

## Louie Stafford

[00:00:00]

**PARTICIPANT:** Yes, yes, so my name is Louie Stafford, I am 31 years old and I work here at LGBT Foundation. I am a trans man, I have been transitioning now for about five years and I'm kind of not quite finished that process as well. But I have a background in youth work and I've been doing sort of sexual health advice and support for young people and also I've been doing trans support work for the last four, five years. And now I work full time at LGBT Foundation as the trans programme coordinator and I head up their trans sexual health work, and I've been doing a fair bit of activism around sexual health for the last two years in this post. And we're two years in to a four year Reaching Community project, which is kind of a community development project funded by the Big Lottery. And yeah, that's kind of it, my job.

[00:01:19]

**INTERVIEWER:** Great. Could you tell me how you first got involved in, say, you mentioned youth work – how you first got involved in that and what motivated you to kind of pursue that?

**PARTICIPANT:** Yeah, well, I actually, in my early twenties I had, I was part of the Evangelical Church actually. Before I came out at all to anyone I was heavily involved in an evangelical church and through that I was doing youth work through a project that the church that I was involved in ran. But then I came while I was still part of the church and I had a relationship with someone within the church that didn't go particularly well, it wasn't really very well-received. And I experienced a fair bit of backlash about that, I was kind of sent to a conversion organisation, I was subject to various kind of therapies that had been dreamed up by the church to kind of heal me of what was then my homosexuality. Because I came out as a lesbian. This was long before I had any inclination that I was trans. But yeah, I just went through a few years of real sort of heart-breaking trauma at the hands of a church which was meant to be my sanctuary, my family, at the time. And it took a long time to get to terms with that. and I eventually just turned my back on it. I tried to stay around for a while and try to navigate... and I tried to not be gay for a while, if that makes sense. But it didn't work out very well, so I can kind of decided to move on.

And at that time I was already kind of sold on the principles of youth work, I'd kind of without the kind of Christian element, I'd kind of seen that... I'd seen the kind of power that youth work has to kind of transform young people's lives from feeling kind of, from dealing with mental health problems to... and that was my own experience as well, and I think that was a big motivator for me to kind of get in to the sort of work where you can actually support other people. And I would like to say that was a really... you know, everyone wants to think that they do things selflessly and kind of give back and all of that but actually I think a lot of it was kind of, it was driven by a kind of want to discover my capabilities, it was kind of selfish in a way because it makes you feel good to help other people so yeah, that's how I got in to it. And then I got an apprenticeship with Leeds City Council, where I was living at the time, and was doing that sort of work and got quite involved in C-Card schemes and giving out

condoms and like talking to young people about sex, and I really enjoyed that, I really loved kind of turning conversations with giggly young lads that were kind of like, you know, just being stupid, in to like serious conversations when they'd come to me when they'd had like a pregnancy scare with their girlfriends and stuff.

And I saw the kind of like, the real need for young people to kind of have open and honest dialogue about sex. So yeah, in that kind of... and then in my mid-twenties I kind of realised that I was trans and sort of went through a really long period of self-discovery and through that I kind of used my skills in kind of supporting young people in... I applied them in to a setting where I was kind of supporting fellow trans people. At the time there wasn't a trans groups, really, that I could go to, so again it was a way of meeting other people and kind of discovering what I felt about my own journey through kind of supporting other people. I'm a bit further along in that now, I'd say the kind of work that I do now is much more strategic and I kind of support a team that delivers events and produces resources to kind of supporting trans people here in Manchester. But yeah, it's been, that's kind of been my journey really.

[00:06:08]

[Break]

[Interviewers adjust the mic]

[00:07:20]

**INTERVIEWER:** Yeah. Yeah, yeah. Erm... going to have a sip of coffee as well. Erm. So you mentioned an aspect of your work with, on the apprenticeship with the youth work, was the C-Card scheme. Now to someone who doesn't know anything about that how would you describe that, what was involved?

