

Title: Interview with Bryant Varney

Date: July 23, 2022

Location: Zoom meeting

Subject: NMU LGBTQ+ Alumni

START OF INTERVIEW

KR (Katarina Rothhorn): It is currently Saturday, July 23, 2022. My name is Katarina Rothhorn, and I'm recording from my home in Lansing, Michigan.

HB (Hayden Bruzewski): I'm Hayden Bruzewski and I'm recording from Onaway, Michigan.

KR: We are here with Bryant Varney. Thanks for doing this interview with us. Could you please state your full name, pronouns, and current location?

BV (Bryant Varney): My full name is Bryant Steven Varney and my pronouns are he/him.

KR: And where are you recording from?

BV: Negaunee, Michigan

KR: Awesome. And can you talk about when and where you were born?

BV: I was born in Escanaba, Michigan [on] March 11th, 1968.

KR: Did you grow up there as well? Were you raised in the UP (Upper Peninsula)?

BV: I was raised in the UP. That's my mother's hometown. My dad is from a tiny hovel called Foster City in Dickinson County, and his parents had a farm there. So, I'm not sure why... I think I was born in Escanaba because there was no hospital near there, except for the one in Dickinson County. So I was actually raised in Foster City in Dickinson County in the Upper Peninsula.

KR: Great, and why did you choose to go to NMU?

BV: Eighteen years later, I chose NMU because NMU came to our high school to get us to become interested in attending there. Plus, the valedictorian and salutatorian were so neck to neck in grade point average that they decided to award us a double valedictorian scholarship to go to NMU, so that was a big motivator. I didn't have wheels so I needed to be brought to school, so it was a number of factors, but all in all having grown up in the tiny hovel of Foster City, I thought moving to Marquette was moving to the big metropolis at the time.

KR: Yeah.

HB: Great. What year did you graduate from NMU and what did you go for, for your degree?

BV: Well, I started at NMU in mathematics and computer science. Computer science was a very new — it's still not a department — it was a new discipline, I guess you would call it. But I wasn't very happy in those classes, and my parents wanted me to be sellable, or marketable, and I could easily get a job by taking the high maths courses. So, my second year in, I was struggling with my identity, and I decided to go into elementary education, which was kind of the next best thing to library science. My heart was really into cataloging. I'm very analytical and I like to sort, I'm OCD to the max, so it really spoke to me. But NMU did not offer a library education degree, so I went into elementary education and I enjoyed that immensely. So I graduated in 1990. Sorry, what was that question, about what year did I graduate from NMU?

KR: Yep.

HB: That's correct.

BV: It was December of 1990.

KR: Awesome. And can you talk a little bit about the difference between Marquette and Foster City? You talked about it as kind of like going to the big city — what were your initial impressions of that, and what was that initial experience of going to Marquette like for you?

BV: Well, my parents literally went into town once a month for supplies; that's how remote we were. I did spend summers in Escanaba, which is a little bit smaller than Marquette. Marquette is where I let loose, that's where I was on my own to be myself and come into my own. I felt like a lonely satellite growing up. I was very much a loner. I didn't relate to many people, felt like a lonely satellite. And sometimes today I still do. There were no role models for me, at all. You know, that was the days before "Will & Grace," "Ellen," and "RuPaul's Drag Race". So, role models were few.

I would say my teachers at school were my biggest role models. Funny enough, and I hope I'm not segwaying too much, two months ago, I learned that my favorite high school teacher had moved to Marquette to be closer to her siblings. She's 79 years old, and I was told about a 50 year reunion for our high school. It was built 50 years ago and all classes were invited to attend. This favorite teacher, her brother was the head of NMU's education department a while back and he still lives in Marquette. So I reached out on Facebook, and indirectly got a hold of her to let her know about the 50 year reunion and said, "you have to go because you'll be the star attraction at the reunion." And because she had just had a mastectomy and was going into chemotherapy, she was kind of weary of being around people, but in the end she decided she would go under the conditions that we would have lawn chairs outside the building and we would be the official greeters. So it worked out well, and she was one of those that really mattered to me during my formative years. So it's really nice, all these years later — just a month

ago—to be reunited and have her all to myself for an hour driving down and an hour driving back to get all the inside scoop on the other teachers. Funny enough, my opinions of other teachers, she shared the same opinions on. So, it's funny that a young person's opinion could be very similar to an older adult's opinion.

KR: Yeah, that is so special. I'm really glad you got to have that experience.

