

COUNTRY QUEERS SEASON 1 EPISODE 5

DESCRIPTION: [Addendum] E died unexpectedly due to complications following a heart procedure on September 23, 2020. Their passing left so many of us devastated. They were truly an incredible organizer who touched the lives of so many people. We ask folks to make donations in their memory at the organizations listed below. You can find E's obituary [here](#).

Elandria Williams identifies as a Black, southern/Appalachian, disabled, genderqueer, pansexual, Unitarian Universalist, "auntiemama" to 3 nieces and nephews and 4 god-kids. E grew up on Cherokee land in Knoxville and Powell, Tennessee. In this interview, recorded at the [STAY Project's](#) summer gathering at [Highlander](#) in 2013, E talks about organizing, their complicated feelings about "country," how you can never be anonymous in the town you grew up in, and how much joy they get from seeing youth thrive.

For this episode, at E's suggestion, we're asking folks who have additional funds to donate to two initiatives. The first is [Black, Appalachian, Young & Rising](#), a Black-led youth program of the [STAY Project](#). STAY is a central Appalachian regional network of young folks 14-30 supporting one another to make their home communities places young people can and want to stay.

The second is the Disability Justice work of the [People's Hub](#), a nonprofit that offers live, interactive trainings and workshops to build community power and support grassroots work. Elandria is their Executive Director.

CREDITS: Host/Producer/Lead Editor: Rae Garringer. Assistant Editor/Composer-Performer of Acoustic and Electric Guitar Music: Tommie Anderson. Editorial Advisory Dream Team: [Hermelinda Cortés](#), Sharon P. Holland, and [Lewis Raven Wallace](#). Theme Song Composer/Banjo: [Sam Gleaves](#). Theme Song Pedal Steel: [Rebecca Branson Jones](#). Most importantly, thanks to E for sharing their story so generously with us all.

TRANSCRIPT

[Sound of rain]

JAKE [Intro]: This is Jake in Lewisburg, West Virginia and you're listening to Country Queers, the podcast.

[Theme Song]

RAE GARRINGER [Host]: Hey, I'm Rae Garringer, and this is Country Queers, a podcast featuring oral history interviews with rural and small-town queer and trans folks in the U.S. Each episode features an interview I've recorded since founding this project in 2013. In this episode, you'll meet Elandria Williams.

ELANDRIA WILLIAMS: Okay, my name is Elandria Williams. I'm now 34 years old and I live in Knoxville, Tennessee.

RAE [Host]: Elandria identifies as a Black, southern/Appalachian, disabled, gender queer, pansexual, tantric yoga student and teacher, no-college-degree-having, Unitarian Universalist "auntiemama" to three incredible nieces and nephews and 4 god-kids. E has been organizing and leading popular education since they were 14 years old. They're now 41. Much of their work is rooted in Disability Justice and spiritual fortification.

E grew up on Cherokee land in Knoxville and Powell, Tennessee. At the time of our interview, in August 2013, they worked at the Highlander Research and Education Center. Highlander is a catalyst for grassroots organizing and movement building in Appalachia and the South that has been leading and supporting organizing work since 1932. Highlander is located on traditional Cherokee territory, on a gorgeous mountain farm spanning about 200 acres in New Market, Tennessee.

Elandria and I talked on a Sunday afternoon after a long weekend at the STAY Project's annual summer gathering. STAY, which stands for Stay Together Appalachian Youth, is a regional network that was founded in 2008 that works to connect young folks aged 14-30 across six states to build community, share skills and political education, and to support one another in their efforts to create sustainable & equitable communities.

STAY is important to shout out in this episode for a few reasons. The first is that Country Queers wouldn't exist without the STAY Project. When I moved home to West Virginia in 2011 after nearly a decade away, I didn't know how or if I'd be able to find political and queer community. I found all of that, and so much more, through STAY. I first heard the phrase Country Queers through friends I met at STAY, Sam Gleaves (who wrote our theme song) and Ethan Hamblin. It was through STAY that I started to meet and learn from other rural Appalachian queer folks, and STAY was the community that encouraged me to set out on this big ambitious project with no training or experience. It was also at STAY's Summer Institute at Highlander in August 2013 that I recorded the first six interviews for this project, including Elandria's. And Elandria was one of the founding members of STAY through their work as the Seeds of Fire Youth & Young Adult Program Coordinator at Highlander. I aged out of STAY years ago at this point, but they still inspire me every damn day. Young folks are literally leading the way, y'all, and we'd best follow their lead, because they've got a beautiful vision for the future.