**PARTICIPANT:** So the C-Card scheme was a... still is, I believe! An initiative where you could provide safer sex information and condoms to, I think it was anyone above the age of 13 actually at the time. I don't know whether that's changed. There was sometimes, I can remember the exact ages but there was sometimes some controversy about how young you could deliver that information. But it was completely confidential so the young person could come to a youth club or to an office in a school or something and talk to an adult about sexual health, and we deliver like a short intervention as part of that, we talk about how to use a condom. And I just found it, it was a really good way... I mean a lot of the young people I worked with would often ask for the condoms and I would see them then blown up on the street like around the corner, like a few hours later. But I think it was, just for them to know that it was there, because actually they were doing that from the age of like, 13. But then actually when they started having sex at like 15, we'd be the people that they'd come and talk to because they'd know they'd be able to get free condoms. So yeah, I thought it was a really good scheme.

[00:09:05]

**INTERVIEWER:** Great. Cool. So could you say a little bit more about, so you've talked a little bit about your transition journey, as it were. And if you're okay talking

about it, would you mind saying a little bit more about that and about... I know before we started recording you were talking about how sexuality figures within that and how there's changes within that.

**PARTICIPANT:** Yep. I mean, obviously for myself, I identified very strongly as a lesbian for almost a decade of my life, it was a big part of my identity and who I saw myself as. And then once I started realising that some of the emotional and mental health problems I was having was connected with my gender identity, I saw a real shift and shake-up of my sexuality as well. So when I started taking testosterone, which is actually quite common in trans men, I actually started to become attracted to other men in ways that I hadn't been before.

And now, to this day I identify as bisexual. I'm in a monogamous relationship with a woman but I still am attracted to men in a way that I'm much more open about and I feel very strongly that I... I feel very motivated to talk about bisexuality because I think actually allowing people to be fluid in their sexuality really helps everyone, as well as trans people who are maybe thinking about, or worrying about their sexuality changing in some way. In my work with trans people I've met a lot of trans people over the years that have told me that their sexuality has changed and moved and adjusted in the time that they've transitioned and I think that's really common actually. There's not actually a lot of research about that but I think it's quite telling when people's relationships with their bodies start to change, when they start to maybe be more comfortable or they start to express themselves in different ways, that that broadens as well and reaches out to their sexuality and they start to think about different things they might be interested in, different people they might want to sleep with, that kind of thing. And I think it's quite an interesting thing to think about really because actually a lot of trans people, a lot of people that don't know about trans people, often think it's about sexuality anyway, they think it's about when you change your gender that it's somehow rooted in the fact that you're attracted to a certain type of person.

For example, with trans women, people often just assume that they're like gay men who are like extremely feminised in some way, but that's like a really narrow way of looking at things and actually there's trans people's sexualities are just as diverse, if not more so I think, than non-trans people. And I think that's to do with actually being more comfortable with not conforming with the way that society tells you to. So actually you think 'why should I conform in a way that is being dictated to me by my peers and by my community? I'm going to kind of live the life that I want to live' and there's more determination around that.

As a side-note, I think there's a lot of conversations to be had a lot more to learn about how we open up conversations in the trans community about sex and how to stay safe while having sex. 'Cause there's also a culture, I feel, like, where trans people are sometimes, and I'm guilty of this as well... not that it's anything to be guilty about, but are sometimes uncomfortable talking about their bodies. And that makes sense if you think about the kind of journeys that trans people go through, a lot of people feel dysphoria and a disconnection and an actual dislike towards their own bodies, so it makes sense that people wouldn't want to talk about them. But actually, trans people are sexual beings, we're all sexual beings and I think it's really important that we create a safe space for trans people to talk about their feelings

towards sex, so that we can explore together how we can all have the kind of sex that we want. and also I think it's just important to remember that actually there are, some trans people have experienced trauma and there's research to say that lots of LGBT people have experienced higher rates of sexual assault or negative experiences around sex. And I think that trauma really can be culturally significant if you're in a room full of trans people, it can be really visceral and it can stop people from having an open conversation. So I'm really trying to... and also that's something that I've also found personally, I find it difficult sometimes to talk about sex. But actually, especially if it's personal. I think if I'm in a work setting I can talk about sex, I can teach people how to put condoms on, I've done it hundreds of time.

