



Brenda McComb Oral History Interview, February 24, 2015

Title

“A Scholar and Advocate's Gender Journey”

Date

February 24, 2015

Location

Kerr Administration Building, Oregon State University.

Summary

The bulk of Brenda McComb's interview focuses on her gender journey. In recounting the story of her life, McComb discusses her feelings of unease with her assigned gender from a very early age. She then recalls the coping mechanisms to which she turned, her experiences in counseling, and the process by which she came out as a woman to her colleagues. She describes her transition from male to female, including the application of hormones and surgical procedures, and she describes the support apparatus that she helped to create for the transgender community in the mid-Willamette Valley. Additional focused attention is devoted to the family ramifications of McComb's gender transition, as well as the professional impact that her transition made.

The session then shifts to an examination of McComb's career in academia, including her teaching and research on forest ecology and biodiversity. McComb also shares her memories of the Forest Science program at OSU from her tenure on faculty in the 1980s and 1990s. She next recalls her decision to move to the University of Massachusetts and her years as a faculty member and administrator in Amherst. From there, McComb describes her return to OSU, her work as Dean of the Graduate School, her membership on the OSU Board of Trustees, and her thoughts on the future direction of the university.

As the interview nears its conclusion, McComb details her involvement with the OSU Queer Studies Program and describes the ways in which she has helped other members of the campus community through gender transitions of their own. The session concludes with McComb's reflections on having arrived at her current position in life, both personally and professionally.

Interviewee

Brenda McComb

Interviewers

Chris Petersen, Kalia Flocker

Website

<http://scarc.library.oregonstate.edu/oh150/mccomb/>

Transcript

Chris Petersen: Okay Dr. McComb, if you would please introduce yourself, your name and today's date and our location.

Brenda McComb: Sure. I am Brenda McComb, I'm the Dean of the Graduate School. It is February 24th and we're here in Kerr Administration Building, room 402A.

CP: Terrific. Well, we'll talk a lot about the evolution of your career and your identity and we'll start at the beginning. You were born in Connecticut?

BM: Yes, Suffield, Connecticut. Well actually I was born in Hartford. My family lived in Suffield, which is a small farming town at the time. It's now a suburb of Hartford and Springfield, but I grew up in a fairly rural environment.

CP: You were raised on a farm?

BM: Yes, my father—well we, I was raised on a farm that was owned by my grandfather. My father had cows for about the first four years of my life and then sold the cows and became a mechanic. My father did not graduate from high school. My mom did but immediately after graduating from high school my mom and dad were married and I was born about a year later. So yeah, rural environment and it was a great chance to have a very easy childhood, although it was a bit isolating at times. Isolating not only because of the location but isolating because of some feelings of incongruity with my assigned gender at a fairly early age, which I kept hidden for around the better part of fifty years.

CP: Yeah, well tell me a little bit more about those feelings that you had as a child, I mean how did that sort of—how did you develop that sense of self-awareness, I guess?

BM: Yeah. I guess the easy answer is that from as early as I can remember, ages four or five, I would see other boys and other girls, see what they do, see how they behave, see what their mannerisms are and felt that me being referred to as a boy and being treated as a boy didn't fit. It just didn't feel right and it created a sense of anxiety. It also created a sense of shame and guilt that I was feeling things that my parents, my teachers, others would not, not only understand but would not accept at the time. And so, I kept my life from a very early age, I would say age six or seven on, until age fifty very separated. I would have my private life where I felt like who I was and then my public life which I would portray as the male that everybody assumed me to be. And it was just easier that way but it also created a high level of anxiety over time. Keeping that separation, keeping those two worlds as completely apart as I could—and that meant that I had to cope in a variety of ways.

As a very young child my coping would be to just go for long walks on the farm, get away from everybody, take my dogs for a walk. They didn't seem to care how—what my gender identity was, so it was very reassuring to be able to be with other beings and just be who I needed to be. And then later in life exercise, I would run. I used to race motorcycles, I would do anything I could do to just bury my brain in such intense activities that I didn't have to think about gender. As I went on through school I focused my activities very heavily on work and so I'd work very long hours. There were times in my life when I resorted to alcohol. I recognized that that was not a good way of coping and so that would kind of come and go but it was always there.

And it was about age forty-five or so that I really reached a point where a series of repeated depressions had reached a point where it was affecting my life in a pretty big way. And so I went to see a therapist about depression and saw him for about two years before I got up enough nerve to talk with him about my gender feelings and he said, "I don't know how to help you but I know somebody who probably can" and he referred me to a different therapist, Lisette Lahana. I was in Massachusetts at the time and I met with her and my first appointment and within half an hour of meeting with her I felt like "here's somebody who understands what I'm feeling."