Ok, so now let's just get to Elandria's brilliance already. It's August 11th, 2013, and the STAY gathering is wrapping up. E is in the conference room of the Highlander office, which, by the way, was intentionally burnt down by white supremacists in March 2019. But in 2013, the office building is still standing, and Elandria is inside of it, sitting at the conference table, and as usual, putting together packets for a workshop they're preparing for. You can hear E shuffling papers and grabbing paper clips throughout our interview. Otherwise, the building is quiet, and it's just the two of us.

ELANDRIA: What is it like where I live? So, I feel like I live in a city that thinks of itself as a town *[laughs]*. I live at the nexus of Appalachia and the South, in Knoxville. Knoxville is the largest city in Appalachia. Knoxville is...well, the county, which is where I grew up, is a mostly white county, with some people of color in it. So I went to school in a pretty diverse school, for most of it. I went to high school, not in a diverse school.

I live in a place that is dominated by University of Tennessee football. I live in a place that Pilot Oil runs a lot of things. And where Tennessee Valley Authority dominates.

And so, you have a couple of big industries where everybody works through. And so, where I live is beautiful. The National Parks are amazing. And it's great.

I also live in a place that has one of the oldest gay bars in the South, the Carousel. And so, we are in the top 10 list of the friendliest gay, small/medium cities in the country. In large part, because the women's basketball team, and Gatlinburg, and because there's the University of Tennessee here as well.

So that's where I live.

RAE: So, where were you born? What was your childhood like? What was growing up like? Your family?

ELANDRIA: I was born here. I left, but I came back. I was born in the University Tennessee hospital and then grew up in Powell, Tennessee. Which I wasn't at much, because my mom was a teacher, and so I went wherever she was at. But then, I went to high school in Powell.

As a young Black person, Powell sucked, in many ways. And I spent most of my time there doing organizing work around Confederate flags, trying to get rid of Confederate flags from places, trying to stop race fights, and all that.

But there were good people. I feel like, because crazy Powell was so intense, the people that I met there, that I'm friends with, I'm really good friends with now. So, I made some of the best friends of my life out of Powell.

Growing up was intense because...Knoxville is a really big party town because of the university, and because the football team was doing so well, and the basketball team, and all the teams, were doing so good. It meant there was lots of partying. And so,

that's what I remember the most, actually, about being in middle school, high school, and college, is the intense amount of partying done.

So, there were these two places. So, one was called Lord Lindsey's, that on Thursday nights, it was like the club to go. And Thursday's nights, was called the Closet. And it was a place where everybody gathered. And it didn't matter, but it's clearly called the Closet, so everybody knew, the Closet was a place where all the queer folk would go and hang out and party. But it also was like the best club in town. And so, everybody came. And so, it didn't matter if you were, doing your thing, that's where everything happened. And so, I feel like that was the one thing that Knoxville has that's different than every other place I've ever been to. Is that nobody only hangs out with one type of people.

And I think that's what's made being where we live so unique, is it's not small enough to where you feel like you have to like close in and only hang out with a certain type of people. And it's also not big enough to where, especially if you're from here, that you can just let go of all the people that you grew up with. So you're almost, in many ways, forced to have to work to have friends that are cross-race. You're forced to have friends that are everything. And so, like my friend group is all races of people, but also all sexualities, which is different than a lot of places where people only have lesbian friends, or you only have gay boy friends, or they only have trans friends. Whereas I'm like, nope, I have friends that are in all those categories, and all different races of those categories, and we all hang out together. Which...It's beautiful. And it was one of the things that I appreciate the most.

And I also grew up Unitarian Universalist in Knoxville. Which meant that when I was—we were in the sixth grade and our friend's dad was transitioning, when we were kids. And having that conversation about what that means, what's going on. And so, it was like, from an early age, I was taught that, whatever you are, sexuality's a spectrum, just like gender's a spectrum, and you don't have to identify one way or the other.

