

Oral History Interview: Nicole Garcia

Interviewee: Nicole Garcia

Interviewer: Mark Bowman

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Mark B. This is Mark Bowman on October 16, 2015. I'm here with Nicole Garcia, and we're at Pacific School of Religion during the Multi-Faith Trans Summit. And it's good to talk with you again, Nicole. And as we developed a profile, a longer biographical profile about your life, journey and ministry, but I would like to hear you talk to amplify a bit that just around how and when you began to understand trans identity, and when and how you embraced that for yourself, and how that journey worked out for you, and maybe people or resources that were enabling or helpful for you. So if you just want to talk a bit, thank you.

Nicole G. Well, it's a pleasure to be here with you, Mark. And as I remember the interview we did, I did kind of leave off with the point where I had just really made contact with St. Paul Lutheran Church in Denver, having been raised a Roman Catholic and left that church for specific reasons, essentially rejecting the patriarchal and hierarchical structure of the Roman Catholic Church, feeling that it was oppressing me in who I was, but not knowing exactly why.

Always having this feeling that I never fit it, that I was lying to God, that I was lying to the people around me when I was saying the creed or the

confession because I did not have confidence in who I was as a child of God and what that meant to me. I didn't have words for it. Growing up in the '60s and '70s and into the '80s, during my religious growth, so to speak, I didn't have...I never felt quite right. I couldn't put my finger on it. I knew I couldn't be homosexual because it was a sin against God, but I had those feelings. So always trying to repress them.

And the best way to repress them was to live out what I thought I was supposed to be. And in order to do that, I went into law enforcement. I learned, as a law enforcement officer, how to be a man, because I had really good role models. Unfortunately, that didn't work really well for me. I ended up drowning my sorrows, so to speak, with Jack Daniel's and running away from who I was.

So when I finally recognized and knew that something had to change, and I got into therapy, then I began to really explore myself as a human being and what these feelings really were. And it was with a wonderful therapist that I told that all through my life I liked to wear women's clothing. And that was an incredible admission to her.

And so the first conference I went to was called the Gold Rush put on by the Gender Identity Center in Denver. I went to that conference grudgingly, accepting the fact that I may be, but it wasn't definite, I may be a cross dresser, that I was really a heterosexual man who just liked wearing women's clothing, and that was about as far as I could go.

But when I went to that conference, and sitting there I started hearing stories that were like mine—never feeling comfortable, never really feeling like I fit anyplace. And it's not necessarily I didn't feel comfortable in my own skin, it's just that I didn't know how to perform what I was supposed to be doing as the oldest son in a Roman Catholic family. It just didn't fit me, my conception of self.

So when I came to that realization, it was having that moment of clarity, the epiphany that I was really a woman, and I always wanted to live my life as a woman because that was most comfortable. And discovering that within myself changed my life dramatically. And it was also right in that same time period that I recognized that I could not do this journey on my own. I knew I couldn't live my life the way I had, and I knew that down deep inside I had this seed of faith that had been planted many, many, many years ago in the church, that underlying desire and love for Jesus Christ.

And so it was at that same conference that I met someone else who happened to be in law enforcement, also happened to be a person of faith, who invited me to go to a Lutheran church. Of course, I said no because Martin Luther was the heretical excommunicated priest who...just going down that path as a Roman Catholic. But after the third time that my friend asked me to go, I realized that maybe I should be putting away my preconceptions and start listening to the voice of God.

So when I walked into this church in downtown Denver, St. Paul Lutheran Church, the first thing that I noticed was the mission statement. And in that mission statement it said that people of all sexual orientations were welcome in that church. It didn't mention gender identity at that time, but I'd never seen anything in a church that mentioned or dared to write the words "sexual orientation" in a welcoming statement.

And then it was early in my transition, and I expected, as I walked in—I was dressing and presenting as a female, as Nicole, as part of my therapeutic process. I was going to work as a male and living as a male, and then living the rest of the time as Nicole in order to satisfy my therapist. So I fully expected to walk into that church and people to turn and point, look at that man in a dress. But they didn't.

They asked me if I liked the service. They asked me what I thought about the sermon. They asked me to come back. And I did. And part of it is because at St. Paul they celebrate high church, so they have the procession walking in. They had the same...the creed and the confession, and I knew all the words, and so it was very comfortable in that respect. And then the words from the pulpit were accepting and welcoming, and all people are children of God. It doesn't matter who you are or how you present, you are a child of God. And those were the words I needed to hear at that point.

