all of that.
- 15 AJ: Yeah, absolutely.
- 16 JP: So, again, there is a happy ending to this story, it’s not all doom and gloom. I did wind up in a  
17 really good spot. Last summer I was working for UW-Madison in a program – they have what’s  
18 called, “Survey of Health Wisconsin.” So I did that between July and December of last year and  
19 that was great. I was collecting samples for their bio-repository that they have down in  
20 Madison. This was one of those epiphanies. I was still . . . I still had the social anxiety, it was still  
21 very difficult for me to go out in public, even though people told me, “Oh, you look fine, you’re  
22 passing, there’s nothing about you that is telltale.”
- 23 AJ: Right.
- 24 JP: In the course of doing this job, I probably met 3000 different people. Of those 3000, I had three  
25 that very verbally outed me, confronted me. I’m not sure what set off their radar, but here’s the  
26 lesson I learned, and this can be the takeaway from this.
- 27 AJ: Sure.
- 28 JP: Is that for the longest time I sat there and I concentrated – these three people that outed me,  
29 who berated me, “I don’t know who you think you’re fooling,” “What is your game? Are you  
30 trying to blah, blah, blah.” I let those three people weigh so heavily on my mind and on my  
31 conscious and yet I forgot about the 2, 997 people who just took me at face value, who just  
32 came in and met me with a smile, let me do my job, wished me well and went on their way. And  
33 sometimes that’s where we get stuck with transition. I know, again – now working in this job, as  
34 a director of The Center, being a facilitator for the trans group, especially with the younger  
35 generation. I’m not going to sit here and get into, “Those millennials . . .” and that sort of stuff,  
36 because I don’t buy that. I was the first Generation X year or so, there was a lot of horrible stuff  
37 to say about us, but I know that for the younger generation when they first go into transition  
38 that they can be very easily offended, very easily hurt. If somebody dead names them – even if  
39 their name isn’t legally changed, they consider it dead naming, which technically it isn’t.

- 1 AJ: Yes. And dead naming is calling someone by their birth name rather than their chosen name.
- 2 JP: Rather than their chosen name – yes. And they’ll cut people off for this. They’ll say, “If you  
3 can’t call me by my real name then I don’t want anything to do with you.” So again, back to the  
4 lesson about the three people versus the rest of the 3,000, and this is the lesson that I learned –  
5 as I said. 2015 was my legal . . . January of 2015 was my legal name change. My dad could not –  
6 he told me flat out that he would not call me by my name. I understood this in part, I was his  
7 namesake.
- 8 AJ: Sure.
- 9 JP: I was the first born son. So I get it, the emotional tie to this. In July was my 50<sup>th</sup> birthday and I  
10 got a phone call from him while I was on my way in here, driving to the office. And he’s like, “Hi  
11 Jessica, I just wanted to call and wish you a happy birthday.” I’m like, “Who is this? Dad, did  
12 you hit your head?” Best birthday present ever. Because I know how hard it had to be for him.  
13 Talking about significant others and spouses and parents of trans people, I imagine my parents  
14 had to sit there and wrestle with the idea of, “What did I do wrong? How did I affect this child  
15 so that they became this . . .?”
- 16 AJ: And it’s nothing about them.
- 17 JP: No. Again, the way we differentiate. Whenever I go out and give a presentation in public, we  
18 talk about the three different aspects – sexual orientation, gender identity, gender presentation.  
19 That wasn’t something that they knew back in the 1970s or the 1980s, we didn’t talk about  
20 those things. And even now, it took them a while. They still kind of look at me weird because . .  
21 . I own a motorcycle. When I ride, I ride . . . they say, “Ride for the slide.”
- 22 AJ: Yeah, you’ve got your leathers on.
- 23 JP: Exactly.
- 24 AJ: Helmet on.
- 25 JP: So I am the stereotypical dyke on a bike. I am leather boots and heavy jacket and sunglasses  
26 and my hair is pulled back. And so people kind of look – again, I think because I’ve been on  
27 hormones long enough that even with that I have a feminine appearance. But they see me like  
28 this normally if I take the Jeep up, then I’m dressed like this - my normal presentation. So again,  
29 gender identity versus gender presentation. Riding my motorcycle has nothing to do with my  
30 gender presentation. Eddie Izzard does a wonderful . . . he was on a talk show or something like  
31 that, I think it was *Today*. But Eddie Izzard is an English comedian . . .
- 32 AJ: Sure, I know who he is.
- 33 JP: And one of the interviews . . .
- 34 AJ: A draggish kind of . . .
- 35 JP: He defines himself as a transvestite.
- 36 AJ: A transvestite.

