

I Grew Out of That Place

Michelle Esther O’Brien (MB), Cecilia Gentili (CG)

In this wide-ranging interview, Cecilia Gentili reflects on the relationships and experiences that inform her story of struggle, resilience, and joy. Cecilia recounts her childhood and adolescence in Gálvez, Argentina, describing complex family dynamics and early experiences with gender nonconformity and transphobia. Cecilia’s journey also includes years in Miami and New York City facing addiction, homelessness, incarceration, and life under threat of deportation as an undocumented immigrant. Finally, she considers her professional success as an organizer and advocate for the trans community and beyond.

MB Hello, my name is Michelle O’Brien and I will be having a conversation with Cecilia Gentili for the New York City Trans Oral History Project in collaboration with the New York Public Library’s Community Oral History Project. This is an oral history project centered on the experiences of trans identifying people. It is June 9, 2017, and this is being recorded in the offices of Gay Men’s Health Crisis. Hello.

CG Hi, how are you?

MB I’m doing very well. How are you feeling today?

CG A little tired, but good. I’m excited about doing this, and I think it’s a great project.

MB Tell me about your job here.

CG Well, I’m the Director of Policy here at GMHC. I do everything that has to do with making sure that changes in policy or implementation of policies in a city level or in a state level, and at a national level, are the best policies for what we believe is the right of different communities like the HIV community, women, immigrants, trans people, people that use drugs, sex workers—those are all the good things we believe in, we just make sure that everything that has to do with policy is relevant to what we believe is right. So, that’s kind of what I do.

MB I’m going to ask you some questions about your life up to this point, and if we can get to it, I’d love to hear a lot more about your job. So, where did you grow up?

CG I grew up in the city of Gálvez, in the state of Santa Fe in the nation of Argentina. The Republic of Argentina.

MB And when were you born?

CG I was born on January 31, of 1972, which was a very hot summer, sweaty day. And I celebrate it now here usually with snow to my knees, which doesn’t make sense to me yet. After so many years living here, I still can’t put my birthday with the cold.

MB What was your family like? What kind of work did they do?

CG My family, I had a father that was a butcher—

MB Did he own a shop or was he an employee?

CG He owned a shop, and he also had a small farm, and in that farm, he would have cows that he would then send to be slaughtered, and sold the meat. My mother, until I was about seven years old, was a cook in a men’s school. And then she was a cleaning lady in a music school. She seems to excel at ironing, so she would iron for some rich folks that needed somebody to iron clothes.

MB What was your first memory?

CG I’m forgetting my brother. I have a brother who is seven years older than me, and he still lives in Argentina. My first memory was at my grandmother’s house, where I would spend week-ends and holidays, and my first memory is a tangerine tree. It’s me playing under a tangerine tree and going up the tangerine tree and eating tangerines and everything that was around that tangerine tree.

MB Did it smell?

CG Like nothing else in the world. It is my favorite smell. Tangerines and orange, also. Kind of like, citrus is my favorite smell. It may have something to do with that. The tangerine tree was an amazing place to play and have fun as a child.

MB What were you like as a child?

CG I was terrible, and I was lonely. I was a child that really enjoyed playing by herself, and I think it had to do with the fact that I kind of realized at a very early age that other children didn’t want to play with me because my gender issues, I guess? So, I made a clear decision that I would play by myself. Kind of picturing a child playing by themselves may sound kind of sad, but I was a very happy child all the time. I don’t know if many children do this, but I was known for eating dirt. And that wasn’t a good thing for my mom and my grandmother. Everybody kind of freaked out because I would be eating dirt.

MB They got mad at you?

CG They would get really mad at me, and at the time it was the ’70s. There wasn’t so many directions about what was okay to do. So, I would get spanked a lot for eating dirt, and other things.

MB You mentioned that other children didn’t like you because of your gender.

CG Yes.

MB What was your gender like at that time? How did it come out?

CG Well, another part of my first memory is that when I was talking about my grandma’s house and the tangerine tree, I think I was around four years old, I was being kicked out of the girl’s bathroom. One day I went to school and then they told me, “don’t come to class. You have to go to the principal’s office.” And even if you’re five, you know that the principal’s office is some shit that’s going down, and that you did something wrong. I was very scared, and I have a clear memory of walking there thinking, “What happened, why am I going to the principal’s office?” And I remember being little and reaching for the doorknob, and having to make an effort, to just push and open it. I saw the principal, my teacher, my mother, and these two women on each side that after the fact I learned were a psychologist and a psychiatrist. We had a meeting where they showed me pictures of what I know now was female and male genitalia, and they asked me which one was mine. I kind of chose the one that was a penis, because that was the one that looked like mine. They explained to me that penises were what boys have, and that’s why it was a boy’s bathroom to go to, and that I shouldn’t go to the girl’s bathroom anymore. I thought they were absolutely crazy. There’s also other parts of this story. The area that I lived as a child in Argentina was known as an area where there was UFO activities, with those marks in the corn fields. I remember jumping on my bike and trying to find if there were any UFO activities. One time, driving to my grandmother’s house with my brother on a very dark night, we went through a railroad, and my brother told me, “I have something to tell you, but you have to promise me that you’re not going to tell mom or dad about this.” And I said, “What happened?” He said, “Did you see that railroad that we just passed? That’s where we found you five years ago. You were a baby.” And I’d say, “Was I in a basket?” And he said “No, no basket.” I said, “Was I wrapped in a blanket?” And he said “No, you were there naked.” And I started crying. He said, “Don’t cry, I just want you to know that you’re not our family, that you were found.” During the rest of the trip to my grandma’s house, I put two and two together and I thought, this is an area with

