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Interview with Haven Wilvich on August 10, 2021

Haven Wilvich

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Haven Wilvich 8.10.21

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SPEAKERS

Rebecca Cavanaugh, Haven Wilvich

Rebecca Cavanaugh 00:03

Okay. Let's start with some background information. Can you tell me about where you grew up the politics of that place? You know, family? Were they progressive or traditional affirming? etc?

Haven Wilvich 00:17

Yeah. So I grew up in a fundamentalist Christian household in East Kane County, where I was homeschooled in a very conservative political environment. I didn't know any queer people firsthand. I didn't even know that transgender people existed. I just knew what I was being told through that form of Christianity, which was very quick flooding and homophobic.

Rebecca Cavanaugh 00:47

Yeah. And so what was it like growing up in your family? Can you tell me a little bit about that?

Haven Wilvich 00:57

It was challenging, growing up knowing that I was weird and couldn't live up to the kinds of masculinity that my subculture wanted. I went through various stages of either rejecting gender or lean hard into overcompensating with masculinity. Because I just knew I was different. I wish I'd known that being trans was a thing, was an option that I had, because I probably would have come out a lot sooner, though, I have no idea how my community would have reacted to that. Because I didn't have the opportunity to do that. Other than the religious shame and social isolation of being homeschooled, my family was very loving and caring. I don't feel like I was badly raised. Just I think I had very limited options available to me.

Rebecca Cavanaugh 01:53

And yeah, okay, so you mentioned that your family was religious and that impacted you. And you touched on slightly what you knew about your sexual and gender identity beforehand. Was there any moment that you felt like you were sure of one thing or another before, you know, you came to college?

Haven Wilvich 02:16

I wasn't sure of anything other than I knew that my brain operated differently than my peers. I would frequently describe it to myself, I don't know that ever told anyone outside myself this, but I thought like, I had a girl's brain trapped in a boy's body. But I had no idea what that meant. Or the implications of that.

Rebecca Cavanaugh 02:40

Yeah. And so, um, you mentioned, you've mentioned this a few times already, that there wasn't much discussion about this. So when you were younger, what did you think about LGBTQ plus issues? And just, yeah, so what did you know about it? And what did you think about it before, when you were younger?

Haven Wilvich 03:08

Honestly, I didn't think about it too much. And knew or thought I knew that, you know, being queer was a sin. And that, you know, we were supposed to try to convert those people and help them like live straight lives or whatever. But I didn't honestly give it much thought. I mostly just like, Well, those people exist somewhere. I'm sure there's people in Seattle, but I don't know any of them. So it doesn't really matter to me.

Rebecca Cavanaugh 03:40

Yeah, thank you for sharing about your background. A little bit. So let's move into your time at SPU. Can you just clarify with me what your affiliation was? Were you a student or faculty or? Yeah, yeah.

Haven Wilvich 03:58

I was a student in the ecology department. I was also a student worker, and I was there from 2007 to 2011.

Rebecca Cavanaugh 04:13

Thank you. And so why did you Why did you come to SPU? What brought you to that university?

Haven Wilvich 04:27

Haven Wilvich 04:27

I'd been on the campus before and I knew that it was a beautiful campus. I loved it was in King County, so I didn't have to go too far from home. And when I when I visited, I was very interested in the music and ecology programs.

Rebecca Cavanaugh 04:46

So the next question is a little bit broad. I've got some more specific ones that you saw. I'm kind of just like what your experience was that SPU. I can ask Yeah, I'll get to more specific ones. But I guess if you were going to describe what those four years were like, how would you describe that?

Haven Wilvich 05:10

I'd say that they were a good time for me. I made a lot of friends. I've worked well with a lot of different faculty and a variety of departments. I think I came in as one of the more conservative students at the college. And I was, I went into this mindset of like having to resist more than mainstream Christianity influences. But I had really good professors, particularly theology professors, who helped me see how Christianity can be viewed through different lenses. And that really helped me change and grow in my own faith and make it my own, and not my parents faith. And I'm really grateful for that. I think it changed me fundamentally, as a person, I think I came out of SPU a much better person than I went into it. By the time I graduated, I was probably one of the most liberal students there. But I really enjoyed particularly the schooling experience and the social experience.

