

S2E1 - Brandon Connolly

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SPEAKERS

Brandon Connolly, Elle Billing

E Elle Billing 00:00

Hi, my name is Elle billing. I am a chronically ill queer femme, and I'm tired. I'm here this episode and every episode to dig at the roots of our collective fatigue, explore ways to direct our care and compassionate and sustainable ways and harness creative expression to heal ourselves and our world. Welcome to Hoorf: Radical care in a late capitalist heckscape. Welcome to part one of a special two part live recorded episode of Hoorf. "Live recorded" sounds like an oxymoron, so I'll explain. This summer we had the opportunity to visit Idaho and meet with today's guest in person. Instead of our usual web-based remote recording setup, we brought a field recorder and had our conversation across the table from each other at the UU Fellowship. We had a lovely conversation. We do want to mention that the audio quality is different from our usual episode. Because the conversation was so great, time got away from us while we were talking. So instead of cutting out any of the conversation, we have decided to give you two episodes of our interview with Brandon. In part one we discussed the long term activism that is participating in Idaho politics as a member of the LGBTQ-plus community. In part two, we dig into the accessibility of queer spaces. Thanks for being here for this special two part live recorded episode of Hoorf. And now I bring you part one. My guest for this episode is Brandon Connolly. Brandon is Afro Latino, an amputee, and a transgender man. Brandon embraces all of his intersectionalities and it has helped him in his work as a community organizer, and advocate in Idaho. Brandon has appeared on multiple podcasts, news, interviews, articles, and even on a TV show on HBO. He is the president of a local LGBTQIA-plus nonprofit organization and is the vice chairman for his county Democrats. Of all things, Brandon loves being the spouse of his wonderful partner and a dog dad. Welcome to the podcast. Brandon, we are so excited to have you here. So hi, Brandon.

B Brandon Connolly 02:27

Hi, how are you?

E Elle Billing 02:28

.....

Good. I am in Idaho, my old stomping grounds. And I am here with you in person to do a live recording, which is kind of an oxymoron. But we're going with it.

B Brandon Connolly 02:39

It's good to have you back.

E Elle Billing 02:41

Yeah, it's so good to be here. It just it feels like coming home. It's just nice to see people and it's been raining the whole time. Which is funny because we're in the high desert. We it's rained every day we've been here really? Yeah, I guess so. Yes. So but it's been raining at home too. So it's different. It's just been wet spring. Yeah, it's the wet part of spring. So how have you received care this week?

B Brandon Connolly 03:07

Oh, my goodness. How have I received care this week, I have been trying to receive care by playing video games, which I haven't done. Literally all year. I think the last thing that I played was one of my Assassin's Creed games. And I immediately opened it back up. And it was like the last time you played this was and it was almost like 10 months ago when I had last played any of my video games. And I was like, Oh, that's so bad.

E Elle Billing 03:37

But so is that that's a way that you like to unwind and de stress.

B Brandon Connolly 03:42

Yeah, because I think that video games for me like most video games have a checklist of some sort. Like you have to get past this. And you have to do this and you have to gather this. And so like I feel like in real life, the checklists are really long. And they drag out a lot. I mean, you keep adding to the bar and yes, exactly. never end. Yes, they never end versus if I'm playing video games, I can get my checklist done really fast. And I feel so like a pseudo accomplishment it's like so it makes me feel a little bit better. But also I've been working on lately trying to make myself less accessible to people. And that sounds that sounds so cold. But at the same time, I think that is something that I've been needing to do for myself because in order for me to unwind, I need to have just my own my own time and my own space. And being as the things that I do for both work and for my activism, a lot of is online, and a lot of it is on my phone, and I have everything attached to my phone or my computer. And because our phones are basically glue to us at this age, it's made it so that people can reach me more accessibly versus my parents in the 90s if they left the house Looks like you're not going to hear from them unless there's a payphone around wherever they are, right. So I'm trying to make myself less accessible. And that has also been a little bit of care because it means that I

get to have a little bit of quiet. Nobody can text me and be like, Hey, did you remember about this, or I can't look at my phone and think, oh, man, I forgot to do this, this, this and this, and I need to call this person I need to do this. So I'm trying to make myself less accessible.

E

Elle Billing 05:27

That is amazing. Yeah, when I was in college, I didn't know I had ADHD. But I did. And my my task list, especially during midterms, and finals always felt like really huge. And so they were always on multiple sticky notes, like all on my wall next to my desk. And each of the sticky notes was like a category of tasks, because that's how I could conceptualize what needed to get done. And there was always one that was like self care tasks. So that like, every day, I could like always remove like, eat shower, eat again, it's like, well, I did these things, because it is motivating to be able to get through an easy task list, because you can build momentum. Yes. So I totally get the like, this is a task list that is completely inconsequential to the rest of my day. But it gives me the needed dopamine boost to get other things done and to also feel good about myself.

