My Fun and Colorful Life

By: Parlin Scott Gressitt

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Introduction

The earliest memory I have is of me fainting when I was three and a half, right after we had gotten home from the hospital after my third heart surgery. I was sitting in my highchair watching PBS Kids and my mom was in the kitchen. I started to call out for her and then shut my eyes. I don't remember what happened next but my parents said they called an ambulance and rushed me back to the hospital. As you'll find out reading this, I've spent a lot of time in hospitals but that's not the only thing that makes me unique.

While I just described myself as unique, I normally prefer to use another term – weird. I've gotten to have a variety of experiences that the average kid has not, so I am proud of my weirdness. I had an enjoyable childhood that was atypical for reasons such as my schooling, health issues and close relationships. Some people might not like being called atypical, unique and weird but I am glad that I am these things because these words help make me who I am.

Many of my experiences have also made me who I am and relate to what I love to do. One of the things I've had the most fun doing is acting. I love all my acting classes which have taught me how to be a more open/less shy person and how to understand my emotions on a deeper level. My love of theatre continues to grow whether I'm acting on stage, in the audience or behind the scenes doing tech or ushering and greeting. I feel fortunate to have had these experiences despite having spent so much time in the hospital.

While the hospital time might make some people angry or depressed, it's had the opposite effect on me. I love and appreciate life. I love my church family and all the

activities I do with them. I love my parents and love that they homeschooled/unschooled me. I love that I am able to be an out and proud asexual lesbian. I love the friends I've made in acting classes, through homeschooling/unschooling and at Hope With Heart. Most of all, I love that I am alive and able to enjoy life.

It hasn't all been good, I've had my share of losses. While everyone loses grandparents and pets, it's much more difficult to lose a nineteen year old friend. Even still, all of my exposure to death and health challenges has only helped me to be a stronger person who appreciates life. Also what sets me apart from most people is that I have come close to not being on earth so I am especially grateful and thankful for every day.

When I was twenty-one years old, I looked back on my experiences as fond memories, some are great ones that I mention a lot and some not so great. Overall I am thankful for all of these experiences. I look forward to having more great experiences, some of which I hope will lead me on the path to becoming a professional musician like my parents and a professional actress one day.

Now, I'm 26 years old, and I have grown significantly in the five years since my first book was published. While my first memoir, *My Fun and Crazy Life*, documented my childhood and the medical hurdles I survived from birth to age 21, I have evolved deeply both personally and artistically, and my second memoir, *My Fun and Creative Life*, captures this next stage of my journey. This book combines my two memoirs and goes from birth to 21 as well as from 21 to now.

As an artist, I am constantly learning more about my creative side and discovering new ways to articulate my experiences. I have started intentionally weaving metaphors and imagery into my text to help bring the unique stories I want to share to life.

Heart Condition

Hi, I'm Parlin and I've died twice (beat) I know what you're probably thinking, what? No! Seriously? Yes it's true I have.

The first time was when I was nine days old, my heart stopped, my organs shut down, and I got resuscitated. The second time was when I was two years old during a catheterization when they went through the right side of my chest to the left side and my heart stopped, so they stopped the procedure and I got resuscitated.

A catheterization is a tube that has a balloon-like thing and a camera on the end that usually goes through your leg. Also, in an earlier catheterization where they went through my leg like they normally do, the main artery in my right leg collapsed and the smaller arteries grew around it. That's why I'm so short and why when I was two years old they went through the right side of my chest instead of going through my leg.

Now you're probably wondering why this happened and why I needed catheterizations.

It's because I was born with Hypoplastic Left Heart Syndrome (HLHS) which means that I have half a heart; I only have one atrium and one ventricle. The left side of my heart never developed so I only have the right side. I have had three open heart surgeries; the first surgery was when I was two weeks old.

I've also had four eye surgeries because my eyes tilted. In the first surgery they moved the wrong muscle so they had to do three other surgeries to fix it. This resulted in me needing glasses and not having depth perception or stereo vision so I can't look at one thing with both eyes at the same time but I can look at two different things with each eye at the

same time. For example, right now I am looking at my closet door with my left eye and my bedroom door with my right eye.

I also have keloids on my scar which is a skin disease that some people get on permanent scars. The keloids were getting really bad and starting to hurt a lot so I chose to have an eighth surgery. In 2019 I had a surgery and three days of radiation to try to get rid of my keloids. The surgery didn't totally work because I still have keloids but my scar looks a lot better than it did when I was younger.

I also basically don't have an immune system so I get immunoglobulins subcutaneously (Sub Q) every two weeks. Immunoglobulins is the medicine I get so that my immune system works like another person's normal immune system. Subcutaneously means that I get it at home every two weeks through a syringe with four little needles that go into my stomach and I switch the side they go in each time, vs at the hospital once a month through an IV.

I also have a rare chromosomal anomaly called Jacobsen syndrome which means that 35 genes of the tail of my chromosome 11 are missing. This may not seem like a lot because 35 genes out of 23,000 genes in the tail isn't much. Still, Jacobsen syndrome is why I have all of my other medical conditions and why I have some cognitive issues and am a Concrete Thinker.

So that's me, a girl who has had eight surgeries, has half a heart, basically doesn't have an immune system, has a rare chromosomal anomaly and has died twice.

Jacobsen Syndrome

I have Jacobsen Syndrome, which is also called JS or 11q. It is the underlying genetic condition that connects all of my other medical conditions together. I have been going to the 11q conference since 2022, and it happens every other year. The conference is for families with kids/adults with 11q to meet and learn more about 11q. I have learned a lot at the conference from other people with JS, their families, and doctors who study JS, especially from Dr. Paul Grossfeld who is the main researcher in the world for JS. Dr. Paul is also a pediatric cardiologist who specializes in HLHS as that is the most common heart condition within JS. (You can have JS and not have a heart condition or have a heart condition that's not HLHS, and you can have HLHS and not have JS). Dr. Paul is very helpful to all of the people with 11q who go to the conferences and helps us all out in any way he can. For the first two conferences I went to, it took me some time to find my footing even within this small community since I'm in the 3% of people with JS and all my friends are in the 97%. I also learned about my JS when I was 18, and all of my friends (older, my age, and younger) learned when they were babies. This year however, I feel completely connected to everyone because as we are all getting older, I am seeing all the unique strengths my friends have and how much they are thriving, and I am learning more about myself because of the JS.

I got to be on the 11q Adult Panel at all of the conferences I've been to. At my first conference, the questions were not too difficult and I was able to answer them from my memory of how I wanted to answer them. At the conference two years ago, I was not prepared enough and the questions were hard because a lot of them said the same thing in

different ways. So I repeated myself a lot and passed on some questions because I didn't know how to answer them. At this year's conference, I prepared ahead of time with my parents' help and printed out my answers like my friends do, answering from the notes I printed out to help me answer the questions. I am going to prepare the way I did this year for every conference from now on.

At the conference this year, I learned that if you have JS, you actually have Paris-Trousseau Syndrome. I always knew that I had traces of this syndrome, but I didn't realize I fully had it until this year's conference. Learning about this was so helpful because it finally explains exactly why I bruise easily, why my blood platelets are low, and why I had such bad nosebleeds last year.

I also have hearing loss that I wear hearing aids to help with. I can hear without them but they help amplify sound, like high and low frequencies that I can't hear, they're also Bluetooth and have a charger that plugs into the wall. They also don't have the white noise on because that's for people with constant tinnitus (ringing in the ear), I have that, but mine is sporadic.

Along with my HLHS and other medical conditions, I also have Fontan Associated Liver Disease (FALD), which is a liver disease that anyone who had the Fontan procedure can develop. (Fontan is the third of the three open-heart surgeries I got for HLHS). At the moment, my liver is mostly okay, but I do have liver fibrosis and an enlarged spleen due to the disease.

While my cardiologist mentioned what could happen in general if it gets worse in the future, the first thing is managing it with new medications. Beyond that, a Fontan redo surgery can be done to help reduce strain on the liver. After that, in the absolute worst-case

scenario if liver failure happens, the last option would be a heart and liver transplant. Although no one knows if those possibilities will happen or if those steps will ever be necessary, instead of worrying about the what-ifs that might and might never happen, I prefer to focus on the present and how well I'm doing right now as best I can and keep moving forward with my life and my creativity.

Family History

My family history is full of incredible stories that run deep on both sides. On my dad's side, Penelope Stout, the first pioneer woman of Monmouth County, is my 10th great-grandmother. This is so cool because on both sides of my family, I have ancestors who were the first women to own their own land. Centuries later, that same local history and strength follow my grandfather's line right down to me.

