

COUNTRY QUEERS in collaboration with OUT IN THE OPEN

SEASON 2 EPISODE 7 : Dana Kaplan

DESCRIPTION: Dana Kaplan (he/him) is a white trans person and the Executive Director of Outright Vermont and he's on a mission to make Vermont celebratory and affirming for all LGBTQ+ youth. When not working, Dana spends time making music, fermenting food, people watching, and hanging out with his spouse and their two kids. In this episode Zach Henningsen interviews Dana about living in Vermont as a NYC kid, music, finding a sense of home in ourselves, and the creativity of rural queer people.

Zach Henningsen (he/him) is a Junior in highschool with a passion for social justice and equity work. He served on a school board that oversaw- and ultimately suggested the removal of- the School Resource Officer position. He also volunteers at Planned Parenthood, and spends most of his time free either studying or playing music. Zach moved to Vermont in December of 2016 from Texas- and has lived in at least five different states over the span of his life. He believes that place and environment can shape identity to a great extent, and the shift from Texas to Vermont- while jarring- was a positive one. A supportive community fosters growth and comfort, and he believes that wherever you are, such community can be found. He is the producer and creator of this week's episode featuring Dana Kaplan.

For this episode, Dana is asking you to support The Root Social Justice Center. The Root is a Vermont-based, POC-led nonprofit organization focused on racial justice organizing, community advocacy, and relationship-building through their programming, actions, and local initiatives. The Root provides a physically and financially accessible space in Southern Vermont for social justice groups to meet AND is a hub for racial justice organizing.

You can learn more and donate on their website: <https://www.therootsjc.org>

CREDITS: Created and produced by Zach Henningsen with support from HB Lozito from [Out in the Open](#), and Rae Garringer of [Country Queers](#). Sound Design by Hideo Tokui. Audio editing by Rae Garringer. Editorial advisory dream team: [Hermelinda Cortés](#), [Lewis Raven Wallace](#), and [Sharon P. Holland](#) Our featured song on this episode is "Simple Times" by Dana's band [The Smittens!](#) Additional music is by One Man Book and Podington Bear.

[sound of door opening, creek, and birdsong]

LEO COFFEY: Hey y'all, I'm Leo Coffey in Bostic, North Carolina and you're listening to Country Queers the Podcast

[upbeat acoustic song Simple Times by The Smittens]

ZACH HENNINGSEN [Host]:

Hey folks! My name is Zach Henningsen - or Zacharie, if you'd like to be fancy - and I use he/him pronouns. I'm a junior in highschool, and I'm white, trans, and queer. I'm spiritual, and I'm an Aries sun, Pisces moon, and Capricorn rising. Currently, I live on Abenaki land in central Vermont. I have two pet snakes, a colony of hissing cockroaches, a lovely betta fish, three rats, and an Australian shepherd named Comet.

So, I've always been very interested in how place shapes experience and how geography and the intersection of queer or transness connects. Two folks I knew recommended I check out this summer opportunity, and so I did! It seemed like a great opportunity to actually explore that intersection, as well as learn some useful technical skills.

I interviewed Dana Kaplan, Executive Director of Outright Vermont. Dana uses he/him pronouns, and has been a crucial part of Outright Vermont- an organization building hope, equity, and power with LGBTQ+ youth in Vermont that was founded by a small group of queer adults. Outright hosts a variety of youth programs, as well as statewide education, outreach, and events.

The first time I went to an Outright program was when I was twelve, and it was a trans youth group. I used to live in Texas, and a variety of other places before Vermont, but I immediately gravitated towards a group of my queer peers as soon as I moved here. Even seeing an out and happy trans person two years older than me was hard to process. So when I started attending more Outright programs, especially the trans group, it was encouraging and even joyful to see such a wide variety of *happy* queer adults. I wanted to share this joy with anyone who might find it useful - no matter how impossible it may seem for you to have a happy and healthy future, you have one and it's beautiful.

So, because of Covid, Dana and I were unable to schedule an in-person interview, so we opted for one through the phone. Despite all the sweltering summer heat, I turned off my fans and sat at my desk to record. I messed around with the audio equipment, double and triple checking it, before finally making the call to Dana. I put my phone on speakerphone and held the mic up to it.

You'll hear Dana talk about the intersections of queerness and location, as well as the experience of being raised in a city and moving to Vermont, and the struggles and benefits that might come with that. I hope you enjoy, and thank you for listening.

[INTERVIEW]

ZACH: Okay, so we're recording. Just to start off, why don't you introduce yourself?