There are a couple things that stick out to me really bad. So, my parents, even though that was them—so I loved basketball. It was all I actually really like for a long time. And so, my dad was so freaked out about me playing on the basketball team because the coach was a lesbian. And he was like, "Oh my God, no!" And it was like, a fight to play sports. Even though he wanted me to play, it was a fight with him, because he was like, "I already have a daughter who doesn't want to be a girl."

And so, literally, I was not a girl in my life until I like had a period, and I thought I was internally bleeding. And I was like, I need to go to the hospital immediately. I was in Miami with my cousins and they were like, "You are not dying, you are having a period." I was like, "No, we don't have these."

And so, gender was always one of those complicated things where I was like, "I want to be a boy, I do not want it to be a girl. Girls suck. And I want to play football and basketball, and I want to enjoy my life." And it was, and I have a twin brother. And so,

there were decisions made at different points in life around, what does it mean to—what does gender look like in terms of expression and in terms of what you have to be to make it?

And so that's my growing up. There's so much more I could say, but that's a lot.

RAE: That's great. Thank you. Um so, how do you identify?

ELANDRIA: In terms of what way? Whatever I want to say?

RAE: Whatever you want to say.

ELANDRIA: Sexuality-wise, I identify as pansexual, which for me means, I date some dudes, some women, and trans folk. Mostly trans men. But yes. But, I'm pretty picky, but that's how I identify, in terms of pansexual.

And then, um, I don't really, I mean the thing is, gender stuff for me is complicated. I'd rather not do either one. I mean like, I also live in a place where I don't feel like having a conversation about it all the time. And so, there's a whole group of people that I do work with, and they're in the Brown Boi Project, and we talk a lot about what it means to, be in the mids—for us ourselves, to be in whatever presentation we're in, is because we want...there's something bigger. We have other things to impact, to be moved. And the primary conversation doesn't need to be about gender, like, it needs to be about other things. And so, yeah. I don't normally identify as a girl, but you know, that's how I present. It's easiest, for me. To do what I need to do in life, in the world.

RAE: Great. Thanks. So, when did you first know you were queer?

ELANDRIA: When did I first know I was queer? That is so complicated. I don't actually know if I know the answer to that. Like I think I knew—because I grew up with everything knowing for always—Like, AI happened in the seventh grade. And before then, I clearly did not want to be a girl. So, I clearly knew there was something...Like, I think everybody in my family—Because it was just too, what it was. And so, I always knew that I was like this, "I don't want to be in this body." That's been there since I was a kid. Actually, I remember clearly being in kindergarten. And so, me and this girl Ebony, were put in these tutu things, 'cause our moms wanted us to be ballerinas. And we were like, "Hell, no." So, we ran around terrorizing all of the girls in the ballet class, so that we could get out of ballet. And I completely forgot about some of it until I ran into Ebony at the Carousel, when I was, I don't know, I was like, 22. And she was like, "Do you remember us terrorizing all those little girls in ballet so we could both get the planet out of ballet?" I was like, "Oh, that's so right." And I was like, "That was hilarious."
[Laughs] We were like, "No!"

And so, it was pretty early. I was like, this is not my steelo. And then, I think over time, I knew like I was somewhere in the spectrum, but was like, "Mm, until I find somebody

that actually want to talk to, mm.” And I think that most of the girls that I’m attracted to are more butch and are mostly not white. And that wasn’t in Knoxville.

And so, I think that also like was a part of it. So, it’s like whenever I would go out of town, it was like, “Mm, you’re hot.” And I’m like, “Ok, I don’t live here, I’m going back home, and you don’t exist in my local area. *[Laughs]* So, we’re not going to worry about that. I don’t know if that answered the question at all, but.

RAE: No. I think you did. And so, these questions I sort of ask together, I guess. So, what do you think the largest, maybe struggle, facing queer people in the U.S. is, are? Struggles are? And then, what do you think it is for like rural queers? And do you think it’s the same or different, or—? It’s a huge question.

ELANDRIA: That is a massive question.

RAE: It is.

ELANDRIA: Wow. Oh my God. Okay. One of the large struggles to me, is how to actually talk about race and class in queer community. That’s huge. Because I think people don’t want to—I think there’s large swaths of the queer community that doesn’t actually want to deal with it at all. Which is why I think marriage was great. People took off. And you’re like, “Now what? Are we really going to deal with the other things that people need like bullying, around stuff around prisons, around what does it mean to have around economics?” Knowing that most poorest people or people who are differently abled and queer, combined.

