

Queer and Catholic: A CLGS Oral History Project

Archival Identification:

Interviewer: Emma Cieslik

Interviewee: Stephanie Battaglino

Date of interview: December 7, 2022

Overview: Stephanie Battaglino (she/her) is a trans woman, activist, and speaker. She is the author of the book, *Reflections from Both Sides of the Glass Ceiling: Finding My True Self in Corporate America* (2021). She came out as a trans woman in 2005, while working as a corporate vice-president for New York Life. Since then, she has focused on trans education, awareness, and inclusion, including among Catholic communities. Born in Newark in 1958, New Jersey to a religiously Catholic Italian American family, Battaglino describes her upbringing, her experiences of faith and gender expression, and her transition in this interview. Due to technical difficulties, the interview is split into two parts.

Keywords: Transgender Catholics, Sister Luisa Derouen, International Foundation for Gender Education, Rhythm Kid, COVID-19 pandemic, Kearny, New Jersey, Morristown, New Jersey, Kearny, New Jersey, Newark, New Jersey, pre-Vatican II, University of Delaware, Knights of Columbus, Catholic Social Services, Recovering Catholics, Episcopal Church, Tucson, Arizona, Palm Desert, California

[Part 1]

00:00:00

Emma Cieslik: Wonderful. So, this is an interview conducted by me, Emma Cieslik, on Wednesday, December 7th--or Tuesday. Yes, it is Wednesday, December 7th, starting at about 6:10 pm Eastern Standard Time, about 3:10 pm Pacific Standard Time for Queer and Catholic: A CLGS Oral History Project. I use she/her pronouns. We are recording this oral history interview via Zoom, while I sit in Foggy Bottom, Washington, D.C., and Stephanie sits on location, accessed via Zoom. I wanted to thank you so much for your time and for agreeing to contribute to the Queer and Catholic Oral History Project. Starting out, would you mind please introducing yourself?

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Stephanie Battaglino: Sure, my name is Stephanie Battaglino. I'm a retired corporate vice-president from New York Life. I had a 20-year career there where I came out as trans in 2005. I was the first person in the history of the company at the time to come out as transgender, and ever since that time, I've been doing a lot of work in the community as well as throughout the Church, quite frankly, with education and training and speaking and consulting. And now that I'm retired, I'm kind of doing that as a kind of the second chapter of my life. So, I live in Palm Desert [California] with my wife, Mari, who also happens to be a trans woman and our two cats, Angus and Fiona. [Chuckles]

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Cieslik: That's so wonderful. Thank you so much for introducing yourself.

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Battaglino: You're welcome.

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Cieslik: And starting off, if you feel comfortable, would you mind please sharing your preferred pronouns?

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Battaglino: She preferred to pronounce are she, her, and hers.

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Cieslik: Wonderful, and along those same lines as well, and getting into the thick of the interview focused on your Catholic identity, do you identify as Catholic?

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Battaglino: I do. I do. Although I haven't been to church in quite a long time. I also kind of self-identify as a very spiritual person. I have a--you know, I believe that I have my own kind of personal relationship with Jesus as well as with God, and that works for me, given all the know, the kind of the rather circuitous, circuitous spiritual journey that I've found myself on over the years since I have transitioned.

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Cieslik: Yes, and along those lines, I know you mentioned that you consider yourself a spiritual person. Do you consider yourself part of the Roman Catholic Church?

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Battaglino: I do, I do now, and a lot of the reason for that, that connection, Emma, is through the relationship that I have with my spiritual adviser and really my friend, Sister Luisa Derouen. Sister Luisa is a Dominican nun, a Dominican Sister of Peace and she believes her calling is to minister to the trans community, and her and I met back in--oh, I guess it was 2008--and we went on retreat and now, I'm, you know, at a point in my journey where I was very much unsure of kind of where I was spiritually and you know, and she helped me a great deal with kind of reconnecting to my Catholic faith, and we've worked together and spoken together and she's been a true blessing in my life.

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Cieslik: I'm so glad, and you mentioned that you started to learn and become friends with this person at a conference. Would you mind sharing more about when and what that was?

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Battaglino: Sure, it was--the conference was for--it was in Tucson, Arizona, where Sister [Luisa Derouen] was at the time. She is no longer in Tucson, but it was the organ--I was part of an organization which unfortunately no longer exists. It was called the International Foundation for Gender Education--I.F.G.E.--and they would always have an annual

conference, and it would move around the country. And this and this particular year was in Tucson, which had a very active not only trans community but LGBT community. Very, you know, very accepting. The mayor of Tucson, I think, Emma, like opened up the conference, came and spoke, which kind of for us back in, you know, that wasn't that long ago, but back then it was like,

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Battaglino: "Wow. This place is really accepting. It's really cool, you know." So as a board member I was kind of very involved. I did a workshop and things like that, and I think, Sister, I'm not sure Sister did or not. But she was there because there were a lot of trans people who lived in Tucson that were at the conference that had already known and had been seeing Sister. I would think or were friends with sister and so she was there, and it was really there that you know, I believe, kind of God brought us together. I was just kind of coming off a very bad relationship and I was very emotional, and I remember sitting in a lobby--sitting in the bar actually of this hotel in downtown Tucson, and there was like 500 people there, but it was like--well, the best way I would describe it was:

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Battaglino: so, there's all these people that are supposedly should be there. But I suddenly found myself just sitting on this couch and like, as I remember it, no one was, no one else was around. It was like where did everybody go, and then suddenly Sister starts walking by. I was really--I had just got done like writing like a "Dear John" email to this person, right. So, I was a mess. I haven't met my wife. You know, we really haven't gotten to know each other by any stretch yet. So and so like I see Sister walking by, and I knew she was a nun, and I knew she administered to trans people, and so it was almost like God was saying: "So Steph, I can't, you know, make her come over to you, but I can create a situation where here she is. So, it's up to you to take the next step." And so thankfully, the voice inside my head was like, "Sister, you got a minute," you know, and I was like crying [mimes tears on her face and short breathing] and everything, and she right away,

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Battaglino: "yes" she sat with me, and we talked, she held my hand. She listened and it was there that I was like: "Well, I think I really would like to go on retreat with you. Can we do that?" And she said, "Of course we can. You know, just get in touch with me, and you know we'll," and that was like in March I think of that year, something like that, and then in July of that year I went out to Tucson and went on retreat, and it changed my life. It was great.

