

Jenn T. Grace – Episode 95 - Dissecting LGBTQ Identities Around Same Sex Relationships with Dr. Jennelle

Jenn T Grace: You are listening to the Personal Branding for the LGBTQ Professional Podcast, episode 95.

Introduction: Welcome to the Personal Branding for the LGBTQ Professional Podcast; the podcast dedicated to helping LGBTQ professionals and business owners grow their business and careers through the power of leveraging their LGBTQ identities in their personal brand. You'll learn how to market your products and services both broadly, and within the LGBTQ community. You'll hear from incredible guests who are leveraging the power of their identity for good, as well as those who haven't yet started, and everyone in between. And now your host. She teaches straight people how to market to gay people, and gay people how to market themselves. Your professional lesbian, Jenn - with two N's - T Grace.

Jenn T Grace: Hello and welcome to episode number 95 of the Personal Branding for the LGBTQ Professional Podcast. Today I am just super excited that we are in the middle of October in 2016, and that I am on episode 95. It somewhat seems crazy to me that I have recorded 95 podcast episodes, and really it's been 125 because I did a special feature of thirty episodes a couple of years ago. But thinking that I'm nearing the 100 mark just- it seems mind boggling. I remember the first episode I did and what a- I don't want to call it a complete hot mess, but to some degree it was definitely a learning experience, and it took a bit of time to really kind of catch my bearings, but 95 episodes in I'm feeling really good and really confident about the guests that I've been having, and I just feel like everything is going really, really well.

So today I have an interview for you, and then I can also tell you that episodes 97, 98, 99 and the big old 100 which will all occur within 2016 will all also be interviews.

I have found over the years that just interviewing people who are a part of the community, not part of the community but some way are supporting the community, all of that, I find that interviews are absolutely the best way to help educate you. And today we have an

interview with Dr. Jennelle who is a PhD psychologist and she is in the greater Boston, Massachusetts area, and she has a really interesting niche within the LGBTQ community, and you'll hear from her directly that she's not even saying that her niche is LGBTQ, but rather she works with women who are in relationships with other women, but that doesn't necessarily need to be confined with or by having a label of being part of the community.

We had a good 45-minute or so discussion on just all of so many different things; about stigma of being in a relationship with somebody of the same sex, and how people are always trying to label you, and we talk a lot about personal things, and family, and just kind of dynamics around what it means to be in a same-sex relationship. And as a psychologist, her goal as a relationship advisor as she calls herself, is to really help women kind of navigate these lines. And a lot of it I think is really valuable for you the listener to just be listening in, and kind of seeing how she is positioning herself as a personal brand within the space. So as we're here as the Personal Branding for the LGBTQ Professional Podcast, we're really talking about how to brand yourself and your identity as it relates to the LGBT community whatever label you're applying, and how to really use that and leverage it within your particular business.

I feel like Dr. Jennelle is doing an amazing job of that, and you can find her at www.DrJennelle.com, and she, like I, has two N's in her name so it's Jennelle, so www.DrJennelle.com. And if you're looking for links that are mentioned in today's episode, or you're looking for a transcript of what we talked about, you can find all of that at www.JennTGrace.com/95 and that is for episode number 95.

Thank you so much and enjoy this interview.

I want to just start off with having you share with the listeners a little bit about your background, and about yourself, and really what kind of led to you doing the work that you're doing in present day.

Dr. Jennelle:

Sure, well first thanks so much for having me Jenn, I appreciate being here, I'm excited about this. And I have, as I think we all do, a winding path to get to where I've been. I think I always start off by

saying that I don't think I've met anyone who says otherwise. But I was in graduate school for psychology, I realized pretty early on I did not want to go the academic route and be the college professor doing the research, and I was looking for a more direct line of help. I really wanted to see my impact right away, and so I actually ended up going into the wellness field for a while, and that was also directly related to my own personal wellness revolution as I call it. So in 2009 I lost thirty pounds which I always say was the catalyst for getting me to kind of figure out that I could make myself a priority and go after what I want, and achieve it, and I started doing that more and more. I went into the wellness sector for work and kind of was using that as my way to help people through the psychological process of sort of losing weight and changing their whole life. And then that sort of led me to realize that I had somewhat outgrown my own life and I really wasn't feeling fulfilled in what I was doing with my relationship, my personal life, and I sort of accidentally- completely accidentally met someone who she was feeling the same way, she was married to her husband, they had three kids, and we met through a friend of a friend who was getting married, and we ended up both leaving our partners to be together, and that was in 2012. So it kind of turned my whole world upside down, I was engaged at that time to my high school boyfriend of over ten years, and four years later about the small wellness company that I had been working for was basically going under. They really had a terrible business model even though they had a great program, and they couldn't pay me, they couldn't afford to keep me anymore. So I went off on my own to really start using my psychological background more to help people again in a really direct way. Which as a result of my personal experience, I became a relationship advisor. I started helping people that were going through some really challenging times with their partners, even though that they loved their partner like crazy and wanted to stay with them, that it's still really complicated, messy, and hard. And I started specifically working with female same-sex couples, and even beyond that I really like to help people with their big change of heart as I call it. So in my case and in my partner's, we both were with men and left our male partners to be with a woman, and there's a whole host of challenges that come along as a result. So that's really the way where I sort of look at it the 'ah-ha' moment, her after him, and helping people embrace that big change of heart.

