Pussy Palace Oral History Project
Oral History Interview with Anthony Mohamed
Conducted on March 31, 2021 via Zoom
Interviewed by Alisha Stranges on behalf of the
LGBTQ Oral History Digital Collaboratory (Elspeth Brown, Director)
Transcribed by Rev.com and Elio Colavito

Summary: Anthony is a 53-year-old, gay, South Asian, Caribbean, Canadian man. At the time of the interview, Anthony was living in lockdown, in Toronto, Ontario (more specifically, Treaty 13), during the COVID-19 pandemic. Having served for 26-years as Senior Specialist in Equity and Community Engagement for St. Michael's Hospital, he was continuing to facilitate workshops in a volunteer capacity, while completing various online education courses and acting as a knowledge sharer for projects that centre Queer and Trans histories. Anthony discusses growing up gay and as a person of faith in the wake of the 1981 bathhouse raids and the Ken Zeller murder. The interview mostly concerns his experiences as a facilitator of the Toronto Police Service's court-ordered, LGBTQ+ sensitivity training. He reflects on the evolution of the training curriculum, the nuances of both large-group and private encounters with the student cohort, the personal and political challenges of attempting to reform an authoritarian institution like policing, and other topics. Anthony speaks in depth about Toronto from the 1980s to 2021; however, the following locations are also mentioned: Trinidad and Tobago, the Indian subcontinent; Peru; Rwanda; South Africa; and Belgium.

Keywords: LGBTQ; Gay; Religion; Spirituality; 1981 Bathhouse Raids; Ken Zeller; Zami; Khush; Intersectionality; Policing; Defunding; Community Facilitation.

Alisha Stranges (00:00:00):
All right, I'm recording now.

Anthony Mohamed (00:00:02):
Okay.

Alisha Stranges (00:00:03):
Okay, here we go. So, this is Alisha Stranges from the Pussy Palace Oral History Project, and I'm here in Toronto, Ontario interviewing Anthony Mohamed on March 31, 2021. Anthony, I believe, is also in Toronto, is that right?

Anthony Mohamed (00:00:22):
That's correct, Treaty 13.

Alisha Stranges (00:00:25):
And Anthony is going to tell us about the experience of being a community facilitator hired by the Toronto Police Services to lead court-ordered LGBTQ+ sensitivity training, following the 2005 settlement of the human rights complaint and class action suit that the Toronto Women's Bathhouse Committee filed against the Toronto Police. Anthony, do I have your permission to record this oral history interview?

Anthony Mohamed (00:00:57):
Yes, you do Alisha.

Alisha Stranges (00:00:58):

Thank you. So, before we get into your experiences as a facilitator, I'm just going to ask a few questions that invite you to tell me a little bit about yourself, in particular we're trying to get a sense of the different aspects of identity that you hold, or categories that you occupy, and how at least some of these may have shifted or evolved over time. So, to start relatively simply, can you tell me your full name, your age, and your preferred gender pronouns?

Anthony Mohamed (00:01:27):

Great. So, hi everybody, and hi Alisha, thank you very much for inviting me to be part of this project, I think it's a very worthwhile project. Often our queer and trans histories are not recorded, and I feel like it's important for future generations to know all the struggles that we faced as a broader community. And so, I very much appreciate the work of the archives and of you specifically, Alisha, for reaching out and including this aspect of the events surrounding with the Pussy Palace raid into your project, so that's appreciated. So, hello everyone, my name is Anthony Mohamed, and I'm 53 years old. My pronouns are he, him, and his. And I am… Male cisgendered is how I identify. Gay male cis-gendered, and then there's a whole bunch of other categories, but I'm sure we'll get into that.

Alisha Stranges (00:02:39):

Absolutely, yeah. So, you say gay male cisgendered, and I'm curious if that has ever been different at some point in time, the way that you identify your sexual and/or gender identity?

Anthony Mohamed (00:02:55):

Yeah, that's actually a really good question because, of course, things to do evolve over time. I don't know if I'm unique in this or not, but I came out at a very young age. So, I started identifying as gay quite early, like 11, 12, 13, so very, very early in my childhood. I grew up here in Toronto, but I was born in Trinidad and Tobago, but we came when I was a baby to Canada. So, as far as my sexual orientation goes, I've always been fairly certain as to where I was on that particular spectrum. In terms of gender identity, I also felt very confident with my male identity, both prior to me acknowledging it personal. So, of course, I was assigned male at birth, but that doesn't necessarily mean that I would be comfortable with it when I was of an age where I could make my own decisions.

Anthony Mohamed (00:04:08):

But when I was of an age, so in my early teens, that I felt like, okay, I'm searching for who I am. I knew very clearly in my mind and in my heart that the identity assigned to me at birth is the identity that I identify with, which is basically the definition of cisgendered male, and there you go. So, I was a cisgendered male at birth, and I'm still a cisgendered male. I haven't questioned that. What I have questioned, however, are the traditionally assigned gender roles of what's considered masculine and what's considered feminine, and like many people in the community I continue to challenge that on different levels.

Alisha Stranges (00:05:10):

Mm-hmm (affirmative), thank you. Well, what about racial, ethnic, and cultural identities? Sort of started referencing a bit, but I'm curious how you express yourself through those types of categories.

Anthony Mohamed (00:05:24):

Yeah, and that's actually a very long story, as far as the community goes. So, the way I identify now, which I've developed over many, many decades, is I identify as Canadian. So, I'm a Canadian. So, that falls under the

umbrella of nationality, so in terms of national identity I'm Canadian. In terms of cultural identity, I'm Caribbean, and more specifically Indo-Caribbean, and then in terms of race, if you go back far enough, it's South Asian. So, South Asian, Caribbean Canadian is happening, but as a result of searching for identity throughout history, and not just based on skin colour or faith, or anything along those lines, it's amazing the directions that it could take you to because, when I was coming out in the early 80s in Toronto, I was a member of Lesbian Gay Youth Toronto, because I was young. I was a member of Zami, which was a group for Blacks and West Indian LGBTQ people, and that was primarily Caribbean in those days, people from the Caribbean, and more so African-Caribbean, which was fine because culturally there are so many connections.

Anthony Mohamed (00:07:11):

And then there was also Khush, I was a member of Khush, which was a group for South Asian LGBTQ people; however, it tended to be people from the east, so from the Indian subcontinent, so India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and the surrounding countries, and then people like myself who were from the diaspora. So, it was very interesting how I can fit in all these boxes, but not one of those boxes identified me as a person as a whole. They were all amazing. It was great to be part of them. I was also part of Gay Asians Toronto, I was part of Hola, the Latino group. So, it was this amazing mish-mash of being able to blend into many different organizations. But in terms of my identity, I would say Canadian, Caribbean, South Asian, and that's taken me a while to get to that place, so that's the identity.

Alisha Stranges (00:08:22):

I have a little follow-up question here, I hope it doesn't take us too far down a different path, but you're describing being a member of all of these different organizations and communities, but not one of them encapsulated you. Can you say any more about what that experience was like, of having many places to go, but no one place that encapsulated you?

Anthony Mohamed (00:08:48):

Yeah, well that actually was a challenge for me. As a young person, I was searching my space in the world and my identity in the world, and as a result it was challenging for me; I really disliked it. I was like, "Is there no room where I fit in?" kind of thing. And it took me a while to realize that it was amazing because I fit into all of these places. I had to turn around the perspective of it's not that I don't fit into other places, it's just that other places can't define who I am, kind of thing. So it's a different perspective, it's one where you say I'm 100% part of Zami I'm 100% part of Khush, I'm 100% young person at the time, and I'm 100% Canadian, and it's when you embrace all these different aspects of your own identity that you feel empowered by the diversity within yourself. And I think all of us, regardless of our skin colour or background or where we were born, we all have these multiple identities, and it's up to us to embrace them and to really celebrate who we are. And I can't say that that came immediately or easily, it was something that was learned over time.

Alisha Stranges (00:10:23):

Mm-hmm (affirmative), thank you. Well, what can you tell me about your educational and class background today, in 2021?