Rebecca Cavanaugh 06:15

Thank you for sharing that. And so what kind of support, you mentioned a little bit about the theology department, some friends. What kind of support did you find on campus that, you know, sticks out to you the most, in hindsight.

Haven Wilvich 06:34

I had several different jobs on campus. So I really found love the whole student work environment, pretty supportive. I had some great teams while I was there, I had my first office job, which kind of put me on the career path that I'm on now. I had really supportive faculty, particularly in the biology department, and the sociology department. And in the end, the theology department. Once I started realizing I was gender nonconforming, and I got a lot of support, in particular from the sociology professors there.

Rebecca Cavanaugh 07:13

And did you ever look for support off campus as well? And if so, like, what was that?

Haven Wilvich 07:21

Yeah. During my time at SPU, I started going to St. Mark's Episcopal Cathedral, and I found some good support their community that was much more affirming than SPU was.

Rebecca Cavanaugh 07:41

Thank you. But did you ever? And so did you have a whole lot of conversations with these support groups about? I mean, you kind of mentioned but like, were these? Were your conversations with the support people or support areas of your life like constant thing? Or were they every now and then?

Haven Wilvich 08:05

No, I, I got pretty consistent support. I've spent a lot of time in office hours with professors getting both career advice and schooling advice, as well as personal advice. So I feel like I was very well supported, particularly by the faculty.

Rebecca Cavanaugh 08:22

Nice. And did you ever think of leaving SPU?

Haven Wilvich 08:27

No, I really enjoyed being there. And I didn't think of leaving.

Rebecca Cavanaugh 08:32

That's, that's good. So and so did your faith grow as a result of your experiences at SPU? Did your faith grow also in your understanding of your own sexual identity as well? If you could describe some of that.

Haven Wilvich 08:52

Yeah, I, my faith absolutely grew as a result of being at SPU, I went through all three of the required theology courses. I don't know if that's still the requirement, but I did all three of them in the space of one year. Which was a very intense, theological, spiritual experience. And I think I came out of the other side of that a completely different person, honestly, than I was before. I learned a lot about how to interpret the Bible multiple different ways. I learned how to integrate my own belief systems into Christianity and authentic ways instead of being at conflict. And I learned how to, to not be as judgmental about where I was where other people were, and just recognize, you know, the full breadth of humanity as part of Christianity.

Rebecca Cavanaugh 09:47

I like that. Um, and so I know that being at a Christian institution while you're, you know, discovering these things about your sexual gender identity may have been a difficult space. But can you? So can you describe some of that for me? Like, what it just the definition of being at a Christian institution during that?

Haven Wilvich 10:16

Yeah, I would say the hardest part with the administration, particularly the lifestyle expectations. The faculty were generally pretty open. And I learned a lot from them about how to integrate my sexuality and gender, with, with Christianity with social constructs with biology, but the administration definitely had a much more narrow view. And it was hard being an SPU, particularly during the administration in 2010 2011. That was very actively homophobic. And I think a lot of the student body was as well. I think there was definitely a hostility towards towards sexualities and genders that didn't conform with evangelical Christianity ideas.

Rebecca Cavanaugh 11:22

Yeah, that, that makes sense. And then what was it like with that, that, that being at that I couldn't, Christian institution in relation to also being in Seattle, which is this, you know, progressive city that, you know, fairly liberal? If I would say, was there? Was that like, juxtaposition, ever confusing? or How would you describe that?

Haven Wilvich 11:55

I mean, I'd say while I was there, it felt very much like we were in this little conservative bubble in the middle of liberal city. Like, we'd go out into the world, but like, that level was always kind of like, our home base. Especially living on campus and kind of reading that culture every day. I didn't really experience too much of what Seattle was actually like, until I left school. But during, during the end, when SPU haven was under fire, by the administration, I did find a lot of support from local places, like the Stranger and Seattle Gay News that was kind of unexpected, and, you know, really taught me like, Oh, hey, the city has a lot to offer.

