

# Thoughts on DragFest

*Excerpt from Interview with Chris Wolf '98, July 24<sup>th</sup>, 2019.*

00:43:39.00 **Wolf** DragFest was definitely something that I looked forward to every year. The whole campus seemed to look forward to it every year. It was just— [calls dog] [chuckles] It was just such a fun event and such a big event. It was just a celebration. It was not about taking ourselves seriously, but it was just about having fun and being wild and fabulous. I remember even like the fraternities and stuff—all the fraternity guys would come to DragFest and some of them would like put on a dress that didn't really fit them and put on a little makeup and be like, "Woohoo! We're going to Dragfest!." They were—most of them were probably—super straight guys that had never ever dabbled in drag at all but they were playing along because it was fun. So, that's what I loved about the event, it just made it not an issue, it just made it a good time for everybody. Yeah, it was great. [calls dog again]

00:44:50.21 **Wolf** One year I dressed up in drag [leans over to distract dog] and I took—I had some pretty serious theatre make-up where you could make facial hair, you could make little beards and stuff. So, I made like a goatee and mustache [Robson laughs] and eyebrows and you know, just went full drag and had a great, fun night. Then, went home to my house in the Outhouse that I shared with a girl named Emily and I walked into our room where I lived. I came home at the end of the night and she screamed at the top of her lungs. She was like, [loudly] "Get out of my room!" and she was like throwing [pillows?]. 'Cause she thought I was just some dude that was breaking into her bedroom! [Both laughing] Like, "Emily! Emily! It's me! It's Chris! I'm so sorry, I just have a mustache on! So sorry!" [laughs louder] She was terrified. Oh man. So, apparently, I was pretty convincing in drag 'cause—enough to scare somebody. It was always a fun time.

00:45:53.22 **Robson** Yeah, it sounds fun. I think it made a really big impact on a lot of people, lot of strong memories from it.

00:46:03.15 **Wolf** It really was the biggest party of the year, it was like Halloween and DragFest are the two things you look forward to.

*Excerpts from Interview with Tristen Shay '04, Nov. 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2019.*

00:23:33.16 **Robson** Yeah, where there any other, I don't know, memorable issues or events that Coalition Against Homophobia did that you want to talk about?

00:23:48.20 **Shay** Hm, that's a good question. I think at the time, it was interesting because we spent a lot of time throwing parties [laughter]. We spent a heck of a lot of our time doing large party events that I recall. It's funny because now, if I were to be in that group now—well obviously I have a lot of different perspectives now, being way further down the road but, at the time, I think, had it been—Yeah, I just think had it been now, we would have done more educational work. We would've done more outreach, we would've been—we didn't really do any of that sort of stuff, which—I think. At the time, it was just being there, being out, encouraging people to be out, to be seen, to celebrate queer culture, even though we weren't necessarily calling it that, felt really significant and felt really awesome. like, 'Oh cool, awesome, this is what we're doing, we're like, really standing up, we're like sticking it to the man!' Even though all we were doing was throwing drag shows, you know? We were bringing in performers from other areas, we brought in performers from Portland, a couple years in a row, a drag troupe that I was friends with at the time and was like, 'Oh come on in!', professional performers from that area. And so, we were bringing drag culture to campus, we were talking about, we were showing movies, we were doing screenings. We were trying to bring and support queer artists who—musicians who were performing, things like that.

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00:26:27.28 **Shay** I think there are things that Coalition Against Homophobia did that were really impactful and helpful at the time but yeah. Looking back, it is, I think, both true to—I think both true to the fact that we were—it was an undergraduate experience but also just the time of like, yeah throwing a party is the most radical thing we can do. Let's dye everyone's hair—just where ever I was at we used to—I knew I would have to book out all my evenings the week leading up to a dance because people were like, 'Let's dye my hair crazy colors!' I'm like, 'Yeah let's do it!' So I was always dyeing everyone's hair, doing crazy haircuts—'It's gonna look awesome!'—and just getting people really pumped and jazzed to get out there and kinda show themselves. It felt really triumphant and seeing people who'd never been comfortable with themselves before coming in and being like, 'Hey can you dye my—' 'you know, guys coming in saying 'Hey can you dye my hair pink?' 'I wanna just be like really out there.' I'd be like, 'Alright, let's do it, man! This is great!' It was great. It was really cool to see people coming out for the first time.

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00:29:26.29 **Robson** Yeah. I guess, you were—just kind of thinking about DragFest and all of the parties and stuff like that, I guess I was just wondering—it kind of seemed like DragFest was one of the only trans, even like kind of

adjacent things that was going on at Whitman for a long time. Kind of like, what you thought about DragFest and maybe then versus now, but then also how did Coalition address trans issues generally? If they did.