a lot of UFO activities. I am a girl with a fucking dick. And I was found there? I know what happened here, I was left by mistake by a UFO, and I thought that somewhere there would be a planet where all girls could have penises like me. I told that to my grandmother, who totally entertained the idea, and we waited for a couple of nights to see if any UFO would come back to get me. She was ready to let me go back there, and she waited with me until late at night, helped me prepare a little backpack in case they would come to rescue me. It was so cool that she did that.

MB What was the political context in Argentina like at the time?

CG It was one of the worst dictatorships. Parts of my family were more involved in politics. Because of that, that was a conversation that was always on the table. But most of the people didn’t really know what was happening, didn’t really know that people were being kidnapped and killed and that pregnant people were being kidnapped and their children were stolen from them and then they were killed, and those children were sold, and everything that was not totally in line with the dictatorship that was going on, was simply eliminated. You were against the dictatorship, you were going to disappear and be killed. Most people didn’t even know or didn’t want to know, which I’m not saying this in any kind of judgmental way—many people don’t want to know, or they don’t want to talk about these kind of things, because it’s a way to deal with the problem. My family did talk about it because many members of my family were very political.

MB Were they on the left or connected to the government?

CG Most of my family members were on the right, but also at the same time it was this confrontation in-between parties. My mom’s family, who were the poor ones—I don’t know why they were conservatives. My dad’s family who wasn’t rich, but had more resources, they were liberals. So, it was an issue between families. And in my mom’s family, my aunt was married to a person that was very politically involved, and they were always hiding. There were periods of time that we didn’t see them, and we didn’t know if they were alive or not because they had to hide. Very, very traumatic times, and it took me a long time to understand that a lot of my family members, they weren’t just against my persona, they were just very scared of what could happen and what happened to people like me that didn’t conform to gender or sexuality or had a big mouth, like I was known for having. It was very problematic—a very horrible time. People are still being found nowadays. Last year one of these children that were conceived under the dictatorship, which the mother is still missing and most likely is to be dead because she was killed, and this child was sold or given to a family, to a movement that is called Madres de Plaza de Mayo, they’re still looking for their grandchildren. Last year they found one, and it was a big event in Argentina. The political climate in the country was very conflicting until 1984, which I was 12 years old when we found a way to go back to democracy. The fact that Argentina found democracy in 1984 didn’t really affect me much in a way that people kind of perceive it. I think that democracy was just a name that was dropped into a nation that was mentally living in a dictatorship. It’s not that democracy comes, and everybody changes their ways, way of thinking, and understand what democracy is. Since 1984 I live in a democracy around people with dictatorship mentality. That is as bad as living in a dictatorship. It was hard. I was 12, I was a very queer person, we found this idea of democracy and I learned what gay people were, because people started talking about it. But the ideas were incomprehensible, and very, very oppressive.

MB Did you encounter any trans people or gender non-conforming people when you were growing up?

CG No. I had no idea what it was. And I always thought like I was crazy. So, I try not to think about that, because I thought that was some kind of mental illness and every time I tried to talk

about that, that was how it was addressed. As, no, you are crazy. That’s what it is. But I always knew that I was a girl. I just felt I shouldn’t talk about that. At age 12, I was attracted to boys at the time. And so, around age 10, 12, I came across the idea of being gay. I felt, this is closer. If they say that I’m not a girl, maybe I am a boy, and there’s some boys that like boys. And I was sexually active with boys and everything, but at age 12 I came out to my mom and said I was a gay boy. She had a hard time with it, which doesn’t make sense. You had a meeting when your child was five because your child was going to the girl’s bathroom. Is it surprising that at age 12 that child comes out as something? For example, this is one of my mother’s phrases that I cannot get out of my head. She would say, “We’re going to your aunt today. Please don’t ask for anything to eat. Unless you are extremely thirsty, don’t ask for anything to drink. Unless you really, really need to use the bathroom, don’t ask to go to the bathroom. Please, please, when you talk, hold your hands together.” And I said “Why?” And she said, “Because when you talk, you move them too much, like in a very flamboyant, feminine way, and I hate it.” So, with all these signs, I don’t know why she had a hard time when I came out as gay. Again, I came to understand now that the people really didn’t have an issue with me, my sexuality or coming out as gay... They were scared because gay people were just killed. There were no rights or anything. I think it wasn’t just that they were against me, they were just very scared about it. I came out as gay at age 12. And then when I moved to a big city called Rosario at age 17, I met the first trans person there, and it was this realization of somebody else is like me in the world.