Rebecca Cavanaugh 12:45

Thank you for sharing that. Okay, and so you were involved in Haven during your time, so I'd love to talk about that for a little bit. Um, how, why did you feel called to be involved in this type of like, activism, I would call it activism in itself. But just this leadership position, at SPU what, how'd you feel called to that?

Haven Wilvich 13:13

Well, honestly, when I first came to the school, I remember that there is some people circulating a petition to

try to get the school to recognize them as a club. And I kind of like shied away from that and avoided that. And I was like, Well, I don't I don't want to be involved shied away from that and avoided that. And I was like, Well, I don't I don't want to be involved in mine, one of the things that I'm queer. So I stayed away from su haven for the first, probably year and a half, that I was there. And eventually, I decided, like as part of my theological growth process, I decided to attend a pastor panel that they were hosting, where local church pastors came in and talked about how their denomination viewed homosexuality. And I learned a lot from that. I was really impressed by the respectful dialogue that was happening, and by how there was a space held for multiple opinions. So I was drawn to that. I started getting involved. I attended for a good year and a half before I stepped up into leadership. And really, by that point, I thought like, I don't know what I am yet. I hadn't figured out for sure what, what kind of queer trans I was. I just knew I was gender non conforming, but I want to make spaces for people to have that exploration to have that discussion. And really, like whether or not people consider themselves part of the LGBTQ community just actually think about it and talk about it in critical ways. So I really wanted to help foster that space.

Rebecca Cavanaugh 14:54

Yeah. And so while you were in both just the club and in leadership, what kind of changes, besides, you know, creating that safe space? Did you really want to see on campus? What were you advocating for within the community within the policies? Yeah, if you can describe that.

Haven Wilvich 15:20

I mean, our purview is pretty limited. So we weren't actually allowed to advocate for anything. What we were really just fighting for was the ability to have a conversation, to have a space where people could just talk about LGBTQ issues as it relates to Christianity. And I think that happened a lot the first year I was involved, but it was really harmed by the administration's decision to try to cut SPU Haven out of campus. My the year that I was in leadership, they tried to completely say, like, you can't meet on campus, you can't have posters up. You're not a club anymore, you don't exist. And, you know, we hadn't been recognized as an official cloud, we didn't have funding. So we've been always kind of a scrappy grassroots organization. But I think that really harmed our mission to create a safe space and a discussion place. Because then we had to, like triage and go into this just fighting for our right to exist kind of thing. And the people that were involved at that point, are people who are willing to kind of put themselves out there and be part of the advocacy. And we lost a lot of people that were trying to explore trying to discuss trying to learn and grow.

Rebecca Cavanaugh 16:45

And so how, what were some of the, I mean, you said it was very difficult to even, you know, have these events and such, what was some of the best support that faculty or students or outside parties, what was some of the best support that you guys received for doing that?

Haven Wilvich 17:07

Yeah. There was a point at which the administration was being particularly firm about us, not existing, and the

faculty on campus, only the tenured faculty, because associate professors didn't want to risk their careers. But a lot of the tenured faculty wrote letters of support into the Falcon and to the administration. And that was that was really supportive and helpful. But I think what really changed the tide was, there are some alumni that organized the campaign, and got a bunch of other alumni to write in letters. And some of those alumni were donors. And I think threatening to withdraw financial support is really what changed the situation.

Rebecca Cavanaugh 17:53

It's very interesting. Um, and so outside of just the club events that you guys held on campus, were there ever any, like larger events or protests that you guys held? If you could tell me about some of those?

Haven Wilvich 18:11

Yeah, so we do annual pastor panels. We also had annual transgender Q&A panels. But I think the biggest most visible thing we did was participating in the the National Day of Silence, where we would all sit in the square outside of the cafeteria and put that tape or bandanas over our mouths and just sit there silently all day. And then at the end of it, we would have communion together and discuss what came up for us. And I think that was really where we got the most engagement because it's very visible. I wouldn't call it a protest, but it was definitely a direct action of some sort.

Rebecca Cavanaugh 19:03

Were you there for the I think it was the 2009 National Day of Silence when they had tried to get a pastor to serve communion at the end of the day, but the admin wouldn't let them. Can you tell me about that a little bit more.