00:30:07.00 **Shay** Yeah, yeah, I think there was—you know, my knowledge obviously of things has changed overtime and my understanding of things has shifted. I think at the time I saw drag as this triumphant celebration of queerness and more particularly folks like myself who weren't necessarily within a binary. That you could be fluid with how you present yourself, that you could go up on stage and you could be a man and then you could come off stage and you could be a woman or vice versa was this really crazy liberating concept at the time, especially with such rigid concepts of trans identity, I think. Such limited concepts of trans identity or as people at the time say, quote unquote "really trans," you know, being "real trans," right? Versus like, being like—I don't know I'm like what, I don't know, 'play trans? Fake trans?' What was the alternative? But I mean, that's what people—I don't know—like "real trans" meaning they've done hormones, they've done the surgery, "the surgery" whatever surgery that would be. People didn't even really know but folks were kind of coming up to this idea that this was what was required to be trans and not everyone in the trans community obviously was buying into that but some were and that's who, kind of, I think, replicate that misconception that was the only way to be trans. So meeting drag performers—and that was something that I had done in high school, even, folks who were my age up in Portland having gone up and seen them performing at all ages groups up there—I was like, 'Holy crap this is so cool! You get to play with gender in a way that I've not seen, and it's respected in a way that I'd not seen.' Because it was in an all-queer environment, right?

00:31:59.21 **Shay** Now, what we know is, take it out of an all-queer-environment and you bring it to a place like Whitman that's dominantly heteronormative in not just demographic but actual construction as an institution, and things shift a little bit. All the sudden it's—it can be more of the dude in a dress sort of concept, right? It's the freakshow mentality. It's that we've got these folks here who—it's maybe no longer as pure an expression of self-identity and now it's instead this spectacle for a mainly cisgender heterosexual audience, right? And encourages folks to think that they can start co-opting drag culture in ways that it's totally offensive. It also particularly for transfeminine individuals, trans women, saying 'Hey look how easy it is, quote unquote, "to be a woman"'—no, of course it's not easy. It's not—and being a drag queen is nothing like being a trans woman. It's just not the same. But people missed that nuance when you're in this primarily heteronormative environment like Whitman was, and I imagine, still is.

00:33:12.26 **Shay** So I think there were things—I was definitely part of that group that brought DragFest together and started doing that, of like, 'Alright, let's bring these drag performers in because this will be—'this, to me, again,

this kind of defiance in the face of societal conformity, of ‘No, look at what we can do. We can totally fuck these norms; we can be anything we want to be. Look at these phenomenal people performing,’ not really considering the ramifications of the psychological impact that would have on my trans sisters and not really thinking about the fact that, taken out of the context of a primarily queer environment in Portland and putting these performers in Walla Walla might be a little wild. They were having a ball, they were like, ‘This is crazy shit.’ They thought this was wild, living in Eastern Oregon or Eastern Washington. But it was probably, in retrospect, a little stupid in terms of safety to have them out there. But they were like, ‘This is great! This is defiant.’ They wanted to do it and come out and at the time it felt really great. It felt awesome. I think, same thing with my argument with Leslie Feinberg about Queer Eye, is like, any representation felt like some sort of visibility. And that was good. Of course I think now the beauty of our society is that in many areas we get to be more selective now and say ‘Hey you know, yes, while that’s true, there’s some types of representation that really play in to and continue the marginalization of certain communities, and perhaps we should be careful and considerate about when and where we engage,’ you know, so—little different.

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01:44:25.14 **Shay** You’re like, ‘who knows?’ [laughter] But yeah, so I mean—that I would imagine that happening. I know that’s some of the things I’ve seen on my own campus that I’m on. And I think also what I imagine is having the biggest impact on the community there is just the community itself, ever-evolving and changing and growing. We’ve got so many letters now in our alphabet soup. A lot of people add the plus because that just kind of helps out, but just there’s so many ways to identify, so many more ways to identify now than there ever have been before. And people’s understanding of those identities are so much higher than they’ve ever been before. So, I think that combination probably makes for a lot more unique issues than I ever saw, or ever could have dreamt of when I was there in terms of stuff that would have never crossed our minds as being problematic. Like for instance we had—you asking this, I think a very minor example but the drag culture and the DragFest night and what does that look like and what does it look like to have cisgender, heterosexual men dress up as women but leave their beards, right, and not in a gender-bending, reclaiming gender way, but rather ‘I’m a dude in a dress, let’s laugh at me’ way. It’s like those things—we were aware of that at a level but we didn’t really have a context to be thinking about that twenty years ago. Now we do. So, I have to imagine there’s so many more examples than that that are so much better that are now issues that we would never have even thought about. Which, like, if I were to go back now, with the knowledge I have now, looking at in my experience again it’d be like, ‘Oh my gosh, of course that was an issue, huge issues.’ We just never were even—just never even had the awareness

at the time. So, yeah, I think that's what happens when you're just are bringing in more people, more and more people who have a higher and higher level of awareness, education, experience, but also a wider and wider array of identities. You're going to find more and more areas of friction that need to be addressed, you know, that are problematic at the institutional level, and that's hard. [inaudible] It's exhausting. And what I guarantee is that the hidden labor components that students, staff, and faculty who are LGBTQ-identified are carrying has not changed. I would guarantee that those are still—that that weight is still sitting squarely on the shoulders of people from marginalized populations, including populations of color. I'm going to guess. I'll make an educated guess that that is the case.