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Cieslik: That's wonderful, and do you remember what year that was?

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Battaglino: 2008.

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Cieslik: Wonderful, wonderful!

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Battaglino: Oh, wow, so that's 14 years, we've known each other. Wow.

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Cieslik: It's wild. Time goes by very strangely.

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Battaglino: Oh, Emma, I call it you know, it's like you blink, sometimes it's like my son's 28. It's like get out of here. I changed his diapers last week. What are you talking about?

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Cieslik: Thank you, and with your interview we really love to start and get a picture of what your childhood experiences looked like and your childhood religious environment. When and where were you born?

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Battaglino: So, I was born in 1958, so I'm very much a Boomer. I was born in Newark, New Jersey, in a hospital that doesn't exist anymore. But I grew up essentially in a town called Kearny, New Jersey, which is literally seven miles west of New York City. I mean from our high, from my high school you could look across the meadow lands, and you could see the skyline of New York. That's how close I was to New York City. So, you know, I grew up in a very, very blue-collar, a very middle class Italian American family. My dad and my mom both were originally from downtown Jersey City, New Jersey, and you know for their era. You know there were, you know they were born like 1919, 1920. I believe you know. So, for them, growing up in Jersey City, downtown Jersey City,

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Battaglino: you know it was very much kind of like the Italian ghetto and downtown Jersey City. You know and you know, children of the depression, you know, that kind of thing. So, they kind of brought those values, I think, to our family unit. I was the youngest of four. I was the late baby, you know the "Rhythm Kid." You know that kind of thing which I've been told many times because there was 12 years difference between me, and my middle brother and sister were fraternal twins and then my oldest brother who passed a couple of years ago when we had the COVID lockdown.

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Cieslik: I'm sorry.

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Battaglino: But oh, thank you, but not because of COVID. But he passed during that lockdown time, couldn't go to his funeral or anything like that. But that's another story. But he was like geez, my brother had to be like 15, 16, when I was born. 15, or something like that, so you know. But so that created a different family dynamic for me. But anyway, so very blue-collar, very, you know, very middle class, very Italian-American. My mom and dad didn't graduate from high school. My dad drove a truck, my mom was stay-at-home mom, always was. She didn't even she didn't even learn how to drive a car. And you know we went

to church. I mean I did not go to Catholic school. I went to public school, but I went to Catechism. I remember going to Catechism like on Mondays.

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Battaglino: I think it was our parish that we went to was called Saint Stephen's in Kearny. Kearny had like, oh god, like three or four Catholic churches. It is not that big of a town, but it had like 3 or 4 catholic churches. It had Saint Stephen's, which where we went, and then on the other side of town, it was Saint Cecilia's. To this day I don't really know the difference, other than the architecture of the church was different and then there was a church, I think it was Our Lady of--oh, I think I'm going to kill the last--I think it was the Polish Parish. It was Our Lady of Czestochowa, OLC, it was called for short, and that was another parish that I think most of the Polish families went to, I guess, but yeah, it was pretty wild and so for me it was very much: church on Sunday, go to Confession.

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Battaglino: [I] still bare scars of that, to be candid. We had a fire in Brimstone Monsignor back in those days. It's funny that I'm actually telling you that. That's how much I still remember it. I'm 64 years old for god's sake, I'm talking about something that happened when I was like nine. But so yeah, and so then I received all the sacraments at Saint Stephen's Church. I actually did go back there a few years back on Christmas Eve, and it was lovely, lovely to see the church. It's a beautiful church, very kind of like neo-gothic. It's just a really beautiful church, especially in Christmas time when it's all you now festooned for Advent and the holidays. It's beautiful. But yeah, I received all the Sacraments there except I never got married there. I had moved away from home.

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Battaglino: So yeah, I mean it was church on Sunday, Catechism for a while, you know, leading all the way up to when I got confirmed. And so, you know, I guess, for you know, as I'm hearing myself tell you this, Emma, it's like it's like many children I think of my generation growing up, it was kind of the church experience for me. I think my dad, to be honest, like he just went along with my mom. My mom was the person who was very much--my mom was pretty devout to be honest, I mean she can remember times when she used to wear the, the covering--

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Cieslik: Oh, the chapel veil? Yes.

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Battaglino: Thank you, thank you. She would wear that you know, and I was like, "oh, what it that, you know?" And but yeah, she used to do that. My mom was very--I do something today that it's become a habit for me that I probably got from my mom. I always do, I read, I read scripture, I try to every day. If I miss a day, it happens, you know, and then I have on my Kindle I have that, and I have kind of another book. It's from, like the Irish Jesuits of all people. It's like reflections, daily reflections, and I try to read those every day, and I miss day like I don't think I've read it this morning. But I try to be very regular about that as best I can.

And I think I got that from my mom because my mom used to sit on her front porch all the time and do daily prayers.

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Battaglino: She had her, she had a little, know, the little prayer cards, you know, and she had a bunch of them and I'm not sure--I'm sure she prayed the rosary too, Emma? I mean I have a beautiful Rosary. I'm looking at it right here that I got from the Vatican for the--it was a special edition of the, from the Jubilee. You know, a few years back when we were in Rome, my God, and but I will admit I'm not praying a rosary. I feel like this is like you know, Truth or Consequences right. [Chuckles] I'm kidding. I'm kidding, but yeah, but so that was really kind of the kind of my background you know in the Catholic Church and barely--you know, I can remember, I mean faint memories of, Emma as a young kid, where I think it might have been because I was born in [19]58, right? When was Vatican II? I don't remember, but it was like the [19]60s, right?

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Cieslik: I think [19]62.

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Battaglino: I can remember, but I can remember I have a vague memory of like when you go to Mass, and the priest never faced, remember didn't face--before Vatican II, the priest had never faced the congregation. It was like really weird and then I think the Mass was in Latin, or at least portions of it were in Latin. I like vaguely to remember that it's really odd and that all happened at Saint Stephen's and then suddenly, you know, the priest actually faced the congregation, and it was in English, and they changed the whole order of the Mass and everything. I actually do remember that. And so yeah, you know, I mean, and that's really my faith journey really and that I pretty much lasted, you know, even when I got into high school, I think I was still going to church.