But actually if I were to talk about my own sex life, it's something that I don't feel very comfortable doing. So I'm trying to push myself and learn more about my own boundaries within that. And actually, encourage others to listen and be kind of hear and to learn from each other. Yeah.

[00:15:29]

[Break]

**INTERVIEWER:** Great, okay.

[More chat about mic adjustments]

[00:16:18]

**INTERVIEWER:** So no, it's not loud. It's... I'm probably being pedantic, to be honest. [Pause] Okay, but that's... [Missed] [00:16:42]. Doing really well, so yeah, thank you. Yeah, we're still rolling. Okay, cool. [Pause] Yeah, I mean I find what you're saying really fascinating and... how have you, in terms of... at one point you said opening up, how do we open up conversations about sex? Do you feel like that you've ever had the opportunity to do that as a trans man, to have a safer space where you can do that? Or, are those spaces kind of not really that available?

**PARTICIPANT:** I think I've worked very hard in my personal life to have a group of friends around me that I feel comfortable about opening up about, but that's really a handful of people. I think I don't feel that comfortable talking about my sex life, or sexuality, outside of that. And I think part of that is to do with the fact that it's very difficult to separate yourself as a professional, to like your peers. Because actually, when I meet with other trans people in my job I think it's really important to strike a balance between kind of bring real and authentic with people whilst also kind of being boundaries and kind of guardian yourself, because actually if you don't do that I find it can be emotionally draining and you know it can be difficult. In terms of spaces to do that, I think one of the things that can be really difficult is not really, is if you've have negative experiences you might not have trust there, and I think building trust can be a really difficult thing to do, especially for communities of people who have been marginalised through kind of oppression like transphobia, and I think we have a long way to go before we can kind of really realise the kind of effects that that has on people. And I think you can't dismiss the fact that a lot of trans lives and existence is fetishised in wider society, in the media, in pornography. In any

conversations that are had, you either get a fetishisation around kind of like 'oh, here's a man with a vagina, so he's like somehow...' I'm just thinking of famous porn stars like Buck Angel, for example, who you know, I think he's a great guy but like, almost like when you see people, the porn that he's in, the way that's marketed for example, I don't think it's really... it doesn't help a guy like me exist in the world because people see that and they think that is, like, it's kind of freak show porn, that's the way it's portrayed.

[00:20:09]

And the same way that kind of trans women are portrayed, a gender non-conforming and non-binary people, I think are portrayed, I think it's very othering. I think it's kind of like, the reason that these people are hot and the reason that these people are sexy, is because they're different, you know. It's not because they are people, and people are hot, and people are sexy. And I think, that can be... when you internalise that, that can be quite damaging and that can be quite affecting on the way that you see yourself and the way that you see your body. Like, I am only sexy if someone sees me as a man with a pussy. That is weird, right? Because that's like, I should think that I'm sexy because I'm a man and that's the way I see myself and I'm confident and I like my body and I like having sex and I'm good at sex and I have great sex, and all of these things. But actually it's like, the way you internalise it, it's like... and I really found that when I was in a period of my life when I was having sex with other men, I could only really see myself having sex with another man if I kind of knew that they found the fact that I was a man with a vagina kind of like an attractive, almost like as a fetish. And I would only feel comfortable having sex with people on that basis. I didn't do that for very long because I realised that actually it wasn't making me feel good, it wasn't making me feel happy. I was actually self-perpetuating a kind of loathing that I had for, kind of... around my dysphoria, not feeling like a real man, and those kind of narratives that I think someone with the mental health condition like I have, I suffer from depression and anxiety, so I tell my... my brain tells me negative things about myself which I have to constantly rebuke and be like, no, that's not right. And I think that that did play out a lot in the way that I was navigating sex. and I'm not saying that's true for all trans people, I've met loads of trans people that have amazing self-confidence and they tell me that they have amazing sex and they love being trans, and being trans makes them feel sexy. And I think that that's brilliant and I like, want that for every person. But I just think, let's have a conversation about the times when that's not the case. Because actually when you think about navigating safe sex, a starter for ten is actually caring for yourself enough to actually feel like you're worth having those conversations with people. Like, I want to keep myself safe because I deserve to be well and health. That's a really fundamental thing around, I think, when you're looking at HIV prevention, when you're talking about safe sex, it has to go so much further beyond 'here, wear a condom' or 'take PrEP' or all of these solutions which are great, I think we have to think as well about well-being and how people see themselves and how people, whether people actually consider themselves worth that wellness, whether they think that they're worth protecting. And I think if you're having complicated negative feelings around your body and your sense of self, which a lot of trans people do, I think it can be more difficult to do that.