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You know, I'd done my web research and I'd looked online, even tried to go to a support group once but never could get up the nerve enough to actually go, but by talking with Lisette it kind of opened up the door to being able to talk with someone very openly and sincerely about how I was feeling.

And within just a few meetings with Lisette, my trajectory had pretty much been set that it was clear to me that I could be who I felt I've always been publicly; to people I work with, to my family and others. Even though there was a risk of losing people along the way, that at this point the risk was worth it because I had a choice, I could be who I always felt I was or I could cease to exist. I'd reached that point in my life. So, that began a fairly long set of talks with her about how to move forward. I began talks with my family doctor about hormones, began about two years of visits to an electrologist, began support group meetings, getting the whole team, transition team together, began talks with my family, which were probably the most difficult. The fear of losing my kids, I think, was probably the one that really caused me the greatest anxiety.

So, I mean, that kind of got me to—about twelve years ago when I came out I was a department head at the University of Massachusetts, I had about thirty or forty faculty that I was responsible for, about three hundred students and with Lisette's help I crafted a coming out letter in email and one morning pushed "enter" and went [cradles head in hands] and waited for the response. I talked to my Dean and the Provost ahead of time and within half an hour the Dean wrote back in saying, you know, "this is wonderful news, we're really supportive and won't everybody else be supportive too." And then the Provost had a very similar response and then I received about a hundred emails over the course of the next day and a half and all but about two were very supportive. Two were, you know, pretty clear that I'd gone off the deep end and they were worried about my mental state, that sort of thing. But most everybody was pretty supportive.

So, that began me being me outwardly to everyone else. I, shortly thereafter, went to see a surgeon for some facial reconstruction surgery to kind of feminize my appearance a little bit and then about a year later went to the same surgeon for gender reassignment surgery and then finally felt like my body was much more closely aligned with where my brain was after fifty-two years, which is a long time to wait. In the process of being in the support group there in Massachusetts I met probably thirty or forty other trans people, which helped normalize the gender dysphoria quite a lot, and in the process of me kind of being where I was in my trajectory, there were people ahead of me who had already transitioned and so they were very supportive. And then there were people who were just starting and I was supportive of them. And so if you think about, for transgendered individuals, this transition journey, I was at one point and I could help those who were coming up behind me. And I was helped by those who were already ahead of me. And it was pretty rewarding.

I came back to Oregon State University about six years ago. I worked here for ten years as a man, I left to go to UMass for thirteen years and in the midst of all that, transitioned, came back here as a woman and upper administration on campus was incredibly supportive. Almost all of my colleagues from the past were very supportive. There were a few people who had difficulties with pronouns and with names and that is something that you can easily overlook for a time or two, but when it's persistent it becomes difficult to overlook. But by and large I was very, very supported.

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And—but when I arrived here there was no support group for trans people in this community, nor on this campus. There was the Pride Center and they're great, they have a—are a huge resource to students on this campus, but the level of trans awareness, I think, was just starting to grow here at that time. And so, just by chance I connected with another transwoman, Delena Spiritsong who was a student here and talked with her about the need for a support group and—so the two of us began one about five years ago, I guess now, first at the Pride Center and then we were there for probably three years and then about two years ago moved it to the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship in town, largely for convenience of community members. Sometimes it was difficult to find parking near the Pride Center for people who were literally travelling from Eugene, Salem, Sweet Home, Lebanon, all the surrounding communities because there really was nothing else available. So, we moved it to the Fellowship and it's still going on today. My role has been, is primarily to manage the listserv and answer emails. The meetings are really organized by another woman in town who has kind of taken over that role. But you know, I think that again, I see in that support group this series of people who are in various stages, helping one another move through. One person who I think I helped, well two, but one person I think I helped is Julie Greenwood and Julie is an Associate Dean in the College of Science. When I first met Julie, Julie was expressing herself as Jeff Greenwood. She came to some of the support group meetings, we talked and she started on her gender journey and is now Associate Dean in the College of Science.

During my first five years or so here at OSU I probably met with, on average, one trans individual per month who was looking for someone to talk with. There's one graduate student in the College of Forestry who came to see me. I was honored that she was the first person she came out to and has since transitioned and is doing really well. I also know of

faculty and staff and students on this campus who are not out. They're not out because of fear, largely. They're not out, in some cases, because of the family situation that they might be in. But, there are people who have an internal identity, a gender identity that they are not expressing to the public for a variety of reasons. And that's fine, I respect that, that is their life, that is their life to manage, but I would hope that at some point in the future we get to a point in our society where people can feel free to express their gender without fear of retaliation, retribution or any other sort of negativity. I think we're getting there but we're getting there slowly.