MB What were they like?

CG Gorgeous. She was gorgeous, and she’s still gorgeous. Although my ideas of beauty have changed dramatically through the years, at the time I thought she was the most beautiful woman ever.

MB Where did you meet her?

CG I met her in a bar. She had long, blond hair, big breasts, big hips and ass, and a small nose. Very kind of Barbie-like kind of beauty, which now I kind of like, ugh, but at the time she was everything that I thought was beautiful. I told her that I wanted to be like her. And she looked at me and she said, “Okay. But you know how this life is?” And I said, “No.” She said, “Well, if you want to be like me, you need to know that you’re going to be a whore, you’re going to get high, and you’re going to die young.” And I said, “Where do I sign? This is what I want.” At the same time, I met with this older person who was so advanced into gender because she would live as a very feminine man—I guess. It was some transness, but it wasn’t totally focused on the feminine spectrum. It was what you would call somebody, gender bender, or genderfluid person, and she helped me in ways that not many people have helped me in my life. She also had me in her house and taught me a lot. She showed compassion and became what was my first family of choice.

MB How did she help you?

CG Well, we would do shows in bars. I wasn’t really gifted with being talented at dancing or lip synching or singing. I was kind of funny. And for some reason, people liked me. I’m not going to say that I was pretty—but I was very well put-together. So, we started making a lot of money working in clubs and in bars. Not only gay clubs, but in straight clubs. I’d work at the door, or I would work just doing some kind of dancing, but as I said I wasn’t really talented. They were basically paying me to be there. I made a lot of money, and I made my living by doing that for many years. And all of this is because of her and because she had this great taste for fashion—it had a strong impact on people. It wasn’t just that we were trans, we were wearing this crazy stuff that she would make with her hands. And when the time came when I didn’t have a place to live, she took me with her and I lived with her, and she helped me through many situations that weren’t the happiest situations.



She showed me a lot of love. She was also a person that was dealing with a lot of issues, I guess mental health issues and things like that. But I guess that gave me a lot of understanding of what it is to live with somebody that has untreated mental health diagnosis, and how hard that is. But it showed me that it is possible to have lives around people that may be dealing with mental health diagnosis, and to have them as part of our lives, and have a normal life. It gave me a better understanding of those issues, and it was hard at times. But I guess it was so much love there and so much beauty in that relationship—and I wasn’t the only one. There was a lot of trans people living with her. Not just trans people, gender variant people, and we were all living together with her.

- MB What was that community like? Was there a broader network that you were part of, or a scene?
- CG Well, we were part of the trans community. I always was involved in many communities at the same time. That was the most artistic part of the community, but at the same time I was part of the sex workers’ community because I started doing sex work. And at the same time, I was going to school until I started to transition more and more, and the school wasn’t a welcoming environment for me anymore, but I had my school friends, and I had my artist friends, and I had my sex worker friends, and I interacted in all, just difficult—
- MB So, very socially connected?
- CG Yes, yes. I was always very social. And again, for some reason people liked me always, so I had a lot of friends. I didn’t have friends, but I knew a lot of people and I was welcome in places. I was welcome in bars and clubs where trans people weren’t welcome, and they would not just welcome me, but they would give me work. To work at the door, until of course I started asking myself, why do they have me working here at the door and they don’t let my friends in? And I thought, this is not okay. I lost many jobs because of that. I said, “I can’t work here if you don’t let my friends in, what kind of shit is this?” So, they said, “Okay, if you don’t want to work here, don’t.” I pretend I needed the money, but I was doing sex work and I also was working in hair salons.
- MB Were the other trans people you knew, did they do similar kind of jobs? Sex work, clubs, and hair salons?
- CG That was what we did. That was our occupations. You were either a hair stylist, you were an artist, or you were a sex worker. I did three of those things, and I was very happy. Again, I always found ways. I was telling you as a child that I was isolated, but I found ways to be happy. Working in hair