[00:23:59]

**INTERVIEWER:** Okay. [Pause] So in your current role, could you describe some of the work that you do that is kind of related to what you just talked about in terms of...? I mean, it's a theme that has emerged in terms of sexual health, you can't really isolate it from mental health or from other kinds of well-being, but obviously there's a specificity to that and I was just wondering if you could maybe describe in your current role the kinds of things that the programme does.

**PARTICIPANT:** Yeah, so in my current role we really signpost... we're there to kind of reach out the trans community and let them know that there's a whole host of health and wellbeing services that they can access. So we work to make sure that the services that we offer are trans-inclusive, we offer training to GUM clinics and other I suppose sexual health workers. I work nationally with organisations like CliniQ, who are a trans sexual health organisation based in London, to kind of raise the knowledge in general wider practice in sexual health around how to be inclusive to trans people. But then I think we also look at how we can provide trans-specific spaces for people who maybe feel uncomfortable accessing mainstream GUM clinics. So yeah, there's the kind of training and education side of it, but then also we do outreach to the trans community to let them know where they can go to access testing, where they can go to access mental health services, we offer some talking therapies work here which people can come for counselling, which is notoriously difficult to access through the NHS, especially for trans people because there's a lack of affirmative practitioners who know about trans issues. So we work with counsellors here to kind of help them understand how to work with trans people.

So I'd say it's about kind of finding, giving people additional choices about routes of access in to services is a huge thing because historically trans people have faced lots of barriers to accessing services. So we want to kind of build some of those bridges with services where they've maybe not been as accessible to trans people, but then also work with the trans community to help them understand where those places are, to give them choices and options about how they can address issues. We're also looking at piloting an advocacy project with trans people because we are also aware that even though there's the wellbeing side of things, a lot of trans people have logistical issues around navigating services, such as the use of legal names and pronouns and things like that. Or for example, in a service like speech and language therapy, if you go to a general service a lot of speech and language therapists won't feel confident working with a trans person because they don't feel like they have the expertise, but actually there's very few gender specialists in speech and language therapy, so we kind of work to broaden, to educate speech and language therapists that actually, you don't need any specialist skills really. I mean, you could do with reading a book maybe, but like actually you have all the tools and skills already in your repertoire as a qualified practitioner to deliver services to that individual. They're just another person. So kind of demystifying the fact that trans people are somehow specialists and require specialist healthcare, because quite often they don't. They just require the same sort of support that any other person would.

So yeah, there are a few things that we're doing to support people, and I'd say one of the most important things that we do is we run group support, we do a monthly event

here, and I think just getting trans people in spaces together, creating environments in which they can have conversations and debates and learn from each other, is probably one of the biggest things, one of the most important things we do. And it's one of the most consistently asked-for things as well. And within that we try and weave in as much as possible kind of conversations about sexual health, we tie in... for example, we just had HIV testing week, we tie in that to our events. We also are running a HIV testing clinic on parallel to these events so that people can drop in to them if they so wish. And to give people additional routes of access to testing for HIV.

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Yeah, and I think one of the things that I have been exploring through my work is kind of how we can encourage people to reflect on their own well-being, not necessarily as part of their transition journey, but the wider determinates of their wellbeing. Like what they eat and how much they exercise. Because not to be paternalistic about it, but actually we all know that those things can impact on your wider wellbeing. We talk a lot about the word 'resilience' and building resilience in the community. I actually don't like that word so much because I think it implies that it's the responsibility of the individual to kind of make themselves better, when actually a lot of the problems that trans people face are external, they're the way that other people treat them. Why should they become more resilient? It's actually the world I think need to change, and become a bit more kinder and a bit more accepting to trans people.

