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Photo by Holly Falconer

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# Beyond trans tolerance and trans inclusion: Contributing to transformative spaces in an all-genders youth, live-in, substance-misuse programme

Vikki Reynolds in dialogue with James Kelly

**Vikki:** When *Context* invited me to talk about transformational work, I immediately thought of Peak House and your role as executive director. Peak House is a small, important gem of a program that's really been transformative in many youths' lives. We work alongside First Nations and indigenous communities, and with queer communities, to be educated by them and to be useful, safer and worthy of trust. The most exciting thing in the last decade has been transforming Peak House to be more open and useful to youth who are gender non-conforming. Your leadership as executive director, and your own path – specifically transitioning in your role as executive director – has been inspiring. Workers really are eager to get youth who are gender diverse or gender questioning into Peak House. It's not so much about their substance-misuse problems, but where youth might be honoured and safe-enough.

**James:** Thanks that's honouring, but this work is a continuation of work that's been happening long before I came to Peak House. It has a community reputation of being innovative and at the forefront of meeting the needs of young people and their families. A history of risk-taking and resistance positioned me to take on the things we're doing as a collective now.

**Vikki:** What are some of the historical pieces that helped to make more space for you to bring a fuller experience of your gender identity and this transformational work?

**James:** The first thing that comes to mind is our program manager, Wendy, who is a lesbian. About 20 years ago, she came out when it was very risky to do that in 'residential' care.

**Vikki:** She had worked at Peak House and was closeted for over five years. It was painful. She was not even safe-enough to be out with all of the staff. We're not imposing the need to come out on marginalised workers; that's a pretty white and moneyed imperative (Hammoud-Beckett, 2007), but Wendy wanted to be able to be safe-enough to be out at work.

**James:** At the time, it was a huge risk, especially as she was a sole-parent and didn't have access to structural power in the organisation.

**Vikki:** Peak House is a live-in program, and it was very risky to be queer, or gay, or lesbian and work in a house where youth slept and had bedrooms. Wendy did all the hard work required to come out and absolutely transformed the place. On her back as a lesbian single mom – we started to make more room for queer and questioning youth to see Peak House as a place where we might be safe-r. And that became our reputation.

**James:** Absolutely. One person can't make that kind of change. From an organisational perspective, other people need to get onboard. Peak House became a place where you can send queer youth; it's safe, or safe-r. Now we're just continuing that with gender diversity.

**Vikki:** And things move forward on the back of vulnerable folks. Queer youth changed the

programmes dramatically. It's a group that foments change, but we also have to realise that, while lots of people are in play in terms of making structural change, the risks are not equal (Reynolds, 2013). The fact you transitioned while you were in the position of executive director, is one of the things I talk about when I teach about Peak House, both as a metaphor and as a real, practical thing. Workers are blown away to hear that, and inspired by your courage and vision. Your being out in various ways has created much more space, not just for Peak House. The ramifications are bigger than we know.

**James:** In some ways, transitioning on the job was calculated and thought through, but I knew it was something I needed to do for myself. I thought about the ramifications on the program, both positive and potentially negative. I did think about cultural shift: *"What kind of difference is this going to make in the lives of young people and their families?"* I thought about my own professional safety, and the impact this may have on my career and my continued employment in the sector. My primary concern was that parents or caregivers siding with transphobia could obstruct youth who were non-binary, questioning or, trans young people, queer young people, from accessing us. One of my main concerns five years ago was, *"Would me being out as a trans man prevent young people from reaching our services?"* *"Would there be discrimination for people sending their young people to us?"* *"What would those preconceived notions be? Could I be seen as a possible threat or a risk in caring for young people?"* *"Would there be media attention that could be negative?"*

*Would my board be supportive? How would this impact funding? How would this impact me as a professional in the community? Could I be at risk of losing my job, or under scrutiny of my job? How would the staff team receive it? Would they be supportive? Yeah, there was a lot of thought that went into it and, at the same time, not a lot of decision making around it.*

**Vikki:** You've said you felt there was a part of the decision process that was about what you needed to do personally.

**James:** Yeah, I was determined to transition and come out, and I was hoping I would do both while still being employed. But it was happening either way. I was quite intentional about trying to have it be the most positive outcome for myself, and for Peak. I consulted. I talked to you and others about wanting to set the program up for a success, but also create enough 'generosity of spirit' that folks could come alongside in good ways. I think we all

did a good job of moving through those spaces in beautiful and imperfect ways.

**Vikki:** Many programmes talk about being trans-inclusive. Some places are possibly trans-tolerant now because a bunch of us have banged on the doors and dragged all kinds of stuff in through the backdoors, so people realise they have to be trans-tolerant.

