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Voices from the Field: From “Lesbian Activist” to Beloved Mayor of Houston: A Conversation with Annise Parker

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Drs. Pfeffer and Sanborn (JFS) conducted an interview with Annise Parker, former Mayor of the City of Houston, to discuss her career and some current issues of relevance to the LGBTQ community. The following interview has been edited for clarity.

Annise Parker (AP) spent 18 years in public service for the city of Houston. From 1998-2003 she served on Houston City Council. She was elected to City Controller and served in this capacity from 2004-2010, before being elected as the Mayor of Houston from 2010-2016. She is one of only two women to have been elected mayor of Houston, and she was the first openly LGBT mayor of any major American city.

JFS: So the first thing we wanted to ask, Mayor Parker, is when you ran for office...you ran as someone with vast experience with public policy and public office, and sort of a competent and very experienced politician. And you won on that. In other words, that you were a lesbian was just...

AP: Okay, so that's not quite true.

JFS: Ah. Please correct us then.

AP: I actually ran twice and lost and then figured out how to do it and won nine times [laughs]. So, I was elected three times as councilmember, three times as controller, and then three times as mayor. But my first two races...I ran in 1991 for city council and I was...I was sort of the poster child for how women shouldn't do it. Which is, women wait to be asked. And I was asked, I was recruited by the LGBT community to run sort of as the gay standard bearer and then I also did what you shouldn't do which was run against an incumbent. You know, the most gay-friendly districts across the America are often represented by really nice, liberal, straight allies. And I ran against Vince Ryan. He was a council member back then. And I got just shellacked. But I was the LGBT candidate. And then in 1995, there was a special election to replace Sheila Jackson Lee when she was elected to Congress. And it was a January election and there were nineteen candidates. No one was paying any attention. December or January, a six-week campaign, because right after she was elected she resigned. And I finished third out of the nineteen candidates. But in both of those races, every time I saw my name in print, it was “Annise Parker,

Lesbian Activist.” Or “Annise Parker, Gay Activist,” back then, they didn’t use the L-word as much. Annise Parker, gay activist running for city council. So it was very much a part of the public persona. And because in the eighties I was arguably one of the most, if not the most visible lesbian activists in Houston, so it was how people identified me. So in ’97 when I won, I had to figure out a way to manage that LGBT persona and sort of nullify it.

JFS: Is that what you had to do? Because I was thinking about your first mayor’s race.

AP: By the time I ran for mayor, no one cared anymore. Because I had been elected and been in office for twelve years and I’d been elected six times. And by the time I ran for mayor, I didn’t talk about it. Nobody talked about it. It was...I was just experienced.

JFS: Right, yeah. Except for sort of rabid opponents, right? That was like their one issue right?

AP: But not Gene Locke and Peter Brown...the three of us, you had three serious democratic candidates and they were not...they didn’t use it. Dave Wilson, my buddy Dave Wilson, who berated me forever [laughs] put out a piece. It actually was a picture of being sworn in as Controller with me and my now wife Kathy standing next to me, with a black female federal judge swearing me in. And the tagline was, “Is this the image of Houston we want the world to see?” It was like, okay, which part of this is...[laughs]. But by then it was...while my election made worldwide coverage, for Houstonians, it was like, what?

JFS: Right.

AP: But the first time I ran, it was like, no, I was the lesbian activist running and it was many years to change that public perception.

JFS: So do you think going into the future that this sort of thing will be a non-issue for gay, lesbian, transgender candidates? Or do you think as we go into the future, it’s an issue but it’s not a big...it’s a pro?

AP: I don't think necessarily going into the future it's going to be a pro, but it doesn't necessarily have to be negative. Because when I first ran it was a really different time, in the early nineties, and I had been a very visible lesbian activist. So people who knew me, that was the only data point they had. Well she's a single issue candidate. And I was... I worked for a conservative republican oil man, I was a civic club president, I was a United Way volunteer, I was all these other things, so I needed to introduce them to the other data points and I actually...when I decided to run for a third time after twice curling up into the fetal position and saying, "I hate politics," which is true, I actually went to...we still had two newspapers back then. I went to the Post and the Chronicle and I had a little portfolio of all of the print coverage. I even had some of the transcripts of the TV coverage of the campaign and I laid it out. And also we went to the electronic outlets as well and we laid it out and said, look at the coverage of the previous races. And you talk about what my opponents do for a living, well I work for Robert Mosbacher, republican oilman. And I have for, at that point it was nearly 18 years. But you never talk about what I do for a living. You talk about lesbian activist. I haven't been an officer or a board member for an LGBT organization for a decade, but I don't see you talking about what my opponents did ten years ago. And we went systematically through everything.

