

G Pagan Lopez

Q: Today is January 21st, 2010. This is Kathy Staley with Gabe Lopez. And I like to start with just the facts, sir: name, age, birthplace...

A: My name is Gabriel Alberto Pagan Lopez. I'm 23. I was born in San Juan, Puerto Rico, moved to Boone, North Carolina when I was three years old with my mother, older brother, and until I was about five, I would say I knew very little English, some pre-school, until kindergarten I was still learning the English language and really being acclimated to the culture.

Q: Could you describe why your family moved to such a very different place?

A: Sure. My mother worked for the same company she does here, which is an electronics company in town. It was, when she moved here, a very big company with hundreds of employees, and she was brought to the team from the plant where she worked in Puerto Rico, so the pay raise, as well as the opportunity of living in the United States, is something she wanted to offer not only herself but the family.

(break in audio)

Q: And then you ended up going to a school in Watauga County?

A: Yeah, I went to preschool here and then I was in -- I went to the school, went to Parkway Elementary School as a kindergartener. I was a little young for my age. I made the cusp, so I was four when I went in, which I've always kind of thought about how I was younger than everybody else and what it would have been like if I would have been held back a year, but there's no way to really tell what the difference would be, better or worse. And I stayed at Parkway all throughout my elementary career, so I was there for nine years with the same principal for the most time, Principal Gary Childers, this amazing principal. And that was a, Parkway was a great experience. I was one of -- you know, looking back at it now I can't remember any other students of color, so I... And also I don't remember any -- there's no openness about sexuality in any way, shape, or form, and I don't... That's something I've thought about a lot is whether or not I make of it an issue -- it's an issue for... It's -- my race and ethnicity is an issue, and being gay is an issue for *me*, so I feel like I might project that and expect that it's an issue for other people, or if that stigma really exists on the other side.

Q: Have you ever asked people or had conversations about...?

A: I've... The people I have talked to it about... Well, I was teased a lot growing up because my, I was different, I

feel. My name was Gabriel, so I was always being called Gay-briel or Gay Gabe, or being asked if I was gay, and I really never knew what that meant, and I was given no education, so I had to do re-, like find out on my own, through the internet, through finally talking to my mom, and she got me a lot of books, and therapists. I had maybe five therapists in town while I was in grade school, before I went to high school.

Q: So your grade school goes up all the way up to eighth grade, so what time period did this exploration of yours start? Second grade? Fifth?

A: Well, I had a girlfriend in fifth grade, fourth grade, but I knew that that wasn't being true to myself. I would say it started in probably fifth grade where I was questioning myself and I didn't know if it was because others were saying things about me or --

Q: So people were already saying Gay-briel, that they extended your name by a fifth, right?

A: Emphasis on gay, oh yeah. Probably before that. But when, but I started -- but I didn't really understand that until later, until about fifth grade, and that's when we had, you know, they split the boys and the girls up into sex ed classes, and the girls got their class and the guys weren't allowed to go in there, and then we were brought a teacher

from another grade that was male to teach us about wearing deodorant and changes in your body and your voice and physical and all that stuff. I would say that's when I really started to question, you know, where did I belong.

Q: Was that the extent of your sex education?

A: Yeah. There was... Yeah, until freshman -- I think freshman year in high school is when we had health education, which was taught by a football coach, and was taught by the [father] of one of the kids I had known since preschool, so that was a weird sort of dynamic. Although I knew him and I, you know, felt comfortable with him 'cause I knew him, I also knew that... You know, I was nervous that if he -- what if I ask a question about being gay? What is he going to think about it, and what is he going to tell other people about, you know, the question?

Q: So between fifth and ninth grade you had already internalized something that "gay" was negative?

A: Oh, yeah.

Q: Could you describe that process of how things that happened that affected your thought processes?

A: I really don't know why I thought it was such a negative thing, and when I was asked if I was gay by students I'd respond always in a negative way, and now I know that that was not the best way to do it. I would always either... I

learned to ignore them and not even -- in high school I learned to ignore it completely. People would ask me if I was gay, and at first in grade school, I would say, "Why, are you?" or "You're gay" and then I'd respond, "Well, it takes one to know one," and it was always negative, it was never like, "Oh thanks, yeah, and?", which is the response I should have had as... But I also didn't know that about myself. I wasn't even sure if I was gay, so to be identified by others as something and you don't even know what that is, it's like they're creating, they're creating you and they're projecting what they think you are.

Q: During that time, did you know any out --

A: No.

Q: -- positive role models?