But there is something within that as well about, actually change takes a long time to change hearts and minds, to change attitudes, to educate people about how to improve services and make services more accessible to trans people, takes time. And although a lot of work has been done on that at the moment, we still have a stop-gap, we still have a long way to go, so in the meantime it is important that we help people to look after themselves in whatever way we can, and we look after each other in whatever way we can.

[00:31:29]

**INTERVIEWER:** Just on that last point, obviously the, a lot of, especially in association with HIV as well as other STIs, a lot of the focus historically has been on cis men who have sex with each other, and I just wondered how, including in representations as well as, the cultural representations and then as well as services that are targeted at specific groups kind of thing, I'm just wondering how, do you see your work, the kind of work you've just been describing, as kind of trying to change that around a little bit and to broaden out?

**PARTICIPANT:** Yep. Yeah, so you're right, historically there has been a focus... because of the AIDS crisis, because of what we know about AIDS and how it's transmitted, rightfully in terms of HIV prevention that was targeted to men who have sex with men. And that mainly was cis-gender men. And that legacy still exists today in the way that HIV prevention work is funded. That does impact on trans people because what we know is that, you know, on a global scale that there are certain trans people who are up to 49%, or 49 times more likely, to contract HIV than a non-

trans person. That, those sort of statistics, are shocking in this day and age when we've come so far against, in tackling HIV transmission. I do think... I hear a lot of people in HIV prevention work talk about ending HIV in a generation, and I think that is an incredible way to frame it and I think it's a really good aspiration, but unless trans people are included in our HIV prevention work at every level you're going to have a reduction of HIV transmission in cis men that have sex with cis men, but there's massive potential that we're actually going to see an increase, a continued increase, in HIV prevalence amongst trans people, particularly trans women who are having sex with cis men. So unless we tackle these issues at the root there isn't going to be an end to HIV in a generation. And I really believe that, that in order to make that happen we have to, we're talking about all communities of risk including trans people, and in order for us to address the need we need funding, in order to deliver sexual health work with trans people.

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And this brings me on, I suppose, to the importance of monitoring as well because a lot of sexual health services in the NHS, they don't actually record trans status or gender identity, so actually in the figures that we have at the moment around HIV prevalence, there's a lot of trans women for example who might be being included in the statistics that we have for men who have sex with men. And there's a lot of trans men that might not be being included in those MSM statistics that you think should be. I think in order to really understand what we're dealing with we really need to track and monitor it, which isn't really happening at the moment, and that is going to be a huge problem. because people, if people don't know the level at which a problem is happening, or the level at which HIV is being transmitted, they don't know at what level or what place to direct the preventative services, so it's easy to just think, 'oh trans people, there isn't a prevalence rate in the UK of trans people contracting HIV', and the reason why people might think that is because we're not actually measuring gender identity when we're looking at people who are contracting HIV. So I think you have to... there's a broader challenge there about how we... and this is something... so, sorry I've lost my train of thought.... erm, what was I going to say?

I suppose this is cis-normativity we're talking about, when we're thinking about, the whole world is designed for people who are cis. We presume, when anyone walks in to a doctor's surgery or in to a hospital you would presume that they are cis, unless they tell you otherwise. Unless there's a way to record it there's no way for that to be tracked in the system. And I think in order to really address the problems for trans people we need to look at the way that we design our services, we need to revolutionise the way that we design services to be more inclusive of trans people from the beginning. And I think in terms of HIV prevention work I think it's really important that we look at how we broaden our mainstream services to become more inclusive, but also I think we need to look at targeted work, because obviously targeted work is important when you're looking at groups that are at high risk of contracting HIV. There's a lot of evidence around how actually we should be doing targeted work to gay men because they may not feel comfortable accessing a mainstream service, they might want to access a service where they know they're going to have a safe experience and not experience homophobia. I think the same exact principle applies for trans people, we need to be looking at services that are

trans-inclusive, where people trust that they're not going to experience transphobia when they walk through the door, otherwise you're not going to get people to walk through the door.