Jenn T Grace: You just said quite a mouthful. Okay so let's unravel that a bit. So for the person listening- so you and I have had the pleasure of having a couple of conversations prior to recording today, so I have a good sense of what it is that you do, and how you serve your current clients. So I know that you were saying that you're a relationship advisor, and it's for primarily same-sex couples that are women. Can you go a little bit deeper into that for the audience listening to just kind of get a general sense of what your practice looks like, and how- even to some degree how you're acquiring women that are in those situations that you're helping advise?

Dr. Jennelle: Sure, yeah. So the first part is that I specifically termed and call myself a relationship advisor. I'm not a counselor, I'm not a coach, a clinician, a teacher, trainer, or any of those words, specifically because I do think a little non-traditionally, which you'll see that word pop up a lot with me. But it really came from thinking about sort of a financial advisor, right? You don't wait until you're bankrupt, you don't wait until you're reaching retirement age to finally go see a financial advisor, or at least you shouldn't. Came out to ideally start really in your twenties and early thirties to see someone where you can make small adjustments in your daily spending habits to eventually reach some sort of financial goal that you've set. Well the same is really true for relationships, that's my philosophy, that you need to be proactive, you need to make small adjustments day to day if you want the love that you have to last a lifetime. And so that's really how I kind of position my approach. It's solution-focused, it's proactive, and it's really about making sure that the love that you've found that you were so happy to have, that you're able to continue to foster and grow that even though there's going to be tons of things pulling you and stressing you in a million directions. And so I actually wrote a piece about my own personal experience and have had it for a long time, but I had it published this past April in Elephant Journal, and a lot of people actually reached out to me who had been through a similar experience where one of the people in their relationship at least had left their husband, and they had kids, so there was this complexity of dealing with everything that comes with that, and they were really happy to find someone who understood. And not just understood like a friend, but then could also offer support,

guidance and advice in the deeper level. And they didn't even have any friends or family that understood so that was already a bonus right there, but then they had somebody that could say, "Okay not only do I know where you're coming from, but I can break this down and give you some ways to actually make the transition a little bit easier." So that was one of the first ways I started acquiring clients, and now I specifically really try to reach women who are in that situation. The first year of that transition is incredibly difficult. I can say that a million times, incredibly, incredibly difficult, so I really try to find ways to reach people through whether it's my articles that I've had published, my podcast, my community, any way that I can get out there in the community, the actual local community, I'm in and connect with people that are going through this really big change.

Jenn T Grace:

Now do you find that there is- I'm trying to figure out how to phrase it. Do you find that there's a bit of stigma in some ways attached to the women that you're working with because they don't necessarily fall into a specific label that people are expecting them to either identify as or self-identify as? Do you find that that is part of the struggle?

Dr. Jennelle:

Absolutely, and it's an interesting dichotomy because you have all your friends and family who thought for your whole life you were straight, so they just assumed because you were with this long-term heterosexual partner, or at least you'd maybe only ever been with men, that all of a sudden you're seen to them like, 'Oh she was really gay this whole time.' Or 'We don't know her anymore, we didn't know she was hiding this.' And they see you as that label because you went from someone who dated men to someone who's now with a woman. They just kind of put it there. But the lesbian community often does not see it that way, and even if you've been with your partner- your female partner for a long time at this point, like I have for almost five years which in lesbian world is like an eternity, and it's still seen as- I mean I don't get this as much anymore but certainly in that first couple of years it's that, 'Are you experimenting? Are you dabbling? Are you trying this out? Is this just a phase?' And I personally didn't experience that as much because I just don't know that many lesbians, so

nobody- probably people thought that, but I didn't really know that many people that were saying that to me at the time. One of the things that I really feel that people are dealing with is sort of how do they label themselves, right? So are they all of a sudden gay? I got questions that were, 'Were you gay your whole life and you just never told us? Were you ever happy with your ex?' All of those kinds of questions. And I think personally I dealt with a lot of that, but I never really needed a label because I was just in a relationship. So I was with this guy, and now I'm with this woman, and I just tell people that I fell in love with a woman. I've never really had to apply a label, and I think that's where a lot of the women I'm connecting with are in that same place.

Jenn T Grace:

So along this vein, I want to bring up Elizabeth Gilbert, because I feel like there's no way that we can't bring her up in this conversation because she articulated it almost how you just said it of just that she happened to fall in love with her best friend; and it wasn't her intention, and she didn't set out to do this, and she's not trying to do it to upset others, like it's just very- to her was very organic. Do you think that having somebody with her level of recognition is a benefit to the work that you're doing? Do you see that that is a positive thing, or do you see that there's any- I don't know, chance that there could be something- some kind of negative fallout that comes from that? Like what are your general thoughts on the whole situation?

Dr. Jennelle:

Yeah I was really happy to see the way that she posted about that, and of course she's a beautiful writer so she wrote it so eloquently. But I had a lot of people reach out to me and say, 'Oh my God did you hear? Look, look, look.' And of course having someone who is very well-respected and thought of as one of those really big truth tellers, and truth seekers, and being authentic, and being who you are, it was a really wonderful thing to see her embrace this part of herself that yes, did come about unexpectedly, and I think that's true for a lot of the women in these cases. In fact I've been recently reading this book that actually came out in 2010 but I just came across it, which is 'Dear John, I Love Jane,' and it's letters by women who have left male partners for women. And the range of experience is broad, but of course there's a lot of commonalities,

and I absolutely think that bringing more and more light to the fluidity of especially female sexuality. It seems to be more the case, the research has shown, for women to have a more fluid sexuality always, but also more comfortable changing more dramatically at certain points in their life than men do. And I think the part where it's not that you're denouncing the whole life you had before. She never said she didn't love either of her husbands. It's not that Elizabeth Gilbert is saying that secretly this whole time she really was in love her best friend and she just finally got the courage to say so. It was very much a different experience where at this point in her life something in her made her feel very differently towards this woman, and she very much feels in love with her at this point. And that's a very common experience that I've found for women that just fell in love with a woman that was put in front of them, right? So it's not necessarily that they went out seeking women because they felt that they may be looking for that same-sex connection, but they just met someone who really, really connected with them and really- as I always say, spoke to their soul. And that made them want to be comfortable enough to want to pursue that. And so I absolutely think that her bringing light to that in such a poetic way is a really, really big benefit for the community.