On this campus, our counseling and psychological services, Beth Wasylow started a support group for students a few years after we started the community level one. And so now there's a place where students can stay on campus, go to a support group and they don't have to travel off campus. Because of my experience with trans issues, I also talked with the—with Susan Shaw and others in Women, Gender and Sexuality Studies and a few years ago offered a course called Transgender Lives to allow students on campus to really understand what some of the ramifications are of being trans. Interestingly I'd say that I taught it twice and I think I had three or four trans students take the class, which was great because they could help teach it. They were living the life too. And so it was a lot of fun. I didn't teach it this year because of lack of enrollment but maybe in the future we will. So, that's kind of a very, you know, what's that, a ten minute, twenty minute overview of a sixty-two year life, gender life?

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CP: Yeah. I would—if you're comfortable, I'd be interested in knowing a little bit more about the family ramifications.

BM: Sure. Yep, so just as a little bit of background, a woman, Pat Kennedy, was on the faculty here at OSU, works over in La Grande, is writing a book on women in wildlife biology, and I was honored that she asked to write a chapter about me, covering many of the things that we're talking about here. And at that time I asked if, I asked my kids if it would be okay if she used their names or not and they said they're fine, use their names. So, when I came out to my two kids, my two boys, my younger son Mike was in eighth grade and my older son Kevin a senior in high school and Kevin said "okay, you do what you need to do but wait until I'm out of high school please." He just knew he was going to get a ton of crap from his peers at school about this issue. I had been very involved in their life, I was—I coached their soccer team, I taught them how to ski, I took them hiking, we went fishing, we did all sorts of things together. So, we were very close but Kevin knew that it was going to be a difficult time for him at that point. So, I did not send the letter out to the faculty and the students and staff in my department until the day after the last day of class for his high school, out of respect for him.

Mike said "okay." I said "are you going to have problems at school with your friends and peers?" and he said "yeah, I know who I'm going to have trouble with and I know how to handle him." And I will say that most of Mike's friends from that point on and probably prior to that have been pretty open, liberal individuals and I'm sure he had internal feelings of abandonment. And I know Kevin did but I think Mike did too, that affected them. So, it affected me that I knew that it affected them. But, I think that they handled it probably about as well as two adolescents probably could. We're still close, Kevin, my oldest son, just turned thirty, which is amazing, I can't even comprehend that. He's living in Boston, buried under about seven feet of snow at the moment. He's a chef at a restaurant there. I see him whenever I can. Mike is—works here in town at American Dream Pizza. He just moved here about six months ago from Massachusetts. Whether he'll stay here or not, I don't know, but it's great to have him around, we get together every week and see each other. So, it's really worked out quite well with him.

But, you know, I've talked to other trans parents about this and we all have this internal angst that we know that what we did affected our children. We don't know how much, we don't know to what degree, we wish it didn't have to but we know it did and it is a source of just, "damn I wish I didn't have to do that," you know. I wish it didn't have to affect other people that way, especially people I love dearly.

When I came out I was divorced, my ex-spouse knew about my gender issues from fairly early when we were married. She basically ignored it and said "okay, that's your issue, I don't want to deal with it," you know, "its fine, you have to deal with it." And it wasn't why we were divorced but even after we were divorced she was very supportive of me. So, when I came out, I think it really helped two boys to know that their mother was very supportive of my transition.

By the same token, my mom and dad had divorced and so when I came out to them my dad had remarried a woman who was much younger than him, very liberal, and so when I came out she was able help him through that process. My mom had kind of a harder time but came to grips with it too and was a supporter and when last, a year ago now, when she was diagnosed with an aggressive form of breast cancer and knew she had not long to live, I went back and spent a month with her to help her through some of the early stages and she decided to move out here with us in Oregon, where she died last June. So, the fact that she chose to spend her final months with me I think is testament to the fact that she'd come to grips with I am who I am.

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CP: How about the broader professional impact? You talked a bit about the institutions that you're affiliated with.

BM: Yes. Really good question. So, when I came out to the faculty and staff at the University of Massachusetts I, at the time, had interviewed for a position here at the Environmental Protection Agency in Corvallis. I took a year's leave without pay from UMass to come work for them. When I interviewed for the EPA job I interviewed as Bill and when I showed up for work I showed up as Brenda, so there was some scrambling on their part to kind of figure out what to do. The staff that I worked with were amazing, they were just awesome. I think the lab director initially was caught off guard, as you might expect, but he too came around and became very supportive. And so, in a situation where it could have been very disruptive for them, they just rolled with the punches.