B

Brandon Connolly 06:21

Oh, yeah, for sure. And I'm a really restless person. So I'll be playing video games for a couple of hours. And then I'm just like that dopamine kicks in. I'm just like, all right, I have accomplished something today. Again, it's a pseudo accomplishment, it feels like I accomplished something. So now I can clean the rest of my house. And that's how I work. I know that that's not how a lot of people work. It's really easy to get sucked into video games. And it's also really easy for somebody to get sucked into their phone and be looking at like their social media or to, for me, it's like, I got to make sure that these documents are, are sent out worded correctly, I need to look at the calendar so that I remember what it is that I'm supposed to be doing the next day, it can feel really overwhelming. So yeah, I'm trying to make myself less accessible, long storyline.

E

Elle Billing 07:07

Yeah, I think about the accessibility and communication thing. You know, I grew up on a farm, I live back on the farm now. And when I was growing up, like you said, in the 90s, we didn't have cell phones, but we still had to communicate with everybody on the farm. And so we had like CB radios in all the tractors and the pickups at my aunt's house. But my mom didn't want one in our house. She's like, I don't want to talk on it. She was very adamant about it. So if we ever needed to get a hold of my dad, we had to call my aunt, and have her get on the radio. And it was just like this whole tedious process. And now we have cell phones, and we can text. And everyone, like all the guys have an iPhone now. And like everything is run so differently on the farm than it did when I was growing up. And you know what, my mom still doesn't text. She has a cell phone and she doesn't use it. Like she did for a while. But now it just it's a lot of iPhones are confusing. And she'll doesn't remember how to text or she doesn't know how to check her messages or she'll forget. And so we're still doing the same thing where she's like, can you get a hold of yours? That's fine. That's fine. That's what I'm there for. But it's just sort of repeating itself with just different technology. Yeah, but even now, my dad will get home at 10 at night.

And you know, my uncle will call or my cousin will call or they'll text because they're still trying to manage farm stuff at all hours of the day. So yeah, accessibility is both a blessing and a curse and a burden.

B Brandon Connolly 08:33

Yeah, for sure. So I mean, my parents grew up like they were teenagers in the late 80s and early 90s. And my dad is still really grumpy that he has a cell phone. He's like, I know that it's important to have one. But I hate that people can get a hold of me so easily. I can't just like disappear for a little while.

E Elle Billing 08:50

And I've been trying to, I have to limit my screen time for like medical reasons. And so at night now I've been either knitting or sketching, just to put my phone away, so I'm not constantly glued to it. But then, you know, we watch TV at night, and my dad and I are both trivia geeks. And so the phone always comes back out anyway. What are we doing? We're supposed to be enjoying each other's company. And we are because we're doing trivia. But it's also just like, like you said, We're glued to them.

B Brandon Connolly 09:17

So my nightstand. I try and put my phone on its charger, the furthest point away from me on my nightstand. And I have a book that I'm currently reading that is closest to me. i Yeah. So when I'm laying in bed, and I can't fall asleep, it's easier for me to grab my book and to try and read than it is for me to grab my phone. Because I have to like actually lean over and get out of bed and you know you're lazy at night. And so it's like, Oh, well I don't want to do that. So it's been motivating for me lately to like, Okay, well this book is closest to me and I'm actually enjoying it. So I'm going to read it.

E Elle Billing 09:50

That's a great idea. I have like five books stacked up next to my bed. So then I'm like, which one? I don't know. Maybe I'll just sleep.

B Brandon Connolly 09:57

Yeah, there you go.

E Elle Billing 09:59

I have that perpetual problem of my TBR pile is like 10 books deep. My Progress in progress piles five books deep, it's terrible. So you did mention that part of the reason that you sort of restructured how you interact with your phone is because of the accessibility and how much

people do try to get a hold of you. And part of it is necessity because you're very invested and embedded in the community. So can you share a little bit about what your community and advocacy work looks like? What do you do and I know,

B Brandon Connolly 10:36

oh, man. Okay, so it feels like I do a lot. So I will try. What I do here in Idaho is LGBTQ activism and advocacy in Idaho.

E Elle Billing 10:52

I think that's a big job.

