



GYPSY, ROMA  
& TRAVELLER

LGBTQ+

SPOKEN HISTORY  
ARCHIVE



# GYPSY, ROMA & TRAVELLER

# LGBTQ+

## SPOKEN HISTORY ARCHIVE

Romani Cultural & Arts Company

**Contents**

Gypsy, Roma & Traveller LGBTQ+ Spoken History Archive.....3

Timeline .....5

The Romani Cultural & Arts Company.....7

Interviews.....9

Biser Alekov.....10

Cillian Ammar.....17

Daniel Baker.....26

William Bila.....34

Isaac Blake.....44

Francisco Camacho Cabello.....53

Oein DeBhairduin.....61

María del Carmen Cortés Amador.....68

Felicia Mercoledi G DeRosa.....73

PF.....83

Demetrio Gomez.....91

Gianni Jovanovic.....99

Vera Kurtic.....108

Christine Virginia Lee.....115

Joci Marton.....124

Dezso Mate.....135

John Maughan.....146

Sandra Selimovic.....155

Iulian Stoian.....164

David Tišer.....173

GRT LGBTQ+ Reading List.....179

Acknowledgements.....181

## Gypsy, Roma & Traveller LGBTQ+ Spoken History Archive

The Romani Cultural & Arts Company (RCAC) is proud to present this text adaptation of the online Gypsy, Roma and Traveller LGBTQ+ Spoken History Archive<sup>1</sup>. This publication follows the launch of the audio archive which was compiled through research carried out by the RCAC with the support of the European Roma Institute for Arts and Culture (ERIAC). This text version has been created with support from the Welsh Government and is intended to further disseminate insight into the experience of LGBTQ+ individuals from a variety of international Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities. For the full length audio versions of the interviews please follow the link at the bottom of the page.

The aim of the archive is to give voice to the important, fascinating and often moving stories told by members of the global GRT LGBTQ+ community, and to highlight the valuable roles that these individuals play in the rich complexity of Gypsy, Roma and Traveller life. The result is a dynamic resource that not only documents and archives but also celebrates the intersectional heritage, culture and experiences of LGBTQ+ Gypsies, Roma & Travellers across the world. This timely project uncovers the often hidden GRT LGBTQ+ stories that our community members carry with them whilst at the same time offering greater insight into the wider Gypsy, Roma and Traveller experience.

The need for such a project became clear following recommendations made by the RCAC in their report<sup>2</sup> following the first Gypsy, Roma & Traveller LGBTQ+ International Conference in the UK which was held by the RCAC at the Senedd – National Assembly of Wales on July 4<sup>th</sup> 2019, with the support of the Welsh Government. This event featured an international selection of speakers including activists, academics, artists, community champions and government ministers each of whom focused on the current and historic experience of GRT LGBTQ+ people and the

---

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.romaniarts.co.uk/voices/grt-lgbtq-spoken-history-archive/>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.romaniarts.co.uk/lgbtqi-gypsy-roma-traveller-conference-report-2019/>

future possibilities for improving equality and opportunity across our communities.

The conference took place in the context of the Romani Cultural & Arts Company's ongoing programme of increasing visibility, opportunity and equality for all members of GRT communities across Wales and beyond. The aim was to showcase emerging international voices within the field of GRT LGBTQ+ awareness and to facilitate the development of dialogue across communities about the ways in which articulations and negotiations of difference continue to inform the lives of individuals within GRT and LGBTQ+ communities today.

The conference presented a unique opportunity to participate in discussion with an international panel of inspiring speakers and to learn of their research and their professional and personal experience. Throughout the event a variety of aspects of the intersectionalities of GRT LGBTQ+ people were shared with the general public. It created visibility and awareness of experiences that have widely been ignored, suppressed or denied. Such omissions have been commonplace throughout mainstream society, the LGBTQ+ movement itself, and the wider GRT community. The very act of refusing to deny the existence of GRT LGBTQ+ people proved a potent starting point for beginning dialogue that can eliminate the amplification of violence felt at the intersection of antigypsyism and homophobia.

Acknowledging the spaces that these multiple identity positions occupy and how they overlap can lead to new synergies that radiate beyond specific intersectionalities to help build a more cohesive and tolerant society. The Gypsy, Roma & Traveller LGBTQ+ Spoken History Archive carries forward the groundbreaking work achieved through the 2019 GRT LGBTQ+ International Conference with the aim of continuing to build trust and respect across communities.

Interviews for the Gypsy, Roma and Traveller LGBTQ+ Spoken History Archive were conducted by Christine Virginia Lee, and Daniel Baker. Both also participated as subjects for the project along with RCAC Director Isaac Blake. This publication was compiled and edited by Daniel Baker.

## **Timeline of Romani Cultural & Arts Company's GRT LGBTQ+ Activities**

**2015:** Christine Virginia Lee represented the Romani Cultural & Arts Company (RCAC) and Gypsies, Roma and Travellers (GRT) in Wales at the first GRT LGBTQ+ conference in Prague. This historic conference highlighted and explored the many challenges facing LGBTQ+ Roma in Europe and beyond.

Christine Virginia Lee also represented the RCAC and GRT in Wales at an event with Rainbow Pilgrims, which focused on the Rites and Passages of LGBTQ+ migrants in the Britain

**2016:** Christine Virginia Lee represented the RCAC and GRT in Wales at the second International Roma LGBTQ+ Conference, Prague. The event included the drafting, by 28 Romani LGBTQ+ representatives from 12 countries, of the Roma LGBTQ+ Prague Declaration which seeks to address the challenges faced by LGBTQ+ Roma, Gypsy, Sinti and Travellers across Europe and lobby to influence national legislation. Christine Virginia Lee also attended the Prague Pride Parade.

**2017:** Christine Virginia Lee once again represented the RCAC in Budapest at the follow-up meeting of the Roma LGBTQ+ Conference held in Strasbourg in June 2017. Funded by The Council of Europe, representatives from several European countries participated in training designed to mobilise communities and further establish networks.

Isaac Blake represented RCAC at ILGA-Europe's Annual Conference in Warsaw, Poland, November 2017. Isaac made a joint presentation with other European organisations around the issues faced by LGBTQ+ Gypsies, Roma & Travellers and the 'double-discrimination' they face.

**2018:** Isaac Blake represented the GRT LGBTQ+ European Community and the RCAC at ILGA-Europe's Annual Conference in Brussels, Belgium. Isaac delivered a workshop alongside Laszlo Farkas and Dezső Máté.

Isaac Blake also delivered a queer Roma talk in Brussels in 2018 for ILGA Europe. He also co-created a queer Roma exhibition with Queer Roma TV.

**2019:** Isaac Blake represented the GRT LGBTQ+ European Community and the RCAC at ILGA-Europe's Annual Conference in Prague, Czech Republic. ILGA-Europe is the largest Annual Conference dedicated to the rights of LGBTQ+ people.

The Romani Cultural & Arts Company held the first Gypsy, Roma & Traveller LGBTQ+ International Conference in the UK at the Senedd – National Assembly of Wales on July 4<sup>th</sup> 2019. The event was supported by the Welsh Government.

The Romani Cultural & Arts Company produced a report<sup>3</sup> following the first Gypsy, Roma & Traveller LGBTQ+ International Conference in the UK at the Senedd – National Assembly of Wales on July 4<sup>th</sup> 2019.

**2020:** The Romani Cultural & Arts Company carried out research for the Gypsy, Roma & Traveller LGBTQ+ Spoken History Archive with the support of the European Roma Institute for Arts and Culture.

**2021:** The Romani Cultural & Arts Company launched the online audio version of The Gypsy, Roma & Traveller LGBTQ+ Spoken History Archive<sup>4</sup>.

The Romani Cultural & Arts Company launched the text version of The Gypsy, Roma & Traveller LGBTQ+ Spoken History Archive with the support of the Welsh Government.

---

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.romaniarts.co.uk/lgbtqi-gypsy-roma-traveller-conference-report-2019/>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.romaniarts.co.uk/voices/grt-lgbtq-spoken-history-archive/>



## **The Romani Cultural & Arts Company**

The Romani Cultural & Arts Company (RCAC) was formed in September 2009 as a not-for-profit company limited by guarantee and is a registered charity. Working through the arts the RCAC raises funds to take community development and educational projects onto Gypsy, Roma and Traveller sites and into non-Gypsy communities across Wales and beyond. The RCAC is a Gypsy, Roma and Traveller (GRT) led community development organisation at heart. They work toward GRT communities becoming fully acknowledged as valued participants in mainstream society while still retaining their distinct culture and heritage.

Mission Statement: Racism is born of ignorance, the Romani Cultural and Arts Company exists to promote a better understanding of Gypsy, Roma and Traveller culture within and beyond these communities.

Aims and Objectives: The main aim of the Romani Cultural & Arts Company is to bring about change in order to make the world a better place for all by facilitating advocacy through the arts. Our objectives are to advance the education of the wider public in relation to Gypsy, Roma and Traveller culture through arts-based and other community activities, to enhance racial harmony for the public benefit by promoting knowledge and mutual understanding between different racial and ethnic groups, and to educate by raising awareness across diverse communities, in order to promote good relations.

The RCAC sits on a number of national forums including: The Gypsy Roma Traveller Police Association (Honorary Member); Welsh Government; Wales Race Forum; Cross Party group of the National Assembly for Wales for Gypsies and Travellers.



# Interviews

## **Biser Alekov**

I grew up in a Roma Muslim community in a small village in north-eastern Bulgaria where my grandfather was the imam and had an important social position. I am the only son in a family of six children. Until I turned 34, I never talked about my sexuality with anyone from my community or family. Then I decided to unload the burden and share it with my parents. Being a Roma rights activist and gay at the same time was not easy. I was fighting for equality for Roma and at the same time I knew it would harm me if other activists knew I was gay. I now live in Brussels. Together with a few friends, we have established a small NGO to provide support to Queer people who move here from Balkan countries. We also initiated the 'Balkan evenings' in the Rainbow House in Brussels. Today Brussels is my home where I can be Roma, Muslim and gay.



*Where are you from?*

I'm from Bulgaria, from a small remote village close to the northern border with Romania. 12 years ago I moved to Brussels because of my job and I decided that I can settle here. So currently I'm living in Brussels.

*How would you describe your ethnicity?*

I'm a Roma.

*How would you describe your sexuality?*

I'm a gay man.

*What when did you first realize that you might be gay?*

It was a very long time ago. It was when I was like 12 years old, just having the first wet dreams and then starting to question do I like boys or girls mostly. It was a period of lots of questions with very limited literature. You can imagine in a small village each with 500 inhabitants what you can find in the local library. But then I remembered a story; I went to the library to look for books and suddenly I found a book which was talking about gender and in it there was a small paragraph about sexuality. But I was very shy about borrowing it in order to read it so I just stole it. I stole the book from the library and I kept it for years at home and just two years ago, when I was clearing out my old books, because once a year I go through the books I don't need and I donate them to the library, and the last time I took this book about sexuality to the library and I told them "you don't have to stamp it as a donation because it was stolen from here." But since I was 12 it has been a very long time of questions you know. Somehow it was an issue that I didn't want to talk about until maybe my twenties.

*How was your being LGBTQ received within your family?*

For my community it was taboo and for my family it was taboo. Very often I was hearing my father sharing negative thoughts about gay men who were seen on the TV for example. And then for me being gay, you get even more scared to talk about it. The first time I talked about it with my parents was when I was 34 years old. That was the period when I was

already settled in Brussels having my own income in my own home and I was not depending upon my parents. I said it's time now to share and we had dinner together and I said I want to talk to them and then I opened the discussion. I told them I liked boys and I didn't like girls. Because until this moment I was always getting the question of "when you are going to marry" and I was trying to somehow overplay it. Then it was like five minutes silence. And then my mother said "yes, but you were in love with Aysel", that's the girl from my village, and I was like "mum, I was in love with Aysel when I was six years old", which means that she was looking to the past to find out when I thought about girls, and she found one when I was six years old. And then after a while my father said it was my choice, "you know you can do whatever you want, you are grown up, you are a clever guy, just try not to harm anyone". So they accepted it with one condition; not to be really vocal about in our own community; which means in the village community. And afterwards for the next few months my mother didn't feel very good. She took an appointment with the psychologist to talk about it, and it passed and now it's quite okay.

*How does your Roma community relate to you being gay?*

Now, in the community personally it's fine but nobody talks about it. But I think that now the new generation, the young people who are in their 20s, they are more open about it. For example my nieces and nephews they know about me being gay and for them it doesn't really make any sense to question it somehow. But also there are other guys who don't belong to my family who say "sir, what do you think on this issue", and I say "listen if you have a question you can ask openly, I am gay too". And then they say "yeah we always thought you were gay but we were doubting whether to ask you the question". And I say "if you have any questions you can freely ask. For me it's not taboo". I think in the community, it's very slow but it is changing. About my coming out, sometimes I question why I didn't to do it years ago, but I don't think my parents would reacted the same way as they did when I did come out.

*How do you feel that being a Roma gay man is received in the wider non-Roma community?*

When I was in secondary school I felt discriminated against. I always thought I was discriminated against because I was Roma but apparently it was not only because I was Roma but also because I was gay; not even openly. I mean visually you can realise that I'm a gay man. After that, when I moved to Belgium, I was more conscious of living as a gay man. With a group of young Roma gay men here in Brussels we had a few cases of not being allowed to enter a gay disco because they were Roma. So we made a complaint to the equality body then we had a discussion with the equality body and the owner of the disco, and somehow we resolved the issue. Now many Roma can go to this disco.

But for me there is something else because after this small discrimination with this disco we decided that we should do something even more so we made contact with the LGBT umbrella organization in Brussels, called RainbowHouse, and we started voluntary work there and started some Balkan party nights. Then a few months later we even registered our own NGO which is called Balkan LGBTQIA and today we have plenty of activities. We have also implemented a project to bring some Roma LGBTQ stories out of the shadows. We published a book about it where we have the stories of gay sex workers, trans sex workers, gay men who are drug addicted, all different cases. The only thing that is still an issue is we are very silenced about being lesbian for example. The position of Roma girls in the LGBTQ movement is very much silenced I think. I mean even in normal cases the girls are still so scared and I understand why because they face double the pressure to get married and to have children with a man instead of having their relationship with a girl.

*How do you feel about being a gay Roma man?*

For a certain period I thought it was a disadvantage for example when I was studying until my university years I was hiding that I was Roma. But once I started to be more vocal about it, being Roma, it started to bring me a lot of advantages. Like after a certain time you start to be accepted as a speaker of the community as well, then you get a different social status in the community. That also brought me to attention as a person who is multilingual. Speaking the Romani language is another asset, a



chance to show I have something more than you. And then after my university years it was quite positive for me being gay but until my university years it was like shame, you know.

*How do you feel about the connections between the Roma LGBT community and the wider LGBT community?*

I see and I think there is huge gap between the general LGBT white middle class community and Roma LGBT community. Still the white middle class consider themselves higher positioned than the Roma LGBT. For sure the connections should be strengthened but it needs efforts on both sides. There is a lot to be done in this area.

*How do you feel that being a gay Roma man has affected your work and your career?*

Sure it affects it because I've had already, I think so far until my forties, I've had like four or five jobs, and not all the jobs where I've been working were welcoming of me being LGBT. I would be welcomed as a person who finished university with certain qualities. Then I could be accepted as a Roma as well but being LGBT should always be something hidden. But with my last two jobs for example I don't have to hide neither my identity as Roma nor my identity as gay. I mean I'm not overly vocal you know but at the same time it's like, "okay guys I am an activist also in this field so pay attention to what you say, you should speak politically correctly."

Now I'm working as a social worker and I had a Roma intersex person visiting and in my office we have two toilets, one for men and one for women. Suddenly there is the issue of where this intersex person should go to the toilet. How does he or she feel? So I took the labels for men and women down so that any person can go to any toilet. Because I'm working for the municipality, the local authority, the hygiene services said no we have to put labels up and I said we cannot put labels up. Then the issue was raised to a high level and suddenly they took the decision that they will not label toilets anymore in the in the public administration, at least in the places where we come into contact with the public.

*How do you feel about being described as part of the LGBTQ Roma community?*

Me personally, I'm easy with it because half of my background is as an activist within the Roma field and also in the LGBT field. I consider myself to have different multiple identities so for me it's really a positive thing you know. In my experience, for example, with the people around me like there are activists who wouldn't really mention being LGBT or there are like LGBT activists who wouldn't mention they are Roma. I mean that also exists.

## **Cillian Ammar**

Cillian Ammar is an asexual, transgender man from Orlando, Florida, and is of Irish, Romanichal, and Lebanese descent. His family has been performing magic in circuses and formal shows across Ireland and eventually the United States for the past six generations. His father, Michael Ammar is considered one of the greatest living magicians, even performing for the president and the Vatican. Cillian hopes to start a project in activism for Romani communities in America.



*Where are you based?*

I am based in the US, near Orlando, Florida.

*Where are you from?*

I was born in Thousand Oaks, California.

*How would you describe your ethnicity?*

That is actually... a really tough, complicated question. I'm mixed, with my mom being of Romani and Irish descent, and my dad being of Lebanese descent. So ethnically, I feel it difficult to claim one more than the other. And I am very white-passing. I tend to say I am white because I greatly fear speaking over darker-skinned people of colour and stepping on any toes. However, when I just claim to be white, it's painful. I recognize the privilege of being able to walk through the world that way, but it feels like a part of me is missing, because it is. Here in the US, the term white often includes people of Middle Eastern origin and says so on surveys and what have you. I am used to saying white because often, I was told to, which I will expand on later but I have taken to saying Romani, and occasionally include Lebanese because, in the US, Roma are so underrepresented that Americans will say, "Romani, what's that?" And that is always a starting point for education that I take pride in. Also, a friend once used the term "spicy white" to describe themselves, which I thought was hilarious and a little accurate so I sometimes joke that that's what it is.

*How would you describe your gender or sexuality?*

I am a transgender man, which to clarify means that I was assigned female at birth, and I use he/him pronouns. My sexuality is almost as complicated as my ethnicity I'm afraid—I am asexual, so I don't experience sexual attraction, but romantically I am attracted to men, women, and non-binary people. I prefer the term biromantic asexual.

*When did you first realise that you might be LGBTQ+?*

Ninth grade—my first year in high school. There was this boy I had a crush on, and when I found out he was transgender that totally flipped my world upside down. My parents never talked to me about LGBT stuff, and it

wasn't in our education so I had no basis for my own identity until then. I learned about the transgender experience through him and thought, "Wow... that sounds just like me." As a transgender person, I think it's common to have to figure out your gender before you figure out your sexuality from there, because a lot of it is, "do I want to be with that person, or do I want to be that person?" It would take me two more years to figure out who I was, and another year to come out. But yeah, that was the starting point.

*How was your being LGBTQ+ received within your family?*

Incredibly well. A little confused, as they're older, but they've got the spirit. Everyone is wonderfully supportive.

*How is your being LGBTQ+ received within your wider Roma community?*

I am disconnected from my local Roma community, if there even is one close by. I've heard most live down south, near Miami. This means a lot of whom I'd consider my community is online. Most are equally kind and supportive. However, I run into homophobia and transphobia within the community just as you will find it anywhere. It's the more traditional folk, usually. But not anyone I can't cut out with one click, so I'm fine.

*What is your experience of meeting other LGBTQ+ Roma?*

I know many. There was even an LGBTQ Roma group chat which I was in for a while. I prefer to have LGBT friends already because we usually have the same humour and views, so having LGBT Romani friends is wonderful because we have even more in common. I think I've yet to meet an LGBT Rom that wasn't super cool and friendly.

*What is it like to be LGBTQ+ in Romani communities?*

I may be transgender, but I still present myself in a very gender nonconforming way. I'm a man who wears makeup and form-fitting clothes, even a skirt on occasion. So, as I mentioned, a lot of my interactions with Romani communities are online, meaning I can interact with those I want to how I want to, and not interact with those I don't. However, I remember asking a Romani friend if I would be accepted if I, say, combined traditional men and women dress—wore a dikhlo for

example. She was kind in her answer but said no, they wouldn't accept you. It was a little expected with how old-fashioned many are, but it still hurt to know that I might not be accepted for who I am by those I wish to be accepted by possibly the most. I wish the best for LGBT Roma that live within their communities, and I hope that they stay happy and safe.

*How is this different from being LBGTQ+ in the wider community?*

I live in Orlando, Florida, which is actually a very LGBT-friendly city which I am so, so thankful for. And I was born in Southern California which is very liberal as well. However, in America's current political climate, being LGBT and especially being a transgender person, it's really scary. I'm afraid of what will happen to me and our rights. It's one thing to move through a traditional community that might not accept you on its own, but it's another, much more frightening thing to live in a country and under a government that hates you just because they don't understand. Too many people that even accept me think that being who I am is some kind of choice, but it's not.

*What is it like being a Romani in the LBGTQ+ community?*

I have noticed that LGBT people—LGBT gadje, I mean—tend to be more accepting anyway of other minorities, because they understand how it feels to be discriminated against. I may have touched on this, but almost all of my friends are LGBT both online and in real life. LGBT people are of course capable of being racist, anti-Semitic, and bigoted, but in my experience tend to be less likely to be so. So, when I mention that I am Romani, the reaction is usually something along the lines of, "Great," or "That's really interesting."

*How is this different from being Romani in the wider community?*

As I've said, Americans have a different view of Roma than most of the world. Either they don't know we exist at all because "Gypsy" is just a fictional thing—a costume or movie trope or a lifestyle, but if they do, and if I educate them, very often they are accepting and even find it fascinating. I have started a project to start educating Americans on our existence and our beautiful culture and how to stop appropriating it and

saying or doing things that we would consider offensive, and so far the reaction has really been, "oh my God I had no idea, I'm so sorry," and trying to be better. Not entirely the reaction, but a lot of it which is very moving.

*How do you feel about being Romani?*

Honoured, that's a good word for it I think. I've been gifted with one of the most illustrious and beautiful cultures in the world. When my family immigrated to the US, they changed their name and passed as other things in order to hide. My parents don't really like to talk about their pasts, and they ask that I keep quiet about where my last name is from, for example, to keep me safe. They aren't ashamed, just afraid. My mom doesn't want to talk about how poor she and her family used to be, or how she travelled and even had to sleep in their van for a time. We are underrepresented and underappreciated more than anyone, I think, but we are everywhere, and we aren't going anywhere. I'm tired of hiding. I'm too proud to hide.

*How do you feel about being LBGTQ+?*

I'm proud of that, too. LGBT people fought so hard to earn what little we have now in terms of rights and representation, but I think we're really tired of hiding or living in fear, too. And let us never forget the transgender women of colour that led most of the way. LGBT people are so beautiful and unique, and honestly, I wouldn't want to be anyone else. I don't want to be cisgender or straight, because I can't imagine what kind of person I'd be, or how different my journey through life would've been if I was either.

*How do these different parts of your life work together or influence each other?*

Romani communities and the LGBT community have an understanding with one another that I don't think a lot of people recognize as being there. We live in a society that shames people for being who they are—for being anything other than the "standard." Both Roma and LGBT people are so often shamed and forced into hiding. Being both felt like a crushing



weight on top of me for a long time. I mentioned how my parents wanted me to keep quiet for safety reasons. And to this day, even already being out with a legal name and gender change, I don't speak up when I'm misgendered or deadnamed because even though it hurts, it's hard. How do you know who is safe to be yourself around and who isn't? Am I in danger, even? This may sound dramatic but I've decided that if I am put in a place of danger for being who I am, I'm not going to squeeze myself into a perfect little box to be left alone so that bigots get their way. I'm going to go down fighting as a queer Gypsy.

*Which community do you most identify with?*

Given my aforementioned dilemma with my ethnicity, I feel that my queerness is more central to my identity. It's just that... gender and sexuality are such a core thing to a person in a different way than one's ethnicity, even if you consider those things to be fluid throughout your life as I do. It's difficult to explain. I see so much fighting between others as to who qualifies as a Gypsy and who doesn't that I'm afraid to step into that conversation due to my own feelings of impostor syndrome. I am undeniably queer, that is without debate.

*Which has had the most influence on you?*

I think my queerness has the most influence on me. My gender and sexuality, and the community I became a part of because of that, helped me understand that there are people out there who hate me and will always hate me for who I am without ever even knowing me, and that I can't let that stop me from continuing to be who I am and fighting for what is right. It, in turn, really helped me come to terms with my own ethnic identity and being more open about it as well. I would say that I was white and make self-deprecating white jokes to new friends I made, and it's funny how I "came out" as not really being white in the same way as coming out for being trans. Like, "I really hope that you'll accept me for being who I truly am."

*How does it feel to be part of an LGBTQI+ Roma 'Community'?*

It feels good, warm. To have people that understand both of those sides of you and relate to you in a way that's different than either community on their own. On twitter I shared a design for an outfit that combines both men and women's traditional dress like I mentioned earlier, and every non-binary or other gender nonconforming person said things like, "taking notes as we speak," or "I love this and absolutely want to incorporate it into my style, thank you for helping me embrace both my culture and my queerness." That's a really nice thing to hear, especially considering how many of them might feel the same internal fear that I do about being rejected by our community. It's like we can make our own, a safe space for being both Romani and LGBTQ+.

*How do you think that feeling being LGBTQ+ and Romani has affected your work and career?*

I touched on this, but in America, Roma aren't really visible in a positive or negative light—we aren't there at all. So that's never in the forefront of an employer's mind, which is safer for me. And Orlando is a liberal city so I feel that a workplace here is non-discriminatory. However, I am still young and new to the workforce, so for long term career goals it has certainly affected my decisions. I have to consider what kind of career will welcome someone like me. Openly queer, I usually have dyed hair, I have tattoos and piercings. At the same time I want a career that will also allow time or even lead in activism for LGBT people, Roma, or both. Pursuing justice and respect for my people is such a huge priority for me and I really want to lift up those that don't have the privileges I do. I still haven't figured myself out entirely yet, but I'm doing my best.