You know, after a year of working for the federal government I decided that academia was really where, really where I belonged so I went back to UMass. And my colleagues back there were largely supportive. I had a few bumps in the road but not too bad, very supportive colleagues that worked with me to reinitiate a research program and get some publications out, which I felt was important if I was going to kind of reestablish professional credibility. But even so, what I found was even though I was previously an editor for a journal in my field and would get six to twelve papers to review each year after I transitioned, I don't know if it was the name change or what it was, or lack of credibility, sudden lack of credibility because I was different, but I received almost no requests for review of publications after that, which I found interesting.

And then on the teaching side, the rumor spread through the classroom about what happened and what my transition was and lots of questions, none of which were directed to me, all were directed to others, so I had a few students I was close to, to talk with about things and they would tell me kind of what was going on. I'm sure they didn't tell me everything. But within about two weeks when, you know, it was pretty clear that there were some lab reports due and midterms were coming up and the biggest thing on their mind was what they were going to get on the next midterm and not about what I was about, that all kind of changed. And I will say that there were a few students that probably had a difficult time getting over it, but 98 to 99 percent of the students, you know, it was "it is what it is, I have this class, I want to learn something, I want to get a good grade, that's more important than anything else the faculty member is up to."

So, all in all I think the professional side didn't affect me too badly. I think it did have influence on my perception of credibility around research. I think it affected my teaching evaluations probably a little bit, from a few students, but not the majority of the students. And when I decided that I wanted to go back into administration, I applied for jobs at several institutions and several of them I received interviews and I was not hired. And I contacted some colleagues at those institutions to ask, you know, "I respect the decision, I know there are lots of reasons why I would not have gotten that job, but did my transition have anything to do with that?" And confidentially they would say "yeah, they were concerned about how you might interact with alumni or potential donors or people outside the university."

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So, it did have an effect on employability, credibility. I don't think I was worried about that now, you know, I felt like "this institution has supported me" and so being a minority, being someone who is part of the LGBT community, it can work two ways. It can have no effect—or work three ways—have no effect, you are who you are, you're hired because of your professional qualifications. It can work against you if there are implicit biases against that community. And I think that was the case in a few of the places I interviewed. Or it can work in your favor if you're viewed as an underrepresented minority and you have qualifications equal to someone who is not, then they might hire you. So, all of those effects are

unknowable. You don't know really what's going on, but I think they've all played out in various forms over the last ten years for me.

CP: I'd like to capture a little bit of institutional history at this point. You were very well established, it seems, at the University of Kentucky, you were there for eight years in a faculty position for forestry. Then you came in OSU in 1987 for your first stint to join the Department of Forest Science and Fisheries and Wildlife, do you want to talk about the decision there to come to OSU?

BM: Sure. So, I had been to Portland, Oregon for a professional meeting while I was at the University of Kentucky and just fell in love with the Northwest. I mean, it felt like this is where I belong. But, I had, at Kentucky I was tenured, I had a young family, my first son had been born there and so to pick up and move to Oregon meant losing tenure and having to go through that process again. It was an agonizing decision. It was one that my spouse and I discussed at length. She said she would much rather live in Oregon than Kentucky as well, so we decided to make the move. But I did have to go through the tenure process again and then I was actually promoted to full professor in the Forest Science Department.

And the reason I moved is that, not only did it feel like a good fit for professional; natural resources issues were on the front page of the *Oregonian*. They're not on the front page of the Kentucky newspapers, any of them, anywhere in the state. It's a completely different culture and so I wanted to be in a place where things were happening. And at that time, around those issues, Oregon is where things were happening.

CP: And what were some of those issues that you were involved with, and was the spotted owl one of them?

BM: Yep. It was one of them, although I didn't dive into that bucket right away. That was pretty politically charged and there were already people who had staked out their claim around that issue, so Chuck Meslow, Eric Forsman, Bob Anthony and a variety of others were heavily involved in owl issues. But, because of the owl and because of the work of the Forest Ecosystem Management Assessment Team, about twelve hundred other species had been identified as being at risk if Oregon forests were continuing to be logged at that rate. So, the question arose, you know, how do we go about managing our forests to achieve our natural resources wood products goals but at the same time provide some protection for some of these other species? Owls and murrelets were kind of special cases. Once they were kind of already taken care of, or through policy and legislation we thought that they were being taken care of - now we're not so sure - but we really don't know about many of the other species. So our focus was really what can we do to conserve biodiversity in the Pacific Northwest while at the same time actively managing at least part of our forest land base? And that was a pretty big challenge and it was one that got a fair bit of attention, especially from the Forest Service, the BLM, Fish and Wildlife Service, and to a certain degree, private industry groups.