*Excerpt from Interview with Elana Stone '06, Nov. 15<sup>th</sup>, 2019.*

00:44:52.29 **Stone** So, like DragFest to start with, is obviously something that had a lot of momentum behind it and a lot of tradition and excitement, was a big Coalition event each year. Also I came into Whitman knowing it was an event where people mostly straight, cis [cis-gendered] guys would take advantage of wearing the most horrendous outfits they could come up with and being really as drunk as possible to give an excuse for dressing the way that they did. And really, in a lot of ways, making a mockery of the event and the reason for having the event. So, there was certainly a lot discussion in Coalition and a lot of work on our part to come up with a way to honor the impetus behind DragFest and certainly the community. You know, specifically for drag and for queer and trans communities to have this really celebratory and awesome event but do it in a way that was a little bit less offensive or potentially offensive.

00:46:21.25 **Stone** So, I'm trying to think, I know we ended up doing—we started making DragFest a culmination of a week—a week of programming and events and education on campus. So that, our goal was that while obviously—you know, it wouldn't be perfect—it would be more of an opportunity to let people know what drag is and why it is really important and the history of drag and educate people about the difference between drag and performance and transgender identities. [pause] Also help people make better decisions about their actions so that—I'm sure that a lot of people didn't really think about how hurtful it might be for them to go act and dress in the way that they did in preparing for DragFest. So, being able to provide a little education and whether that was some social norming campaigns and posters and emails or whatever. If people weren't coming to sessions—usually if we had a big speaker, we would try to plan it for that week also. So,

really trying to make it more of a community-impact event but it was not without its issues that's for sure.

00:47:51.22 **Robson** Yeah, there was a lot of debate around it from what I could find, starting in the 2000s.

00:48:03.05 **Stone** Yeah, we were squarely in it, for sure. I don't know. I think I came down pretty firmly on the side of— there is still a lot of value to having an event like this if we can—like, I would rather keep it going and make it into a more positive community impact than get rid of it. if I were to approach it now, I don't know if I would feel the same way, but it felt like the thing to do, to just try to work with the resources at hand.

*Excerpt from Interview with Jed Schwendiman, June 21<sup>st</sup>, 2019.*

00:53:06.06 **Robson** There's a few things to sort of start wrapping up, but just some really broad thoughts. As someone who was in and around the Whitman community for a long time, what do you think were some of the big events or shifts that you can remember that you feel like really had an impact on the culture here?

00:53:32.24 **Schwendiman** [pause] That's a good question. I think some of the things we talked about earlier had a cumulative affect over time. It wasn't like the light just switched on one day. I think that the RA training—the "Sensitivity to Sexual Orientation" that was consistently done for years and years and years; the work that Sharon did at the Counseling Center to help people who were struggling with coming out; having alumni involved; establishing the David Nord Award and publicizing that, that was a big deal at first, it was— And so, building those traditions— DragFest, I don't know if you guys do DragFest anymore, it kinda reached a—at least in my time—it reached this pinnacle where it had become too successful almost and the LGBT students were questioning what the purpose was because it had become such a huge social—it was almost like a big frat party, right? So, they started to actually scale it back because they felt like they had lost control of the true meaning that was behind it initially. But I think those things—I don't see any big watershed moments, but I do see the steady cumulative building of some of these things and these traditions that have created the community that is here today.

*Excerpt from Interview with Bex MacFife '11, Nov. 21<sup>st</sup>, 2019.*

00:30:07.12 **MacFife** DragFest! I remember DragFest!

00:30:10.07 **Robson** Yeah, but—

00:30:11.14 **MacFife** Yeah, was that—oh and there was also the Tranny Road Show that came through. [Robson starts to respond] It had—Shawna Virago was the only name I can remember from it, but we brought—there was an artist troupe—there was one kid who juggled and a few singers and musicians that all identified as trans.

00:30:38.10 **Robson** I don't think I heard about that!

00:30:41.29 **MacFife** Yeah, that happened. I forgot about it until just now! That was a really cool performance and brought visibility to trans stuff. For DragFest, I felt like it was always pretty silly. I didn't necessarily identify it as a super queer space. More just like a gender play space. I also think that was a different group that organized that.

00:31:12.07 **Robson** Yeah, that was Coalition Against Homophobia.

00:31:17.03 **MacFife** Right. I remember them existing, but I don't really remember the difference too much. I know that GLBTQ was more support and social hang-out. That they were a little bit more activist-based, but I think a lot of the same people were involved in both, but I just know that I didn't plan any parties. I remember going to DragFest and having a really good time. Maybe drinking too much and maybe wrestling with someone on the lawn out front. That might have happened.

00:31:51.18 **Robson** That's fun!

00:31:51.18 **MacFife** Hypothetically. Yeah.