B Brandon Connolly 10:56

It really is, especially with Idaho being one of the one of the states that has the most anti LGBTQ legislative bills, every single legislative session, like from January until the end of session, and we have some of the most radical and also the most harmful of anti LGBTQ bill. So it is, it feels like a full time job for sure. With not only just for myself, but for lots of advocates around the state

E Elle Billing 11:25

the whole time I lived here-- and so, I don't-- I was here for 13 years, I've been gone for two. So that's 15 years that I've been familiar with Idaho politics, there has been a Republican supermajority in the legislature, and it's a Republican, they call it a trifecta. So it's the governor, the House of Representatives and the Senate have all been very right wing Republican. They've been very strongly conservative and pulling even further to the right. Over the last 15 years.

B Brandon Connolly 11:53

Yeah, it's pretty scary. I mean, we have some conservatives like the governor that could be considered could be considered moderate. But with the Idaho Republican Party right now, there is a huge in fight between moderate conservatives and the far right conservatives that are trying to take over the Idaho majority. So we have more people that are running from the far right, that are trying to take over Idaho politics. And so there's a lot of infighting right now. Yeah.

E Elle Billing 12:26

And it has, it has definitely pulled further to that far right to the far right.

B Brandon Connolly 12:30
Oh, yeah.

E Elle Billing 12:31
...the last probably like what year is it? Six, seven years? Probably since 2016.

B Brandon Connolly 12:37
Yeah, yeah. So that's 2016. I wonder what happened?

E Elle Billing 12:40
Yeah, what happened?

B Brandon Connolly 12:42
No, it's really scary.

E Elle Billing 12:43
But even before that, there was the there's a specific group here called the Idaho Freedom Foundation, they grade and rate every single legislator every year based on how they vote on very specific issues. And basically, if you don't vote far right, on guns, abortion and LGBT issues, you get an F or close to it. That's where a lot of infighting comes from, is for control over the Republican Party in the state because they have a lot of money and power and influence. And it's frightening. Yes,

B Brandon Connolly 13:15
it's been scary and very difficult to find moderate conservatives to run because the far right. People that are trying to take over the Idaho Republican Party are scary. They're well organized. That's why they're scary is because they're well organized. They have a lot of people on their side, and they've used fear and intimidation to do so they do.

E Elle Billing 13:40
Yep. Can you share a little or a lot, or however much you want about what this legislative session look like for like for you, like individually, but also for the LGBTQ community? Like as a whole?

B

Brandon Connolly 13:55

Well, we had several bills go through this last legislative session, but I think the biggest one that everybody was really fighting was HB 71, which was a bill to ban gender affirming care for minors. That one was that one started pretty early on in the session, we had lots of people that had had come to the Capitol to talk about their own experiences, talking about how gender affirming care has saved their life. Parents talking about how gender affirming care, saved their child's life or had made their relationship with their child a lot better. Medical professionals came in and said we provide gender affirming care. Part of the bill was that there's going to be jail time and fines for medical professionals that provided gender affirming care to minors. And for parents that were seeking gender affirming care for minors in the state would also get jail time.

E

Elle Billing 15:02

Can I just cut in for one second? And just in case there is anybody listening, who isn't sure what gender affirming care for minors looks like -- it's not surgeries. Okay. It's its counseling. It's social transition is changing your name and pronouns and not even a legal name change. Its, its clothing, its hair, its counseling. And sometimes, sometimes it's puberty blockers.

B

Brandon Connolly 15:31

And those are only for teenagers.

E

Elle Billing 15:33

Right. Those aren't for little kids.

B

Brandon Connolly 15:35

Yeah. Thank you so much. Yeah. I had a conversation with somebody that I know, an older person that had asked me like, Hey, I saw this on, gosh, Fox News or some conservative something. And they asked me they're like, Okay, well, you know, you're transgenders. So what is this mean? Like? Are they really doing this, and I thought that it was really great that they had come to me to like, ask and make sure that they were fact checking a little bit, and I was able to talk to them about what the Republicans that are promoting this bill are not telling you is that the minors that are receiving pu- puberty blockers are not single digit aged minors, they're, they're teenagers. And this is to help them figure out who they are as people without the conflict of secondary sex characteristics, right. And that way they can figure out who they are. And the thing is, is that it's reversible. That was the other thing that a lot of the Republicans didn't want to talk about was how it's reversible.

E

Elle Billing 16:45

Because there because the talking point is that it's like, irreversible, permanent damage and all

these things, and none of that is true. I, I worked with a student who had a different medical condition, completely precocious puberty started puberty at age seven.

B Brandon Connolly 17:06

Oh, man.