I think we’re still at a place where people think queer means white. And we’re still fighting. That is not a white man’s disease. It’s something that has happened in all of our communities. People have queer in the communities forever. That’s like normal. I think that’s still like, huge. I think that—I think that almost every issue that impacts everybody, are like the biggest issues queer people face. Because queer people have every other thing in back of them. Right?

And that’s the one that I’ve appreciated about my work, for the last six years, and actually with me the whole time, is that you’re able to work with queer organizations, but you’re also able to work with queer people within other organizations that are doing work around educational justice, and are doing work around juvenile incarceration, and are doing work around housing or transportation. Because of all those, all the issues that people face, queer people face. Because queer people are people, but they face them, harsher a lot of times.

If the country is dealing with the economic recession, the biggest issue queer people face is the economic recession. Because at the end of the day, everyone needs a job. So, that’s what I believe. I think there’s a different, there’s a bent on it, around what does it mean to be queer dealing with these issues, and how it impacts queer people in a way

that it does not impact hetero people? That to me is one thing. But that's my personal opinion.

And so, I feel like in rural areas? That's a different kind. I actually think it's different in rural areas than urban, because I would say that's true for urban. And rural areas, people are still fighting for survival. Actually, no, that's not true. I think in New Orleans somebody just got murdered a couple of weeks ago for being trans, trans man just got murdered. And a trans female got murdered a month ago, in New Orleans. Both black, of course. And the kid got murdered in Miami, right? Tasered, like a week ago? And so, I think that it may be the biggest fear actually still. Right? What does it mean for people to be murdered because of their identity and the way they express? That to me is huge.

I think in rural spaces, communities are small. You know? And I think it's hard to figure out how do you find a relationship? How do you maintain? How you deal with your family? I was just talking to a friend of mine the other day, and trying to stay at home, while her family is tripping out beyond measure. And you want to stay connected, but it's tough. And it's like every bit of you is yearning to like get out and go, so you don't have to deal with the foolishness. And so, it's like, weighing. But I also think, how do you maintain stability? And how do you have a family? However family means to you, right? And how do you have a job that you're actually successful in your life, or whatever that means?

I think it's harder in rural areas than in cities. And in many ways, it's because most people in rural areas are from those rural areas. And so, it's not just about like you, it's about your family, it's about their family's community, and people and their lovely mouths' wagging. And I think that is different than when you're like—cause, if you move to another place, you're almost an anonymous bug. Your life starts from when you got there. When you're at home—It's like, I was at this thing, and I ran into the church, Baptist church that I grew up in, that I left in the fourth grade! But Reverend Skinner's like, "Elandria!" I haven't seen that man since I was like, little. But then he's going back to your life story when you were in kindergarten. And so, it was like you never left. It's like to them, that you're still that little five-year-old girl that they remember.

And so, that's the box you're in. And so, I think that's the biggest—I think that's actually the hardest thing about being in a rural area that you're from. Is that people will remember you, and they remember your family, and you're always connected back in. And the small-town gossip. That, to me, is the hardest thing, I think.

[BREAK]

[Music]

RAE [Host]: Hey friends. Because we know the impact of colonization on people, land, and resources in the U.S, we're encouraging our white listeners to engage in an ongoing process of reparations. So during each episode break, we're asking our white listeners who have extra funds to donate to projects founded and led by queer and

trans, Black and Indigenous folks, and people of color. Today, at Elandria's suggestion, we're asking you to donate to two initiatives.

The first is Black, Appalachian, Young & Rising, a Black-led youth program of the STAY Project.

The second is the Disability Justice work of the People's Hub.

Links to both of those websites are in the episode notes and over on our website at www.countryqueers.com.

Now, back to my interview with Elandria from August 2013.

[END OF BREAK]

RAE: So the question is...Where? I lost it. How do you feel about being queer in country, or maybe you don't identify as country, or a country queer? I don't know.

ELANDRIA: Country queer. I don't actually know if identify as a country queer. I don't actually...I mean, I feel like I identify as someone who is from a small zone. I feel like I identify as somebody who is tied to the land. I mean, country is complicated, and it's partly based upon my own internalization. I mean, let's just go there. Right? It took me—I hated East Tennessee, my entire life. Hated it. So my family's from Florida. They're not from the big busting metropolis. I mean, now some of them live there. But they're from rural Florida. And that was fine with me. When I think country, I think East Tennessee. And it took me 23 years to be fine with East Tennessee. *[Laughing]* Now I'm okay, but it took a long, long time. I mean, I clearly don't identify as an urbanite. So I guess the other option than urbanite is country, small town. So what was the actual question?