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Battaglino: You know, like a lot of kids, you know teenagers and I'm like, "Oh, Mom, I don't want to go to church today," you know it was that kind of thing, and then I wouldn't go. You know, and I do remember going to college. When I was away at college I went to the University of Delaware. That was where I got my undergrad degree. I graduated high school in [19]76, so [19]76 to [19]80 that was in Delaware, and I remember going to church there. They had an--it was called Thomas More Oratory was the--and they have a chapel on-campus and that's where you can go on Sundays too. I used to go with my friends, and you know, received the Sacraments and all that kind of stuff. So, yeah, that's kind of the foundation. I think hopefully that kind of helps set the foundation, kind of my Catholic upbringing, I guess.

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Cieslik: That's wonderful and I know you mentioned it as you were going through some of your formative moments and experiences. Where did you attend primary and secondary school?

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Battaglino: Okay, so all in Kearny, through the Kearny Public Schools, so Kearny High School. So I went through all the elementary school, junior high school, and then high school, all within Kearny Public Schools, Kearny High School. It was all public and yeah, and then when I graduated in [19]76 I actually went to Delaware on, you know--back in the day I was a bit of an athlete in high school, and I actually went to the University of Delaware on a football scholarship, and I played football for two years when I was at the University of Delaware. I know that was long-gone far-away but yeah, that's how I got to the University of Delaware. [Laughs]

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Cieslik: I'm curious, what did you study a Delaware?

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Battaglino: I had studied communication, I have--my BA is communication, I have an MBA, which I got later, but in marketing. But my undergrad[uate] is in communication and it was interesting. I always--unlike a lot of my peers and especially like some of my teammates, you know, people were changing majors left and right, you know, it's like, "ahh--." But I started out as a communication major, and it was kind of a--as I remember, it was kind of a fledgling department at [the University of] Delaware back when I went but I stuck with it, enjoyed communication. There was a time when I thought I was actually going to have a career in--pursue a career in in the radio industry. I had worked at the campus radio station, was an on-air personality for four years, and I love doing that and I actually was thinking about pursuing a radio career.

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Battaglino: That didn't quite work out. But that had a lot to do with my staying within the communication department. You know, liberal arts all the way, you know, avoided math like the plague. You now, I did, Emma, oh my god, it was horrible because you know, when I was in high school, I actually thought I actually wanted to be a civil engineer. I wanted to build bridges and things like that, and you know, and I did really well in math until I hit calculus. And then it was like this is like, "this is Greek to me. This is like, you know, you're teaching me in Latvian or something." I mean, I have no idea what's happening here, you know.

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Cieslik: [Technical difficulties, Zoom video and audio feed pauses]

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Battaglino: So sorry.

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Cieslik: No need to apologize, you're totally good. We live in the age of Zoom and technology happens.

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Battaglino: Oh anyway, I'm sorry, so where were we?

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Cieslik: I believe you were sharing more about your pathway in higher education, in college and how it had kind of led directly then into your career and what you chose to do with your communications degree.

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Battaglino: Yeah, I mean for me it was like well, you know, part of you know. So I had the whole radio thing, at least I thought that's what I was going to do, but for me it became--well, you see, what started bubbling up at that point was my gender issues quite honestly, and you know, I really kind of felt like it was a period in my life where I was really starting to kind of waver, you know, that I was kind of directionless sort of, and I think when, you know, I think back on it now--let me just, I've got to fix my shades bear with me. [Reaches over to upper right corner on video to adjust shades out of frame].

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Cieslik: No worries.

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Battaglino: Okay good. It was coming right through one of my eyes [points to eyes], so I'm so glad you're on to edit this. Anyway, so you know, I just you know the like in the book that I wrote over here you know, I kind of characterized that period of my life where I was just kind of--I kind of lost direction, I think. I wasn't really sure what I was going to do. You know, I didn't really pursue the radio thing. You know, in retrospect you know so many years later, so I was always kind of looking for the easy out I guess you know. And having a liberal arts degree like communication, I mean I might as well have just been like, and I don't mean to offend any philosophy majors that you have in your life, Emma, but I mean I might as well just have been like a philosophy major or like,

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Battaglino: you know, American Studies major or something like that, because--and I loved American Studies by the way. I took one of those classes. But it's like for me it was like, "Well, just you know, get a degree like one, almost like a one size fits all kind of approach." You know where I could kind of take it and go well, yeah, I can get into your management training program because I had a communication degree. You know, like you know, it wasn't like you know, I had graduated say with an accounting degrees or finance degree or you know, like some sort of management degree or something like that. You know none of that. Business management, you know nothing like that. You know things that you know, as I think back on it,

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Battaglino: you know in my next life you know that might be something that I should have done or would have preferred to do. But I think my gender issues were clouding my ability to think clearly and manage through a lot of that, because at that point you know, and it was the late [19]70s, and there was a lot of drugs around and drinking, and I will tell you that I never pushed anything away and you know, so that didn't help either. But you know, so that's really

kind of--you know where I was at the time, and you know. So, I wound up in a management training program for, like a new retail chain of stores that was launching in Delaware valley area. You know, Southern New Jersey and the Philadelphia area of Pennsylvania and the Wilmington, Delaware area.

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Battaglino: I mean I hated it, but again this started me kind of on the path of, "Well, This is what everyone else in my life thinks I should be doing so. Therefore, I am going to live my life on their terms, to make everybody happy and not me, because I have this really bad, horrible, terrible secret that I've kept locked in the closet that I'm in the wrong body, and so, yeah, that's kind of how it all kind of played out at that stage of my life."

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Cieslik: Yes, and I know you brought this up as you were explaining more about higher education, when did this period of gender discovery happen and when did you come out to yourself and to, and, if you are, to your family?

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Battaglino: Well, I didn't know, you know, and I was in my twenties, you know, and in my teens, I always knew something was, was actually started at a very young age, started cross-dressing in my sister and my mom's clothes. You know a somewhat common theme, frankly, for trans people like of my generation, my generational cohort that have transitioned later in life. So, you know. So, you know, throughout this entire time, like when I first started experimenting with my sister and my mom's clothes, you know, I was like 8, 7 when--I was young, you know, and then that just really kind of continued all the way through high school, even into college. You know kind of cross-dressing only, you know, with the door locked to my--and bolted shut to my fraternity house room.