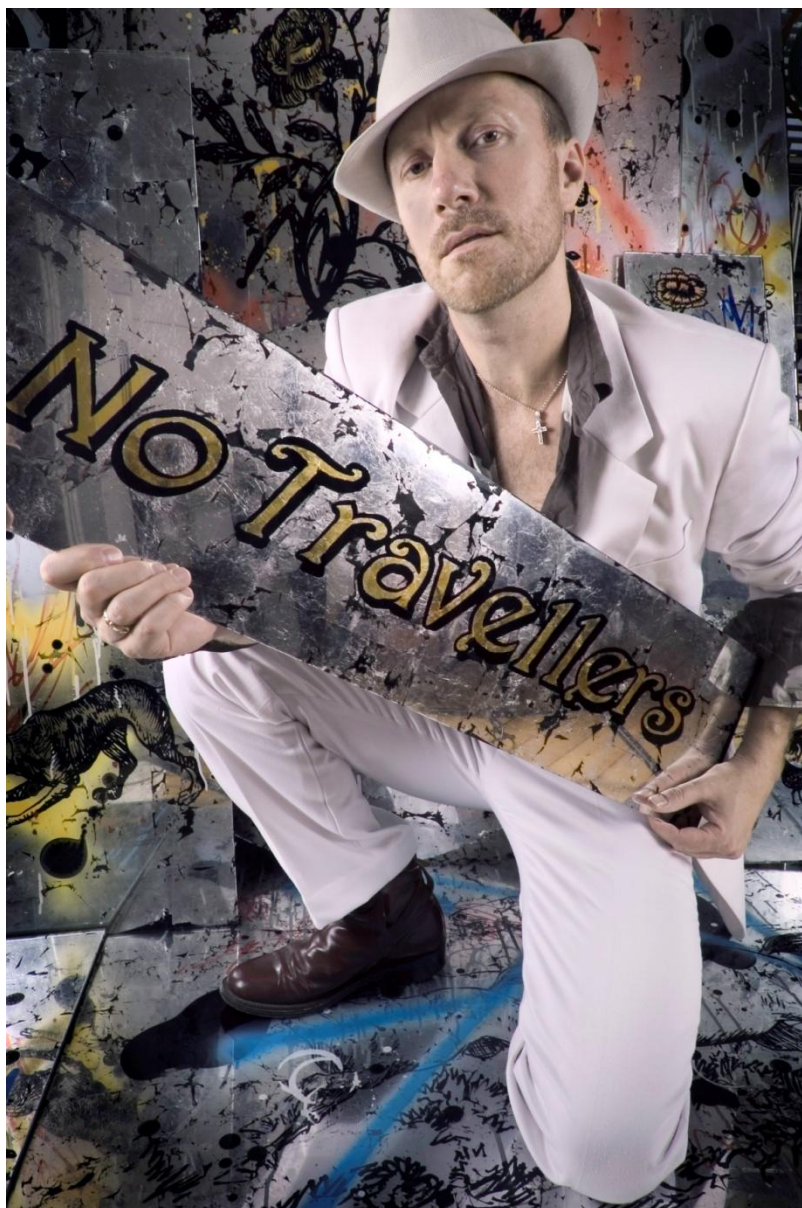
*Is there anything else that you would like to talk about?*

Yes. My family, on both sides, immigrated to the US because they saw a better life here. They wanted "The American Dream"—the existence of which is debatable, but they found it, I think. Given what the US is like right now, I wish to make it clear that I am not proud to be an American, not anymore. However, when my father's grandfather walked from Ellis Island, New York to West Virginia, he was doing that for his family and his descendants. When my mother's Romani family landed on US soil and

travelled the Southern US in the circus performing magic, they brought joy to American children and families everywhere. I am extremely proud of my family history. And I am proud of who it has made me today. Our history is remarkable and resplendent, but hidden. Generations of Americans past will never know of just who brought them passion for magic and wonder, but I am ready to tell our story. Roma are beautiful, talented, loving, dedicated, and matter. We deserve visibility and respect just as anyone else.

## Daniel Baker

Daniel Baker is an artist and curator. A Romani Gypsy, born in Kent, he holds a PhD on the subject of Gypsy aesthetics from the Royal College of Art, London. Baker curated *FUTUROMA* at the 58th International Art Exhibition at the Venice Biennale in 2019. His work also appeared at the Venice Biennale in 2007 and 2011. Baker's work examines the role of art in the enactment of social agency via the reconfiguration of elements of the Gypsy aesthetic. His 2001 MA dissertation titled *The Queer Gypsy* reported findings from his primary research into the experience of LGBTQ+ members of GRT Communities in the UK. This was the first academic study of LGBTQ+ Roma to be carried out and has been published in a variety of international journals since. Publications include *We Roma: a Critical Reader in Contemporary Art*, *Ex Libris* and *FUTUROMA*. Baker's work is exhibited internationally and can be found in collections worldwide. He is currently based in London. Photo © Karl Grady



*Can you tell me where you are based?*

I'm based in London, in the UK.

*And where are you from?*

I'm from just outside London where the suburbs meet the green belt so it's a sort of edge lands between the city and the countryside.

*How would you describe your ethnicity?*

I'm a Romani Gypsy.

*How would you describe your sexuality?*

I'm a gay Man.

*When did you first realise that you might be gay?*

I can't pinpoint a time exactly when I felt that was the case. I think I always knew that I felt a bit different to others, to other boys I suppose. Growing up, most of my friends were girls, not that that should have any bearing though. Also I think that my awareness around being different was partly due to the way that others perceived me, or reacted to me, or dealt with me. I think from quite a young age I picked up that people thought that I was different, and I think that that was a kind of foundation through which I felt that I didn't fit into stereotypes of how a boy or a man should be really, and that continued through my time at school. I suppose when I reached puberty I realised I was attracted to males more than females so ideas of gayness didn't really enter my world until I became a teenager. There wasn't a time when I thought "oh I'm gay"; it was more a continual process of self realisation really.

*How was your being gay received by your family?*

I didn't tell my family for a long time. Not until I was in my 30s. I'm sure some of them knew but I didn't really talk about it with them, but when I decided to I was actually quite surprised. I wouldn't say it was well received but it wasn't badly received. I've spoken to a few people whose family had quite negative reactions. Mine didn't at all. It was very, I suppose loving is the right word. And that was interesting for me because I suppose I was expecting the opposite. I don't know why I was expecting that. I couched

that information within the notion of me being with another actual person. I had a partner at the time, so I told my family "me and so and so, we're together as a couple", and I think that was an interesting way of doing it because rather than me talking about this abstract idea of sexuality I talked about me and my involvement with another human being which I think people are much more able to understand. Particularly as they knew this person and they liked him and they knew that we were good together. I think that was a good way for me to do it rather than confront someone with this idea of sexuality which inevitable gets people thinking about the sexual act and that brings in all other kinds of prejudices. The fact that it was about love between two people was I think an easier thing for them to understand. My experience was generally positive.

*How has it affected your relationship with them?*

At the time it was a bit difficult because I was aware that there was a different version of me that they were having to deal with. So that was a little bit tricky to begin with but since I came out I think our relationship has been much closer so it was a positive move for me to make and maybe I should have made that move earlier but things happen for a reason I suppose.

*How has your being gay been received within the wider Gypsy, Roma and Traveller community?*

I think most people in that community must know that I'm gay, certainly within my profession as it relates to my community. I'm often still asked at funerals and weddings if I'm married though. With my work I've been involved in other aspects of the Romani community but it's not really talked about, although I think there's curiosity there. In the early days when I was volunteering for Romani organisations it was known but it wasn't really discussed. I think it probably would be more now because it's becoming a more of a phenomenon. The idea of the intersectionality of LGBTQ+ and Romani ethnicity is becoming more of a thing. If people aren't comfortable with it they don't let me know so generally when it comes to me dealing with them it's fine.

*What is your experience of meeting other LGBTQ+ Gypsies, Roma and Travellers?*

During the eighties, through my partner at the time, I met a cousin of mine who was an ex of his, and we worked on an arts project together. So he was the first other gay Romani man I met; this ex partner of my then partner. The three of us we did a small arts project based on the idea of gayness and Gypsiness. This was in about 1995 and for that project I did a small piece of research; basically getting in touch with other gay Gypsies. I put some advertisements in the gay press of the time, print publications like the pink paper. In fact I was going through my filing cabinet this week and I found the original adverts from that period which was quite interesting because obviously you wouldn't do it that way now because those publications don't exist for one thing. I got contacted by about five or six people, some men and a couple of women. So that was my first contact. I never met any of these people that answered by adverts but it was interesting to get to speak to them and I did send them a little questionnaire just to kind of get some ideas about them which some of them replied to.

A few years later I picked up on this research when I did my MA in Gender and Ethnic Studies at Greenwich University in the Romani Studies department. I decided to do my final dissertation on gay Romany people. I did more extensive research and I got in touch with people in the same way, through the gay press. I interviewed four gay Romani men. I also heard from some women. I spoke to them on the phone but they don't want to be interviewed which was fine. So the people who did elect to be interviewed were four men. So basically my study was of gay Romani men actually. I met each of them and I interviewed them, and that was very interesting. So my interaction with other LGBTQ+ Romani people has been gradual but growing. Now I suppose as things have become more open and there's more communication I've met quite a few so it's been an ongoing process.

*What is like being a gay Traveller in the wider LGBTQ+ community?*



Because I look like most of the population, the British population, the white population, I don't necessarily look like a Gypsy. So unless I tell people I'm a Gypsy in the LGBTQ world they wouldn't know. And it's not something that I lead with. So when people do find out they think it's kind of curious. Although I've written about the intersectional aspect, I suppose I haven't really operated in the gay world, socially let's say, presenting as a Gypsy immediately.

One of the things I looked at quite closely in my MA research was the idea of passing, passing as something that you are not; for example gay people who pass as straight, or Gypsies who pass as non-Gypsy. So I found that because of my particular kind of physicality people don't know that I'm a Gypsy unless I tell them. That's quite an interesting position to be in. I know it's not the same for lots of Roma people around the world. I think that's difficult question for me to answer because I don't really operate in the gay world that much, I mean mostly it's professionally and then people know that I'm a gay Romani man because that's usually part of the reason I'm there in any given situation.

*How do you feel about being Romani?*

I'm very proud of it in many ways. I like to call myself a Romani Gypsy. I like the word Gypsy. I think that it's a bit like the word queer. It's something that can be proud of and we can reclaim. It's such a powerful word I think it's good for us to be able to wield that power ourselves.

For a long time I didn't really think about it very much. For instance at school I thought it was something to be kind of kept under wraps because of the negative perceptions that it came with in the eyes of others. The area that I grew up in was a very heavily populated with Gypsies so in school Gypsies had a reputation. I was very conscious of not wanting that to be the way that I was defined completely. So for a long time I kind of kept it hidden when I was at school, as much as you can. And then in secondary school again I thought it was not an advantage to be a Gypsy so I kept that to myself as much as I could.

It wasn't until quite a lot later in life, in my thirties maybe, that I realised that this part of my life, that I had turned my back on to a large degree, was fuelling my energy. And once I'd made peace with that I thought "well this is the whole of me and I need to be looking at the whole of me because otherwise things are being suppressed."

This is a similar process to gayness really. I realised the power of the Romani aspect of my identity and my background and started to look at it more and became more and more aware of the importance of it and the importance of our role and our contribution as Gypsies to the wider world.

*How do you feel about being a gay man?*

I enjoy it actually. I'm kind of proud of that as well but very fortunately I've never really suffered from not wanting to be gay. As difficult as it's been on occasion, navigating the world from that perspective, I've always felt the world has to catch up. It's not about me changing is about the rest of the world changing so yeah I feel good about that.

*How do these different parts of your life work together?*

I'm an artist, that's my main occupation, and those two positions have informed a lot of the work that I do and the way that I approach work. Ideas of passing and the way that we can change our identity along with ideas of visuality and how different aspects of identity are conveyed through the visual are very much something the preoccupies me as an artist. The gay parts of me and the Gypsy parts of me are fundamental to that. That also means that some of the other work that I do, like my writing and my thinking comes from those foundations. So those two aspects of my identity inform each other very well and really have enabled me to explore a lot of interesting ideas in terms of my life and my work.

*How do you feel that being a gay Romani Gypsy has affected your work in your career?*

I think it's shaped my career and my work. Because I didn't fit into most of the norms of how I understood the world to work, it made me think that maybe at a different kind of approach to life was going to be needed for

me. Maybe deciding from a young age that I wanted to be an artist was part of that. I think that the idea of 'outsiderness' probably helped me to decide which direction I wanted to go in. And since having left school and going to art school I suppose those aspects of my life continue to be a powerhouse that I draw upon to produce my ideas and to produce my work.

*How do you feel about being described as part of an LGBTQ+ Gypsy, Roma Traveller community?*

I feel good about that because for so long I felt isolated with those two aspects of my identity. I think now to be able to speak in terms of a community is a very positive thing. Although I don't really take part in pride events anymore, partly because the function of it and the meaning behind it has changed so much, I think it's a very positive thing.

## **William Bila**

William Bila was born in New York to Czechoslovak refugees fleeing the Soviet invasion of the Prague Spring. As the product of a multicultural American upbringing, he has always been proud and curious about his roots. He has been engaged with several organizations over the years supporting Romani culture, education, history, and rights themes such as, President of La Voix des Roms, Board Member of Roma Education Fund, Roma Education Support Trust and the Center for Intersectional Justice. He also took part in the first and second ever European LGBTIQ Roma conferences in Prague (2015 & 2016). He holds a BSc Finance from the Stern School of Business at NYU and an MBA from the Booth School of Business at the University of Chicago. Photo © Paolo Verzone



*Can you tell me where you're based?*

I am based in Paris and I've been here for the last 10 years.

*Where are you from?*

I was born in New York, Brooklyn New York. A part of town called Bensonhurst, an Italian neighbourhood, but my parents came from Slovakia, then Czechoslovakia, and I grew up in the States and so I'm from there and I'm from a lot of places in between.

*How would you describe your ethnicity?*

Slovak Roma. I describe myself as 100% Slovak, 100%, American and 100% Roma.

*How would you describe your sexuality?*

I'm gay. I'm not LGBT. I'm just G.

When did you first realise that you might be gay?

I think there's two points I'm thinking of. Because if you look back with hindsight I think you might have known it much sooner, but then there's a point in time where you kind of you stop denying it so I would say that I accepted that I was gay around 21. I didn't know that I really was until at least let's say 14. But if I think about some of my memories, I wouldn't say that it happened all of a sudden, that it was probably early childhood, like five or six years old but there is no way that I could identify it at that age.

I think I got some hints at around 14. By 18 I think I kind of knew and by 21 I was no longer in denial. I had a few encounters while I was still in New York. I went to school in New York from 87 to 91. I worked there for one year until 1992 and then I came to Prague. I met someone who I was friends with for awhile and eventually became my partner for 23 years and it was then through his friendship and with going to places with his friends and them knowing who I am and everything about me, and accepting me, I could be normal with normal people and I thought oh this is a new experience for me, I'm learning to deal with it.

*How was your being gay receive within your family?*

I waited until I was 30, after I had been with my partner for three years I think. I was living in Prague and my family lived in the US outside of Cleveland and my sister and my brother were in Kentucky. I had some cousins in Prague but I wasn't so close to them, and I have cousins in Slovakia that I visited more often while I was living in Prague, and I visited my grandparents there as well. So with distance (4 hours by car from Prague and an ocean apart from my parents) it was easier to kind of keep that secret because there wasn't that much to talk about or I just wouldn't talk about certain things. It was more like omission. And when I felt that there was a need to declare something because there was someone important in my life, and I've reached a certain age, maybe I should just say something.

So at the age of 30, on one vacation, I came home and I told my mother and she kind of froze. She was kind of shocked. She didn't say anything. She was trying to be accepting. Then a couple days later, I go back to Prague, and she wrote me a letter that said "this isn't any good, I don't like it and it's Stephens fault because he's older than you". He's like four years older than me so it was like he'd corrupted me or something. But a couple weeks passed, we talked on the phone, everything was okay. There was no problem after that.

It was it was hard at first. I didn't tell my father then. I waited a couple more years and I brought Stephen home for Christmas and my mother knew about him and my sister knew about him and my brother knew about him by then. I thought I made it obvious to my father. I said "I'm bringing someone home with me. I've been living with him. He's special to me. I want him to come home for Christmas this year." He said "yeah, sure of course" and they got along well. They had a great conversation. And then two years later I visited my father in Slovakia. By that time my parents divorced but I visited him and he was with his second wife, and she asked me if I was married because I was wearing a ring and I said "no but I'm with Steven. Didn't my father tell you?" And he started to practically cry. His eyes were tearing up and he said "no I didn't know that. I didn't understand". It was like okay, yes we don't talk very specifically in my

family about certain things like sex or other intimate details but I thought it was fairly obvious.

I didn't want to say to him back then, two years before, that this is someone I'm having sex with and we sleep in the same bed. No, I would never say something like that. I thought when I said "he's special to me, we lived together, he came with me to Chicago from Prague, he's Canadian", he would get the picture. But he didn't. Well, he got it later. That's how it was.

More recently when my mother found out that one of my cousin's children was gay she said "you need to be in touch with him because he's like you". So then I got the picture and so she's been supportive of that in the way that she knows how.

*How was your being gay received within your wider Roma community?*

That's a good question. In the States I didn't really grow up with the Roma community. My mother was Roma and her family in Slovakia and the Czech Republic. I didn't really tell them. They weren't close enough for me to announce that to until later when I got in touch with the cousin's son. Then they knew. But they don't talk about it to other members of the family either. So it's kind of like the 1950s in away. Nobody talks about it.

As far as my activism is concerned, I came to Prague in the 1990s and when I saw how Roma we're treated I felt like I needed to do something. So I tried to get involved. I met different people. I went to different meetings and I kept that part of me quiet. I was in the closet at work in New York about being gay and in the Czech Republic I was in the closet about being gay to the Roma activists.

I wasn't extremely involved. I attended a few meetings. I tried to help out. I did some translation, attended some protests. But occasionally I would hear the homophobic remarks and one meeting in particular there's one local leader he said he attended a meeting in Brussels and he was getting advice on how to do community organising and he said "we have to make sure that when we speak about Roma we talk about the Roma nation or the Roma minority and never talk about the Roma community because a



community, that could be a bunch of fags". That's what he said. It was in Czech though.

He said that "if you talk about the community that lowers our prestige and we could be just like a bunch of homosexuals all together. They constitute a community and we're better than that". And I thought okay, that's how you perceive this, that's your interpretation of what this language means. I don't know if I want to address this here and now in this room with these people that I don't know very well. Maybe I just won't attend in the future because I don't want to deal with this.

And so I kept my distance and wasn't extremely active because of that. Because in my free time outside of work I want to do something good, I want to feel good about it and if I have to worry about these things then I just better not get involved. And that's how I felt.

As I got older, say after I got my MBA, I was out to everybody at work about being gay. I was out to different people in different companies depending where I was located. Like in Germany I wasn't completely out about being Roma until towards the end when I left Germany and moved to the US, because it's just better to avoid.

If it's not obvious or people don't ask me, why bring it up. It doesn't affect my competency at work so I don't think being gay affects my competency in being an activist either, so I didn't want to talk about it. That was my attitude. It's not something I wanted to be in your face about. But in retrospect maybe I could have said something or could maybe have been more open because as I get older I'm just more like; "I'm here, I'm out, I don't care, that's your problem if you don't accept it." And that's how I've done things with my most recent activism.

When I really started to be involved with Roma activity was in Toronto in 2008 at the Roma community centre. I was out. Everybody knew I am a gay Roma or if they didn't know I would tell them. Some people liked it, some people didn't. But it wasn't a problem because it was Canada and marriage between same sex couples was legal so the law was on my side. I had nothing to worry about. It was a very open city. Some people don't

like it. When they are immigrants to a new country, I was too; they have to learn how to adjust to these things.

When I came to Europe I was open about it and if I couldn't be open about it then I didn't want to be there. I don't want to deal with the extra baggage. I don't want to deal with explaining myself. I don't want to feel uncomfortable. If I have to, I just won't be there because it's not open, welcoming and inviting. I don't have to talk about being gay. I usually don't talk about it most of the time and if the subject doesn't come up I can be a part of the team but if it comes up in a negative way then that's immediately a signal to me. It's like maybe I shouldn't be here. Well that's how I've taken it up till now. Now once in a while I speak up, but that's years of getting used to how to behave and understanding the situation before you react.

*What is your experience of meeting other LGBTQ+ Roma?*

I started to get involved in activism again and that was like a new generation. Ten years had passed and somehow more young people were around and some of the older people with the traditional views were a little bit less vocal so already that was the start. I really don't know if I met anyone before 2015 at the international Roma LGBTQ+ conference that took place in Prague and that was thanks to Lucie Fremlova who introduced me into this group. There were a lot of Czechs some Slovaks but then there were a few people invited from the UK like Chris Lee. There was Gianni who came from Cologne in Germany and María del Carmen from Spain. And that was really the first time that I met other LGBT Roma in person and it was like "wow we exist, and there are other people who exist like me" and I was what 45 years old by then.

*Is being gay in the Roma community different from being gay in the wider community for you?*

Well it feels different in that if you're rejected by your own community it hurts more, or you feel like you are even more isolated or abandoned. I think that's what's different but if you're homophobic Roma or you're homophobic gadje it's the same thing and it's usually for the same

reasons. And if you're accepting it's usually for the same reasons. My feeling is that there is something a little bit different about it and I guess it's not in the way that it functions or how people are persuaded to think otherwise but it's in the effect that it has, I think it's stronger.

*What is it like being Roma in the gay community?*

Well in France it doesn't really mean anything. I don't think that there are many anti-Roma racist gay people. At least I haven't met any. I think to some people I'm an exotic object because I'm like that, or it's "tell me more about that" or it's a conversation point because quite a lot of gay men are well read and they read things about human rights and so then they're "oh Roma issues, I read about them, tell me is this true?" So it's a conversation point very often and most often it's positive. But I'm not sure that it is the same way in Eastern Europe. I don't think it's like that in Prague or in Bratislava. If I passed for white there and nobody assumes that I'm Roma and I start talking about Roma things, I think that there is a tendency to kind of like back off. I don't think that just because someone is gay that they're open minded. They can be equally racist and I think the farther east you go the more likely that that's possible.

*How do you feel about being Roma?*

I like it. Once in awhile I think does it doesn't really make a difference. But in general I like it. I like learning things. I like discovering things. I put two and two together with the things that I learned from my mom and from my family and then read books and then learn from other people with activism. There is a rich culture and history. I love languages. I studied languages. I grew up speaking Slovak and English at home. I took Spanish at school at a very early age. That's been my passion and then I found out I could start learning Romani. The fact that there is a language and there is a history associated with that and there are cultural idiomatic expressions, all of that is just something that enriches the world.

If I grew up in a multicultural North America learning that every culture has something to contribute and has value in society, why that same attitude and approach is not taken with Roma in any country that I know

of baffles me. There's a lot of historical institutional antigypsyism that exists and after discovering that I felt, in my younger days, that everyone needs to know a little bit about Roma history. Everybody needs to know a little bit about Roma culture. Now I kind of feel like you know what, being a Roma is my business, it's no one else's business. And how I'm Roma, that doesn't concern anybody else, just the same way as being gay doesn't concern anybody else. That's maybe more recent that I feel this way, in the last couple of years.

It's good to stand up and fight for rights but I feel like a lot of the time it's like this negative discourse. Do something positive, live for something positive as opposed to living to fight the negative because I think I used to do that and it's worn me down and I'm kind of fed up with that. So for me being Roma is my personal thing. I know now what I might not have known when I was 20 years old; I am Roma and nobody can take that away from me and no one can tell me that I'm not a real Roma, and if they do that's their problem not mine.

*How do you feel about being gay?*

I think it's my personal business. I don't know that I've suffered because of it. Maybe I have. Maybe I've missed out on job opportunities. Maybe there's reasons why I wasn't promoted because of some feeling from other people but I will never know, and I always assume not, unless I'm starting to feel depressed. But I feel like it's allowed me to see a lot more from a different point of view. It's allowed me to be a lot more understanding. It's pushed me to learn a lot more about myself and other people and I think I wouldn't be so civically involved if there weren't a gay movement and it wasn't an example of something that can be achieved. Because they've achieved great success in the last fifty years compared to the rest of history.

*How do you feel about being part of the LGBTQ+ Roma community?*

There's a group of us that met and we stay in touch even though it's only occasionally by email or social media or phone call, or something like that, once in a while. Just the fact that we got to meet is very important and

that there are so few of us who can actually be open about who we are and what we've done and where we come from. The fact that we know that there are others similar to us, even if they're in another country and they speak another language. I think we're there for each other if we need something. We're very glad that each other exists and it's a network that we can contact for information, to find out stuff or what have you. My LGBTQ+ Roma friends are all basically mostly from that conference, a couple of others, and they're mostly in other countries. I don't know any in France. I don't know any in Paris. There's too few of us in one specific location as far as I'm concerned.

## **Isaac Blake**

Isaac Blake is founder and Executive Director the Romani Cultural & Arts Company (RCAC), Cardiff, UK. Isaac is a proud Gay Romany Gypsy and has worked as a professional dancer and choreographer. The RCAC is supported by a variety of major funders and government departments and has developed innovative programmes to enable cross-cultural dialogue and improve social cohesion across a variety of platforms ranging from Gypsy and Traveller caravan sites to contemporary art spaces and government buildings. Under Isaac's leadership the RCAC has grown from a small voluntary group into a major third sector NGO leading the way in Romani and Traveller advocacy and empowerment across the UK and beyond. Other pioneering RCAC projects include the first UK GRT LGBTQ+ international conference held in Cardiff at the Welsh Parliament in 2019. Blake acted as Curator of the Dance Section of the RomArchive: International Archive of Roma Arts.



*Can you tell me where you are based?*

I'm based in Cardiff, South Wales in the United Kingdom.

*Where are you from?*

I grew up in the Midlands in a place called Stourport-on-Severn near Kidderminster.

*How would you describe your ethnicity?*

Romani Gypsy.

*And how would you describe your sexuality?*

I'm a proud gay man.

*When did you first realise that you might be gay?*

When I was young I had a sense that I was attracted to people like me. I didn't quite know what that meant. I just knew that I was attracted to males as opposed to females. When I was a boy growing up on the Gypsy and Traveller sites we used to watch old black and white films and I remember seeing romantic scenarios, you know, with a lady and a gentleman but I always imagined that I would have romantic scenarios with a gentleman.

*At what point did you talk about that with other people?*

I remember telling people that I was gay when I was in my 20s. I didn't tell anyone before that. When I was growing up in the Gypsy and Traveller sites my older brother read my tarot cards one day. My brother's a clairvoyant and I come from a dukkering family which is Romany for clairvoyance. My older brother read my tarot cards when my parents had gone out to the town and he said "I can see lots of men in your life". I remember being slightly embarrassed but I knew it was true. I just brushed the cards off the table and said I didn't want to hear that stuff. My brother was right though and it took me until my 20s to tell my brother that I am gay. I then also came out to my mum. Sadly my father passed away when I was 18 so I didn't get a chance to tell him.

*And how was that news received by your family?*



From my immediate and extended circle in relation to my Gypsy and Traveller community there was a mixed response. The first response was "yeah so, you're gay so what", which is fantastic, that's exactly what you want to hear. Other people took a little while to grasp the idea, because they were used to me being Isaac. I think sometimes people within my community, they acknowledge the Gypsy element because I've grown up on the site with my community and they've known me my entire life; that bit they get and they love. The gay bit is actually quite a new concept for them and I think in a way people don't really acknowledge my gayness. They certainly acknowledge my Gypsiness because I'm from a proud Romani family. They know I'm gay but they don't talk about it.

*How would you say that coming out as affected your relationship with the GRT community?*

I guess up until my 30s people knew I was gay and obviously they know I'm a Gypsy because I live with my own kind. They know that I trained as a contemporary dancer and the awards I've had and they love that. In my 30s I set up the Romani Cultural and Arts Company which is a charity here in Wales that works at a local, national and international level. People know me as a Gypsy but they also know me as a gay man and people from my own community have been drawn towards the charity. We started doing LGBT+ events, talks and conferences to give a digital and a physical platform to have those conversations.