RAE: So how do you feel about being queer and maybe not urban? *[Laughs]*

ELANDRIA: You know what? I mean I feel like...Here's actually, I realize how I feel. I feel like, because of it, I'm able to straddle everything. And I'm just as comfortable going to the country bar and doing the thing, and just having a good ass time, as I am sitting at the football game, as I am being at the gay bar in the city. Like, all of it is fine. I think that that is what it means for me to be country queer. Is that like, you can't leave your folk at the door. You can't act like you grew up with people that weren't like the people that are acting all kinds of crazy in all kinds of ways.

And, it's different. I mean, I go to New York all the time, and there is definitely a difference. I can't handle New York for but so long and I'm like, I got to go. And what being queer means in New York is not what it means for me. And so I do think, like, now I'm very happy with it. I wasn't for a very long time. But I'm happy now. I'm very happy now.

And I think one thing that I feel like it's really important is for other people to feel happy and rooted in who they are, and from whence they came, and to be really thankful. I mean, it's like, I'll never forget having this conversation with my dad, and my parents. I'm really close to my whole family. And because we were talking about a whole bunch of stuff and pushing back. And at some point he was like, "You know what?" He's like, "I had a cousin from every single one of my family that was queer." Well, he wouldn't say queer because Black people don't use that. Black people mostly use same gender loving, and gay. No, they don't actually use gay. They use same gender loving.

So he's like, "I have four cousins, gay men, gay women." He's like, "Everybody knew it. Everybody knew their partners. They were at every family reunion. They were hanging out. They were everywhere." He was like, "But it was never talked about. They were just there." He's like, "And nobody got kicked out the home. Everybody was just there." And so now I have to look at my, I have a younger cousin, who's also another one of a twin. I'm a twin. He's another one of a twin. And he was outside of Pensacola in Cantonment. And now is in LA, having this like—it's like, okay, this is a little much.

And we were having a conversation about what it means to be okay in your skin...but he is fine. He's like, "My family was always extra supportive. And the ones that aren't, they don't say nothing!" And so I think that's the one thing I think about my family, is like, there's never—there's been like moments of stupidity, but throughout, there's never been a huge anything. They're just like, "You are who you are. We're not going to change it. Clearly you're not going anywhere. We don't do that. That's not the Williamses." And so I think that's helped.

Yeah, it's a interesting thing about what it means to still be. I mean, I also think it's different being here. It also means that like, I've basically decided that I sometimes have relationships and other times don't have them, because who I'm attracted to mostly isn't walking around east Tennessee. And that to me is also what it means. Is that there are times where I'm like, okay, if I want a relationship, do I actually have to get up and move? Do I have to always be relegated to the long-distance relationship? I mean, and there's good long-distance relationships out there and there's good folk, but it can get real challenging to find somebody. I think, especially as a Black queer person, in a mostly white town, that doesn't mostly date white people. It gets tough. And that's the part where I think it's tough. Um, yeah. But you know, it's a beautiful thing. I love where I'm at. I'm happy I get to see all my family. And that for me, is what matters.

RAE: Yeah. Let's see. So, let's see. When do you feel most proud to be queer, and maybe the most proud to be...non-urban? *[Laughs]* I have it written as country.

ELANDRIA: You can say country.

RAE: You want to say country. Okay.

ELANDRIA: It doesn't matter. I'm like, Goddamn, I don't know. I don't know what I identify as.

The most happy to be queer...

RAE: And is it ever at the same time, those parts?

ELANDRIA: I mean I feel like...Okay, so here's what I think about it means for me to be queer. Because I realized, I was like, why are there things that I do and things that I don't do. Right? So to me, it's like such a natural part of who I am that it's like, it just is. I think when I'm the most happy is when I get to see young people that are happy in their skin. Because I work with young people mostly for a reason. Right?