BV: Yeah, funny enough, all these years later I would never have guessed she's one of the greeters [at NMU's Northern Lights dining]—she swipes their card or taps their cards or makes sure that they do something so they can use the dining service. Who would have known that all these years later that she and I both would be employees at the university?

KR: Look at that. Yeah, that is quite cool.

HB: So while you were at NMU, what was your relationship like with your sexual orientation and how were you figuring that out while you were at NMU?

BV: Back in the 80s, so I was at NMU from Fall '86 to Fall '90. It really wasn't talked about; there was no official organization. There was no ALLIES. If anything, there were lots of religious groups on campus, and I actually got involved in one because it was a way for me to make new friends, have life experiences with other people that I had been wanting. It was a way to, I guess, express other facets of who I am. Sexuality, obviously, may be very important to other people, but for me, it was always sort of less important or the least important part of my personality.

Growing up, I made a few friends and I would say they also were what we would consider, certainly not the popular kids. To be popular you had to be athletic and none of my friends were athletic. We were nerds and geeks. A lot of us ended up being gay later in life, such as myself. Funny enough, I would say the majority of us have maintained close ties through it all.

KR: That's great. Can you talk a little bit more about the religious group that you were involved with when you were on campus, and what impact that had on your experience?

BV: I can't remember what it was called; I think it's still on campus. It's nondenominational. I can't remember the name of it. (Editor's note: It was called "Intervarsity.")

KR: No worries.

BV: We met in the basement of the dorms that are now gone. I lived in Payne Hall; it was fun to tell people that I lived in Payne ("pain") for the two years that I lived at NMU. That was, "P-a-y-n-e" not "p-a-i-n," but still, it was fun to say.

I'm actually good friends with one of the members of that group. She resides in Iron River, and she has an antique store. She graduated from NMU [and] she was a high school chemistry

teacher for a while, but like so many people, it's easy to get burnt out as an educator and she moved on to other fun things, where she was not under pressure and getting paid very little.

KR: Yeah, so since you said that your identity as a gay man was not at the forefront of your mind during your collegiate experience, did you ever feel the need to come out as a gay man or was that something that you just kind of kept in the back of your mind?

BV: I definitely wanted to meet another human being who was like me. It was extremely difficult since this was before the internet. I guess we had to read people's personalities. I guess I was drawn to people who were more colorful, people who were more expressive in their dress. So that probably was the best way I could get to know people, and I didn't actually even admit to being gay until probably my junior status.

While I was in the dorms it just wasn't a good idea for me. I was struggling enough as a student academically. However, having said that, my fourth semester at NMU, I ended up [being] roommates with a guy who was in the Reserve Officers Training Corps (ROTC), and we got it on a few times, as roommates. He was worse than me. He just could not deal with his orientation at all, and he actually became verbally and physically abusive, and then once he graduated from NMU he entered the service. I know he ended up in San Diego, so is that the Navy? I think it might be the Navy. And then he got a dishonorable discharge and entered the gay porn industry.

KR: Imagine that. Wow, so did that experience in your fourth semester influence your coming out experience or being able to admit to yourself that you were a gay man? How did that experience really impact the rest of your college career?

BV: You know, coming out is so different today than what label you're giving it, for my day. I can tell you this, coming out to me, it was very personal. I only came out to very select individuals who mattered to me, starting with the people I least liked in my world, and those two people were my parents. Most people find it extremely difficult to come out to their parents, but for me, it was like one more stinger that I could throw at them for the horrible upbringing I had, and we won't get into that, that's another soap opera all together. But, my dad struggled with mental illness, he was one hundred percent a disabled American veteran. My mother, she struggled with mental health issues as well, and I was her punching bag in high school. So, I think that really added to my insecurities as a person able to be himself and self confident.

I suppose you're wondering, 'When did I finally feel comfortable being myself?' Well, even into my full time career at NMU, early on during the 90s I was still cautioned to be careful about my sexual orientation. One time when I was open about who and what I was to one of my students, who I felt comfortable with. And a situation occurred where the student wasn't doing what they were supposed to be doing. I called him out on it, and then he went straight to Cohodas to make a complaint that he not only felt mistreated, but he felt extremely uncomfortable with the fact that I had come out to him. So, in 1995 or 6, I think it was 1996, it really personally affected me, because I thought, 'wow, I'm blacklisted for being myself at NMU.' The person who was the

Title IX Coordinator at HR at the time, was required to take these types of complaints seriously. Thankfully, I had people backing me at Olson Library, where I worked. My boss at the time, she's now retired a long time ago now, Carolyn Myers, she was a good support through that. At the time, [my student] was house-sitting for Carolyn and she said, 'I will never have him house-sit for me again, after that.'