Haven Wilvich 19:21

Ah, that was so long ago. It's hard to remember exactly what happened. But I think we have invited a queer affirming pastor from off campus. And the administration got wind of it and was basically like, now it has to be like somebody who is approved by the administration. So I think what ended up happening is one of the theology faculty members who was ordained ended up doing communion.

Rebecca Cavanaugh 19:48

What was the student and faculty reaction to hearing that the admin wouldn't let this person come get or had asked this person to not come give communion Do you remember any of the the community reaction?

Haven Wilvich 20:03

The people that are actively involved in SPU Haven were pretty outraged. But I don't think that it really got publicized a lot beyond that. I don't remember if there are any Falcon articles about it really got publicized a lot beyond that. I don't remember if there are any Falcon articles about it, but I don't think that there was any kind of major outrage at the time. I think that didn't come until later.

Rebecca Cavanaugh 20:22

Okay. And so what about some smaller events that were on campus? Maybe even just like, discussions that were had in dorm rooms or in dorm hallways? Do you remember any of that type of stuff?

Haven Wilvich 20:41

We had weekly meetings actually for SPU Haven. And usually those were held in Demeray or Weter...now I'm questioning the names of the halls.

Rebecca Cavanaugh 20:53

I can't even remember some of them. So you're good.

Haven Wilvich 20:58

So yeah, we had we had all of your meetings on a regular basis, that were open to anybody. And they were usually pretty small. They were usually like, six to 20 people. But we had a weekly space for that, which was really helpful. It was kind of a good social club as well. Just a way to actually like bond with people and over like shared values, even if the shared value was just talking about it respectfully.

Rebecca Cavanaugh 21:32

And so I guess now I want to ask about... You've mentioned, you know, conversations on campus a few times, we did faculty or other types of events ever facilitate discussions about LGBTQ Plus, you know, topics. Inside or outside of the classroom,

Haven Wilvich 22:01

it was pretty limited to discussions that SPU Haven held, like, there are a few professors who were bold enough to include a little bit of content in the class, like sociology professors talking about gender as a construct, or biology professor was talking about intersex conditions. But for the most part, I think people tried to stay out of that realm, and not get into much trouble. I think the most controversial thing that faculty

did was there is a human sexuality class, taught by some nursing professors. And it didn't really focus on the LGBT stuff very much. But it was talking about sexuality in general, mostly straight sexuality. And I think that was pretty controversial at the time still.

Rebecca Cavanaugh 22:56

Interesting. You mentioned the National Day of Silence and how that was one of the most engaging times for students on campus. Did you ever have, like, private conversations and like with people that maybe you usually wouldn't talk with as a response to some of that activism?

Haven Wilvich 23:22

mostly people on campus avoided talking about it. Like even if people knew that I was involved in SPU Haven, people usually didn't want to talk to me about it. Until that, until the issue where the administration tried to shut things down. And then suddenly, we're in the Falcon every week. And people started talking about it in corridors and hallways and between classes, and I'd get pulled aside frequently to give updates on where we were and what was happening. It was kind of like becoming a campus celebrity for a few weeks. It was weird. But yeah, it was, I think that that was the only moment that I really saw conversation happening.

Rebecca Cavanaugh 24:09

So yeah, so let's, let's talk about that now. Um, all of you trying to get, like allowed to meet on campus. What was that time like? You mentioned that like that few weeks when it was very much you're in the Falcon every week. If you could just like, describe that all to me. That'd be great.

Haven Wilvich 24:30

Yeah. So at the beginning of the school year for 2010. The administration told that haven leaders and our faculty sponsor that we can no longer reserved rooms on campus. We weren't allowed to meet on campus. So for a couple of weeks, we started out holding in some off campus housing. And then we're like, wait, why are we doing this? Let's just go meet like in the middle of campus, so we met like in common areas in, in some of the buildings for several weeks unofficially. I'm sure the administration knew we were doing it. But they didn't, they weren't bold enough to like, kick us out. And we kind of went on that for a while, until February 2011. I think I have the Falcon articles that I can provide you. But basically, we were contacted by the administration saying, SPU haven no longer exists. You're not a group you're not affiliated with SPU. You can't post advertisements on campus. And if we find out there'll be punitive action or something like that,

Rebecca Cavanaugh 25:48

And what was their reasoning?