So I started attending St. Paul regularly. And you know you're really loved and accepted when you're asked to be on a committee, so I joined the Reconciling in Christ Task Force. And that was a task force formed in the '90s to explore the opening welcoming statement, which ended up as a mission statement for the church. So with a bunch of people who were primarily allies—I was the only trans person on the committee—we would plan to march in the Denver Pride parade and have a booth, and then we would also go out to different churches who were exploring becoming what we call, in the Lutheran tradition, Reconciling in Christ, open and affirming.

So in the time that I was working with St. Paul, I participated with, if I remember correctly, eight different congregations, going through their welcoming process. So sitting with people and answering their questions, and assuring them that becoming open and welcoming doesn't mean you're going to be the gay church in the town, it just means that you're going to live out Christ's words and message to love your neighbor as Christ loved us. And it was during that process I was noticed by a group called Lutherans Concerned. I kept getting phone calls from them inviting me to meetings. I ended up in—

Mark B. Is that national meetings or local, in Denver?

Nicole G. National meetings. The first meeting I went to Chicago because I was considered a leader in the Denver area. I said, who, me? And so I ended

up in Chicago, and then the next phone call I got ended up in San Francisco for a board meeting. Then the next meeting I came back to San Francisco and ended up being elected to the board of directors as a transgender representative. And from there I've received a lot of training on how to speak, and how to talk, how to present my story, how to hone down who I was and really talk in front of people and with people, and learn how to listen.

So I was able to fly throughout the country and make presentations and teach congregations about what it meant to be open and welcoming. Going to Nashville, Tennessee, of all places. I never thought I would end up in Nashville, Tennessee presenting what's called a Building an Inclusive Church training. I thought in Nashville it would be me, my co-trainer and the pastor sitting there by ourselves wondering where everybody was at.

We had 56 people who showed up in Nashville because they wanted to know how they can be open and welcoming. And it wasn't just Lutherans. It was an ecumenical gathering of Disciples of Christ, Methodists, Episcopalians. We even had one from the Seventh Day Adventists, a minister who wanted to explore.

Mark B. Wow.

Nicole G. It was amazing. So through this journey, I recognized first that I didn't want to be a law enforcement officer any longer because I originally went

into law enforcement to prove that I was a man. That didn't work really well. I was still a very good officer. I could do the job very well. But I no longer wanted to do the law enforcement aspect. I was actually a parole officer for 11 years, and I decided the part of the job that I really enjoyed and was the best at was working with the people that I was supervising.

So I ended up getting a master's in counseling, and I left working as a parole officer in July of 2013. And since then I have gotten my master's in counseling and I'm a psychotherapist in private practice in a little town called Longmont, Colorado.

But during that whole process of going through graduate school, and working as a parole officer, and still trying to do my work within the community and education within the church and outside the church, I recognized the fact that I wanted to know more about what I was preaching. I really wanted to make sure I had a solid foundation. So I thought about getting a master's in theology, so that way I would have at least another degree so people would take me a little bit more seriously.

But master of theology never quite satisfied what I wanted to do. I looked at a couple different graduate schools of theology and seminaries, and I just realized that it wasn't what I wanted to do. And one morning... Pastor Kevin at St. Paul would have service at 7:00 in the morning in downtown Denver, and my office was on the other side of downtown, so I

could whip by, go to service at 7:00 on Thursday mornings and then go to work.

Well, one Thursday morning, as Pastor Kevin is holding the host above his head and saying the words of institution, I knew at that point that's where I wanted to be, that's where I needed to be, that's where I was called to be, was up on the altar, and to be an ordained minister in the Lutheran Church. And I talked to Kevin afterwards and I said, Kevin, I know I'm called to be a pastor, but I don't know how to do it. I can't give up my life and just go to seminary. I just can't stop everything and go. At that point I was still finishing my master's in counseling.

And so Kevin just told me, "Look at Luther Seminary distributed learning program." And I'm like, okay. And being a good, dedicated government employee, I went to my office and spent the first two hours that morning looking on the computer for Luther Seminary. And I found a program where I could take classes online in the spring and fall semesters, and to satisfy the residential component I would go to St. Paul, Minnesota in January—best time to be in St. Paul—in January and June for two weeks and take intensive classes.