Jenn T Grace:

Absolutely, and I feel like there's just so much that's kind of wrapped up in all of this because I feel like the community- and I think this might be the case generally speaking for people who identify as bi, or pansexual, where they really are more fluid in their sexuality. And I think that we are definitely on some kind of cusp of that being more of the norm than not, because if you look at- I don't know what- I was reading some study not that long ago that was talking about how younger teenagers, people in college, how fluid they are, and how fluid they identify in terms of their sexuality, and I would imagine that if we fast-forward twenty years that is going to be- I would hope that the stigma around being bisexual or pansexual or any number of other ways you could identify yourself would be more common than having to specifically say, 'You're a lesbian.' Because I know you and I had the back and forth via email about my professional lesbian stickers which I thought was hilarious, and I have put it out there to say that I am the Professional Lesbian, it is what it is, but at the end of the day when I really think about how I define myself, being a lesbian

really is kind of on the bottom of my list. And it sounds crazy to say that when that is my brand, this is my platform, this is what I do, but it seems so kind of counterintuitive in a way. If I'm saying that being a lesbian is really kind of a low priority for me and this is what I do for a living, think about all the other people out there who identify as lesbians. How little of an impact it really has on a lot of things. And of course this all is based on geography, and a whole host of variables, but I find that in thinking of what you're doing, I'm sure there's a lot of people out there, especially with like Elizabeth Gilbert who want to claim that she is now a lesbian when she is not saying that, nor are you. So when somebody is wanting to like put a label on you or the women that you work with, and that label just doesn't fit right for whatever reason, what type of advice are you kind of giving them to help them protect themselves in a way but also kind of educate whoever it is that might be trying to force that label on them?

Dr. Jennelle:

Yeah this is a really important and interesting issue around this, and as I've said to you Jenn before, and I've joked that I'm the worst lesbian ever because I'm not a lesbian, and yet the world-most of the world that is not in the LGBT plus community will see me as one because I am in a relationship with a woman, and I think that that's exactly what you're talking about where it's this- the way that you need to communicate with certain people is in that sort of LGBT framework, but yet it's a lot more intricate than that, and I think that's where there is that opportunity for learning and for growth. I have found that people that are in the rainbow community at large, which I'm starting to kind of just say that and say queer because there's too many letters for me to keep up with at this point, but that the allies as well are just it's more about being open-minded. And so if you kind of put that as your home base, you're more likely to find people that are understanding of the fluidity that you're experiencing. Whereas lots of times if you are in the sort of more heterosexual space, that there are a lot of people that are more close-minded about the concept of it being black and white. So it's either you are gay or you're not, and that's it. And so I think for me I had a lot of challenge with not wanting to identify as a lesbian, and I never said I work with lesbian couples, because I really wanted it to be clear that it's not just that, and that there's a lot of women that I work with that don't identify as being a lesbian, and that it's more about for the status of your

relationship right now. So I think that that was something that held me back too was sort of like well what label do I even say I want to reach out to? And I think that's again a place where you have to just keep the dialogue open and explain that you know what? This is where I am right now, I wasn't there ten years ago, and who knows where I'll be in another ten years? Even my fiancé now, at the very beginning of our relationship she would love to ask me, "Well if we weren't together would you be with men or women?" And I'd always say, "I don't know, it would depend on the person that I met," which drove her nuts because she has had the very strong feeling since she was younger that she wanted to be with women, her family wasn't exactly supportive to put that very lightly, so she married a man for ten years- who she did love also, I'm not saying that that wasn't there, but it was more of an innate feeling for her for her life. So she says of course, she knows now that she has been with a woman in this way that she would never sort of go back. And so that's a very different experience, right? So you can see from person to person it's just- it's not that black and white, and even in heterosexual couples there's tons of variability. So I think we just have to be more communicative, and again keep that dialogue open about what your individual relationship and identity looks like. And the labels are supposed to help us, but most of the time they don't. As you said being a lesbian doesn't necessarily tell anyone anything about you, other than one really small detail, right? They don't know you any better. It's as much as I tell somebody that I'm a parent, or I'm a female. I mean it's just you don't know that much about someone by applying those labels.

Jenn T Grace:

Absolutely. And do you find that it's hard to find the women or reach the women who need you most? Because they don't even- let me backtrack. I'm thinking about even the coming out process, and not to say that there is a coming out process specifically here, but to some degree there's like a coming to terms with these revelations. Whether you want to say that you're coming out or not, it's not necessarily- it's all semantics. So if we're looking at that, do you find that the women who would need you most might have a hard time finding you because A) they don't realize you exist and they're kind of used to being shunned by people within the community. Or B) is it that they can't even articulate what it is that they're looking for at that moment? Does that question even make sense?