CP: That seems to have been a major theme of your academic career in forestry.

BM: It was. Even in Kentucky where it wasn't an issue at all, we worked with forest ecologists and silviculturists to test different forest management techniques and see what the responses of the animals would be. So, having that context there it was easy to transfer that kind of thinking here, work with silviculturists and forest ecologists here, and social scientists too, and work in a team to try and have some of these things. So, the silviculturist John Tappeiner was a close colleague here at OSU and we taught courses together, we taught professional development courses together to people and the agencies, we had research projects together and so it was a very collaborative arrangement.

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And a bit different from the way wildlife biologists and silviculturists have worked together in the past. Typically a silviculturist would do something and then the wildlife biologist would step in and see what the effect was. With John and Bill Emmingham and Dave Hibbs, a number of the others there, we would talk about "well, if we want to have these sorts of habitat conditions develop, how can we do that silviculturally and still see wood come out of the forest with minimal impact on other resources?" And so, we'd work together as a team to come up with an approach, an idea, and then implement that and see if we were right. So, it wasn't a "you do this and we'll see how it works," it was "let's think about this together and approach it as a team." That was really rewarding.

CP: Oregon State's been known for its forestry program for quite a long time, it's highly ranked, very prominent. What are your memories of the department during that time period?

BM: Forest science was a graduate program only, it had no undergraduate program, very heavily driven by research dollar, every faculty member basically was the principle investigator for their own research program and had a research cluster around them. So, intense is what I remember, you know. You're always out there looking for the next grant, you're always looking for ways to support your students. But on the other hand it was also very well connected politically. At the time we had something called the Coastal Oregon Productivity Enhancement Program, which was federally earmarked dollars coming to the state of Oregon to conduct research on many of these issues that I described. We were well-respected on campus, we had a strong dean who was known, who made everybody on campus know that the College of Forestry was the number one forestry program in the U.S., if not the world. So, a very strong message to the rest of campus.

So, I think there was a very high degree of pride, but the—but intensity was there too. The work was demanding, the workload was pretty intense and when you're trying to balance a young family and coaching kids in AYSO soccer and taking care of yourself, which meant going for a run at lunchtime with your colleagues where you worked on research project proposals together while you ran. Yeah, you just, you kind of wore out after a while.

CP: Yeah, I'm sure. Where were you conducting most of your fieldwork?

BM: Here in Oregon in the Oregon Coast Range. Pretty steep, difficult terrain, lots of salmonberry. But amazing places. Places that I would say, you know, 99.9% of the rest of the world would never set foot in but we were working there daily, so really excellent opportunity to get to be in some really remote places. Some in the Cascades, HJ Andrews Experimental Forest and the area around there, certainly, and then to a certain degree in central Oregon around Sisters, Ponderosa pine forests. So, really gorgeous places to work. I will say that the steep slopes and demanding terrain and the coasts terrains probably—that plus running marathons probably contributed to having knees that don't work anymore. But it was worth it at the time.

CP: What had motivated you to get into forestry in the first place?

BM: Well, more wildlife biology than forestry. So, first of all I love the forest. I loved being in the forest, as I mentioned early on. My source of security was to be alone, away from people with my animals and on the farm there were forests that I could walk through and so that early memory I think imprinted on me, this feeling of security while being in a forest, a place that I valued. And so, working with animals and being in a forest, to me, got me away from people, got me away from some of the gender issues that I was grappling with and just felt like home. Felt more comfortable.

CP: In 1996 you went to the University of Massachusetts, you were there for thirteen years, was that a move to get into administration?

BM: Yes, it was. So, after working at Oregon State University for ten years and running a pretty successful research program, being promoted to full professor, an ad came across my table that—for department head in the Department of Forestry and Wildlife Management at that time, at UMass. The kids were young still, my parents were still alive in New England, in New York state, and I had respect for UMass and the program they had there. And so I think on the day that it was due I wrote a letter of application and sent it in and said "well, we'll see what happens." And long story short, they, you know, they interviewed me and offered me the job. So, it was a chance to get the family back closer to my parents. I will say that in retrospect I know we probably didn't see them that much more there than we did when we lived here, but it was a chance to be closer to them, in a part of the country that I knew. Massachusetts is pretty liberal, pretty progressive; I think it's no accident that I ended up spending most of my career in Massachusetts and Oregon, two of the blue states and one on each coast. It's a comfortable place to be, safer place to be in, given my identity.