It's a really interesting question; how do they feel about me being gay? I've never really had anything negative from my community. I might have had people from my community take a little while to grasp the concept that I'm gay, because within my community there are clear gender roles and I always find it difficult within myself sometimes because I want to honour my own community but also be truthful to myself and I want to be respectful to myself and to others. I know not everyone in the community are happy about LGBT communities but I like to think of that as an opportunity to educate people and support people because often when you look on Gypsy and Traveller sites, you are in a way forgotten and abandoned by the wider community. They don't come on to the sites,

there's no interaction and there's no space for people to come together to have a conversation about culture and identity and sexuality.

Certainly when I was growing up there was no visible LGBT+ representation. No one was coming on to the site to talk about LGBT issues with the community. We did have LGBT people within the community. Maybe it's my perception but I felt that they were visible but they were in a way ostracised. People knew that they were gay but people didn't really bother with them. It was taboo to go to their trailer. Looking back now in hindsight I really wish there was opportunity for agencies to come on to the site, for example Stonewall or any other LGBT organizations, and have a conversation about sexuality. Each site is different with a different energy and different feel because there are different people involved. Some sites are more inclusive to LGBT people whereas some sites may not be.

*What is your experience meeting of the LGBTQ+ Romanies and Travellers?*

Well I do know LGBT Travellers. My aunt is a lesbian so I have had gayness within my immediate circle but we were always told to stay away from gay people because they might turn you gay. I never quite understood that. I recently went to Poland with Laszlo from Queer Roma TV, which is a wonderful project, to put on a joint exhibition of queer Roma and Traveller LGBT art. There was scholarly work, text, documents, artwork, videos, programmes and flyers. It was a bizarre time because I never thought that I'd ever go to an exhibition about gay Travellers, I'm using Travellers as a broad term, but it was so wonderful to be around other people from my own community that identify as LGBT and who are out and proud. Because when I grew up you weren't allowed to mix with those people so to go to a space where you could have a high level conversation and feel proud of your Gypsiness but also your gayness was just mind blowing to me. It was a humbling experience, an experience that I will take with me for the rest of my life because I never thought that it would happen; to be in a space where I could finally be me. I could be Romani and gay and it was accepted.

*How does being gay in the Roma community compares with being gay in the wider community?*

When you are gay within your own Gypsy community some parts of the community will be closed to you and some parts will be open. I think if you are LGBT from Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities you are discriminated against on several different levels by society. You're discriminated against because of your ethnicity and you are discriminated against because of your sexuality. There's antigypsyism and homophobia so you are discriminated against on multiple levels

*What's it like being a Romani in the LGBTQ+ community?*

If I go out to any gay venues I don't really talk about my ethnicity because and I can pretty much guess what they're going to say and I don't want to feel treated unfairly. I think there needs to be more training opportunities to have conversations with the gay community at large, not just about GRT but also other Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic communities because of course Gypsies, Roma and Travellers are ethnic groups. I think a lot of people forget that we are recognised in the equality act of 2010 as ethnic groups with our own rights.

I would like to see the opportunity for more conversations related to race, identity and sexuality. I was really proud in 2019 when The Romani Cultural and Arts Company team organised the first International LGBTQ+ Gypsy, Roma and Traveller Symposium held in the UK. It was supported by the Welsh Government and held at the Welsh Parliament. That was an opportunity to have an open conversation in relation to our community and the intersectionality of being Roma and also being gay. Since that conference the minister for equalities, Jane Hutt, has mentioned revising the major Gypsy, Roma and Traveller policy here in Wales to talk about intersectionality in my community so we're hoping that the next revision of this policy from Welsh Government will include LGBT issues because before we started these conversations nobody was talking about LGBT Travellers.

I feel really proud that we are leading in this area. Another thing I'm really happy about is that everyone presenting on that stage was from the community. We had people from the UK, from Europe and the Americas and these people are leaders in their own field and that shocks the government. Often you go to these events and people are talking about us, but I thought now we've got enough talented LGBT Travellers that can speak for themselves. We just need to give them a platform and the space and make sure it's properly resourced.

*You've talked about being Roma in the LGBTQ+ community. How does this compare with being Roma in the wider community?*

In the wider community people see my ethnicity rather than my sexuality. I think the wider community don't realise that we have gay Travellers. I also think there's a bigger conversation to be had. Over the years, The Romani Cultural and Arts Company have done many different programs, all of which are community led, and when gorjers come to the event they are always shocked because they don't expect to see Gypsies that are academics; not just academics, but world class leaders in their field. And they don't expect to see Gypsies that are police officers for example. I think people get the idea of the Gypsy as the dancer, the musician, the painter but actually Gypsies Roma and Travellers are in all walks of life not just the visual arts and the performing arts but also in civil society, equality, diversity, academia etc. I think that always shocks people.

*How do you feel about being Romani?*

I love my Romani heritage. When I was a child it was wonderful growing up on the Gypsy and Traveller sites. I had a really wonderful childhood being a Gypsy. It was my teenage years that I found quite challenging because we moved to South Wales and if you are Gypsy you are ostracised. You are left on the site. There's no public transport to get you off the site so you can't easily access the mainstream society. It was more challenging and more problematic being Romani in Wales. Then fast forward to my thirties and I get a chance to set up a charity that is all about Gypsy, Roma and Traveller arts and culture and to meet all these different groups within my own community. It's an absolute privilege to go

to all these places and have these conversations about how we live here in the UK as Gypsies and how Gypsies live across the world. I absolutely love my Gypsy identity and I love sharing that with the wider society.

*How do you feel about being gay?*

I know my heart is gay. I know I'm attracted to men and I'm okay with that. I like that about myself. When I was younger you had to be careful about what you said, how you acted, how you dressed. But now I'm in my 40s and I'm comfortable in my skin. I own my gayness and I own my Gypsiness, and I would never give that up to anybody. I would never let anyone tell me what it means to be a gay man or certainly a gay Romani. I own those labels and those identities and I'm proud of that.

I'm hoping that other young gay people growing up will be able to feel happy about their ethnicity but also their sexuality because I am so tired of seeing articles where young people are committing suicide because they can't come to terms with their gayness. I'm hoping that through having these conversations we can make the world a better and fairer place and we can have policies and procedures in place to make sure that people don't forget about gay Travellers because until 2019 nobody was talking about gay Travellers in the UK. We deserve to have a seat at the table. We deserve to have resources, funding and intervention. We deserve to have a place in society. We deserve to be decision makers in society.

*Which community do you most identify with and why?*

The Gypsy community because it's the community I grew up in. My Gypsiness will always influence my life because I think like a Gypsy. Now in my 40s I feel more comfortable with both labels because there is was a wonderful gay culture and there is a wonderful Gypsy culture, and it's finding those opportunities where those two cultures come together. That's where I am at the moment. Sometimes it works and sometimes it doesn't because of prejudice and discrimination towards Travellers.

*How do you feel about being part of the LGBTQ+ Romani community?*

I feel proud that I'm part of that community. I also feel a great responsibility because I don't think it is good enough for me just to

develop personally, I also need to make sure to bring people along with me on that journey. I do feel a responsibility to represent myself and my community in the best possible light. There is an element of anxiety in that you might let yourself and your community down but ultimately I think you have to be comfortable in your own skin. You must own your identity and you mustn't give it up to anybody.

*How do you feel that being gay and Romani has affected your work and your career?*

My professional training is as a contemporary dancer. I was lucky enough to win a three year scholarship to train at Laban in London, now known as Trinity Laban, and I enhanced my skills by attending the Martha Graham School in New York. So my background is in dance theatre. In the dance community you do have lots of gay men, so I'm comfortable with being gay in the dance world. I also work as a charity director with an organisation that I set up in 2009. There people recognise my Gypsiness because it's a Gypsy, Roma and Traveller charity but I think people sometimes don't feel comfortable talking about the gay stuff.

Agencies including high level civil servants, academics and NGOs come to have conversations with us because we are the GRT charity and we have full access to our community. We have Gypsies, Roma and Travellers on our board, in our workforce and as community champions throughout the organisation. So people come to us as the Gypsy organisation in the broadest sense and people are happy to talk about health, education and employment etc. but no one really talks about the LGBT stuff. They know I'm gay and they know that we've staged gay events and that we provide a digital platform and a physical space to have those sorts of conversations, but I think most people are still nervous to talk about gay Travellers. Wider society has an image of the Gypsy but it's a straight image, a heterosexual image. They don't really see intersectionality within that so it's a really interesting time right now to have these conversations.

## Francisco Camacho Cabello

My name is Francisco Camacho Cabello but people call me Qurro. I was born in Jaén, Andalusia in southern Spain. I was brought up in a Romani mixed-race family. I have one sister and two brothers and we grew up in a humble neighbourhood. During my childhood my family moved to a small village near Jaén where an anti-Roma pogrom had recently occurred. I attended school and completed a Primary School Teacher degree. I also trained as a Labour Guidance Counsellor. I currently work with the Roma Foundation in Jaén. Several years ago, I got a divorce because I got married to a man. After this I was reborn again and I learnt a more conscious form of love. After several years of having very little relationship with my family we have now learned to accept each other as a diverse Roma family. We have a better understanding of each other and have become close once again. I actively participate in various areas of society - politics, neighbourhood associations and platforms and LGBTIQ NGOs. A number of years ago I met a fellow Roma activist called Demetrio Gómez and in 2008 we started what has today become 'Ververipen, rroms por la diversidad'. This is the first Roma NGO in Spain which promotes respect and supports the rights of LGBTIQ Roma people.





*Where do you live?*

I am living in a small city south of Andalusia in the south of Spain. This city is not well known. It is situated between Cordoba and Granada. It is called Jaén. It's like a big village. It's not like a city. We have few inhabitants. Most of our region is composed by 96 or 97 small villages. The capital is Jaén. It's known for its olive trees. The best olive oil is from here. Also I have to say that there is a very interesting history related to the Gypsy population. The day of Andalusian Gypsy people is celebrated on the 22nd of November. In 1462 the first Gypsy families came to Andalusia through Jaén.

I was born here but when I was 13 we had to migrate to another village 19 kilometres away. It was a small village called Mancha Real. Me and my family were living there for seven years. These seven years marked the history of my life, because the same year that we moved there, the people of the village rejected the Gypsy population. This was because a gadje family and a Gypsy family fought and a Gypsy man killed a gadje man. The inhabitants of this village rejected the Roma population in the same year that we moved there, 1991. Imagine. My first day of school was really awful because one of my classmates wrote on the blackboard "Gypsies are shits", "Gitanos de mierda", and the only Gypsy in my class was me.

After this the following seven years were very difficult. My father is Gypsy and my mother is gadje but she is an assimilated Gypsy. The inhabitants of Mancha Real knew that my father was Gypsy. My father had a big problem going to bars. My elder brother had problems with high school and I also had some problems with high school but when I was 15 or 16 I gained some power. I joined with other classmates from the small villages around Mancha Real. This area was very special because there were lots of good furniture businesses but the people were more concerned about money than culture. They were very narrow minded and xenophobic. When I was 15 or 16 I joined with the classmates from the small villages who were most discriminated against because of their origins and we took a certain empowerment from that, and it's very curious that when I was 16 I was voted high school representative by the other pupils.

*How would you describe your sexuality?*

It's very easy. My feeling towards my women friends is love. I'm gay but I only found this out when I left Mancha Real. While I was living in that village my sexuality was very hidden. My problem was to resolve this with my Roma origins. When I came back to Jaén and when I went to the university I knew other gay people and I found out that I was gay.

*Did you share the information that you were gay with your family?*

Yes. I came out in August of 2001, the same year as the terrorist attack in America. I told my mother that I wanted to live with my partner. I told my mother first then my sister. The last person who knew about my homosexuality was my father because my mother advised me that my father might hit me. But however my father said to me "you can do whatever you want but if you make a mistake you come back with your family." But it was very difficult. When I became more mature I understood that it was very difficult for my father, for my parents and for my family; mainly because I was having a relationship with a man who was 16 year older than me with two daughters, and I was Roma and gay in this small village.

*What is your relationship with your family like now?*

Before we came back from Mancha Real, when I told my mother that I was gay she started crying and she told to me that they thought that I was having a relationship with a disabled man in a wheelchair because the people in the village gossiped about our friendship. They confused our friendship with a relationship as a couple so my parents believed that we were a couple. But when they found out that my partner was a different person in Jaén; a man who was 16 years older than me with two daughters, this was very difficult for them. They thought that this action could hurt our honour as Roma and our pride as a family, because they think that to be Roma you have to be heterosexual because we assume the identity of the gadje people and the most conservative Roma people. I even thought—today it's seems ridiculous, but in that moment I thought that I was the only gay Roma person.

My relationship with my parents was very difficult and after one year I left my home on Christmas day 2001. It had a big impact on them and the following year I only met with them once or twice. They tried to hide my relationship from the family, mainly from my Gypsy family because my gadje family accepted the relationship mostly, but my Roma family didn't know. They suspected something because I didn't go to family events like weddings and baptisms and they tried to lie about my relationship. Seven years after I left home I wrote a letter to my mother saying that time was passing and this was very sad for me.

They believed that I was very happy because I lived my life, I went to work, I went to out. But they called me at my home one day and said that I had been brainwashed and they tried to convince me that I had made a mistake. This was very difficult for me because sometimes I was very depressed. Even when I was in Mancha Real I developed severe anxiety. When I was at university I had to see a psychologist because I couldn't face crowds because this provoked anxiety. Performing in the theatre at the university helped me. Seeing the psychologist and performing in the theatre, these two things helped me to overcome my anxiety. Seven years after I left home my family accepted my partner and he came with me to my family home.

In 2013 we split up but for me it was like being reborn. I had become more conscious about love. I was more conscious about relationships. I didn't want this kind of relationship. My parents accepted my relationship when they found out that the rest of the Roma family had other problems, for example some daughters who had split up, and other families with gay sons that they kept hidden. They told me that they told the rest of the people that they preferred us all to be together; accepting our diversity rather than being separated, and that they had spent seven years worrying about what other people might think. They overcame this but it was very difficult for all of us. Today I am my parents' neighbour. I have three brothers and a sister and I am the only one living near our parents.

I recorded five TV programmes when I was a volunteer with a gadje LGBTQ NGO. They asked me to show my difficulties, only my difficulties

but not the other side of the Roma community, only the difficulties. Today I wouldn't accept this kind of programme but at that time, it was about 2007, I recorded five TV programmes, not in the same year but at different periods.

When I started working for the Roma Foundation here in Spain I began to assist a lot of Roma people and I thought that they didn't accept me, but today I am a role model not only for gay people. Because here gay Roma people are still hiding, except two cousins who are transsexual but they haven't transitioned yet. I am their confidante. Even the women who broke with tradition or who breached the limit of the most conservative values here—because the Roma people mixed our values with their religious values, with their evangelical values and the Roma women who don't want to follow these conservative values, they trust me.

My parents didn't believe that I could be a role model for the Roma communities here but they have found over time that when the Roma people speak about me they say they admire their son because he defends the right of the Roma people; that he has helped them a lot and they are proud of him.

When I split up with my previous partner and I met my new partner it was like a new coming out for my family. They accept that you can be gay but you have to have the same partner until you die; forever.

*How are you treated by the non-Roma Community where you live?*

To the Roma community in Jaén my father was less Roma because he was one of the first Roma men to marry a non-Roma. And because my family are not evangelical, we are considered less Roma. We have to demonstrate continually that we are Roma and for this my parents once wanted to be more conservative because they were a mixed race family and they were not accepted like normal Roma. Now as the years have passed we have achieved our honour and our Roma identity. We had to demonstrate it to the non-Roma and to the Roma community. It has been very difficult for us because we have broken most of the rules of the gadje

and of the Roma here because most of the Roma people here are evangelical.

It's very curious that after my relationship broke up, when I was looking for friends and partners etc. some non-Roma people didn't want to keep up relations with me because they knew I was Roma. But today most of the Roma community respect my family and most no-Roma also respect my family. But in this city most things are very difficult because a lot of people are very narrow minded. For example when I want to participate in non-Roma spaces like politics they only want me to decorate but not to be a representative.

*What is your work?*

I work as a social advisor. I give advice about social situations, how to achieve employment or training courses, because the traditional markets that Roma were working in are not profitable. I also work in an employment project for the Roma Foundation. I belong to the most critical sector of the Roma Foundation but this is not a visible sector because most of the people with power in the Roma Foundation are non-Roma. I agree with most of the Roma people that the Roma community has lots of people with strong academic qualifications and enough knowledge to occupy positions of responsibility.

I denounced a non-Roma work mate who was very racist with the people who came to our office. I denounced them and I was sent home for five days. After this in 2015 in a public event of the Roma Foundation I showed some posters to the Mayor, who was from the right party, explaining that they didn't get our votes and the Roma foundation tried to suspend me again but I was lucky because this was not during work time.

As I mentioned before I was close to the Roma people who want to be different, who want to break with the most conservative views. In Jaén, if the heads of the more important enterprises know you are Roma they use their prejudices as an excuse to exclude you but certainly with their training courses the Roma Foundation are not bad.

I think that some NGOs, like Ververipen for example, can make things better for LGBTQ Roma people. We have to create strong projects to complement the employment projects of the Rroma Foundation because for example part of the Rroma Foundation's staff (gadje or Roma) don't care about the LGBTQ Roma people. The Rroma Foundation has more than forty offices around Spain and I think that only me and few of my workmates have the sensitivity to deal with LGBTQ Roma people. The rest of the people they don't care about our life and about our difficulties. I think an intersectional approach to assist people would be necessary here.

But from Ververipen we must create projects for the LGBTQ Roma because it may be possible that other NGOs may lead these kinds of projects with non-Roma thinking and with non-Roma values, and I think that the LGBTQ Roma, they don't trust these kinds of projects that aren't assisted by LGBTQ Roma staff or allied people. I think that a lot of LGBTQ Roma people would thank us if we created projects, for example to assist LGBTQ Roma people to look for jobs, to look for emancipation. So, I think we are a bit slow to increase our projects, to create projects.

We need changes and new approaches incorporating new LGBTQ Roma activists or Roma allied people so that new structures can be created to support our collective. We would have to create projects through the public budget to support these kinds of objectives because many LGBTQ Roma people here in Spain are still feeling alone. Sometimes, they didn't want to go to NGOs such as the Rroma Foundation because they can be faced with some of my workmates that don't want to know about our lives and our issues. We have an important responsibility to prevent other LGBTQ Roma people from living with a feeling of loneliness. We have to create social nets, activities with a sense of community. Our LGBTQ Roma phenjalipe is still looking for peers.

## Oein DeBhairduin

Oein DeBhairduin is an author, herbalist and Travellers' rights activist. He is a creative soul with a passion for poetry, folk herbalism and preserving the beauty of Traveller tales, sayings, retellings and historic exchanges. DeBhairduin is the manager of an education centre and a long-time board member of several Mincéirí community groups, including having had the honour of being vice-chair of the Irish Traveller Movement and a council member of Mincéir Whidden. He seeks to pair community activism with cultural celebration, recalling old tales with fresh modern connections and, most of all, he wishes to rekindle the hearth fires of a shared kinship.





*Can you tell me where you're based?*

I am currently living in South Dublin in Ireland

*Where are you from?*

I'm from near Tuam in County Galway, the west of Ireland.

*How would you describe your ethnicity?*

That would be Traveller.

*And how would you describe your sexuality?*

I'm gay.

*When did you first realize that you might be gay?*

I never had a singular moment but I think there was a gradual stretching in my understanding of who I was, but that idea had really registered with me by the time was 14.

*Did you share this information with other people?*

I did. I made several disclosures to close friends growing up but I hadn't had a coming out experience of really verbalizing my identity as a gay person until I was 18.

*And how was your gayness received within your community or your family?*

In various degrees, the first person within my family that I told was my sister who accepted it very well, that night at least. The next day she'd actually convinced herself that it was a dream and we didn't speak about it for three months, which I took quite agonizingly and she thought was just a passing moment for herself. When I spoke to my parents about it my father received it very well. My mother however didn't and I think that's an ongoing journey negotiating those spaces with my family. I've been with my partner Dan for 13 years and my mother first met him 2 years ago.

*How was you're being gay received within the wider Traveller community?*

In the collective community of where I'm from it was mostly received in silence and in events of violence at times. As for the wider Traveller community, passive disinterest mostly. Most people are dealing with their own issues and me being gay is very low on the line of how they

understand they fit into themselves. However you can be a catalyst for concerns in their own life, among their own family and their own friends, and irritation can arise from them, or sometimes you can be a confidante.

What's your experience of meeting other gay Gypsies, Roma and Travellers?

Mostly positive. In 2007 I set up an LGBT Travellers support group with an informal group of our own peers which led in 2009 to the setting up of a more formalized support group. Every year since we've attended events and had a minimum of three events a year, with supportive spaces, and attending Pride. I am concerned at the rising levels of mental health and distress within the general population but also specifically with LGBT Travellers, Roma and Gypsies.

*What would you say it's like to be a gay in Traveller community?*

For myself it would be an experience of being among people who live on the edge and knowing that you yourself are on the very tip of that edge.

*How is this different from being gay in the wider community?*

I think from people within the wider community there's received experience to support an acceptance and celebration of diversity, however when it comes to Travellers, Gypsies and Roma my experience has been that that division, that divide and rejection is still very much there because we've never had the opportunity to come to know each other. Anyone can be LGBT but only Travellers, Gypsies and Roma are Travellers, Gypsies and Roma.

*What would you say it's like being a Traveller in the LGBTQ+ community?*

It varies. The example I'd like to identify would be that at the moment we have the LGBTQI inclusion strategy here in Ireland in which Travellers and Roma are specifically mentioned five times—however there are no actions under any sort of delivery or provision of supports for Travellers, Gypsies and Roma in the country. Likewise that space and that strategy were negotiated with the department and the LGBT allies and organizations. So while we can be named and we can be told that we have a place at the

table, when it comes the practicality of it, the reality can be starkly different.

*How would you say being a Traveller in the LGBTQ+ community differs from being a Traveller in the wider community?*

I think the factors remain the same. Many people experience a lot of othering. There can be opportunities within all spaces for allies and celebration but that lack of knowledge of Travellers, Gypsies and Roma is still very much prevalent. But I have had many positive experiences that also make stark for me other experiences within the LGBT community; an example being a couple of years ago we got a group of people together who wanted to go to a very iconic gay bar in town and we were rejected at the door because they felt that this collection of Traveller men wouldn't have actually wanted to see this space and if they were to engage it would be for nefarious reasons.

*How do you feel about being a Traveller?*

I think it's an absolutely amazing gift. I think it's one of the most enchanting things and best things I've ever received in my life.

*What does it mean to you?*

It means celebration. It means resistance. It means history. It means understanding lineage. It means knowing that your people have the strength to survive in the most punishing, distracting and I suppose disbanding ways possible that have been inflicted upon us, and yet we remain. And that, for myself, is a point of absolute and utter strength.

*How do you feel about being gay?*

Delighted. Happy. It's very much a core part of who I am and how I engage with the world. However it would not have consumed me and any other parts of my understanding. I don't think I could divide myself up. I don't really see myself as a gay Traveller or a Traveller who happens to be gay. I see them as part of the tapestry that composes me and as part of me and I don't think I would ever want to pull those threads away from each other.

*What does it mean to you to be gay?*

It means that I have another point of connection with another community which is incredibly diverse and stretches the entire world.

*How do these different parts of your life work together and influence each other would you say?*

They can be very synergetic especially when it comes to activism and claiming of identity and of space. Knowing how similarly people have been historically rejected because of identity or what is interpreted as, I suppose, as reformers of the sense of who we are. They do lean upon each other and they do give strength to each other. It wouldn't be something I would find to be in conflict within myself thankfully.

*Which community would you said that you most identify with?*

It varies. I think I identify with spaces and people rather than entire collectives. My family will always be my family but we have a family by our blood and a family that our heart chooses, and I think that their value and importance in our lives don't need to be differentiated with such severity and can be held and embraced as equal.

*Which of these two aspects of your identity would you say has most influence upon you?*

I would say my Traveller identity and my history and my connections because they were more at the forefront in my formative years, as well as through my employment, through social negotiation and space. Also here in Ireland in 2020 it's a stronger point of rejection from the wider community. More people are in this position of celebrating LGBT culture and identity and not so many people are celebrating Traveller identity. An example for myself would be when we walk in Pride every year people are excited and surprised to see Travellers and every year I always think to myself wouldn't it be nice for us to be able to go into rooms as Travellers and have that welcome. Because that surprise is still there, I continue to bring people. I think it's important to be there and in those spaces. Pride remains a protest; both pride as a gay man and also pride as a Traveller.

*How does it feel to be part of an LGBTQ+ Traveller community?*

It's interesting. I think it's a point of strength, a point of curiosity, a point of concern, a point of worry. I do think that there is a rising of support within us all and I think that is something we can all take inspiration from. If someone else can do it, we can do it.

*How do you feel being from these communities has affected your work and your career?*

A lot of my work is within education. At the moment, an example would be that I manage an education centre that predominantly engages with Travellers. But at the same time I also work part time with Senator Eileen Flynn who is the first Traveller Senator within our Dáil, which is our parliament, around sculpting legislation and inclusion, not just for Travellers but for people including the LGBT community. I think that they work quite harmoniously within myself and are quite celebratory. I've never had a problem with being gay and I've never had a problem with a Traveller. My problem is with bigots.

## **María del Carmen Cortés Amador**

My name is María del Carmen Cortés Amador. I am a Roma woman who was born in a marginal neighbourhood of Almería in southern Spain. With the efforts of my family and my own hard work and perseverance, today I live in Madrid working as a lawyer in an NGO defending the rights of Roma people and LGBTQ+ activism.



*Where do you live?*

I live in Madrid.

*Where are you from originally?*

I am originally from Almería, South of Spain in Andalusia.

*What is your ethnicity?*

I am a Roma woman.

*Do you identify as lesbian?*

Yes of course.

*When did you first realise that you might be lesbian?*

I think since I was a child.

*How has being a lesbian affected your relationship with your family?*

Being lesbian has not affected my relationship with my family and friends; the people I meet daily.

*How do you think that your being a lesbian has been received within the wider Roma community?*

I will try to explain because you know that each country has their rules and their rights. I'm a lawyer in Spain and I live in Spain. It's a good country that respects the rights of LGBTQ people, and Roma too fortunately. In my case in Spain I think that there is some resistance from Roma people to accept Roma LGBTQ people but in general there is no problem with that identity. There are some cases, because people are different, Roma people are different too, and there are some families who accept that their children are lesbian or gay and then there are other families who don't accept that their children are LGBTQ.

*When did you first come into contact with other Roma who were also LGBTQ?*

Good question, because as I said I was born in Almería and now I'm living with my girlfriend and working in Madrid. So this is a different context. Madrid is a big city and there are more people so it's easier to meet other LGBTQ Roma people than in Almería. Almería is a small city and it's



difficult to find places or associations or groups of people who are LGBTQ. In Madrid it's more common, more usual to find these spaces. My first time was here in Madrid.

*How was it growing up in Almería?*

I remember that I was so young. Now I'm 42 years old. I remember that I was afraid, you know, when you ask yourself what's happening. I fell in love with my friend. I didn't understand my feelings. These were difficult situations sometimes. But as I said, the first time when I felt that I was a lesbian, and that I had some feelings toward my friends for example, I was so confused because I didn't have any lesbian references. I didn't know any lesbian people in Almería and that made it difficult for me to find answers. So I read all the time and watched TV series all the time and I found some answers. Then I met a colleague at my job when I started to work at an NGO, Fundacion Secretariado Gitano. There I met a fantastic woman, who was lesbian too, who helped me and now she's a good friend of mine.