And so, when I see young people like, just happy in who they are, is the happiest I am to be queer. That like I am helping create a process to where people can come in and flippin' be. The happiest I am is when I see friend groups, because I've worked with young people so long. that the friend groups are completely mixed up, and people are not all queer over here, all hetero over here, all Black over here, all white. But when people are like friends and they're all blended together. And even if that's not their only group they're in, but they're able to do that, *that's* when I'm happy. Because I'm like, something is an identity, it's not all of who you are, it's a part of your identity. And that's what makes me flippin' thrilled.

I mean at youth camp this year, like watching Samaya do body party, and do a whole like. drag theme to body party, as a trans woman at youth camp, while this 11-year-old boy is like, "Uhhh," *[laughs]* was like amazing. It's like, yay! And people were able to see what it means to be queer if you're from Spartanburg, South Carolina, or if you're from New York. Well, not New York, 'cause Samaya's clearly not from New York, but she's from New Orleans. And to see all these groups from Miami, to see all these folk like blend up together from small towns, really big cities in the South. And to be like, this is what it means, and all the different aspects of it? That's what makes me like, super psyched. And to see young people, like my nieces and nephews, and having conversations with them. And trying to tease out, "Yes, I know this is what your hockey coach says, but we are not going there." And then they're like, "Oh, that's you! No, we don't believe in that." So it's like, I think that having, watching that, that's what makes me most proud.

I think what makes me most proud to be country, or whatever I am, oh gosh...When small towns win at stuff, that makes me happy. When people from small towns do good, I'm like, "Woo!!" That's psyched. That's exciting. Yeah, I don't know. I mean, I think it's just when people are happy to be where they're from, you know, and carry that back with them.

Actually, what makes you most happy is when people go back home, right? When people go to Atlanta, and then they're like, "You know what, I think I'm going to go back to Tuskegee." That's what makes me super happy when folk are like, "You know what, I actually have what I need. And I got what I needed, and I can now go back home, and root in and change where I'm from." That like, makes my day.

And what makes me happy too, is to like, be home. To walk around and randomly see somebody that I haven't seen since I was like, in high school. That makes me happy. I mean, that's not proud, but it makes me happy because it wouldn't be in other places, even though I see people I know everywhere. It wouldn't be like that other places.

I realized the thing that made me the happiest it was, my brother and I had our birthday party, and every single person at that party, except for the youth that came with me, where all people I had known since I was in between zero, and the newest people were when I was in my freshman year of college. I'm 34 now. Everybody else I've known forever. And I was like, "I'm at a party with people I've known for 15, 10, 34, 30 years. And I mean, we're all having the best time ever." And that was the happiest thing, is I was like, "Who would have think that we would all still be here?" And people came back. And like, I saw a friend I hadn't seen in years. And everyone's got kids, or they're like partnered or married, or whatever in the world they're doing. Most of them are. And I think that's what makes me proud to be where I'm from. Is that, like, you don't get that other places. And to actually have all of us actually like get over ourselves. Because I feel like people have had to grow and shift and change a lot in 30 years. *[Laughs]* A lot. For us to all be in the same space and be happy? Yeah, that was good.

RAE: Let's see. So let's see, let's see. I guess, do you feel pressure to move to a city? Do you feel pressure, have you ever felt pressured to move to a big city?

ELANDRIA: Yeah, I left.

RAE: Did you?

ELANDRIA: Yeah. Well now, so it's a combination, right? So I left. I mean, I went to college here, but I had done internships in D.C. I mean, I was like, "It's time to roll." So I left. I lived in DC, I lived in St. Paul, Minnesota, I lived in New York for three and a half years, I lived in Orlando.

But I also have—I mean, I have epilepsy, and so I also could not drive for three and a half years. So I had to move to a place where they actually have public transportation. And that to me is a challenge. So, because of differing ability things, I needed to move to a place that I could actually get around without a car. And so I was forced in many ways, both to move to Minnesota and to New York, because I couldn't stay down South and I couldn't stay in a rural area anymore...because without a car, you can't go nowhere.