So yeah, UMass was a great place to land, very supportive faculty. Had some challenges. Within that one department there were wildlife biologists, forest ecologists, recreation specialists and wood products people, all who had their own little idea about what their discipline should be in that department. Over the course of the—about seven years, we began to evolve that into a more comprehensive natural resources program, changed the name, changed the structure of the programs, and now I think it's called the Department of Environmental Conservation and they really have become kind

of more a holistic group under the current leadership. So, I like to think that I had some role in beginning to move that somewhat fragmented department into a more holistic, cohesive group. It was fun.

CP: In 2009 you came back to Corvallis.

BM: Yes.

CP: What precipitated that?

BM: Well, so even though it was good professionally and it was a great situation there, I have to say that within the first two months of being there my heart kept on thinking about, you know, wanting to be back in Oregon. And even while I was department head and later as a faculty member at UMass, I had research projects that were still going on back here, so I would fly back each year and work with my colleagues back here, particularly Tom Spies in the Forest Service, on the ongoing research projects. So, my heart never left Oregon, even though my body was in Massachusetts. And I kept looking for opportunities to come back and I knew it would be difficult but I was persistent and was fortunate enough to have Hal Salwasser offer me the job in 2009.

CP: Two years later you went into the Graduate School; you're the Dean of the Graduate School now. How did that happen?

BM: That was another one of those situations where you know, opportunity came up and I thought about it and I thought about it and then kind of at the last moment threw my hat in the ring. But I did take a little time to talk with the provost about the position prior to sending my application and he was supportive of my move. I also talked to Hal Salwasser about my thoughts about moving. Hal was supportive. I felt more than a little bit of guilt after being only two years in at Forest Ecosystems and Society, then moving to a different position, so I think the department was hoping that I would be there for a much longer period of time, provide some stability to a situation that was somewhat unstable at the time. But it was an opportunity to move into an upper administrative role where I felt like I could have a voice at a larger university-wide level, and that part of this job is one thing I really enjoy. Provost has been supportive and I think that by being on the Provost's Council and working with colleagues all across campus, not only on their graduate programs but on other initiatives as well, has really given me a really good understanding of how the university works and I just, you know, I love that part of my job.

CP: And you are a member of the Board of Trustees as well, is that correct?

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BM: That really took me by surprise. So, we knew that U of O and Portland State University were developing their own boards and there was some discussion about Ed Ray and many people on campus about whether OSU should as well. The decision was made to do that. And we also knew that the board structure would involve somebody from the student body, ASOSU, somebody from the staff and somebody from the faculty ranks. So, one day I received a call from Kevin Gable who was president of the Faculty Senate and asked if I would be willing to be considered as a faculty representative to the board. I asked a few questions about what the time demands would be and then said "sure, I'd be happy to be considered" but as an administrator I thought there's no chance. I mean, why would you ever want an administrator representing the faculty on a Board of Trustees? But, then I got a request from the government to serve, so it's hard to turn that down, and not that I wanted to, either. It was a very—it was an honor to be asked.

So yes, I've served on the board for the last two years, it's an excellent group of people, they have OSU's best interest at heart. Across the entire board, that's the common theme. And I think my role is, because I understand faculty, I understand administration, I have a fair understanding of what some of the student issues are that Mark Baldwin who represents the staff and Taylor Sarman who represents the students, and I, I think can provide information to the other board members about really how the world works here at OSU. Certainly they go to Ed and to the Provost and others but, you know, if they want to lean across the table and say "how can you help me understand about this?" I know we can really help in that regard.

As an appointment to the board I represent the Governor and the people of the state of Oregon, I don't represent OSU. I take that role very seriously. I try to separate, you know, what I do on the board from what I do sitting in this office and

try to keep that line very separate. I think that's important. Providing information is a role but when it comes to voting on decisions, I have to keep in mind what's best for the citizens and the state of Oregon and Oregon State University.

CP: One of the questions we've been asking everybody as part of this project is sort of their thoughts in the future direction of the university. And I'm particularly interested in what you are thinking along those lines as a member of this board that is helping to chart the future of the university. What are some of the points of emphasis that are coming up in the conversations or things that people are really thinking about?