Dr. Jennelle:

Yes, no it absolutely does, and it's exactly the kind of issue I have as well. That it is I try to go back to where I was in that very beginning process for myself and say, 'What would have drawn me in? What would have been the thing that I was like, 'Oh my God, somebody else gets this.'" And part of it, that's the reason I write a lot and I try to get as much published as possible both about my personal life, but about some of these intricacies of being in these kinds of relationships. Because publishing in Elephant Journal- I was reading Elephant Journal before and during, and it had nothing to do with my identity. But if I had come across a piece that was speaking to exactly the experience I had I would have been like, 'Oh my God, this is exactly what I needed to see, and who is this person?' So part of it is sort of thinking outside the box of where these women are finding themselves. And I will say a lot of people there, they are very introspective, and so going to those places where they're reading those sort of deeper articles, and wanting to really understand themselves, and being big in personal development, that's really big. I mean the relationship kind of hubs are not the place that most of these women are, so that's sort of at more my place to educate those that are not understanding rather than to reach the audience that I'm looking to reach. So there's sort of the difference there. But I would say that looking for people who are friends of these people- that's another big thing. I've been connected with women because someone says, "Oh my God, I have friends that are going through this right now, I'm going to tell them about you." And I think that that's where they understand that I'm the really good friend of this person but I have no idea how to relate to them on this, and they would feel so much comfort in knowing that there's somebody besides them. Because you do feel really alone and isolated when your whole world looked different before, it's that undoing. Our friends call it how we came out because when they found out we were together, and that sort of, 'Oh we remember when you came out together.' And then since then though it's really that sort of undoing of everything you knew before, and your whole life around you- it's something that people don't understand can change but also stays the same. Like we have all the same friends we had before, which also then means that none of our friends really understand our relationship dynamic because none of them are in same-sex relationships. So you have to sort of find other ways to connect with people, and I think that

that's where- you know very good friends of ours would be like, "Oh I met somebody who was in the same experience, like you guys should connect," and I think that that's where a lot of it happens.

Jenn T Grace:

I feel like that makes absolutely the most sense that that's when it would kind of naturally come up in conversation. And in thinking about that, I feel like there's so- the LGBTQ plus queer, whatever we're calling it today, is so complex in so many ways because coming out generally speaking is so incredibly complex that no matter what age you are, what gender you identify as, what level of fluidity you are acknowledging within yourself, there's still so much stigma against one another. So you have like the whole- not theory, the lesbians and gay men hate each other, that whole kind of like stereotype out there. When that is not necessarily the case number one, but in looking at stuff like that I think of like when I came out, and I remember- and this was when I was nineteen, and I used to wear a shirt that literally said, 'I love my girlfriend' on it, and people would still think that I was straight. And it used to drive me absolutely crazy that no matter how 'gay' I tried to appear, it just was completely futile. Like there was just- it just did not work. And that's why I ended up naming- the title of one of my books is, 'But You Don't Look Gay' because I got that phrase all the time. So I'm thinking about how hard it is for lesbians or gay men to feel like they fit in this tribe of people. So you have the straight friends who don't understand you for whatever reason, then you're trying to merge yourself into this community of people who inherently should understand you, but for whatever reason they're not looking at you as being part of their own because you're not looking the stereotype or looking the part. So now what you're doing is like an added layer of complexity on top of that because it's even deeper, because they're not trying to necessarily look any certain part, but yet in a way they're kind of ostracized from two different communities.

Dr. Jennelle:

Yeah it's a really interesting- and I can't speak for everyone of course, and I can speak with the clients that I've worked with and then myself, but one of the things that I find- because it is different than coming out at nineteen and wanting to belong in that way, is

that a lot of these couples don't actually necessarily want to immerse themselves in the LGBT world. It's more like 'I want to keep my life the way it was in the sense that I have a job, and I already have friends and family, I have kids-' a lot of these people do, and they're just hoping that like everyone they know isn't going to turn their backs, and honestly that almost never happens. There are certainly family members, usually more than friends, that end up having more of an issue with it because it's sort of that reframing of everything they've ever known about their family member, and sometimes that can go really poorly. But most people have said that they don't lose their friends, but it's still- you can't talk about things in the same way, right? So you have a girl's night- I was writing about this recently, you can have a girl's night and of course everybody comes without their spouses and partners, and they kind of bitch about their husbands and boyfriends and all of that, and if you're coming with your partner who's a female then she's there, and you can't really do that. And it's just- it's a different dynamic that your friends will learn. I mean I often think that we are the education to a lot of heterosexual couples because they're like, 'Oh you're like still the same people even though you're now together.' Like our group of friends knew us both before this as two women with male partners, and they've realized that we're not really any different because we're with each other, we're just a much better fit as a relationship. But I think it takes time for the friends to get there, and I think that that's where that first year you feel very ostracized from the world because nobody really understands what you're going through. And I think- I have now as a result, because I've learned that there are more people like us, that it's more comfortable to reach out to the LGBT world, and probably part of the reason I didn't in the beginning, and a lot of couples don't, is because they don't feel like that's really who they are. That they won't be accepted, people won't understand, people will think that they did it wrong or however, and so I think there is a little bit of shying away from even connecting with that identity. So being disconnected from that community is almost a choice in the beginning that you're not quite sure that you belong in it to being with, and it's not even that there's people telling you that. So I don't think it's that you've been discriminated against because you don't fit the lesbian stereotype, but it's that you aren't sure yet that that's who you are, and that you need that community. But I think over time when you learn that, there is a lot more variability within that community that you are more

comfortable connecting and associating and finding people that did date men first, and now are with women however they identify. Or had kids with a man and now- I mean there's a lot of women that fall into that category, and so it takes- I think it's just part of the growth process of being in the world. You know I think it's also because as humans we tend to want to hang onto what's stable and secure, so if we can just be with this new person but kind of keep everything else the same, we feel okay about it. Which you do to a degree of course, but you also are going- there is something very different and big that's changed in your life and you need to figure out the way in which you can also expand with that and connect with people that really understand that.