So they run a 30 credit system, so essentially a full credit class is one credit. Most institutions call them three credit classes, but... So you needed 30 credits to graduate, and ten credits would be taken on campus. And I thought that could work. That could work.

Now, in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, in order to be accepted to Luther Seminary, I had to go through a process called candidacy. And when I first thought about it, I thought I had a really good chance. I knew four people on the Synod candidacy committee. I had a really good relationship with the bishop because I had gone to a Church-wide Assembly in 2009 and 2011 so the bishop got to know me really well. And I would go into his office sometimes and just chat with him.

And then all of a sudden the bishop decided he would retire, and so a new bishop was elected, whom I didn't know. And when bishops come in, they change their staff and change the committee, so I only knew one person on the candidacy committee. So I thought, well, I would apply. And it's a matter of writing essays and getting letters of recommendation, and the 12 pages of admission paperwork and everything I've done since my mama changed my diapers. And then it's a series of interviews with pastors, and a psychological exam, and a background check.

And I thought, well, at least I can put in my paperwork, and when they turn me down I can say I tried, and I can just move on and I can forget it. Well, I'll be darned if I wasn't granted entrance to candidacy. And in me they saw that spark, they saw that faith, that underlying devotion to God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit.

And I applied to Luther Seminary. And at that point Luther Seminary was still considered one of the more conservative seminaries in the Lutheran

world. So I thought, well, at least I can go and I can have the interview so that I can say I tried. I was granted entrance but, you know, the only program that would work would be the DL program through Luther, so I know they won't take me, so I can say I tried. I was accepted. I was accepted to the program.

So here I was finishing up my graduate degree in counseling, and I decided that I could start seminary. I was really, really, really eager and excited to start. The one thing I can say is never, ever, ever work on two graduate degrees at the same time. I was taking my very last semester on campus at CU Denver, and I was doing my internship at the CU student counseling center, so I was working about 20 hours a week seeing clients. And I thought I can see my clients, do my paperwork, that would be easy.

And then I had to take Greek. And I'm terrible at languages. So what I thought would be ten to 12 hours a week on Greek turned out to be 20 to 24 hours a week on Greek just to get it through my thick skull. And it was difficult. I would be sitting, between clients, going through my flashcards trying to learn vocabulary. So it was a challenge.

And then that January, when I ended up going to St. Paul for the first time, it was during the polar vortex, so I got the joy of walking through campus at 30 below zero, covering every aspect of my body, top to bottom. Well, what was most joyous about that first semester... In our online Greek class we were assigned small groups, and so my small group of six people,

we would meet twice a week in order to talk about Greek. So I got to know them fairly well. But I never mentioned the fact to anybody that I was trans.

Apparently the word had preceded me, because when I got to campus people were very cordial, but I always got the impression that they didn't know what to say to me. And we were living in a dormitory on campus. And finally one of my classmates just basically came up and just started talking to me, and she said I have to ask you, are you the transgender person? And I'm like, yes I am. And we had a wonderful conversation.

And I was encouraged and ended up on that Saturday between the two weeks showing a movie called "The Faces and Facets of Transgender Experience," a little movie produced by Boulder County PFLAG, Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays. And I happen to be in it.

And so we designed that movie so that it was 22 minutes long, it could be used in churches, because most church adult forums are 45 minutes to an hour at the most, so you could show it and still have 20 to 25 minutes for discussion. So I announced to my classmates that I was going to show this movie on Saturday, and I expected one or two to show up. I had 15 people in the room. Got to show the movie and we had open and frank discussions about gender identity, sexual orientation, and how much it meant for me to be there at that seminary.

And out of my 26 classmates, I had 25 who support me completely. One is still kind of ah, I'm not quite sure. But it's been an amazing journey through seminary and over the past two years, getting to know these people really, really, really well.

And it really proved to be an incredible experience because last month I was invited to go, of all places, Grand Forks, North Dakota to preach. Christus Rex Lutheran Campus Ministry. And so I put on my cohort page that I was going up to North Dakota, and any advice about what's the weather going to be like, how do I get there and so forth and so on.