- 1 JP: He worked in . . . in Britain it's proper terminology to call somebody a transvestite. He would be  
2 technically considered a cross dresser. He doesn't do it for sexual pleasure, he doesn't do it for  
3 his gender identity, he does it just because . . . and this is what he said to the interviewer. The  
4 interviewer asked him, "So why do you wear women's clothes? Is that just part of your act?"  
5 And he looked at the interviewer and said, "What do you mean women's clothes? They're not  
6 women's clothes, they're my clothes – I bought them."
- 7 AJ: Oh wow. You know what Jessica, I'm running out of battery life here so I just want to make sure  
8 that I capture everything. But, we are living in a time of high increased visibility for transgender  
9 people now – probably the most visible time for trans identity that I have ever experienced in  
10 my time being out. I just want to know, is there one thing that I didn't get a chance to ask you  
11 about that you want to share about the state of transgender people or identity?
- 12 JP: We'll close with two things, and I'm trying to remember whether it was the Trevor Project or  
13 some other project that their slogan is, "It does get better." I want to tell you, as somebody  
14 who fought for 45 years trying to be person that society expected me to be, that it does get  
15 better when you are ready, when it is time for you to move forward you will do it and it will be a  
16 life changing experience. The second thing that I would say is just like with that Eddie Izzard  
17 interview is find the opportunities to identify humor in your transition.
- 18 AJ: I love it.
- 19 JP: We were just up, Alicia and I, were just at a mental health thing a couple of weeks ago and one  
20 of the things we talked about was alcohol and drug abuse. As I'm reading through this manual  
21 that they gave us, I'm looking and it's like, "OK, alcohol limits for men – four drinks in any one  
22 sitting or 14 drinks in any one week. Women, three drinks in any one sitting or seven drinks in  
23 any one week." And I'm not a big drinker but I'm like, "Oh great, I moved to the other side of the  
24 gender line and I lose half of what I can drink in a given week." I'm surrounded by these people  
25 . . . I'm out, I'm out to everybody. I figure if I can't be, then I don't have a right living this life or  
26 being the director of The Center here.
- 27 AJ: Absolutely.
- 28 JP: But to be able to sit there and hear everybody giggle over that because they understood the  
29 joke, they got it.
- 30 AJ: Totally.
- 31 JP: So find the times to laugh at yourself, find the times to be able to look at . . . because there is  
32 going to be those times of doom and gloom. There are going to be times where you feel like  
33 you are at the deepest, darkest hole.
- 34 AJ: That happens to every human being on the planet though, Jessica, to be quite frank and honest  
35 about it. Not just transgender people.
- 36 JP: No. But keep on fighting, keep a sense of humor and it does get better.
- 37 AJ: Well I just want to say thank you so much for sharing so much of your time, but even more so of  
38 your personal story. It's fascinating and it's been a challenging journey but even in this  
39 interview we have laughed a number of times.

- 1 JP: Exactly.
- 2 AJ: And so you're living true to your motto.
- 3 JP: Any journey worth taking is going to present its challenges. You're going to have road blocks  
4 and detours, but keep moving forward.
- 5 AJ: Keep moving forward. Thank you so much, Jessica. Bye-bye.
- 6 JP: Bye.