BM: Yeah, these are my own opinions and not at all representing the board opinions. Well, we have changed dramatically. So, we've grown in numbers, largely on the undergraduate side. We are increasing graduate student numbers by about two hundred per year, so over the last five or six years we've increased a thousand grad students on this campus, which is significant. But the proportion of graduate students on this campus hasn't changed at all because everything is growing. We've internationalized this campus, we have grown our research funding to two hundred and eighty million dollars, you know, we're no longer a small land grant university in a small city, we're becoming one of the big players. And that's significant. That takes a different mindset. It takes a different mindset for everybody. And I think for some people on campus who have been here for quite a while, it's hard to make that adjustment. We always think of ourselves as a small cow college in Corvallis when we're not. I mean, we're really one of the big players now.

So, the future, you know, I see us continuing to grow our investment in research and graduate education, largely through the research side. But that's going to be harder to do. Federal funding is harder to secure for faculty. So it's going to be more competitive. I see us branching out into forms of education which are much more blended between face to face and online and hybrid, and I see us reaching out to students and clients who are not our traditional, out of high school, go to college, get your bachelors, go to graduate school. I see mid-career people being much more of our clients than in the past. I see us being collaborative with other universities on degree programs, on what it means to ensure student success. I see a whole new way of thinking about how we conduct this educational enterprise. And we have to be adaptive and we have to be nimble because if we keep on doing what we're doing, we're going to fall behind.

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If we look at some of the other universities that are really leading the way, they're not doing what they were doing ten years ago; they're not even doing what they were doing five years ago. They're really taking things in a different direction and everyone has their own idea about what that direction might be. But OSU, I think, is figuring out what its own strength is, what those directions could be to enable us to continue to be a leader and go in that direction. One thing that I think will change on this campus is the diversity picture. And around that I also see a change in inclusivity, the inclusivity of people whose identities do not fall within the majority. And I see a change in civility. I have likened this campus to having a veneer of politeness; we are all very polite people on this campus. We work very hard not to offend other people, but I think at times and in certain places, we lack the roots of empathy that allow us to truly connect with other people and understand what it's like to have lived in a different identity or different pathway through their life. And my hero in that regard is Larry Roper, you know, I think he has not only talked the talk around that issue for his many years on this campus, but he's walked the walk and has the ultimate respect of everybody on campus. And it's people like Larry that I think are going to cause that change, the way we interact with each other on this campus.

And, because OSU is such a focal point of Corvallis and Benton County and the mid-Willamette Valley, we have an opportunity to have an impact on much of western Oregon as well. So, if we become more diverse, more inclusive, more civil, create an environment in which every person feels valued and that ripples out into the community around us, our university has had an effect on others that goes far beyond education, it goes into the community and I think that's something that personally I would love to see OSU aspire to.

CP: Yeah. Well, I have some more things that I can ask you, as time permits, but I want to give a chance to have Kalia here ask you a few questions, if you have any questions, Kalia.

BM: How are we doing on time?

CP: We've got about fifteen minutes, max.

Kalia Flocker: I've been pretty interested in the development of the Queer Studies Program on campus and I read that you'd been involved in that, I'd be interested in hearing a little bit about that.

BM: Yeah, I can't comment too much. I've been very peripherally involved with that and so my involvement there has been to offer the transgender lives course and I serve on some student committees, grad student committees. So, I am strongly supportive of that program. I have a very peripheral role in Women, Gender and Sexuality studies as well, but given my current position, you know, I haven't played a really strong role. Teaching the class was something that—so, I teach two to three courses a year which is a bit unusual, I suppose, for a dean, but I teach, you know, after hours I teach from five to six or I teach at lunch time. So, I take my theoretically free time and spend it with students, which is a good way to spend time. So, the transgender lives class is one that I taught at lunchtime for a few years and it's really been my primary involvement with that program. But I really enjoy working with the staff and especially the students engaged in that program.

I think it, even the fact that Queer Studies had to go through the program review process here on campus and go through Faculty Senate evaluation and have faculty understand what Queer Studies means was an educational opportunity for many of the faculty on this campus. Because outside of parts of Liberal Arts, most people on campus would not really understand what Queer Studies means or what it's about. So, I think the more visibility it gets the greater effect that will have on this campus-wide civility and inclusivity. Every bit of help we have. So, sorry, not much of an impact there, but supportive.

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CP: Anything else? You have any other questions you want to ask?

BM: Any question's a fair question. I answer any question.

KF: I know you've also helped at least one student go through some of the hoops of transitioning on the campus, particularly through like documents and stuff like that, and I was wondering what that was like and what sort of changes you've seen in that area of campus.