My grandfather Sumner's grandmother is Ella Gray Frake Clarke, and she saved everyone in the school she was the principal for—Lakewood's School No. 5. Because she was a stickler for safety, she made everyone do regular, disciplined fire drills. When an unexpected fire finally broke out on January 29th, 1945, her strict timing paid off perfectly: everyone got out safely before the wood-frame school building fully burned down within the span of 15 minutes. When they rebuilt the school, they named it after her, Ella G. Clarke Elementary School.

Through Grandpa Sumner's line, our family history is also related to Aaron Burr, the Allen House, and Hartshorne Woods, and even goes all the way back to the *Mayflower*.

On Grandma Anne's side of the family, her father's family were Albanian Jews who escaped to Italy from Albania. By the time my great-grandfather was born, our family was Italian, had an Italian last name, and did not mention being Jewish. It wasn't until I was a kid that we found out we were Jewish. My parents and I saw a geneticist when I was young, and when she shook my dad's hand, she said, "I didn't know you were Jewish."

He said, "We're not Jewish."

She looked at his other hand and said, "Yes you are, you have Ashkenazi thumbs, which is strictly a Jewish trait."

After the appointment, my dad called Aunt Lynn to say that she didn't have to convert to get married because we are Jewish (even though she had years ago). Then he called Grandma Anne.

She said, "We're not Jewish, your grandfather had shoemaker's thumbs."

My mom in the background then went, "Jewish shoemaker!" Because my great-grandfather had the same thumbs as my dad and was a shoemaker.

On my mom's side, we are related to Sir Francis Bacon as our ancestor is his half-brother, Sir Nicholas Bacon (through my maternal grandmother, Patricia, fondly known as Bubbles). On my mom's father's side, her family tree also leads back to another incredible trailblazer: my maternal great-great-grandmother, Ada Latta. Her family history runs incredibly deep, connecting us to the town of Gressitt, Virginia, and the historic colonial Gressitt House where Urbanna's harbormaster once lived. Grandfather Gressitt's family has a great story that I researched and wrote about for a history assignment. I want to share it directly here as Ada Latta's life was a grand adventure.



Parlin Gressitt Artifact Assignment

Ada Latta was the first born of her parents, Benjamin Franklin Latta and Martha Anne Mitchell on 11/01/1861 in Hickman County, Kentucky. Ada had six siblings. The third born, Ruth Latta is shown in the photo (my artifact) with Ada's first born, Maud, Ruth's niece. Maud Rutter married John Walter Gressitt and they had two children, Mary Lyell and Tillman Johnson Gressitt. TJG married Patricia Bacon and they had four children, Hunt, Scott, Kit-Bacon, and Lyell. Lyell is my mother. My great-great-grandmother, Ada Latta has a rich history as a groundbreaking pioneer woman who moved west to stake claims in Kansas, Oklahoma and Cuba.

After Ada's father died and she and her siblings inherited some money, she was able to stake a Kansas homestead claim in June of 1886 at only twenty four years old. Her younger sister Martha followed suit two months later, and the two became some of the first women to stake a land claim as single women. Having sold their claims later that year, when the largest of the Oklahoma land rushes happened on 09/16/1893, Ada Latta was one of the nearly 100,000 pioneers who rushed the land that day and filed a land claim with the Enid, OK territory land office, staking claim to land that had previously belonged to Native American Indian tribes. Single women pioneers were a minority group, much like the Europeans who came to America for various reasons, one being that, "Persecuted minorities were in search of a new start in life" (Strayer and Nelson, 551). Two months later on 10/04/1893, Ada married "the boy next door" John Albert Rutter, who had claimed the neighboring property to Ada. Four years after they married and joined forces, Ada and John, had their first of four children, Maud Hortense Rutter, who was born on 11/23/1897 in Waukomis, Oklahoma. Over the next six years they had three more children.

On 02/03/1905, they left the craziness of the Wild West and headed to Cuba having heard that farming tobacco and coffee were profitable there. They went as a way to have a new life and be in a safer land. Ada Latta and family farmed tobacco and coffee in western Cuba until a hurricane destroyed their farm in October of 1910. At that point, Ada's mental health was declining due to the stress of a pioneering lifestyle and in April of 1912, Ada sailed with husband John without children from Havana, Cuba to New Orleans. She ended up in an Oklahoma asylum, Fort Supply. John and the three youngest kids moved to Tampa while Maud stayed in a convent school in Havana, Cuba. In 1913 after her father died, fifteen year old Maud left school in Havana and sailed to Florida. She took her three siblings to find their Aunt Ruth (Latta) and Uncle Tillman Johnson who took them in. Maud later named her only son Tillman Johnson after her uncle who took in Maud and her siblings.

Museums should include artifacts from everyday people because everyone has a story and these stories can connect us all together. Talking about your family history is fascinating, but being able to see artifacts that have been passed down is even better. If more regular people had the opportunity to share artifacts and stories from their family history at museums, then we could all discover the things we have in common as well as learn to appreciate our differences. Objects that belong to everyday people can tell hundreds of stories. You could have had relatives who were pirates, or pioneers, or president, or vice president. The possibilities are endless and the more we share our stories, the more we grow together.

My Parents

My parents are my mom, Lyell and my dad, Doug.

Mom was born in Morristown, NJ and lived in Mendham, NJ with her parents, Patricia and Tillman, her older brother, Scott and her older sisters, Kit-Bacon and Hunt. They lived in Mendham, NJ until Mom was four, moved to Baltimore, MD until she was eleven, returned to Long Valley, NJ where they lived until the summer before her senior year of high school when they moved to Atlantic Highlands on the Jersey shore. Mom went through four school systems and did not enjoy school. She grew up in a very musical family and also did community theater with her father. Mom's whole family played instruments and sang together. While the kids did the typical folk tunes of the '60s, there was a strong jazz influence from Mom's jazz drumming father. When she was seventeen, she returned from a choral tour through Europe and moved to Hoboken to live and play in a rock band. After five years in the NY/NJ rock scene, Mom returned to her jazz roots. She married a French chef in the late '80s and moved to St. John in the US Virgin Islands where she immediately hooked into the music scene with the few working jazz players. Mom left the chef in the Caribbean in 1994 and returned briefly to Hoboken until she secured the first of two lofts she lived in, in downtown Newark, NJ.

Dad was born in Toms River, NJ and lived in Lanoka Harbor, NJ with his parents, Anne and Sumner, his older brothers, Charlie and Steve and his older twin sisters, Lynn and Kathy. When Dad was six months old his family moved to Eatontown where he grew up. Dad grew up in a not very musical family, the musical people in Dad's family were him and his brothers. Dad went to Berklee College of Music and studied jazz guitar. After college he

traveled around doing jazz gigs including several years on cruise ships. In 1992, Dad moved to New York where he worked as a jazz musician.

Dad first met Mom on a gig in Hoboken, NJ. They met because the piano player Joe Ruddick couldn't do the gig and the bass player Dave was Dad's roommate. So, Dave got Dad the job but Mom was not happy about it at first. Mom didn't usually like working with guitar players, but she really enjoyed working with Dad. They continued working together. In 1997, she moved to a 12,000 square foot loft down the street from her first loft. Mom turned the industrial loft into a raw yet artsy living space and Dad moved in when I was on the way. I was born in the loft on December 2nd 1999. It was really cool and fun growing up in a giant old factory building. My baby swing was a car seat hanging by a rope from a 13ft ceiling. Hide and seek games took hours in a 12,000 sq ft loft.

It turns out Mom and Dad actually met years earlier but didn't know it. When Mom was twenty-three she was the hostess at the Inkwell in Long Branch, NJ. Before she got the job there, she broke her foot so she sat at the hostess' desk with her foot up. When Mom was working at the Inkwell, Dad was eighteen and a senior in high school. He would go to the Inkwell with his friends to hang out. Dad and his friends thought of Mom as the cute blonde hostess with a broken foot. Thirty years or so later when Dad had a gig at the Inkwell, he and Mom figured out that Mom was the cute blonde hostess with a broken foot back when Dad was eighteen.

Growing up with two professional musician parents gave me a huge love for music!!! I love writing and playing music. I have written a whole album and two singles. Since I was a little kid, Dad has been teaching me Piano and Mom sometimes helps with the piano.

Growing up I would stay up late at Grandmother Bubbles' (my mom's mother's) house waiting for my parents to get home from their gig. *Grandmother Bubbles' name is Patricia but everyone called her Bubbles because of her bubbly personality.* Bubbles moved in with us in 2008. From that point on we spent a lot of time together & I became her babysitter when my parents were out (which wasn't fun). Also, we would go to my parents' gigs together.