Anthony Mohamed (00:10:34):

Sure, in 2021, okay. Well, like I said, I grew up in Toronto, so I did compulsory public school and high school, but it was really challenging in high school when it came to education because we're talking about the eighties, and there was a lot of homophobia and transphobia, but that didn't necessarily directly impact me. Although it did because I was accused of being feminine, being too effeminate, so, of course, that's part of transphobia too. Anyway, the reality is when I was in high school there was a murder, of Ken Zeller, who was

a librarian, a gay librarian for the Toronto District School Board, and he was murdered in High Park, and there were five young people, young men, who were responsible for it, and three of the boys were in my class. So, that's to tell you the level of homophobia.

Anthony Mohamed (00:11:46):

And I remember, I was out in high school, and I remember *Toronto Life* came and interviewed, and one of the things they asked was, were these boys normal? And my answer was, yes, they were normal because it was completely acceptable for young men to get drunk and go beat up gay men, and that was normal at the time and quite acceptable socially. And there were no protections at this point in Ontario, or Canada, on the basis of sexual orientation. Sexual orientation wasn't added on to the Ontario Human Rights Code until two years after that murder, and then eventually in the Charter. So, as a result, my education suffered because I ended up quitting high school three times.

Anthony Mohamed (00:12:45):

Ended up in alternative school, loved the alternative school environment, working at your own pace, speaking to your teachers with a more friendly respect and them speaking to you with more friendly respect. It was a much nicer environment, plus it was very gay positive, so it made me feel very comfortable because there were out teachers. That was the first time I had ever met an out teacher, and there were other students who were also LGBTQ, so it was easier to function. So, as I speak to you now, however, it's amazing how far that history is in my life and in my mind.

Anthony Mohamed (00:13:37):

So, now I have… I'm very blessed. I don't have a bachelor degree, I didn't go to university or college straight out of high school, but what I did have was a desire to do the kind of activism work that was important. So, I got into equity work, I got into AIDS prevention, I got into international development work, and it's taken me all over the place, and got to work on LGBTQ projects in Peru, and AIDS projects in Rwanda, disability projects, and working in South Africa at a hospital. So, there's so many wonderful experiences that I had, but all this before I had any formal, post-secondary training.

Anthony Mohamed (00:14:36):

As a result of those passions, York University was very kind in that they were able to fast track me and said that my experience was equivalent to a bachelor degree, and as a result I was able to enter a master's program at York. So, I have a master's of Environmental Studies with a focus on cross-cultural community health promotion. And then on top of that, since then, I've been able to do three major certificates, so master's-level certificates. One is Health Quality Improvement from the medical school at the University of Toronto. The other one is the Christian Scriptures, so an in-depth look at the Christian scriptures, from Harvard. And the last, the most recent one, which was just two years ago… Oh, sorry, no, it was last summer. It's amazing how time seems to fly. But last summer I completed a certificate program on International Human Rights Law from the University Katholieke Leuven in Belgium, and that was all, of course, online during COVID.

Anthony Mohamed (00:16:14):

All of this was beyond my thinking at the time of high school, so it's amazing how, as a non-academic person, all of a sudden you become an academic person, and you don't even realize it. But one thing I do want to say about education, for people listening, is education comes in many different forms, and don't discount informal education. And especially employers out there, please don't discount informal education because my last career, which has lasted over 26 years now, they took a chance on me without any post-secondary

education, but one of the things they told me is that they could see the passion that I had for equity issues, and it was that that actually got me the position.

Anthony Mohamed (00:17:09):

So, follow your heart, follow your passions, and as long as you're helping others and loving yourself in the process, I think you'll be fine. So, that's as far as education goes. For the other side, which was, I believe, class background you asked, so very working-class and, in fact, working-class not so much due to being immigrants to Canada, but because of the racism faced by immigrants in Canada. So, my dad had an amazing job in Trinidad, and we actually were quite well-off, and we were on the road to have resources, a home, education, et cetera. But when he came to Canada in the 60s, he couldn't get a job anywhere, largely due to his skin colour and "lack of Canadian experience," quote-unquote. So, he ended up working at Canadian Tire in a garage, and then to a trailer company doing rivets. These were things way below his skill level, as far as fixing stuff goes.

Anthony Mohamed (00:18:33):

And then my mom, she took an accounting course and worked for one of the cable companies. So, very much working-class, and no one in my family had gone to university at this point, even among the extended family. So, it wasn't even on our radar, as far as options go. You don't even think about it. You just finish high school, and you start working, and that's all there is to it. Now, I'm proud to say many people in the family have continued on to post-secondary education, but at the time it wasn't very common.

Anthony Mohamed (00:19:20):

And I know that while my dad was really happy that the children had had a lot of opportunities as a result of us moving to Canada, he personally regrets it, he wishes that he had stayed, and is sad, especially during winter when he thinks how they used to grow food, and they used to be able to hang out outside, and it's just a different spirit and a different life involved with growing up in the Caribbean. So, he misses Trinidad badly, and still does, and there are a number of practical reasons that keeps him here, largely do to his health, and for mom's health as well, but I think if they had a choice, they would have moved back a long time ago.

Alisha Stranges (00:20:19):

Right. Must be challenging as a child to hear.

Anthony Mohamed (00:20:24):

It is because you feel guilty. They sacrificed their life for us. And my sisters and myself, we… We're all very grateful to the sacrifices that they made, but there's also a sense of guilt. At the same time, I'm really happy because I was able come out in a place with resources around LGBTQ people, which made life easier for me. Of course, nowadays there are many resources in Trinidad, but at that time there was nothing. I mean, even today the homophobia, the social homophobia, is expressed much more blatantly in Trinidad than it is here. It's not that it doesn't exist here, just it's unable to be expressed as blatant because we have protections, because we have media. I mean, when I was coming out there was nothing. There was Jack Tripper on *Three's Company*, and he was the only reference to anything gay.

Alisha Stranges (00:21:40):

Right.

Anthony Mohamed (00:21:40):

And it was about a fake gay, living with two women. So, there was nothing, there was no Ellen [DeGeneres], there was no internet, there was no anything. *The Toronto Star* and CBC and others, they had horribly homophobic articles, and racist too. It's like they compound each other, and then I imagine, for women, that the sexist messages compounded on top of that, and for myself as an ally I can kind of understand it, but I can't speak from experience, as far as that goes. But as you learn about allyship and intersectional oppression, you realize that they're so well-connected, and about keeping a certain few in power and privilege compared to others. So, it's a difficult… It's an uncomfortable conversation, and it's horrible that we're still having it in 2021. Okay.

Alisha Stranges (00:23:03):

Thank you. So, just recently you were gesturing toward your connection to faith, and I'm wondering if you can expand on what role religion or spirituality plays in your life currently.

Anthony Mohamed (00:23:18):

For sure. So, I was brought up at First Presbyterian, and then we went to a Pentecostal church. So, most of my childhood was in a Pentecostal church, and I was heavily involved in that church as a youngster. So, in my tens, I guess, and early teens, I was running the sound system; I was volunteering in the daycare; I was part of the youth group there, and it's amazing because it was very much a part of my life about five days out of the week, so five days out of seven I would be at the church doing some something.

Anthony Mohamed (00:24:07):

Anyway, we had a new pastor when I was very young, and there was another boy in the youth group who was also questioning his sexuality, and he went to the pastor and told him about his experiences and how he would like some guidance. And one of the questions the pastor asked him was, are there any other kids in these groups who are struggling with their sexuality? And so, he outed me to the pastor. Of course, we're the same age, so it wasn't done maliciously, it was done out of a caring way. So anyway, but the pastor came to me and he said… He came at a time when he knew my parents weren't going to be home, and he asked me to stop volunteering. And I said, "What do you mean?" And so, he said he wanted me to stop helping with the daycare, that was the first thing. Then he said he wanted me to stop doing the sound system, and I'm not sure why, if the microphones could become queer, or something.