**James:** Or they have to say they're trans inclusive.

**Vikki:** Yeah, because that's where we're moving in terms of a social justice movement. But the difference between trans-inclusion and trans-tolerance is massive, right? And there are limitations to inclusivity: being included isn't what trans youth want. That's a pretty low bar. Justice-doing isn't about inclusion, it's a different project, right?

**James:** Yeah, doing a workshop and changing bathroom signs doesn't equate to an inclusive environment. It doesn't mean they will respond to oppression, to transphobia. It doesn't mean they will take action to make it a safer place. Some programmes saying, *"We're trans-inclusive"* or *"Trans people welcome,"* are binary programmes.

**Vikki:** What kinds of shifts, or differences do you think have been made for gender-diverse youth connected to you publicly taking that space and that location and shifting the culture at Peak House? Because as therapeutic supervisor, I've witnessed deeply rooted influences in the way we work.

**James:** It starts with the team, from education and training, to signage, to visibility, to staff-hiring practices. What our program forms look like. Advocacy that we've had to do with the pharmacy that works with Peak, or the extended health benefits that our staff access. It's not a big deal to change intake forms to be gender inclusive until you have a youth who sees it as a big deal – they notice it's inclusive, and that makes all the difference. We've changed the groups we lead. We do something called Healthy Tuesday, which primarily focuses on health and wellbeing, but has a lot to do with sexual health and relationships.

We re-wrote all of that with gender inclusive language. We're doing sexual education in the house that's completely gender inclusive in terms of the use of language, which is a tricky thing to undertake, but so important. There's been some radical shifts within the program

**Vikki:** When you say Peak House changed the forms to be gender inclusive, it was more than inclusive because it's not a new category of trans. It's this expansive space where everybody's not required to get boxed. I'm thinking what kind of changes that makes

for youth and for the program in ways that aren't actually about gender identity but about interlocking sites of oppressions. When you make things better for gender non-binary youth, you make more space for youth struggling with other oppressions, right? Like racism, colonisation, poverty. You tackle it on any front and, as soon as we start to shift, when folks who are marginalised carve out space, they make so much more liberatory space for others. Dean Spade talks about it as social justice trickling up (2011).

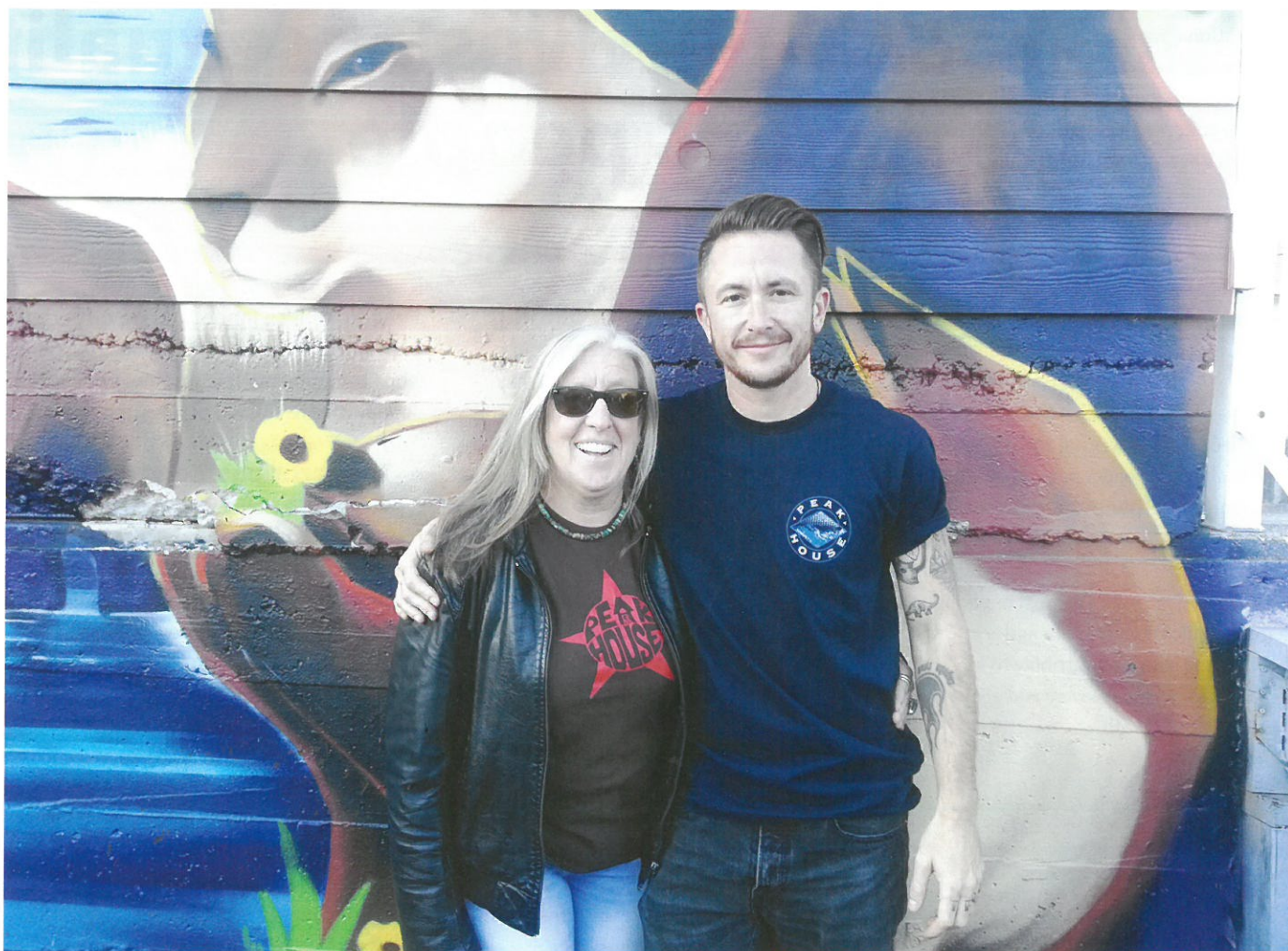
**James:** I feel very intentional about being out at work. On the Peak House website, I mention I'm a trans person. And it's not a conversation I have every day, but I use the fact that I'm in a privileged position in a way that's useful. I have a lot of privilege. I'm white – I'm male identified, I live in Canada, I came out at work, I kept my job, I was celebrated in it, I was able to create some real shifts within my work environment that were not only meaningful to me, but meaningful to my values and the values of Peak House. I also have points of marginalisation and oppression. It's important for me to recognise the ways I benefit from my privilege and try to use it in a way that's useful. One of those ways is to be out and visible at work, which makes it easier for youth. Several young people I've met with at Peak House have said, *"You're the only other trans person I've met"*. And what an honour they feel safe-enough to share that with us. There are not a lot of out trans people in program leadership, so I want to make sure youth have access to seeing positive role-models living positive lives. I had a meeting with a trans-identified youth who said, *"I came here because all my counsellors said someone in the higher-ups was Trans and I'd be safer here"*. I hope we're achieving that as an organisation. It's the reason we take personal and professional risks when it is safe-enough to do so, to help create visibility and more inclusive spaces.