Jenn T Grace:

Absolutely, and I think that to your point about how you're just kind of out there educating your straight friends and those around you, I feel like every one of us whether we want that responsibility or burden, it's ours to bear. We have- it's our responsibility to be educating people at every turn in the road whether you feel like it or not. I think of- I wish there were a way that we could articulate to the average straight person that by being in a relationship with someone of the same sex, that it literally has no bearing on most of what you do, your day-to-day. And there's no- and I haven't found a way to articulate it yet but I think of most of our- let me back up. A lot of our friends are part of the LGBT community, but our closest friends- like I have two best friends that are both straight women and my wife has two best friends and they're both straight women. So for whatever reason that just happens to be the case for us, because again our LGBT or non LGBT-ness does not really have a bearing on who we choose to hang out with, or who we're friends with, or who we gravitate towards because the sexuality piece is really not the driving factor of friendship in my opinion anyway. But like if we look at being parents, I think that that's been the most eye-opening experience, and maybe to some degree you can speak to this too, is that it's really hard to articulate when you are- for us anyway, we are the token lesbians in our school district as far as parents, and there is like the token gay couple as well. But looking at that, it's like our routines are the exact same thing as the straight couple across the street's routine. It does not matter- like our kids go to bed at the same time, they eat the same food, they do the same things. Like there's literally nothing different, and I haven't found a way to like really express that to get people to

understand, but I have found that slow and steady over the last-our kids are eight and ten, like over the last however many years, they have slowly educated people for us because it's harder to argue with an eight year old who loves their two moms, versus arguing with me if they so chose. So do you find that to be the case too, and have you found a way to articulate any of this in a way that gets the average perhaps straight person to understand who may not have a good base level of understanding to begin with?

Dr. Jennelle:

I can relate to this on so many levels, and I know my clients can too, and so I think it's such an important point. You know there's two main points I'll say here which is that much like you, we- I always say we bring the diversity to our town, which is pretty sad because we're two white women. But we are the diversity, there's nothing else here. We're a pretty small town, it's predominantly white, there's no other diversity, and we are like the racy ones. And funny enough, when we moved here another couple- a lesbian couple moved here but they divorced right after they moved here, so there happened to be two lesbian couples here. I don't think we have any gay dads, but we're a real small town. So what I always say, and this is my perspective, and I guess I sort of puff up my chest a little bit, and I've always been this way since I came out in this relationship, was that I don't give people an opportunity to think otherwise. So we live in a neighborhood with a ton of kids, and from day one it was just this is what it is. And the second and third day all the kids were hanging out, we overheard them saying how it was so cool that they had two moms in this house, and their friends telling them that was so cool. They're still at the age where having lots of parents is cool, they'll get over that real quick. But I think that that's part of it where it's- because of the fact like you said you know that everything is the same. Your bedtimes, and food choices, and activities, and whatever else, that the more that they are just immersed in that with you, the more that your community says, 'Oh yeah, there is really no difference here.' And I have yet to experience anyone expecting something to be different because of that; because we're in a small, suburban town I think people probably also don't say anything. But we've really also embraced that people are very accepting and happy to see that, and learn that, and also then to know that their kids are growing up seeing that as well. And like you said, the kids are the biggest advocates for us anyway because they're the happiest kids around,

and they are completely comfortable talking about their family dynamic. And in our case now their father is in our life, and he's remarried so there's three moms and one dad, and everybody thinks that that's like so cool and crazy, and nobody is saying negative things about it. Now granted our kids are eight and five, so who knows how things will progress, but I do think that's more the role that we do take. As you said it's kind of constant educators just by existing, which you never thought you would be, but that's really what it is, right? Just by existing the way that we do in the world. By going grocery shopping on a Sunday afternoon, that we're teaching people that oh yeah, it's not any different.

Jenn T Grace:

And I think that there's a flipside to that as well. So for the most part I would say that we are doing a perfectly good and wonderful job at being symbols in our community, because I also live in a very kind of suburban town, we are in the general Hartford area, but we're in the suburbs totally. We at the very least have a lot of racial diversity which we're really, really grateful for. But when it comes to being the token lesbians, it is what it is. But I think of how my wife is a teacher, and there is a- I'm not even entirely sure what her role is, but it's somebody that kind of works in and out of the district, and is also a lesbian and happens to be the wife of a friend of mine. Because of course it's the tiny two degrees of separation with the lesbian community. But in looking at that, the two of them are both kind of- I don't want to say paranoid because that's probably too extreme, but they don't want to be seen talking to each other. So let me just- random tangent here is that my wife comes with like a dozen donuts the other day, and neither of us are donut eaters, and it's because they had some kind of staff meeting, and the friend of hers who's the other lesbian in the town- she doesn't live in the town, she just works in the town, gives her the donuts but they had to do it like in some kind of covert way because they didn't want it to be seen as like the favoritism between lesbians. And mind you they barely even really know each other, they know each other because our- me and her wife are friends, so it's like this very strange- like we can't be seen associating with each other because now we're going to be those stereotypical lesbians that every lesbian knows one another. So there's kind of like this strange flipside that comes with this visibility in a way, because we're all visible whether we are intentionally trying to be visible or not. Like we could just be living