But it wasn't necessarily that I needed to go to a big...Yes, it was. I needed to go to a city. I was like, "It's time to go." Like, I wanted to see what big city life was going to be like. And I still have to go every so often. Because if you go from New York and you're gone for three—like I didn't to go to New York for two and a half years. And I went back and I thought I was going to kill somebody. So, like, New York is one the places that if you like it, you need to go ahead and get up there every six months, so that you're more

acclimated because it's like, you stand in one place, you see more people in an hour than you've seen in like, three years. That's a problem. *[Laughs]*

RAE: Yeah. So let's see, let's see. I think I'm getting towards the end. So these two questions sort of go together, and you've sort of talked about that, about how it's hard to find people to date in a rural place, and also like, for you in this part of Tennessee. I guess in terms of thinking about, I don't know, getting older and having... I don't know. Do you want to have kids? Is that something that you think would be hard to do here? How do you find people to date in a rural area, or not rural, area? *[Laughs]*

ELANDRIA: Knoxville's weird. Knoxville's definitely like not a big city. I think for people who don't live here, to them, it's a city, maybe. It's not. Knoxville's a town. Because anytime everyone's related, it's a town. Everybody here's related, except for the people who move from outside. So there's like the place where everybody's from, then there's like the out—the people, the transplants. And all the transplants live in the same place. And then all the people that are from here live in the same place. And so where I'm at, all the people that are from here, live here. It's the same people. They ain't gone nowhere. So I mean, I feel like dating here is hard. I think it's very hard. But I think it's not just because....

So if I was a good Knoxvilleian, and was not progressive—actually forget that, and was not radical in every way, I would have someone to date. So it actually is not about necessarily...ok, almost of all my friends here that are queer, have—Well, no, that's not true. My friend Eric cannot find anyone to date either. Because we have needs other people can't meet. So, if you're not looking for somebody that's super - that's intellectual, that reads a book, that likes sports and likes to read, and likes maybe, I don't know, hell, let's go to a play. Woo! A museum? What the hell's a museum? Oh my God. We like those things!

So, if you need somebody that's got that? They can straddle the both worlds? If you don't need that, then you're good to go! But like, I need both of those. That's actually what makes that dating in Knoxville hard. And dating in Powell hard, or dating in Florida hard, dating anywhere hard. It's the combination of stuff. That's what I realized is, oh, it's actually the combination of things that makes it hard to date. Because we're such a conservative—it's so conservative. The queer people here are conservative. I mean, we have like the Log Cabin Republicans. The Black ones aren't, but that doesn't mean that they like plays or art museums or any of that either. And so I think that's where it gets complicated.

The baby thing? My brother told me at 19 we were having kids. And I said, "Really?" cause I wasn't pregnant. So, I have had kids since I was 19 years old, and I have four nieces and nephews and nine godchildren. I am good to go! *[Laughter]* I am great! So on that front, I am good. Everyone around me has babies. I don't need any babies. *[Laughter]* I might adopt one day, or I might be a foster mama. But other than that, I am in great shape. *[Laughter]* I'm like, everybody got too many babies around me! So yeah, I do not have a baby urge. *[Laughter]*

RAE: That's funny. Okay. I feel like I've asked almost all of them. So, I guess, yeah, let me make sure. I'm starting to forget cause I've done five in a row today. *[Laughs]*

ELANDRIA: Oh my gosh.

RAE: Yeah. I think I'm down to this one. Which is, is there anything you would want to say to other rural or small-town queer people who are struggling, or who aren't struggling, or just what would you want to tell people, whether they're young or not, or?

ELANDRIA: The irony of the whole thing is that little thing where the guy was like, "It gets better," the sad part is he's right. I mean, it's sad to say a clichéd thing to say to somebody, but you're like, "You know, it is true though. In the end it does get better." The thing that I feel like—I don't think there's anything wrong with moving, as long as you're moving for the right reasons. I left. Hell, everybody should leave. I don't think there's anything wrong with leaving. I don't think there's anything wrong with staying. I think you just have to be happy.

And I think that, if you want to go be a fashion designer, you need to leave your small town. You got to go. You're not gone to make it. You got to go. *[Laughing]* You need to go ahead and go to school somewhere. But if you're trying to be a farmer, then you need to stay in a small town. *[Laughter]* Right? So it's like, it's all a matter of what are you trying to do with your life?

My biggest thing is find your passion. Find people in your life that love you. It doesn't matter what their identity is, if they are bad for you, let them go. Find friends of all types. 'Cause you will be amazed. If people are going through stuff, it doesn't matter if they're going through exactly the thing you're going through.

My friend group, I did not realize this until at one point, we were all in a car, and we were all hanging out, and we were driving. And it got really cold, and all of our muscles did this. All of our muscles locked up. Everybody. And we're all looking around like, why is everybody looking ranky? Why is everybody looking so bad?