JFS: And how did the newspapers react to that?

AP: They got a little defensive but they stopped. And I think partly we put it in front of them, and the reporters...a lot of it is an education process but I think the world was changing too and the combination...but they would figure out how to make a reference after the jump, but it wasn't my last name anymore: Annise Parker Lesbian. It was, they really did, if they talked about what we did for a living, they would have to figure out some way to work it in. And then it would be, Annise Parker, best known for being president of the Gay and Lesbian Political Caucus in the early eighties. But it allowed me to get a little more data points with people so they got past that. But it had to be worked. So then every time, every piece of literature, and I have all of it from that campaign, we put "Past President, Houston Gay and Lesbian Political Caucus." So I have put it on all of my literature so my opponents couldn't talk about it. And I also wanted to be sure that my community didn't want to think

I was trying to go back in the closet. But I had to control the narrative. And so, going forward, right now the things that I dealt with, right now transgender candidates are dealing with. LGBT candidates, it's one of the factors people consider, and there are people out there who will never vote for a gay or lesbian candidate, ever.

JFS: But those are people getting old, aren't they?

AP: I was going to say they're dying off! Literally. The polling has really shifted. And even for some conservatives there's a strange dynamic that, well, if you're honest about that, you're probably going to be honest about everything. There's this little reel that goes through their heads! For those of us who don't think it's a horrible thing, we kind of roll our eyes. But that...people vote for those who they think, who they identify with, and who they think understand their lives. And as long as LGBT candidates are other, who can't understand their lives or can't be trusted, then they're never going to vote for us. But if they can get to, "Wow, man, I can trust her. She's okay."

JFS: Was that ever something that you worried about when you were just thinking about politics? For young people now who are thinking about...

AP: I never thought about politics when I was young and I don't encourage young people to...

JFS: But it's scary to think about the digging that happens and the defamation of people's character that happens. So how did you overcome that?

AP: You know, before I launched every campaign, the first thing I did was pay for oppo-research on myself. And, first of all, there's not any dirt.

JFS: I mean, you have a little bit of a reputation of being boring right?

AP: I'm very boring. Very boring! And politics is a blood sport and it's intense. But it's not any more negative today than it was when the country was founded. It's just that it comes at you from a different

source. It's now social media rather than pamphlets passed out on street corners. And it's no longer just directed at the candidates, it's so easily also attached to candidates' families. And that's actually one of the things people should consider. No one runs by themselves. If you have a family, they're part of it.

JFS: You said you don't encourage young people.

AP: I think people ought to live a little bit. I...because I teach at Rice now and I'm actually a mentor for the student government students and I get a lot of budding politicians. They'll say, "I want to run for office someday," and I'm like okay. The office is a tool. And a lot of them say they want to run for office. The office is a tool. It's meaningless to say you want to be in office. What do you want to do? And if they haven't figured out what they want to do, then they're not ready to run for office. Because each office... I have served...I loved being a city council member. I'm a former civic club president so I love...I'm the author of the pooper scooper ordinance for the city of Houston.

JFS: Are you really?

AP: I am!

JFS: God bless you, Mayor Parker.

AP: Part of it came about because we had a dog and my now spouse wouldn't pick up after the dog and she said, "Well if it's so important, make a city ordinance." [laughs] So I did. But I cared about this really basic city stuff. I worked on the smoking ordinance and trash pickup and recycling. But I served with people who wanted to be in congress and I won't name names but council members, councilmen, who ran for council because they wanted to be in congress. And they were terrible council members because they didn't care about city council. They didn't care about potholes and barking dogs and trash pickup, but that's what city council is. Or the idea of running for school board because I can get elected to school board. But if you don't care about school issues and testing and school lunches and the things that school boards do, you're a terrible school board member. And so if you're interested in foreign policy, then you should be running for congress and not city council. So what I encourage young people to do is to figure out

what they want to do, and politics may be the way to do what you want, but you need to figure that out first.

JFS: That's insightful. Recently in Virginia, a state delegate was elected who was transgender.

AP: Yeah, Danica Roem.