E Elle Billing 17:07

So her doctors put her on puberty blockers until she was a teenager, because you don't want a seven year old developing breasts and starting, and menstruating. That's not healthy. Like puberty blockers exist for reasons, you know, and it's okay to be on them. And that was a case when, like a single digit age minor needed to be on them. And it was okay. And then later when they were a teenager, that they they went through puberty at like, a developmentally appropriate time, right age. So and I've I have worked with trans and gender expansive students, when I was teaching at the school, and the gender affirming care that they received as minors in Idaho was counseling. And anything else that they might have received didn't happen until they were like, 17.

B Brandon Connolly 17:58

Yeah.

E Elle Billing 17:59

And even then it was like a heavy slog to get that far. So that was HB 71.

B Brandon Connolly 18:06

I appreciate because I am so used to just talking to the same people over and over again, and even legislators, they know what gender affirming care is. And so you don't really have to explain it to them. Again, it's because they've already been told what it is. And then they're told like, this is a bad thing, because and then the other thing that happened during the legislative session is that they had somebody that had detransitioned from out of state, by the way, come in and talk to all the legislators about their experience about detransitioning their experience about their parents helping them with gender affirming care. And then they realized that they were not trans or they didn't need gender affirming care, but had already gone through all of those stages for themselves, that it was kind of irreversible for that particular person. What I found to be very interesting was that out of the one person that had come out of state that had claimed to be a detransitioner and detransitioner means that you basically have trying to find the right to find the definition.

E Elle Billing 19:15

It's a person who transitions and then detransitions back to their gender assigned at birth. Yes

It's a person who transitions and then detransitions back to their gender assigned at birth. Yes, yes. Is that is that episodic? Yeah.

 19:25

With detransitioning, you can have a multitude of reasons why you detransition, it could be because you can no longer afford the medical care that you need for transition. It could be because it's been really hard for you to find a job because of people's prejudice of you being transgender it could be it could be because your family gave you an ultimatum and you don't have anywhere else to go. There's a multitude of reasons as to why somebody decides to detransition and it's not just, it's not, my parents abused me and they made me transgender. And then when I was old enough to know the difference, and that's what this person was basically telling these legislators. And what I found interesting was that there are studies of people who have transitioned and how many of them had detransitioned after, I think it was a five year period. And how many of them had regret any of their gender affirming care, gender affirming care for them was social transition, was name changing, pronouns. And also any, any surgeries that they had wanted to take for their transition? Only 1% of them actually regretted doing any of that stuff, which is less than which is less than knee surgery, which is less than

 Elle Billing 20:46

then cisgender, gender-affirming care, which includes breast augmentation, hair implants, permanent makeup, tattoos, things like that. There's a higher regret rate for those types of surgeries for like cisgender people, which are also gender affirming.

 Brandon Connolly 21:01

Yeah,

 Elle Billing 21:01

than there are transgender people who go through the same procedures.

 Brandon Connolly 21:04

Yes. So

 Elle Billing 21:06

I have seen the same statistics.

 Brandon Connolly 21:09

Yeah, we had one person from out of state come and talk to these legislators about their their

mean, we had one person from out of state come and talk to these legislators about their their detransitioning experience. And then they had a

E Elle Billing 21:16

higher.., there's even a higher regret rate for tattoos than there is for transition. I don't know if you knew that one.

B Brandon Connolly 21:26

Wow,

E Elle Billing 21:27

I know tons of people who who have tattoos. And we're like, not making new new laws about like, there's already regulation in place, but we can all still easily go get tattoos. As soon as you turn 18 You can go get a tattoo. But we're not freaking out. Because people regret their tattoo.

B Brandon Connolly 21:42

These legislators had a room full of transgender people that were trying to tell them that this is something that saved my life, this was something that made my life better. And it really just kind of reflected that statistic of it was only 1%. And they decided when they passed the bill through the House, they decided that that one detransitioner was, their voice was more important. And their experience was more important than the other 99 trans people that were saying that please do not take this away. This has been life saving for me, that was really disheartening. It really just showed that statistic and and the people that were promoting the bill really tried to to push like there's a high regret rate, there's a high regret rate. And yet, you didn't see that in the room that they were in all those statistics that they had quoted, there are multiple issues with those statistics. It was just unbelievable. They really just did not want to listen and it and I think that that's what makes Idaho politics really hard is that the Republican Party is large, and it controls every part of the Capitol. And if they have already had it in their mind that they want to pass something, it's really hard to get it to not pass.

E Elle Billing 23:18

How do you take care of yourself? And how how do you-- How do you have stamina? For like, knowing that this is like long term advocacy work? How do you not burn out?