DANA KAPLAN: So my name is Dana Kaplan, and I am based in Burlington, Vermont. And I am currently walking down North Winooski Avenue, which is the street that our home base office is located at. And I just actually saw a friend of mine biking by and their little bike bell just dinged, and I looked up, and there they were. So that's, that's the specificity about this very moment that I am in. It's like 80 degrees and a little bit windy and overcast. Um, Yeah.

ZACH: Yeah, thank you. What are some of the ways that you identify, so that could be whatever you want to talk about, really?

DANA: Sure. Um, so I identify, I identify, in lots of ways. I am a twin. And I strongly identify as a middle child, I'm a Libra. I am a Jewish person who was raised in a middle upper class family. I am a person who is deemed white, and certainly benefit from the amount of melanin in my skin. I am someone who identifies as a city person who's living in Vermont, which I know we'll talk about more later. But - a strong part of myself is very much based on the fact that I grew up in a, in a city and all that that has sort of framed around my life experience to date. I also, at this point, identify as a parent, I have two kids, two young kids. And what else do I want to say, I identify as queer? I didn't say that. Yeah, those are some things.

ZACH: What's, like, a project you're working on, and you're excited about?

DANA: So one of the things that I'm excited about right now is, -one of my side project bands is called, Let's Whisper. And we recorded an album... A few years ago at this point, but it is going to come out hopefully, sometime in early 2022, on a label that's based in London, called FICO recordings, and it's an... you know, music has been a really important part of my life, and actually a really important part of my transition and just sort of finding ways to make sense of what I'm feeling and thinking through song. And so it's a, it's a body of work that I feel really excited about, and I'm happy to get to see it sort of in this next iteration of like, the public getting to hear some of these songs. So we're, you know, we finished writing liner notes, and we've got to take a photo for the album, but like, for the most part, we're, we're putting finishing touches on that. So that is something that I'm really excited about.

ZACH: That is really exciting. Yeah, how do you have like - it's probably a dumb question - but you have like, a general estimate of like, how long you've been doing music?

[soft upbeat acoustic music]

DANA: Yeah, well, I mean, I, yeah, I grew up in a family where music was definitely like always playing. Like, yeah, I think music has always been pretty formative for me. But you know, and I started like, taking piano lessons. I mean, I remember playing the recorder maybe- I think maybe. I don't know if all kids still play the recorder these days. But like, that's probably the first instrument that I ever held. But I played piano as a kid. And I think in college, I taught myself to play the guitar. And the thing is, you don't have to be super super good at your instrument in order to make music.

And it's funny, it took a long time for me to identify as a musician. I still don't- I don't even though that I super identify a musician at this point, even though like I've been a part of a band that has put out multiple records and toured and that sort of stuff, but in terms of the sort of capital M musician, like making music. I think, yeah, I taught myself to play guitar in college. And then it was shortly after I came out the first time that I actually traveled with my partner at the time to Thailand, and we were doing some, some volunteer work and, and. And I got online from like a internet cafe. Again, this is back in like 2002. And I was in contact with one of my friends from here. And and before we left, we wrote, we wrote a song, two songs, actually one about a roommate that we had that everybody thought was queer, but who was straight called 'Nate is Straight.' And then another song about having a hard time being in Vermont. And, and like, from this internet cafe, I checked email and he was like, 'look at, here's this new website for this band. And like, how would you feel about us playing those two songs that we wrote?' We called ourselves the Archibalds, we lived on Archibald street in Burlington. And, you know, he was like, "how would you feel about the Archibalds, about the Archibald songs being played by our new band, the Smittens?" And I said that that was totally fine and cool with me. And I remember feeling really envious, that he was like, up to this, like, "real" project, this like "real" music thing. And when I came back from Thailand, they invited me to sing the song- sing one of those songs with them. And then, like, the next day invited me to be a part of the band. So we've been doing it for a minute at this point, I think it was like 2003 or so.

ZACH: Wow. That's very exciting.

DANA: Yeah, it's been cool. You know, the Smittens is definitely part of my, my chosen family. And, you know, they've been, they've been all along this transition with me. To the point of like, we have our little like, monikers, and my name used to be the 'Lady

Smitten.' And so, now I'm the 'Smitten Formerly Known as Lady.' But, but yeah, it's been a journey for everyone for sure.

ZACH: Yeah, thank you. Um, so like, some history? Um, where were you born? What was your childhood like? And what was your family like? And you don't have to, like, get super deep into this, like, whatever you're comfortable sharing.