CliniQ in London talk about people presenting with quite late stages of symptomatic... sorry, AIDS symptoms. So... in 2017, that is kind of virtually unheard of, it's normally kind of like, people would get treated much earlier, but people are presenting with really late stages of AIDS symptoms, and it's really, that tells a story about, you know, people are waiting until they've got really horrendous symptoms before they're accessing a clinic. I think that just shows that people obviously aren't feeling comfortable accessing their GP even, you know. To wait that long before getting help, I think, it tells a story.

[00:39:23]

**INTERVIEWER:** Okay. We're coming to the end now, but I just wanted to ask if there was anything else that you wanted to say, anything else that you felt you hadn't covered, before we finish?

**PARTICIPANT:** Yeah, I think, the thing that... I think that consent is a huge thing, navigating consent for trans people can be really difficult and I think not just for trans people, for anyone who maybe isn't confident about what their options are when they're having sex or maybe doesn't know about what risks are there, I think having... if you're having sex with anyone consent is really important and I think having conversations about consent can really revolutionise your confidence towards having sex.

I think it's not something we talk about enough really. I don't know where I'm going with that. I do that maybe there is... I've been reading quite a lot recently about sex by deception kind of lawsuits and convictions that have been made against trans people, particularly trans men, for not disclosing the fact that they're trans when they have sex has then led to a conviction of acquiring sex by deception. I think it brings up lots of things about... I think, there are so many reasons why trans people wouldn't disclose their trans status to someone that maybe they don't know that well. Risk, fear of violence, violent repercussions is one of them. But I think when you've got a legal system that criminalises trans people for holding their trans status, which is a very private thing, and legally under the equality act you're not required to tell anyone your trans status or your trans history. It's actually if you tell someone and they then tell someone else, you're in breach of the equality act if you do that. So to have a legal system that then convicts trans people of having sex without telling that history is quite shocking to me in 2017. I think we've got a long way to go before we are confident and comfortable enough with trans people's existence and trans people's bodies and trans people's lives where they're seen as normal as kind of just any other person. We've got a long way to go before that happens because there are just so many pockets of our society that look upon trans people as being kind of deviant or... and I've heard it said time and time again that trans people are kind of, in terms of the rights that we're fighting for, we're kind of a few decades behind gay and lesbian people in terms of the rights that have been required. But there is a huge momentum at the moment and a huge amount of support I think in Parliament, around kind of getting behind trans people and advocating for trans people's rights.

But it just takes so long for those kinds of attitude changes to then convert in to legislation change. And I think in the meantime, it's the responsibility of everyone in society to kind of not be a dickhead. You know, that's what we need to do now because actually we need to think about how we're... sorry...

[00:43:27]

[Break]

[Interruption as someone comes into the room briefly]

[00:43:44]

**INTERVIEWER:** Do you just want to say what you said at the end again?

**PARTICIPANT:** I was kind of forgetting where I was going with that... what was I saying? Sorry, I just totally lost my train of thought.

[00:43:56]

**INTERVIEWER:** It was about people... I mean, you'd kind of just finished but it was about people not being a dickhead and because it's taking time for attitudes to change and for laws to change-

**PARTICIPANT:** Yeah, so I think, in this time when we're in sort of a transition period, pardon the phrase, between kind of hearts and minds changing to legislation change, which takes a long time to come in to force, and I think in the meantime we need to not be shit to each other, we need to look after each other, we need to look out for our trans friends and family, particularly in the LGBT community. I think the LGB community needs to stand up and put its arm around the trans people around and look out for trans people. I hear a lot about transphobia that happens within LGBT spaces and that's the same for kind of inclusion of people of colour and racism, I think, we've got... we need to use the kind of games and liberation that we've received through fighting for gay and lesbian rights, we need to use that momentum and those victories and convert it in to kind of support and kindness for people who've still got a way to go.

**[00:45:28] End of transcript.**