in our suburban towns minding our business, and it doesn't matter because we are still known as like that token- for at least us, the token lesbian couple, and even for you guys you're probably labeled as the token lesbian couple even if that's not how you identify. So in looking at that, thinking about kind of all of the bad that can come with that too, because I would imagine that we could both be living in some- it could be an urban area, it could still be our same streets in our small towns, and the neighbors could be fighting every single day for a month, and everyone hears it, everyone's- the talk of the neighborhood that the neighbors are fighting. And the second you know that if you're out on your street fighting with your wife, or I'm out on my street fighting with my wife, suddenly it becomes like an LGBT issue rather than just two people in a relationship who are bickering over something. Like suddenly it becomes such a broader thing and then it's like proving all these stereotypes that they have in their heads about what lesbians do or what lesbians look like. Do you find- like have you thought about this yourself, and does that sound like probably a fair statement?

Dr. Jennelle:

Absolutely. I mean I think we are certainly in that neighborhood where everybody sort of knows everyone and all that, not in an annoying way, but everybody sort of knows enough about what's going on in everybody else's lives where if we- we're both very passionate women, we are also very loud, and so arguing or anything else it's sort of like I completely agree that I'm sure there's times where it's, 'The lesbians are arguing.' Or, 'It's so different over there,' where I mean we've seen issues that happen with any other couple, and I agree that I think it's sort of hard to get away. Like we always joke whenever we wave to kids that don't know us that well but they live on our street because they're older than our kids, that it's probably like, 'Oh there's the lesbian couple waving at us,' or whatever. Like the middle school and high school boys are probably like, 'Oh yeah, those two.' It's just I agree completely that there is a little bit of that overshadowing of everything, and I guess I sort of always have felt like even if that's there, as long as it doesn't result in something negative, it's just going to be there. And I think through more and more education and just co-existence, that starts to go away to a degree, but it's also if you have a couple on your street that's much older and their kids are really young, they're that couple that are the really old

parents. I mean or whatever, you know it's like there's always some sort of label you get that who knows. Like we have a very active neighborhood and there's a couple in our neighborhood who own a CrossFit gym and they're super, super healthy and fit, and you always say like they're the pillar of like we should be where they are when it comes to health and fitness, and everyone sort of knows that about them. That happens to be more of a positive label obviously, but everyone sort of gets the label in some way. We happened to get one that's more seen and can have lots of issues behind it I think, but it's more socially known, but I think it's also just what you do with that. We really try to also kind of out ourselves at times, like jokingly if something does come across as being really stereotypical. We're like, 'Oh there we go again. Are we building into your stereotype right now guys?' And they laugh because I think everybody is comfortable enough at this point to realize that you're just two people, yes it's really not that much different. There is a difference between like the husbands all do one thing and the wives all do something else, and we never do that. I didn't want to do that with my last relationship either, it's just more the 50/50 partnership perspective. So I think that changes no matter what.

Jenn T Grace:

Yeah and you just saying that you didn't want to do that no matter what, I think that the other thing that kind of comes up with this conversation is how often are you having conversations with people where they're trying to identify you as their husband. Or like, 'You're so much like my husband,' or your partner is so much like their husband. Because I think that that's something that commonly happens too. So rather than just looking at us for the individuals that we are, and have no necessarily- no bearing on things, I feel like everyone's always trying to label one or the both of us as having some commonality with someone's husband, just because in their minds it's the only way they seem to be able to group things into buckets properly, is that somebody has to have that masculine energy, or masculine trait, or masculine hobby; whatever the hell it happens to be but it's always people are trying to like shove somebody in a bucket. And I witness this for our relationship, I've witnessed it with dozens of others. Is that also kind of what's occurring for you guys as well?

Dr. Jennelle:

Absolutely, it's huge and I mean it's funny because both of us obviously were with men before, and those men hung out with the males in our community of friends, yet at this point it's actually more my fiancé Jess who very much is the one that's always like- you know she loves beer, she's a huge athlete, she's big into sports and they're like, 'She's the man.' But yet I mean she's incredibly feminine in every other respect, so it's ridiculous that people are like, 'Oh she's just like a man,' but that's exactly what people do because they're trying to like make sense of it. But we have a lot of friends now where both of us or either one of us can interchangeably hang out alone with the husband and it's not any different. Because we have something we get along about, or we can laugh or talk about whatever, and I think that too has opened up a little bit more room in friendships where people say, 'Oh maybe I should give the female in that relationship a chance to actually see them as a person and not just so-and-so's wife.' And I think that that's sort of another level of education, which is- I wrote about this too recently that I really, really hate- and I really wish people would stop asking like, 'Which one of you is the man in your relationship?' Because even in a relationship where one of the women is identifying more on the masculine spectrum, she's still not a man unless she's decided to be transgender, and then she's transgender. And there's a different issue there and I think that it's just they're trying to figure out the best way to relate, and that's the only way that they know how because that's the experience they have. And I think it's just sort of kind of explaining that, 'Yes I also love sports too, I just never played because I'm just not that athletically able.' Or whatever, I mean it's that continuum and I think again it's all about the education. But we still see that. I mean for sure there's more times in a social situation where I'm talking with more females and she's talking with more males, and I don't know if that's partially like they've carved that out and she's also kind of moved into that at times, but it definitely- I think that's a constant with any two female couple where they're trying to put you in something that they recognize, and it just obviously doesn't always work, but I think it's the best way that they know how to relate.