*How does it feel to be lesbian and also Roma in the wider community?*

My experience has been good in Almería and in Madrid better. Madrid is a big city and there are a lot of people, there are a lot of LGBTQ places. For example if you want to meet with other girls you just go to these places and meet with other people, friendly LGBTQ people. My experience with gadjé or non-Roma people is the same. Sometimes I've met with people who don't believe my identity and my sexuality because they have some stereotypes around Roma people and around LGBTQ sexuality. They think "how is it possible that you are lesbian if Roma people are so traditional?" They have the usual idea that it's not normal in the Roma community but in general my relations with other people and with other LGBTQ people are very good. A good experience in general.

*What does it mean to you to be a Roma woman who is lesbian?*

It's fantastic. It is very important that we remember that 2020 is better than 20 years ago. Society is changing. Laws and rights of LGBTQ people are changing for the better. In Spain we have 70 regions and most of

them have laws regarding gender identity and LGBTQ and in this context LGBTQ people can avoid some problems because they have laws to protect them. And this is good because Roma people too can use the law to defend their rights like LGBTQ people. It's a good moment.

*How do you feel that being lesbian and Roma has affected your work and your career?*

I have to say that in my case it represents an opportunity. Because you know that I work at Fundacion Secretariado Gitano, it's a great NGO in Spain that works to promote equality and rights for Roma people. It's very important. In my case, to be Roma and a lawyer and lesbian represents for me a great opportunity in my work. I work in an equal opportunities department so as a lawyer I inform Roma people who are victims of racial discrimination and I try to defend them with various actions such as mediation or writing a letter. Sometimes in the news they mention ethnicity explicitly and in Spain and in Europe when newspapers mention ethnicity in reports this is forbidden by law because ethnicity is a specifically protected characteristic. Sometimes when social media posts mention ethnicity I will try to defend my client by writing a letter informing them of the law and telling them that they have to remove or amend the page.

*How do you feel about being described as part of an LGBTQ+ Gypsy, Roma and Traveller community?*

I'm very proud to be part of this community. When I decided to join the International LGBTQ Roma Conference in Prague, for me that group represented something beautiful. For me, being part of this group from around Europe, from around the world, represents being connected with my community and to learn with other women, other Roma people. The situation is a way to share our feelings, to share our experience, and I think that this is a way to grow and not forget that we are Roma and that we are strong people and that we can do a lot of things to change our lives and the lives of many Roma people. That's what it represents for me.

### **Felicia Mercoledi G DeRosa:**

Felicia Mercoledi G DeRosa is an internationally acclaimed multidisciplinary Roma artist, educator and activist. A 'New York born San Franciscan,' she became a staple of the American west coast 'Low-brow POP Surrealism' scene of the early 2000s, exhibiting across the US, Europe and Taiwan. In 2010, after a cross-country art tour and a few years in Chicago mentoring and doing public art, she escaped to the EU for a 5 month adventure of art and friendship as a guest of her then Belgian-based gallery. In 2010 she and her wife Gwen landed in Columbus, Ohio to pursue their MFAs. Shortly after, DeRosa immersed herself in the local art scene. Midway through her graduate studies at the Columbus College of Art and Design, her expertise landed her a 6 year position teaching technical anatomy and foundational drawing. Felicia currently works to raise awareness of intersectional issues in the queer, transgender and BIPOC communities and she believes wholeheartedly that Black Lives Matter. Photo © Jim Fischer



*Where are you based?*

Right now, I am based in the United States; Columbus Ohio.

*Where are you from?*

I was originally born in New York in a wonderful place called Long Island, in a town called Ronkonkoma. Depending on what part of my family you talk to, we are second or third generation Americans. When they immigrated here, my family was living in New York City proper, in one of the boroughs; Astoria. Now I don't have a really New York accent or a big Long Island accent anymore because, when I was around seven, I moved to California and lived there for a good period of time. I actually have moved around quite a bit. Mostly because my mother and father were at odds with each other, and my mother kept trying to move us around so that he couldn't continue to find us. Basically, my growing up experience was a combination of early years in New York, young years up until junior high in California, and high school in Florida. Once I graduated, I returned to California for college. I went to art school and lived in San Francisco until 2007. It was there that I dove into my career, doing some big art things. I met and married my wife and we moved to Chicago for a few years. After that, we spent five months in Europe with art projects and that later turned into a little backpacking expedition, before eventually landing here in Columbus. That's not counting all the other places I spent a small period of time living in, though.

*How would you describe your ethnicity?*

Well, in the States when people ask me, I say I'm Sicilian Roma because I'm Roma on both sides of my family and that describes my very young growing up experience, but also my family was based in and around Sicily for a couple of generations before running to the United States to start over and have a better life. My family was essentially fleeing discrimination, violence and racism. This is speaking purely from my own family experience though. I do understand it is kind of common in the United States that when Roma come here, they assimilate, hiding in plain sight. It's a common practice. So you'll have your immediate community and

family, where you keep your culture alive, but for us—we assimilated into the Italian American community. I was told very directly to keep this part of me to myself. You know, like “we’re in America, we’re Americans. Just leave it at that.”

They were very into the idea of assimilation and I obliged, because I respected my family, and lord knows I heard all their stories of what they went through before coming here. For them, it was an issue of safety. But nonetheless, there's still a lot of ignorance of who the Roma people are. Here we don't exist officially on paper. When you get the census and it says; “check your race or ethnicity here”, we're not even listed. Not really. So we've been kind of ‘white washed’ out of existence. So depending on where you are in the US, depends on how you're received. I've spent a lot of time—recently anyway, educating people on who the Roma are, because when I came out of the closet as transgender and pansexual 6 years ago, I also decided I was not going to hide any aspect of who I was anymore. And so I came out completely, like this is my culture, my people. This is my heritage... This is who I am, and I just take the lumps as they come.

*How would you describe your gender identity?*

I am a transwoman. My gender identity is female.

*When did you first realise that you were a transwoman?*

Well, it's actually kind of an interesting origin story. I didn't realise that I wasn't assigned female at birth until I was six. The discovery was one of those things when you're hanging out with your friends, playing when you're really little. My friend's little sister, who was like two or three? Something like that, came up and did that old school thing of pulling her dress over her head, because when you're that little, it's hilarious, and I realised that I was built differently. That was when I first realized that my anatomy (at least on the outside) was different from other girls. But honestly, in my mind I'm like, “you know, it'll sort itself out by the time puberty hits.” And then it didn't, and then that became a source of contention and what became the origin of my dysphoria.

*How was your being transsexual received by your family?*

Well, I had a couple of instances. I'm 47 now. When I got out of college, I was 23 or 24 and I sought help, because I was struggling emotionally. I was dealing with so much internally. So I went and sought some therapy and they discussed it with me, saying, "you have gender dysphoria", among some other things. For a short time I was in transition and on hormone therapy. This was for about a year, but I was in such a bad financial situation, and there was a lot else going on that I was trying to navigate, and for a lot of reasons my experience was just not healthy or safe. I couldn't really express myself in the way that I wanted to. I just didn't have the funding to do so. So I went back into the closet, and just stopped all the things and just focused all of my forward energy on my art career. The idea was, the harder I worked—the more often I was doing something, the less I'd be left alone with my own thoughts and the less I'd have to pay attention to what was going on with me. I just focused on everyone else. So I came second.

Fast forward quite a way, I was in graduate school (2012 - 2014), I was getting close to graduating, and doing a thesis project that required me to dive into the idea of diagnosis and medication, and that meant diving into my own psychology and my own ID and unboxing quite a few things. One of those things was my gender dysphoria. At that point there was no putting it back. I had to face my truth. I started the process of coming out, in probably early 2015. And then officially went into full time transition beginning January 1st of 2016, and it's gone on from there. I just hit my five year mark (January 2021)!

So my blood family, we're all very matter of fact. My family is very hard working, very what we call "blue collar" here, and because of that, we are also very pragmatic. The main question I got was, "are you happy?" And I said, "well you know, I'm working on it... but definitely much happier now, since I'm at least being genuine. I'm not holding anything back anymore." I am open about my heritage and who I am on a familial level, but also publicly. Generally, I'm open about my gender identity, and being pansexual. It's very freeing.

So, at the base, I'm very happy. The only question I got that I thought was hilarious was from my niece—who at the time was five. She said, "do you have to change your favourite colour too?" And I was like "no, my favourite colour is still red." That seemed to be her biggest concern. She said then; "okay. Well, that's fine" and that was the extent of it. I had one uncle that asked me why my chosen name was Felicia, but beyond that, there was a general acceptance that "as long as you're happy, we're happy for you." Ultimately, I have not had any difficulty with them, which genuinely surprised me, because my family is very traditional in a lot of ways, and many of them are very rooted in Catholicism so I kind of expected some kind of pushback. Needless to say, they were just supportive and nice.

*How is your being trans received within the wider community?*

I feel like I come out every day. I was raised in a very typical cisgender, heteronormative male culture. There is a lot of toxicity in the male culture that is deeply rooted. It forces men into that archetype of a masculine ideal. In Roma and especially Sicilian culture there are very proscribed definitions: this is how men are, this is how women are, and there's really no grey area in between.

In the early days of my transition, I sort of ricocheted to the far opposite end of that experience, and over the last five years I've kind of settled, you know—this is all female on one end, this is all male on the other—I'm kind of about here, closer to the middle, but still feminine. I've kind of relaxed into myself, become comfortable in my own body, and I think people respond to that. I'm fortunate in that I am widely accepted as female, and oftentimes people are surprised when I say that I'm a transwoman, which can work to my advantage. If I am in a place that I feel might be hostile, I can fly under the radar and go stealth if I need to, which is a good bonus for me to have. I do travel around and I do a lot of activism where I go into other communities in support of other marginalised peoples as well. So I think overall, I am mostly received fairly well. I occasionally get people that will maliciously try to misgender me and try to conflate my identity or invalidate who I am and then I've got to give them a talking to. But you



know, I also grew up punk, so I don't stand down to anybody. I don't know if you can tell with all these tattoos?

*What is your experience of meeting other LGBTQ+ Gypsies, Roma and Travellers?*

Well so far I've met five. And they expressed very similar experiences. Their blood family was more concerned with their well being and if they're happy or not. It's a similar kind of thing like having to jump through these social hoops and work around obstacles within mainstream culture, because there are very set gender roles and ideas. But on the whole, it's a similar experience to mine. I haven't yet met another transfeminine Roma. I know a few who are identified as lesbian and a couple that identify as non-binary, and they expressed similar kinds of stories.

*What is it like being Romani in the general LGBTQ+ community?*

Well, so far with my experience I have run into some Romani folks online that have a conservative viewpoint about gender and usually they just do not engage with me at all. I haven't gotten, let's say, "negative feedback" or anyone saying or doing anything combative or argumentative towards me. I have noticed that that's actually been a very small occurrence for me. In the US, really the only Romani community that I had was family, and specifically my elders, and in the last five years the last of them has died off. I am probably the last in my familial trappings that is committed to keeping our traditions and our culture alive. I have all of my family's history and stories in my head, so I've been working on memoirs because when I die, that's it. That's the end of this particular line here, and I don't want to see that happen, so I'm trying to do what I can to keep it alive for them, as much as for myself.

*How do you feel about being Romani?*

Well, I have a lot of pride in it. It's a way that I feel rooted and grounded within history, within my family, because there was so much turmoil in my family and specifically with my mother, father and myself. I never felt connected to people. But as a member of—not just the LGBT and trans community, but also the Roma community, I feel like I have strong roots;

that I am part of a larger narrative, which is something that helps me feel safe, and gives me a strong foundation for my identity. Because who I am as a Roma, and who I am as an artist and as a trans person, are the core of my identity and everything else is built off of that.

*How do you feel about being transsexual?*

It's challenging. It's very challenging because we're still in a place where the binary way of thinking about gender is the dominant, even though there is this sort of revolution moving away from binary to something that one could look at as either a spectrum or even—some people have gotten very poetic—a universe of gender identity. I think all of that is beautiful, because it does give people latitude to be themselves without feeling like they have to be a “certain way” in order to be accepted or to be safe. It opens that up more. I think about members of my own family that identify as cisgender/heteronormative, but physically or even emotionally exhibit more of a different kind of gender identity. Having the openness to say “this wasn't working for me and this is who I really am”, I think, empowers a lot of folks. Even if they don't identify as queer or identify as trans, it gives them a little bit of license to say I can be more masculine or I can be more feminine if that is my natural inclination.

It's about not having to feel like I'm betraying myself or putting myself in harm's way. Today, the trans community has directly confronted that very narrow viewpoint of gender and of society in general. I take a lot of responsibility with it.

In the community here, I do a lot of activism and a lot of public speaking. I go to religious institutions, I speak on inclusion. I go to schools, and I speak about inclusion and identity and basic respect. I am a college educator and one of the things that I do, is advocate for queer and trans youth, because there are issues of being allowed to simply use a bathroom that lines up with their identities. There are issues with teachers (what we call) ‘dead naming’ or ‘misgendering’ people to the point that these younger people have developed intense anxiety or depression—and then the suicide rate skyrockets. So I do my part because my attitude is one that I get from my grandmother which is; “wish me well or go to hell.”

I'm gonna live my life, and I'm not going to give in to fear, and if people don't like it, tough titties. I use that as fuel to speak for other members of my community who have been rendered mute or don't have a platform or don't feel like they can speak in front of people.

I use what little privilege I have, to get into spaces and speak on behalf of the community. I get called more and more often to do those kinds of speaking engagements and to participate in rallies and marches. It helps me by helping other people in my community, because it has helped me root myself deeper into my identity, and to come to terms with some of the things I have to face like, people not seeing me truly as a woman, or—at the same token, also having given up male privilege. In a patriarchal society, that's a big thing to walk away from.

*How do you feel that being trans and Roma has affected your work and your career?*

In some ways it hinders. The art world is still a kind of a boys club, and as a woman in the arts you constantly have to go above and beyond to establish your footing. I think as a transwoman, I am something of a novelty in the art scene, at least in the States, so that does actually open a few doors for me to get in and get my work seen and do some exhibits.

My work as an artist is a lot of social commentary and especially after transitioning, has been a visual exploration of my gender identity and how that intersects with my Roma identity. There's no real public Roma expression in the US at this time, and for me it's become important to say "'hi. I know we're a minority, there's only a million of us in the US, and a lot of us have assimilated—but we still exist. This is who we are.'" I do what I can to be a good representation of my people. I have to wear a lot of 'hats'. There are a lot of 'plates' constantly spinning, and that can be exhausting.

*Is there anything else that you would like to talk about?*

Well, I'm excited for this opportunity! Moving forward, actually, I would like to continue to be involved in whatever capacity I can, because I like your organization. I like what's going on over there and, again, it helps me feel

like I'm actually more part of my community—that I can contribute something worthwhile. Whether it's my presence or us speaking about things or my actual artwork—which is always my main focus. I'm glad that I can be an active member of my community and I'm hoping that in my own small way, I can do what I can to help things improve on the socioeconomic and political levels. There's only so much that an artist can do, but I hope that I can do some good work.

**PF**

PF is a Gay Romani man from the United Kingdom.

Image: *The hidden face of intersectionality* © PF



*Can you tell me where you're based?*

I am based in Wiltshire.

*And where are you from?*

I'm from this area originally.

*How would you describe your ethnicity?*

As British Romani I suppose.

*How would you describe your sexuality?*

As gay.

*When did you first realize that you might be gay do you think?*

I think most probably about 11 or 12, something like that.

*Is this something you've shared with them other people any point?*

Very few people. Certainly not my family. A few people when I was living in Cardiff, but not while I was at college in Newport. I had a relationship in Cardiff. Up until that point I'd disguised the fact that I was gay because it was easier to hide your sexuality than to live with the stigma that you get from other people

*And when you did talk to other people about this how was that received?*

Some people were more open than I was and were fine about it. I haven't really talked to anybody who wasn't gay themselves I suppose.

*What is your experience of meeting other gay Roman people?*

Well the only people are the ones that I've met through the Romani Cultural and Arts Company. They've been supportive and I've been corresponding with them on Facebook. I first met Isaac; I'd done some research on Isaac before I met him in 2016 because I recorded (with my cousin) our family history as part of a project that Isaac was running. Having lived in Cardiff, and my father was born there, I thought that the RCAC was the best place to tell that story.

*What do you think it's like to be gay in Romani communities?*

I think up until recently it's been a fairly taboo subject. It causes, along with prejudice from the general public, it can cause anxiety and suicide

amongst the community which is one of the reasons that I'm prepared to do this interview. I think it's an important matter to talk about and make people aware of. It is in the community, and it's not part of the usual stereotype that's levelled against the community.

*Do you think that being gay in the Romani the community is any different from being gay in the wider community?*

I think it's just as hidden, but there's a growing support there now through the likes of the RCAC and within Europe as well. I think that it's always been there but it's just been hidden in the background.

*How do you feel about being Romani?*

Well I didn't know that I was Romani until 2014, and that was after both my parents had passed away. I really felt that there was something in my background. There were hints of it. When I was at art college I felt that I was trying to obtain something. I didn't have a focus on what I was trying to achieve. I could sort of feel that it was there, and I think I did eventually get to a place. Art colleges always try to break you down to find what your inner core, your inner being is, and I think I did achieve that. The work that I was doing then was a sort of preliminary to what I'm continuing to do now with tables.

I consider the edge of the table a dividing point. Like the Romani have this difference between inner and outer, and above and below the waist, so I see the edge of the table as the dividing point. It's almost like a dividing point between heterosexuality and being gay or lesbian or queer or transgender. There's a divide between what is accepted and what isn't accepted within society. The lower half, the impure half is the hidden aspect of that and that's something that I'm trying to bring through in my work.

*How do you feel about being gay?*

I've been it for so long. I find it difficult but it's there, I can't change it. I think it's awful that it's been so legislated against, criminalized, people have been put into asylums for aversion therapy and things like that. So



there's always that fear in your head constantly that people will try to turn it against you. It's there but it doesn't define exactly who I am.

*How do these different parts of your life work together or influence each other do you think?*

It's come up within my work. I did a sculpture degree in Newport then I went into the embroidery industry through some job information that I received from the college. I worked up in the Rhondda as a designer for embroidery, and my employer was himself a holocaust survivor. It was a Jewish family run business. I worked there for 14 years and I came to know about his story. I didn't realise at the time that I had this Romani ancestry. It came as quite a shock when I found out about my Romani ancestry. I suddenly realised that that persecution could have happened to my family. They could have been killed just as easily as my boss' family had been.

*Which community do you most identify with?*

I was brought up outside of the Romani community but parts of it (I now recognise) were part of that Romani community particularly with some of my aunts. I didn't meet my auntie Rowena until I was 11 and I found that very strange. She was the most outrageous person, very unpredictable. One of the pieces I've written includes a story about a walk that I took with her through a wood to see a friend of hers and I describe the journey. As we were walking through this bluebell wood she said, in an offhand way, (which was her strange sense of humour), she said, "watch out for adders," this did nothing to comfort me whatsoever. Thinking about that now, by saying that, it made me more attentive to the surroundings I was in. The bluebell's and the scent of the bluebells, the fact that the ferns sort of curled up and every one of those I thought was some kind of snake trying to get me.

Then when we got to the other side of the wood, there was a three legged collie dog that came bounding towards us that belonged to her friend, as I found out later. But I didn't realise that there was anything wrong with it at the time, anything wrong with the dog. It was only when it got closer that I realised that it was missing a front leg. But that didn't

really faze me or anything because my mother was born with a disability. When she was born both her feet were facing backwards, and she had operations when she was a baby to correct them. She had one foot that was bigger than the other but it didn't make any difference. That's just how she was and I accepted that, and that's how I've always sort of viewed life and people. You just accept them as they are. Everyone deserves a chance.

*Which community has had the most influence on you would you say?*

Before 2014 it would be the gorjer community because that's just how I was raised. My family was quite close. My grandparents lived in the next village and so did one of my dad's half sisters. So there was a whole collection of relatives in quite a small area. Then after 2014, when I found new cousins and I told my family's history to the RCAC, I was invited to attend a symposium in Swansea. I wasn't quite sure what to expect or how I would be accepted. Everyone there was very welcoming and I felt like I belonged somewhere, that I belonged to a community at last. I'd been searching for something and I didn't know quite what it was that was missing. When I was at college I described it as "a distilled memory." When I was talking about this to the RCAC, Chris Lee mentioned about Carl Jung's theory of synchronicity. That's something that I've really taken on board now. There are just far too many incidents of things that I've found and experienced that have backed that up.

*How does it feel to be part of an LGBTQ+ Romani community?*

It's amazing really because it's fairly new for the Romani community. It's a new visibility within the community. It wasn't until a recent zoom meeting that I had really considered that I could be part of that. I outed myself in a zoom meeting. I'd been thinking about how I could integrate the gay part of my being, the gay part of my personality, into the work that I was producing. It was combining both sculptural and textile art pieces that brought together both the history of my family and myself, Romani issues and my gay sensibility really.

*How do you feel that being gay and Romani has affected your work and career?*

In terms of my work as a commercial embroiderer it hasn't really affected that, but when I found out about my Romani ancestry in 2014 it produced an out flowing of work. I needed to come to terms with what it meant to be Romani and how I could approach being Romani without appropriation as I hadn't been brought up within the community. How I resolved it was to use the psychological aspect of having a Romani community suppressed from my childhood, and how it affected my family. It has caused a lot of psychological problems within my family, mainly because the family was split up after my grandmother died. I didn't know my grandfather or grandmother on my father's side. My grandmother died in 1927. They'd been living in a vardo (wooden caravan) in Gelligaer and my grandmother died in the workhouse in Merthyr Tydfil. She was buried in a grave with two other people that she didn't know. There were five children and my father was the youngest. He was brought up by his aunt and uncle. Two of the girls went with their father and two were put into a care home. It greatly affected how the family as a unit functioned.

*Is there anything else you'd like to talk about?*

I think there's the hidden aspect of people who've only found their Romani or Traveller Ancestry late in life and how they react to it. I've come across a lot of people who have discovered this part of their life and if they have artistic talents whether they be in music, photography, painting or sculpture there always seems to be this big out flowing of work to try and work out what it means to them and how they can resolve being part of that community. Everyone's different but everyone seems to know that something was missing.

One of the pieces of my work that will include my gay aspect relates to when I was in primary school. It will be entitled "the pink medicine." It's called the pink medicine because there was a teacher who picked on me when I was in primary school. So much so that I developed a psychosomatic cough and sniff. The doctor prescribed this pink medicine and so there will be a representation, a 3D representation, of this bottle of

pink medicine which was very much like a placebo medicine. I can remember it quite clearly. It was extremely thick like wallpaper paste but brilliant pink and sticky. I got through bottles and bottles of that and it was only when the teacher was involved in a car accident, she wasn't seriously injured but she left teaching, that it sort of disappeared. I didn't have the cough and sniff anymore. I also had warts around the ends of my fingers when I was at primary school and I was very conscious of that, and that I had black hair. One of my cousins had black hair as well but no one else in the school did and I felt very self conscious.

There's a photograph of me that I'm going to use and embroider on top of, a sort of flesh coloured mask with just the eyes showing through. You're able in digitized embroidery to make lines so you can define the nose and the mouth. But basically it's just a covering and that's how I felt, being different. A difference that I couldn't express; I couldn't tell anyone that I was gay. It was criminalised then, in the sixties. Then with various aspects of being gay, like with Aids and the government campaign and things like that, you just sort of felt that if you came out, if you told any people it would make life so much more difficult for yourself. So I sort of hid it really. Being in a rural location it was difficult to find people to talk to about it or people that you felt you might be able to trust.

## **Demetrio Gomez**

Demetrio Gomez Avila was born in 1970 in Tijuana (Mexico) and is of mixed ethnicity. Demetrio works in training and education as a Roma rights activist and trainer specialising in intersectionality, minorities and identity. He has actively participated in the defence of human rights since he was a teenager, particularly in relation to the minorities to which he belongs, contributing to an inclusive, decolonised and intersectional discourse. His work focuses on the international level. He has worked on numerous occasions as an expert and trainer for the Council of Europe, the European Commission and different international organisations and institutions linked to racialised activism, the fight against xenophobia, racism, anti-fascism and intersectionality. He is currently a member of the European LGBTIQ+ Roma Platform and president of 'Ververipen, Roms for Diversity'. Demetrio is the founder of the blog Baxtalo.



*Where are you based?*

I live in Valencia in Spain. My work in general is more international. At the moment I am concentrating more on Spain. I have started to become more of an international activist rather than a local activist.

*Where are you from originally?*

This is a little complicated because if we speak about countries I can say that I am half Mexican and half Spanish. If I need to speak about ethnic origins we start with the cosmos because I have Romani origins, Indigenous origins too for my part of Mexico. I have a very complex identity with lots of different parts and I love all the parts of my personality.

*How would you describe your sexuality?*

I think we are very conscious that we are sexual beings. We have sexual compulsions but what is the nature of these compulsions and these desires that you have when you start to have a sexual life or you start to have more sexual preference for one than the other? I am conscious that I am gay but I am also conscious that I was different from the beginning because I felt different things about what masculinity is, and what masculinity is not. For me as a child I didn't understand so much this difference because I remember that my superhero was not a superhero but a superheroine. It was Wonder Woman. I remember when I was a child I identified with this girl more than all the other superheroes. I think for me the question of gender is very diffuse, something not very fixed.

*When did you first realise that you were different?*

I am all the time different. Why? Because I was born in Mexico and I lived in Mexico only until I was five years old. After that I came to Spain. I suppose that if I was living in Mexico I would be a Spaniard, or a stranger in the city. But when I came to Spain I was a stranger here too because I arrived at the age of five, I had a different accent, and at that time they didn't have so many immigrants in Spain. I am a stranger because I didn't live in the Roma community in Mexico and when I came another time to Spain I discovered, or rediscovered, parts of my identity. I think for me the

question of diversity, or the question of difference, is something that has existed inside of my soul from the beginning. I can't say at this moment I felt different. No, I feel different all the time and I think it is because of this that I am and activist in questions of intersectionality, diversity and identity.

*How was your being gay received by your family?*

Okay it's interesting this question because we are people with some age. It's different. We are another generation in another time and I think it's very different the history at this moment from 40 or 30 years ago. I didn't really have a coming out with my family because it's not only the process with your family; it's your own process of accepting yourself for what you are. In the beginning I didn't accept that I was gay. I accepted that I was sophisticated and ambiguous. I think I was more sure of my orientation when I quit Valencia and went to live in Madrid because I was away from people who knew me and I could live my life for myself. I think this is one of the important moments for my empowerment as a gay person.

*Has your being gay affected your relationship with your family?*

In my family we have the policy, you don't ask, I don't speak. My family now, sadly sometimes, don't want to see the reality. But people know the reality. I am an activist. I am a public figure but my family don't see this you know. It's not exactly that they don't accept the situation, nor that they accept it. It's like; "we don't want to discuss, what we want is that you are relaxed and you have an established relationship. I don't care if it's woman or man or what but as long as it's stable and sure and relaxed." This is most important for my parents at this moment. I think they don't accept. But they love me.