And we realized we all had chronic illnesses. Every last one of us. Lupus, epilepsy, sickle cell, muscular dystrophy, Leukem—all of us had things. In that time period, I've had five friends to pass away in five years. All under 35. They're all gone. No. Now it's six. I'm sorry. Six are gone in six years. Six are gone. Six years.

And, some were queer, some weren't. All from this area, except for one. But we lived life to the ultimate fullest because we were all sick. All of us lived to the ultimate fullest, 'cause every day was a struggle. It wasn't realized—later on, we were like, we didn't just come together because we were chilling. We didn't actually even know we all had some chronic illnesses, until we all in the car were like, "What's going on with you?" And then we all figured it out. But we all understood like, what it meant to get up and just have to

barrel through. And no time for excuses, no time for whatever. Cause if you don't move, you're not going to move again.

And I feel like you have to find your folk that hold and guide and carry you through, and are more interested in your success than they are in you hanging out with them. And they're more interested in you doing your thing than they are in like, "Oh, but you're not being my friend right now. Oh, but you're not hanging with me. Oh, I got this depressing thing I wanted to tell you." Let it go. And that's the thing, is what I believe the most, is that you have to find people that push you, to be better than you ever thought you could be. And that's what I found.

And that's what I think I would tell people is, if you're in the South, hang out with SONG. If that's not your thing, find another group of people that you can hang out with that really support queer folk in the region, or wherever you're at. And care about something other than just being queer! Shit. I'm like, that's the biggest thing. Hell, there's an economic crisis going on. Do something about that! *[Laughs]* I mean really, that's going to help you out! So that to me is maybe what I care about—that's what I would say. That's what I think I would say. And just love yourself. Love you, and find a group to belong to that helps you figure out how to love yourself. That's it.

[Music]

RAE [Host]: Elandria worked at Highlander for 11 years. Much of that time, they worked as the Seeds of Fire Program Coordinator. They also helped coordinate the Economics and Governance Programs and served on the Organizational Leadership Team. During that time, Elandria also helped found and support STAY, the Appalachian Emerging Leadership Network, and the Appalachian Transition Fellowship. Elandria is now the Executive Director at PeoplesHub. E also provides development support to cooperatives, solidarity economy enterprises, and other organizations in the Southern United States, across the US and globally as well. Elandria is a co-editor of Beautiful Solutions, a project that is gathering some of the most promising and contagious stories, solutions, strategies and big questions for building a more just, democratic, and resilient world. E serves on the Movement for Black Lives Policy Table and is a member of two Global Working Groups as the North American Representative around Alternatives to Development. To check out the People's Hub, you can find that link in our episode notes, and also over on our website. And don't forget to donate in support of their Disability Justice work.

Next time on Country Queers, we'll hear an excerpt from my 2014 interview with Kody Kay. Kody is a trans rodeo announcer who was living on Cheyenne & Ute land in Longmont, CO at the time of our interview.

KODY KAY: Yeah, so I came out when I was 14, and I had my first experience with women, but I didn't even know that I was gay, like I didn't even know that that's what it was. Like I always thought it was weird you know. But it was after my sophomore year of college that I went to my first gay bar. And that's when I found out that there was a

whole world called “Gay.” You know, this was 1982, so we didn’t have Gay-Straight Alliances in high school and people didn’t talk about things like that—and in college. I mean I didn’t know—we didn’t have that kind of stuff. So, when I found out that there was this whole world of other people just like me it was so incredibly freeing. So I lived that way, expressed as a lesbian for all those years, and then when I turned 50, my mom got cancer, and she went through chemo and lost her hair, and me and my little sister shaved our heads in solidarity and um, that’s when I was like, you know, I can’t—this is my perfect opportunity, I can’t go back to living as Kimberly any more, that was my girl name. So I never grew my hair back, and my mom passed away from the cancer, and I started living full time as Kody and I’ve never looked back.

RAE [Host]: This episode was created and produced by me, Rae Garringer. Audio editing support comes from Tommie Anderson. Our theme song was written and performed on banjo by Sam Gleaves. Additional music on electric and acoustic guitar was written and performed by Tommie Anderson.

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Until next time...stay queer out there, friends!

[END]