JFS: Is it something that you think we're going to see a lot more of as we move forward? Or we're going to see more but not a lot more? What do you think?

AP: First of all, there aren't a lot of transgender individuals, period. And we have had transgender candidates here in Houston. Jennifer Rene Pool has run for city council I think twice. Jennifer has been on the ballot, out, campaigning. And the fact that we're not reacting...Jennifer is very well known in democratic circles...I'm afraid she's gotten a reputation as a perennial candidate but she'd be an awesome council member. And she's served on various boards and commissions in the city, the Buildings and Standards Commission, for example. You're going to see more and more transgender candidates simply because they are becoming more visible in all aspects of life. But the challenge for them...it's like when I was running in the early nineties, the world was just catching up to them. And no one can say today they don't know someone who is gay. They may not know them personally, but they know an actress or somebody. Anybody you walk up to, "name somebody who's gay." But the vast majority of American's today don't know anyone who is transgender. And most Americans know someone who is openly gay or lesbian, whether the person at the grocery store or work or church. And the familiarity changes things. Until we get...I don't think Caitlyn Jenner is a role model for anyone or anything but I mean having high profile people, where you can say, I know someone who is...or I know what that is...the more familiarity, the way the world views transgender men and women will change. And of course, there are so many more transwomen than transmen. And transmen actually pass much more easily than transwomen, so they have just sort of disappeared.

We have to, I think, come from a place of respect. And where people are, as long as you're happy, you're living your life, you're a

productive citizen, why is it a problem? Or why should it be a problem for me?

JFS: But what you're saying sort of supports that idea that we need people who represent the transgender community in positions of visibility in communities. Because if you don't know, you don't care. For this community that's so tiny, they have to know. And for the rest of us to know, to care, to become engaged, we have to see them out and around.

AP: The people who have the real challenge, and again, it's sort of the non-binary or somebody who wants to have a feminine dress but also a full beard. And it's because of the way people's minds work. We like to categorize data and we have this piece of data and we can't figure out how it fits in. And it's like the rough tooth and you keep putting your tongue over the rough tooth because it bothers you because you can't figure out where it fits and it sticks out. So there's a huge education process, but mostly we just need to realize that transgender men and women, for the most part, just want to live their lives just like everybody else. And they very much are male or female in orientation and outlook and perspective in every way that matters and we just need to respect it.

More and more parents, and this is when it really began to change for the LGBT communities, we had to speak for ourselves, but when our families began to stand with us, that really made a change. And now, the transgender community, to have so many parents...it's still rare, but more and more parents who are identifying their children at very young ages and saying, "This is my child. You're not going to mess with my child. My son or my daughter needs to have a safe place to go to school, a safe place to toilet, and you're going to do whatever you have to do because this is my child!"

JFS: And it's interesting, those kids in schools, the classmates are often comfortable with the children choosing what they want to. It's parents who have the harder time with it.

AP: That's my experience.

JFS: You were elected many times and were elected as mayor three times and by all accounts you were a very popular and a very good mayor.

AP: Thank you.

JFS: And I always said that when I disagreed with you, I always said I loved you as a mayor. But then we had HERO which was basically an equal rights ordinance that was voted down. And it seemed odd to me that we would love you as a mayor but there would still be a large body of people who loved you as mayor but would still vote down HERO.

AP: But it became about men and women's bathrooms. And it wasn't a rational argument. And I'm frustrated with myself because I should have known better but for the campaign, we kept focusing on the rational arguments. We focused on the fact that HERO wasn't about gender identity and sexual orientation, it was about all of the different categories...it was a comprehensive ordinance when Houston had no ordinance. Most cities across America in the last decade or so have taken existing discrimination ordinances and added sexual orientation and gender identity. We had to write an ordinance from scratch and include everybody. And so we were trotting out, literally, I mean, it was a gift. During the middle of the campaign, one of the hot nightclubs over on Bagby turned away African American men and was charging them cover charges but not non-African American men. And the guys did a TV commercial for us and we said, this is why we need HERO. But the other side hijacked the argument and kept going on and on about how men in dresses were going to sneak into women's restrooms and rape women. And they did this over and over and over again. And we lost the battle before we even started because they owned the narrative. And it wasn't about me, or how people felt about me. It wasn't about equal rights and literally, the anti folks, many of them came to city council. It was something like four to one in city council in favor of it. But they came to city council and said, "If you'll just take the transgender people out of it, we can support it." And I'm like, I'm not going to do that. And the really sad part is they used the Houston playbook and they went to North Carolina and it worked in North Carolina and they tried to roll out the playbook across the country, but fortunately it stalled out. But the same, the