Anthony Mohamed (00:25:26):

But the worst was when he said to stop coming to the youth group because all my friends were part of the youth group, and it was… Every Friday we'd all go bowling, do something fun, and so it was very much a big part of my childhood. But anyway, about two weeks after that he came back at a time when he knew I'd be home alone because my parents worked, so I was home alone for one hour before they came home from school, and he came at that time and he asked me to leave the church. To quote him, he said that he would be "responsible on judgment day for all the people in his congregation," and he couldn't see himself being able to defend an openly gay person on judgment day, and his words were that I was "a thorn in the side of Christ."

Anthony Mohamed (00:26:41):

And so here I am, I think I was 13, listening to this, and of course I don't have the language or the knowledge, or even the confidence to challenge him on any of this because we're told from day one we're supposed to respect these individuals in positions of power within the church, so it was very difficult. It took me a while, but I realized eventually that it wasn't God that hurt me, it was this man that had hurt me, and

when I returned to the church about six months later, my best friend at the time, she was in the pews, and I was whispering, and there was a different pastor. And I said, "Where's the other pastor?" What happened to him, kind of thing. And her brother was a deacon at the church, her older brother, so she had found out that they were very upset with this pastor for how he treated me, and they asked him to leave. As far as I understand, he ended up in Alberta, where it was okay to say that to gays, right?

Anthony Mohamed (00:28:03):

But, of course, that's not the case, but that's where they sent him. So, I was very touched by the deacon's standing up for me because they knew me. They knew that I had not changed from an infant; I was the same person the whole time. One thing I do want to say about spirituality, it was actually spirituality that helped me accept who I am and faith in all aspects, not just around sexuality, but specifically around sexuality. This is something that I find a lot of people of faith who are not LGBTQ may have difficulty understanding, so that's why I want to share the story while I can. Before all this happened, there was a youth retreat and there was a local Baptist church across the street, so the Baptist church and the Pentecostal church, the youth groups would get together and we'd have weekends away.

Anthony Mohamed (00:29:08):

So, it was fun because there were all these other young people to do stuff with. Anyway, around the campfire one night, we were all singing songs and doing the marshmallow thing, and the youth pastor asked if anyone wanted to invite Christ into their hearts, and here I was someone who was questioning their sexuality and needed guidance, and I said, "Well, I would like to." I remember him praying with me and afterwards feeling this incredible warmth inside of me, and it wasn't just from the fire, it was actually a warmth that was inside of me. The way I kind of describe it as like being hugged from the inside. Anyway, I prayed kind of privately about, "I need your guidance because I'm having these feelings." I'm attracted to Tom Cruise on *Risky Business*, dancing around in his underwear.

Anthony Mohamed (00:30:20):

I'm attracted to boys at school, and I'm not attracted to girls in the way that the other boys are. All my best friends were girls, but I didn't want to kiss them. So, I remember praying, very clearly, for guidance that night, the next morning I woke up, and I was on the top bunk and I remember hearing over and over again in my head that, "You are my child. You are my child. You are my child." I just heard that over and over again, and from that moment on, I realized that I was okay. I didn't understand what being gay meant or what the attractions meant. What I did know was that, I was God's child, and that's all that mattered. So, all the homophobia in media, all the homophobia from the pulpit, all the homophobia from school or from society in general, it didn't matter anymore to me. I was like, "I'm God's child."

Anthony Mohamed (00:31:35):

So, that happened before the pastor had told me to stop leaving, so when he asked me all those things, I was confused, I was like, "But I'm God's child. What are you talking about? You can't ask me to leave." That was going on in my head. I didn't really have the language to express these things, but as a result of that experience, that's led me through my whole life to get involved with things like equity work because it's about the two great commandments, one is to love God and the other one is to love your neighbour as yourself. I think people forget the "as yourself" part often. You really got to love yourself. I know depression can be very high within our communities, and I know that the churches and other religious facilities are often responsible for a lot of that self-hate.

Anthony Mohamed (00:32:43):

So, I'm hoping that anyone listens here, whether they're a person of faith or a person of no specific faith or atheist, can truly look themselves in the mirror today and tell yourself how beautiful and wonderfully made you are. So, I'm hoping that that comes across very strong because it was that that gave me the confidence to face when people were dying of AIDS. It was like left, right, and centre in those days. That's when I got involved in AIDS work in the 80s. Every month there was a funeral. I mean, that was horrible. There were whispers, and "Oh, he has it. Look at his face." All that kind of stuff. So, there was kind of discrimination within the community, but there was incredible discrimination in the wider society of, "It's okay that gay men are dying," as they didn't need our empathy or our sympathy, as a society.

Anthony Mohamed (00:33:50):

What we needed was treatment. Nobody was listening, but there are many silver linings to that too. I remember a lot of women in the community stepped up and formed these amazing care teams that were taking care of all of these guys who were dying. I mean, I'm not saying that women weren't impacted by AIDS, obviously there were positive women as well, and they certainly benefited from all of these care teams, but what I mean is the lesbian community really took the lead when it came to care teams. A lot of gay men were part of the care teams, but it was amazing how it brought us all together. It wasn't until five or six years after that, that even Ronald Reagan, who was the president of the time in the States, had even mentioned the word AIDS. So, that's to tell you how underground this all was, it was a very difficult time for us.

Anthony Mohamed (00:35:00):

The other benefit that came out of AIDS, which I hate to say is, I think the LGBTQ rights movement has advanced largely because of AIDS. For the first time ever in Canadian history, there were gay people on the news almost daily, and, all of a sudden, young people, no matter where we were in Canada, were saying, "Oh, I'm not alone with these feelings." And that was the first time we felt not alone. As a young person going through it at the time, that was very important to me. I mean, even though it was talking about death and dying, for me it was more about, there are people out there who have the exact same feelings I'm having, and they're organizing, and they're doing stuff, and I want to be part of it.

Anthony Mohamed (00:35:55):

That's what… It helped me, and it helped a whole bunch of other people. I know for a fact because it was the first time, for example, AIDS committees across the country got funding. All of a sudden, we had some government money, not just to do AIDS prevention work, but to do anti-homophobia work. We had never had that before. Prior to that, during that time, the most political thing that anybody could do was to come out about their identity. So, when people realized that their bank teller, the person cleaning the street, the doctor, their sister, was LGBTQ, all of a sudden that's what changed things, and that would not have happened had there not been the visibility that was caused by the HIV/AIDS crisis. Sorry, that was a huge tangent.

Alisha Stranges (00:36:55):

No, I appreciate it, thank you. I just have one more question here in this sort of realm of positionality. Just… We haven't talked yet about what kinds of activities occupy your time these days. What are you up to in the world?

Anthony Mohamed (00:37:14):

Oh, what am I up to? Lots of things. I continue to do things like this, where I share stories of queer and trans history in Toronto but also, mostly through volunteering, I facilitate workshops. My title is Senior Specialist

Equity and Community Engagement at St. Michael's Hospital in downtown Toronto, and I've been there for the past 26 years. However, unfortunately I got quite ill about five and a half years ago. So, I'm currently… I'm doing well everyone, but it's been a tough road, and who knows where that will lead. So, as a result of being on disability, I'm limited in terms of what I can and can't get up to, but I exercise a lot, I travel when I can. Of course, no one is traveling right now, and I'm looking forward to being able to hug people again at some point and see some of my friends and go back to the world.

Anthony Mohamed (00:38:37):

So, that's what I've been up to, and then, as I mentioned, last year, I tried to continue education. There's a lot of great online resources out there, so I would highly recommend that for people listening to do something that they wouldn't think that they would do. Personally, I was thinking, by the end of the course, this will all be over. Last summer, I was thinking, "This course will get me through." And international human rights law was so hard. All these words in Latin and all… You had to learn so many broader law concepts in order to understand and the human rights aspect. It was really challenging, and I wasn't sure I would pass in the end, but I ended up passing quite with quite high marks. That was all based on my final essay. The coursework itself I found very challenging, but I'd highly recommend, if anybody has an interest in learning something new…

Anthony Mohamed (00:39:52):

And it doesn't matter how old you are or whether or not you're planning to work or not work in that field. It's amazing what that can do for your self-confidence; to challenge yourself. Not just around education. Of course, you know, getting on a bike could be a challenge for other people, or swimming; something like that. It doesn't have to be around education, but whatever you do, challenge yourself and continue to grow. So, even though I'm off work and at home mostly anyway… So, I was kind of used to this before COVID because I was already off.