DANA: Sure. So I was born and raised in New York City, at Mount Sinai Hospital, I- so I, I lived in New York City until I was 18, or 17. And then I came up to Vermont for college and have more or less been here ever since. I was raised on the Upper West Side of Manhattan. So I didn't realize that the majority of folks were not Jewish until I came to Vermont. I, like I said, I- and I think so another part of that, I think, is just coming from a pretty large family and bio family being a close and important part of my world. Growing up, like we're very close to each other, in some ways, and then simultaneously, I think also like, not super vulnerable and closed in other ways, which is maybe true for a lot of queer and trans folks. I don't think I realized that sort of what I was navigating. Because I- I think there were a lot of ways that we sort of performed being close and then yeah, I think it's maybe one of the- one of the many gifts of being a queer and trans person, it's just sort of...the ways that we have to learn to trust and lean on each other and- and with our authentic authenticity. And so I think that was sort of a lesson I learned later, later on.

ZACH: So, where, where do you call home? And what do you think is important for people to understand about that place? And then how would you describe that place to someone who's never been there?

DANA: Interesting. I guess there's two ways that I could take that question. And one is just sort of the, the reaction of well, home at this point home is Burlington, Vermont, and this is the, the place that I have created home, the other, the other way that I could take that is really actually just like, a home, within myself, I think that I actually spent the greater part of my 20s and probably into my 30s, actually, like, always being - always like moving around and never being really skilled at staying still, and always looking for like, the next adventure and being just very sort of externally oriented.

And I, I really know that, for me, part of that is the story of my being trans and sort of not really feeling home, within myself and not not being something that was like, super safe or accessible to me. So I think that there's an interesting relationship between sort of the work that I had to do to celebrate my trans identity and sort of how that shifted my relationship to home.

I remember having a conversation with a therapist, actually, at one point who sort of challenged that notion- challenged that notion in me and asked me to look at what- what

it means to come home to yourself. And I remember at the time feeling like 'Oh my gosh, that's so chees!', but it really it has obviously, clearly stuck with me.

[upbeat acoustic music]

And I, you know, it's not like a one time thing and cross it off the list, I think there's lots of ways that I continue to explore that. But I do know for myself that as I, like, when I started my transition and and sort of as I found more alignment with, like, who I wanted the world to see. And, and sort of how that reflected my internal sense of self that my relationship to home definitely, definitely changed.

So, you know, you asked for specific descriptors in terms of like, what is home and, and, you know, like, I'm walking, like I said, I'm walking down the street. And at this point, this home is, you know, situated and situated on Abenaki land. This home is, you know, surrounded by Lake Champlain and mountains. More whiteness than I would like to see, in terms of being in Vermont. My, my, like, little specific, home is a home that my partner and I purchased a couple of years ago, and we have a sweet garden in the backyard and kind neighbors that live around us. And there's usually toys all over the ground at that home. And instruments and yeah, those are some things about about home- something fermenting, intentionally fermenting on the counter.

But I think, you know, home can also be like, yeah, being in space with people that - that you have a shared affinity with, you know, there's something especially in a place like Vermont, for me as a Jewish person, like, I find home when I talk to another Jewish person who has had a similar experience and is like talking about, you know, they start talking about their bat mitzvah or something or like, making challah and I'm like, "Oh, I, I, there's a piece of home in that for me." Or I play- I play music, I play in an indie pop band, and home might be like, connecting with people about that, or, you know, singing a song together or something.

[dreamy calm acoustic music]

[EPISODE BREAK]

HB LOZITO [Host]:

Hey friends, I'm HB Lozito, with Out in the Open. Because we know the impact of colonization on people, land, and resources, we're encouraging our white listeners with access to wealth to engage in an ongoing process of reparations. So, during each episode break, we're asking our white listeners who have extra funds to donate to

projects founded and led by queer and trans Black and Indigenous folks and people of color.

Today, Dana is asking you to support The Root Social Justice Center. The Root is a Vermont based poc-led nonprofit organization founded on racial justice organizing, community advocacy, and relationship building through their programming actions and local initiatives. The Root provides a physically and financially accessible space in Southern Vermont for social justice groups to meet and is a hub for racial justice organizing. They prioritize people of color leadership and shifting resources to people of color led racial justice work, and they operate collectively to sustain a space that strives to be free of oppression, harm and injustice. The link to their website where you can donate and learn more about their work is in the episode notes and over on our websites at countryqueers.com and weareoutintheopen.org.

Now, back to Zach's interview with Dana.

[END EPISODE BREAK]

ZACH: So when did you first know that you're queer?

DANA: For me, at least in my, in my experience, there have been many coming- coming outs, you know, like, I mean, in some ways, I come out still on a regular basis, depending on how other folks are or not clocking me or, you know, based on different levels of understanding. So, it's definitely not linear.