very same messages, that they used in the state legislature here in Texas, they started in Houston. It's the same people, the same messages and the same fear mongering. And I wasn't campaigning a lot for HERO because I was still running the city, but I certainly went out and advocated for it. And places where having nice civil conversations with folks who loved me but couldn't vote for it. And the single biggest problem was the average age of voters, I think according to Bob Stein, was 68 years old. If the average age of voters had been 50, it would have been a different outcome. If the average age had been 40, it wouldn't have even been on the ballot. I mean people under 40, they're really just like, "really? This is a problem?" So the opposition is moving off the stage. But it points out the vast differences in opinion across age groups but it also shows how important it is to get involved in the political process. And until Millennials and Gen-X's, those under 40, start voting in their numbers, you end up with a Donald Trump, you end up with a no HERO ordinance, you end up with a lot of bad outcomes.

JFS: The way you're describing this makes me think that this is the civil rights issue of our time. And it was just becoming apparent at the end of your tenure as mayor but if you could still be in office, would you take that up as an issue?

AP: Absolutely. And people ask me all the time, what would I have done differently about the HERO ordinance, and the answer is that I would have brought it up the first year I was in office instead of the last year. So that if it didn't pass, I would have another bite at the apple. But I think because...I do think that by 2010, the end of my last year in office. That was the year the Tea Party really started making gains across America. So some of this is the rise...the Tea Party was about less government and fiscal issues but it quickly became this whole complex basket of right-wing, they just kept throwing in anything that would fit in there and it just got more and more outrageous and more virulently anti-gay, anti-abortion, anti-women's rights, etc. So I really...starting it earlier probably would have been a good thing, but hindsight.

JFS: Annise, all across the country there are kids who are in the closet or are in the process of figuring out who they are and realizing that it's hard to come out. What's the message we should be sending those kids around the country who maybe live in communities not

like Houston or other communities that have embraced kids being who they are?

AP: This is going to sound a little bit harsh but I tell kids that if they're truly afraid of what their parents will do or if they're truly afraid of what will happen to them at school, just wait. Wait until you're safe. Because unless you're in a truly abusive situation. Too many kids, the choice is: you tough it out until you're able to live on your own or you end up on the street. And the street is no place for anybody. And as many resources as we put out there to rescue kids, most of them fall through the safety net. And so, stay home and suck it up. But young people do have a different attitude about coming out and that sense of shame. I mean, I attended my first LGBT organizing even in 1985. I've been out 40 years and, as my wife likes to say, not just out but on the front lawn! [laughs] But I still have a sense of shame that I have to process periodically. That was just the era in which I grew up, and it was an awful thing, it was a bad thing, it was something to hide. And so I don't...people aren't cowards. They have to process their own life experiences in their lives in their own way in their own time. And you shouldn't force somebody to come out. Unless they're actively engaged in discrimination against the community and then take 'em out! A lot of times the most virulently anti-gay opponents have turned out to be projecting.

JFS: But I think that's interesting to sort of wait until you're out on your own, you move someplace new, or go to college...

AP: And I know being miserable, being isolated in your teens is a horrible experience. But, again, the choices are not great. And I don't know that will change. So Kathy and I have four children. Our son is forty something...forty-one. And he came to live with us when he was sixteen. So that was a long time ago. And we took him in from the street. We took in a gay street kid.

JFS: This is something that you never really talk about. All of your kids were street kids at one point right?

AP: Well, the girls came from foster care so it's sort of different. He was living on the streets of Westheimer. And I had seen him off and on. There used to be a drop-in center for youth called HIPY, Houston Institute for the Protection of Youth? Remember HIPY? And then

there was also Hatch. But HIPY was for the street kids and Hatch was for the "good kids" that were still in their families. And I'd seen him through the years on and off, because he was being raised by his grandparents, and he'd go on and off the street. And I would go talk to HIPY periodically because of the LGBT role model thing. And so I knew him, just said hi, how are you doing. And I ran into him at pride week almost 20 years ago and he had his little duffel bag in his hand and I said, "Are you on the street again?" and he said, "Oh yeah." His grandparents kept trying to beat the gay out of him and then he'd run away or they'd throw him out. So it was back and forth. So he was on the street again and he said, "yeah." And I said, "Where are you going tonight?" And he said, "I don't know." So in a moment of madness, I gave him my house key and I said, "Here's my address. Go let yourself in. Take a shower. Do what you need to do." And then I went to find Kathy to tell her what I had done, and we agreed that he would stay for two weeks. And what we discovered was that there was no place for a gay teenager to go. Covenant House wouldn't take him back then and there really wasn't any other...so he just stayed. And became our son.