*How is your being LGBTQ received within the wider Roma community?*

You know I think sometimes I receive more negativity from the gadje community than from the Roma community. In the Roma community I had more problems when I didn't speak about my orientation than when I started to speak about my orientation. It's something very paradoxical but when I don't say, it's like a secret, but a secret that all the world knows, and I felt the pressure more beach because you haven't said what you are



and the other people don't stay directly you are a faggot, but people put pressure on you to make you feel that you've done something bad, and you repress yourself you know.

But when I started to be openly gay sometimes we have problems with people because we have a lot of different people, some more intelligent some more stupid and with the stupid we have problems all the time. I have less problems because I started as a Roma activist not an LGBTQ Roma activist. I had respect in the community for this work and since I came out as gay it is something that all the people know, more or less. When I do public events I receive a lot of support from a lot of different Roma people. I have more difficulty being recognized in the majority society as Roma and LGBT because it is more like a unicorn for the majority society than in the Roma community. In all communities we have stupid people you know. Stupidity is universal. It's not only for one group or one religion or something, you have stupid people all around the world and it's normal to have problems with them sometimes.

*What is your experience of meeting of the LGBTQ Roma?*

We started with this question more the ten years ago in a secret group on Facebook. The old technology had a lot of problems but also a lot of advantages. One advantage was to have the possibility to be in contact in one group, and you could speak anonymously. My experience in this first group was really incredible because it was the first time that a lot of Roma people had the opportunity to speak with other LGBT Roma people and share their experience. Sometimes people cried because it was the first time that they felt it's possible to be a Roma and LGBT. The problem is not to be Roma; the problem is to be intolerant, because Roma culture is not an intolerant culture. People within the culture can be intolerant but not the Roma culture itself. We need to make this separation because sometimes people that live in bad situations in the Roma community think, okay I don't want to be Roma anymore because it's problematic so they prefer to make a trans-identity and mix with others and not claim their identity because it's easier.

*What is it like to be Roma in the wider LGBTQ+ community?*

I think we live in a society that is starting to give permission to diversity—but only one type of diversity. You need to choose. Good you are LGBT. Good you are Roma. Or good you are an immigrant but don't have this global vision that contains a lot of things at the same time. In the majority society when you say I am Roma, okay. If you are Roma it's impossible to be LGBT. You need to choose. And I don't want to choose. I am part of all and I need to be recognized for all of the parts of my identity. I recognise all my parts and I need to be recognised for all my parts too. I don't need to choose if I am gay or I am Roma.

On the question of policy, when mainstream organisations start to have power they savour this power because it's a lot of years fighting, it's a lot of years presenting policy and claiming their rights. I understand this. But the LGTBQ community is not only the white LGTBQ community. If you make policy only for urban, middle class, occidental, white LGTBQ people where are the minorities in this? What is the intention of these people? Because I think that sometimes movements use minorities like exotic augmentation. We do the photography and in this picture we have one black and sometimes one Roma. It's like doing something commercial you know, like boy bands that need to show one different from another, but only for the picture because after when we need to derive indications, we lost these minorities. But it's not only in the gay movement. In some parts of the feminist movement it's the same. This is the phenomenon of homonationalism and the phenomenon of feminationism. Progressive policies from the left are often taken by the far right and transformed into something exclusive. We need to be very clear with this kind of discourse because sometimes it's very ambiguous. When people don't think carefully about exactly what they say it can be used to defend exactly the contrary of what they want.

*How do you feel that being gay and being Roma has affected your work and your career?*

It's not only in the professional way, it's also in the personal way. We suffer. Each history of diversity is one personal history of suffering because you need to think about a lot of different things that other people of your

age don't need to think about. Why am I Roma? Am I a good Roma, am I a bad Roma? Am I integrated, am I not integrated? What is my future, what do I want, what does my family want or my parents? It's a lot of different question and you need to put these questions in place. Because if you don't have these things in place, and know what you want, you are absolutely confused. You don't have the empowerment to be sure of yourself when confronted with reality.

We have a lot invisible people in the community. We know that some people are LGBT and suffer very strong pressure from the community or from inside of their families. And sometimes it's driven them to suicide. But people don't speak about the consequences of these suicides. We have a lot of victims that are invisible inside the community. We have a lot of lives with a lot of suffering because they are not accepted and because they don't accept themselves. It's not only because others don't accept you, sometimes we have something inside very deep that makes it impossible to empower yourself or be sure of yourself. All the time feeling that you are less than the others, that you need to justify yourself all the time. Not only this, sometimes if you are LGBT it's not only for you it's for your friends. Sometimes your friends suffer this discrimination too, because if you go with the fag it's possible you are a fag too; this kind of mechanism. We need to be more open. We need to be more pedagogical too. We need to have more positive examples for the people in the community now that it is possible to be LGBT and Roma; to be a person who is sure in society, sure in your life, sure in your relationships and your friendships.

*How do you feel about being described as part of an LGBTQ+ Roma community?*

I feel that we have a lot of luck in this moment because we're starting to have a new generation that are more educated. This age of information opens the mind too. We see other realities. We see the other Roma people in other countries with different ways of confronting this situation. I think we are at a good moment. We are starting to have Roma politicians. Here in Spain we have some people in the parliament and in the Congress. It's good because I have confidence in these people. I'm

confident that we are going to start to change some dynamics in society, some dynamics in policy. The only thing I ask of Roma organisations and Roma politicians is don't lose the question of diversity. Don't play the same game as the majority society that wants to have one monolithic idea about the Roma, only one site of identity to be Roma. We don't need to follow these lines. I think one of the possibilities for fighting antigypsyism is the question of diversity; Roma people with diversity. We are not a fossilised people that have had the same culture for 500 years. This is not true. Sometimes some Roma leaders start to speak about the conservation of the Roma culture, 500 years and never changing. Well it is not true. This is a romantic discourse. This is a colonialistic discourse.

## Gianni Jovanovic

Gianni Jovanovic is 42 years old and the son of a Roma family. As a child he experienced discrimination and marginalisation. As a teenager Gianni was married off by his parents. A little later he became a father twice. In his mid-20s, he came out as homosexual to his wife and family. He has now been happily married to a man for many years and has good contact with his children and grandchildren. Gianni Jovanovic cannot be pigeonholed. He is a college graduate, entrepreneur, activist and performer. For several years he has been committed to the rights of Roma and Sinti. In 2015 he founded the initiative 'Queer Roma' among other initiatives and he campaigns for LGBTQ+ people who have been discriminated against in his community. Gianni fights for the right to self-determination and for more visibility for minorities within a minority. In 2020, he decided to call his collective 'Colors of Change'. His goal is also to give people of colour and black people more space in the LGBTQ+ community as racism is also a big problem in the Queer community. Based on his own experiences, Gianni Jovanovic uses various workshop concepts to raise awareness of topics such as racism, discrimination and intersectionality.



*Where do you live?*

I live in Cologne in Germany.

*Where do you come from originally?*

I was born in Germany near from Frankfurt and my family and my parents are originally from Serbia. They migrated in 1977 to near Frankfurt. Darmstadt was the name of the city. My family were with the first 50 Roma people to come from Serbia to Germany and the governor of the city made a big party for them, a welcoming party because it was a reason to celebrate. He was a very nice man but six months later we had a change of governor then came all the big problems that many people know of from the media and from their own lives. So my family comes from Serbia and I am a Roma with roots in Serbia, and I think from India.

*How would you describe your sexuality?*

When I look in my photo album at a family portrait and I see a small child of three or four years old he doesn't look like a small boy, he looks like a small girl because my clothes were skirts and dresses from my cousins. I think I was the first child to live as non-binary. When I was 18 I was sure that I was gay. I was sure in my heart. I was sure in my body and I was sure in my in my brain. I knew that I was gay when I was 18. I was in a club with friends and I kissed a man for the first time in a small corner of this club and it was amazing. That was the first time that I had the feeling that I was home, you know, this is right, this is that what I need. So I was 18.

*Did you tell your family that you were gay?*

I've had three coming outs in my life with my family. The first was when I was 21. The second was when I was 23. The last one was when I met my husband Paul and I was 25. The first one when I was 21 was like a comedy drama movie. First of all I told my wife. I said "listen, I have depression, I'm not feeling good, and I'm not feeling well in my brain, I must tell you something." I told her that I was gay and her first reaction was "I don't believe, you're joking, it's not true." I was a little bit shocked when she said that because I was very openly gay because when you hear Gianni, when you see Gianni, how his body moves, how he speaks you can think okay

he's not heteronormative. He's a little bit beautifully different, you know. I was shocked; "really you don't believe that I'm gay?" This was a shock for her and a shock for me. We cried together and a little bit later my parents came and I told my parents. My mother made a really big drama. She broke down. She was crying. She was pulling her hair out; a real Roma drama (laughs).

Right now in the present, that's a joke you know, that's comedy, that's what I talk about when I'm on stage with my comedy act; my experience of my coming out. But it was very hard for all of us because we had no bridges with the LGBTI community in our family. We didn't have spaces to meet LGBTI people. Our people also have different problems. My parents didn't have documents to stay in Germany for ever and it was a very big problem. We had very big problems about whether it was possible to stay in Germany or be deported to Serbia. That was the reason why my family, and especially my parents, didn't have space in their reality to meet LGBT people. If you don't have bridges together, if you don't create a conversation, don't eat together, drink together... we have never been in that situation together to fuel us, to change us, to go into action together.

When I got married I was 14. My wife was also 13 or 14. My father comes into my room and says to me, "Gianni I want to tell you something. You know you are sometimes sick, you have migraine in your head, you are not healthy, and you are now 13. All your family have wives at your age and I have the idea to bring this girl together with you to make a family because you are the only child that we have." I'm the only child of my parents. I don't have any sisters or brothers. It was a legacy, you know what I mean, it was a bad legacy because I had to put aside everything, my work, my life, my feelings, put these aside to be their prince and that was a very hard situation for us. When I was 16 my first son was born. He's 26 now. I think that was the first moment in my life that I felt "okay Gianni you must take responsibility because you have a child and you don't want your son have the same problems as you, to not have the chance to grow up as an individual person." And it was my responsibility to say "no, not



with me." I had the idea to, when my children were 18 and 19, to come out with my sexual identity. That was my plan.

*How did your parents react?*

Well my parents were very shocked because my father had the idea that I was going to be their Gypsy Roma intellectual academic. I was like a prestige project for him because I was their only child. So it was a very big shock. It was very bad for my father and for the rest of the family because it's not cool to have one child in our family. You are rich when you have five, six, seven, ten children because we don't have pensions. It's also good because there are not so many of us in the world; you know our history... My father had the bad eye on him from the rest of his family because he only had one son so he had the idea to make a prestige project of Gianni and that was a very big mistake.

*What is your relationship with your family like now?*

We needed time for our relationship. I don't want to say I have a good relationship with my family, especially with my parents. Right now it's 16 or 17 years ago so a lot of time has passed and I'm getting older and my parents are getting older. We have grown and had experiences. The first ten years were horrible. We were like cat and dog you know. It was a fight every time I met my family. It was a fight, it was a drama. My father would say from one moment to the other "you are the problem in the family, you have made mistakes, you have left the family, you are not a good father, you are gay." He spat in my face; everything bad in our culture, you know. He tried to break my human dignity and every time I felt a power inside of my soul saying "no Gianni, if you don't fight for your dignity you cannot be." Then I stopped contact completely for five years. I didn't speak one word with my father.

Then last year, the first year of Corona, I had a vision in my head. I was in bed, I couldn't sleep. I was a little bit scared about the situation you know; old people dying. Because my father he's just 60 but he's not 60, he's 80 you know, he's worked so hard in his life and had so many problems that he's not 60; he's had lots of sickness and predispositions. I had this idea in

my head, "what would it be like for you to try to forgive your dad and your mom for what they did? Because now you are so educated about the problems for our culture, about racism, about antigypsyism, about every 'ism' that we have in the world, and that Roma, Sinti and Traveller people know and feel." I was afraid that my father would pass away. That he would die of Corona and that feeling was not good. The feeling to forgive him was better than that feeling so I wrote a letter. It was very emotional. My daughter reads for my father because he cannot write and it was very emotional for me when I saw this on a video clip of his 60<sup>th</sup> birthday. That was the first step to getting a little bit closer.

I have a strategy when I meet my family now. When I have the feeling that it's becoming a little dark, I leave. I say to my parents "if you don't stop I will get up from my chair and go directly in my car and drive home." Every time that happens I do it. Now my family have the experience so when Gianni comes we are a little bit smoother because I cannot change the life of my parents. I cannot change the strategy of my parents and the communication system of my parents. My family have a completely different communication system to me because I have another experience. This is a big problem so when I go to my family I turn a light on and think, "Gianni you have to be careful, this is a very difficult communication system. If you don't have the power to do it don't go there."

*What is your experience of meeting other LGBTQ Roma?*

Oh my god, Chris. We met for the first time in Prague that was so important for my soul. So important for my... I miss everyone. I miss my brothers and my sisters that I met in Prague, and that I met in Wales. We have so much together, experience and pain and problems in our present, and we don't have spaces to meet and to share the love, the big love that we all need in our lives, because we have such diverse problems in our lives. You, Chris and all the others, William, David, Lucy, Sandra everyone that I met there are my brothers and my sisters. That was so important for me. All of them are gorgeous and phenomenal people. Artists and politicians and lawyers and PhDs. Everything that we need from the white majority we have in our small minority. This is our small minority. So we

need this space for our small minority to share our experience, to empower yourselves together, to make workshops, to speak about strategies, to make ourselves more visible in the context of antigypsyism and racism.

People don't know that we are here. People don't know of our existence. It is so important that we all stand up and say we are here, we are strong, we are beautiful and we have a message to tell the world. This is my way, this is my fight and I know that every one of the sisters and brothers that I've met, that I know, that I love live that in their DNA. We must do it. Other people won't do it for us. When others make decisions for us it's not good. So this is a very big and a very important small minority of Roma diversity culture; LGBTIQ people.

*How do you feel about being Roma?*

First of all I want to say what Roma means. Roma means Manouche. Roma means human. Roma means love. It's my identity, what I feel, what I have in my imagination when I think of music, when I think of good food, when I think of strange conversations, of fighting, of big love, of great parties and big trauma in our identity; a very big strange trauma. Many are transgenerationally traumatised but we are not working with this trauma. We don't have the room for that. It doesn't matter if you are privileged or not privileged, that is the big problem that we all have. So for me to be Roma is to be proud and beautiful and responsible because we are so small and when we don't use our responsibility for our generation and also for the next generation, other people won't do it for us. It's no longer the time to be the underdog. We must rise up, we must grow, and we must use our strategies together and come together and make good and diverse projects together. When we are together we are stronger than alone. It's very simple. It's like spaghetti.

*How do you feel about being gay, what does it mean to you?*

In my past it was a very big problem, especially in my culture. But not only for the Roma culture also for the white culture and the gadje culture. But in the gadje culture I am in a position to say okay that's a problem for

gadje, who cares. But in my culture it was a very big problem especially my family because that was my identity. That was my culture. The Roma culture was my culture. My family, my big family was my culture and that was a very strong symbol of my identity because I was completely socialised as Roma, not as German, as Roma. That is extremely important for me now that I am 42 because when I was born I was the first grandson in my family. I am the oldest grandson in my complete family and my grandfather and my grandmother were so proud. We say in German, "we put him in a silver tablet with salad in his mouth." They showed everyone in the family. I was so loved by my family from my first breath until I was seven or eight years old, with so much attention and so much empowerment in a situation where they had nothing. Sometimes we had nothing to eat but I had my luxuries, like the dresses from my cousin. So I can say that that was so important in making me the strong Gianni, the good human that I want to be, to speak and to share my experience, especially my private story, with others. As I say in every interview that I give, "so many people in the world think this is the story of this Gianni Jovanovic that comes from a different planet, Pluto or Mars."

*How has your being gay and Roma affected your work and career?*

When we research academically parts of our society we can say that we are intersectionally discriminated against as people. I'm Roma, I'm gay, I'm not white, I am an only child in my family, I was in a special school etc. So I have many discriminatory elements in my identity and I cannot separate them because the microaggressions come like arrows and I must have armour, I must be strong. It doesn't matter which culture I am in, it's always a problem.

I have been working for myself for sixteen years but when I was a young student, and I was working to build my practice, I had lots of problems when I told people I was Roma. People would say "he must be a thief, why is he clean, why is he not dirty." Often I heard racist jokes, white racist jokes with that bad word in German, I don't want to say it here, you know, the Z word; these kinds of problems. It was a very aggressive experience and I became depressed. I said I don't want to work anymore in this job

and I had a breakdown. Then eventually I began my own business. Now I'm self made. I work for myself and this is a very big privilege in my situation because there is no one above, there is no hierarchy. No one has authority over me.

## Vera Kurtic

Vera Kurtic is Serbian, a proud feminist and a Romani woman. She studied sociology and communications and for many years has been an activist for Roma, LGBTQI, animal and women's rights. In her work as the Project Officer in Belgrade working in the Council of Europe Roma and Travellers Team within the Programme ROMACTED, she was involved in 'promoting good governance and Roma empowerment at a local level'. In her research, Vera mainly focuses on the intersectionality of gender, race, nation, class and minority sexual existence. Her book *Džuvljärke-Roma Lesbian-Existence*, tackled the problem of the invisibility of Roma lesbians who are denied their own identities, achieved relations and personal connections, both within the Roma and broader social communities. Vera enjoys veganism, writing short stories and photography.



*Where are you based?*

I was born in the South of Serbia and I moved to Belgrade because it is bigger and there are better opportunities for everything here.

*How would you describe your ethnicity?*

Well I'm a Roma woman. I declare myself as Roma. The reason I declare myself as Roma is because of my pride and because of discrimination against Roma people so I think it's politically important to speak as someone who is Roma.

*How would you describe your sexuality?*

I'm lesbian.

*When did you first realize that you might be lesbian?*

Let's say I was 16 years old in high school. I thought maybe I was a lesbian because I had a crush on a girl. And then I continued to build my identity.

*How did your family react to you being a lesbian?*

My parents died. I had a bad connection with my father. My mother was very angry at first and then she realised that I was happy, that there was nothing wrong, that I wasn't unhappy; like in the mindset that people who are lesbian must be unhappy. Then she started to accept it and I remember she started saying that she has two daughters, me and my girlfriend. So she accepted us in full but at first it was very, very hard. I don't have a big family. I don't have contact with relatives but that is not because I am a lesbian, it's family history actually. I am who I am and I don't want to pretend that I'm not who I am. I think maybe it is hard but during childhood I hadn't had much connection with community because my grandparents moved from settlements and started to live among the majority. And we were fully integrated in society. I had the feeling that we were different, I was different, but I didn't know how because I hadn't had any connection with other Roma. I didn't know what it was to be Roma actually, or what we have common because I was integrated. And then later in life I started to declare myself as Roma. I started to have



connections with other Roma. But connections with broader family were ruined. Not because of me; before me.

*What is your experience of meeting other lesbian Roma?*

I was very happy to meet some women who are Roma and I have built connections with them. I wanted to build connections with them because we have things in common; we are Roma and we are lesbians and we are women. I started to remember what it was to be lesbian and what it was to be Roma and that was important to me. Then I met you as well as other LGBTQ Roma from all around Europe, and when I speak about meeting other Roma lesbians I very often explain that I felt like I was home because I felt that there are people who are like me.

During my life I had the feeling that I cannot make links with people who are Roma just because we are Roma, because we are from different worlds. I attended school, I was educated, I listened to different music. There were lots of differences. I remember when I met women in Serbia who were lesbian I started to look for connections, things we have in common. I felt this also with people at the first European LGBTQ conference. I felt like we have so much in common because we had a similar history; we attended school, we are different from our society and we are different from broader society. So the people I met were people who were different like me.

*What's it like to be lesbian in the Roma community?*

It is very difficult actually. I collected stories and I wrote a book about it because it was very important to me to write down their personal stories. It differs depending on how dependent you are upon your community, your family and your community. If you are depending on them life can be hell for you and lots of women are forced into marriage. Lots of them think it's a stage in their lives or they have to be married. It is difficult. I built my life to live a life on my own, as I want to, but I know it's not possible for most people. It's very hard for me and it's not possible for someone who is very much depending on someone else. So it is hard.

*What is it like being a Roma woman in the general LGBTQ community?*

Well people don't have an image of what it is to be Roma. They don't know how hard it is. I know a couple of Romani lesbians who I think don't feel accepted. I feel accepted because it was a process and I had all my life to think about how it is to be Roma. I worked on it. At this moment in my life I don't have a problem with being Roma but I know how hard it can be and I know a couple stories about women who felt they were not accepted.

I remember the story of one woman who was attending a women's seminar, a lesbian seminar, that was organised by a lesbian group and they had a party after the seminar as usual. And she went to sleep. Nobody knows why she went to sleep. They thought that she was not a social person but actually she felt like she wasn't invited because someone had to invite her by name; "please come." But the white women just said tonight we have a party and they thought it was clear that everybody was invited. It was not their fault, but they actually didn't think. And it's not her fault that she never felt like she was accepted among the majority. That was a misunderstanding and it was very hard for her I know, and it was very hard for the organisation because they felt like they didn't do their job because they're job is to support.

*How do you feel about being a Roma woman what does it mean to you?*

Well to me personally being a Roma woman means that I declare myself as a Roma woman. I don't live in a Romani settlement. My work is related to Roma but I'm working with white people for Roma. What I have is that feeling of pride and I want to say on purpose that I am Roma maybe to irritate someone; maybe to provoke someone, to start some thinking, discussion, brainstorming in someone's mind. But I think I can also forget because I don't have any other connections with Roma society actually. I mean I have a lot of friends, I know people, I'm going to settlements and everything but I'm not from a settlement.

*How do you feel about being a lesbian?*

Well it felt like a heavier burden because being lesbian means not to be dependent on men. Like I am Roma but I am not dependent on my

community, on my family. I also don't depend on any man. It is hard in this society, this misogynistic society in Serbia. It is very difficult. We don't have any particular rights as LGBT. I don't have the right to register my family or my partner. When you want to buy an apartment you are alone. If you live with someone you are alone. If you don't have a husband you are alone. If you don't have children you are alone. That is really difficult. And I mean in this moment it's a mix match of these two, of being Roma and being lesbian.

*Which community do you most identify with?*

I don't identify totally with any of them.

*How do you feel that being lesbian has affected your work and your career?*

Well I decided to be an activist and that directed my work. But I remember during my studies I tried to find additional work and I couldn't because of my last name; Kurtic. I remember that I tried to see if that was the problem. So I said my last name was Kristic not Kurtic, it's Serbian, and they called me for an interview. It was clear. I didn't feel like there was something wrong with me, that I couldn't find a job because I was ill equipped. I realised what the problem was. That was during the nineties with big nationalism in Serbia and former Yugoslavian countries and that period was terrible—although this period is also terrible. People were very aware of who was Serbian and who was not. I started to work from this experience. I started to grow. I started to be an activist and I started to take part in NGOs and civil rights organizations and I felt like there was good ground for me and for my work. I found myself there. So being LGBTQ and, being Roma directed my career.

*How do you feel about being described as part of an LGBTQ Roma community?*

Actually I felt like I'm home because I met people who are like me. We have lots in common and I really can connect with that kind of community. The first international Roma LGBTQ conference in Prague was the first time that we had a safe surrounding actually. William Bila and Dezso Mate were there. Before that the Open Society Institute organised a

meeting in Budapest. I'd just finished my book, *Džuvljarke*, and I was invited to speak about it and I met these boys there. I was really thrilled about meeting gay men, Roma gay men, but the stronger impression was of the Roma activists who were against us. They were so closed minded they didn't want think about the possibility that someone could be LGBT from the Roma community. I felt like these people were talking about us in the same way that they are talked about by the majority. We wanted to explain this to them but it was useless. There were also some feminists, Roma feminist women, and all of us felt this is very hard.

That was my first experience and it was not so good actually, to speak with other Roma about this topic openly. I had workshops with women and I had seminars. We spoke about it even with young people from the majority. We spoke about LGBT Roma and everything but this was actually something very new for me. That was the same year as the first meeting in Prague and I felt "oh my god it is such a safe surrounding." We were all LGBT or people who were very supportive. I felt very relaxed and no attacks and maybe that was strange actually, no attacks. Like look we are speaking about being LGBT and nobody is attacking us. I remember that.

*When your book was published in Serbia how was it received?*

Well it was published by the European Roma Rights Centre in an electronic version and a women's based organization published the printed version in English and in Serbian. My first presentation was in Budapest, as I mentioned, and I thought "okay if my experience so far with the Roma community's international activists is like that who knows how it will be received in Serbia." But actually I had a very good experience with it. I think it was useful. It was very important for me because I had many invitations for presentations in Serbia for women's LGBT movements and also I had presentations around Europe so it was actually very good and very positive for me.

## **Christine Virginia Lee**

Christine Virginia Lee is a Community Champion and Researcher with the Romani Cultural & Arts Company in Cardiff. Christine trained as a graphic designer specifically in the area of media design and design aesthetics and has worked in theatre, advertising and education. In later years she established her own graphic design company. Christine is openly gay, a feminist and proud of her Romani Gypsy heritage. She is involved in a wide range of work with the Romani Cultural & Arts Company relating to health, education, racism, history, culture and GRT LGBTQI+ issues. In 2015 Christine attended the first International Roma LGBTQI conference in Prague organised by ARAART. In 2019 she spoke at the first GRT LGBTQI+ conference to be staged in the UK. This event took place at the heart of our government in Wales - The Senedd.



*Can you tell me where you're based?*

I'm based in Barry, which is near Cardiff in South Wales.

*Can you tell me where you're from?*

I'm originally from North Wales. I was born in Saint Asaph in Denbighshire. I grew up in a town called Holywell, Treffynnon in Welsh, in Flintshire north east Wales.

*How would you describe your ethnicity?*

I think I would describe my ethnicity as Welsh, with Romani Gypsy heritage on my father's side.

*And how would you describe your sexuality?*

I'm a lesbian. I identify as lesbian.

*When did you first realize that you might be a lesbian?*

Well, I find this quite difficult to answer really. I've never had a very good memory about how old I was when something happened. What I tend to do is kind of associate things with which school I was in. I think "oh when that happened I was in the infant school" or "I was in the primary or the high school." Rather like you, when we spoke recently, Daniel, I think I was aware later on in primary school, if not earlier, that I felt different to other people. I think I've felt that for most of my life if I'm being honest.

When I was a child I was a real tomboy. So were my sisters because I had three sisters and the three of us were real tomboys. We spent most of our time in the local woods climbing trees. I not only had girls as friends throughout my schooling but boys as well. I used to love the company of boys. But I was aware of my feelings I think. I didn't put that description on it, of being lesbian, but I was aware for certain when I went up to the high school that I was more drawn to girls, or women, than I was to boys. So I would have been around 12 or 13 years old.

*At what point did you begin to share this information with others?*

That would have been much later. It was probably when I went to college. It wasn't in the first year of college, more like 19 or 20 years of age.

*Is that something you shared with your family at any point?*

No I didn't. Not at that stage I didn't. I spoke to very a close friend about it. But I didn't share this with any of my family.