- was okay. Working in clubs is hard because you find people that either adore you or hate you, so it was hard working at night also, and working as a sex worker. It is a beautiful community, but the work is very taxing though. You know, I’m a victim of sexual abuse as a child. Sex work wasn’t really the best job with that kind of history, because there was a lot going on there. It was hard. I just don’t want to vilify sex work, but it was hard because dealing with tricks and police and other sex workers sometimes. It’s not easy. It has its beauty though. But it wasn’t the easiest job to have.
- MB What city was this again?
- CG Rosario, Argentina. It’s a big city. Think of it as something like Chicago—if you needed to do a comparison. When I finished high school, I moved there in 1989 until I came to the United States in 1999.
- MB So, you were doing sex work, you were doing some hair styling, some club stuff.
- CG Yeah, it was my life, and I was doing a lot of drugs. A lot of drugs. I did what she told me, and I kept that.
- MB You didn’t die young though.
- CG Yeah, I didn’t die young. Well, I see I can die today, but I never thought I would make it to age 45. I always thought, 32. 32 is a good age.
- MB 32 is a good age. Jesus lived to 32.
- CG In a very ageist kind of way, I didn’t want to be old. I never saw an old trans woman.
- MB How old were the trans women you knew?
- CG Now I know older trans people and trans women, but at the time nobody was older than 40. And we always look at them as oh, those old hos, right? Again, as she told me, you’re going to be a whore, you’re going to get high, and you’re going to die young. And everything was like that. I was a whore, I was getting high, and I didn’t know people older than 40, trans women older than 40, so I thought this is what it is. In my mind I was going to live until age 32 or 35 at the most.
- MB What kind of drugs did you do?
- CG All of them. In Argentina, I did cocaine. Just cocaine. But I did a lot of it. Lots. Tons and tons of cocaine. It became my natural state, if I wasn’t sleeping. I was high on coke for many, many, many years.
- MB What were relationships like for you and other trans women with non-trans women in the same jobs, in sex work and hair dressing?
- CG Um—
- MB When you say the sex work community, were you in a community of both non-trans and trans women?
- CG No, no, no.
- MB So, it’s really centered around trans sex work.
- CG We were trans sex workers, and very isolated. It was a lot, there was a couple of cisgender women that were extremely open-minded and trans friendly. But at the time it wasn’t like sex workers were united, and it’s cis and trans. We had trans zones and cis zones, without the terminology. At the time we used wording that real woman, and transvestites. We use the word transvestite and it’s not derogatory in my country. Trans people, transgender women call themselves transvestite. I’m very aware that here in the United States that’s not what it is, but for us it’s not an issue with that word, so I feel the need to say it.
- MB Would people medically transition?
- CG Yes. Some people did medically transition, and we would do hormones from the black market. I don’t know how people got hormones, but you’d just go and just buy hormones. But then I found out that you didn’t need a prescription, you just needed to have a friend pharmacist. And they would give it to you, it was a specific plastic surgeon that would do plastic surgeries to us. I got my first plastic surgery around 21. The first one of a series of plastic—for many years I thought I found a solution for my life through plastic surgery, and I don’t. I still think that

- plastic surgeries can be very affirming sometimes, but for a long time it was just my only way of thinking that transition could be possible. Some trans women would have SRS, and most of them would do the reassignment in Chile.
- MB Would they continue working as sex workers after surgery?
- CG Yes. I used to think it was funny, they wouldn’t go to work with cis women. They’d still work in the trans area. I always thought, men are looking for trans sex workers because of the genitalia, right?
- MB That’s what I would have thought.
- CG One time I asked her, “Why don’t you go and work with cis women?” Again, I wasn’t using this vocabulary, I was using all the vocabulary that may come across as transphobic nowadays. I don’t want to repeat it, but I said, “Why don’t you go work with cis women?” And she said, “No, why would I, and lose all these clients? They don’t know what I have. When the time comes and to find out, they already gave me the money. If they want me to fuck them, I have dildos. If they want to fuck me, they can fuck me—I have an asshole and I have a pussy, and most of the time they don’t even want that. I do more business working in the trans area,” she said. And I’m like, that sounds right.
- MB And you were saying that some people were more genderfluid?
- CG Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. For many years, I didn’t fully transition, I guess, and I’m quoting this. I worked in a hair salon as a very feminine boy. I was always using my birth name, which was associated with masculinity. But I was super feminine. I had long hair, and I would just wax my face or tweeze my face, I never had hair. I had little tits—hormone tits. People could see it. It wasn’t just like nobody notices and says, “Oh, this man is going to come and do my hair.” It was kind of an advantage for me, because I felt women could relate better with me. And then at night I would be full femme bombshell, working in a club or just working the street trying to turn a trick. For many years it was kind of genderfluid bender. I didn’t do the masculine part with conviction, I did it more as a survival. But it was that kind of fluidity in there. It was fun, and I miss that. A lot. Like all this idea of femininity, I don’t think it’s going to be, unless I die today, but I don’t think it’s going to be the end of my life as clothes, as the feminine spectrum, as I was and somehow, I think that it’s not the end of my gender odyssey. I think there’s more to come.
- MB Excellent. Were there terms to distinguish between trans women who were more gender bending or trans women who had SRS or trans women who—was it all the same word?
- CG Yeah, we always knew everybody’s business, and it was this