BM: Yeah, really good question. And so, you know, it takes certain individuals to be change agents on this campus and so I think the person, I know the person you're referring to. And so, she showed up in the office to get her name changed and gender changed on her records here at OSU, ran into some obstacles, was referred to by one of the staff members in a way that was not respectful and so I found out about that and arranged a meeting with that office and talked with them about it. So, it was two other students and I who arranged a meeting with that office and talked with them about how they should interact with trans individuals that might come by. And it was really well received. I think it was worthwhile. That kind of opened the door to some discussions about how we ask people what their gender is when they apply to a school here. We knew that the University of Vermont was light-years ahead of us on things like that and I've been kind of pushing gently to see what we might be able to do. But getting Jeff Kenney here, who is the LGBTQ coordinator, we were able to begin working with changes on our admissions forms to be gender inclusive.

We're also asking if people are trans, we're asking if they view themselves as being members of the LGBTQ community, and that can be interpreted two ways. So somebody who is unsure about answering that question and self-identifying that way may be worried that that may be held against them if they're in admissions, but our view is that if we provide that opportunity, it sends a message to students and to potential employees that we care, you know, we're open to that, we're open to not only understanding who you are but we're also open to providing you with the resources that you need to succeed.

Right now we have an Affirmative Action statement that includes sexual orientation, gender identity and gender expression but we don't know how successful anyone is if they don't fall within one of those groups, right? So, a transgender individual is recruited to campus as a graduate student, there might be fifteen others; are they as successful as anybody else on this campus or are they less successful? And we won't know that unless we begin documenting their identities and following those trajectories through time and seeing if there's a gap. And if there is a gap then we need to resolve that gap. So, that was one thing that we've begun doing and I think now we have the documentation in place to be able to understand what people's gender identity and sexual orientation are.

We also have worked with CGE, a Coalition of Graduate Employees to ensure that transgender healthcare is included in their health coverage. And that includes transition surgeries as needed. And that is also now, as I understand it, available for employees too. So, we've seen a lot of change in the last few years. I don't claim to be responsible for any of it, although I have been involved with others to try to make that change happen. And I will say that five years ago I would never have imagined that we would be sitting in the President's conference room with university leaders around the table talking about how to word a statement on an admissions page to ensure that we were representing gender identity in an appropriate way, beyond male and female. That just amazed me, and so we have had significant progress in that regard.

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I will say one more thing though too, and it somewhat relates to what you're saying, and asking, and that is there's an undergraduate student on campus whose sister was transgender and lived in Idaho in a very remote town and faced bullying, hostility, and marginalization daily. She posted a YouTube video just prior to committing suicide, explaining why she was doing it, and it just devastated her brother, who was a student here. And it was a horrible, horrible event. That department rallied around that student and supported him like I've never seen before. It was universal, it was deep and it was meaningful, and I think to me that horrible event really showed me that people care and they understand what some trans people are going through and they care about the ripple effect around that. And that one student was adversely affected by this event in a very profound way. And because he was affected, it affected other students and it affected faculty and it was just, just sending a message that people are beginning to understand just how bad it can be for some trans people.

CP: Well, we're short on time here, so I'll ask you, kind of in closing, what it means to you to have arrived at this point in your life where you are living the life that you want to be live, you have attained a high level of success and you're acting as an advocate for others?

BM: Well, the advocacy piece is very rewarding. It can also be a bit draining at times and so one reason why I stepped away from the support group was I was—between what I was doing at work and what I was doing there, I was just getting burned out. So, I still am an advocate, I still do as much as I can but I am beginning to learn my limits around what I can do. How does it feel? You know, from the day I walked out of Lisette Lahana's office after that first visit and had the 900 pound gorilla fall off my back, it feels really good. I'm not living two lives anymore, I'm not having to parse my identity to two things, I have a whole identity finally. I'm in a loving relationship with a partner that I thought I would never have. One thing that I was sure that I would give up after transitioning was the ability to be in a relationship with someone else. Who would possibly want to be in a relationship with me? I mean—and there were some bumps in the road trying to find people who might even be willing to feel that way, but I'm incredibly fortunate. So, how do I feel? I feel whole, I feel incredibly lucky that I ended up where I have, I look around me at other transgender people in the world and I know that I am a huge outlier, that most people have a much—well have an impossibly difficult road ahead of them that I didn't have. I am privileged; I mean there's no other way to describe it. And my hope is that I can use the power that that privilege gives me to help others and use that in a way that's constructive.

CP: Well, thank you very much Brenda, we appreciate this.

BM: Absolutely, happy to do it.

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