Haven Wilvich 25:50

They were really uncomfortable with the conversation happening about LGBTQ issues. There was a particular President's Cabinet member who really had it out for the club really wanted us was a particular President's Cabinet member who really had it out for the club really wanted us to not exist. And I think there were also members of the Board of Trustees that were really uncomfortable with us existing. So the director of Oh, I don't remember his title. I remember his name. But there was an administration member who was kind of our facilitator person between us and the Board of Trustees. And he basically was trying to shut things down. And so we went into advocacy mode, we reached out to some media outlets, to let them know what was happening. And the story got picked up and kind of went across the nation like, I started finding publications. from as far away as Florida, that were talking about this, we were kind of at the front end of a national thing that was happening where a bunch of school administrations at the time, Christian colleges were trying to shut down their LGBT groups, we weren't the only one. So one of the benefits of that time is we started getting connected to other student groups across the country are starting to have similar things. They're very popular change.org petition that was actually started by the founder of change.org. And was featured on their homepage for a while. So basically, there was a letter running campaign to the administration started with the student body, the faculty who could join in. And then the alumni really picked it up. And I think that's what changed things. It all happened in about six weeks. With just like a flurry of media attention, a lot of Falcon articles about the issue a lot of opinion pieces on it. And at the end of the six weeks, the administration called this into a meeting. And we're basically like, okay, fine, you can continue to meet on campus. We'll give you official permission to hang up posters, which we've never had before. But you're still not a club and you don't have funding. So they haven't really issued an apology, certainly nothing public. But they basically caved on their possession. At the time, that was good enough for that. You know, we were on the leadership team are all seniors and we were pretty hard into our final quarter. So you know, that was that was a victory enough for the moment. Eventually, SPU Haven gained club status. Three or four years later, I think I was really glad to see that. But, you know, I think 2011, Spring 2011 was pretty intense.

Rebecca Cavanaugh 29:16

So you, you are a senior at the time, and so was some other leadership in your club, how was there a sense of like preparing the underclassmen for continuing to support the group? Now tell me about that.

Haven Wilvich 29:36

Yeah, we had. We had leaders who come on for the next year, a few months before the end of the school year so that you know that we were getting them prepared and trained while all this was happening as well. And they did a good job of carrying on that thought after we left.

Rebecca Cavanaugh 29:54

Yeah. I would love to if you You could point me in the direction of that, you know, change.org petition. Some of those articles from across the country. We can do that after but I just I wrote a note and I would love it if you could provide me with those.

Haven Wilvich 30:14

Yeah, absolutely. I saved all the links. I have all the Falcon articles, I could have printed
Yeah, absolutely. I saved all the links. I have all the Falcon articles, I could have printed originals of them. If
you're interested, I'm happy to scan my copies and give you the originals or give you copies, whatever you
prefer.

Rebecca Cavanaugh 30:29

Thank you. Yeah, I'll check with our archives team. Because they are also, you know, they've got access to a
lot of the articles, but there's some that I know that maybe they'd love it, if you could point them to as well.

Haven Wilvich 30:45

I don't know what happened to the Falcon archives, but I can't seem to find them online anymore.

Rebecca Cavanaugh 30:50

Yeah. So yeah, that time was that you'd last year of school? Wow, a lot happened for you. Is there anything
else? Any other stories about? Any, like specific student conversations that you had? You know, you
mentioned that people like would stop you in the hallway or on campus? Are there any other stories or
anecdotes that you'd like to share about that time? If not, that's, you know, that's okay.

Haven Wilvich 31:23

I mean, I think that time is really crucial for actually fostering the kind of conversations on campus that we are
looking to foster. Like, we weren't able to be a safe place for personal growth and exploration the way we
wanted to. But I think people talking about LGBT issues in a major way, frequently across campus was, you
know, really in line with what we were hoping to happen anyway. So I think the irony is that in the
administration trying to shut us down, they made the biggest conversation they could have possibly made.