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Battaglino: I mean really, you know, but that's what I did. And but Emma, here's the thing. I mean that I was, you know, college-age, right? I didn't--well, I never came out to my parents because by the time I did come out, I was in my forties. So, it was really just decades of what I always describe as shame, guilt, decades of shame, guilt and denial. I couldn't--you know, I graduated in 1980, I mean, and I started working in his series of meaningless jobs, as I look back on them now, throughout most of the [19]80s. I wasn't going to come out in the [19]80s. I mean we didn't--I sound like <methuselah now or something, but it was like we didn't have cellphones, we didn't have the Internet, we didn't have community. I thought it was the only person that was like,

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Battaglino: and you hear that a lot from people. I think again of my age, but there was no way in heck I was going to come out to anybody. There were no resources, there was no affirmation, there were no people, there was no way--couldn't do it, nope. So that really, you know, continued throughout my life and you know, I was married three times. You know, I was divorced three times. You know it was all really--that's all rooted back to you know,

where I was with my gender and not being able to reveal that to anybody and feeling ashamed and whatnot you know and honestly, you know, at a young age, you know to bring the Catholic Church back into it. You know I thought God made a mistake. You know, I mean what I was hearing from the pulpit as a kid,

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Battaglino: you know, made me--formulated in my mind that you know this as I was, you know, the personification of blasphemy or something you know, it's just you know, no. What it really did for me was it just kind of cemented in my mind: "No, this is a secret that I will take with me to my grave," and I'm saying this to myself and I'm like 12, you know, but I was petrified. There's like no way I can't this--nobody can ever find out about this, these desires that have, these feelings, and moreover, every Sunday the Church is telling me that that's not going to work, and I don't--and let me just to be fair, I'm not suggesting that I'm laying all this at the feet of the Catholic Church. No, not at all, but it's certainly reinforced whatever fear I had.

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Battaglino: You know, I never got a sense that, well, the Church could possibly be a safe haven of acceptance from me, for people that are different. [Blows raspberry] They're still fighting with that within themselves. You know. So yeah, that's kind of kind of how it all kind of went down. To be honest, I wasn't great.

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Cieslik: Yes. I am so sorry.

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Battaglino: Oh, Emma, thank you for saying that. [Holds arm to heart]. You're so sweet for saying that, but I'm good, trust me, therapy is a very good thing. [Laughs]

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Cieslik: Thank you so much for sharing, and that actually leads right into my next question and line of thinking was-- I know you mentioned that you were aware of this gender identity at a very young age, as many are, and as part of that you were receiving different messages and understandings about gender identity within the Church. What did you learn from an early age? I know you mentioned that you weren't getting reinforcement that this gender identity was acceptable, but what did that look like and who were you hearing these things from?

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Battaglino: Well, you know, I think it was a combination of things. So, first of all, you know in my house growing up was very traditional, right? I mean it was my dad, you know the breadwinner and mom the homemaker you know, so it was very, you know, I mean it wasn't Ozzy and Harriet by any stretch, but you know it was, but gender--let me put it this way. Gender roles were very clearly defined, and you don't step out of that box. You just don't. At least there was fear in my mind that there's no way you could alter that right, that construct. So, then you know, and then to bring the Church into it. Every Sunday I'm going to church

and it's like so there's the nuns over there, you know the picture of subservience, to my way of thinking. I feel a little bit differently about the nuns now.

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Battaglino: I think the nuns are pretty--I think the unseated. But we can talk about that, based on my experience with people like Sister and her fellow sisters who I've met and are totally on board. But yeah, I mean, but at that time in my life growing up it's like, "Wow, so priest runs the show. You know that what he says goes," you know so again very rigid gender roles. To this day, I would argue in the church, still very strict, women-priests, really? I didn't start that until I went to an Episcopal church for a few years. I was actually a member of an Episcopal church, Emma, you know, after I had come out. This is like 2004 to 200--oh for a while you know when I moved away from New Jersey, I kind of you know, couldn't go there anymore, but that was the first time where I was like, "women priests?"

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Battaglino: You can do that really, and it's okay?" You know, I mean, I don't mean to make light of it, but really that was the first time here like a 40-year-old person walking into an Episcopal church going, "wait a minute? You have bishops that are women, what? No, you can't have the same thing. So, then you can't be as religious as the Catholic Church? Then, right, you know?" But getting back to the general, so yeah, I mean as far as I'm concerned, you know, the top-line of rigid gender roles at home, further reinforced by rigid gender roles in the Catholic Church. So, and then how did that kind of moved into my own concept of my gender identity: It's like, "well, I feel like a girl inside, but I was born like you know, a guy, with like male equipment. How's that going to go over, geez, you know?"

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Battaglino: So, it's like now and again my first reaction was to recoil and to withdraw, because you know--whatever was on the other side, if I had ever said anything that made people think that I felt that way, you know, I don't know what it was, but it wasn't going to be good. It was going to be horrible; I mean beyond horrible, and I just you know, and that just whatever that was over there just kept getting bigger and larger and more ominous, making me retreat further and further back into the closet.

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Cieslik: I'm so sorry,

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Battaglino: That's okay.

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Cieslik: But I'm so happy that you are who you are today and speaking to that point as well, I know that you mentioned, and I wanted to explore this a little further. You mentioned that when you were younger, around the age of nine, you had a very, as you put it, "fire and brimstone" monsignor within our community. Was that in any way affecting this understanding of gender roles? I know you mentioned there was some drama with reconciliation.

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Battaglino: It added to the fear. It just added to the fear, you know, because I got into the confessional, you know, oh, well you know, I was nine. I was talking about like lying to my parents and things like that. I mean that's what I was confessing, you know, in reconciliation, and he just went off. He did. I mean like he was kind of yelling at me as I recall. I mean that's a long time ago, Emma, but yeah, I mean it was just. I remember the guy's name, Monsignor Dailey was his name. It was horrible. It was terrible. He was a fire in Brimstone guy and let's be honest, the Catholic Church had plenty of them, especially back in 19--what that would have been: 1967. Sure, I'm sure there were. And I was mortified. I was [gasps], I don't remember what my penance was--probably had to say, like a million Hail Marys, and one Act of Contrition wasn't going to be good enough. You have to do, you know, like 12 of them or something. I don't remember--I'm again joking, of course, but-- [Laughs]

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Cieslik: You'd be in the church all night long!