*When you did share that information with your family how was it received?*

Absolutely fine. I'd had various short term relationships but when I was older I had quite a long term relationship for the first time, but I never sat down and said to my family "oh you know I'm lesbian and this is my lesbian girlfriend." I didn't get my family around a table and tell them about my sexuality or hire a float and do it that way. I was aware my family knew, and it became apparent when I was living long term with the person that I ended up spending many years with; that I was in a serious lesbian relationship. But my family were very accepting of whatever I was because we're a very close family on both sides, my mother's side and my father's side. I had, I suppose, a kind of conversation about it with my mother once, and with an auntie, and one of my sisters but it was almost in passing. They really weren't bothered by it.

*How would you say that your being lesbian was received within the wider Gypsy, Romani and Traveller community?*

I didn't really have any contact at that point with other Travellers. My father was Romani Gypsy but I grew up in a house. My father had travelled when he was younger. He was the eldest of ten children. His family had moved into a house in Holywell. He'd lived in a house well before he met my mother. I had contact with his sisters and brothers but many of them had immigrated to Australia. So this didn't really apply to me when I was younger.

*And what's your experience of meeting other LGBTQ+ Gypsy, Roma and Travellers?*

In my younger years I had no contact with people who I knew personally who identified as LGBTQ+ and were also Gypsy, Roma or Traveller. But when I started working for the Romani Cultural and Arts Company I was asked to attend the first international Roma LGBTQ conference in Prague. It was the first one that had ever been held. It was absolutely wonderful to meet people who were LGBTQ and who were Roma. It was wonderful on two levels really because it was the most contact I'd ever had. I'd known Traveller families in North Wales off and on and I have some dear friends who are Travellers who live on sites but in the conferences in Prague it was wonderful to be with



people who were both GRT and gay or lesbian, whatever. I think it was also really lovely to be with so many Romani people in the same room. That's the thing that struck me especially in the first conference.

I attended a second one the following year and I felt this really wonderful kind of the spiritual connection to the people and we all got on so well. We literally did. It was a wonderful group of people. We did a lot of work. It was really good to hear the stories of other Romani people, particularly European Roma and the kind of problems they'd experienced growing up as Roma and also being LGBTQ. In all my life, I've never experienced any open prejudice against my having Romani Gypsy heritage. As far as I can remember I have not experienced any homophobia. So to hear from people whose lives have been plagued by both of those things, anti-Gypsyism and homophobia was a real eye opener for me. And we know that unless people stand up for what's right nothing ever changes. So I embraced that and I've attended other things to do with European LGBTQ Roma issues. I've really made some wonderful friends through this.

*What's it like to be lesbian in Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities and is this different from being lesbian in the wider community?*

I think what I'm aware of is that when I am with Travellers, in North Wales particularly, I think I'm quite aware that many of the Travellers, well most of the Travellers I visit are members of the Pentecostal church and the subject of my sexuality has never arisen really. But when people have asked me about whether I live on my own or if I've got a partner, that has come up twice, I've said yes and I've referred to my partner as she. One Traveller I know well, I have spoken to him about my sexuality, and he said to me it is probably better not to broadcast that on the sites because you don't know how people are going to react. So I've kind of instinctively, when I've visited them, not discussed my sexuality. I visit the people because I like them and some of them I love and I'm always very glad to see them and we have a bond.

*What is it like being Romani in the LGBTQ+ community and is this different from being Romani in the wider community?*

I don't really know the answer to that. I did go when I was younger, sometimes,

to gay clubs. This is going to sound really boring now, but I love music and I love dancing but I used to find them very loud and there were often lots of drunken people in the clubs which I didn't like. I'm not a big drinker. I went to a few and thought this isn't for me. I've been to about three Pride Parades I think in my life, no four actually. So the gay scene in that kind of way, the LGBT scene, was not really something I took part in a lot. I've known other gay people one to one or in small groups. The question of my Romani heritage I think has rarely come up. It did come up in one Cardiff women's group I was in, a lesbian women's group. When it first started you had to talk a bit about yourself and say who you are and where you're from and everything and I mentioned it then and there was no noticeable reaction to that.

*How do you feel about being Romani?*

I think my Romani heritage is just very important to me and I think it's something I've always been proud of and other people in my family are proud of. It's very multifaceted being part Romani Gypsy. I feel blessed to be Romani Gypsy. I think the culture of Gypsies, the language, this innate sense of freedom and the right to roam, even though many don't anymore, is built in and when I'm with Romani Gypsies, particularly on sites in North Wales, I just feel like I'm at home. So it's very rewarding and very spiritually nourishing to be with other people who are from, or have, that same ethnicity I suppose.

*How do you feel about being lesbian?*

Well because I am a lesbian and I'm sure I always was, probably from a young age, but I never was able to talk about it in that way, being a lesbian is all I've ever known. It's who I am. I'm at ease being a lesbian. It's me and it's difficult to verbalise it. I do find when I talk to people who've had a hard time with homophobia, particularly Romani Gypsy LGBTQ people, the hardships they've faced because of rejection by family etc, I feel I've had a life that's been blessed. I'm at ease with being who I am because it's me.

*How do you feel that these different parts of your life work together or influence each other?*

Well I think they are bound to. I think you are influenced by your ethnicity,

your family history and your sexuality. It comes together as a whole and I think it's enriched my life. I think it's enriched my life being lesbian and I think it's enriched my life being from a Romani Gypsy family. I think life would have been a lot more boring if I wasn't lesbian or from a Romani Gypsy family.

*Which community do you most identify with and which would you say has had most influence upon you?*

I think being Welsh, having Romani Gypsy heritage and being a lesbian, this has all equally been part of who I am. So I couldn't pick one out as being the one that's most influenced me if you know what I mean.

*How does it feel to be part of an LGBTQ+ Romani community?*

Well this is an interesting question for me because before I started attending LGBTQ conferences and workshops, through the Romani Cultural and Arts Company, I'd never been one for groups. I'm quite a loner. I love people. I've got lots of friends. I get on well with people but I don't like running with the herd and I never have. I've been quite individualistic from a young age and sometimes, especially when I was younger, I didn't like just being part of a big homogenous group. I do not fare well in groups. It used to set my teeth on edge actually. I've joined small, more intimate, lesbian groups over the years, which have been fine; mostly to socialise with other lesbian like minded women, but not very often. So because I've never been big on being in groups, when I started to get more involved with the Roma LGBTQ conferences and workshops I thought to myself, "well I'm not sure about this, let's see how it goes." And actually I really enjoyed it. I think it's because it's such a unique situation when you have people who are all linked to you by ethnicity and also linked to you by sexuality. I've never had that before. It was a big open forum with a lot of people, nearly a hundred people I think, and I thought it was brilliant actually. And I learned a lot and you always do in different situations. I learned a huge amount. It was quite eye opening and I think it has enriched my life and I hope it continues to.

*How do you feel that being lesbian and Romani has affected your work and your career?*

I'm 65 now and I'll be 66 in January. I've had various jobs and I think I was quite lucky in the jobs that I had. I worked in theatre and then in a job where I felt

that I could just be myself. I was lucky to get it so young really. It was when I moved to Llandrindod Wells to work on a really quite unique project that was set up by the education department in Powys County Council. They put out adverts for creatives, they called it, to work together as a team for two years to design forward thinking ways of teaching children in the schools in Powys. They were almost all primary schools actually that we worked with. So they brought together illustrators, designers, a photographer, a filmmaker and the guy who ran it was a forward thinking educationalist who'd come up from London.

It was in the 1970s and the group of people, well we were virtually all hippies. Some of us were real all out hippies and others were hippy light. I think I was probably hippy light actually. We just literally had a ball. We really did. It was one of the most wonderful experiences. I only stayed there for a year and a half and then I got another job because it was quite poorly paid. But it was one of the most lovely experiences I've ever had in my career. I was quite open about how I felt sexually, so along with most of the people we let it hang out. I worked with a woman who was bisexual, I worked with a gay man and it was a very liberal group and we worked well together. We used to socialise together. We'd go to open air concerts together like a Bob Dylan concert and we went to see David Bowie and it was just a lovely time in the seventies.

Then I applied for a job in a polytechnic in South Wales, near Pontypridd. It was a media centre and they had television facilities, radio and photography but they had no graphics input so they put an advert in the national paper for a graphic designer to set up the graphics aspect of this and I applied for it and I got the job. I soon realised that it was quite a different environment even though it was a college campus. The people I worked with weren't quite as liberal; well they were far removed from the place I worked at in mid Wales. Two lecturers that I got friendly with at the college, who were lesbian, warned me that if I was too open about my sexuality it would probably put a real damper on any chance of promotion. It's hard to believe that now but back then it was something that gay and lesbian people were quite fearful of. I spoke to lots of people in later years who said "oh my god I wouldn't have dreamt of coming out to everyone in work." In a situation like working there in the polytechnic you might've scuppered your chances of getting on in your

career. So it was a bit of a wakeup call and for a long time in work I hid my sexuality. Some close friends I had in the college knew about my sexuality but with everyone else, students, staff I never mentioned it and I never went there. But then I met somebody in the polytechnic who became my long term partner. I was in my early thirties and it was obvious then that we were a couple after a year or so it was quite interesting. People would refer to us as a couple and it felt really liberating actually because before that it felt very false.

You know you can't ever be totally yourself if people don't know who you really are and don't know things about you that are quite personal. I mean the people you are working with day in day out. So that was really nice actually. It was a complete change.

## Joci Marton

Joci Marton is a Roma LGBTQ+ activist from Hungary. He was born in 1985 and grew up in a small mining town in the Northeast part of Hungary. Marton graduated as a teacher with a specialization in Romology and was part of the Roma Program at the Central European University. He organized "Owning the Game", a Roma LGBTQ+ community Photo exhibition. Marton's work focuses mainly on intersectionality and identity politics. He is a founding member of "Ame Panzh", an informal Roma group which broadcasts content on social media to inform public discourse about minorities and thematises recent topics from a feminist / Queer Roma point of view. Photo © Andràs Jòkùti for Joci Marton



*Can you tell me where you are based?*

I'm based in Poprad in Slovakia but I'm from Hungary, the north eastern part. I grew up in Hungary and I studied there but later on I left because of my relationship. First we went to live in the Czech Republic and after to Romania then back to Bratislava, Slovakia. Now I'm settled here in Poprad. I don't work here. All my activities are happening on online platforms so basically I'm here just because of my relationship.

*How would you describe your ethnicity?*

I would say that I'm Roma. I'm Hungarian Roma.

*How would you describe your sexuality?*

I would say I'm gay.

*When did you first realise that you were gay?*

That's a hard question. I've always known that I'm different. But when it was clear I think I was a teenager, around 17 or 18. When I was a child I didn't think about sexuality at all. People say—psychologists, that when you are a small child sexual things come up in a hidden way, not in a conscious way, in kindergarten. Somehow I agree with that because I remember in kindergarten somehow I felt some attraction to the other boys but of course only in a way that I would like to play with them, or be with them, or it would be nice if they would say something nice to me or something like that. But that's a big step from thinking about sexuality and stuff like that.

When I was a teenager I started to feel that I just wasn't attracted to girls at all. I just liked girls; I liked to be with them. I liked their company but somehow I could never picture myself with them, as a couple. So I was like pushing back these feelings. And even when I was in college in my early 20s I just didn't want it to face it. So I was thinking "okay maybe it's gonna pass one day and I'm gonna be normal. I mean normal like everybody else and something is just gonna happen." The first time I think I really knew was when I was in college. I was in the USA for a family visit and I was so far away from home that it gave me a feeling of safety to go to the computer and try to look for information. It's really funny that when I was



at home I still had access to this information but I didn't feel brave enough to look for it. So basically I didn't know anything about what it means to be gay or what it means to have a different sexual orientation.

I used this opportunity, when I was in the USA, and I looked for information and I also went to dating sites. I felt safe. It didn't matter if I talked with someone like me because there was no possibility to meet them because I'm here in the USA and I'm chatting with guys who are based in Hungary. After chatting with some people I realised that okay maybe I don't know anything about it but I'm sure that I'm gay. When I got back to Hungary I decided that I was going to meet a guy and then see how that turns out.

*When did you share the realisation that you were gay with other people?*

There was not a big coming out as I remember. There were steps. First I talked to one of my friends that I trusted. I trusted her and I knew that her reaction was not going to be bad. And step by step I talked to the people who were close to me; first friends, then a couple of cousins. Then I told my brother and my sister-in-law. And I also told my parents. I just felt that I needed to tell them because it was really hard to lie all the time about things like where I was and who I was with so I used a tactic where I told them honestly where I was and who I was with. I just didn't tell them the relationship that we had. But my parents were clever and they found out.

When I had the first break up, when I was completely lost, I just couldn't hold it back anymore. First of all I didn't want to say to my parents, "look I'm gay", so it was not a classic coming out. I wanted to tell my parents, "look I'm broken. I'm broken now and I can only tell you why I'm broken if I tell you all the reasons and at the back story." So that's how I told my parents.

Later on I stopped coming out because I just thought to myself "I don't want this pressure and task of always coming out. I'm going to live a life where it's going to be visible that I'm gay and if people want to make sure, or they have some doubts, they can just ask me." It's also hard for me to stand in front of somebody and say "listen, I need to tell you

something.” So they can also help me. They can make the first step and ask me if they want to. From the time that I started this process it’s really interesting because people just get it. They just know and there is no discussion anymore. I’m talking about my aunties, my uncles and wider family members. They just received the information from somebody or they’ve just seen on Facebook, or a neighbour for example, and they just accept the fact that I’m gay and I don’t need to come out anymore.

*How was that news received within the wider Roma community?*

My parents were panicking at first I guess. I felt that “okay they didn’t receive the news happily. They were not glad because they just want to protect me and they were just afraid that something bad was going to happen to me.” That’s an absolutely normal reaction and I don’t see any specification of Roma identity. My parents are Roma and they have firsthand experience of discrimination so I think their approach is a little bit different than white parents, because white parents are going to experience discrimination only second hand through their son or daughter. But my parents know what it means to be discriminated against so they know what I’m going through in addition to my Roma identity. I think that makes it easier.

My family is a little bit mixed. My mother’s side is more like integrated. Integrated is a bad word. I was just trying not to say it but it’s more a assimilated unfortunately. They have their identity. They know that we are Roma but they are not practicing all the traditions and the language. From my father’s side it’s exactly the opposite. It’s a traditional Roma family so my father needed more time to adjust himself to this—I don’t want to say new situation because I didn’t become gay, I was always gay, but to adjust himself to this new situation. I think he was afraid of what others were going to say about it, but as far as I know everybody received it positively because firstly they knew me as a child, so they knew that I was a little bit different in the sense of gender identity, and because I was not a masculine guy. I was always a feminine guy so I don’t think that it was a huge surprise—like it didn’t come out of nowhere. Secondly the love is really strong in my family, on my father’s side and also my mother’s

side. Only love is able to make this bridge to get over it, a good love, you know.

I don't want to say that parents who are not accepting don't love their children, of course they love as well but maybe there is also some selfishness let's say, which is a completely understandable human reaction. But my parents started to go deep down and emphasised that they wanted me to be happy and it didn't matter that it's not what they wanted for me, or the kind of life that they imagined for me. They had to put their wishes or their dreams back and put my wellbeing first.

*What is your experience of meeting other gay Roma?*

It's a really nice feeling that we have so many things in common, you know, that I never felt anywhere else; only in the in the LGBT Roma community. We understand each other completely. We have differences of course, because we are an extremely diverse group of people in many senses but somehow the mechanisms are similar. We completely understand what it means to be Roma and an LGBTQ person at the same time. I can only answer this question if I'm talking also about the position of Roma people in the mainstream LGBTQ community, or the position of Roma in the whole mainstream Roma community because that makes this experience somehow a common experience.

*How does being gay in Roma communities compare with being gay in the wider community?*

I guess there is a difference. I'm an activist. I always called myself a Roma activist because I'm coming from the Roma movement. It's not a coincidence because I could also be an LGBTQ activist. I could say I'm Joci Marton an LGBTQ activist but I don't say that. It's really interesting to see that for example in Hungary there are many LGBTQ people inside the mainstream Roma community, in the Roma movement. But in the LGBTQ movement there are no Roma people at all. So what I want to say is that I was really welcomed and accepted in the Roma movement but not in the LGBTQ movement. So in that sense I feel that the Roma community is

more accepting and they are more welcoming to us and more diverse than the mainstream LGBTQ community.

*How does being Roma in the LGBTQ community compare with being Roma in the wider community?*

In the LGBT community I always felt that I am a guest so I never felt at home. Many times I had the feeling that people don't understand that I'm at the same time Roma and gay. I'm not half gay and half Roma or something like that. Somehow I felt that when I'm in the LGBT community they just want to listen to me as a Roma person. Many times I was invited for example to a roundtable discussion or some workshops, and they were asking me what does it mean to be Roma? But they never asked what does it to be a gay Roma, or how do you feel about being part of the LGBT community? That's why I felt like a guest. They just wanted to know more about the Roma experience.

When I'm in the Roma movement they don't treat me as gay, they treat me as their fellow brother Roma and that's what I don't feel in the LGBT community. I'm talking about like civil society and movements but if I'm talking about the community as friends or dating or just socialising also I felt that they think about me as some sort of exotic special something, you know. My personality makes it a little bit harder for me I think because immediately they are connecting me to something that is not necessarily me. I mean stereotypes. Stereotypes like being sensitive, in a positive way, but this can also be used in a negative way—that somehow I'm a troublemaker, a drama queen or someone that is always attracting problems.

They also thought many times that I was a sex worker. I'll tell you a short story because I think it gives the feeling of what I felt. I had a date with a writer. He's a kind of well known Hungarian contemporary writer. We met in a library so everything was like so sophisticated; how you would expect it to be. I was really looking forward to this meeting, not just because I liked the guy but also because I was wondering about his intellect. He told me that he likes Roma guys and he has many experiences with Roma guys. I was not surprised because that usually happens when somebody

meets me. I've never been the first Roma for anyone. That is a special kind of guy who likes the darker skinned guys. So we started to talk and he was asking me questions like what kind of problems I am facing in my life, and I was shocked. Why is he asking these kinds of questions? Then I realised that he had many stereotypes against gay Roma people.

He asked me to show him my hand and I reached my hand out. He was looking at my arms and he said, "wow you don't have cuts, you don't have any cuts on your arms." I asked "why should I have?" He said, "oh nothing just, you know, the guys that I met before they tried to commit suicide and I see that that you didn't." I was completely shocked because that man is a well known contemporary writer, part of an intellectual community. He is a well educated, well travelled man and if he is thinking that what do we expect other people are thinking about us. So that was a big lesson for me. So many times even if I think that it's obvious, it's not obvious. We need to tell things from the beginning again and again and again. Even if it sounds like it's really obvious, that everybody would know.

*How do you feel about being Roma?*

It's again a really hard question because I always knew that I am Roma. It's really interesting because other people have a good memory and they can tell when they discovered that they are Roma but I don't have this. I think I always knew, even when I was a baby I always knew that I'm Roma. Not just that I'm Roma, I always knew that I'm different than the others. I mean we are different from other people who are around us. To be Roma for me it's like being myself; also my family and also of course the traditions, and also the fellow Roma people that I love and that I love to be with.

For me it's really hard to describe exactly what it means to be Roma. How it feels to be Roma is an easier question. For me it's like you always need to explain yourself. I don't like to give many interviews. I always feel that I need to give more than other people; that I need to tell more about my private life and this kind of stuff. I like it when I can operate with it and use it as a tool. I like to say things to the people, messages about acceptance, about barriers, about problems of our life, and I want to be the owner of

what I'm sharing and why. I'm really happy to talk with people, especially those who are in the LGBT Roma communities, but I'm a little bit tired of explaining things all the time.

In Hungary it's like a common feeling that we feel unwanted. I think that's the strongest word. I'm sure that if you asked me one month later maybe I would say something different but now what I feel it means to be Roma is unwanted. Also on a political level so many times I feel, even in civil society, that you are unwanted and they want to do everything without you even if it's about you, but without you and that makes me really angry.

*How do you feel about being gay?*

Now I'm completely fine with all of my identities. I'm not just fine I can say that I embrace it. I live it fully. My Roma identity has helped me a lot I think. When you know your Roma identity and you are completely fine with it, and you love it, it's just another step to accept everything else, every other identity that you have. It didn't come without my Roma friends and being in a Roma community. They give you a base, they give you peace but they don't prepare you for all of the questions that come when you start to understand the structure of society. In that time your Roma friends help you out.

Thank god I was always lucky when I was in foundations, in schools, in university groups, that I was among Roma people who had the same experience. Somehow I felt that we helped each other to understand better and embrace our Roma identity. That Roma identity also helped me to accept being gay because if you see what the mechanisms are, they are always the same. It's about what you can do, what other people think about, what are the limits of what you can do as a minority. These mechanisms are all same, all the time.

*How do you feel that these different parts of your life work together or influence each other?*

I think they just make me stronger. And not just me, thank god. I see also many good examples. I see also Roma transgender women who've had

even harder life situations or conditions, and it makes them stronger. And I feel the same; that it makes me even stronger. How are they influencing other? Maybe that's why I am a sensitive person, because of the many layers that I see through. And maybe that's why I see so strongly that it doesn't matter whether you are an ethnic minority or you are disabled person or religious or just marginalised like a homeless person, all these mechanisms that you need to fight against society are really similar and they are coming from the same set of rules.

That's why many times I'm a little bit disturbed, I'm not saying that I'm angry, but I'm disturbed when someone who is part of a minority doesn't understand other minorities. If they would look a little bit closer they would see that it's the same mechanisms. For example a white gay man not understanding what a Roma person is going through, not understanding that attacks by the government or the media don't need to be believed or taken as fact. Somebody who has experience of stereotypes and how these work should understand a little bit more. Many times it seems like that which is affecting one person is painful and an injustice and they're really eager to say loudly that it's an injustice, but when it's affecting other people it's just an everyday common thing, and maybe it's justified. That makes me angry.

*Which community do you most identify with?*

The Roma community, that's a really easy question.

*And which has had most influence on you?*

That's again a hard question because being part of the LGBT community is also shaping me and maybe from my words you feel that I don't want to be part of it but that's not true. I want to be part of it but maybe it's not my place to be in the mainstream LGBT community or maybe in the future the LGBT community in Hungary or in middle eastern Europe is going to be different and when it's different I'm gonna be happy to be part of it fully. But until it changes, I feel a bit of an outsider.

*How do you feel that being gay and Roma has affected your work and your career?*

It's affected it a lot because as I said I'm an activist and I was always interested in minority issues, so now that I'm at peace with my identity and I love it, I really want to work for my community. Thanks to the OSF Youth Exchange Program I had a scholarship and I was working for one and a half years on my own project to produce visual materials for Roma LGBTQ self representation. I really felt like I'd arrived, I was at home. I would also like to deal with other issues as well but this is what I'm really interested in because it's really all about me and about my community. So it has affected me I guess. I don't know if it's going to affect me also in a negative way because I don't really try to work for profit oriented businesses or know whether they will discriminate against me. Actually yes, sometimes I have applied and didn't receive a positive answer back but it would be really bold to say that they didn't accept me because I'm on a Roma gay person. Maybe I just didn't fit that position.



## Dezso Mate

Dezso Mate is a Romani LGBTQ activist – social researcher from Hungary. Dezso gained his PhD at the Eötvös Loránd University (ELTE) Interdisciplinary Doctoral Program - Faculty of Social Sciences in 2020. He graduated as Master of Media Studies - Film Theory and Romani Studies from the Faculty of Art, University of Pécs ), having also gained experience at the Fontys University of Applied Social Sciences Studies. Dezso acted as Research Fellow and a Course Leader at the Central European University - Romani Studies Program (2018-20) and was an International Program Consultant at Community Youth Fellowship – Romani LGBTQ Project of the Open Society Foundations. He was Visiting Research Associate at the University of Sussex - Doctoral School Program - Centre for Higher Education and Equity Research (2015-17), and Research Fellow at the Hungarian Academy of Sciences – Center of Social Sciences – Institute for Minority Studies (2013-18). Dezso worked for the Equal Treatment Authority as an expert on discrimination cases with T- Tudok Centre for Knowledge Management and Educational Research Centre (2011-13). Photo © Istvan Bielik, Humen Magazine 2020



*Can you tell me where you are based?*

I'm living in Budapest in Hungary currently.

*And where are you from?*

I'm from Hungary.

*How would you describe your ethnicity?*

I have a lot of questions regarding the concept of the ethnicity. I don't describe my identity as an ethnic identity, because the concept of Romani ethnicity over the years across Europe and the Balkans became a new form of structural antigypsyism. There is a huge gap and misconceptualisation of Romani ethnicity. I identify myself as a Romani person; a person who is part of the Romani nation. I don't really prefer the framework of ethnicity. I am part of the Romani nation.

*How would you describe your sexuality?*

I am an LGBTQ person, a gay man, whatever that means.

*When did you first realise that you might be gay?*

Well that's quite a difficult question because actually from my childhood I felt that I'm quite different from others. I liked boys but I liked also girls. But over time I just realised that I liked boys more than girls. When I came out I was in my 20s

*How was coming out received within your family for example?*

When I came out I had a fiancée, a girl. They prepared and they gladly planned for me to get married to her. So it was quite difficult. In my 20s I had fiancé and we planned to marry but over time I just came to the point that this didn't work for me and I broke up with her. I met my husband in the Netherlands and I felt that we belonged together much more than with my fiancée. But to answer to your question, they tell me that they accept that I am gay but I feel by their words and actions that they don't really appreciate my identity as an LGBTQ person, especially my brothers. My mother died so I couldn't come out to her in person. She died when I was six so in this case I had it quite easy let's say. When I came out to my older brother he asked me if I was joking with him

because he didn't believe it. My second brother, the youngest, he clearly said that he didn't accept it. He always said that he would like me to have girlfriends and a wife.

It's truly heavy sometimes because when I go home to them and I bring my husband I see that they are kind of accepting it, but they have many questions which they never ask. They are afraid to ask. I'm waiting for them to ask but I cannot force them to, like "let's talk about this", but it's their decision as well. I have a sister and when I came out to her, she just said that she wasn't surprised. She was just waiting for me to come out to her.

But in my larger family it's kind of, let's say, taboo. We are not talking about it. They are not talking about it. They are not bothered with it but it's better for them, or they think that it's better to them, when I'm not talking about my LGBTQ identity. They believe that if I speak openly about my identity I could kind of influence their children's sexuality, the future of their children, and most importantly the family legacy. It's also important I think in this context to say that they are kind of, and it's not only my family, but I mean in such a society, they are really egocentric. They don't really care about the child's or the family members' future or their feelings. They care much more about the family legacy and the family name; whatever that means.

*How is your being gay received within the wider Roma community?*

This is an invisible but present question in our society; therefore I think that this is one of the main reasons why we do not have enough voices of Romani LGBTQ people in the larger society and also in the Romani community. I don't want to blame the previous generations because they had their own struggles, their own questions with visibility as well. They simply hadn't enough space and place to address the question of the LGBTQ and gender identity. In my point of view, as a consequence, this caused a really huge gap for our representation and our visibility.