- idea of, “Oh, she’s a real woman. She got the surgery.” And all the girls that had surgeries with breast implants, they were closer to that idea of real. Then there were people like me that were, “Oh yeah, she’s pretty, but she’s not full-time.” But I never gave a shit about it. I was always very secure about myself, and I hung out with the pretty girls and the girls that were done. And they were my friends, and they always welcomed me. It was just a community of people, and we all were together. The only problem was business, “Don’t fuck with my money, I work here.”
- MB So, real women and transvestites were the two terms that people used a lot.
- CG Yes, yes, yes.
- MB Interesting. Did you all engage much with social service providers or political people or religious people, like outsiders that would try to talk with you all?
- CG No. It was no one outside the trans community. I was going to school, and I was kind of political, so I kind of took part and marched. I didn’t think it was much of political views, it was just being part of a revolution, changing this idea of a dictatorship mentality, and what interests me. So, I did have some interactions with that.
- MB With liberal or students or the left?
- CG Whether it be student centers and anti-colonization. Argentina was a Spaniard colony for many years, so we have all this devotion for everything European and white. I was from the very beginning very into the rights of indigenous and the development of an Argentinian way of living that didn’t have to be European. But at the same time, I was transitioning, and the idea of womanhood was the idea of a white, Nordic, European woman, right? That was the idea of what we saw as womanhood. And at the same time these conflicting feelings of, fuck the idea of beauty as it looked, when it is a white woman. And at the same time wanting to be, because that was the pressure to be. To have long, blond hair, big tits, and a big ass. Kind of, “Oh, I did these high cheekbones to look like Catherine Deneuve.” At the same time I was like, “Fuck Catherine Deneuve and all the European views that conquer us.” I wanted to look like her, but I hated the idea. I did things to my body to look like something that goes with an idea that I do not share, and that has its complications on its own. If that makes sense.
- MB Absolutely, it definitely makes sense. Are there more stories about life in Argentina that you want to share before I ask you how you ended up moving?
- CG There’s many stories, but basically that’s what I wanted to tell you.
- MB So, you had moved to Miami and were traveling around and doing a lot of different drugs, and you were doing some online—
- CG I’m not doing hair anymore; I’m not doing shows and clubs anymore. Just sex work.
- MB And getting online contacts?
- CG Yeah. And I’m in a relationship with this man who had a wife.
- MB And you felt in love with him?
- CG Yeah, I fell in love with him, and she wasn’t going to take it, and she hit me in the street. She found my number, started calling me. She started sending men as clients because she knew, she saw my ad, threatening me. One time she ended up going to my house, she followed me to the supermarket and attacked me with cans of beans and celery, which is really funny. But then she did something that really scared me. She said, “I’m going to call immigration on you.” And she told me, “I’m an American white woman, I can get you out of here in a minute.” I remember, I sat in the steps of my apartment on 16 and Euclid in South Beach with my friend Bianca—and she said, “I love you, and I hate to tell you this, but you need to leave this place. This is not good for you. She’s not going to stop—this guy doesn’t love you. Go.” So, she made some calls and got me a job with this girl in San Francisco to work in her house. I went to San Francisco and I started working at her house—

MB Like doing cleaning?
CG No, sex work with her. So, I go, I work with her, in her place.
MB She was a sex worker and you worked out of her home?
CG Yes, and I gave her a percentage of the money. For kind of renting the place, to live and work there. I also started going out and smoking a lot of crystal meth, and I got really scared, because crystal meth always scared me for some reason. So, I went back to Miami and I talked to my friend Bianca and I said, “I don’t know, something is not right in San Francisco.” And she said, “Okay, let me try with my friend in New York.” She contacted her friend, and I came to New York to work here. And the first person I met in New York was Nina. I fell in love when I saw her, the first time. I couldn’t think of how that can happen to me. It was totally foreign feeling of loving somebody that wasn’t a man. It took me some time to understand but we started a relationship the same day. We basically went out and came back, very high on coke. We had sex, fell asleep holding each other, and we woke up the morning after, and she said, “Let’s go for breakfast.” I remember she wanted to hold my hand in the street—I thought that was so weird, and I didn’t want it. Today, she still throws that in my face, “You fucking bitch, you didn’t hold my hand in the street, I’m always going to remember that, that you were ashamed of me.” I said, “I wasn’t ashamed of you, it was such a foreign feeling of, what the fuck am I a lesbian now?” Questions that I even have now, but at the time it was like, am I a lesbian? Am I allowed to put myself in this category? Which today it would be like, absolutely, why am I asking this? It was 2003, 2004, and at this time the conversation was different. I’m not going to say the trans community, but the trans community that I was around, it wasn’t really a thing to be a lesbian. Most of the girls were straight—how am I going to explain this to my friends, I thought. Then I remember I call my mom and I say, “Mom, I fell in love.” And my mom said, “Oh my god, who is he? Is he cute?” And I said, “Well, she’s actually a she.” And my mom said, “What do you mean? I had a son that was gay, became a woman, and now is a fucking lesbian?” And I’m like, “Yeah, I think so.” And she said, “Oh my God, you’re confusing me so much.” But I loved her. It wasn’t a question about it. And every time I see her, the feeling is still there. In different ways. Like, we’re not sexual anymore because she doesn’t want to, unfortunately, but the love is there. And holding her is still one of the best feelings that I could ever have. Even now that we are not together. I loved her. I was with her for about two to three years, and we were very happy, and we were very miserable, too. I don’t want her to feel guilty about it and put it on her. But she did introduce me to heroin. She didn’t make me do it. I did heroin because it was another drug, and I loved drugs. But she’s the one that taught me heroin. And I was not able to stop doing heroin for many years. Because of my addiction to heroin, crack, and cocaine, I wasn’t the best for her. I also wasn’t the best for myself. I wasn’t the best for anybody. So, we broke up. When we broke up, I started seeing other people and still doing sex work. I went to my friend’s house, who was renting the apartment across the hall from her. I had an apartment on fucking Mott Street, a very expensive place to live in.