As I got older I started going to more and more of their gigs and now I go to almost all of them when they perform together. Dad still does a fair amount of gigs but not as many as he used to. In fact, Dad was on a gig and left early when I was 9 days old the day I died. Mom doesn't do that many gigs anymore as Jazz vocal gigs seem harder to come by even before the pandemic.

Mom isn't just a singer, she also paints houses and does construction work for a living, she painted the house we live in and when I was little she worked at FIT (Fashion Institute of Technology) in the museum, building sets for the fashion shows that happened there. When Mom worked at FIT, Dad would take me to see Mom on her lunch break so we could hang out with her and her co-workers. Dad also isn't just a guitar player. He teaches private guitar lessons and he is an adjunct professor at Brookdale Community College, Monmouth University and Middlesex County College.

The first wedding I went to that I remember being at was my parents' wedding on Saturday August 15th 2009 (three days before Dad's birthday). I wore a red and white striped sleeveless dress with red fabric rosettes and a white headband with white and red fabric rosettes. I was the ring bearer and one of eight flower girls. The flower girls were four sets of sisters ranging in age from three-twelve. The youngest flower girls were Taylor and Logan

who are twins who live next door on the weekends with their dads Sean and Don. The next flower girls were Ally (twelve years old) and Kathleen (six years old). The next flower girls were Izzy (nine years old) and Luna (eight years old). The last flower girls were me (nine years old) and my god sister Ella (twelve years old).

My parents got married on St. John's Island, the island that is on Sunset Lake in Asbury Park. The flower girls, their moms, Sean, Don and my mom processed from my house to the island singing “Chapel of Love” and we turned the lyrics to “going to the island.” Singing was natural for us being a musical family with musical friends. There was a gospel band playing on the other island near us and it was a very nice day out. There were a lot of people there. Our friend Jack, who used to be the pastor of the church I go to, came from Florida to officiate the wedding. I don’t remember a lot from that day but the pictures on Facebook help remind me.

Church

The church I go to is UMCRB, which stands for United Methodist Church Of Red Bank. My parents started going to UMCRB when my mom was pregnant with me.

While I was going through all of my medical stuff, my church was there to support and pray for me and my parents. My family was on the prayer list at church, they were praying that the surgeries went well and that I would survive the surgeries. My parents felt really good about this and they believe in the power of prayer. I was too young to remember this when I had my first seven surgeries.

As I grew up I learned how blessed I was. Because I was so happy that I was saved, I wanted to give back to Mount Sinai. Mount Sinai is the hospital where I had my first seven surgeries. So, when I was fourteen I did a fundraiser at church selling my Perler Beads on Sunday December 7th and 14th 2014 for the Pediatric Cardiology Department at Mount Sinai. I raised $600.

Another meaningful and awesome thing our church does, that I love being a part of, is VBS. VBS stands for Vacation Bible School and it's a week long summer camp that churches do. At our church anyone is welcome to come to and work at VBS regardless of their religion. There is a theme every year and there are different stations that the kids go to throughout the day. *I know the names of the themes from 2004-now because I have all of the CDs.* The stations are: Music, which used to happen in the Chapel and now it's in the Sanctuary; Arts and Crafts, which is in room 114; Bible Stories, which has moved around a lot: years ago it was in the lounge, then it moved to room 214 and now it's in room 115; Recreation (rec), which is in the pastor's backyard and Snack, which is in Fellowship Hall.

Aside from the stations there are two other roles in VBS. There are the photographers/videographers who photograph and video everyone throughout the week. They show the video on Friday night and in church the Sunday after in the sanctuary. The most important role is the Head of VBS. Elaine (the director of youth and young adult ministries) was the head of VBS before she retired from church and when my friend Charlotte was twelve she became Elaine's assistant head of VBS. Most of the people who work in VBS are adults in the church whose kids are now adults and also working in VBS. You can become a helper in VBS when you're twelve years old.

You can start going to VBS when you're four years old (two of my friends, Deanna and Charlotte, were exceptions and started when they were three years old). There are different groups in VBS when you're a camper. This is how those groups work: first you were in the kindergarten age group, then the first grade age group, then the second grade age group, then the third grade age group and finally the fourth through sixth grade age group. For two years in a row, they changed the groups a little bit where the fourth through sixth grade age group became the fourth and fifth grade age group and the sixth grade age group did things a little differently than the other groups. I was lucky and in my last year as a camper I got to be in the sixth grade age group when they did things a little differently than the other groups. What they did differently was they did Arts and Crafts, Bible Stories and Snack in the basement (in the Club 77 room). They still started in Fellowship Hall, went to Music in the Sanctuary, Recreation (rec) which is in the pastor's backyard and went to Fellowship Hall at the end of the day to get picked up.

During VBS every group starts in Fellowship Hall for the day and Elaine does a daily welcome. After the welcome each group goes off to a station. Every group goes to every

station separately except for snack time. In the middle of the day every group goes back to Fellowship Hall for snack time and then they go off to the stations they haven't gone to yet. At the end of the day every group goes to Music to practice the songs they learned that day, then they go to Fellowship Hall to get picked up.

Every group learns music that they will perform for their parents, friends and relatives who come on Friday night to see the video of the week and hear the songs. Also, the kids from our church and some of the kids who don't go to our church come the Sunday after to perform some of the songs. They also show the video.

When you're in seventh grade and twelve years old you become a helper in VBS. When you become a helper you can decide where you work. Whether that be as one of the group helpers or it's in one of the stations, you can work in VBS through adulthood and when you're a helper you eat snack in room 114. I started working in music in VBS when I was twelve and I still love it!!! When I work in music, I help teach the kids the songs and dance moves from the music videos. For this reason, my nickname is "Dance Party Parlin." But I didn't work VBS in 2018 and I really regret that choice.

Mom started working in rec when I was five and Dad started working in bible stories when I was six. My parents worked in VBS for many years. My dad even had a nickname – Awesome Jesus. They stopped a few years after I started working in VBS.

When I was four I joined the Children's Choir at church and I stayed in that Choir until I was thirteen. There were many days in choir where I was the only kid who showed up.

When I was thirteen I moved up to Wesley Singers. There is also an Adult Choir. I don't know if I will ever move up to the Adult Choir because I am still in Wesley Singers.

Now we're called UMCRB's Young Adult Choir and the Children's Choir is now called the Joy Choir and is for kids under third grade.

The Ice Cream Social is a night in Church where the choirs and any person or group can sign up and perform songs. Each group and or person perform their songs in the Sanctuary for the congregation and their friends. The kids are excited to perform for their parents and siblings. Usually, almost the whole congregation attends. After the performances, everyone goes to Fellowship Hall to eat Ice Cream, except for me because I don't like sweets. So, I would usually bring Roasted Garlic Bagel Crisps or White Cheddar Cheez-its. *I really wish they would start doing the Ice Cream Social again.*

I care so much about this church that in 2013 I had Mom make a miniature version of the church which was my Halloween costume. While trick or treating, I sang "I am the church, you are the church, we are the church together" which is the chorus of "We Are The Church" my favorite hymn.

A fun thing that is encouraged at church is to bring a friend. We call it BARF (Bring A Real Friend). I used to bring so many friends (most of them a lot more than once) that I got an award for being the biggest and best BARFer at church.

I started Sunday School when I was four and was in different Sunday School classes until College. This is how they grouped classes: first you were in pre-k and kindergarten, then first and second, third and fourth, fifth and sixth, seventh and eighth (Junior High) and God Squad Sunday School (High School).

When I was in the third and fourth grade Sunday School class, Mr. Jansky, our Sunday School teacher, had us memorize the names of the first five books of the bible and one Sunday he had us act out one of the bible stories.

When I was in High School Sunday School, I started working as an aid for one of the younger Sunday School classes. Now the Sunday Schools are grouped differently. This is how it works now: first you're in pre-k, then kindergarten through second, third through fifth, sixth through eighth (Junior High) and Bagels and Faith (High School). For a few years, I've been the aid in the third through fifth Sunday School. *A month or so ago, pastor Jess and Tammy (Tammy is the new woman who is the director of youth and young adult ministries because Elaine retired last year) asked me to join the Adult Ed class because they think it will be beneficial for me. It would be good to have more young adults in that class and I shouldn't be the aid in Sunday School anymore because the Sunday School aids are supposed to be in High School. I tried it and Adult Ed isn't my thing.*

I started Youth Group when I was in third grade and was in different Youth Groups until College. When I was in Youth Group, this is how they worked: third through fifth (Mustard Seeds), sixth through eighth (Club 77) (Junior High) and God Squad (High School). Youth Group was on Wednesday nights.