A: Absolutely none. I had... I was raised always by women. Even when I was in Puerto Rico, I was surrounded by my cousins, my aunts, my grandma, a female band that I was always like eight girls that were... It was always women taking care of me. My godmother was always taking care of me. When I came here -- I never knew my father so that was out of the picture. When I came here my... There was just... Yeah, there... I had no positive even male role models in my life, much less positive gay, open role model.

I don't think I knew what that was until I moved to Chicago for college.

Q: That's something I want to talk about as well, but I don't want to skip all --

A: Skip past... Yeah, there's a lot in the...

Q: -- the school experience. How would you describe the overall attitudes of your teachers and students?

A: Teachers, I don't know if they were scared to bring, to stop the teasing, and part of me knows that in real life people aren't going to protect you. You have to protect yourself, but they never really... They never... There was never an educated moment where in the beginning of class if there was teasing happening, they never stopped the teasing and made that as an opportunity to educate. They ignored it every time, all the way through.

Q: Did it ever occur during class or was it always between class and on the bus?

A: All the time, everywhere, between class, during class, after class, cafeteria, playground, bus. The bus was one of the most tormenting... I was molested on the bus when I was in third grade for about a whole year, and I was also physically abused, like bullied on the bus, mentally and physically. To then go home to an empty house, and that's all I had. Yeah, pretty hard. (begins to cry)

Q: Want to stop?

A: It's OK. No, we can keep going.

Q: OK. Did you find any havens anywhere? I know you got into theater, and a lot of times that is a special place for students.

A: Definitely was, getting involved in theater helped a lot, 'cause it wasn't an issue. I was never teased about anything in theater. It was... That was great. It really was a great way to express myself. And swimming. I was able... Because I was a really big kid I should have played football, but I never really knew guys or even know how to play football. I tried one year, didn't even understand the rules or the... So that wasn't for me, and also the contact sports. I'd rather avoid it than to get in trouble somehow because of contact sports or to be... You know, I was always last picked, probably, you know... It's so silly, but yeah, being last picked, I just didn't think I was good enough to, you know... I didn't think I was really wanted on the team or needed, so I never even really tried that. As a way to protect myself I didn't even go there. So swimming, the non-contact sport, was something I... And I could still be competitive, and soccer also helped. I played soccer and theater and swam all throughout my younger days. That was great. Soccer I got teased, but

that wasn't part of school, but we, you know -- it was people from school that were teasing *always*, but, you know, he was an asshole anyway and he was mean to everybody, so that was one person.

Q: Were there other kids that got picked out as being gay or lesbian, or were you the one throughout your grade?

A: In my grade, I was it, yeah.

Q: Did you ever tell anyone or talk to anyone about it?

A: Oh, yeah. I talked to my, the counselor -- I forget her name -- at Parkway, but I talk to her a lot and all my psychologists, you know. And I think eventually I talked to my mom about it when I was 13, freshman in high school, so that was a nice, open space.

Q: So you did have some places where you could talk about it.

A: Yeah, ask questions about it.

Q: What type of responses were you getting from various people?

A: You know, I always told people or asked people that I knew would be comfortable with it, so all the responses I got were always positive, you know. My mom told me, "I'm going to love you no matter what, you're going to be who you want to be. You might not make, always make the best decisions or choices, but you'll learn from those, and that's going to make you who you are, and I'll love you for it." You

know, she was all about the unconditional love, and from my, the psychologists, they, it was -- they were saying it's a natural part of life, you know. People question who they are all the time, and that doesn't mean you are or you aren't, that just means that you're learning.

Q: That sounds positive.

A: Mm-hmm, definitely.

Q: I want to start talking about your high school experiences, and particularly let's start with the sex education aspect of the health ed. I know you have said in the past you have a lot of criticisms of how that was run. What was their approach in general, and how do you feel it prepared you as a future man who loves other men?

A: Sex ed... Health education was a joke. Complete joke. It was a waste of time for everybody. Half the class... I think classes in high school ran 45 or 50 minutes, and during health ed we would learn for maybe 15 minutes with Coach, you know, doing whatever exercises or worksheets there were to do, and then the rest of class was free time. And it was mixed, so there were boys and girls in the class learning together, and there was always a time where it was open for questions, but nobody ever asked questions, really. It was abstinence only, no mention... I mean, you mention, he would mention condoms and say that there are

ways to do it, but abstinence is *the* way. You have choices, but your choice should be abstinence, because that's the only 100% way, which is true, to have safe sex. As far as *homosexuality*, there was no -- I don't remember any mention of that, and maybe that's why it was a joke to me, because I felt like it wasn't for me, you know. I felt maybe... I feel like it was a waste of time because I learned nothing, but maybe other people might have a different opinion.