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Battaglino: I mean really, they'd be shutting the lights off, and I'd still be getting through my Hail Marys. Oh my god, oh what's the word I'm looking for? Yeah, I was mortified, of course, but it was--I can't think of the word. I'm so sorry, but it was, it damaged me. I think it was. It was. It is terrible, and I don't exactly remember what he said, Emma, but I do remember the forcefulness with which it was delivered to a 9-year-old. I mean, you know, maybe it was having a bad day, I don't know. But still that I can recount this to you 55 years later or thereabouts, it just tells you how, what an impact it had on me. You know, it's like wow, you know. So again, that just made me retreat further. It's like, "oh, okay, I have to come up with some other way to manage this and cope with it." You know because clearly there is a wall there in front of all of that ominous whatever it is that just keeps getting bigger and bigger. So, I have to move further and further away from that. It's pretty much to that effect.

00:39:02

Cieslik: And along those lines, you mention the idea of coping with it and coping mechanisms. What did those look like? I know you remained in the church for a long time, from high school through college and attending church. What did that look like of continuing your Catholic faith and also coming to recognize this new gender identity?

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Battaglino: Well, you know, I think you know, I mean coping mechanisms. You know, I was 9. I don't know what exactly that kind of manifested itself into. But I just feel like early on, younger, adolescence, what it really kind of led to for me was like a double life. It's like so in my private moments, I could fantasize about what it would be like to have a woman's body and live as a woman. And you know, and all those sorts of things you know, obviously there was sexual excitement surrounding that. So, you know, that manifested itself in certain solitary behaviors that I would do. You know, and but that was always--I always made sure I

did that in private moments when no one was there. So, there was that and then there was so, whatever you need--whatever facade you need to create, you know.

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Battaglino: So, I put a lot of energy into creating that facade, you know, and through you know that you know my adolescence and through college that was easy to do because of my athletic background. You know, it was being involved in sports and being pretty good at it. You know it was easy to make friends, it was easy to hide, it was easy to kind of integrate, you know, as a big jack in high school and all that kind of stuff, but always nice to people. You know, I was never one of those jerks that you see in movies or anything like that, but the point is that was part of my coping mechanism. So, I made sure I had those private moments where I could go to a different place, and I think that enabled me to continue to feed the facade over here so that no one could ever know what was going on over here. It's really kind of how it was and like, like I said that when all the way through, heck that went all the way through marriages too, I mean, you know, just kind of jump--I don't mean to be jumping around, but chronologically,

00:41:56

Cieslik: Go for it.

00:41:56

Battaglino: But it's like you know. So, my marriages, you know, the first two, you know these all happened in the [19]80s, and they didn't last for very long because again it was something I thought I should be doing when my heart was never really into it, which you know I feel very badly about for the women that loved me. You know I want to sound like I was some sort of sociopath, but sometimes you know it's like when I was writing a book, you know, I talk about this and you know I feel very badly, I mean that that you know because I was still doing that behavior. You know it's just the facade part changed and now I was this married guy. You know, you know working, you know, and you know that kind of stuff and you know just trying to build a life. You know, you know, and I felt bad. I feel, you know,

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Battaglino: in retrospect I feel badly about that because you know these women came to the relationship wanting something that I couldn't give them, and I thought that I could. And you know it's a part of the facade. I thought that was giving that to them, but it was really coming from an honest place. So that you know, it wasn't until the last marriage that ended in divorce in 2004. She was the one that found out, you know, but that was the point I was trying to make. The first two never knew. That's how that's how good I was getting at keeping the secret. I could still be living with someone and be married to someone and still be able to go off to my secret place and find those times to go do that when they weren't around. So, you know, yeah, it was just kind of feeding them. I mean, who was like kidding? I mean, you know, but that's--again, I was prepared to live the rest of my life like that, you know, but then circumstances didn't actually work out that way. You know, and you know. So here I am, you know.

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Cieslik: Do you mind sharing more about that--I know you mention circumstances? What did the coming-out experience look like to you?

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Battaglino: Well, you know, I didn't come--my wife, my third wife, found pictures of me because I used to go off and go you because by that time there was the Internet and I realized I wasn't the only person. And you know here was you. Now you could go meet up with other trans people/cross-dressers in hotel rooms and get dressed and take pictures. Sometimes it involves sex, sometimes it didn't, and she found the pictures. I stupidly brought them home in my briefcase. To this day, I don't know why. It was like probably an unconscious way of wanting to get caught because I was done with it. And so that's how she found out. So, I didn't really ever come out to her, you know, and we continued on with the marriage, I mean, and where did we go?

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Battaglino: The night that happened it was New Year's Eve, like 1998, or 1999, I forget. Something like that? So, what did we do? Because I was at that time. I was--we were involved in our local church. I was a lector. I was in the Knights of Columbus for crying out loud, and when this all went down, my son was just an infant. The only thing that we thought to do was go to--go see our pastor. So here I am on New Year's Eve night, you know, trying to explain this to him. Boy, that was awkward, you know, but she was there, you know, and but he listened. You know, he had me say an Act of Contrition right there in his living room. That was very traumatic. That was the word I was looking for from before. Traumatic, yeah, it was really traumatic actually, because I thought my life was over.

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Cieslik: So sorry.

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Battaglino: Oh crap, the secret has been revealed. You know, it took that long, but it was revealed, and then he--the interesting corollary to that though, Emma, he said: "you know, I know a therapist that I have, a therapist that you should talk to." We were like, "okay." It was Catholic Social Services. So, I went once and this was explaining what was going on to this woman and she's like I remember I never forget what she said, "so you don't want to be this way anymore, right," and I said, "yeah, I don't." I don't know what else to say, and she goes, "Well then. That's the course that we'll take," which would have been some sort of conversion therapy, I guess, or something like that. So thankfully I never--

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Cieslik: I'm glad of it.