That was very early on in my career. I'm now 30 years on, so that's 28 years ago. I've long since got passed all that. Sue Menhenick, she was the person who had to write me up, and I had to sign an agreement to never do that again, never talk about my sexual orientation.

KR: That is very impactful and definitely impacts the way you think about yourself, I'm sure. Are there any other experiences especially, as a student or as a teacher, where you remember not being comfortable expressing your identity, or having homophobia that felt maybe suppressing in the Marquette area?

BV: The only homophobia I experienced would have been kids driving down the street looking for attention, they yell slurs just to get people's attention, you know. They obviously could care less about how it affects others, but I take that with a grain of salt. It hasn't happened to me in probably fifteen, twenty years, but you know how kids can be. Flash forward all these years later, I'm in a relationship. I feel comfortable holding hands on the streets of Negaunee. I'm at that point in my life where I'm not going to edit my life for anyone. I'm very confident with who I am. I feel like if everyone else has the right to love and to demonstrate it, I feel like it should be demonstrated everywhere as much as possible. Because the more I demonstrate it, the more people will feel comfortable.

KR: Yeah, thank you so much for sharing that.

HB: All right. Another question. Do you think that the rural community surrounding NMU impacted your experience anyway, versus if you would have went to college in an urban area, let's say?

BV: You know, I think that was the easy way for a lot of homosexuals in the 80s, they gravitated to urban areas. And I thought, there are three things that I wanted. I wanted a comfortable home. I wanted a job that I really felt challenged me in positive ways, that I would go home at the end of the day feeling like I've really accomplished something and I'm appreciated for what I'm doing. And then the third was, you know to have love in my life, but I always kept love as the least important.

I fell in love with Marquette while I lived there, going to school there. There was a brick house on the corner, where Fourth Street curves into Presque Isle opposite St. Michael's Church, and I thought that was my dream home and someday I'm going to live there. Well, that day came and from 2004 to 2008 that's where I lived. Although I didn't get my degree in library science, I ended up working at a library and doing what I absolutely loved as an audio-videophile growing up. Although it wasn't an audiovisual (AV) division, we had Instructional Media Services, that

was the name of our area, and we supported classrooms. Back in late '93, before I got hired, they split AV into academic and non-academic because at that time, it had very limited resources, very limited AV equipment, and faculty were complaining that preference was given to paying customers, the event side of AV. So that's when my position was created. Funny enough, 25 years later, we merged once again so all of us are under one division, and it just makes perfect sense because I was kind of like a one man show on the academic side. I was needing ITs and AVs assistants more and more. So now that we're all together there will be a much better service for our classrooms. Sorry to be off track.

KR: No, that was great. Thank you.

BV: So you may need to ask me that question again, about rural communities around NMU? What?

HB: Yeah, how did that impact your experience, going to college and being a gay man?

BV: Are you talking about where I live presently in Negaunee versus, like Foster City where I grew up?

KR: I think that's up to you to kind of determine.

BV: See, I don't know. Yes, I would say that the Marquette area is a bit more liberal than rural areas, but it just depends who you know and who you hang out with and where you go. In Negaunee here, halfway down the street there's some Trumpster, "Don't Tread On Me" flags but I didn't let that stop me from getting to know my neighbors. And, my first year here I made sure to let everyone know that I'm a kind person. I brought plates of goodies to pretty much all the residents around me. I tried to friend them on Facebook and whatever. It was a big mistake for a couple of them because they were so incensed and so venomous over Biden becoming president, that I just had to shut down a few of them. But I try to surround myself with positivity. That's been my goal my whole adult life. I don't care where I live in the world, I think there are good people everywhere you go, rural or urban. It's an important goal of mine to seek out positivity and if you surround yourself with positivity it really makes you a healthier, happier person. People get so bogged down with all the negativity in this world, the BS. I like to be aware and know what is going on, but I don't like to let it get the best of me, as some of my friends have. My best friend in the whole wide world took his own life last year, and I've never experienced that before. And it had nothing to do with his sexual orientation. Life is short, we have to live it the best we can, and part of that is not letting people dictate who and what we are.