Alisha Stranges (00:40:32):

Oh, goodness, yeah. Well, I mean, thank you, Anthony, for diving so deeply into these questions around positionality. I feel like there's so many avenues we could go down together, but I do want to sort of switch our attention now to inviting you, actually, to travel back in time if you can, to the fall of 2000. So, this was when the Toronto Women's Bathhouse Committee was preparing to host the Night of 2000 Pussies, which was the fourth installment of the Pussy Palace, a series of exclusive bathhouse events for lesbian women, queer women, and trans folk in Toronto. This event, as we know, was ultimately raided by the Toronto police. I'm curious, prior to the media coverage about the bathhouse raid, how familiar were you already with the Pussy Palace events?

Anthony Mohamed (00:41:40):

Oh, that's a great question actually. I had seen them in *Xtra*, advertised, and many of my women friends were already chatting about them, so I was like, "This is great," you know? Because gay men have had those spaces for so long, and there were so few places for women to gather as women, in all those different categories, but as women. So, I thought it was fantastic that these things were happening, and it was great, so it was more, just a kind of word of mouth and *Xtra*, which was the LGBT press of the time. They were talking about it. I think even *NOW Magazine* had a few articles about the Pussy Palace, which I thought was great. So, that would be what my familiarity was. I had heard about it, and I thought that it was fantastic that it was happening. I was sad that it was only one night because I thought, "What if you weren't in the mood?"

Alisha Stranges (00:42:53):

Good point, yes. When and how do you recall learning that the 2000 bathhouse event was raided?

Anthony Mohamed (00:43:04):

I think it was the night on the news on the television mainstream news. So, the night it happened, it was reported that this raid had happened, and, of course, it brought back immediate memories of 1981 and the bathhouse raids in Toronto. I was really angry. I remember being really angry that police were harassing women, but also the community because it felt like, not an attack just for the participants of the Pussy Palace but on the entire community, so I was really upset and angry about that. I remember the news reporting it as a liquor license violation. And it was so obvious. Like, it was so obvious. As the newscaster is saying this, as the reporter is saying this, you're saying to yourself, "Yeah right." You're immediately realizing that it had nothing to do with the liquor license violation because remember that that particular bathhouse space was for men, six out of the seven nights of that week. Why would they choose that particular night to address a liquor license violation?

Anthony Mohamed (00:44:29):

So, there was obviously something else going on. Of course, at that particular moment you can jump to conclusions or you can kind of wait for the facts to arise, but the conclusions that I remember jumping to was obviously that it was because it was full of naked women there, and why would they choose that night, if not to harass women?

Alisha Stranges (00:44:56):

Yeah, is there anything else that you remember vividly about that particular moment in Toronto's queer history?

Anthony Mohamed (00:45:06):

Well, I remember the Toronto Women's Bathhouse Committee announcing very clearly that they were going to challenge this, and I thought, "That's great." Because, first of all, I wanted the people most directly affected to take the lead on that. I don't think that it's right for other people to take the leadership on that, but I do think it's my role as an ally to support that process, wherever I can. I knew that I would eventually have a role, whether it was to donate $5 or to show up at a meeting or to protest in front of 52 Division or anything like that.

Anthony Mohamed (00:45:51):

I didn't expect that the role would actually turn into something professional, which we'll eventually get to. There was a lot of anger because, like I said, it immediately brought back police relations to a… It put it on hold; it brought it to a standstill again because here we are, the 1981 raids happened, and then it took so long, it took decades to try to build up [inaudible] kind of relationship with Toronto police, and then for them to step back like this was very upsetting and well, I mean, people were angry and rightfully so, and I was angry.

Alisha Stranges (00:46:37):

Yeah, I'm curious in '81, you would have been in high school, is that right?

Anthony Mohamed (00:46:43):

Right. So, I wasn't part of the community at that time. I found Church Street in 1983; a little bit after. However, what I do remember clearly is using it to gauge my parents' reaction. So, here we were sitting around watching CBC or CTV or one of the major newscasts, and they were showing the insides of bathhouses and all these men being arrested in 1981. So, this was February 1981, and then that night there was a huge protest at Yonge [Street] and Wellesley [Street], and they had coverage of this. I was like, "Ooh, I'm so excited, look at all these gay people." In my mind, I was thinking that, but remember, I'm really young. So, I was at home, I couldn't believe it, but I knew I had an affinity with them. I didn't understand what the affinity was.

Anthony Mohamed (00:47:45):

I remember thinking to myself, "Okay, so, how are my parents reacting to this?" Because they're sitting here watching this, and they didn't say anything homophobic, and I thought, "Wow, this is a really good…" This was a much better reaction than I had hoped, and maybe one day I'll be able to tell them that I have those feelings too. But I imagined in other people's homes, it was very blatantly homophobic because it was socially acceptable for people to yell at the TV and isolate their young people in their house or even older people who are LGBTQ. I have to remember that, right? Because I'm very much involved with the Senior Pride Network. It's amazing how many older adults will come out of the closet much later in life or begin transitioning much later in life.

Anthony Mohamed (00:48:52):

So, it's important that we remember that it's not only about young people being in the house. Perhaps grandparents were upset when the bathhouse raids happened and somebody yelled out something really homophobic, or when the AIDS crisis happened and people blamed gay people. So, it's important to remember that people of all ages are coming out and are part of the community.

Alisha Stranges (00:49:22):

I'm curious, this might be a bit of a leading question, but I'm just thinking about how in '81, you would have been witnessing the news coverage, and you're in a particular place and time in your life in relation to the community, and then, in 2000, now you had some experience of taking on activist roles, and you had peers who were affected by it, and it called you to action, is there any kind of link there about how you were able to respond as a teenager to the '81 raids versus how you were able to respond to this bathhouse raid in 2000?

Anthony Mohamed (00:50:07):

Well, absolutely, I mean, I have the language. I knew how things worked, to some degree, and I think that that's the important part about education, whether it's formal or informal is, you learn how to navigate systems, and you learn how to navigate media, and you learn how to critically think about a particular issue. So, when the bathhouse raids happened in '81 and then the Pussy Palace raid in 2000 be… Your reaction is emotional, right? It starts out emotional: "I'm upset about this, or I'm angry about this." But the difference is, in 1981, being in that location of being very young and… It was more personal; it was more about: "How does this impact me or how can it help me get through this?" In 2000, it was more: "This is upsetting for the entire community, and what role can I play to help the community get through this?"

Alisha Stranges (00:51:32):

I hear you. I mean, that's a great transition, I'm curious about the process through which you started to become part of the larger story surrounding the raid. As you understand it, what prompted the need for

LGBTQ+ community facilitators to cross paths with Toronto Police Services following the raid? What's your knowledge of how that came to be?

Anthony Mohamed (00:52:03):

So, I don't have all the details, but how it was explained to me and how I got involved was that the Toronto Women's Bathhouse Committee, they challenged the police in court. The case went to court, and it took a solid 10 years almost for the case to come down. And as part of the court settlement, one of the recommendations or the demands from the Women's Bathhouse Committee was that all Toronto police personnel go through LGBTQ cultural sensitivity training, or an understanding. As a result, a small group of police educators were formed, and most of them were out LGBTQ police officers, and they were tasked with recruiting 10 facilitators from the community, and they wanted a diverse group in terms of ages and colours, racial identities, but also genders, and even sexual orientation across the spectrum.