The previous Romani generations were focusing much more on cultural and political emancipation which partially excluded our identity politics

as Romani LGBTQ people and questions of the forms of oppression we are suffering. It was a big issue at that time but thanks to our generation we have actually started to talk about Romani LGBTQ lived experiences in larger society and also in the Romani community as well. So we are breaking the ice and the taboos. I'm not saying that families from older generations, like from the 70s let's say, didn't talk about Romani LGBTQ identity, but not publicly, and they considered it a taboo as well. I think that it's also a big issue that they always talked about sexuality and gender issues as they thought they had to think about it in front of the majority. So they acted in a way that they thought the majority society would find acceptable.

I cannot hide my LGBTQ identity anymore and I don't want to hide myself in the closet. I want to be proud of my identities and wear these identities as values because I believe that Romani and LGBTQ identities are full of value. I think in my larger family there are also many members who may or may not be part of the LGBTQ community but they are not really brave enough to come out, because you know being an openly Romani LGBTQ person comes along with social mobility. Now I'm proudly talking about being a Romani LGBTQ person but if I lived in deep poverty without any kind of welfare or social protection then most probably I would be in the closet still and I would not be talking about LGBTQ identity because I'm sure you know this identity goes with a kind of middle class positionality. If I was under middleclass or living in deep poverty then most probably I would not talk about these identities as openly because I would fear excommunication.

*What is your experience of meeting other LGBTQ+ Roma?*

I think it's really wonderful to know that I'm not alone. When I met other Romani LGBTQ people for the first time in 2014/15 here in Budapest and after in Prague, in a formal space, I thought that we have to do something because actually we were really the first to get together and address identity issues in larger society and in academia, as you did in the United Kingdom. We needed almost the same kind of job here in central Europe. We felt that we had to do something, not only for

ourselves or our legacy, but for others and for the next generations. We know we make huge steps for the next generations and for the next LGBTQ generations, and for the young people who are suffering because of their gender and LGBTQ identities in their own community. I know that we are kind of role models for them and we cannot be selfish in not helping them or providing victim support or different services.

Talking about and working on Romani LGBTQ issues is a huge social responsibility. Of course it comes with great visibility as well which we can enjoy, you know, appearing in articles, on television and media, kind of becoming a celebrity or whatever, but this can really sometimes be depressing. When you are at home alone, or with your partner at home, nobody sees what you are struggling with because you have to show for the publicity that you are strong enough, that you are invulnerable, that you are resilient and you can take all of the harm and the oppression from everyone—by Romani people, by LGBTQ people, by hetero people, by larger society. You always have to show a kind of mask for them, that you are strong enough and that you are not vulnerable.

When you are alone at home those kinds of issues sometimes come out and then the depression can be really strong. I'm talking about this because I think I'm not alone with this issue. And that's why I am saying this. Being among the first in the discussion and the topic not only comes with visibility in the majority but also with big mental questions let's say. It's gonna be really harmful for your own mental health this kind of pioneering work that we do.

*How does being gay in the Roma community compares with being gay in wider society?*

When I am in the Romani community I am usually a gay person who belongs to them. They also feel that they have to accept me sometimes because of my social status or positionality or my educational background let's say. Openly they are not excluding, not violating but when I'm not there I'm sure that they do, of course. Being in the in the LGBTQ community as a Romani person, as Romani LGBTQ people, it's also a different story because the LGBTQ community usually kind of

exoticise or eroticise us, or we are just the wild flesh for them. We have to challenge this, to question them as to why they think about us in this way; taking our identity into that kind of sexual savage position.

It's a big, I don't want to say fight, I think it's better to say game, to negotiate that as part of these communities you will not hurt them and at the same you are challenging their stereotypes. Like being gay in the Romani community, and the stereotype that most gays are having sex with everyone and they are living with HIV and so on and so on. And also one of the biggest, not Roma specific but also a big stereotype, is that in same sex couple relationships one usually wears the trousers and the other the skirt; like they try to give roles to us like male and female.

Actually my brother also asked this, like who is the woman and who is the man in the relationship? And I answered that we are both men. I'm gay but this doesn't mean that I have a vagina. Or as a gay man this doesn't mean that I have a vagina or that my husband would have a vagina. We both have the same thing and we are men, both of us, so we don't have these kinds of gender roles. We are sharing the house work. And also this kind of who earns more, who does what? We try to be equal to each other. This is really heavy to understand or make it understood in my community, in my family as a Romani person, that we don't live in these kinds of gender roles as sort of woman and man.

In the LGBTQ community we also have to fight the kinds of regular stereotypes; that we are thieves, we are beggars, we are homeless, and we are illiterate. We have education, we have our own thoughts, we would like to have social mobility, we would like to answer back, we would like to challenge society and we have our own dreams. I think these are also the main challenges in the LGBTQ community, that they put our identities in different boxes which are of course the same as the mainstream stereotypes of Romani people.

*How do you feel about being Roma?*

I'm incredibly proud of it actually. Many times I talk about these questions with my husband and it's funny because I always say "thank god I'm not

Hungarian", I mean in nationality, because I consider myself as having Romani nationality because it gives me a strength and a proud identity. I know of course that I'm in a minority but if I could change to being in the majority as a non-Roma person I wouldn't change. I wouldn't change it for anything because we have to find our values in this identity. Of course we have a lot of struggles and oppressions but this is part of our identity, to be oppressed kind of. At the same time there is a feeling, like I know that for example you are now in the United Kingdom as an English Romani Gypsy person, but it doesn't matter in which part of the world we are, I know that we belong to one identity and to one nation and this is I think really strong and powerful.

It makes me proud and happy actually because some people say "how unfortunate that you are a Gypsy or Roma", and I just think, why do they think that it's so terrible for me to be a Romani person. They do not really know how proud I am of my identity. I think this would be a really great achievement for all of us who are struggling with this identity. Of course, many people are violated because of their Romani, Gypsy identity but we have to support each other and we have to show that we are one. Identity politics is really a huge question because I just really try to see the great values of being a Romani person. I don't want to talk about stereotypes like we are full of fire and we like to dance. It's good for them that they think like this and actually this sometimes makes me—not happy but—I just laugh at it.

*How do you feel about being gay?*

Now I can lead with stereotypes as well because being a Romani man in the LGBT community, as I mentioned, I am kind of wild meat; a savage for them which they want to obtain, to attract. This can be a good opportunity to play with these kinds of situations. Like when someone starts to pursue me because I'm a Romani LGBT person, at that point I can really, how can I frame this well, take some kind of revenge for their oppression as a society member. Because at that point, when they are pursuing me or finding me attractive, all social construction is changed. I know it's a kind of selfish thing but I think to have this kind of revenge is



necessary sometimes. They come to me sometimes because they don't want to know me as a Romani person, they want my body. And then I can refuse them and I can say no, and it makes me feel good that I can say it to them.

Of course if you are talking about the movement, there is exclusion in our LGBTQ movement because as I mentioned being an activist, working in activism and being part of the movement, it's usually white and middle class. Entering these spaces is questioning their own stereotypes and views and images of Romani people as well. Okay they say they are working for equality, to defend minority rights, for LGBTQ rights but when we start to talk about our own issues and our own struggles then they're really confused. In this sense I mention the notion of white fragility and epistemological violation. This is really common in our movement and in academia as well because answering back reflects upon their own stereotypes and views and oppressions, and this could be really harmful for them. They have to learn from us what our needs are, not tell us what our needs are.

This is also a big issue in all social movements because usually the majority white middle class tells us what our needs are, and with this kind of turning point, raising our voices and our visibility, we are shocking them. And some of them just don't want to accept it. Usually they tell us that that our narrative is a suffering discourse, that we are very sensitive. Actually this reflects their white fragility. They don't want to acknowledge that they are fragile, they are stereotyping and they are racist.

*How does being gay and being Roma work together for you or how do they influence each other?*

I cannot divide it and I don't want to divide it because I cannot say that I am just a Roma or I'm just an LGBTQ person. I think my identity is complex as a Romani LGBTQ person. At the same time I'm a man and I'm 35 years old, which is continually changing of course. I can't divide it. Of course some parts of my identity can be more present. Some parts come to the foreground and others go into the background and this can change depending on the situation; where I am and what I'm doing. For

example here in Hungary I am more Gypsy or more Roma than in Poland because my husband's family is Polish, which is my family now as well. In that context it is never questioned that I'm Roma or Gypsy. In that context I am a Hungarian person who is their son's husband. But when I'm here in Hungary and I'm out on the streets I become a Gypsy because people are just labeling as usual. It depends on the context.

*Which aspect of your identity has had most influence upon you?*

Well when I studied in the Netherlands I told my roommate that I'm a Gypsy, I'm a Roma person. He was a Dutch guy and he just looked at me and he said "okay, and what?" And I was really surprised because usually when I say here in Hungary that I am a Romani person they have different questions. They come with stereotypical views and so on, but when I told him that I am Romani he just took it as okay and he didn't have any questions. He just nodded like it's fine.

I came out in the Netherlands. I thought, okay I'm Roma and actually in that moment I accepted that I'm Roma, being Roma is okay in the Netherlands because nobody questioned me or thought that a Roma was a harmful identity. So there I learned that my identity can be really valuable and bright. And in that period I had time to think about my LGBTQ identity and to wear it proudly and tell my friends that okay, I had a girlfriend, a fiancé but I thought it time to be honest that I was gay. It is important to accept that this is your life; this is nobody else's life. This is your own life and you have only one chance to make it happy.

*How do you feel about being part of the LGBTQ Roma community?*

It gives me a great, happy, delighted, glad feeling. And actually security as well, that I'm part of an intersectional group and identity which is mine and which nobody can take away from me. I know that if I reach out for example to Germany for an LGBTQ member or to Vienna or to Prague or to Slovakia, to ask them for some help, emotional or material, they would help as much as they could because this makes us a

common group. Of course, there are huge questions like who is more visible and who is less visible, and why and why not. But also in our own LGBTQ movements we have different questions which we have to discuss and disseminate between each other.

We are in a learning process and actually we learn to respect each other and not to oppress each other. Because the previous Romani emancipation generation, which was much more based on political questions and issues, many times they just went over on each other and they caused a lot of harm to our own movement. We are respecting each other and we are open to learn from each other. I'm not saying that we are not harming each other sometimes but we have to say sorry to those who we hurt previously. We have a lot to learn but we are, I think, in a good process.

## John Maughan

John Maughan (right), pictured with his husband Albert, is a gay Irish Traveller. He is a Virgo Born in 1985, so is an 80s child. John married his loving husband Albert, who is an English Romani Gypsy, in 2019. He grew up in a family of eight with no sisters. John is a proud Irish LGBTQI activist. As a creative Male leader in the community sector he endeavours to serve members of his community. John is very passionate about Equality, Diversity and Inclusion for all, as well as LGBTQI rights. He has vast experience in the areas of Enterprise, Counselling, Psychotherapy, Holistic Interventions, Wellness and Community Activism.



*Can you tell me where you are based?*

I'm based currently in Dublin in the Republic of Ireland.

*And where are you from?*

I'm from Dublin as well. I suppose being a Traveller I'm from everywhere, if that makes sense, but I was born in Dublin.

*How would you describe your ethnicity?*

I'm an Irish Traveller from the nomadic community of Ireland.

*How would you describe your sexuality?*

Identify as a cis gay man.

*When did you first realise that you might be gay?*

At a very young age, I'd say I was probably about 11 or 12 when I realised.

*At what point did you make that knowledge known to other people?*

Well I'd probably have told a few close friends at the age of 19, but then I told my family when I was 20. I told my mum first and then I told the rest of my family.

*How was that news received by your family?*

I come from a family of lads; six boys in my family including myself. Three were married at the time. I moved out when I was 17. So within the Irish Traveller community you'd get married quite young as my brothers did. When it was my turn I moved out, which wasn't the norm. I lived on my own for two years. I never lived with a girl or anything like that. I just wanted to kind of keep myself to myself. After about two years my mother asked me, she said "what's the craic, do you have a girlfriend?" I told her no. She said "listen I'm gonna ask you straight. People are asking why you're not married." She just asked me; "are you gay?"

I never lied to my mother in my life, or my father. I always said in the back of my mind that if they ever asked me directly I'd tell them—well since I was 19 when I came to terms with it myself. I told my mother and she received it very well. She told to me not to tell my father. At that stage I

felt like it was a weight lifted off my shoulders and even though my mother said not to tell my father, at that stage I didn't care who knew.

The hardest person for me to tell was my mother. I told her and then I was like "you have to tell him, he has every right to know as you do." Then she told him. Thankfully my father's response was shockingly surprising. He was very positive and very accepting straight away, which threw me a bit off guard because I was expecting the worst.

There was never any talk about LGBT or sexuality. It was just, you get married, have kids, earn a living and live your life. So when he, I don't want to say accepted because he always accepted me, but when he made me realise that it wasn't news to him, not me being gay but LGBT the sexuality wasn't news to him, that really made me feel warm hearted towards my father. He's a really understanding man. He shocked me if I'm being honest; pleasantly surprised.

*How was being gay received within the wider Traveller community?*

A bit of both I'd say. In the early years, in my early 20s, I'm 35 now, so fifteen years ago, it was a different time to today. It was a problem and I cared about what they thought at the time, the Travelling community, because I was very much involvement in the Travelling community. Now that they're more educated they're more accepting. It was different strokes for different folks. Some cared and some didn't. But the ones that did care made it very obvious that they cared by being somewhat homophobic or you'd get some crank calls, or you'd get snidey remarks in their company. And the ones who didn't care made that very clear as well. They just spoke to me and treated me as if I was anyone else you know. They weren't bothered; they were just getting on about their own daily business.

*What's your experience of meeting other gay Travellers?*

I've met many throughout the years, many gay Travellers and trans Travellers who are still in the closet and unfortunately had to move away and live their life in private because they're still in fear of the Travelling community. I try to tell them as much as possible that "look Travellers have come a long way. They're becoming more open minded. They're

becoming more educated and more accepting.” Because it was always there, it’s just being more talked about today. But overall positive, it’s positive. Some sad stories, some suicides and suicide ideation but overall there’s a lot of positives as well. More Travellers are coming out and becoming more inclusive at getting involved more, and just speaking up more. I think social media has a great impact on them speaking out because social media is promoting LGBT rights and Travellers are educating themselves more as well.

*Would you say there’s any difference between being gay in the Traveller community and being gay in the wider community?*

Well if I’m being honest yes there is because Irish Travellers are expected to get married quite young and in Ireland the suicide rate is seven times higher than the general population, amongst the Traveller community with men. In my opinion sexuality has a big part to play in that. Travellers are expected to get married young, have a family and provide for them. In the general population that’s not so accepted. It’s not really heard of to get married young.

By the time a Traveller comes to terms with their sexuality, whether they be male or female, they’re already married with kids and the pressures of having to think about other people, and not just themselves, takes over. Whereas in the general population of non-Travellers it’s not expected for them to get married, so when they realise it they don’t have the pressures of already being married with kids. That’s where the suicide rate increases in my opinion, that’s the different I’d say.

*What it’s like being a Traveller in the LGBT community and is this different from being a Traveller in the wider community?*

It’s hard because I’m an Irish traveller. I’ve introduced myself to non-Travellers and befriended them and didn’t feel the need to tell them; this is within the LGBT community. I wouldn’t exactly say “oh by the way I’m a Traveller”, to start the conversation. But in Ireland and I suppose the UK discrimination is very high against Travellers. I personally have received more discrimination for being a Traveller than I ever have for being



gay. The discrimination I receive just for being a Traveller is worse. Homophobia is massive across the world, if you know what I mean, but it's spoken of more. I feel that discrimination against Travellers is probably the most accepted form of racism today. It's okay to say that someone's a nacker, or to say a Traveller's is a nacker.

But back to your question, yes there's definitely a difference. How I compare them is; first I wouldn't introduce myself as a Traveller because that's irrelevant if I'm gonna get to know this person. They might drop racist slurs directed at Travellers. Then I would instantly lose connection. I wouldn't be able to continue that friendship. I've also tried saying to people "hi nice to meet you", try and get to know them and then tell them straight away that I'm a Traveller so that if they don't like Travellers then it's not wasting my time. Because prior to that I'd feel like I'd actually invested feelings and time and it's just completely wasted because they don't like Travellers. It's sad. It's a bit of a catch 22 you know but there's definitely a difference. I'm Johnny the Traveller before I'm Johnny. Now I'm Johnny to gay Traveller, if you know what I mean—when I'm actually just Johnny.

*How do you feel about being a Traveller?*

I'm very proud to be a Traveller. The way I would describe it is it's very freeing and very family orientated. I loved the nomadic lifestyle. That's in my heart. I love the travelling. In Ireland the Trespass Law, a new law that was introduced in the early 2000s, means that we can't travel throughout the country. It's against the law if we do, and that's what I grew up doing my whole life. I didn't really miss it until it was taken away from me. I am very proud to say I'm a Traveller, as equally as I am to say I'm gay as well. But having said that, I'm Johnny, you know, it doesn't make me. I am who I am at the end of the day.

*How do you feel about being gay?*

I'm proud to be a gay man. And I'm proud to say I'm a gay Irish Traveller. Everyone has their own cross to carry. Thankfully my journey has been fortunate. I married my husband two years ago in 2019, who is also

an English Traveller. His family are very accepting. They welcomed us both in with open arms. I'm very proud, especially in this day and age, because the world is more colourful and more open. People are becoming more understanding and opening up their minds more. It's lovely to be identified, and be proud, because one time ago I'd be afraid to say that and now I'm actually proud to say it.

*How would you say that these different parts of your life work together or influence each other?*

Well I like the morals within the Traveller community. And the respect you have for your elders. Not that you shouldn't have that in the wider and they gay communities as well. You do but there are some lovely qualities of being an Irish Traveller, some traits, and they're in me. People say to me "oh I love your morals", and I truly believe that is what I was taught by my family through their traditions.

*Which community do you most identify with?*

Irish Traveller, because that's my ethnicity. That's what I was born from day one. That's what I realised when I was a child in school. Some kids would say they can't play with me "my mom told me about you", you know. It made me feel like there was something wrong. I was a very young age when I realised there was difference and although I respect and appreciate the general population, like non-Travellers and another people's cultures and things like that, I am proud to say I'm an Irish Traveller because I know what it is to be an Irish Traveller and I unidentified as an Irish Traveller from a very young age. I didn't feel it was wrong regardless of what people around me said.

*Which aspect of your identity has had most influence upon you?*

A little bit of both to be honest. Being in an Irish Traveller in Ireland I have influenced my community, my Travelling community by getting back into education. I've influenced them around mental health; that it's okay to not be okay, it's okay to open up and talk about your feelings regardless of your gender. In my previous role, in my old job, I was a mental health worker and my job was to connect with Irish Traveller men and get them

to talk about their mental health. How I would do that is put in place competitive activities and then from that trust was built. Then they would kind of talk to me on a one on one basis and then they'd open up a bit more. Then I would refer them to the Traveller counselling services in Ireland. That's Traveller specific counselling.

I do believe that they were inspired by me because I'm very open and I'm also strong. Some friends of mine have said to me "you're a very inspiring man for being so open and honest and also seeking support and help and resources as well." In the gay community, I suppose I've come out, I've got married, I'm working, I'm also in education as well. I'm probably inspiring LGBT Travellers that they can live this life as well and that they don't have to live in fear. It's not just about getting married to a woman and having kids or vice versa, getting married to a man and having kids. I've heard that as well first hand, from both sides.

*How would you say it feels to be part of an LGBT Traveller community?*

I'm proud because it's both my ethnicity and my sexuality coming together. We're very much there and we've always been there. It's just that people are speaking about it and coming to terms with it more now but it's always been there within the Travelling community. Yeah I'm proud. A lot of services are becoming involved with LGBT Travellers. Some services in Ireland are doing LGBT training on how to approach certain people and also pronouns, him, her, they, them so understanding nonbinary etc. People are definitely becoming more open minded. And I feel proud to be part of that journey.

*How do you feel that being gay and a Traveller has affected your work and your career?*

Well I work for Travellers. My role is to work with the Traveller community so that's benefitted me because when speaking to Travellers, Travellers listens to Travellers. When they talk to me they know my family members or if I don't know of them personally they'd know someone belonging to me, whether it be aunt, uncle cousin or whatever and that kind of lowers the barriers and it opens them up to trust me a bit more. So that's the

benefit of being an Irish Traveller and it's the exact same with being an LGBT Traveller. Because I work which Travellers it benefits me.

Having said that about my sexuality and my ethnicity, I have passion too; I care and that's the reason why I do my job. I want to see the wellbeing of my community. So there's a combination of both. I'm proud and it benefits me to be an LGBT Traveller because I understand, I know exactly where they're coming from. I also understand where my community is coming from and I also understand the LGBT perspective.

*Is there anything else you'd like to talk about?*

I don't think there's enough funding. I don't think the government understands the impact of being an LGBT Traveller. For Travellers, there's not enough funding in place for the likes of accommodation and mental health services and Traveller specific programmes. But then to be an LGBT Traveller is as add on. There're a lot of people in roles where it's just the pay check and they don't care. It's sad but it's the truth, whether they be politicians, whether they be doctors, nurses, mechanics you know. If someone doesn't care about the job they're doing, especially when it's other people's lives that are at stake, it kind of makes you re-evaluate yourself. I have to care and I want to be one of those people that cares, to try to change the world, not the world, my community first and then wider population. I'm only one voice but if it reaches someone who's in a higher position than mine, that can make change—that cares, then job well done. That's overall what I'd like to see.

## Sandra Selimovic

Sandra Selimović was born in 1981 in Serbia. She is an actress, director and singer. At the age of five she emigrated with her family from Serbia to Vienna and now speaks five languages. She began her stage career in 1994 and has become a popular actress, director and rapper in the independent theatre scene in Vienna. She performs mainly at the youth theatre Dschungel Wien, and Theater des Augenblicks, and collaborates with Karl Wozek, P. W. Hochegger, Volker Lösch and Tina Leisch. As an assertive and confident Romni, she is a champion for women's empowerment within the Roma community and is also committed to fighting antigypsyism and discrimination. In 2010, together with her sister Simonida Selimović, she founded Romano Svato, the first professional feminist Roma theatre association in Vienna. Photo © Rosmarin Frauendorfer



*Where are you based?*

I am based in Vienna, Austria.

*Where are you from originally?*

I was born in ex-Yugoslavia, Serbia.

*How would you describe your ethnicity?*

We are a Roma. We are Balkan Roma is how our parents describe it because we have a lot of influence from this country where we used to live and where my parents grew up. Yes we Romani people.

*How would you describe your sexuality?*

I would say I am a gender fluid queer person who prefers mostly women.

*How was your being gender fluid queer received within your family?*

They were in their own world and very conservative and it was the plan for every girl to marry, have a husband, have children and that's it. And that was planned for myself when I was young. And I figured out very soon, when I was very young, 15 or 16, that I don't like boys really. I tried and it was always very bored and then I kissed a girl at 16 and then a completely new world opened up for me and many things were clear. It was also very clear that I will not stay with my family and follow their rules and I had to move and start my own life.

I distanced myself from my family especially when I was young because I was very afraid of their reaction. I was hiding it. I didn't tell them what was going on. I just distanced myself when I was 16. I am moved out from my parents' house because I had a girlfriend and I was afraid that they might find out. I was also very ashamed about that because I mean I liked what I found out about myself, what I discovered with this girl, but I was also at the same time ashamed regarding my family; how they would perceive it and that's why I ran away and hid it for many years.

The relationship with my family improved quite a lot over the years I have to say. I started from time to time to visit them and also to bring my girlfriend. For me it was not necessary to explain myself or somehow to defend what I am. I just went there and they took it as it is and we just

didn't talk about it. It was kind of a silent agreement that they know what I do but nobody's talking about it and we don't have to show it so explicitly. But it was important for me to reconnect with my family because it's your family and you're paying a big price. The bill is very high if you are on your own at 16 and don't have anyone who's taking care or supporting you like an adult. It was really very difficult for me. I think when I was 21 or 22 I started to talk with my family again.

*How was being queer received within the wider Roma community?*

I wasn't telling them. I tried to be honest when I was very young. From 16 until my mid 20s I was avoiding places where Roma people were because I was always afraid of their prejudice and also because I didn't dress properly in the in their eyes. From the beginning I was more boyish. I cut my hair very short. I felt always like an alien among them, like I didn't belong there and I was wrong. That's why I was avoiding it when I was a teenager until 21 or 25, I don't know, but for many years. I think if you are a teenager you're questioning everything about yourself anyway, and you don't know if what you are doing is right or wrong, but you like it and you cannot stop it.

Back then Austria was also still very conservative and it is still now. Berlin is a much better place to live, but Austria improved in the last 10 years. Back then once a month there was a lesbian party which was always completely packed full because it was the only party and just once a month. Then after some years there started another club and then we had every second Friday another party with Hip Hop which was not so mainstream. In the beginning I have to say that the lesbian community was very, very white. I felt discriminated there and I felt also racism because also in this community I felt very different, like the way I was expressing myself, the way I was dancing, the way I was talking. I always got the feeling that they thought I was like too much, "you are too loud, you're too emotional, too wild." I was always the first on the dance floor and I didn't need to get drunk. I felt the lesbian scene in the 90s very was stiff, very, white, not very diverse and very stiff. It was difficult also in this space to feel free, or that you were really accepted.



In the 90s there was nothing about intersectionality or diversity there were just men, women, lesbian, gay. Nobody was talking about queer or LGBTQI. There were no trans. It was really different in the 90s. I remember I had one friend and she was trans, I mean he and then she was a she, but she also like girls but was trans and they really harassed her. They really discriminated against her in these spaces. I felt very sorry for her and I feel very bad still that I didn't try to protect her more back then because she was kind of a friend and I was just very shocked about the way she was treated.

*What was your experience of meeting other LGBTQ+ Roma?*

Oh my god it was like it was like a dream come true. It was like finally there are other people. It's not just myself because I never saw, besides myself, visibly LGBTQ+ Roma people in my spaces where I was. I was so happy to like finally see people who had the same experience.

*What is it like being a Roma woman and LGBTQ for you?*

As a woman you are exoticised completely and in their eyes if you say that you face racism and stigmatisation, like this exoticised image of Roma women, and then if you imagine on top of that saying I'm also a lesbian or queer for them it's like, I don't know, I think like fulfilling their porn dreams. Sometimes I don't feel very comfortable just to say it out loud because it's not everybody's business, especially in white gadje places. I don't always feel that I have to say who I am, and it's not their business because you are facing a lot of very stupid questions that they ask with a lot of prejudice and you just don't want to answer these questions. What comes next as a lesbian is that for many people you don't look proper, like if you are more boyish or more trans or tomboy with your short hair, people would look at you anyway.

I feel very comfortable with my sexuality I have to say. I don't question myself anymore. When I was younger I was also trying sometimes to be with men just to have maybe a more convenient life where the rest of society would accept you. I had a phase in my life where I was also thinking about maybe having children. Also my parents again were

nagging me like, "now you are almost 30 you have to have children, why don't you try out with a boy." I was seriously taking it into consideration. I also tried it with two guys but it just didn't work out. It was not the same. I didn't feel the same way. I felt like trapped in this role as a woman, like you have to play the girly girl and the guy has to play his macho role and I felt so uncomfortable. It was like violence on my body and soul to be trapped in this gender role where you're stuck.