I think the part of me that was the part of me that super cared about, like, what other people thought and not wanting to rock the boat, and not wanting other people to feel uncomfortable, sort of, like putting other people's sense of comfort before my own. Made it so that I didn't come out for a while, I feel like it was very easy for me to just focus on, like, other people's needs and interests and wants and stuff, or what I thought they were because like, I mean, at this point, I think, you know, like I, I, I think that I said this when we maybe couldn't hear each other, but like, I have incredibly supportive family and chosen family and friends and feel lucky to have a big group of folks in my community who, you know, love and support me. And like, being being trans and being queer is not what they- at least not what my like bio family would have said that this is their, this is what they hope for me, I think what they have always hoped for me is to be happy. And then and what that looked like, has been different than, than what we may have thought at different points in my life.

So yeah! Yeah. I think in terms of like, what I would say, what I would say about that is just like, hoping for other folks to be able to find a person or, or a place where, um, where you get to try things on and explore and where that is great, and where you are, like supported and loved regardless.

[dreamy music box-like music]

ZACH: So like, Burlington in terms of like, Vermont is like 'the city.' But like, to people from outside is Vermont, it's like, a very small town. So it's that interesting dichotomy. How do you think that transition from living in like, a super big city, to coming to Vermont, how do you feel it impacted you like, in general? And then do you think there's any way like, around queer identities that that had an impact on or like, was notable to?

DANA: Mmmm, Mmhmm, Sure. Yeah, I think that the geography of where we are, is, is super formative. I think it's not a it's not an accident that I left New York City. I mean, in some ways, it's ironic, right? Like, I left this big thriving city to come to Vermont to have some autonomy. Which is just funny and interesting. Yeah, I think that and also similarly, like, if I just track back, like, smooching a girl for the first time and having that be when I was in Australia, like as far away as I could possibly be. I think that just says something about, like, for myself, at least needing to- needing to be in a place where there weren't like, previously held expectations of who I was going to be in order to in order to come out. You know, I think... yeah, and I, you know, I, I think, like for a lot of queer and trans folks that like, some of the examples that I got to see of what, what my gender and sexuality could look like, came from being in public spaces either being in bars in- in queer bars in, in New York City. At- you know, in Vermont, it was, yeah, it was going to the going to the TIC conference. And then also, like reading books, you know, I remember reading Kate Bornstein's, like, 'My Gender Workbook' and like working through that book as a way to make sense of, of myself. So, so, city vs. rural, I certainly recognize the ways that like, informing our queer and trans selves, looks looks different across a city or a more rural landscape.

ZACH: I think that's a really helpful answer. And it kind of goes into the next question. So did living in like a rural place, do you think it makes made it harder to come out sometimes, versus being in a city? Or do you think it makes it harder to be your like, full, authentic self in your community than if you lived in like a big city?

DANA: I remember having a conversation with a with an ex partner, my first real like, serious, queer relationship. And we were talking, and I was - or maybe it was my second real relationship, but I was 20 or so. And I remember having a conversation and this human grew up in Vermont, and just being soooo.... It was really interesting just to clock the ways that we were really differently oriented in terms of our type of play. And specifically, like, this human was really imaginative and talked a lot about the route of

like, growing up in Vermont, and just being outside in their backyard for hours every day. And sort of juxtaposed against my upbringing, which was like very structured play, and a lot of activities and sort of moving from, you know, going after school to dance class to like, very structured play at the playground and like, yeah.

There's so many different pieces of how we become who we are. But I think that, for me, being in a more rural space, farther away from sort of, you know, home- home expectations was, was really helpful to my coming out. And I think also, like, a piece of being queer and trans in a rural space is, is like, creativity and innovation. I think that like, you know, there, I mean.... Burlington, for example, like at this point, there's not a designated queer, queer bar as a- as just an example of like, one of the ways that we find community and social connection and like, the spaces that we gather in and so instead, it's like, you know, creating queer and trans space, in other ways, and in other in other formats. And like, there's something that I think is, is really cool and exciting and joyful about that. There's a different level of... Yeah, a different level of innovation and creativity that often accompanies more rural spaces.

And obviously also like, again, like, that's, I'm just I'm also really aware of, of intersectionality. And like, for myself as a white person, and as a trans masculine person, like, I definitely moved through the world with a really different level of assumed and afforded safety and comfort, than fellow BIPOC community members who are queer and or trans, like, there's a different level of, of scrutiny that is not placed on me based on some of the other pieces of my identity. And so like, yeah, I think there's benefits, and there's also real limitations and real pieces of threat, of scarcity that like, I don't have to navigate as a, as a white person who is also queer and trans. So it's complicated, right? Like, it's all...it's messy and complicated.