**Vikki:** I've been at Peak House almost 25 years and I've appreciated the vision you have for the place. Where do you think things might actually go – what do you think might also be possible at Peak House?

**James:** My hope is that, in some way, we can serve as a model to other organisations of what is possible, in terms of an all-gender program.

**Vikki:** Yeah, remember when we started doing a co-ed young men and young women program? *That was risky.*

**James:** Yeah, then when we had openly queer youth, *"Well, how are you doing that?"* We're an imperfect model, but working to show it's possible to remove gender binaries and still



keep safety, make places safer for all young people, and successfully operate an all-gender program, an all-inclusive program, regardless of what points of marginalisation(s) you're trying to help ease for people. That is my hope.

**Vikki:** In terms of possibility, how does this make more transformational and liberatory spaces of justice (Lacey, 2005)? When marginalised folks like yourself – like you said, you have privilege, but you have points of oppression – carve out space, there's more space for others. I'm wondering about how the hard work everybody's done to shift the culture at Peak House, in terms of gender diversity, sexual orientation, and diversity, can be used to make more just spaces for indigenous folks, to acknowledge white supremacy and racism? Taking on oppression on all fronts. This requires we face the discomfort that is required to address privilege and actually do justice in practice (Kumashiro, 2004; Heron, 2005; Reynolds, 2014). It's exciting, because we start to co-create more spaces of justice, right?

**James:** Again, that is the history of Peak House, long before I came. This piece of work is a perfect fit in the continuum of work the house has done and will continue to do.

In terms of what's next or what's coming, everything is next and everything is coming: right now, our work is to address white privilege. That has been influenced by the space created for trans and gender-diverse folks and at costs to racialised people. Creating space and openness there, is creating space and openness in other areas. We've got some training coming for our team to look at body politics, and fat politics. We're working as a team and with youth around oppressive languages and ideas around bodies, body shaming, fat-phobia.