Well, one of my classmates lives in a little town outside of Fargo, North Dakota, so she said it's cheaper to fly into Fargo, and it's only about an hour north to get to Grand Forks, so once you fly into Fargo, stay at my place for a night and I'll drive you up to Grand Forks. So I ended up flying into Fargo, staying with a friend there. She and her husband have a nice 35 acres, a little farm and a couple kids. Had a wonderful time outside—I think it's called [Glisten], Minnesota.

Went up to Grand Forks, stayed with the pastor there, Cathy, who has been there for 25 years, stayed with her and her husband. And after I preached, because they were celebrating their Pride Day in Grand Forks, which had been resurrected. I gave a talk on being trans and of faith on Saturday at a beautiful Empire Theater, beautiful theater, and about 35, 40 people showed up, so I was very happy with the turnout.

And then the next morning when I preached at Christus Rex, the sanctuary was full. There were over 200 people there. And I was told there's never 200 people there. Well, after I finished my sermon the room erupted in applause, which totally astounded me. You have to remember these were Lutherans. These were North Dakotan Lutherans, where stoicism is...you look it up in the dictionary and there's Grand Forks, North Dakota.

They had listened to the words of promise, listened to the words that God loves all of us as children of God. Yes, we are sinners, we can't get around it. We can try and apply the law, try and apply tradition, but what it really comes down is we have to love the Lord God with all our heart, and in turn love each other as God loves us. That's the message. And they loved it.

And then I ended up going up to Minot, North Dakota. Minot, where another one of my seminary friends stayed, and I stayed with her for two days just to be in Minot. And she took me around so I could meet people on her church council where she's placed, and just loved and spoiled in North Dakota.

So it's been an incredible journey that I've been on. And none of this journey would have happened if I had turned my back on my true self, if I had been continually trying to hide and satisfy everyone else, tried to be the son that my mother wanted, the brother that my sisters want. I was miserable. I was depressed, I was suicidal, I was abusing alcohol.

But when I finally recognized who God made me to be—God intended me to be a transgender Latina, and I have blossomed into a strong, confident advocate for God. And been given such incredible gifts of friendship, of companionship, of being able to travel throughout the country to be able to tell my story, speak to people, and I hope inspire people, both trans people to recognize that if you do follow your dreams and recognize who you are, you too can blossom and bloom and be strong and confident; inspire people who have family members that they don't know quite how to have that conversation just to accept the fact that their trans loved one, know who they are. And you have to let go of your preconceived notions of who you wanted them to be so that you can come to love them for who they are. And talk to people who just aren't quite sure where gender and sexuality flows. And sometimes people want to go back and find scripture or find biological and scientific reasons, and everything should be one or the other.

Well, life is much more complicated than that. There is more than black and white, and there is more than just a rainbow. There is an incredible spectrum of color, an incredible spectrum of gender, an incredible spectrum of who we conceive ourselves to be in this world. And by limiting ourselves, by limiting the power of almighty God, we are just limiting what we can reach for.

Mark B. Good. So you have one more year of seminary to go? Where are you in the process and what are you looking for after seminary?

Nicole G. I'll clarify. I have completed 14 credits out of 30, so this semester I'm taking two and a half, so I'm just about halfway. January I start my clinical pastoral education, so I'll be working in a hospital in a city just north of the Denver metro area, so essentially a semester of working as a chaplain to get that part done. Then hopefully I will be ready to do my internship in 2017, maybe January, possibly. Some place in 2017. I'm really looking to graduate with my M.Div. in either May or August of 2018.

And a lot of people, especially my bishop and candidacy committee, asked me where do I want to go, what do I want to do. And to be honest, I really haven't a clue. In my heart of hearts, I would like to be a pastor, maybe an associate pastor, or a part-time pastor in a small congregation, and then also work part-time as a chaplain or have a small counseling practice. In Colorado would be preferable because that's where I was born and raised. Maybe New Mexico or into Texas because that's where it's warm.

I had my bishop say to me one time, he said that's what's going to happen to you, and I'm like yes, I'll end up in North Dakota. That's where the Lutherans are. So I think God wanted me to take a trip to North Dakota to find out that it's not so bad.

But part of it is also that I'm primary caretaker for my mother. She's 81 years old right now. She's still fairly mobile, but she has arthritis in her back and her hips, so I do all the heavy lifting. I do most of the cleaning

and most of the cooking, and we go out. We have quality time together, so this is really a special time to be with her.