MB What neighborhood was that?
CG Nolita. I started dating people and I was dating this guy, and also was seeing this cis girl. Just sexually. And this guy found out and burnt my apartment down. I came back to my apartment, and it was a yellow thing on the door, and the apartment wasn’t habitable. And I was doing drugs very, very hard. I basically became homeless. I was just going from city to city doing sex work and having to find drugs in cities that are not yours is very problematic. Then I started staying with friends, but most of my friends didn’t want to have me because I was shooting heroin, I guess, and they didn’t want to deal with that. Nobody wanted to have me, and I went to Brooklyn, and I ended up living with this man that was taking the money that I was making, giving



me some drugs to survive, but it was a very difficult situation, and I kept being arrested all the time. I’d be arrested for drugs most of the time, and then they would raid his house, because he would only sell drugs and have me there doing sex work, but he would sell drugs to people, like crack, and he would charge people to smoke it inside the apartment. He would get me to have sex with them and make more money. During all that process, I was also smoking crack, so I was okay, I guess. But it was a very toxic interaction. And they raid the apartment with the police.

MB Where was the apartment?
CG In Bed-Stuy—Bedford and Green. The police would raid the apartment and I’d be arrested again. One of the times that I was arrested, they just said, “You have to go to jail.” So, he sentenced me I think to two months. They sent me to Rikers Island, and they put me with the men. I was detoxing from heroin, and it was horrible. Half of the men wanted to fuck me, and the other half wanted to kill me, and I wanted to die because detoxing from heroin is a very horrible, painful thing. I guess, two weeks after I was there, they called me, and the guards took me to the gym, and it was night. It was this huge gym with a very small table with a chair and a light. And it was an ICE agent, which now sometimes I ask myself, why did they give this information to ICE? Isn’t it like New York doesn’t do that? Why did that happen to me? It happened. The person from ICE told me that I was going to be deported, that I was going to be transferred to a deportation facility. They sent me to the immigration jail I guess here, Varick. They put me with the men, and they attacked me, and the cis women didn’t want me to be with them, which is fucked up. They had to have me in isolation, which is a very, very horrible thing. And not because it was a horrible thing, but because it was expensive for them because one of those cells was supposed to have 20 people and they only had me. They let me out with an ankle bracelet, and I had to check with some kind of ICE parole officer. When I came out of there, I had to go back to that place where I was living. I was clean because my body detoxed from heroin. But I went there, and I started getting high again. The immigration officer, he went, “Why don’t you get clean?” I said, “What do you mean, get clean?” He said, “Well, I’m going to send you to a hospital to do the detox.” And I just did it. I didn’t know what detox was. I went to the hospital, and I did seven days of detox. Then they sent me to 28 days detox. It seems people are able to, after doing drugs for so long, are able not to do drugs. So, I started contemplating the idea of recovery.

MB What was your motivation?
CG There was no motivation. It just happened. I was going to be deported. I had an ankle bracelet on all this time. From there I went to long-term treatment for 17 months, and I did it with the men, too.

MB Which program was it?
CG Samaritan Village.

MB And those are very disciplined, yes?
CG It’s a horrible thing. I think that’s an alternative to incarceration—it’s been seven years—so, it did work and helped me face a lot of these things. They did great things for me. They got me immigration status. While I was there, I was given asylum in this country. And I came out of there and I’ve been clean and sober. But I also don’t agree with the way that treatment is addressed.

MB Tell us about that.
CG I hate to throw the word in the middle, but I feel treatment is very patriarchal, it’s very like, you are sick and I’m going to fix you. Which is the idea—

MB Like control and domination.
CG This idea of, I am right, you are wrong, and until you learn to change that, it’s not space for conversation. It’s not a space for debate, right? In my case, I was placed with men. And there was no space for me to say, “Let me tell you why I shouldn’t be with men.” It was like, you need treatment, and if you really want it, you’re going to do it with the men. That is not okay with me. Somehow, it ended up working with me. But I don’t I agree with the way it was done. But I also have to recognize that somehow it worked with me.