B Brandon Connolly 23:38

I think that the most important thing about doing legislative work in a place like Idaho, where legislators are not only ignoring you, but also strategically trying to burn you out. They definitely know what they're doing. They try and burn us out. They try and put these anti

LGBTQ bills on top of each other to spread us thin or they bring them out last minute during the session,

E

Elle Billing 24:08

or in the middle of the night

B

Brandon Connolly 24:09

or them -- Yes, or in the middle of the night, at the end of the week, something where it's really hard for us to run around especially because when they burn us out, that means that less of us are showing up to the Capitol. That means that less of us are wanting to speak to our legislators because there's a lot of people that have done advocacy that have been to the Capitol that have done the work that had been doing it for either one session or 20 sessions. And the mindset of nothing's going to change really creeps in and gosh, I think it kind of goes to the analogy of the choir. If everybody in the choir is holding a really long note. If you can have a few people at a time, take a breath and then get back to the note, then the note will still continue to hold in the chamber. But if everybody stops to take a breath at the same time, and it starts back to now, it's very obvious. Yeah, yeah. So yeah, I

E

Elle Billing 25:13

remember I sang in choirs in Junior High in high school and like, there was a whole, that thing where everybody goes, GASP and the director goes NO, not like I can see everyone's shoulders, like that's not going to work. It's much funnier when it's in choir practice. And then when you're doing like, life changing advocacy work.

B

Brandon Connolly 25:35

Yeah. So the trick is really, to have a strong support system of people that you trust to say, Okay, I need to step back for like a couple of weeks and work on other things, I will be back and knowing that they are also at some point in time going to be telling you the same thing. I need to go take care of myself, however, that looks, I will be back. And the longer I've been doing this, the more I worry that nobody's going to come back. Because Because like I said, they strategically try and burn us all out. And so when people start to take that break, and they start to replenish themselves, and nourish themselves and take care of themselves, they're like, Oh, this feels so much better. Why would I want to go torture myself even more by trying to talk to these legislators, that don't want to listen, trying to talk to these policymakers that hate me. It's really disheartening. So really just trying to surround yourself during that time with people that love you, really trying to speak love into other people as well as yourself. For me and my spouse. We make, like affirmation playlists on our Spotify.

E

Elle Billing 26:48

Oh, that's great.

B

Brandon Connolly 26:49

Yeah. So we listened to that every morning. So that like something is speaking life into us or trying to, and then also just trying to continue to stay connected to our friends that affirm us and that love us and want to speak life into us as well. And so that's, that's really what I try and do during those legislative sessions. I think also, it's really difficult living in Twin Falls, which is about two hours away from the Capitol in Boise. So I try and use that drive to gear up for basically the hellhole that I'm going to be crawling into, and then I use the drive back to really decompress everything that I just had to go through. So really, I think that the two hour drive really helps me personally. And there's really not a whole lot to look at between Twin Falls in Boise, but I have learned to appreciate it.

E

Elle Billing 27:46

When my the first time my parents visited me here after I moved to Idaho. They flew into Boise and rented a car and they're like, what's the drive to Twin Falls like and he's like, it's really boring. And my parents, when they got to my place here in Twin, they're like it is so beautiful. Between here and Boise, I don't know what the guy the airport was complaining about. It's never been in North Dakota. It's so flat.

B

Brandon Connolly 28:09

Nothing. Oh my gosh, that would be the worst. So I guess I have a lot of privilege living here in Idaho. And I know that too. Honestly, the landscape. Idaho is is gorgeous. It just the people here really suck

E

Elle Billing 28:24

until you find the ones that you can trust and that do speak love into your life. Thank you for joining us on this episode of Hoorf. To view the complete show notes and all the links mentioned in today's episode, or to get a full transcript of the episode. Visit [Hoorf podcast.com](https://hoorfpodcast.com) that's H O R F podcast.com. Before you go make sure you subscribe to the podcast so you can receive new episodes right when they're released. And if you're enjoying our podcast, I'd love to have you leave us a review in Apple podcasts. Reviews are one of the major ways that Apple ranks their podcasts. So even though it only takes you a few seconds, it really does make a difference for us. Become a patron for \$3 a month you can support the creation of this podcast, pay my editor and join a community of fellow caregivers out here just doing our best. Thank you again for joining me Elle Billing in this episode of Hoorf. Until next time, be excellent to each other. Hoorf is hosted by Elle Billing at elleandwink.com. audio editing by Ricki Cummings at rickiep00h.com music composed by Ricki Cummings Hoorf is a production of Elle & Wink Art Studio, all rights reserved. Hoorf Podcast can be found on social media channels at Hoorf podcast, at H O O R F podcast so we can just start and then Ricki will cut all this out okay and then make it into a really funny like like tagout or something