Rebecca Cavanaugh 32:07

That makes sense. Okay, so let's, yeah, let's move into some reflection time. Looking back at your whole time,
at SPU you, what are some of your reflections? I mean, we kind of touched on this when I asked about your,
you know, overarching experience, but is there anything that you like, definitely realized after leaving, that you
didn't realize in the moment while you were at SPU, either based on your own, like, personal, sexual and
gender identity, or just about, you know, the activism that you were trying to, that you were involved in?

Haven Wilvich 32:47

I mean, I definitely didn't have the space at SPU to explore my gender identity or sexuality. I, I'm kind of sad about that, in retrospect, I wish that I'd been able to grow in that way at the same time as I was growing so much spiritually. But I was so focused on just trying to exist and being able to talk that I didn't get the chance to really do my own exploration.

Rebecca Cavanaugh 33:30

Did your life get better after leaving SPU? Because maybe you had more space to do that, or other reasons.

Haven Wilvich 33:40

Yeah. It took a while I got married while I was at SPU. And it was a way to afford paying for the last few years of college. And it was a bad idea. So it took me a few years to get out of that marriage and actually get to a healthy place. But I think eventually, I was able to finally have that space and community support to figure out my identity and grow in a way that I was able to have at SPU. You know, space that I help students now as you can have the sister do, because I think it's a really it's a time of incredible growth in your life while you're in college, and being able to figure out some crucial pieces, like sexuality and gender really helped put the pieces of that puzzle together.

Rebecca Cavanaugh 34:36

Yeah. And how did your involvement in Haven and or, you know, what you eventually discovered about your identity? How did that impact your calling after SPU?

Haven Wilvich 34:55

I think it really launched me into the kind of activism that I continue to do today, up till that moment, I'd been kind of passively involved in environmental movements. But I hadn't really done any major activism. But having that experience, my final year, really taught me a lot about how to build grassroots movements, how to do activism in a hostile environment, how to create an effect change. And I think those are all lessons that I brought with me to a lot of different work in feminism, LGBTQ rights, trans rights. I did continue to do some environmental work after that. racial justice movements, and also things I continued to do today.

Rebecca Cavanaugh 35:46

That's cool. Um, and what is your relationship with SPU now? Do you? Have you stayed in contact with some, maybe some other alumni that you know, that you were students with? Or that, you know, were completely after your time, but somehow you're in contact with them?

Haven Wilvich 36:08

But yeah, there are people, future leaders of haven that I am in contact with, that I know, because of that. There are plenty of students from my time there that I am close to, including because of that. There are plenty of students from my time there that I am close to, including Best friend I made while I was in school, there's some of the faculty members that I keep up with, particularly through Facebook. But mostly, I avoid the SPU community now, because I know that as a trans person is not exactly welcoming to me. I don't feel like I could show up at an alumni event, for example, and be welcomed.

Rebecca Cavanaugh 36:49

And so if you've been keeping up with what's been happening at SPU, in the last, you know, in the in the years after you left, and especially in the last year, what are some things that you think still need to be changed at our university?

Haven Wilvich 37:10

I mean, I think the number one thing is to get rid of Lifestyle Expectations. I think that they're really holding the school back. They don't reflect the breadth of Christianity, that it's within the school. And they're outright hiring discrimination policies. I think that they have always hampered the school's ability to actually serve their mission. And I think they're really hitting up against that right now.

Rebecca Cavanaugh 37:42

Um, and so what would you say to the LGBTQIA plus community, specifically the SPU one, as they're going through this particular chapter in history? What other encouraging words would you give them? Or just advice? Would you have to share?

Haven Wilvich 38:01

Yeah, I'd say keep fighting and stick to your values may not seem like you're making much progress in the moment. But things have changed a lot in the last decade, and will continue to change because of the work that they're doing now.

Rebecca Cavanaugh 38:16

Thank you. And so one of my Yeah, so what are some of the broader trends in Christianity and theology that you see that, you know, change in the last 10 years in the last few years? that are, you know, beyond SPU,

but what are some of the trends that you've seen?

Haven Wilvich 38:40

I admit that I haven't really kept up on evangelical Christianity trends. I know that in a lot of denominations, it's very much a non issue now, which is, I think, a sign of good progress. But I know there's also still a lot of work to be done. There's a lot of denominations that are very homophobic.