Q: It certainly didn't prepare people for married life so that they didn't have ten kids in the first fifteen years of their marriage, so in a way...

A: A lot of people I graduated with have two year olds already, and a lot of them aren't together with their spouses, so yeah, that kind of shows what happened there.

Q: Do you think that being in such a small town made that sex ed portion of the health class more awkward?

A: I would think so, yeah, 'cause you never... I mean, it's a small town and people talk and you know that, and you have to know that, so that is part of why I didn't ask a lot of questions, 'cause I didn't want to stick out. I didn't want my family or me to get hurt in any way or chastised any more than we already might have been for being different physically, like having different colored skin,

which was a big deal, really. That was a really big deal.
In fourth grade, I was called a nigger.

Q: Why do you think they called you a nigger rather than all the interesting slurs that are for Hispanics?

A: I don't think they understood the difference, really, with... 'Cause I responded to him like "Really?" And I stopped the game that we were all playing, a game. I don't even remember, like I don't even know where that came from, but I stopped and I was like, "Really?" I was like, "Do you know what that is?" I was like, "I speak Spanish! I'm Latin! I'm Puerto Rican! I don't know what you're talking about? I mean, do you know what you're talking about?" And that was it for that. But I always, you know... And I always had eyes. I feel like I was always being watched for some reason. I don't...

Q: Did your older brother ever express that type of feeling?

A: Oh, yeah.

Q: 'Cause he came over when he was, what?

A: Seventh grade.

Q: Seventh grade.

A: Yeah, and he didn't go to Parkway because it was so country. He asked my mom if he could go to Hardin Park [Elementary School] in... There was more diversity. But he ended up leaving his... He ended up leaving his, after his

sophomore year of high school. He went to go live with his dad in Massachusetts. Well, he pretty much got kicked out of the house by my stepfather. It was a "You don't follow my rules, you can't live in my house" deal, and that deal was broken, so he left, so that role model was taken out of my life pretty early on.

Q: And he did come back to Watauga eventually?

A: No, he fin... He went... He finished his GED when he... He did come back to Watauga County I think when I was in high school and he finished his GED, and... But he still didn't live in the house 'cause he wasn't allowed to.

Q: That must have been really hard on everyone.

A: Yeah, that was a really weird dynamic.

Q: You didn't confirm that you went to the School of the Arts, but I've heard that you went to the School of the Arts.

A: Yeah.

Q: Could you talk about where the decision came from to leave your family and move to Winston-Salem?

A: After... So during swimming... This is great! During swimming I made a friend who was a swimmer and his dad was the coach. His dad was the first -- I consider my dad the first positive role model that I had ever had, male, and I never really was super close to him, but since Eric was my best, since this is my best friend, you know, I was always

hanging -- he was always around, he was always there, and he was a really positive role model for not only me but a lot of people, so I actually -- becoming more comfortable came from this best friend that I had through swimming. I had a journal, and in that journal I wrote like my dreams and fantasies, and he found this journal and read it, and it had stuff about being gay in it, and, you know, it had lists of who I thought were gay and who I thought like hated people and who I liked and disliked and all those silly things -- you circle people's faces in yearbooks and you write their crushes. And he asked me if this is true, and I said yes, and he told me that night that he felt sometimes the same way, too. So we started experimenting with each other's bodies, and that's where a lot of learning came from about being, about what it feels like and what it is to be gay.

But he left to go to a private school sophomore year after, yeah, after our sophomore year, so after he left I had no, I felt like I had no friends at all. I didn't know where I belonged. Even on the swim team I felt like I was alone, and even while Eric and I were friends I was such an unhappy kid with everything, everywhere. I was always asking my mom to leave, you know. "Let's leave this place.

Why are we here? Why are you keeping me here?" I felt like I was in jail. It was... I felt like I couldn't be myself, so I needed to go somewhere. I felt like a big city was somewhere that I need to be, and I'd been in this small town all my life growing up with the same people, experiencing the same thing, being so unhappy. I knew that there had to be a change, so I looked for opportunities to find somewhere that I could be happy because all I wanted was to be happy. I would tell Mom -- you know, "What do you want for your birthday?" "I want to be happy." "What do you want for Christmas?" "I just want to be happy." That's all I asked from her. And so the opportunity came up to audition, and this is an endeavor I started on my own because of theater. My mom never really pushed me any which way, direction. She supported me in every decision I made, and she would make whatever things necessary for me to get there, so although I had a lot of help from her she never said, "Yeah, do that, that's... You know, do it, do it, because that's good," or "No, don't do that." She let me make decisions for myself, make mistakes for myself and learn through experiencing. So I went to NCSA, and very liberal there in everything, but I was really... I wasn't really there to be gay. I don't think I went there to be, you know, to be gay. I went there to learn how to be an

actor. That was like, that was my biggest dream was to be famous, so that's what I was concentrating on there. We didn't have any sex ed. It was one year of school, and it was really just arts intensive, and that was great.