Anthony Mohamed (00:53:34):

However, out of the 10, it was great because we had such a diverse group that was pulled together. We would have meetings at different police stations around Toronto. Often, we'd meet at the one down by the Distillery District. Near Parliament [Street] and King [Street East]; there's a police station there. I remember we'd meet in there, and our task was to come up with — in consultation with the education police officers — come up with a robust training program. I was very blessed because I was in a work situation that allowed me to take part in this project, so St. Michael's Hospital has a relationship with police already, and because of my role there, and also being very openly gay and doing homophobia work out loud everywhere, I was asked to be part of this project under the auspices of St. Michael's Hospital and our connection with the police.

Alisha Stranges (00:55:00):

So, you shared a little bit about the demographics of the other facilitators. I'm curious about the education officers. I don't know what their title would be. In some of the literature they're sort of talked about as being an LGBT police liaison committee, I don't know if that's something separate in fact.

Anthony Mohamed (00:55:27):

I think that's separate.

Alisha Stranges (00:55:28):

Okay. So, the officers that you were collaborating with, about how many of those officers?

Anthony Mohamed (00:55:39):

There were four. I remember four, but our main contact was one person.

Alisha Stranges (00:55:46):

Okay, and can you speak a bit about the demographics of that group of four?

Anthony Mohamed (00:55:52):

It was, I believe two men and two women, all white, all kind of, I would say, the kind of 30 to 50 range.

Alisha Stranges (00:56:06):
Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Anthony Mohamed (00:56:07):
Yeah, and their task within the Toronto Police Services was specifically around education, broader than this particular project.

Alisha Stranges (00:56:20):
Okay.

Anthony Mohamed (00:56:21):
But they had an interest in this particular one, for whatever reason. I don't know their internal process of how they ended up being a part of it, but I do know at least two of the officers identified as gay and lesbian.

Alisha Stranges (00:56:36):
I see. And do you know in what year the program that you were working with the TPS [Toronto Police Service], in what year that program was established?

Anthony Mohamed (00:56:48):
2010.

Alisha Stranges (00:56:49):
2010. And is it still running? How long did it run for?

Anthony Mohamed (00:56:54):
It's a one-time shot.

Alisha Stranges (00:56:57):
A one-time.

Anthony Mohamed (00:56:57):
And we had to do everybody. When I say everybody, I mean officers as well as civilian staff, so people like 9-1-1 call centres, reception staff, people who were non-officers.

Alisha Stranges (00:57:17):
About how many people was that?

Anthony Mohamed (00:57:25):
Honestly, I don't have those numbers, but it was a lot, it was multiple thousands.

Alisha Stranges (00:57:30):
Multiple thousand?

Anthony Mohamed (00:57:31):
Yeah, multiple thousands. Because remember there was 10 of us, and each of us had about 40 people per workshop, and we did so many workshops, it was crazy.

Alisha Stranges (00:57:47):
So, you had to complete this in a certain amount of time?

Anthony Mohamed (00:57:51):
Yeah, I guess… No, I mean, I don't think we were time-limited as far as the court directive goes, but I think the idea was to meet the court ruling as quickly as possible.

Alisha Stranges (00:58:07):
Okay.

Anthony Mohamed (00:58:10):
So, that was, I think, the goal. And the workshop that we developed, I mean, it was pretty good. It was basically around the definitions of the alphabet soup, the acronym, that's how we would start. And then we'd go into great detail with small group discussions, table discussions. And the one that police seemed the most unfamiliar with was the T. They were okay with the LGB because they understood sexual orientation, and there was a general understanding of sexual orientation, and of course by this time Ellen [DeGeneres] had come out of the closet; there were visible representations on TV and in the media. People were much more vocal by this time. However, they were unfamiliar with trans and gender identity issues, and what the relationship was between sexual orientation and gender identity, seeing them as kind of together but separate, or something like that.

Anthony Mohamed (00:59:25):
Anyway, so there was a lot of discussion and clarification required. So, as a result, a lot of the discussion of the workshops focused on trans issues, and it was great because many of the 10 of us, the 10 community facilitators, identified as trans, and so their knowledge and expertise, and sharing their personal stories, was very, very powerful. Of course, because we weren't all together… So, each person took on 40 people, so myself as a non-trans person, I would share the story of some of the trans facilitators, and the issues that they raised about how expensive it is to go through the transition process, how the laws surrounding it are confusing. You might be able to get the operation in Quebec or Thailand, or something like that, and not "the" operation, it's a series of operations. So, it was those practical issues that, I think, police struggled with.

Anthony Mohamed (01:00:35):
But then the other side of it was, of course, the very practical things, entering a woman's space, sending in male police officers to enter a woman's space the night of the raid, so I remember we talked about that. We also talked about how…when strip searches are done, and which cell to put a person in, so we talked about very practical issues along those lines. And I have to say the Toronto Police Services, at least the people that were directly involved with us, they were truly making an effort to change policies and to try to consult with

the community. Did they get it right, were they perfect? Absolutely not, but I can't think of any policy in any large institution that's perfect.

Alisha Stranges (01:01:33):

Yeah. Well you've started to bring up so many things, and I've got a number of different avenues I'd like to follow. I wonder if we can just backtrack a little bit to, you said that you were collaborating with these four education-based officers to develop the curriculum. How much time did you take to plan what you would actually do in these sessions?

Anthony Mohamed (01:01:58):

I would say we took about six months of the sessions, just to develop the sessions, before we started the education. And then there were a few pilots as well. I remember we thought we might want to try this exercise, and we'd try it, and some things work, some things just didn't work great.

Alisha Stranges (01:02:21):

Right, right.

Anthony Mohamed (01:02:25):

It was a pretty thorough process.

Alisha Stranges (01:02:27):

Right. What was the experience like collaborating with the police that you were working intimately with?

Anthony Mohamed (01:02:37):

We all signed one-year contracts to be part of this project for a year, and they were very sensitive to our needs. And, like I said, the people directly involved, I think their hearts were in the right place. The institution, on the other hand, had some growing to do, especially around policy and around practices, and discussing their unspoken policies. However, the people directly involved with the training aspect, I would say, we were all pretty much on the same page. If a community facilitator brought up something that might be controversial, they didn't shy away from it.

Alisha Stranges (01:03:29):

Right.

Anthony Mohamed (01:03:31):

For example, men entering a woman's space. They knew that we needed to talk about those things as community facilitators, and ask and challenge the beliefs around, why did they think this was appropriate? And do you think this was appropriate? As a person in the audience, do you think this was appropriate? Asking that question.

Alisha Stranges (01:03:59):

Right.

Anthony Mohamed (01:04:00):

And for us facilitators, even though we're bringing a set of material to the room, the knowledge base, and the ownership of it, has to be with the audience, has to be with the people that you're facilitating. So, what we want to do is facilitate knowledge, answer questions where we can, but we don't just want to walk in and tell them, do this, do this, do this. I mean there's a role for that as well, but the sergeants, trust me, they're very adept at doing that. Our role was more to have the conversations, for them to express, "You know what, I'm really uncomfortable with this," right? "You know what, my religion says that it's a sin," right? Or something like that. I want to create a space, and I think all of us did, where we can have these learning discussions in a relatively safe space. Policy and procedures and stuff, it stems from this, and it's an important aspect, and some would argue a much more important aspect, but we have to get to that.

Alisha Stranges (01:05:14):

Right.

Anthony Mohamed (01:05:18):

And I needed to rely on sergeants to walk in and say, "Don't do this, don't do this" because I'm not a police officer, and I can't speak for the experience of a police officer in those particular situations, but whenever I needed to, I could find a police officer to tell… To say the things that I couldn't.

Alisha Stranges (01:05:41):

So, when you say the "don't do this," you mean the sergeant tells the people you're teaching, "Don't do X, Y, and Z?" Oh, I see.

Anthony Mohamed (01:05:49):

Or I have them in the audience, and I'll approach them on the break and I'll say, "Listen, this particular table, they're not understanding what we're talking about. I need you to go directly into policy."

Alisha Stranges (01:06:05):

Okay.