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Battaglino: was part of it. Part of it was, "Well, there's no way I'm going to do this," and then two was there a cost involved, and at that particular time, I wasn't sure how much we could really afford doing this every week, you know, and so I'm really glad that I didn't because I

think, and I don't know this to be exactly true. But I really think that's what--that was the path we were going on. I don't think this person had any background in working with transgender people or anything like that. I mean, you know, it was like--but here's the thing, and it was a seminal moment in my coming out. So, we--you know, I tell the story about, you know, the time that I actually really kind of came out again. You know, our marriage was pretty much over. It was like 2003 or something like that,

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Battaglino: and my ex[-wife] said to me: "you know." So we had a conversation and I told her, "hey, this is me," because I had already started therapy with a real therapist and although I haven't seen her in a few years, she she'll always be my therapist and you know, so I told her I said, "you know this is, this is me, and if I'm going to do this, which I--what I meant what I meant by that was--excuse me--transition, that you know I'm going to go completely." You know that was that was that was never an issue in my mind. But what was interesting is she said to me, "because I know this isn't going to go away." So, she was doing her own research, you know, because this is again 2003, so Internet, you know, all that kind of stuff. But we had switched churches, not because of what I--

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Battaglino: the incident that I was telling you about. But we had switched churches because we had actually moved to another town, one town over, and there was--and here's the thing. There was a sister there, and the sister--God, I don't know if the sister ministered to LGBTQ people. I don't know what. But she knows what was happening, and she had a conversation, or my ex had a conversation with her, unbeknownst to me, you know, I've only figured this out after the fact. She had a conversation with this with this sister who was hip to the vibe, if you will, and I think that's how she kind of you know, because the sister was probably explained to her on at least some level, thank God, that you know, you know, guess what your husband's trans, and you know,

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Battaglino: you can't just wish this away or pray this away. It doesn't go away, because how else was she going to come to the table with us? She probably did some Internet research too, but I can guarantee she had a conversation with the sister because this sister was pretty cool. You know I could just--you know I say pretty cool because you know her, she didn't wear a habit. You know, like Sister Luisa doesn't--her order doesn't wear habits or anything like that. So right away she's totally cool, you know, as far as I'm concerned, you know because she's not wearing a habit. But yeah, I think that had much to do with how that exchange with my ex went down, and it was really from that point on, you know, we were divorce., I moved out and we were divorced. You know from that moment, from within that moment when that I actually moved out and the divorce was final, it was literally like six or seven months. It happened that quickly but that then set me on my path to my authentic self. I was on my own, and so yeah.

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Cieslik: And I'm curious, what was the name of the sister?

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Battaglino: I don't have, have no idea.

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Cieslik: Totally okay.

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Battaglino: I don't remember, oh man! I only wish I remembered, but I have a vague image of her in my memory as I'm telling you the story, but I don't really remember.

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Cieslik: No worries, and do you remember--

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Battaglino: But it was in North Jersey, though. It was in North Jersey!

00:52:18

Cieslik: Oh perfect!

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Battaglino: The parish was, I can tell you, so the pastor, that story happened at Saint Patrick's in Chatham, New Jersey, and then the sister was in the--we moved one town over to a town called Madison, New Jersey. This is all in Morris County, north-central New Jersey, you know, 20 some-odd miles west of New York City, and classic, bedroom communities. You know a lot of people, you know working the city, take the train, that kind of thing. So then in Madison, there are other churches. But this particular church was Corpus Christi Parish in Chatham Township. So, there was Chatham, the town, and then there was Chatham Township. That happens a lot in New Jersey, where you have an actual town and then a township around it. They both have the same names.

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Battaglino: They're both incorporated separately. That kind of thing. So yeah, that's where that happened. And then the Episcopal parish that I wound up in was called Church of the Redeemer, and that was in Morristown, New Jersey, right on the main street in a town called South Street. And that's really the first place I've found my church community, they practice radical hospitality as they call it, and I was accepted for me, as me, from the moment I walked in the church. And all those--so many of those people are still my friends, to this day I have gone back, and I have preached at that parish on like Transgender Day of Remembrance, or what have you, and it's been a joy. It's been a joy really, and so that was always a part of my spirituality.

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Battaglino: You know, I mean because you know everybody jokes about the Episcopal Church, you know, it's Catholic Lite, you know, but it worked for me, Emma. I mean you know because you know you had, and I don't mean sound like I'm poking fun, but it was like it's just me. You know, you know you had--you didn't have all the Pomp and Circumstance of a Catholic Mass, but you sure had a fair amount of it, and you know so, we said the Lord's

prayer just a little differently. We ended it a little differently, but we read the Gospel. We had traditional readings as well as contemporary readings. We took communion, so I was like, "I'm good. This was great," and the reason why I didn't think I could never go back to any of those parishes I was my former self in.

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Battaglino: That wasn't going to happen and then anything that I had read or seen or spoke to other Catholic Trans people: "Catholic Church, no way? Can't go back, radioactive." Was I happy about that? No, of course not. But I had to feed my spirituality somehow. And Sister was always good about telling, Sister Luisa is always good about telling, you know, "Steph, find a church community." I haven't found one yet here in the desert. I will admit to you, Emma, I haven't looked all that hard. COVID had something to do with that--.

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Cieslik: I was going to say, things have happened. [Chuckles].

00:56:00

Battaglino: I'm sure there's very accepting parishes around here because well you know the LGBTQ population, being what it is in the Coachella Valley, Palm Springs, you know, but if and when that happens, great. For now, I have my personal relationship with God and Jesus, and it's working for me. But back then, especially because it was the early days of me, you know, you got your affirmation where you could get it, and for me, to be able to find a church community and get the affirmation at the same time, well, that was working for me, and I became very involved in the church, sang in the choir. I was elector again, you know, communication major, right, public speaker, you know, such a wallflower I am, but it nourished me doing that.

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Battaglino: And then you know the big thing for me at that particular time was--because my son was young and I wasn't out to him yet when I first started going, you know my big thing to everybody at the church was, you know, I would really like we have coffee afterwards, and I developed friendships and we talked. I said, "gosh, it would be great if I could bring my son here one day. That would be. That would be great." And you know, and it actually did happen. You know, after he got around to accepting me and that's the whole another story that thankfully has worked out really well. But then he started coming to church with me, he got involved in the youth program for a while and, and he was a part of the church. My friends embraced him and so it worked out.

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Battaglino: You know really well it was. So, you can imagine why I speak so positively about it, because it was it really more than filled the gap, that kind of, I want to say the Catholic Church created. You know, I don't want to be, you know I feel like I'm being very accusatory, and you know part of you know, because I got to own. I have to own some of that too, though, am I right? I mean at least I think so. So, you know. So, it's that too.