In Club 77, we did an annual lock-in at church which was really fun!!! The thing we do the most on the lock-ins is play manhunt but we can only play on the first floor. My second year doing the lock-in when we were playing manhunt, I hid in a closet the whole time and won the game! That same year while the others were playing manhunt, I walked around the church and scared two of my friends, coincidentally both named Ryan.

My third year, I brought my hula hoops and did a hula hoop show for my friends. For the hula hoop show, I used my light up hula hoop and performed to music on the stage in Fellowship Hall. I messed up a little but that's ok. One of my youth leaders filmed it and the video is on Facebook!!!

In God Squad, there is a highlight event that they do which I wanted to do for as long as I could remember. The event is a week long mission trip God Squad goes on every summer organized by ASP (Appalachian Service Project) to fix and build houses for the homeless. When I got to God Squad, I was so excited to finally go on mission. It's great to help the unfortunate and mission is a great bonding experience. Unfortunately, Elaine wouldn't let me go on mission because she was too scared that something might happen to me. So, Mom tried to be a volunteer in case something happened. Also, Mom is one of the best people for it because she works in construction and paints houses. They also had been asking her for years to go. I got a letter from my cardiologist, Dr. Gelb, saying that it was perfectly fine for me to go. But, Elaine still wouldn't let me go because she was too afraid that I would get hurt or die.

The other things we did were the annual fall and winter retreats. We would go to the Pocono's for the retreats. The fall retreats were fun because we did team building exercises and on the winter retreats we would go snow tubing. When we were at the house we stayed in, we would play fun card games that one or two of us brought. The retreats were a really great bonding experience.

When I was sixteen, I had pneumonia. It started out as a pain in my shoulder and then it grew to the rest of the left side of my body. I remember going to youth group on Wednesday March 23rd 2016 with Mom, who was one of the cooks that night. When we got to church, all of the youth groups had dinner in fellowship hall. Fellowship hall is a big room with high ceilings, a stage and a kitchen next to it. During dinner, we sat in metal folding chairs (the ones with a foam seat cushion like in a couch) at rectangular folding tables. After dinner, each group went to their rooms in the church. The God Squad room was in the

basement. Before God Squad went downstairs we put away the tables and chairs. When we got to our room we sat on the couches.

After God Squad (at around 10:00pm that night), my pain reached a ten, like from those pain scales in the hospital. So, my parents took me to Jersey Shore Hospital. At Jersey Shore, they said I had pneumonia and then transferred me in an ambulance to Mount Sinai (my main hospital) in NYC, across the street from Central Park. I went to Mount Sinai in case there was something wrong with my heart and it wasn't just pneumonia. I stayed at Mount Sinai for a few days and one day when I was there, Elaine from Church surprised me and my parents by visiting me. She came because she was worried about me and had been surprised to hear from my youth group leaders that I was sick. She was surprised because I'm really good at not showing that I'm in pain (physical and or emotional). So, when one of my youth group leaders called her after my parents called them, she drove all the way to New York to check on me. It was just pneumonia so I didn't have to stay at the hospital for very long but I was sick for a few months. As I was recovering, Dad got strep throat which I then got from him, so I was sick for even longer.

When I was a senior in high school, I wanted to become the president of God Squad. On Wednesday September 20th 2017, we had elections for the exec board of God Squad. I read a speech I had prepared that told my friends why I would make a good president of God Squad and I won! I was the president of God Squad for my senior year!!! My friend Marie was the vice president. *Marie died from signet ring colon cancer on Saturday January 18th 2020, eleven days before her twentieth birthday. Marie was adopted from China when she was a baby. Even though we grew up in church together, I wish we could've gotten closer. Losing Marie has been the hardest loss for me since Grandma Anne.*

Hope With Heart

When I was sixteen, my friend Fion (who also has a heart condition) told me about a week long sleepover camp they go to for kids and teenagers with heart conditions. *Apparently, Dad told me about the camp when I was seven but I wasn't interested in it then.* In 2016, I started going to Hope With Heart camp. It was fun at first. I made a lot of friends and two of them have my heart condition! Unfortunately, I got in trouble one day my second year there. On my third year in 2018, VBS changed dates from June to August and I had to decide which camp to go to. I went to Hope With Heart. I would have stayed home and done VBS but I had only been going to Hope With Heart for two years. That was my last year as a camper at Hope With Heart. *If I had listened to my dad when I was seven I would have done VBS.*

I tried to become a counselor at Hope With Heart in 2019 but they rejected me because of my "inability to follow a strict schedule" and other reasons that I don't remember. The reasons didn't make any sense because I have the abilities they were talking about. I think they rejected me because I was newer to the camp and because of the time I got in trouble (even though I technically didn't do anything wrong). The thing I got in trouble for is something that everyone does and talks about anyway.

The camp has a rule that you're not supposed to date in camp or talk about dating in camp. I think it's a stupid rule. How I got in trouble was by asking Fion about their boyfriend but I didn't use the word boyfriend.

I asked, "How's Christian?"

Fion said, “He’s good, also I have a girlfriend named Jackie and she used to be one of our old friends.”

The only other time I talked to Fion about it was when I asked, “When did Jackie become Jackie?” and Fion didn’t know.

Then, I got sent to Alyssa (the camp director’s) office which was actually the room where Alyssa slept and Alyssa said, “I heard that you talked to Fion about their relationships.”

I replied, “Yes.”

Then Alyssa said, “You know you’re not allowed to talk about that in camp.”

I said, “I know.”

Then Alyssa told me that, “It made Fion uncomfortable and if I hear that you bring it up again I will be sent you home.”

Then I promised not to bring it up again then she took me back to my group. After camp that year I talked to Fion and they were fine with the conversation. They also thought it was wrong that I got in trouble. *Also, two of the counselors are engaged and everyone at camp supports them. I think one of the counselors overheard our conversations and turned me in. Alyssa was just enforcing the rule even though she didn’t know exactly what happened.*

Homeschooling/Unschooling

When I was growing up, my parents homeschooled me because Mom hated public school and because of my medical conditions. Homeschooling was fun at first. I watched educational shows like Sesame Street and programs on PBS Kids and Nick Jr. I learned a lot about math, English, science, archaeology and how to be a good friend.

I sat at the dining room table and Mom taught me math and writing on paper. For writing, I used lined paper to help me form letters and for math I used regular construction paper. I also did work online using Brain Pop and Khan Academy.

After a while, I didn't want to do schoolwork because I didn't like doing the work. I just wanted to see my friends and watch TV, both educational and non-educational. So we started Unschooling which means you learn through life rather than through a curriculum. For example, when you go to a museum you are learning things through experiences and places rather than through a book, show or website.

During my time as a Homeschooler/Unschooler I was in various homeschool 4-H groups. The 4-H groups were art based groups and the last one I was in was called 4-H Club da Vinci. I have friends from many homeschool 4-H groups, other homeschool groups and homeschool bowling. Many of my homeschooler friends were in multiple homeschool, 4-H and homeschool bowling groups throughout the years. I also went to Good Sports with other homeschoolers and I took a swimming class with other homeschoolers at the Atlantic Club.

When I was four, Mom was looking for a refrigerator on Craigslist and when she looked in the free section she saw a three year old yellow lab part chow dog named Chelsea

in Queens, NY. She called the owners and said, “I’m going to bring my four year old daughter to see your dog and if she likes the dog we’ll take her.” So, Mom and I drive to Queens and Chelsea and I bonded really quickly.

When we get home, Dad sees that we have a dog instead of a refrigerator and he says, “You went out to get a refrigerator and you came home with a dog!!! Does it shoot ice cubes out of its butt or something?” Our friend Teri Orsburn used to call her Chelsea Maytag.

Darius and Aurora (who are brother and sister) are my “bestest” and closest friends. They live two blocks away from me in Asbury Park. Darius is two months and twenty-two days younger than me and Aurora is three years, nine months and seventeen days younger than me. I’ve known Darius since we were one and a half and I’ve known Aurora for her whole life. Growing up, Aurora and I practically lived at each other’s houses.

JSFS stands for Jersey Shore Free School and it’s a “School” for homeschoolers where kids go to hang out with their friends. There isn’t any traditional schooling going on. It’s based on the Sudbury Valley method of schooling which is often associated with unschooling. It’s a place for homeschoolers to hangout and learn through life that is NOT free. It’s now in Little Silver and when I went it was in Marlboro. When I went, I had a lot of fun and made a lot of friends but I could only go for one semester because it was so expensive. The parents of my friends Izzy and Luna that went helped pay for me to go. Izzy, Luna and I started going to JSFS at the same time but we had been friends through homeschooling long before we started going to JSFS.