Now I feel very good with myself. I don't question myself anymore. I just tell people. If I am like doing political work, or in my art, for me it's very important to show myself and to be visible as an LGBTQ Roma because it's very important to have role models for other people. This was the most difficult part for me. I felt always very alone with all my different identities. Being a woman, a migrant, a lesbian, a queer, a trans, a Roma and all these together. I felt very alone wherever I was. If I was in a lesbian space I was not 100% comfortable because it was very white. If I was just among Roma I also didn't feel very comfortable. It's very difficult to find a space where you feel like entirely accepted and people would not look at you and question or feel discrimination. It's still not easy but I found some places where I feel comfortable.

There is this place in Berlin, they are Roma activists, just women and they're very open and they're working as activists for Roma rights. These people are very lovely; like finally finding people who Roma and also activists and open and maybe also queer. In Bucharest I also found some girls working in one NGO. They also fight for Roma women's rights, and fight against sexism for Roma women. I have to say that in the last few years this really helped me a lot; to be comfortable with myself and still have spaces where I feel comfortable and where I can embrace myself.

In the last two or three years, especially with my work, I was connecting a lot with other Roma artists and many of them are also LGBTQI which was very nice and convenient for me, also just to be myself and not to explain myself. The last few projects in the last five years were mostly also with other Roma people or NGOs or Giuvlipe, the feminist Roma theatre group in Bucharest. We also connected together. I was really looking forward in

my work to connect with other Roma organisations and to build some projects together. In my private life I go see my family, they are Roma, otherwise, for me I feel more comfortable if I hang out with people who are also at least non-white, like more diverse or people of colour. I feel more comfortable with these people also in my private life.

*How do you feel that being LGBTQ+ and Roma has affected your work and your career?*

If I was not queer I would have just a very regular shallow life with one guy and I think my political interests would not be so important. In the beginning of my career as an actress I was not thinking about political projects, to have political impact, to have a message that you want to deliver and talk about and question society and provoke society. I was absolutely not that way. I just wanted to be an actress. I just wanted to be on stage and just wanted to play characters. But then with my Roma identity I was always facing discrimination and they were also very racist.

When I head castings I was always cast as a prostitute or beggar in the streets or the wife of the criminal guy who is dying and I have to cry for him at the end of the movie. This affected me a lot; to decide that I want to do my own projects. I want to work with people who also are facing the same discrimination. Always playing beggars or thieves just because I am Gypsy, or to play the prostitute—I was really fed up with these clichés. Then I met a director, she was doing political theatre, and 2006 was the first time that I made a play with Roma about Roma. There my career, or my interest in being an artist, changed completely.

Suddenly I wanted to tell our stories, to be visible and show all the problematic discrimination against Roma and also talk about my own sexuality. It took me a long time. I think the first time that I was saying this on stage in a role was three years ago with Roma Armee. It was also when we had a guest play in Vienna and all my family were sitting in the theatre. This was the first time that I was saying it on stage in front of a lot of people and my family were sitting in the audience. I was really prepared for any reaction from my parents and my family. But they were just saying nothing. They were just very proud of all our work and for all that we

created and that it was such a big and successful play. They were just very proud, especially my mother. I was very surprised I have to say, that they didn't say anything about my coming out story on stage. Since then I also feel more calm with them, like I don't have to explain myself all the time.

I know that they are unhappy that I don't live the life they would like me to have, like with a husband and children and a family. They're very worried also. It's not just that they don't like what I do. I think they're just worried that I might be alone because I need children. Family is everything, especially for Roma. Family is the most important thing in your life and I think for them this is the most difficult part to understand and to accept because they are very worried about family. They don't know another way of life. They cannot imagine having an LGBT community family where you also feel like a family, or having it with friends. This concept of life is something completely unknown for them.

*How do you feel about being described as part of an LGBTQ Roma community?*

We are still not where we could be in our own Roma LGBTQI community because first of all it's still very dominated by men. I mean when we have these Roma LGBT gatherings you have 50 men and three women, something like this. This is still something that I don't like, that it's very dominated by men. It doesn't matter if men are gay or not there is also still kind of a machoism or sexism or that men still occupy too much space in our community. I think there are many more Roma women who are lesbian but we don't know them, and we have to find them. I feel to be honest like we have to find more Roma lesbian women. I really understand why they don't want to be out of the closet. You have to face so much discrimination on so many layers—not just because you're lesbian. I feel that we're still we need to support each other more and have more compassion with ourselves. Also that men, gay men are more aware of it, but they also have to be more feminist and fight for women's rights because we still have a very sexist world also among the LGBTQI community.

*Is there anything else you would like to talk about?*

I already said that we still need more female voices in our community, many more. We have to support each other more and give each other space. Men should be more aware to take a step back and give space and not occupy all the spaces, especially for LGBT Roma people. It's too dominated by men. We should support each other's work. For example, if I know that another Romani lesbian was doing a project, like to share it, to help to be more visible. Really to have better and more connection with each other and watch out for more projects and support each other's work

## **Iulian Stoian**

Iulian Stoian is Head of Public Policies Department at the National Agency for the Roma, Government of Romania. He worked as a Chief of Staff at the Office of the President of the National Agency for the Roma and was formerly a consultant for the Council of Europe's ROMACT programme in Romania. Stoian was a Program Manager and Researcher/Expert on Roma-related issues at the Open Society Foundation. Other professional posts include Public Policies and Advocacy Senior Adviser and Executive Director with the Roma Civic Alliance of Romania. Stoian was formerly Director of Programs within National Democratic Institute for International Affairs (USA). He also served as a Public Service Coordinator and Public Information Officer within the Information Center of the European Commission in Romania. Stoian holds a B.Sc. in Chemistry, a post-university specialization in Project Management and a Masters' degree (LL.M.) in EU Law. Stoian has been involved in various European projects including delivering training programs for Romani NGOs in Romania. A dedicated human rights activist, Stoian has volunteered for various NGOs advocating for vulnerable groups, such as LGBT and Roma minorities.



*Where are you based?*

I'm Bucharest based.

*Where are you from?*

I was born in Bucharest, Romania.

*And how would you describe your ethnicity?*

I identify myself as a Roma gay man. This is my intersectional identity let's say.

*When did you first realise that you might be gay?*

I knew that there was something. I couldn't tell why I was aware that I'm different. But I'm pretty sure it started early, six or seven years something like that. Obviously I wasn't able to say what's going on. As a teenager I was more and more realising that I'm not in the generally accepted majority.

*Did you share that information with others?*

Well the coming out process was a long one. That's a very complicated question. I came out relatively late, while a student. When I was a student and after graduating from university I had my first love. It was a gradual coming out. In the first steps we were close friends then you know I think it's a usual story in my case.

*How was being gay received by other people, your family for example?*

Well my coming out process was bit facilitated as my partner and I were involved in the only LGBT rights organisation in Romania at that time. When I was invited to become a member of the their board, from that moment I decided okay this is the point when I need to assume that everyone will know because I'm becoming a public figure. It was let's say a smooth transition. In my case was a bit different than the average since I knew my rights. I knew how to advocate and I was in the position to assume my sexual orientation for the general public. It was gradual but I was becoming more and more well known in my professional circle, my friends and also in relation with mass media from time to time.

*How your sexuality received within the wider Roma community?*



Because I was both a Roma and LGBTIQ activist in the beginning most of them knew my preoccupation and those in the Roma movement knew that me and my partner were together. I also found out that people from before knew that I was gay. It wasn't a surprise that the people were talking.

*What's your experience of meeting other LGBTQ Roma?*

Since I was a student I had friends or collaborators who were both Roma and visible gay men. I was in various circles. You should know perhaps in Romania as a former communist country, as we were becoming adults after the revolution in 1989, there was still the famous article 200 from the penal code that was banning homosexuality in Romania. It was eliminated in 2000. Almost ten years of democracy and they were still forcing the gay community to stay hidden or to be harassed by the police. Even though these penal provisions were not enforced that much, within the community we were hearing about police harassment and there were some raids of the meeting places in Bucharest. People might be harassed or people might be interrogated.

There was a practice before, during the communist era, to out people in front of militia so that people were imprisoned or publicly shamed on the grounds of homosexuality. So this was the context when I was becoming an adult, exiting the teenager period and starting my first steps as an adult in democracy. There were these biases still affecting our relations. I make this introduction so you understand somehow how the relations were at that time with other the Roman LGBT people.

It was marked by social status and the level of education. If you were poor Roma and a gay man for example, most likely you were forced to stay with the peers in your social class let's say. While the others, you know, with higher educational or with intellectual preoccupations, they might stick together and, not discriminate against those with so called or perceived inferior social status, but it was a kind of socialisation within your class. So depending on your affinities you might be either in one world or the other. Myself I was in the middle, I was perceived as poor but with higher education and I had access to both environments let's say and I had

contact with both highly educated people as well as the with those with lower education.

*What's it like to be gay in the Roma community and is this different from being gay in the wider community?*

Well it's debatable. Obviously there is racism within the LGBT community as well as homophobia within the Roma community. There is a stereotype that in traditional or closed communities it's very unlikely for someone to be out as a gay man for example. Even though there are some practices, and people are discussing, or know, that some people are having relations with men; either you are outcast or you're living a double life.

I met many Roma gay men who were forced to marry, to have children just to satisfy their family's aspirations. So I wouldn't say it's very different from the Romanian society, traditional ones, especially in the rural areas where people know each other. Everybody knows what the others are doing. Right now we have an intersectional project with an NGO and I'm mentoring a young Roma Hungarian man who's living in a very traditional rural community, coming from a mixed marriage, with two ethnicities and fluid sexual orientation. He's not very convinced whether he's gay or not, if it's a phase or not. So there are such cases where people might face discrimination.

People are still staying in the closet even in 2020, with younger graduates still dependent on their parents because of the lack of opportunities and lack of possibilities to become independent, and live on their own and live their own lives without being controlled by the family. So I would say we are only scratching the surface with this discussion of the phenomenon. It's very complex with many faces. We could continue the discussion only on this ground for example.

*What is it like being Roma in the LGBTQ community and how does this differ from being Roma in the wider community?*

Well as Roma in the LGBT communities we're not so popular, you know, minority groups. To belong to both minorities this is creating an additional challenge. If you are an atheist as I am, this is a third nail in your coffin, or

you have a disability, so of course multiple discriminations are functioning. I might not be the most relevant subject for this discussion because I consider myself a bit privileged compared to others simply because I have a background that is allowing me to defend myself or I know how to react in difficult situations, and this is a different discussion, but most of the young Roma LGBT people they don't have this possibility to cope with these multiple intersectional challenges.

*How do you feel about being Roma?*

Well that's a very tough question. Obviously as with any other young person I internalised the stigma. I had to work twice as hard or be the best in the field to demonstrate that I'm at least on the same footing with the Romanians. I had the privilege to have a family who were directing me to education. I was studying chemistry. Actually from the seventh grade I knew from that moment that I wanted to become a chemistry teacher and everything I've done in my educational path was to follow that stream. So I was following through high school with this specialisation in chemistry and then the Politehnica institute with chemical technology and then I decided engineering is not for me. I was also following university to study pure chemistry.

So I had this preoccupation, to follow my dream to become someone respected and with a good education and good social status. These goals were somehow helping me to not bother with this. Maybe it was a survival strategy and maybe the fact that the older I was growing the whiter I became. When I was a teenager I was more dark skinned and when I was growing up I became more white let's say. So I became a bit, what is so called an "invisible Roma." This might, I don't know, might have influenced my self esteem and self awareness.

*How do you feel about being gay?*

Well I never thought of that. You are gay or not. I was the having an issue with understanding the so called bisexuality and since I identify myself as 100% gay man I never had curiosities of the other kind. For me it was very clear which was my sexual drive and that's why, I must admit, I had my

prejudices against those who identify themselves as bisexuals as being, you know how the stereotype functions; either someone who's not decided or someone who is still in the closet but is looking to assume this identity of bisexuality in order to cope with social pressure. It's more acceptable let's say to identify yourself as bisexual than a gay man. Traditional societies such as Romanian and the Roma communities are more eager to accept bisexual men than 100% gay men. So speaking of masculinity and gender roles in this society I knew from very young which was my sexual tribe and I never had any doubts. You simply are, you know you are into men and that's it. I never tried to split the ideas on this issue.

*How would you say that these different parts of your life work together or influence each other?*

Obviously with identity, these are the inner layers of everyone's identity; sexual orientation, ethnicity, gender. I think they were coming hand in hand and as a young activist for me it was easier to better understand other grounds for discrimination or to be more sensitive to other minority groups needs for struggles or challenges. So I would say they were helping me to become who I am today. As I said I'm an openly gay man of Roma ethnicity with no religious affiliation, so I'm not going to be characterised as a generally accepted individual. But still in my professional circle I'm accepted and I'm glad of that.

*Which community do you most identify with?*

Well it's complicated to answer too. It's similar to asking a mother to choose between her two kids. Obviously since I'm an assimilated Roma I might say that the sexual orientation is 51% because I'm not living in the Roma community anymore or I'm not the so called traditional Roma man. I'm not speaking the language. My family gave up speaking the Romany language during the communist times when it was forbidden. In Romania there was a forced assimilation process during the communist times to discourage the Roma minority from using their mother tongue so many Roman families were forced to abandon their mother tongue in order to get social acceptance. This is why most of the Romanian Roma are not

speaking the Romany language anymore. And that's coupled with the historical trauma.

During the Second World War the Roma were deported to Transnistria and the memories were still fresh during the communist time so our grandparents and our parents were told not to make waves. Everyone was trying to blend with the crowd so that they might not face discrimination and marginalization. So I would say my sexual orientation is dominant compared to my ethnicity but they are very close. As a former Roma activist and Roma LGBT activist I wear both hats and it's very complicated for me to weigh up. I would say that it's 51% to 49%.

*How do you feel about being part of an LGBTQ Roma community?*

Well I'm very glad of that. Since I was a teenager it was strange for me to see lots of young Roma men who were very feminine, as regards gender expression I mean. Obviously the general opinion or perception was that they might be gay or queer or sissies or whatever pejorative denominations were designated to people. I myself think that I am not that visible in terms of expression. I'm sort of an invisible Roma, the invisible gay man. I'm aware of my identity and I'm accepting it but as I said I was aware since my childhood that many young Roma I met, they were more what we are calling today queer.

Now in the last years we met, even internationally. We were recognising before in the Roma civic movement, at European level, that Roma ethnicity was coupled in some cases with sexual orientation or gender identity among the Roma activists. Maybe belonging to two worlds makes us more attentive and for this reason we are getting more involved in civic or human rights activism simply because we have these sorts of unresolved issues, and we need to demonstrate that we might become a voice for others. These might be some ideas we might deepen perhaps. I am feeling that this idea might resonate with other Roma LGBT activists; how our identity is putting a finger tip on our motivation to become or stay as activists in this field.

*How do you feel that being gay and Roma has affected your work and your career?*

Well you'd be surprised in a way. Because in everything I've done I was trying to be among the best in my field and I would say that this was appreciated and people perceived me as a professional rather than someone who's only raising a flag and demonstrating in the streets. So for me because I had this, and I still have this issue, I'm always eager to learn new things, to discover, to do research, and to share my knowledge and skills. So people perceive me as very easy to interact with and maybe this was making things easier for me in this respect.

## David Tišer

David Tišer is from the Czech Republic, and currently the director of ARA ART in Prague; an association which focuses on culture, education and advocacy of the Roma LGBTAIQ community. A romist, teacher and theatre director, David has been a member of the Government Council for Roma Minor Affairs. He is currently a member of the Committee on the Rights of Sexual Minorities on the Government Council for Human Rights. In 2009, David wrote a screenplay for the semi documentary 'Roma Boys - The Story of Love '. In 2011 he was nominated for the Alfred Radok Talent of the Year Award for his performance in the National Theatre play 'My Neighbour, My Enemy'. David is the founder of the European Roma LGBTAIQ movement. He holds a degree in Roma Studies from the Charles University in Prague. David is a laureate of the 2018 Museum of Romani Culture Award. He is also the holder of the František Kriegl Award for Bravery in 2019. This award is given by Charter 77 (a public initiative in the former Czechoslovakia, which tried to defend human rights). In 2019, he received the title of Marshal Prague Pride for his significant contribution to the promotion of the equal rights of LGBT people and the development of LGBT communities.





*Can you tell me where you are based?*

I'm originally from Belgium and I live and work in Prague, Czech Republic.

*How would you describe your ethnicity?*

I am Roma. I'm from a Roma family so my mother language is Romanes.

*How would you describe your sexuality?*

I am gay. It's simple.

*When did you first realise that you might be gay?*

I don't remember but I think it was around 13 years old.

*How did your family react to your sexuality?*

I think that my family reacted very well. Better than I was thinking. But my coming out wasn't personal. I shot a semi-documentary film about me and my boyfriend and my family saw it so this was my coming out.

*Has the fact that you are a gay man affected your relationship with the wider Roma Community?*

I don't know because my position is a little bit different because for a lot of years I have done work for Roma. I am an expert on education, Roma education and I have lectured about the socio-cultural background of Roma. I am for example in socially excluded localities in the Czech Republic and the Slovak Republic three or four times a week. I am in contact with Roma a lot. I'm an expert in education and now in healthcare. Also I am one of the few Roma involved in culture in the in the Czech Republic because we have theatre for example, Roma theatre. So my position is a little bit different because they must speak with me. They must cooperate with me.

*What is your experience of meeting other LGBTQ Roma?*

Eight years ago I was really shocked because it was quite new with a lot of horrible stories but now thanks to our online consulting services, another programme that we do, the situation is better and more people are involved in this topic. We also educate Roma about LGBT issues so if for example we have hate speech on social media from one person, 20 or 30 other Roma are positive.

*What's it like to be a Roma gay man in the wider community?*

I don't know because I don't think about myself as a Roma gay man. I am still David and this is the first thing I say if I am in contact with new people. So I don't know because this is quite a new question for me. But I think that the important thing is that I'm not thinking about myself as a Roma gay man.

*Have you experienced homophobia?*

Yes, after our third conference in Strasbourg I put on my face book page a picture of when we held the Roma flag and the LGBT flag, and I had on my Facebook wall more than 2000 comments and a few people were really angry and homophobic. So this is one of my experiences. But I made exhibitions from these comments.

*Have you experienced racism because you are Roma?*

Yes, a lot. More than homophobia, because first you see Roma, not gay and this is something that I usually have every day. For example if I look for a flat in Prague it takes one year. So now if I look for a flat I call my friends. I don't use advertisements or the internet or other people. Just my friends.

*What does being Roma mean to you?*

Well when I was 18 I really didn't think about what it means for me to be Roma. After that I studied Romology and so I am involved in the Roma topic every day. Now it is really important for me that Roma who are famous, or who are really good in the work that they do, for example surgeons or hairdressers, it's really important to say that they are Roma because they must be a positive role model for our children. Because we have a lot of positive Roma but our teenagers, for example from socially excluded localities, they don't know about that. So for me to be Roma it's really important because if you know the tradition, the culture and the history you know that you have to be proud to be Roma because there are lots of things and people that you can be proud of. But a lot of Roma they don't know this and for them it's really hard to be proud of being Roma.

*What does it mean to you to be gay?*

It's one small piece of me. I am in this topic because I see the discrimination and racism and not only from the gadjé but also from the Roma community. If somebody wants to live and it's not his or her choice because you are born like this, and because I am a human rights activist, that's why I am in this topic. Not only because I am also gay. As I said to you my family is really open and I have really good relationships with them so this is not about me. This is about the people who have not had the same luck that I have. So what it means to be gay for me is, it's one piece of me.

*How do you feel that being gay and Roma has affected your work around your career?*

This is also something that is different from other people because my career was started before people knew that I am gay. I was active in Roma human rights, I was active in Roma education, I was active in Roma culture and they knew after that I am gay. I told you just now that I know a few Roma human rights activists who are also homophobic, so it's really hard to cooperate with them but I am a professional so I cooperate with them. I had lots of jobs during my studies but I think all my life I have been an activist in my soul, in my heart. I had one period of time when Roma topics were too much for me. I went to work in Tesco because I didn't want to work on Roma topics, because it was really too much for me but it was only for half a year. It was like a vacation for me. After that I went back to work with Roma.

*How do you feel about being described as part of an LGBTQ Roma community?*

It was my choice because I started the national movement here and the international movement too thanks to the first Roma LGBT conference. It was my choice and I'm fine with this. I want to see Roma LGBTIQ made visible because now for each of our countries it's an invisible group of people. Thanks to our new project from the European Commission I want to see Roma LGBTIQ in national documents and strategies. In the future I

hope not to work with Roma LGBTIQ because they won't need it. But for now it's good if Roma LGBTIQ will be in each of our countries' strategic documents.

In the Czech Republic I see really big progress because before I started with Roma LGBT nobody spoke about Roma LGBT, really nobody. Now we speak about Roma LGBT more. We have Roma celebrities who are gay or lesbian, and they speak about this. We have strategic documents in the Czech Republic. Now for example Roma LGBT will be in the Roma strategy for another ten years. We have an online consulting service so the young Roma LGBT community can call or write to us and we can help them. So yes in five years we have had a really huge change; 200% because it was from nothing.

## GRT LGBTQ+ Reading List

### Books

*Gypsy Boy*, Mikey Walsh, 2009

*Gypsy Boy on the Run*, Mikey Walsh, 2011

*Multi-Disciplinary Approaches to Romany Studies*. Michael Stewart, Martón Rovid, 2011

*Džuvljárke Roma Lesbian Existence*. Vera Kurtić, 2014 Translation into English by Ana Zorbić:

[http://www.errc.org/uploads/upload\\_en/file/dzuvljárke-roma-lesbian-existence.pdf](http://www.errc.org/uploads/upload_en/file/dzuvljárke-roma-lesbian-existence.pdf)

*De-Centring Western Sexualities: Central and Eastern European Perspectives*. Edited by Robert Kulpa, Joanna Mizielińska, 2016

*Gypsy Feminism: Intersectional Politics, Alliances, Gender and Queer Activism*. Laura Corradi, 2017

### Articles

*LGBTQIA, Feminism and Romani Studies* by Jekatyerina Dunajeva, Angéla Kóczé and Sarah Cemlyn in *Roma Rights: Journal of the European Roma Rights Centre*, 2015

*The Queer Gypsy* by Daniel Baker in *Roma Rights: Journal of the European Roma Rights Centre*, 2015

*Faced with Multiple 'Values' - From the Perspective of the Roma LGBTQ Community* by Dezső Máté in *Roma Rights: Journal of the European Roma Rights Centre*, 2015

*"They become stigmatised in their own family" - Interview with Roma LGBTQ activist David Tišer* in *Roma Rights: Journal of the European Roma Rights Centre*, 2015

All articles above can be found at:

[http://www.errc.org/uploads/upload\\_en/file/roma-rights-2-2015-nothing-about-us-without-us.pdf](http://www.errc.org/uploads/upload_en/file/roma-rights-2-2015-nothing-about-us-without-us.pdf)

*Coming In – Coming Out from Inside and Out: LGBT writing from HMP/YOI/Parc*. Published by G4S for Parc Prison, 2015:

[https://www.g4s.com/en-gb/-/media/g4s/unitedkingdom/files/care-and-justice---prisons/inside\\_and\\_out.ashx?la=en&hash=1AFD50CCB5CA671720F6FC855932015A](https://www.g4s.com/en-gb/-/media/g4s/unitedkingdom/files/care-and-justice---prisons/inside_and_out.ashx?la=en&hash=1AFD50CCB5CA671720F6FC855932015A)

*Decivilising Gays and Gypsies?* International Network for Hate Studies, 2016: <http://www.internationalhatestudies.com/decivilising-gays-and-gypsies/>

Roma Boys: An award-winning Czech film about homosexuality in the Roma community. Travellers Times, 2017

<https://www.travellerstimes.org.uk/features/roma-boys-award-winning-czech-film-about-homosexuality-roma-community>

Roma LGBTQ People Talk About the Challenges of Facing Double Discrimination. Vice, 2017

[https://www.vice.com/en\\_us/article/yw3zpg/roma-lgbtq-people-talk-about-the-challenges-of-facing-double-discrimination](https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/yw3zpg/roma-lgbtq-people-talk-about-the-challenges-of-facing-double-discrimination)

Campaign launched for LGBT Irish Travellers and Gypsies who have 'nowhere to turn.' Travellers Times, 2017

<https://www.travellerstimes.org.uk/news/2017/10/campaign-launched-lgbt-irish-travellers-and-gypsies-who-have-nowhere-turn>

Romani LGBT film and discussion about *Queer: SAID* (*Queer: ŘEKNU.TO*, Czech Television, 2017. Media Voice, 2018

<https://www.mediavoice.eu/en/2018/01/06/romsky-lgbt-film-a-diskuze/>

Finding a community – Henry's story. Rainbow Pilgrims, 2018

<https://www.rainbowpilgrims.com/read/#page/17> &

<https://rainbowpilgrims.atavist.com/community#chapter-3414060>

Gypsy and Gay. Fixers, 2018

<http://www.fixers.org.uk/news/17105-11208/gypsy-gay.php>

The video can be seen on:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I9QM0wFWSTA>

*"I'm Henry, I'm a traveller, I'm a university student, and I'm gay, and it's ok. I will stand up and be counted."* Travellers Times, 2018

<https://www.travellerstimes.org.uk/features/im-henry-im-traveller-im-university-student-and-im-gay-and-its-ok-i-will-stand-and-be>

Q&A: A Media Haven for Europe's LGBTI Roma. Open Society Foundations, 2019

<https://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/voices/qa-media-haven-europe-s-lgbti-roma>

QRTV – A queer Roma TV from Europe

<http://qrtv.eu/en/>

## Acknowledgements

Thanks to Welsh Government for supporting the production of this publication and to the European Roma Institute for Arts and Culture for supporting research for the Gypsy, Roma & Traveller LGBTQ+ Spoken History Archive.

Special thanks to all the interviewees for their generosity of spirit in sharing their time and experience for this project. We could not have done it without you.

This project is 100% led and produced by the LGBTQ+ Gypsy, Roma and Traveller Community.

The interviews were carried out by Christine Virginia Lee, a lesbian feminist of Romani Gypsy heritage and Daniel Baker, a gay Romani Gypsy. Each note of their experience working of the project:

*'We've been very fortunate that all 20 contributors spoke so openly and freely about their very personal and sometimes difficult journeys as Romani Gypsies who are LGBTQ+. I've learned through these interviews how important the Romani LGBTQ+ community is to many people. I've also realised more and more through these interviews, the wealth of talent, kindness and goodwill that exists within the community.'* Christine Virginia Lee, RCAC Community Champion

*To embark on such an intimately personal collaborative project as the GRT LGBTQ+ Spoken History Archive felt particularly poignant during these current times of isolation. The archive will be a valuable resource for many who are beginning their journey as LGBTQ+ people across the variety of GRT communities.'* Daniel Baker

*Isaac Blake; Director of the Romani Cultural & Arts Company, said 'This is a very personal project for me as a proud Gay Romani Gypsy. The Romani Cultural and Arts Company gratefully acknowledges the support of the European Roma Institute for Arts and Culture and Welsh Government in carrying out this important work.'*

Cover images © Daniel Baker









Romani Cultural & Arts Company