Anthony Mohamed (01:06:07):

And they'll walk in and they'll say, "I think it's important that we look at our own policy that was developed by us, and this is what we're supposed to do." So, for example, having a split strip search where, for example, two men might search the upper part of the body and two women might search the lower part of them, depending on the identity and the request of the individual. So, that would be an example of a policy change directly related to the Pussy Palace raid, a positive one.

Anthony Mohamed (01:06:57):

And like I said, they were struggling with the policies, and reasonably so. I mean, because each person's an individual, and how they react, or how they would want to be treated is different, and I think that that was one of our main messages as far as the workshops go, is that even though we're talking about a large community in Toronto, it comes right down to the individual, how they want to be treated with respect. Using the correct name, identifying the right pronouns, all that kind of stuff. But it grows from there, and it gets complicated, which room, which prison, who should be strip searching, all that kind of stuff.

Alisha Stranges (01:07:47):

You hinted at it a bit earlier, but I'm wondering if you can walk me through how the training was structured? Walk me through a typical session start to finish.

Anthony Mohamed (01:08:00):

Sure. We'd walk in and sometimes we'd do some kind of introduction exercise because people were coming from different precincts, so they didn't necessarily all know each other. So, some sort of introductory exercise, that would be very brief. I remember, during the pilot, we tried some ice breaker games. Oh boy did they not work.

Alisha Stranges (01:08:24):

Oh no, tell me more.

Anthony Mohamed (01:08:27):

It was ridiculous. I remember clearly asking people to identify their favourite colour as part of their introduction, and you think something really safe, a really safe question, nobody's going to react badly to that, but the idea was around diversity, and everybody in the room, regardless of age or gender, or whatever, they identified blue as their favourite colour. I was like, "Oh, great, thanks for identifying all the diversity in the room."

Alisha Stranges (01:09:11):

So, like, 40 people, all said blue?

Anthony Mohamed (01:09:16):

Yeah, 40 people, all said blue.

Alisha Stranges (01:09:17):

And with complete seriousness?

Anthony Mohamed (01:09:20):

Absolute seriousness, absolute seriousness. And to me what that identified was this broader issue of a pack mentality, is the… Sorry the computer screen has gone off.

Alisha Stranges (01:09:36):

That's okay, take your time.

Anthony Mohamed (01:09:39):

That's why the light has gone down.

Alisha Stranges (01:09:43):

That's okay.

Anthony Mohamed (01:09:43):

Because I have your questions open in the back. I can't see them now; it won't come back on. Come on, come on. Anyway, so that pack mentality. I'm going to have to restart the computer, it's completely–

Alisha Stranges (01:10:05):

Gave up on you.

Anthony Mohamed (01:10:06):

It gave up on me. These old computers. Oh well. So, can you still see me?

Alisha Stranges (01:10:12):

I can still see you, yeah.

Anthony Mohamed (01:10:14):

Okay, good. And then, I do want to contrast that with, so there is this pack mentality of: we're all one team, we have to be all on the same page, kind of thing, and protect each other. So that, to me, as a facilitator, that's what it told me, is that it's going to be hard for anyone to dissent from the pack when we get into harder issues because if they can't say, "My favourite colour is red" or "orange," how are they going to say, "I disagree with you," or "I think we should be more in tune with the queer and trans communities," or something like that. So, I was challenged as a facilitator around that.

Anthony Mohamed (01:11:05):

But I do want to contrast that with the hallway conversations. The hallway conversations were amazing. One-on-one interaction with all the students, they were fantastic. They would identify their favourite colour in real, out in the hall. They would speak to me like I was human. Because remember, they hated this, they were forced, and no one likes to be forced to do anything. But in regards to the court case, they knew that this was court-ordered training that they had to sit through. I'm trying to remember the exact time, but my guess is two, two and a half hours, possibly three hours each session was, so they hated having to be there. Before they had even met me, or before they've even tackled the topic, there was a certain hatred.

Anthony Mohamed (01:12:12):

But then, like I said, the hallway conversations were fun, we were cracking jokes, we were having fun with them. And then I remember, I ride my bike everywhere in Toronto, and at the time I was riding, and I remember riding home from the hospital one day and this police car was honking me on the side, and I looked over and it was two officers from the session, and they were waving. And here I was terrified. It was this strange thing where, not only could they see me as human, but I started to see them as human too, but also recognizing that institutions, like most institutions, have flaws, and Toronto police are no different in that regard. They have major, major flaws that they still have to deal with.

Alisha Stranges (01:13:15):

Yes. And so, when you moved from the icebreaker exercises and it moved into the discussion of the alphabet soup, you were saying…

Anthony Mohamed (01:13:27):

Yeah, so what we did was we would have the alphabet soup up on, there were three big blackboards, and I remember we put the L-G-B-T right across the board, including "allies" and "asexual," we would include… We tried to be as inclusive as possible. But anyway, and then we'd have the definitions printed out on a paper, and we put them at different tables. So, we put four definitions per table, and asked them to discuss with people at that table, where does it go in there?

Alisha Stranges (01:14:12):

Right.

Anthony Mohamed (01:14:13):

And often they'd get it correct, but more often than not they'd get it wrong, some of them wrong. But that's everybody, and remember language is evolving, so I certainly don't hold them responsible for that. What was called something in the 80s is called something different in the 90s, and in the 2000s, it was called something different, so it's completely understandable that they wouldn't get it 100% correct. I think if I did that with a group of LGBTQ people, we wouldn't get all the definitions absolutely correct.

Anthony Mohamed (01:14:50):

So, I do have a lot of understanding as to where their location is, to me that wasn't the big issue. The big issue is how they treat people, and what policies and what backups do they have that enable mistreatment. So, those were the big issues, as far as I was concerned, that led to the Pussy Palace raid. Things like language and stuff, those things can be learned, and understanding definitions. So, that was the first part, but then the second part was more in-depth, where we actually went into policy, and I'd have one of the police officers, the education officers, come in to talk about policy. And I would be there as a backup. "But what if I do this? Would people feel comfortable if I did this? And, what language should I use when I'm talking to the media?" Those kinds of things.

Alisha Stranges (01:16:01):

The police were asking you?

Anthony Mohamed (01:16:03):

Police were asking these questions to both of us, to both of us. So, that's when we'd get into the nitty gritty. But the LGBT alphabet soup discussion, that wasn't easy, that was 45 minutes to an hour of in-depth discussions, and then possibly even longer. And then, we had a few exercises and scenarios with a break thrown in it all. But the scenarios were more around the policies: "What would you do in this situation?" or "CityTV has asked you this question, how would you respond?"

Alisha Stranges (01:16:49):

So, the exercises around policy, were they to test the student cohort's knowledge of the current policy that they were expected–

Anthony Mohamed (01:17:00):

No, it was to actually tell them.

Alisha Stranges (01:17:01):
Okay.

Anthony Mohamed (01:17:04):
Yeah.

Alisha Stranges (01:17:04):
Because they had–

Anthony Mohamed (01:17:06):
When it came to policy, the officers, they don't ask you to learn about it. They say, "This is what you're doing." Whereas a facilitator, you're like, "Okay, so this is what we're proposing, let's see if we can get there." Because in my thinking, learning is about ownership of the thing. In their thinking, "No, sorry. This is what the higher ups have said and this is what you will do." They're very clear, and often a sergeant would play that role, meaning their hierarchy would play into that.

Alisha Stranges (01:17:49):
Did the policies that were being communicated or used as material for the exercise, were the students supposed to already have known that they exist, or were these new policies that came out of the settlement?

Anthony Mohamed (01:18:09):
I think it was a mixture of both.

Alisha Stranges (01:18:10):
I see.

Anthony Mohamed (01:18:12):
Some of the policies were related to LGBTQ communities prior to the Pussy Palace raid, and that was the anti-discrimination stuff. But the more specific stuff was around the strip searches and cell holding and media guidelines; those kinds of things came directly from the Pussy Palace raid settlement. And I'm not sure, to be honest, I can't speak to it in great detail, but if you speak to someone from the Women's Bathhouse Committee, they would probably be more familiar with what they had demanded as part of the settlement.