When I was going to JSFS, Mom was painting Izzy and Luna’s house and each of our parents would take turns carpooling. One day when we got to Izzy and Luna’s after

JSFS, their front porch was messy because of the construction Mom was helping them with. We started to go to the front door then Mom told us to go through the side door. I stupidly ran to that door and tripped on a garbage bag full of wood. A little while later (I don't remember exactly how long after), I went to the doctor and discovered I fractured my right ankle from the fall. So, I got a walking cast that looked like a boot and was made of the same material as regular casts. At JSFS everyone signed my cast.

APFP stands for Asbury Park Free Play and it was just like JSFS except it was completely free and it was at my house so we couldn't call it a school. My closest homeschool friends came to it and it was great. We would hang out at my house, play games and make YouTube videos!!! It was also the prime time in my life from 2011-2014 when I was eleven-fourteen years old. *I mention APFP times a lot!!!* There were some bad times for me when my friends became my bullies but we're all great friends again. Towards the end of APFP it turned into a homeschool group where we actually did schoolwork. Then it moved to Izzy and Luna's house and ended a year later.

For the first few years in APFP times, the parents of some of my friends that were in APFP started 4-H Club da Vinci and everyone in APFP attended. Some homeschooler friends who didn't come to APFP went to 4-H Club da Vinci. During APFP times most of my friends in APFP and I started thinking about our sexualities.

In APFP times, the group of us that went to 4-H Club da Vinci and our friend Lexi (who just went to 4-H Club da Vinci) would go to Darius and Aurora's after 4-H Club da Vinci and sleepover or just hang out there almost every week.

In APFP times my friend Nat, his mom Marcelle and his stepdad Billy took me and our friends Darius and Aurora on a road trip to Pennsylvania to visit Marcelle's mom. It was

a really fun trip and my parents gave me a pay-as-you-go phone before we left. On the way there, Nat and I were texting each other while we were in the cars because the girls were in one car and the boys were in another car.

On that trip, Aurora, Marcelle and I built a fairy house (a small house you find in the woods that is made out of nature) in the woods near Marcelle's mom's house. I don't know exactly what time of year it was but it was long sleeves weather. We started out just walking in the woods and then the girls decided to build a fairy house. It was the first time Aurora and I made a fairy house and we were very excited. We picked a tree that we would build the fairy house in front of then we gathered sticks, stones, leaves and flowers. After we gathered everything, we sat in front of the tree and made the fairy house on top of some moss at the base of the tree. The fairy house had a stone walkway with flowers, sides made of sticks with red, yellow, orange, pink and green leaves on top of the sticks for the roof and sides. With an evergreen leaf for the door, the fairy house was about 2ft tall and when we finished making it Marcelle took a picture of Aurora on the left and me on the right of the fairy house. The picture is on Facebook!!! Meanwhile, while us girls were making the fairy house, Nat, Billy and Darius made a fort out of wood and sticks in front of a tree near our fairy house.

In APFP times I got really into YouTube!!! When I was eleven, I made my YouTube channel (supershines12) and everyone in APFP were in most of my videos. Also, Nat and I were in a lot of each other's videos and I did a lot of sleepovers at his house.

In APFP times when I was twelve, I wanted to try public school for the first time and I tried to get into the elementary school in Eatontown where Grandma Anne (Dad's mom) lived but they said I was too old and too smart so they made me go to the middle school.

So, I tried middle school for two half days and lived at Grandma's for those days because the school system is better in Eatontown then in Asbury Park. I quit because it was too overwhelming. It felt like two full days without lunch and I was afraid to go to the bathroom because I was scared that I would get lost and or be late to my next class and get detention. When I tried middle school, my friends Aurora and Maya (who have also never been to public school before college) bet each other on how long I would last in middle school and Maya won. Aurora thought I would last a week.

Bubbles died on Tuesday June 11th, 2013, shortly after I had broken up with my boyfriend Griffin. Although the loss was hard, Bubbles health had been declining for a few years. In that time, I had become more and more resentful towards her so losing her wasn't as hard for me as it could have been. I wrote a song about losing Bubbles and breaking up with Griffin called "My Life Is Free" but it doesn't talk much about loss and break up. A little while after Bubbles died I did a sleepover at Darius and Aurora's and I wrote the lyrics to "My Life Is Free." *I could write about that better now but when I wrote the song I was trying to lift myself up that's why there isn't much about those things in the song.*

On Saturday November 30th 2013, *two days before my fourteenth birthday,* we had to put Chelsea down which was hard for me because she was the first pet I really remember having. *We had two cats (Otelia and Vision) when I was born but they died when I was four and I don't really remember them.* The day we put Chelsea down, my parents took Aurora and me to see Frozen that night and Aurora slept over.

When I was growing up I did a lot of sleepovers at Grandma Anne's house. It was really fun and we watched shows that I liked together. She really liked the Disney show Phineas and Ferb but she could never remember what it was called so she called it

“Triangle head and his brother.” When I did sleepovers there, I would usually play with Magnetics and sometimes I would bring Perler Beads. Perler beads are little beads that you put on pegboards and then iron to fuse them together into whatever pattern you’ve created. *I used to do Perler Beads pretty much 24/7 until I started going to Brookdale.*

From 2012-2015 I took Aikido with my friend Natalya. Natalya is a homeschooler friend of mine that I’ve known for a long time who lives in Red Bank. If you’ve ever seen the Mystery Machine parked in front of a house in Red Bank, that’s her house. Aikido is a martial art where you learn to defend yourself without hurting yourself or the other person.

Natalya and I would do sleepovers at each other’s houses on Aikido nights almost every week!!! My parents would take turns driving and we would pick up Natalya from her house on the way to Aikido in Middletown. After Aikido, our parents would take turns picking us up depending on whose house we were staying at that night. Sometimes one of her parents would pick us up from Aikido and bring me to her house where I would hangout for a while until one of my parents picked me up.

Sometimes after Aikido we would stay at my Grandma’s house. We stayed there so much that Grandma Anne was like a third Grandma to Natalya and Natalya would say that she has three Grandma Anne’s because both of her Grandma’s are named Anne.

My favorite show of all time is The Backyardigans!!! I love that show so much that I call myself The Backyardigans encyclopedia. At one point when Natalya and I were hanging out and doing sleepovers every week, we started writing our own version of The Backyardigans called The Mouse Masters. The Mouse Masters is geared towards teenagers because almost all of the characters are couples and there are characters in the LGBTQ+ community. There are twelve characters and most of them use a magic mouse

backpack to go on adventures. One of the characters is a fairy *(who is one of my two alter egos).* The other characters are animals. The similarities to The Backyardigans are that some of the characters live next to each other with a combined backyard. Both shows have characters that are animals who use their imagination to go on adventures. *I'm still working on The Mouse Masters but I need to find more cast members again and I need to find an animator before I can make the show and make a YouTube channel for it.*

During some of the sleepovers, we would make YouTube videos together and we decided to do the Ice Cream Social at my church together one year. Two of Natalya's sisters Katya and Nyree also did the Ice Cream Social that year.

Natalya and I practiced for the Ice Cream Social at my house or at Grandma's house during our weekly sleepovers. Natalya plays the Violin; I play the Piano and we both sing. For the Ice Cream Social we did a medley of "Clementine," "I've Been Working On The Railroad" and "Oh Susanna."

On Friday September 24th 2015, I had my last sleepover at Grandma's. It started out as a normal sleepover and things were great but when I woke up the next day I heard Grandma complaining to her caretaker Nora about a leg pain. The pain got really bad so Grandma went to the hospital and kept declining. On Saturday September 26th 2015, Grandma Anne died. Mom was on her way to visit aunt Hunt in Maine and Dad was at the hospital so Megan, my homeschooler friend Honorah's mom picked me up and drove me to the hospital. When we got there, Dad met us outside. Then, Dad and I went up to see Grandma but when we got to her room it was too late. *Losing Grandma Anne was the first hardest loss for me.*

At one point in 2013 or 2014, Griffin liked Natalya but she didn't like him back. Our friend Idil took Natalya's phone when they were hanging out one day and set Natalya and Griffin up on a date. When Natalya and I did our weekly sleepover after the "date set up", she told me what Idil did and asked me to make sure the date didn't happen because she didn't want to date anyone and she only liked anime characters. When we got to my room that night, I called Griffin and told him that Natalya just wanted to be friends and that she only liked anime characters. This made Griffin scared of Natalya because he doesn't like anime.

A little bit later Griffin liked Idil and called me and he asked, "Is it ok if Idil and I come to your Halloween party as each other's dates?"