Q: Did you feel like you did get that release that you were trying to get your mother to move to a larger area by going to the School of the Arts?

A: Oh, yeah. It was a small school, I mean, and it was in the ghetto of Winston-Salem so you couldn't really leave, (laughter) so it wasn't like we were in the city, but it was -- the idea, it was... It was awesome to be around Asians and people of color, you know, just different, just a different view, different perspective, different point of view. It was really nice, and it allowed me to be me and become -- that's when I really started to bloom and like become -- and know what I wanted and what I didn't want. And I would say that I knew there that I was gay, for sure. After, after -- I would say that I knew that I was gay after Eric left and feeling that emptiness inside of me because my best friend and pretty much partner, even though we were 13, had left. You know, he was gone. I knew that I wasn't straight like everybody. I wasn't like everybody else. But that wasn't a big deal. It was not even thought of there. No teasing, no questioning, you know. Sometimes

girls would be really interested in me and say, "Oh, would you be my boyfriend?", and I'd tell them, "You know, I'm not really into girls," and still at that point I wouldn't feel comfortable telling them that I was gay, but I would be able to tell them that, "You know, I don't really think that that would be best for us. I wouldn't be true to you if I was doing that. I mean, I like you as a person and you're super cute and let's hang out and be friends, but it won't be intimate, you know. I'm not sexually attracted to you."

Q: This was before the days of GSAs, as well, wasn't it? It was just beginning with Gay Straight Alliances in high schools. Do you remember if there was anything like that Watauga or...?

A: There definitely wasn't. Yeah, there definitely was no... I remember somebody earlier and like older trying to start one and it being a big deal and getting a lot of negative attention. I think one part was it was hard to find, it was hard to find a faculty... I think I talked to our principal about this, and he said it was just hard to find a faculty that was willing to head, be head of that group. That's why it didn't happen.

Q: At the School of the Arts?

A: At Watauga.

Q: At Watauga.

A: At Watauga, yeah. At School of the Arts I don't think there was a... It wasn't necessary. I don't think it was... No, there -- I don't think there was a group. I don't know if there is one now. I'm not sure.

Q: I don't know, either. I'm going to ask some broad questions that just hone in a couple of things that you've already said. How has living in Appalachian region affected not only your sexuality but how you express yourself? It's called gender expression but I'm not saying you're transsexual. That's not what I'm saying, it's just how you portray yourself.

A: Especially because I -- knowing that I moved, I wanted to portray myself while I was at Parkway as, you know, masculine, especially getting all the gay stuff, so I intentionally wore workout clothes. I would only buy Adidas, Nike. I would only buy sports clothing because sports are masculine and why would he, how could he be gay if he's into sports? And so I gave the -- I would, you know... I didn't play sports, but I still wore all the sports clothes to give that effect! And even now I purposely... There's... About half the clothes in my closet I don't wear because it's not, it's not clothes that people wear here, and I don't want to get, I don't want to stick

out any more than I already do. I've really learned to put myself in space, safe spaces to avoid confrontation and to avoid any negativity I might receive. So yeah, I definitely try and blend.

Q: Where do you think this pressure for heteronormativity is coming from?

A: I'd say peers, definitely, and the fact that the teachers never said anything. Adults, too. It's easier. Let's make life easier, as easy as possible for myself.

Q: What different role models in Watauga County, such as doctors and teachers, what roles did they have in developing society as it is with regards to social acceptance of homosexuality?

A: I think they could play a huge role. They could play the.. I feel like they can make it or break it, really, and the fact that -- I don't know if people were scared or they didn't have the training or why teachers never really took the moment to stop and educate about that. It's not part of the curriculum. I don't know if maybe they would get in trouble if they started talking about that 'cause kids would go home and say something and it would get back and turn around negative. But they play a huge role.

Q: Do you see -- since you came back after being away for a few years, do you see any changes in Watauga County in how social acceptance or activities?

A: Maybe because I'm part of a college and because I surround myself with an accepting community, yeah, I see a difference, 'cause I've sought, I've sought safe spaces out purposely knowing that there, you know, there's places where aren't, it's not safe.