MB How did they relate to your gender when you were living there?
CG I have great friends there, you know? Like my counselor is now my very good friend. And we can talk about this, and I actually met with them, and we worked on a whole policy for trans people. I feel like I made an impact there, and I’m being part of the change. Whatever they did that I disagree with, they’re making their business to change. But that doesn’t take away the fact that there were many things that I went through that are not okay. At Samaritan Village you have an orientation part. And then from orientation, you go to main treatment, and in main treatment you have kind of steps. It’s kind of tiers. First tier, second tier, third tier, and then it’s the last part when you will go and walk outside, and you come back just to sleep there. So, when I got there, I was in orientation and I was put with the women, and very weirdly nobody spooked me, because I never pass. I think it will be one in 1,000 times that I pass. I don’t pass. I really don’t care about passing. I know for many other people that affects them—it doesn’t affect me. And I’m very clear that most of the time I don’t pass. That’s one of the cases where I passed. I was with the women, and nobody knew, and I had a fucking big mouth and I told somebody. I was worried that having a body that includes a penis—it’s hard to hide.

MB That they would retaliate or find out.
CG And it’s hard to hide, right? All the women shower together.

MB There’s not a lot of privacy.
CG They always sleep together in the same room. There’s no privacy. So, it isn’t like, I didn’t want this to be found out by somebody. And I thought I should say it. And I did, and the woman complained. Since there was no guidance from city, state, or federal on how to work with trans people, they told me that they had to move me with the men. Which was, from the beginning, a very difficult transition because all these men that saw me at the women’s, now they see me there, and it’s the whole kind of revealing. We are talking about hundreds of people living under the same roof, and different reactions. And my feelings about going from the female dorm to the men’s dorm, including showers—

MB It sounds humiliating.
CG It is. It is a lot of domestic lifestyle. Getting dressed was one thing in the women’s side, but on the men’s side, it was very uncomfortable, terrifying, and very stressing. I don’t know

if you know—when they talk about the idea of surrendering, I really grabbed into that idea and I surrendered. And I just thought, I surrender. If they tell me to do this, I will do it, right? And I dove into the whole fixing me part.

MB But does that include surrendering your gender?
CG It should not include, but I didn’t know that. I understood surrendering as a total surrendering, everything, and let them create the new me somehow, or fix the old me.

MB And were they trying to create a man?
CG No, no. no. They were just totally not sensitive to my transness. They were actually very affirming somehow. It was funny, because I was living with men, but they would send me to women’s groups. I was living with men, but I didn’t get any activities for Mother’s Day because their understanding is that everybody that is a mother is a cisgender woman. I was in the group, so everybody was working for Mother’s Day, and I wasn’t. I was with the men. But I was living with them, so very, very weird. The process was wrong. And it wasn’t intentional from them. I don’t want to put them as the villains here. There was just no guidance. They didn’t know what to do with me. They just did what they thought was best. Also, I think these places are terrified of lawsuits and things like that, and I think that for them I was some kind of liability. But they were also doing some charity with me because I didn’t even have Medicaid. I was undocumented. So, nobody was paying for me, and those places live from your benefits basically. And I didn’t have any benefits. Nobody was paying for me. I was going through all that with this extreme gratitude to them, which is so weird to have so many different and counter feelings about something. Sometimes I feel like I’m jumping from I love them to I hate them, and I think I did both.

MB You mentioned that you’ve been working with Samaritan Village around developing a better trans policy. What do you wish they had? How do you wish they had related to you and what kind of policies have you been helping them try to implement now?
CG Well, we’ve been working on the older allocation of clients regarding to gender identity, and it has nothing to do with gender assigned at birth. Although they’re a super straight place, people should have an opportunity to say, where I find myself in the spectrum of gender, I should be here, right? And if that is not the male or the female, they should have an area that is for people that are non-binary.

MB Oh wow, have they set that up?
CG In bathroom policy. They’re working on it and creating equity. Because sometimes a trans person needs that specific extra push, right? I think I was successful because somehow, I had a case manager that understood that case management and counseling wasn’t going to be enough. To be around drug counseling, it had to be an extra part about my issues around gender. And she understood that she wasn’t ready to do that, and she sent me outside to get that.

MB Where did you go to get that?
CG I went to The Center, and I remember, taking my first counseling and going to this room and finding out that my counselor was going to be a trans woman.

MB Who was your counselor?
CG The wonderful Christina Herrera. In my mind, trans women were only supposed to be whores, but Christina works eight hours a day as a counselor, and not in sex work. Then she told me, “I want you to meet another group of people, some of them are sex workers, some of them are not.” She took me to the group, and I remember the first group was the biggest group of trans women that I’d ever seen. I thought that was the most wonderful thing in the world, a group of trans women in the same room, 70 of them. For some reason I think they were all waiting for me. It was a big room, but it was extremely crowded. Some of them were sex workers but some of them were lawyers. And I’m like, what do you mean? They can be lawyers?