Jenn T Grace:

Yeah I think most of it comes down to people aren't trying to be offensive, they're not trying to go out of their way to isolate you, or hurt you or whatever it is, they're just genuinely trying to

categorize and put people in buckets because that's just how our brain is wired. We are wired to try to make sense of things, and when something does not look like the other- like if we think of like Sesame Street way back in the day of like one of these things is not like the other, that's the case so people are just trying to figure out how to kind of plop you down in those particular buckets. And I know for us going back to that whole masculine and feminine thing, my wife and I are both very balanced, and neither one of us is like super masculine or super feminine, we're both just your average women, like there's really nothing special about either of us, but yet it's always people being completely and utterly shocked to find out that she is like a romantic comedy junkie, and that's like her- because they look at her and that's not- like for whatever reason that just is not what they think of because she's also super athletic, was an all-star athlete growing up in multiple sports, so when they hear that she's the junkie on romantic comedies and I want nothing to do with them, it always shocks people because apparently I look as if that would be more my thing. And it's like this is the ridiculousness of our lives, and it's more so when you're part of a community of stigmatized people. Because we're not having this conversation with straight women, right? Like there's plenty of straight women who don't like romantic comedies either but yet because I'm a lesbian suddenly that becomes an issue.

Dr. Jennelle: Yeah I would say it's the same thing where my fiancé is seen as way more the man because of the beer and the sports or whatever, but like couldn't be more terrified of bugs, and bees, and spiders.

Jenn T Grace: Oh my God, my wife too.

Dr. Jennelle: And so I'm always like going to save the day with like a bug, and I'm like- which again goes against the stereotype. I'm like oh she's that male masculine stereotype, like really? And then they get all confused. And I'm like because that doesn't make any sense, and it's interesting though is that it's not just the straight couples that we know that have kind of done that. I will never forget this, the first party we went to for this particular other group of friends who does have a lot more LGBT influence in that group, there's

several gay couples, there's several lesbian couples, and when we first came to this gathering with a really good friend, I literally- we got stopped in the kitchen, it was a Fourth of July I think or Memorial Day- we both happened to be wearing sundresses, it's the only reason I remember this. This was like 2013 I think, and a particular woman that was there who was with another woman, but everybody says, 'You can't call her a lesbian because she used to date men too,' so I get that concept. But she stopped us in the kitchen and said- she was really upset that we were both wearing dresses and she was like, "Well do you identify?" And we were like, "Identify as what?" And we couldn't figure out what she was asking, and she was like, "Well how do you-" it wasn't even a 'how do you identify,' it was like, "Do you identify" was what she kept saying, and we kept wondering what does that- like do I identify as being a lesbian? Do I identify as being with a feminine? I'm like, "I don't know what you're asking." And I remember just having that really- that was sort of the first clear case where someone who was in the LGBT community was also confused by who were and what we were representing. And so I think it can happen of course not- we didn't fit. I mean of course there's plenty of lipstick couples in the lesbian world too, maybe they're not as common, honestly I don't know, I don't know the statistics, but I think a lot of times especially if we're out that's what we look like more, and I think it still throws people off sometimes that how could we both be into each other, and blah, blah, blah and whatever. And it's a question- I think it's almost that same deal where you're going back to say we- obviously there's something you're not seeing that's what's brought us together, it has nothing to do with any stereotype you're putting on us, and sorry that it doesn't fit into what you were expecting, but here's what it actually is.

Jenn T Grace:

Yeah and I think that a lot of times in my opinion, it's people within the community who are more hung up on those aspects of relationships than people outside of the community. Because I think people who are outside of the community, they can't wrap their head around two women being together regardless of what those two women look like, versus people within the community, there's all of this baggage, especially older generations that are of people carrying around this stigma, and in some ways that self-resentment towards themselves, or they're used to hearing negative things toward themselves based on what other people

have said to them. So they are almost- they're so kind of stuck in that, that they're projecting that onto other people, so when you do have two women who are the 'lipstick lesbians' in a relationship, or the two 'butches' in a relationship, it's the people within the community who often have the biggest complaints about that. And that's at least- and I'm trying not to generalize, this is all just in my personal interactions that I've witnessed, but it's like if we could all just stop for a second and recognize that you can identify yourself however you so choose, I can identify myself however I so choose. We both may have the commonality that we're both in relationships with women, but that is like a very surface level commonality. That might mean that we literally have nothing else in common, like truly nothing else in common other than the fact that we are in a relationship with a woman and happen to be a woman. And that could honestly be the end of it, and yet there's this societal kind of pushing and pulling to some degree that's saying like you have to be friends, like why wouldn't you be friends? It's like, 'Well how about you, straight woman? Why aren't you friends with that straight woman?' And then they give you five reasons why they're not and I'm like, 'Okay so let's apply that to me, it's the same conversation.' But for whatever reason within the LGBT community, so many kind of societal norms just kind of are thrown out the window when in reality they shouldn't because they're just as applicable to us as anybody else.