I said, "Sure that's cool." Then I called Idil

and she said, "I don't know him that well but if he wants to call it a date that's ok."

I felt really bad for Idil that night because Griffin kept trying to hold her hand and kiss her.

At one point that night a bunch of us were hanging out on my trampoline and I said to Griffin, "I'm glad you asked for my permission to have Idil be your date because in a fake family Idil is my daughter." He was a little scared of us after that.

One day in 2015 at 4-H Club da Vinci Griffin showed up and we talked for a while. While we were talking I told him that I had a significant other for 2 weeks that summer

and he said/asked, "Oh so you're gay?"

I said, "No I'm bi."

Then he asked, "What does that mean?"

So I said, "It means you like both boys and girls."

He then acted as though he understood but he didn't because he kept asking me what bi meant. Then some of the others came over to join the conversation and we had to explain; Bi, Transgender and Asexual to him because Max is transgender and his sister Abby is asexual. Also, Griffin only knew gay and straight. He did not come back to 4-H after that.

PLC stands for Princeton Learning Cooperative and it's a co-op for homeschoolers that meets in the basement of All Saints Church in Princeton. Nat told Darius, Aurora, Maya and me about PLC because he moved to Princeton with his mom Marcelle and his stepdad Billy so he could go to PLC. I went to PLC for a year and a half from 2016-2018 when I was sixteen-eighteen years old; I tried it out in December of 2016 and officially started in January of 2017. PLC offers a variety of classes and you decide which classes you want to take; you have a mentor who is one of the four main staff members who helps you with a class when you need help and you talk to them once a week about how your classes are going.

During PLC times, Dad volunteered at PLC teaching guitar. He also taught me the ukulele. He stopped volunteering when I finished going to PLC.

On Thursday September 21st 2017, the day after I became the president of God Squad during my last year of High School at PLC, there was a litter of five kittens in the kitchen at All Saints Church. A woman who works at the church told the leaders of PLC that there are five black and sable kittens up for free adoption and I got one! Her name is Snowflake!

Every spring there is a Homeschool Prom in Point Pleasant for ages thirteen to nineteen. In 2016, some of my friends and I from PLC, APFP and Homeschooling in general started going to the prom. 2019 was the last year I went to Homeschool Prom. The fun thing

about Homeschool Prom is that you can go with a date, one friend or a group of friends. You can bring a friend who goes to public school. *I'm going to try to be a chaperone when the pandemic is over.*

One thing I've learned throughout my years of Homeschooling/Unschooling is that almost all of the Homseschoolers/Unschoolers who I know, are in the LGBT+ community.

Coming Out

Hi, my name is Parlin. I'm twenty-one and I'm an asexual lesbian.

At first when I was young, I thought I was straight. When I was eleven, that all changed. My friends and I started talking about our sexualities, which got me thinking a lot about my sexuality. As I thought more about it, I came out as bi to some of my friends.

When I was thirteen, I had a boyfriend Griffin, which lasted for three months. I broke up with him because he was afraid to kiss. Also, whenever I would go in to hold his hand, I felt like he was thinking: "oh yeah we're supposed to do this." I still kept thinking do I like boys or girls or both?

When I was fourteen, I asked my friend Shannon out via text on our way home from the fall retreat that God Squad, the high school youth group at my church, goes on. I got rejected. Also, Shannon told her mom and our youth group leaders.

A week later on Sunday, Elaine my Sunday school teacher had me stay back at the end of Sunday school. When everyone else left, Elaine walked over, brought a chair and sat in front of me. Then Elaine said, "I heard that you asked Shannon out and got rejected."

I looked at her and said, "Yeah."

Then Elaine said, “I'm sorry you got rejected.” and asked, “Are you bi?”

I answered, "Yes." While we kept talking, I looked down, then at the door behind her but was still paying attention and was looking in her general direction.

Then Elaine asked, "Have you told your mommy yet?"

I shrugged and answered, "No, I'm not ready"

then Elaine encouraged and informed me, "You have to tell your mommy that you're bi."

and I said, "Ok." But I wasn't really ready.

After that, Elaine asked, "Do you want me to be there when you tell your mommy that you're bi?"

and I said: "No." Because that conversation should be private. I was surprised she asked me that. Then I grabbed my pocketbook, she grabbed her things and we went to Fellowship Hall for coffee hour. After coffee hour, Mom and I and maybe Dad (I can't remember if Dad was there that day) went home.

After church that day when we got home, Mom and I went into the kitchen and I told her that I was bi.

Then Mom asked, "Do you know what that means?"

I answered, "It means you want to date both boys and girls."

and Mom said, "No it means you want to have sex with both boys and girls."

So I said, "Ok then I'm bi romantic."

then Mom said, "You know, you don't have to use labels."

and I said, "I know but I want to."

Then Mom said, "Ok cool."

When I was fifteen, I had a significant other Fion for two weeks. They broke up with me on our first date. After that, I kept thinking and thinking and thinking, what do I like, who do I like, what gender do I like?

When I was seventeen, I couldn't stop thinking about it. Then on June 20th 2017, as I kept thinking and thinking, I finally realized I like girls not guys. I like GIRLS!!! That night

I came out as lesbian to my friend Kaitlyn. Then, I came out to a lot of my friends and family, who were all accepting.

However, when I told my parents they said: "we accept you but we don't think you should settle down on a label. We think you should expand your horizons and should keep exploring your possibilities. In the future if this is what you end up being, then we will accept you"

Since 2018, Dad has been totally accepting. Mom has been accepting since 2019 but we didn’t talk about much at first.

In LGBT+ Club at Brookdale, I learned that bisexual is an umbrella term and that there are two types of bi. There is bisexual which means you are sexually attracted to roughly two genders; it can be any two-ish genders. Also, it doesn’t have to be two. There is also bi-romantic where you are romantically attracted to roughly two genders.

Fion and Griffin go to Brookdale. I’m still close friends with Fion and I occasionally see Griffin on campus.

Theatre

When I was eight, I took my first acting class at Algonquin Arts Theatre in Manasquan. In the class, we wrote a play with a song in it and at the end of the seven week class we performed the play for our families. The teacher was my neighbor and friend Bill.

When I was ten, I took ballet to be like my god sister Ella. At first I liked it but then I started getting bored and wanted to quit. My parents made me stick it out and do the recital before I quit. So, I did the recital but hated having to wear so much makeup and putting my hair in a bun. I never liked wearing makeup anyway and the bun really hurt.

When I was fifteen, I took a musical theater class at Count Basie Theatre in Red Bank. I was the oldest student. It turned out to be a singing class and was very fun. At the same time, I took a musical theater class at Algonquin and the classes had their final performances for our families around the same week in December 2015. I was sixteen when these classes had their final performances.

In the spring of 2016, I took an auditioning class at Algonquin and I was the oldest in the class. I became friends with a person named CJ and the teacher Dan. One night in class when Dan had finished giving CJ notes, he looked down and tried writing something but his pen wasn't working. He jokingly blamed me, so I said: "I guess I have magical pen breaking powers just by looking at the person who is holding the pen." Then Dan gave me the nickname Notorious PSG (Parlin Scott Gressitt), based off of Notorious BIG and Notorious RBG. Dan also teaches at Actors Playground School of Theatre in Freehold and is one of the people who got me interested in going there.

During my time in Dan's class, I started going to Teen Night which is a free improv class on select Friday nights at Algonquin. It was one the best decisions I've ever made!!! CJ also started going to Teen Night and we've been going ever since. On select Teen Nights, we get to see the current Algonquin show for free.

I tried Teen Night when I was thirteen but didn't like it because I only knew three people. I tried it again when I was sixteen and loved it. I became an assistant teacher in Teen Night when I aged out of the class.

In the summer of 2016, I started doing musical theater camp at Algonquin. Musical theater camp is a two week summer camp where there are two age groups; six-ten and eleven-nineteen. There are four teachers and some teenagers get to be interns. The dance and music teachers are the same for both groups and the acting teachers are different. There is one acting teacher per group. Both groups put on some scenes and songs from a musical that the acting teacher chooses. The groups always do different musicals. Also, both groups do different musicals each year. At the end of the two weeks, the groups perform for their friends and family and the other group. The younger group goes first then the older group follows. *The music teacher Mr. O. was one of my teachers in the musical theater class I took at Algonquin in 2015.* My first year I was just a camper but the next three years after that I was a camper and an intern. The acting teacher for the older kids my first three years was Megan Donovan. She also teaches at Actors Playground and is the other person who got me interested in going there. In my last year as a camper in musical theater camp, the acting teacher for the older kids was Anthony. He is also one of the teachers for Teen Night.