KR: Well said, thank you. You did touch on this a little bit already, but can we go back to what your housing experience was like as a queer student living on campus? Maybe those first two years?

BV: My first year I had surprise roommates where I had no idea who I was going to end up with, and I didn't like either of them. We were so mismatched. The first one was an adult cry baby,

very sensitive. He had to eat at a specific time, had to go to sleep at a specific time, very sensitive to noise and smells and where my stuff was. So in my second year, I decided to pay extra for a single, and I hate to say it, although I was in a quiet hall, I lived in a party house. You know at the end of the school year students purge their furniture, and I bought someone's bunk bed. So I was able to sleep eight people in my single dorm and I got written up a few times for being a little noisy. I was the first, in my hall at least, maybe one of the few on campus, to have a CD boombox. There were plenty of people who had record players, but compact discs were a new thing when I started school.

KR: And you had one, that's pretty cool.

BV: I lived in the suite where all of the hockey players lived and if you know anything about hockey players, they can be quite aggressive. And by then I had dated a couple of cosmetology students, so I had the tools of the trade and I had some skills.

Back up, my mother used to cut our hair when I was a kid and she would give us those old fashioned - the kind of haircuts that are really attractive today, you know, the high and tight, she gave us those haircuts - but it was at a time when all the guys wore, well you've seen *Stranger Things*, you know longer hair down to here. And so, my brother started asking me to cut his hair so mom wouldn't butcher him. And you know at that time, the only association at school was the Nazis. People thought we had Nazi haircuts.

My brother was my guinea pig, and like I said I did date some cosmetologists, so to get the hockey players on my good side, I gave them free haircuts.

KR: Nice. That's really a fun story, I like that a lot. And then after those first two years, you moved off campus or were you living in an apartment?

BV: When I became a junior, first I lived in an apartment with the first cosmetologist that I dated - we were just friends the first two years - and that would be the apartments across from the high school.

KR: Okay, yeah.

BV: Then from there I went and lived in the apartments on Presque Isle. But before moving there, a group of us were walking past those Presque Isle apartments one evening, and first we were accosted, but then we were actually pummeled, a few of us. I was able to get free of the guy who was attempting to beat us all up and then they were caught by the police. And the guy who had pinned me to the ground for a bit, he ended up in jail. He ended up taking his own life. So, that was interesting. Obviously, some anger issues. I don't think that we were beat up for our sexual orientation. We were probably just beat up for being different. We looked like easy targets. How dare we be pacifists.

KR: Do you think that was fairly common, for people to be kind of harassed on the streets for being different during that time in Marquette? Or I'm sure it's everywhere.

BV: I think that the world was definitely more cliquish. I think people were less accepting in general. And that's why I think we were more unified as a group. We had big dreams. We were all Anglophiles. We loved British bands and the British scenes, the New Wave movement of the 80s and most of us actually ended up visiting Britain after college. I actually incorporated it into my degree. I did my student teaching in Britain. So it was a giant step going from Foster City to Marquette, and then another giant step going from Marquette to London.

KR: London. Wow, yeah, really big step. That's really cool.

HB: All right. We have another question for you. Was there a particular event, moment, person, I know you talked about some people that were important in your formative years, but that shaped your view of life as a gay man while you were at NMU?

BV: My biggest role models definitely were teachers both in high school and a few at NMU. Christie Slavick was an education professor. She handled some of the elementary ed curriculum, specifically the reading, language aspect of it. I idolized her. I just loved her positivity, her elegance. I wanted to make a difference the way she was. I wanted the confidence that she seemed to ooze and I think I still struggle with confidence all these years later. I think I've come out of my shell quite a bit, especially when I went into student teaching. When you are forced to be a role model for students, you can't help but think of others and not yourself.

Being an elementary education major, one of the final courses we had for going into student teaching actually touched on being out as a teacher, and it was very much frowned upon in the late '80s. And so when I went to student teach, I was completely in the closet. I was not an out man. It's funny how you can not just exist, you can actually thrive without identifying, but I feel like there's always gonna be something lacking in one's life. I've since had a supervisor who I feel is deep in the closet. I hope he watches this. You know who you are. I feel bad for that type because I feel like there's an underlying bitterness and almost envy. Because I've brought boyfriends to work, celebrating life, you know? Whether we're going to his family's gathering or my family's gathering, or just showing them around the office, that kind of thing. Anyway, I'm off topic a little bit.