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Cieslik: And along those lines, that brings up a real another, really important question I wanted to ask: in your childhood and in your spiritual journey, did you ever encounter anyone who identified as queer and Catholic?

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Battaglino: Never!

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Cieslik: To this day?

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Battaglino: Not until I got to let me, let me just think for a second, not until I got to the Church of the Redeemer did, I ever encounter someone who identified as LGBTQ+ that was part of the same religious community that I was in. No, never, never at any time in Saint Stephen, no and not even in college either. You know I didn't hang around with the gay people. You know, because again, I didn't want anybody to think that I was like that. So, no, you know, you know, for all I know, is the University of Delaware. I mean, I remember I was a TA at a human sexuality class, and they talked about "transgenderism" as they called it, and cross-dressing, and I remember when that part of the curriculum came up, I was like, "oh my god, not that I didn't already know, but I'm like, holy crow,"

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Battaglino: so, I think there were gay people--yeah, but that wasn't in church, though that wasn't church setting, that wasn't an academic setting. So no, I don't think--oh gosh, gay people at any of those churches I just mentioned to you, like Saint Patrick and Corpus Christi--no, and if they were, they were--no, geez, can I be any more definitive. But I just I just keep iterating in my mind. That's like did I ever not at all, not until [Church of] Redeemer, because there were a lot of, as we called ourselves, recovering Catholics that went to that church, not just--there was a group of trans people that were also my friends, and we all sat in the same place, every know, but we were friends too. We weren't just--we didn't just see each other at church.

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Battaglino: But there are a lot of gay couples and lesbians and lesbian couples. And you know, as you got to know people and talk to them, it's like, no, yeah, they were all brought up Catholics, but you know they were like: "Catholic Church doesn't really think too highly of me. So, I need to find my church community somewhere else, and you know we've looked around." You know a common story, Emma, was, well, you know, and just as an example, you know, a common conversation would be like, "Well, you know we went church shopping and you know the Universalists, love them, but it just wasn't working for me. You know the UCC church, hmm, you know. But we found a home here." And now, in all fairness, you know the Church of the Redeemer was in the Archdiocese,

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Battaglino: the Episcopal Archdiocese of Newark, New Jersey, arguably one of the more

liberal archdioceses throughout the Episcopal Church in the United States, and we were probably the most liberal church community parish in the most liberal large diocese of the Episcopal Church because a lot of people that had been going through for years and years would say, "Now Steph, you need to understand something, not every Episcopal church is like this. It's very different." [Chuckles] But seriously though, you know, I got a lot of recovering Catholics. You know, because we can't go back there, but we found a home here and it worked for me for a very long time. And you know, circumstances being what they were, if I was still in New Jersey, could very well still be going there. I mean, while still having a Dominican Sister of Peace as my spiritual advisor. But you know what, you get your spiritual nourishment where you can.

01:02:45

Cieslik: You do.

01:02:45

Battaglino: There are no rules as far as I am concerned--I don't God or Jesus is looking at me, and going, "Oh, pick a lane, Steph."

01:02:48

Cieslik: [Chuckles].

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Battaglino: I don't think so. At least that's how I feel.

01:02:55

Cieslik: Most definitely, and I think that that ties into my next question, I know you mention a lot of recovering Catholics and from your work and getting to know you, you work a great deal as a speaker and a writer who incorporates their own experience into the work that they do and the impact they have on the community.

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Battaglino: Thank you.

01:03:14

Cieslik: Have you encountered many recovering Catholics as part of the work, and this the speaking that you do?

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Battaglino: Oh, I have, yes, I have. Yeah, I have a lot of people say, "You know, Steph, I had a similar experience," where you know trans people in particular, really, mostly you know they're like--a lot of them have a similar story. "I couldn't go back to my old parish. They all knew me as Joe or Jerry or Bill or something, and me show up. There was no room for that," you know, in fairness, who knows, maybe there would have been, you know, I mean. But you know we don't want to take that chance. You know because the consequence, the negative consequence of that. You know it's like oh, I don't know. I don't I don't know if I want to take that chance. You know it's you're taking a calculate risk. You know, and I've said this to groups of Catholic people that I have spoken with and did some training,

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Battaglino: trans awareness training, because some of them, like in our Q+A, they would be like, "Steph, we just want to find a parish where--", you know and then most of these people, by the way, are allies because they have a trans grandchild, I think in one case was the case, or you know or another trans daughter or son. "We want to find a parish where we feel home, we're at home," and I'm like, "I got it, I understand, I get it, I totally get it," and I said, "you know you might find it," and I think this is the conundrum with the church right now. You know, it's like you might find a parish that has a rector. Are they called rectors? I'm sorry, or I am--.

01:05:26

Cieslik: Pastors, maybe, monsignors.

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Battaglino: Pastor, monsignor. Rector is the Episcopal Church, right, so you may find a parish that's pretty hip, you know, because the pastor gets it and it might exist in an area where there's a lot of LGBTQ people, like here in Palm Springs for example. I don't know, you know, but the problem, and I'm not telling you anything you don't already know. But for the record here you know there is no greater hierarchy than the Catholic Church, right so and layers. So, it's like hip pastor on a local level still has to report through to a bishop or an archbishop who may very well not be on board. And as we all know, there are many bishops, not all, but many bishops and archbishops in the United States that are not cool at all with trans people, and some have been very public about that. So, what's that--you know, to say nothing of Rome, because that's the one thing that that that Sister taught me. You know Rome--it's kind of their separate thing. You know, the pope and what he says and what he does [gestures into the air].

01:06:48

Cieslik: They're across the pond over there.

01:06:50

Battaglino: But you know, I mean in my humble opinion, they are very much disconnected. I would say, I mean I know I know I get pushback from people in the Catholic Church, that in the hierarchy, but very much disconnected from what's going on here. He [pope] can say whatever he wants, but they're going to go do whatever they do over here. You know, and on a parish level that seems--that could be happening. I mean positively, you are now. But at the end of the day, you know, if there's again a bishop or an archbishop who gets wind of what you're doing, you're having a mass or service around Transgender Day of Remembrance, in your church, what? Can't do that. I'm just using that as an example. I don't even know if that happens, you know, but I'm just trying to make a point. You see what I mean,

01:07:51

Cieslik: Yes.