In the fall of 2016, I started going to Actors Playground in the Saturday class and it was the best decision I've ever made!!! When I started taking the Saturday class, Dan, Megan and Ralph (the owner) were my teachers. In 2018, Dan and Megan stopped teaching the Saturday class because Megan as well as Dan's wife Becky (the writing teacher at Actors Playground), were both pregnant. So, Ralph and Rich are currently the teachers for the Saturday class.

In the fall of 2019, I started volunteering at Algonquin and I can't wait to go back. I was an usher/greeter and I would help at the concession stand during intermission. Also, they let the volunteers watch the shows.

I'm still taking classes at Actors Playground but I'm too old for the Saturday class. Last spring was supposed to be my last semester in that class, but then the pandemic started. So, who knows, maybe when the pandemic is over, Ralph will let me finish the full school year in the Saturday class and then I will move up to the adult class. During the pandemic I have been able to take three classes per week on Zoom which has been really fun and great!!!

From ages ten through present I have auditioned at Algonquin, Actors Playground, Count Basie and Brick Children's Community Theatre (BCCT) but I didn't get into anything until I was eighteen.

When I was eighteen, I did *Godspell* in Ocean Grove at the youth temple through Ocean Grove Teen Show which is a group that does a musical every summer. When you sign up you're automatically in the show and you audition for specific parts. If you don't get cast as a lead, you get cast as an ensemble character. I did Teen Show in 2018 and 2019 and I was in the ensemble both years.

In November of 2019, I was in *Algonquin: The Musical* at Algonquin, which is a musical filled with songs and scenes from various shows as well as scenes used to inform the audience about classes that Algonquin offers. To be in *Algonquin: The Musical,* you need to get invited. It was such a fun and great show. I was in a few of the songs and a scene with Anthony and Nicole who teach Teen Night. I got to explain to the audience how much fun Teen Night is and that you can do it even if you have cognitive issues and improv is hard for you. I'm a concrete thinker so improv is hard for me but I keep working on it and I'm getting better at it. Also, we did an improv scene with a random member from the audience and had other random members of the audience pick a location and an activity for us to use in the scene.

Arcadia

I never thought of the idea of transferring until 2023, during my senior year at Brookdale Community College. When I started thinking about it, I knew I wanted to find a school that had a musical theater program and a music program. I searched for these things and found Rider University, Arcadia University, and Montclair State University. I looked up the information for applications and pre-screening for these schools and worked hard on preparing for the acting pre-screens. I submitted my applications and sent in the acting pre-screen videos first. Then, in November 2023, I went to visit each school in person. Ultimately, I finished Brookdale in 2024 and got an associate degree in Music and an associate degree in Theater.

The first school I visited was Rider. When I was there, my dad talked to me about how when someone goes to check out colleges, they get this feeling that this is where they belong. He asked me if I felt that about Rider and I said no, as it was the first school we visited and I wanted to see what the other schools were like first. The next school we visited was Arcadia. During the open house there, I got that feeling,

I said to Dad, "Dad, I am having that feeling. This is where I belong."

We still visited Montclair the next day, as the open house was the next day and we were planning on it. Montclair was way too big and overwhelming for me, so I emailed them saying that I didn't want to go there. Then I waited to find out about Rider and Arcadia, and decided that if I got into Arcadia, I'm going even if I don't get into the Musical Theater concentration. If I got into Rider—whether I got into musical theater or not—and didn't get

into Arcadia, I would go to Rider. If I got into both, I would choose Arcadia. I got into both, but just into the BA Theater program, and I went to Arcadia.

Which was such an amazing decision, and I wish I could have gone there for four years. I loved it there so much! I made lots of friends and some of them I'm still very close with, including my best and closest friends from there, Raffi and Teddy, who are twin brothers, and the three of us know each other more than we know ourselves. I did have some hard times there, but I also had some amazing times.

I loved seeing Raffi and Teddy almost every day in the commuter lounge. That was our hangout spot since they were commuters, and it was a nice place to hang out. I also loved spending time with other theater students, whether that be in a class, working backstage or on stage, hanging out eating lunch, or hanging out at a cast party. All the acting classes were very fun, and some of them were pretty special at times.

A fun moment at a cast party during our Fall 2024 semester became an inside joke which is still said and done today. Will, Aidan, and I were hanging out and Aidan said that he could go from nonchalant to freaky in three seconds. Then it became a thing with us to see who could go from nonchalant to freaky the best and fastest. I could do it the best and will still do it any time someone counts me down.

The next semester, the three of us were in Acting II together. In this class, we learned about the twelve theater archetypes: Hero, Explorer, Ruler, Rebel, Sage, Caregiver, Everyman, Magician, Artist, Lover, Fool, and Innocent. Each of the theater archetypes and or combinations or archetypes make up every character in any art form. Will turned going nonchalant to freaky into going nonchalant to various combinations of the archetypes, to freaky, and sometimes then back to nonchalant in three to five seconds. Aidan was amazing

at it and we couldn't believe how well he did it. That class was also very fun because everyone in the class got close with each other. Learning about the archetypes inspired me, and I wrote a song about them.

When I was in Script Analysis in the spring of 2025, my professor wasn't just a great professor; he also let us talk about personal things in class. For example, in February, which is Heart Health Month, I mentioned in class that it was Heart Health Month, and he said that if I wanted to, I could share a PowerPoint about my heart condition. So, at the next class, I shared a PowerPoint about Congenital Heart Disease (CHD) and Hypoplastic Left Heart Syndrome (HLHS).

Raffi, Teddy, and I have gotten so close that Teddy is my younger brother and Raffi is my queerplatonic partner. A QPP is when two queer people act like a couple but are not dating, they are platonic partners. When we would hang out in the commuter lounge, Raffi and I would play video games and games like "Guess the Song" and "Guess the Movie from the Song." I was always impressing Raffi with my music knowledge, but if we did a rock music guessing game, Raffi dominated. We played a ton of *Date Everything!* and *JumpStart World 2nd Grade: Quest for the Color Meister* for hours. When we aren't around each other, we will text and talk for hours, and we still see and chat with each other whenever we can. Raffi, Teddy, and I all graduated from Arcadia this May 2026. Raffi also helped me with one of my acting finals and did a great job. Raffi and I were involved in Arcadia Christian Fellowship (ACF). We really enjoyed connecting with other faithful students during weekly meetings and small groups.

One of my biggest accomplishments and hardest writing challenges was my senior thesis, an original play I wrote and directed a staged reading of called *Friendship Goes*

Beyond Life. It was challenging because I was drawing heavily from my own life; the play is directly about me and one of my closest, best friends who is also my Anam Cara, which is Irish for "Soul Friend." I first started writing the script during my playwriting class in the Fall of 2025, and then used the following semester in the Spring of 2026 to develop it into my thesis. My playwriting professor helped me write new drafts to make the show slightly less realistic. Even with those adjustments, the final show remains deeply realistic, making it the most vulnerable piece of writing I have ever shared.

The end of February 2026 during the spring semester was hard because I got kicked out of a club, became ex-friends with someone, and my oldest dog, Cody, died, all within a week of each other. Dealing with all of that at once was very difficult, but Raffi and Teddy helped me through it, and things turned around for the rest of the semester.

The other hard time was during thesis day. That day and night, all the seniors who aren't theater majors presented their theses, and that night, the theater majors each had a table in the Little Theater to tell people what our theses were about. The hardest part was that the night before, my mom called to tell me that our close friend Gregg Jones had died. He was only a few years older than my mom, and it was hard to hear that news right then. Despite the heavy news, I still made it through and truly enjoyed thesis night.

I had a lot of fun spending time with the other theater majors and minors during senior week. We all went to Noah's house one day, Will's house another day, and Klaudia's house another. We also have a group chat that we still use sometimes. Graduation was nice, too, as all of us theater majors got to sit together. Somehow, my parents ended up sitting next to my ex-friend's family at graduation, but it was fine. I earned a BA in Theater

and a minor in Music, Arcadia class of 2026! I can't wait to visit Arcadia to see a play when I can. Go Knights!!!

As I continue to grow and learn, I returned to Brookdale to work on a Creative Writing Associate's degree, and it's felt so great to be back. I knew I missed Brookdale when I was at Arcadia, and I miss Arcadia now that I'm back at Brookdale. But I didn't realize how much I missed Brookdale until I was back. A lot of my friends from when I went to Brookdale the first time for 6 years have graduated. Some friends, however, have not, and I have also made lots of new friends. Mikayla and Cosmo, who are two of my closest friends whom I met when I was going to Brookdale the first time, are still there, and I'm so happy we get to be in school together again. I'm also excited as I'm only taking one class at a time to save money and only have to focus on one class each semester. I will be going for two more years and will get to graduate with them.