Dr. Jennelle:

And I think maybe some of that goes back to when it felt like it was such a smaller community of people that needed that like place to belong, and be a close-knit group of people, but especially today I mean everybody knows somebody who's in some letter of the LGBT community, and it's just more integrated obviously. You don't have to be like separated and be a pocket. You don't have to go to a town where everybody's gay to fit in, and I think- I mean certainly I think there are places where you do need that sort of community feel and protection if you're living in like the Bible belt, you're probably not walking around like making out with your girlfriend. I mean there's a little more of an issue there with the acceptance level which I understand, but in general the need to belong with other LGBT people purely for that notion. I mean I think that also starts- it's like when you're in high school into college if you're coming out at that age, and you are single, and you are young and wanting to find somewhere to belong period, then it

feels really good to know that that's something that you can start with. But I distinctly remember that there was- in high school there was this boy who would literally introduce himself as, "Hi I'm Jesse and I'm gay," and I remember being like, "I know nothing about you," but it's like that's how he literally would put his hand out to shake your hand. And he was written up in the newspaper about it because he was in high school, and he was young, and it was like this suburban town, and whatever how great it was, and I mean very happy that he was super comfortable and out and all of that, but I remember wondering, 'What else are you?' Because that doesn't really tell me anything. And that was sort of- he needed that and people felt connected to him if they wanted to come out because it was a safe place. And I see that a lot in the younger generations I think, if that makes sense. But as we start to get older, I mean of course it's just about what you connect with. You want your friends to parent the same way you do, and like the same things you do, and any of those other areas that make us actually like the people in our life. It has nothing to do usually with our sexuality.

Jenn T Grace:

Yeah I really think that that's what it comes down to. I think that that's a by-product of aging, and I think that there's probably- we can't deny the fact that there's still a lot of bullying happening to LGBT youth, and the fact that there is kind of the- to some degree I feel like the gay culture is kind of dying in some ways. Like where there's long standing LGBT establishments that were the lesbian bar or the gay bar in specific cities and towns, and they're closing now, and now it's more of just like, 'Hey Thursday night is gay night,' or whatever it happens to be. I do think that there's a big loss to the community that is happening and will probably continue to unravel because those safe places in the areas where- we're both in the northeast, you're in Massachusetts, I'm in Connecticut, we're definitely on a very kind of extreme progressive spectrum in terms of most of the time being very much a non-issue, but there is a whole other area of the country- most of the country I think that still has these types of problems. So I think that to some degree we have a privilege in many ways being in the northeast, or even in New England more specifically, so I don't know. It's just very interesting to see all of how these kind of dynamics play out, and I feel like there's just so much space for you as a thought leader to be able to kind of share your opinions and

insights because when we first connected, I know I was like grilling you with questions of like just how you fit or don't fit within this whole LGBT community, and I feel like your message is just so important because in some ways it's very polarizing to some people I would imagine. So I'm just thrilled that you've been on and we've been able to kind of like dig deep into a whole myriad of topics.

Dr. Jennelle:

Oh I very much appreciate that, I mean I thank you so much for saying that, and I just think it's- I always say the issues that are difficult, they just need to be- someone needs to keep talking about them because there's more people that are on this path than you know because no one's talking about it, people are uncomfortable. And the whole other parts of the country that you said that don't necessarily have the privilege we have of being in this progressive area are probably really stuck, and maybe they're stuck to the point where they're like having affairs with women instead of leaving husbands, or leaving partners because they're scared and they don't know how to do this. And to open up the platform of giving the opportunity for people to realize that you can get through the hard part, and that there's a place to figure out that just being someone who fell in love with someone of the same sex doesn't mean that you have to change everything you know about yourself, or that everybody else needs to see you completely differently either. And I think that that's- just kind of keeping up that continued conversation, and being that one of the voices that really continually brings this up, because I think it's something that we really need to recognize and continue that embracing of all the variations and just variants of sexuality in our society.

Jenn T Grace:

Absolutely. So for people who might be listening to this, I have a good mix of my audience between straight folks and people within the community themselves, but for somebody who's listening to this and they're just completely kind of wrapped into what we're talking about, and they want to reach out to you, what is the- I know that you mentioned the podcast, so what are the ways in which people can kind of get more of your thoughts and opinions, or possibly engage with you one-on-one?

Dr. Jennelle: Sure yeah, absolutely. Thank you for that opportunity. So my podcast is called 'Big Change of Heart,' again it's looking at all the issues with complicated love, but one of the areas that I focus on of course is sort of the big change of heart that happens when you've left a male partner for a female, and that is released every week, so you can go to www.DrJennelle.com/podcast you'll find everything there, or of course we're on iTunes. And then there's also the Big Change of Heart community on Facebook. www.DrJennelle.com/community as well, and it's really a place for people who are also going through similar experiences with their big change of heart, and also trying to keep the love as a priority in their life amidst the chaos and all the external pulls and stresses that come, whether dealing with the issues around sexuality, dealing with blended families, divorce. It's stressful, right? So this is a place to kind of remember why you got together in the first place, and so that's a really great place to come, it's a great growing community, and of course you can always contact me directly at Jennelle@drjennelle.com. I'm always looking to talk with other people that are in these experiences, and what they share they can offer to this community that needs to hear that voice. So I'd love to hear from you, reach out, and I'm also continually looking for people to share their story on the podcast. So if you fall into this big change of heart category, I'd love for you to reach out and consider being a guest.

Jenn T Grace: Awesome, I love it. Thank you so much for being a guest. I'm so happy that we got a chance to connect, and perhaps we will have you on as a second time guest in the future.

Dr. Jennelle: Well thank you so much for the opportunity, it's been a great conversation and I'll look forward to talking again soon.

Jenn T Grace: Great, thank you.