01:07:51

Battaglino: and I think that's the problem I do. And that's why you get recovering Catholics

that are like, especially in the trans community, that are like, "I can't take the chance of going back to my parish because I don't know. And by the way, I'm not comfortable going back as my true self, because everybody knows me there as my former self, and do I have to set myself up for all that heartache and as it is, I've had to come out to everybody else in my life and in many instances, I've been voted off the island, you know, by my family and my children and all that kind of stuff, so I'm going to go through that with my parish community. Oh please, I bear enough scars. I need more? You know, I need to get it on my head again. No, I'm going to just go find a place, find a parish, perhaps in another religion like the Episcopalians, and I'm accepted from day one and I'm nourished, and I can continue to have my community and my relationship with God and Jesus Christ, and I'm fulfilled." So why wouldn't you do that right? Maybe the Church will get it one of these days. I pray for that. I do, I really do.

01:09:13

Cieslik: Most definitely, and that leads me to one of my last questions. I always like to round out the interview with this one.

01:09:19

Battaglino: Sure.

01:09:21

Cieslik: How do you see your Catholic and your LGBTQ+ identity, do you consider them compatible, conflictive? Do they overlap? How do they engage and interact with one another?

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Battaglino: Well, I think they're all a part of me, and you know, because what have I learned in this, my journey, and especially my spiritual journey, you know, I've learned that God doesn't make mistakes. God put me on this earth for a reason. He gave me a directive that I can never recall or understand because I wasn't even formed yet to be on the earth to do what I did. Now, it took me 40 years to get there, but you know, some packages aren't opened up immediately on delivery sometimes, and so for me, everything that I do, whether it's within the church, when I'm speaking to, you know, women religious, like I did last year, with Sister or speaking at my former parish, or doing a training for Catholic allies, it's all coming from a place of, well, this is my calling. This is what God wants me to do, this is a part of me, and it's taken a while to come around to know that it's what makes me whole, and it's really, it's what I'm here to do. And, as seen in that light, it's their component parts of me that need to be taken together because they're kind of inextricably linked, you know, and so yeah, it's kind of where I am at with that.

01:11:36

Cieslik: And I'm so glad that you're doing that work.

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Battaglino: Thanks, thanks. It brings me joy. It does, you know, I mean you know. It's like you know what they say, the Gospels--.

01:11:48

Cieslik: [Technical difficulties, Zoom video and audio feed pauses].

[Part 2]

00:00:00

Cieslik: [Left off the recording due to technical difficulties: How would you describe your chosen family today?]

00:00:00

Battaglino: My oldest, my oldest brother, passed, like I've mentioned to you. My sister. I haven't spoken within a while, always--she's very ill and in assisted living, and then her twin, and he was late to get on board with me. I mean we were fine at family gatherings while I was around, you know, after I came out and everything, but I still think he might have had some issues, but anyway they're the only two that are left. I don't really--we don't really speak, you know, which is kind of sad, but we just don't, so I mean, do I still love them and are they a part of my family? Sure, but my family is, you know, my wife's family has been amazing, and they are very much part of my life and our life.

00:01:02

Battaglino: Mari has two sons there in their thirties. One is staying with us right now, visiting and they're part of the family. My son, of course. You know, he and I are really close. You know, he lives in New Jersey in Hoboken works in the city, I'm here in California, but we're still in touch and very much in each other's lives. But you know, I've redefined what my family is right. I mean we have friends. I lost my mom when I was like 28, she died in [19]86 of ovarian cancer. My dad passed, he was like 80 some odd--83 I think, or something. He died in 2002.

00:01:49

Cieslik: I'm so sorry.

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Battaglino: Oh, thank you. So I never came out to them, but so, like you know, and being the being the late baby, you know the youngest, and being--it was kind of a weird--on the whole family on my end is kind of just a weird experience because my sister really kind of became kind of like my de-facto mom there for a while, and it just you know I get caught up in this notion, Emma, of you know, the normal family and other people have normal families, and my family is just weird. But it's like every family's weird quite honestly, and so I've had to kind of come to grips with that. But what has kind of came into the breach is like Mari's family, I mean, they have all accepted me and we stay in touch,

00:02:48

Battaglino: especially her sister and her husband and their two nephews, our two nephews, their two sons. You know, we've gone on cruises together and stuff, and she is my sister. She's not just. She's not my sister-in-law, we're sisters, and Mari's mom, was my mom, you

know, until she passed away at the beginning of COVID, not from COVID. But she was mom and that filled a void for me in my life. You know. So that helped part of that redefined family for me and then, like I said, we have our friends, and you know, people that I've met through the movements that have become dear friends. We have friends here, you know and that's our family, you know, and it works, you know it really does.

00:03:41

Battaglino: You know. What I've learned is you know you lose people on this journey, and then, [Knock in the background, Stephanie's son walks into the room to grab something]. Yes, all right, sure [Directed to son]. You lose people on this journey, and you gain people along the way. For those that you lose, there are other people that that enter your life, that you know, celebrate who you are, and I've learned on this journey that you surround yourself with those people that celebrate you and love you and the other ones that used to be in your life. I can't deal with that, well, fine, I can make a choice and I can choose who is in my circle and that works for me.

00:04:35

Cieslik: Most definitely, I'm so glad you've found that family.

00:04:39

Battaglino: Thank you, Emma. Thank you so much. Thank you.

00:04:41

Cieslik: And in rounding out the interview, I always like to ask, is there anything else that you'd like to add to the interview or something that we didn't cover?

00:04:50

Battaglino: Oh gosh, no, I think I really kind of hit on all the things. Yeah, no, I think we've covered just about everything that you know, as I think about, like my spiritual journey and all that stuff. Yeah, I think I think we hit on it. Thank you.

00:05:10

Cieslik: I'm so glad, so with that I'll go ahead and close the interview. Thank you so much for participating in this interview for Queer and Catholic, A CLGS Oral History Project. I'm going to conclude the interview now. I just wanted to sincerely thank you for your time and help in support of the project. It was wonderful speaking with you tonight.

00:05:29

Battaglino: Oh, Emma, it's so my pleasure. Thank you so much. My apologies for the Internet drop.

00:05:33

Cieslik: No worries.

00:05:34

Battaglino: Somehow, I think we've overcome.

00:05:37

Cieslik: I think we have to. It's worked very, very well.

00:05:40

Battaglino: I hope you have a fabulous Christmas.