- Some of them, they work at Target—and some of them would do sex work too. I have to say they're mostly white women, the ones that are the architects and lawyers and things like that. But I've never been afraid. My mom always told me, "You're not less than nobody." And when I saw all of this, I said I can be one of them. I can do other things but being a sex worker.
- MB I imagine it really helped with your recovery to have that help.
- CG Yeah, I can be one of them. I choose not to do sex work anymore, and I finally see another possibility. Because before in my mind, sex work was the thing that I was supposed to do. Learning that there was another choice in life and making the decision to take it has been fundamental in my recovery and my overall wellbeing. I made that decision, and soon enough they asked me if I wanted to facilitate the group. I made many mistakes. I gave many, many awful, regretful groups. I gave groups that were so binary sometimes, like talking about an idea of femininity, and some guys asked me, "What are you talking about? I don't want to be that kind of woman." But I learned. We all learned together. And then they told me, "There's an internship here if you want to do it, and it's paid."
- MB Were you out of Samaritan Village at this point?
- CG So, I was still living there—I started getting an internship, but I was still undocumented. While I was at Samaritan Village, they connected me with a lawyer from Catholic Charities who did my asylum. So, I'm at Samaritan Village, being in recovery, connected to all this trans paraphernalia. And getting with an asylum process. Part of the whole trans thing was me doing an internship. That was a paid internship. But I wasn't able to get paid because I didn't have a Social Security number. It's very funny, the day that I got my work permit, that was about the same time when my internship was going to finish. I went to The Center, and I told them, I got my work permit, and they said, "If you go and complete this paper right now, we're going to be able to pay you retroactively for the whole year's internship," and that's how I got the money to get out of treatment and rent a room.
- MB Because it was enough to put the deposit down.
- CG Everything worked so perfectly. And when I was doing the internship, this amazing person named Ady Ben-Israel asked me to do a resume, and I said, "What am I going to put in it?" And Ady said, "You know, things that you did in your past." And I said, "I can't put that I did sex work," and Ady said, "You can say that you were an entertainer." Ady helped me change the vocabulary for years of work without saying what work it was. Ady explained to me that sex work has, like a big part of—how do you, customer—
- MB Relations or satisfaction.
- CG Relations, satisfaction, so Ady helped me phrase all of that and create a resume. And with that resume, I applied for a job at Apicha as a Patient Navigator. And I had a job, and I was able to do everything wonderfully, right? I got everything on time, and six months later, Apicha advertised the position for a Trans Clinic Coordinator—the trans clinic was very new at Apicha. My friend who worked here then, we became very good friends at Apicha, he came in and he said, "Why don't you apply?" And I said, "Because they're asking for a bachelor's degree." And he said, "I'm a good writer. Let's sit together and write something explaining why they should hire you without a bachelor's degree."
- MB Like a cover letter.
- CG Yeah, a cover letter. When he said, "You know, because I don't have a bachelor's degree doesn't mean that you shouldn't give me this job because I can do it. I can do it, and this is why you should hire me." And they hired me. And I will forever be grateful to Dan because he's been one of the most empowering people for, like, a white, cisgender straight dude. I would never expect that. And he was super empowering. And I got the position and when I left Apicha, they had 625 patients. So, I grew the shit out of that place. I worked there for four years. Then I kind of got tired of doing direct services and got the opportunity to come here to the pol department. That came about and I took it, and I've been here at GMHC for one year. It's been one year that I've worked here doing policy and public affairs.
- MB That's incredible. In my job—I work in AIDS services—I would see a lot of trans women of color who would go in and out of peer educator kind of positions, and then another layer of trans women, mostly white, who had social work degrees sort of doing some administrative jobs. And very few people like yourself that worked as peer educators who spent time on the streets and then moved into a position of administration and authority and real influence.
- CG Thank you. I mean, I don't think I've got real influence, but thank you, that's very nice to say. I don't want to come across as with an idea of success for the community, because success means different things for everybody. When I meet this girl that is where I was seven years ago, I don't even want her to go where I went. I want her to go where she goes. She wants to go right, so—I don't want to come across as like, oh, successful, I was able to get out of sex work and now as an advocate—in my book, my personal idea of success is what I wanted. So, I am successful. Other people may find ideas of success that are different, but for me it is where I wanted to go and how I defined success was to be here. Like, to have a fucking office where I can close the door and do this fucking interview with you, and nobody bothers me? It may sound mundane and stupid, but that was part of my idea of success, and getting this office was huge for me.
- MB You have a door you can shut.
- CG Yeah, I have a door that I can shut, look at this. I'm going to open it, look how it sounds.



The full transcription and audio file can be found here:
<https://nyctransoralhistory.org/interview/002-interview-of-cecilia-gentili/>