Q: OK, what are the organizations and places that you go so that you can feel safe?

A: The Unitarian church. My mom started going there when I was in high school and I started joining her. That is a very safe space. Organizations... I mean, I feel like campus can be a safe space if you're around, if you are conscious of your surroundings. (laughter) But I would never walk around campus with my boyfriend holding hands.

Q: Have you ever seen a same sex couple holding hands?

A: I've seen girls holding hands... but not a lot. SAGA, very safe space. And in the LGBT Center, very much so safe... It's like heaven. It's like a nice little safe haven corner. But then again, even when I first went to the LGBT Center, it's in a hallway -- it's wondering, you know, who's going to see me walk in this hallway where it's only the LGBT Center and I don't even know what else is -- the

Multicultural Center or what other door is right there? So who's going to see me walk in there and what are they going to think about me? And, you know, how's that going to...? But now I've gotten over that. Other safe spaces... I used to feel really safe outside. I used to -- in nature, on trails and, you know, wherever, but I had an experience my junior year before School of the Arts. I got, had gotten into a fight at home so I left and I spent the night out in the woods over by the Hound Ears Dam, and that was a little getaway. I'd gone there a lot with my friends, so I went there and I slept and I woke up and two people or three people showed up, two of whom I don't know, one was in high school who was a couple years younger than I was, but the kids who were hanging out, the guys he was hanging out with were definitely older. They seemed not from around the area, and they were obviously drunk or high on something. And so I woke up when I heard the ruckus, and I saw a familiar face. I don't even know the kid. I saw that familiar face. Sure.

(break in tape)

A: So I saw that kid, and I knew that -- I knew he was from Watauga. And about ten minutes later they started heckling at me, "Hey you! Hey you up there! Hey faggot! What the fuck are you doing here? Get the hell out of here! Stop

looking at me! What are you trying to do, see my dick?
What do you want to do? Why don't you come over here and
show your face? Why don't you fight, huh?", you know? So
I started packing up my stuff and leaving, and they saw me
packing up my stuff. They came, the two older guys came
over to me and telling me, you know, still with the faggot
and all, the, you know, "Stop looking at me that way" and
all... I ignored him. He wanted me to get in a fight with
him. He was telling me, "Oh, I'm trained and I've got a
so-and-so belt and I've done this, that, and the other,"
and he was like, "Why don't you fight?" And I was like,
"Dude, I'm not trying to fight you. Not trying... That's
not what I came here for. I'm not trying to fight you.
I'm going to go." And he punched me from the side, and
then the other guy got -- the guy that I knew in high
school left, and I was like, "Oh shit, they're going to go
fuck with my car, they're going to go slash my tires," and
so I started heading towards the car, and one guy was
behind me and one guy was in front of me, and I tried to
just get up the hill, the embankment over by 105, and so
they were pushing me up, and the guy, the other guy, third
guy that I knew from high school had brought in his car to,
you know, to the edge of the trail like in the middle of
the road. It was like a getaway car. I was like, what the

fuck are they going to do to me right now? I didn't know if they were going to push me in the car, push me down the hills, like there's a highway right there, they could have pushed me into cars, they could have pushed me down the embankment like 30 feet into rocks and water, so I was like... Didn't know what to do. I got punched in the ear. I got pushed from the back, pulled up again, punched more. They broke my glasses. They took my sunglasses off my face and broke them, threw my stuff around, and then they got in the car and just left, and that lasted for a total of probably five or six minutes, 'cause I refused to throw any punches or, you know, I refused to fight, thinking that they would leave me alone. So after they left, I got all my stuff. Since I was bleeding from inside my ear I went home, even though, you know, I had just had a fight with my step-dad and I didn't want to go there or feel safe there. I had to go because I didn't know if I needed to go to the hospital or what. So now I'm a little wary of going, by myself especially, to these places, but that doesn't change that I still do and how I feel about nature, 'cause I love it. That's one of the reasons I live here. And I didn't go to the cops 'cause I didn't... 'Cause then they would have known my name, they would know my, you know, my car, what I drive. I didn't want to be any... I didn't want to

put myself in another dangerous situation by giving people of power an opportunity to hurt me further, so I never documented that, although I should have.

Q: A lot of people don't because of that very reason. Had you thought of...? At that point were you aware of gay organizations outside...?

A: Absolutely not. I've thought, I've always thought I was pretty much a loner, never really fit in anywhere. Other people think differently. I present myself as a happy person, smiling, nice to everybody, trying to make people laugh. That's not reality for me. We can still... But you have to be positive.

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