Alisha Stranges (01:19:02):
Right.

Anthony Mohamed (01:19:07):
But like I said, what I do know is that the officers who we worked with, their heart was in the right place, but I also recognize that there were bigger issues, like that hierarchy stuff was really weird to work within. As a community-minded person, I found that challenging.

Alisha Stranges (01:19:35):

Is that for other reasons beyond the fact that you had different philosophy of pedagogy; for other reasons it was also challenging?

Anthony Mohamed (01:19:45):

Of course, as a person of colour, I was terrified. I was like, these people have authority, they carry guns, and I'm relying on them to treat me with respect if I'm ever arrested or stopped, or anything like that. And I know for a fact that some do and some don't, and there's too many that don't follow policy, or that don't have an understanding. They don't embrace the policy as a personal thing. They embrace it as something written on paper, or worse, something not written on paper, which is worse because then they can make up the policy in their head. But that's what happens, and that's why many people, especially young Black men, they certainly get the horrible end of the stick there. I mean, police have been not nice to Indigenous folks or Black folks in Canada, ever since they've been an institution. So, they've got a lot of growing up to do, as far as that goes.

Anthony Mohamed (01:21:12):

I mean, what would I like to see? I would like to see a complete dismantling of that, and perhaps rebuilding it from the ground up, but realistically speaking, the only thing we can do is influence these really flawed institutions to do things a little bit better, to be a little bit better. At this point in time, anyway, because I can't see in my lifetime police being dismantled. I can see changes happening, but I can't see it completely being dismantled. I mean, the RCMP was there just to control Indigenous people. I mean, they were put in place specifically to clear the way, so these things are long documented, and what's sad is we still see horrible instance of this today in 2021. It's ridiculous, ridiculous.

Alisha Stranges (01:22:17):

I'm curious about how you balance your affinity for the argument, or the movement toward dismantling, or defunding, or restructuring the institution — policing — with this sense that, I don't think it'll get there in my lifetime so there's something else we need to do now. How do you balance those two internal affinities?

Anthony Mohamed (01:22:49):

It's a challenge. Yeah, it's a real challenge, and I can't say that it's personal to me. I think all 10 of the community facilitators, I think we all felt that horribleness, that we were almost defeated before we started. Because inside we were saying, "No matter what we do, no matter how many minds we change, it's still the structure that exists that's meant to control other people's behaviours and other people's actions." But we kept thinking, I suppose I kept thinking, and I'll speak with I-statements, my hope was that the next trans woman to be arrested, hopefully she'll be treated well, and respected, and if that happens to one person, then it would have all been worth it. But I still recognize that the broader institution, there's incredible work to do around equity.

Alisha Stranges (01:24:05):

While you were facilitating, what can you tell me about how the energy or awareness in the room evolved over the course of the three hours that you were with folks? Did you get a sense that you were getting through to people or was every group different?

Anthony Mohamed (01:24:29):

Every group was different, but I would say approximately one-third of the participants, I felt like there was a change. There was a genuine effort. And I found when I was doing the recruits, actually, they were the easiest

group because they were new recruits. They were soaking in the learning. They were also much more aware of the queer and trans communities because people were out in their class. All that kind of stuff, right? People were visible. I remember this one older gentleman, he said… He put up his hand and said this, "I retire in two months. There's no way I'm going to understand all of this. And you know what? I don't want to understand all of this."

Anthony Mohamed (01:25:27):

He was very clear. Right. So, you kind of had those two extremes: I'm here to learn. I'm really glad that you're here and that we're learning something new. And then you had other people who just felt like it was way too complicated for them to understand, especially around gender, right? They couldn't understand gender being on a spectrum and that concept. And even sexuality, they kind of understood, but I had comments like, "Maybe there should be a separate shower for LGBTQ people," so someone would say that in the workshop. And of course, that's shocking and horrible, but… I mean, it's horrible in the sense that they were doing it out of homophobia, right? It wasn't about making the person feel comfortable. It was about making themselves feel comfortable. Right?

Anthony Mohamed (01:26:39):

I was really pleased that they felt safe enough to say that to me, right? Because that's what I wanted to set up. I wanted to set up a safe environment where they could express their opinions and that we could have a conversation around it, as opposed to… Like I said, as a facilitator, our jobs are to walk in and work with the knowledge that's in the room and kind of direct the knowledge towards a place of respect for each other. But that's a much longer process than two and a half hours. But the idea is to start the conversations, right? And I do believe that the police have grown. A lot of police officers have grown. You know, queer and trans issues are very visible within police circles today, right?

Anthony Mohamed (01:27:42):

Danielle Bottineau, who was the LGBT liaison officer for many, many years, she hosted the International Conference on queer and trans policing, and I was invited to go to the opening of the conference. So, it was kind of neat to walk into this room, and they were all in formal dress and formal uniform, and from all over the world. And they were discussing queer and trans issues, and the vast majority were queer and trans police. Right? I didn't personally see a lot of non-community-member police officers there. However, the fact that they themselves can be visible within an institution that has been so mean and cruel towards our communities in the past, I mean, that was quite wonderful to see.

Anthony Mohamed (01:28:47):

However, it was still… Still, the institutional stuff was there. The hierarchy was there. And I don't want to come across as this major radical when it comes to hierarchies, but when you see it so blatant in front of your face, it's challenging this authoritarian environment where people are encouraged not to think as individuals. And that's the part that I find challenging personally, is because in order to reach my own identity and [inaudible], I had to start thinking as an individual and critically thinking, relying on others and bouncing ideas off of others but doing– [phone rings] Sorry, one second. Hello? Hello? Ugh! [hangs up] Telemarketers.

Anthony Mohamed (01:29:55):

Sorry. That's the curse of having a landline. Yes, I know, I know. But even the cell phone gets that too.

Alisha Stranges (01:30:07):

That's true.

Anthony Mohamed (01:30:08):

Yeah. Sorry. So anyway, that's a challenge that I have with police and with policing style organizations is, in order to learn, you've got to know yourself, right. And they don't give you the space to know yourself. So, this conference was great because it allowed them to express an identity of themselves that wouldn't normally be expressed in that environment. But they were trying to merge that with this authoritarian institution. And to me, there's a conflict there that exists. And not just there. I mean, I worked in hospitals for 26 years. I know that in hospitals, it's the same thing. Right? I mean, it's not so blatant, and we do things much more collectively and much more by consensus. However, there's still a hierarchy, but there's a more balanced hierarchy, I guess. Whereas in policing it's so blatant. So, yeah. It's so, "I say jump and you ask how high."

Alisha Stranges (01:31:33):

Well, I'm noticing we're kind of running out of time a bit, but I do have maybe one little final section of questions here. I hope it won't take too much time. This is a little bit of an exercise that I'm hoping to invite you into. I don't know how it'll work, but just go with it to the best of your ability, I guess. I'm really curious if I can get a sense of the impression that the experience of leading these sessions, the sense of the impression it made on your senses.

Alisha Stranges (01:32:15):

So, if I can invite you to, for a moment, soften your gaze. Or, if you feel comfortable, you can even close your eyes, and I'll do the same. And just breathe. And with each inhale and exhale, allow your body to sort of re-inhabit the classroom space on a particular day. It might've been the first day, might've been somewhere in the middle. Don't worry too much about which day, just go with whichever one's coming to mind. And from this sort of embodied or contemplative space, if you can look around in your mind's eye and tell me what it is that you're seeing.

Anthony Mohamed (01:33:26):

So, I'm at the front of the room. It's very brightly lit. It's all white paint, a very light-coloured paint. There's a series of windows on the left-hand side, and, as I mentioned earlier, three blackboards [inaudible]. In front of me, there are, I'd say about seven tables? Seven or eight tables of maybe six or seven people each. And different levels of uniform is very… I don't know the differences, but I can tell that some people are much higher up just in terms of stripes and stars and all that stuff, emblems on their uniform, and some are lower ranks.