When Mama passes, because eventually that's how life is, she will leave us, and when that happens, I'm ready for the Holy Spirit to take me where I need to be, whether it be a pastor in Colorado or North Dakota, or if I end up in Costa Rica, I don't know. But I'm open to where God wants me to go.

Mark B. Excellent. Good, good. You mentioned the film from PFLAG in Boulder that you were in. Step back a moment and look at your colleagues here and other trans persons of faith. Can you reflect on just how that has evolved and developed? Have there been some key people who were role models, witnesses, writers? Who and what has played a significant role in the emergence of the significant trans religious movement in the past ten to 20 years? What's been key for you? What have you seen?

Nicole G. Well, for me, first the people of St. Paul Lutheran Church. They're the ones that I credit, and Pastor Kevin, mainly, who is a pastor there. They are the people, and that is the place that allowed me to celebrate my faith in Jesus Christ. From there, Emily Eastwood. She was the executive director of Lutherans Concerned, now called ReconcilingWorks. The work that ReconcilingWorks has done over the years has allowed me to develop and grow. They gave me so many different tools through trainings, being trained and helping train.

It's so important to conduct workshops, and not only take workshops, because when you put a workshop together, you really have to delve deeply into what you want to talk about. So having the ability to develop workshops, present workshops and speak in different places has given me a tremendous gift. And they have pushed me to do the research that I need in order to figure out what I'm talking about.

Justin Tanis, who is, I believe, the executive director now of CLGS, the Center for Lesbian and Gay Studies in Religion and Ministry at Pacific School of Religion, his book was really instrumental in helping me look into transgender theology. I did a lot of work delving into, especially in my counseling program, Judith Butler and her founding work, and then Judith Lorber in the social construction of gender, some foundational work that I've always worked with.

Marcella Althaus-Reid, an incredible theologian from South America, I believe. Unfortunately, she's not with us any longer. But her book "From Feminist Theology to Indecent Theology" just sparked so much within me. The whole liberation theology concept, the concept that Jesus—and I believe Jesus was the first liberation theologian because he talked about, all the time, empowering the poor, the oppressed and the marginalized, and that it's the duty of the church to change the world, and by doing that you change the church.

A lot of the work that I do, you know, I go back to the early church leaders and try and look through the lens of what they are trying to understand. And a lot of the early church leaders were female as well. The patriarchal system silenced their voices over the millennia, but so much from the early church, they're trying to figure out all this stuff that Jesus left us, and what's most important, and looking at the different arguments that they had over the Eucharist, over the Holy Spirit, the divisions that happened. I'm trying to step back and go back to the early church and begin to put together my theology strictly from scripture.

And today I listened to a lecture from Justin Tanis, and I think we really can't place our modern concept of gender and sexuality on early writings. They're not easily transferred. And so how do we do that? We have to go back and look at what was happening at that time, how they were trying to express themselves, and then allow the Holy Spirit to enter us and take some of those thoughts and concepts and pray over them, and hopefully be enlightened by what the Holy Spirit wants us to hear, and what we need to be doing today in order to fulfill and ask for the promises of God. Those promises of being loved beyond measure, and the promises that by doing that we will love each other beyond measure.

Mark B. Good. Thank you for your time. Closing thoughts or comments or dreams for trans people of faith? What you see needs to evolve or hopes or dreams you have.

Nicole G. As a Lutheran seminary student, I have the privilege of wearing a clerical collar. And I find walking into the church that I'm working at, or walking into religious areas, wearing a clerical collar, nobody looks twice. But when I walk into rooms that are primarily LGBT, I feel most uncomfortable because the "church"—and church in quotes—has done so much harm to the LGBT community.

And as a transgender woman of faith, I want that to change. I want the church to be supportive, and loving, and provide guidance to those who need guidance, provide consolation to those who need to be consoled, and to lift people to where they need to be so they know they are beloved children of God. I want to be a part of that, to break down those barriers and to have "church"—again in quotes—to be liberating and not oppressive.

Mark B. Thank you, Nicole. A powerful story. Thank you for taking the time to talk.

Nicole G. Oh, it's a pleasure, and thank you, Mark.

[End of recording.]