**James:** If you have the opportunity to be in a privileged position, please use it, especially if you're in a position where youths benefit, or you have the opportunity to mentor youth. Not everyone has that or is in a safe-enough place to use it but, when we do, it's so important. We often take for granted everyone is as informed or has access to the same information as us. It is not the case. I often chat with youth from rural communities, for instance, and they inform me they have never seen a trans person, or had the opportunity to meet another person like themselves. Not everyone has internet access. Never underestimate the impact you

have on someone's life. It can be a two-second interaction that you think is nothing. You might have thought you had this fantastic check-in with someone for two hours, but they might never remember; it didn't stick for them like it did for you. But that one minute interaction, where you said something positive or negative, can really stay with people. So, I think that is one piece. And the other piece is for folk to shake up their organisations. The way things have been done doesn't need to be the way that they are. They don't need to follow our model, but there's a lot of creative thinkers out there. There's a lot of ways to do things differently that create more space for everybody.

**Vikki:** I teach a lot and people get inspired when I speak about Peak House. But the goal is not for everybody to come try to work here. We're all not just trying to serve folks, right? Or accommodate youth to lives of oppression. We are actually committed to the project of transforming our societies (Kivel, 2007). The goal is for people to align with those collective ethics and start where they are, because it's all interlocking oppressions. Take on whichever one you've got some access to power to shift and change – that transformative or

organisational work, which is what I think you have really done at Peak House. Thanks so much James for being vulnerable, and bringing your own struggles to this interview.  
**James:** It's been an honour, thanks.

### Acknowledgments

This work occurred on the unsundered Indigenous territories of the Musqueam, Skwxw7mesh-ulh Uxwuhmixw (pronounced Squamish) & Tsleil-Waututh nations.

### Dedication

We dedicate this writing and on-going work to all of the gender non-conforming, questioning and Trans youth we work alongside who question, challenge, educate and transform us. We honour the strength and moral courage required to trust us enough to share their identities with us, and acknowledge the silencing pain we contribute to for all of the youth for whom we were and are not safe-enough to be out with.

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# Narratives of sexuality trans people

## Jos Twist

### Let's start at the beginning

I was 31 years old when I began my own gender-role transition. Whilst I may have been well into adulthood, I had always longed to embark on this particular adventure; yet there were factors present in my relationships that I felt were holding me back. In the main part, though not exclusively, I have dated and had relationships with men. When I told many of them that, despite the body I had, I did not identify as a woman but experienced myself as more masculine, they would often tell me that our relationship would have to end as they themselves were not gay. Consequently, for many years, I believed I needed to choose between holding and expressing a more masculine identity or having relationships with men: that if I made the commitment to transition, I would have to come to terms with the idea of being alone.

In the Autumn of 2012, I met a man who welcomed my story: who opened his heart to the possibility he could love me the way I was, and that others would love me too. It did not matter to him whether I was a man, a woman, or something different altogether; what mattered to him was deeper than gender. The gift of his love helped me nurture the courage I needed to leap into the unknown.

This is a narrative which is familiar to many trans people, with the message that your partner will leave you if you transition being embedded in both medical and community discourses (Lev, 2004). Whilst it is a reality for some, many partnerships do continue through the process of gender transition (Meier *et al.*, 2013). With gender and sexuality being discursively dependent (Sanger, 2010), many partners of trans people ask themselves, "What does my partner's transition mean for my own identity?" (for example, Joslin-Roher & Wheeler, 2009). If their partner moves across the lines of gender, does their sexual orientation shift too? In order for the trans person's gender identity to be validated by their partner, is it necessary for the non-transitioning partner's sexual identity also to change? If identities

are social entities, formed by how others see us and treat us in the world, is it the others who gaze upon our relationships who get to define who we are?

### The participants and method

Influenced by my own experiences of relational sexual and gender identities, I was curious about how others had navigated this process. Between October 2015 and March 2016, I interviewed six cisgender women ('cisgender' refers to someone who remains in the gender they were assigned at birth) who had been partnered with trans people through the course of their transition. In the context of trans identities, the term 'transition' refers to moving from the gender one was assigned at birth to a different gender role. This is often the 'opposite' gender, yet not exclusively, with an increasing number of people embracing a range of non-binary gender identities. 'Non-binary' is an umbrella term used for a range of gender experiences and identities that fall outside of the binary construction of gender (Barker & Richards, 2015). The process of transition is unique to the individual and often, but not always, includes a combination of social and physical changes. Social aspects can include a change in name, pronouns, identity documents, style and dress. Physical transition involves changing the body with the use of hormones and/or surgery.

To be eligible for the study, participants were required to have been together for at least six months before their partner started to transition, and at least a year after this date. The start of transition was self-defined by the participants and included a range of social (change of name and pronouns) and physical (starting hormones) changes. Five of the relationships were ongoing at the time of interview, with the relationships varying between 20 months and 47 years. All of the participants resided in the UK, and all were white. Their ages ranged from 35 to 71. In terms of the trans partners (who were not interviewed), one identified as a trans man, one as non-binary (assigned male at birth),