You're talking about role models. It's funny, role models don't necessarily need to be of your own sexual orientation. I don't know what else to say about that. Being kind of an insular personality, I didn't rely much on role models. I was so disappointed in the ones that should have been my biggest role models, which were my parents, I just developed my own version of what life should be based on my own life experiences. You know a good person from a bad person and you look at the traits of the good and embrace those. I guess it's more of the characteristics than actual people that I pull from.

KR: Absolutely, yeah. Well said, thank you. And we're coming to the end of our questions here, I guess. Are there any other memories of the gay community or really just experiences or stories that really stand out and or are core memories of your personal experience at NMU?

BV: Okay, yeah I do have a couple. I was just telling my partner, I remember I got bored in the dorms and I took yellow highlighter and I highlighted my eyelids and then I was supposed to meet a friend. We were gonna go to the record store on Third Street, and I forgot that I had put highlighter on and I actually left the building and everywhere I went, I had visible yellow eyelids. The person that I met up with was heterosexual and uncomfortable with the very idea of a person being in drag or being gay, and I heard about it later and it just cracks me up to this day that somebody could be that affected by something so silly as that.

I also remember there was an icon of the day Tammy Faye Bakker she would always paint really thick black eyeliner, mascara on her face, and one day I took Wite-Out - you know how quickly whiteout dries - I just kept making my eyelashes bigger and bigger and bigger and until I had big white eyelashes. And I only did that for friends, I didn't accidentally go out in public like that.

But I do remember my first experience, trying to identify with somebody as gay. One of the big bands of the mid-80s was Duran Duran, and their keyboardist was Nick Rhodes and he was very androgynous. And so I told my friend Mike - we were both completely in the closet - but I said something about, I think I just said 'I would do him,' just to see what he would say, and he got so clingy after that and I forgot why. And he basically took that as I was coming out to him, by saying that I would do him. I guess those are the fun ones.

But most of me identifying as a gay man came at the very end of my tenure at NMU. I dated a second cosmetologist, who I actually dated for three years, and that person saw me through my student teaching experience. So this is really special to me. This was the era of writing physical letters. This is before emails and texts. So while I was in London, and I was up in Birmingham doing my student teaching, we had an exchange of letters, at least one per week. I still have all of them to this day.

Now back in 2013, he took his life. We were no longer together, and I did go to his memorial service and share it with everybody that I have all these lasting memories. I probably should go through them at some point because I think I would learn a little more about myself. Funny enough, when you live as long as I have, the person you were at age 20 and the person you are at age 54 are really different. I mean you've got the same underlying characteristics, but we really do grow over time.

You know, they come to the surface in weird ways like we're getting ready for a wedding and I still have clothes from high school in my closet. I just crossed the threshold, those pandemic pounds have made it kind of impossible to wear these articles of clothing, so I'm finally going to probably purge them. But you look at an article of clothing and there's so many memories attached to those, the struggles you had and the celebrations you had during those years.

So, I know you guys are younger, you have a long life ahead of you. It's amazing to me how quickly life does pass. It's important for us now to be our authentic selves, here and now. And if you have a dream, you should pursue it 120%. I know that's not a real figure, but I can't stress that enough.

When I look at the friends of mine who have since passed and why, I feel very fortunate to have lived as long as I have. I know people live into their 80s and 90s these days, but for the gay community, it's not as easy. It really isn't. It may be getting easier; I still feel like there's a long road ahead of us. As you know, Roe vs. Wade has really made us rethink our freedoms and rights as US citizens. We got a great taste of it in the last, how many years has it been since gay marriage became legal? Eight years ago?

KR: Something like that.

HB: 2015

BV: Was it '15? Okay. Wow, yeah. We've got to fight. We all have to unify and we have to fight, and we have to be good role models for everyone around us. So that's what I do. I'm involved with my local beautification committee and I'm going to go door to door. Negaunee is not as big as Marquette, and anyone who has even the slightest bit of landscaping to their yard, I'm going to come knock on their door and have a conversation with them.

KR: Excellent. Yeah, that was fantastic. Thank you. And you pretty much answered our last question, which was, what wisdom would you like to share with the current gay student and LGBTQ+ student community?

Is there anything else? I know you've got a lot of stories and a lot of history there. Is there anything else that comes to mind that you'd like to share at this time? I think we've covered most of the questions that we wanted to ask you at this point.

BV: I think that's it, if I have any fleeting thoughts afterwards, I may shoot you an addendum email.

KR: Perfect. That's great. Thank you so much.