ZACH: Yeah, that's definitely true. For me think that like, at least how, for me, like, Outright has been that, like, that innovation, in motion. Like, there's not a lot of like, queer youth spaces that I think are like, normally a thing. And Outright, like, definitely provides that for folks. Which is really amazing.

[soft dreamy music-box like song]

DANA: Yeah, it feels. It just, yeah, it feels super necessary, right? Like, it's not, it's not optional. It's, it's, it's critical. So super happy to be a part of, you know, a voice for like, hey, let's, let's make this happen. And look to folks like you to say, here's what we want it to look like, you know, so.

ZACH: Yeah.

DANA: Yeah.

ZACH: Um, what is one thing you'd want to say to like other rural or small town queer folk who are struggling or just like, in general. Is there a message you'd like to share?

DANA: I mean, I think one of the things that I may have said, that may we may have captured on the recording or maybe not, was just like, the importance of, of finding your people. And that, like, gosh, I just, I just remember for myself, like having to struggle so much with- with I don't know, I mean, really internalized homophobia and transphobia. Right, that like this thing is, 'it's a valid option, but it's not a valid option for me.' Or, like, 'I'm not, you know, my experience isn't super, like binary trans person. So therefore, I'm not trans enough.' Like, I mean, all that stuff that's just so rampant around us and so easy to digest. And so, so hard not to take on, I feel like I just I, yeah, I have, um- I guess I have a lot of empathy and ability to, to know that that stuff is, I mean, it's just, it's hard. It's tricky, and it's challenging, and like, how do we not let those- that sort of internalized yucky stuff clutter, a sense of trust and knowing that like, there's something really joyful and beautiful about being about being queer about being trans and about like, the the lens that it gives us the work that it that it sets us up to do on- on ourselves and then really like how that affords us. Really sweet and beautiful connections with other humans. Like I don't, I wouldn't, I wouldn't trade it for the world.

So, um. I don't know if that's helpful for anybody else to hear, like, it took me a while to, to really believe that and to know that. I think I sort of intellectually knew it in some way. But to have that actually be like, you know, I can- I can be, I can be trans, and I can have a family or I can be queer and I can, do work that's really meaningful like that, there are there are possibilities for for who we get to be, and that that's a beautiful thing. And we're all you know, we're all better off when we are, when we're being who we who we authentically are. Go figure, right. It's not rocket science.

[OUTRO / CREDITS]

RAE GARRINGER [Host]: Hey there, I'm Rae Garringer, and next time on Country Queers you'll meet KD Randle. KD is a self-described "Black, southern, queer, gender-fluid, introverted, tender, lover, loner, deep thinker, learner, aspiring farmer, and builder boy." They hail from Choctaw lands in central Mississippi. And their episode is made up of audio diaries about their life, and an interview they recorded with their mom. Here's an excerpt from their episode:

KD RANDLE: Just these simple things that really ground me. The rural landscape. Seeing trees, and open pastures. Seeing sunsets over the trees and through the trees. It's just these simple things that really just make me love, love the country yo. I'm so

glad I chose it, and that it chose me! And that my folks is rural folks, country folks, agrarian folks - however you want to put it. Blessed.

RAE GARRINGER [Host]: This episode was created and produced by Zach Henningsen, with support from HB Lozito from Out in the Open, and myself. Our fabulous sound designer for Season 2 is Hideo Higashibaba. Audio editing by myself.

Endless thanks to our brilliant editorial advisory dream team: Hermelinda Cortés, Lewis Raven Wallace, and Sharon P. Holland. Lewis was the editorial advisor for this episode, thank you so much Lewis.. And thanks most of all to Dana, for sharing your story with all of us, and to Zach for this excellent interview you recorded!

Music on this episode by: Dana's band The Smittens! Additional music is by One Man Book and Podington Bear.

If you liked what you heard, please subscribe, rate, and review the Country Queers podcast, it helps other listeners find us. You can find all of our episodes and more about the project at www.countryqueers.com. While you're there, you can also sign up for our mailing list and please consider signing up to be a sustaining supporter of Country Queers on our Patreon page. This project would not exist without the contributions of our listeners and supporters. We are a small team, with a small budget, so really anything helps.

You can also find this episode over on the website of our co-facilitators of this collaborative Season 2 adventure at www.weareoutintheopen.org. While you're there, check out their rad work with rural LGBTQ+ folks in the northeast.

Until next time...stay queer out there, friends!

[upbeat acoustic song "Simple Times" by the Smittens]

ZACH [bloopers]:

[Singing] dooo doooo dooo! We go to! The outro! We're scrolling! And this is my song! Because I don't wanna start another recording!

END