JFS: And he's your first son.

AP: Yeah. And the girls came from foster care. We adopted a seven-year-old and a twelve-year-old. And the seven-year-old, on her very first day at elementary school, she met another little girl who was adopted and had two dads. And they became best friends. But one of her dads was her uncle. It was an intra-family adoption. And they were inseparable. They two girls were either at our place or their place and they got to be about 15 and she never seemed to go home. And she turned 18 and her dad said, "I'm done. I got you to 18 and I'm done." And she was still a junior in high school, she had one of the late birthdays. I said, "She still has her senior year to go!" He said, "She's 18. I don't have to support her anymore." What do you mean, have to support her? So now, she's...now ours.

JFS: Do your daughters call you mom or mayor?

AP: [laughs] Mom. We adopted them when I was a council member. We started the process when I was a council member. And we finalized the adoption between the general and the runoff for controller. Not

a very smart thing to do! It was very stressful all around. No, I'm Mom and Kathy's Mommy.

JFS: This highlights a problem, which is that families push out kids because of their sexual identity.

AP: Absolutely. And then kids in foster care...the oldest daughter was horribly abused in her birth family, as was my youngest daughter. But they were also abused in foster care. They spend five years in foster care. So they all come out damaged and it takes a lot of work to re-socialize them.

JFS: We have a broken foster care system.

AP: If I could work on something and try to fix it, that's what I would work on. I don't have much hope that the state of Texas will do the right thing anytime soon, but that's my hope.

JFS: But the federal courts told the state to do the right thing. But anyhow, I know what you mean.

AP: Just seeing our son...the twenty-year gap between him and our youngest daughter, but the differences in their experiences. I mean, he was a boy and African-American and in an African-American neighborhood and the horrible pressures he had. Very different from the girls. I mean they were damaged by foster care but when they started school there were other gay kids, or kids with gay parents, and they were in a very accepting environment and they felt free to experiment. In ways that he was transgressive, they were more like everybody else in the mix. They were exploring things and it wasn't viewed as negatively.

And fast forward, I was in...and I now tell this when I do stump speeches to gay organizations. But three years ago I was in Charlotte, North Carolina, and I was helping campaign for Jennifer Roberts who was running for mayor of Charlotte. And she'd invited me to come. She was having two events. One of them was in a gay neighborhood in Charlotte...I can't remember the name of it. But I was early and so I was wandering around with my security detail. I found a little coffee shop and I'm standing on the street corner. It's like Montrose and Westheimer, the equivalent in Charlotte. And

these six...I see these six middle school girls walking down the street, the sidewalk. And they had a video camera, and there was a mom hovering about a half a block behind them. And they walked up to me and they said, "Excuse me, we have a question to act. We're doing videos and we have a question to ask." And I said sure, and one of them said, "Are you gay?" And my security detail just went into hysterical laughter, and I thought they had put them up to it because I'm just standing on this random street corner. And one of my security guys says, "Girls, this is your lucky day. This is the lesbian mayor of Houston!" And so they did an interview with me. It was a class project. An interview about attitudes about LGBT issues. None of them, as far as I could see, identified as LGBT. They just thought it was an area that would be of interest and they wanted to have a school video, and they were in the Charlotte Public Schools, and wanted a video that would be punchy. So we got to the end of the video and I was like, "Girls, I have to ask you a question. Was your plan just to come to this gay neighborhood and randomly walk up to people?" Uh-huh! So I said, "I hate to say this to you but that's really not a good plan. And maybe I need to talk to your mom, because you could walk up to someone here who is maybe not gay and they could react very negatively." And the girls were surprised! And I said, "And you might walk up to somebody who is gay and ask them that question and have them react very, very negatively." And it never had occurred to them that people might be upset. And that's beautiful! Scary, but it was beautiful.

JFS: Well thanks so much for this interview, and thanks for your service and for all that you do.