Anthony Mohamed (01:34:21):

What I remember in this particular workshop was that I released them on break, and a woman had stayed back, and I remember approaching the table and saying, "You don't want to go outside?" And she said, she wanted to chat with me. I was so happy because she took that opportunity to come out to me. And she said that it was the first time she had told someone since she started working there, but she wasn't out to the other officers, but she wanted me to know that I had an ally in the room. And it was just a brief, quick conversation, but I felt like, "Okay, these workshops were worth it." And that's why we're here so that people can feel more comfortable, both in their workplace, but also society can feel safer within the institution of policing and its relationship with the broader community.

Alisha Stranges (01:35:48):

And if you could somehow distill this space and time that you're in into a single colour, what colour do you think it would be?

Anthony Mohamed (01:36:02):

Hmm, it's interesting. It's an interesting question. Not one that I would have expected. I'm leaning towards a yellow and an orange. I'm not sure why.

Alisha Stranges (01:36:12):

That's okay. Yeah.

Anthony Mohamed (01:36:14):

It might be because the sun is out on the windows. Most of this happened in the summertime.

Alisha Stranges (01:36:23):

I see. And if the space could express itself, sonically, what is the sound of that space?

Anthony Mohamed (01:36:37):

Oh, there's a buzz. There's a definite buzz. People were chit-chatting a lot, and I encouraged chit-chat. So, how I would do it… I don't know. "Buzz, buzz, buzz, buzz, buzz."

Alisha Stranges (01:36:55):

Yeah, and what does the space smell like? Any lingering odours?

Anthony Mohamed (01:37:04):

It was clean. It was just very clean. You can tell that they were very good at cleaning the school. This was up at the police training college, which they were about to close down after our sessions and move to a new facility in Etobicoke. It was a clean space. It was definitely a professional teaching room, classroom.

Alisha Stranges (01:37:34):

Imagine that some part of your body could brush up against some element in the space. What are you touching? What are its textures? What does it feel like?

Anthony Mohamed (01:37:47):

Well, I had a desk at the front with all the kind of paper stuff on it, the workshop outline. And so, I would often touch that. I would also hold a marker, and that's kind of a nervous habit that kind of releases my nerves, helps me to relax. So, I'd hold the marker, and I'd tap it on the desk or tap it on my other hand. So, that's what I would be holding because all I had was basically chalk, blackboard, a flip chart, and markers. But in this particular time, we didn't use PowerPoint or any kind of technology, which was interesting. I'm not sure why.

Alisha Stranges (01:38:41):

Finally, if you can, think about what the flavour or taste of this space would be. If somehow it could be…you could taste it, what would its flavour be?

Anthony Mohamed (01:38:57):

Yeah, it was kind of this weird thing. I would say it's mostly sour. Now and then there was this sweet, sweet moment that would last for a few seconds, and then immediately go back to sour.

Alisha Stranges (01:39:14):

Okay. Take a deep breath in and out, and you can let that go. Open your eyes if you have them closed.

Anthony Mohamed (01:39:26):

There we go.

Alisha Stranges (01:39:26):

So, my last question is just, as a community facilitator, what were you expecting to experience in the position and sort of how did your actual experience compare to your expectations?

Anthony Mohamed (01:39:41):

Yeah, well, I knew that when we were together, the 10 of us doing the workshop, we were all really quite afraid of entering those rooms. Because we knew, we had been warned that they were told that this was court-ordered training and that their people are very resistant to signing up, but they know they have to, kind of thing. So, a lot of people were just there to tick a box on their HR forms so that they can say, "Yes, we went through the training." So, we were quite afraid. The reality of it though was, it was nerve-wracking at first, but as I became more comfortable with them, and I kind of learned how to navigate, what jokes worked, what jokes didn't. Right? Kind of thing…

Anthony Mohamed (01:40:49):

Or just being blatant. Like, "I know you all don't want to be here." Saying that, "But we're stuck together for three hours, and how about we get something done while we're all here. How about we truly work on it." So, it really helped me to grow as a facilitator. So, I'm really happy for that experience. Right? Because I would have never had that opportunity. Most workshops that you do, the participants are usually signing up themselves, so they're already in tune with the subject matter. Right? This one was different in that it was people of all backgrounds who may or may not be familiar with what you're talking about, and the vast majority were not familiar with queer and trans issues. So, to be challenged as a facilitator on that, yeah, I thought it was great. It was really amazing. And when you discovered a new skill within yourself, it was very empowering.

Anthony Mohamed (01:42:00):

The other part of it is that it showed me, like I said earlier, about how individual police officers can be very, very human, which was something that I… It was a stereotype that I had to address and a bias that I had to address within myself is that… So, yeah, so I would say the greater learning almost was about myself, even though I was hired to teach all of these students. Yes, that was done. And yes, that was achieved. And there were policy changes and, hopefully, individual behavioural changes, but it was more about the skill benefit that I got and the kind of relationship that I could develop with police after that. As a result of that

experience, a few years later, I joined the liaison committee, right — which was separate, the police liaison committee — because I felt comfortable doing… Working with them.

Anthony Mohamed (01:43:16):

And that committee was great because there were some really great leaders from the community on it. And it was a nice mix of people of colour and white people, trans people, and people with different identities from within the community. So, I felt very comfortable being at that committee, but I didn't feel like we had much teeth, to be honest. It was more of an advisory committee, and there wasn't a lot to advise on. The stuff that we were bringing up were things like, young Black men being carded, the kind of broader issues around policing. And then, when the parks were being raided in Etobicoke, and gay men were being arrested, that came up as well. Right? I forget the project, but unfortunately, I wasn't a part of the committee when the series of murders happened. However, I was able to do many interviews for BBC, for other news organizations. CBC a lot, around what it's like to be a Brown man — Brown, gay man — when clearly the murder targeted that population.

Anthony Mohamed (01:44:49):

So, there's six of the 10, six of the eight murdered were Brown, gay men. So, yeah. But I guess, for me, my relationship with the police started through the Pussy Palace settlement, and that's how I was able to have some kind of relationship. I wouldn't say it was a great… I mean, it's been great. It's been great. I wouldn't say it's amounted to a lot of change, but it's amounted to some. And I think there are limitations to the institution's ability to change in the state that it currently is in. And that's where I talk about the complete dismantling needs to happen, but I don't expect to see that in our lifetimes.

Alisha Stranges (01:45:48):

And is there anything else about your experience that you would want to share that perhaps my questions just didn't give you the opportunity to speak to?

Anthony Mohamed (01:45:59):

Well, not really. I mean, I really want to thank the Toronto Women's community, sorry, the Bathhouse Committee, the Women's Bathhouse Committee because they didn't cower away from this challenge that was forced upon them. And so, for the people who were involved with challenging that led to the education happening, kudos to them. It was their efforts and their energy that led to some change. Right? A lot of those changes wouldn't have happened around policy. All of the 9-1-1 operators or the police officers, they wouldn't have gone… They wouldn't have had the opportunity to have these discussions had that not happened. Right? But I see the training as a small part of that on this continuing road around… And it's just a very small part, but I'm really glad that I was able to play a tiny role, which goes back to the beginning. Love God, love your neighbour.

Alisha Stranges (01:47:28):

Yeah. Anthony, we've come to the end. Thank you.

Anthony Mohamed (01:47:31):

You're more than welcome.

Alisha Stranges (01:47:33):

Thank you so much. Yeah, I it was just… I'm so grateful to be able to bear witness to your story, your own personal stories, and also your involvement, your larger involvement. I'm so grateful that you reached out and asked about being interviewed because it just offered a whole other perspective that I would've not known to look toward. Thank you.

Anthony Mohamed (01:48:02):

Yeah. Hopefully you can get in touch with other facilitators and with police officers that were directly involved with the training aspect. I want to thank you as well.

Alisha Stranges (01:48:17):

Yeah, no problem.

Anthony Mohamed (01:48:22):

Thank you.

Alisha Stranges (01:48:23):

I'm going to stop the recording now, and we can do our goodbyes, but I'll just pause it here.

Anthony Mohamed (01:48:30):

Okay.