Being back at Brookdale is also giving me the chance to finally be back in Haunted Theater, the best haunted house in the state! This is also the first time I am officially a scare actor! I got to scare behind the scenes and fill in for actors when I was in tech, but I'm so excited to finally be a scare actor! I have learned a lot from Arcadia in and out of the classroom, which I think is what helped me get to this point. I am also using nonchalant to freaky a lot, which I think really helps; I feel so much more expressive and in my body this year compared to three years ago when I first auditioned and was an understudy. At auditions this year, I felt so much more free and comfortable, and it must have paid off 'cause yay, I'm a scare actor with Mikayla, Cosmo, Sabrina, Louis, and everyone else involved this year!

I love Mikayla and Cosmo so much and missed them dearly when I was at Arcadia. They aren't just two of my best friends; they are my younger siblings, as that's how much I love them and how much they love me. They are an adorable couple, and I am so happy that they have each other and will be together forever. I can't imagine my life without them, just like how I can't imagine my life without Raffi and Teddy, and another best friend, Eli.

I have known Eli for a few years now, and I first met him at Project REAL. When I was first introduced to him, I was told he is an animator and I said, "You're an animator, that's great! Do you want a job?" I said that because I had been looking for an animator for “The Mouse Masters” the TV show I have been writing for years and am still in the middle of writing. He said “sure,” and that's how our friendship started. I still have things to do on my end like record my voice for my characters, get more cast members (again), get my friends who are the other characters to record their voices and send them to me, and then send all the voices to Eli. I have no idea when that will happen, but Eli doesn't care; he's cool with working on the show whenever I'm ready. Eli and I can talk for hours about anything animated, musical, or entertaining with each other. He is such a great friend and we have gotten so close that I call him my older brother and he calls me his younger sister, as we are 6 months and 5 days apart.

Eli, Mikayla, Cosmo, Raffi, and Teddy have supported me through so much and continue to be there whenever I need someone to talk to and just be around. I'm also there for all of them when they need anything. I love them all so much and really can't imagine my life without them.

Imaginative Melodies

Music has always been a huge part of my life and creativity. Whether I'm listening to Gospel, Folk, Jazz, or Musical Theater, music is where I find the most joy, strength, and a connection to the Earth and everything around me like nature, peace, and love. As my background blends stage acting, vocal performance, and writing, my creative half a heart belongs to all these art worlds. In fact, I have an artistic statement that is focused on theater, but it perfectly explains how my love of theater grew from my love of music and creative life.

Artistic Statement

I love music and rhyming so much, it is the best and gives every song and story a fun magic touch. I love rhymes because I am a huge Dr. Seuss fan thanks to my mom who loves him a whole lot. It is very fun and I feel like it helps move along the plot.

My mom loves Dr. Seuss so much that she painted our house as a tribute to him. It fills me up with delight all the way to my brim. “Seussical” is my favorite Dr. Seuss show and is how I know that theater is the thing which will help my creativity grow.

Music has always had a big impact on me and my half a heart. With my parents being professional Jazz musicians, mom is a vocalist and dad is a guitarist, music surrounds me and is such a great kind of art.

I want to use my art to show the world that everything can make music and anything can remind you of a song. I enjoy writing songs about nature and animals, and about life and afterlife. I love singing and playing the piano and I love writing music about how we all belong.

It is my way of helping people get an escape from reality for a little while. I also love writing stories that are mostly fictional about fairies and fantastical lands. I strive to cheer people up with my stories by writing about things that make people smile.

Everyday I try to find anything musical related in every conversation. I get this from my dad, but he tries to find jokes in every discussion whilst I try to find things that make me think of a song or songs, it is a fun little fascination.

I believe that the world is a stage and that life is a song, I also believe that we should all sing along. Like they say in my favorite song, “Sing, sing a song, make it simple to last your whole life long, don't worry that it's not good enough for anyone else to hear, just sing, sing a song.”

Music From Whimsical Poems & Stories

Aside from writing stories, monologues, and plays, I love music and sharing my original albums with the world.

My very first album, *The Seasons We Know*, was released in 2018. This album has 18 tracks and includes songs like “Moonlight Party,” “My Life Is Free,” and the title track, “The Seasons We Know.” Since then, I have put out various albums which each have their own unique themes.

In 2021, I released *Things I Love*, which has 15 songs and features “Shining Stars,” a song that my dad wrote the basslines for. It also features “Friends,” which was the first song I ever wrote; I originally composed it when I was 7 years old, and I made some changes for this album so it would have a better flow. Of course, it also includes the title track, “Things I Love.”

That was followed by my 2023 5-song EP, *Feeling Free in This Community*, where I share my song “Invisible Disabilities,” which is about my medical conditions, a spooky song called “Witch's Treat,” and my song “Feeling Free In This Community,” which is about celebrating the LGBTQIA+ community.

I also love writing about the natural world, which inspired my 2024 5-song EP, *Flowers & Nature*, featuring tracks like “Kindness For Everyone,” “Justice & Equality,” and “Feathers.”

As my musical writing continued, I released three albums in 2025.

These include my 12-song album *Feeling Colorful*, featuring the title track “Feeling Colorful,” “Light Bender” (which is one of my many songs based off of an original poem), and “Theater Archetypes.”

Next was my 12-song album *Lost Angels*, based on a play of the same name by my friend and the owner of Actors Playground Ralph. Featuring the title track “Lost Angels,” “Morgan’s Song (Acceptance For Everyone),” and “Calvin's Song (Light At The End Of The Tunnel).”

Finally, I released my 7-song album *Fantastical Fairycore Folktales*, which includes “Magical Woodland Fun,” the title track, “Fantastical Fairycore Folktales,” and “Fairy Garden Tales.”

My latest album is called *Stream of Dreams*, which features “Wildflower Meadow,” “Flowers & Friendship Forever” (these songs are connected in a special way), and my song “Requiem For Amber” from my play that was my senior thesis, *Friendship Goes Beyond Life*.

Project REAL

I have been going to Project REAL (Real Empowerment On All Levels) since 2018 and I love it there so much! I first went when I was 16 and they used to have a teen day, but I didn't go much back then because I wasn't super open about myself and expressive. Since 2018 when I went again, all that changed.

Finding a community that embraces people for who they are and how they identify is an amazing thing. Project REAL has become a place that feels like another home where I can let off steam or just enjoy my time whilst surrounded by people. I have made lots of great friends at REAL including Eli and some friends I know from Brookdale like my friend Charlotte. Charlotte is the reason I survived the pandemic. She has always been there for me when I need a friend and has helped me through times when I was super depressed. She is also one of the few people who can instantly make me laugh without even saying a word, although it has gotten easier at times for other people to get me to laugh too.

I love going to REAL because it is wonderful to see my friends and hang out whether that means playing Jackbox, watching a movie or TV, or just chatting. It is a perfect place to go when you want to be around people and need a break from other things going on or just want to get out of the house. The staff members are so nice and helpful. I have become close friends with Albert and Arthur who are two of the staff members. They both have helped me through tough times and continue to help when I need someone to talk to. If I am having a bad day or just need to rant, I can talk to them. Walking into REAL always reminds me that I'm never alone, and I am so grateful to have found this community.

Epilogue

So that’s me; a 26 year old girl who goes to the best church ever (one of my second homes), has a great family and wonderful friends (especially Grandma Anne, Raffi, Mikayla, and Cosmo), has unfortunately lost some incredible people, has mostly great but some bad memories (thanks to all of these experiences and more), has also had eight surgeries, has half a heart, basically doesn’t have an immune system, has a rare chromosomal anomaly and has died twice.

I am also defined by creativity and connection, am a proud asexual lesbian, a daughter of two amazing jazz musicians, and a homeschooled/unschooled kid who grew up to earn degrees from both Brookdale and Arcadia University, and I'm currently working on a third degree from Brookdale. I am an actor who hones my craft at Actors Playground (the best acting school in NJ), a dedicated volunteer usher and greeter at the fantastic Algonquin Arts Theatre, and a student of poetry, theater, and song.

My life is very unique as it holds a blend of art in many art forms and a deep medical history. I have done a lot in my life so far, and I am ready to go on more adventures with friends and family. I've still had and will continue to have my ups and downs, but with good friends who are like family and my family by my side, I'm ready to grow, learn, and keep on creating. I want to write more stories, songs, poems, monologues, plays, and all of the above. I am going to continue to let my freak flag wave and fly, and keep on creating whimsical, fantastical, magical things.