Q: Describe your childhood
Januari Leo: It, it was good. I lived pretty traditional suburban middle class back, you know, growing up family background. My mom and parents were very conservative so. You know they had grown up in East Texas, both of them. So it was just kind of a different, a different world and I often pushed back on their beliefs and the things that I would and the thing that they would say. So, that was always kind of a challenge with us, was me pushing back on them. Otherwise, I was really, I was a pretty good kid.

Q: Why did you choose to be a social worker?
JL: So, I looked a lot of different options. I looked a law school and I looked at Masters of public health and public administration and business school and when I looked at the University of Houston Graduate College Of Social Work at their website I knew that this was the place for me. Because it fit my values and my belief system. I have, I had a lot of social work friends already so I was familiar with the work that they were doing and I wanted to be a part of that it was a good way to be able to effect change. And, policy and politics have always been a love of mine and the GSW had, has a political social work program so when I saw that it was just a done deal and I started my application because I knew I didn't want to do clinical work. I wanted to do community organizing and policy and you know really kind of boots on the ground person working with groups of people.

Q: What continues to motivate you as an activist/advocate/ally?
JL: The first is my kids. So, I have a daughter who is 16 and she identifies as pansexual. She came out when she was 14. Um, and just watching her go through that process, you know she's grown up in this community. You know, everybody knows her, they've watched her grow up and she is fully supported, she knows that. But, it was still a struggle for her because she had to come out to grandparents and you know other people who may not be quite as supportive. And so, I was grateful that she has grown up in this community and that she did feel supported. Now she's taking and she's running with it as well. Because she's grown up around advocacy and activism and she knows what that looks like. And my son’s 14 and he's a little bit more introverted and you know, not quite as married to the cause, but, he gets it. The second motivator for me is what's motivated me forever which is friends, you know, friends and colleagues. And just truly believing in equal rights. There's no reason that I should have rights as a cis-gender, heterosexual woman that my transgender friend shouldn't have or that my, you know, my gay friend shouldn't be able to be fired just because their gay, or be denied services because they're a lesbian. That's just for me, ridiculous and you know, it's just a moral and values thing. That I feel very strongly about. I do think it's a civil rights issue and, you know, until we get to equality then we're just going to keep on fighting. Chipping away at it a little bit at time.
Q: What is your approach to being an ally?
JL: And it's really about, it's about support. You know, it's not about being front and center, it's about being supportive. Sometimes you are put front and center and I think that's a good thing because I might have networks as a straight person that are beyond the LGBT community. So, you know if I'm saying something or I'm advocating for something or supporting something I may reach a different group than they might. So it's really about speaking up when the time is necessary, stepping back and listening and knowing when both are appropriate. But always, always being supportive, always.

Q: What is your relationship with the Graduate College of Social Work?
JL: Yeah, I love social work. I love University of Houston and I love the graduate college of social work and I have stayed very involved with the college since I graduated in 2010 as adjunct faculty, as a field liaison and field instructor. I know the people who work here. I love the students so it was just kind of a natural fit for me. So I decided to take the leap and do it and I raise money now for scholarships for students. That's really the primary thing. Building renovation, because our building is really old and a really good face lift. And faculty endowments, you know, bringing in new faculty, special programs that we do. We send a group of students to the legislature every other year and the way that I see it is I'm building an army now. So, I am helping to support future professionals who are going to go out there and who are going to continue this fight.

Q: The challenges of activism.
JL: You know it's really, it's very hard to get people engaged and keep them engaged. In my time at Legacy was you know doing government relations, was an eye opener as well. Because I was doing advocacy, especially at the state level where it is quite conservative. And the issues that I was advocating for are progressive. You know definition of progressive is you're trying to make progress. And in going and talking to people who didn't number one, didn't understand, number two, didn't care. You know, it, when you're talking about people living with HIV there's a lot of stigma that's involved with that. So, you got to get past that first before you can even begin to ask for something like a syringe exchange program. So, it got, you know doing it for six years, you know, it gets you down. When you're constantly feeling like you're just climbing up hill. What is it Sisyphus who pushes the rock up the hill constantly and then he just falls back down again and he's like constantly pushing the rock up. That's what it felt like. And so, you know, that's where the self-care and the taking a break and the recognizing where your personal boundaries lie came in because you know, I am a good advocate and a good activist and I've established a good relationship where people do listen to me and want to hear from what I have to say. And that's valuable and I recognize that and I want to honor that. So, you know, I've got to take care of myself in order to keep doing what I'm doing. But it's not an easy, easy game. HERO was a heartbreaker. You know working for candidates who you know are fantastic and would be great law makers and they don't win for whatever reason. You know that's hard, when you go through that time and time again. You know spending so much time registering voters and people just don't turn out to vote because, I'm not political; it doesn't really matter to me. And then we get to a point where we are today. You know all that adds up and it gets really frustrating.
Q: Houston Equal Rights Ordinance (HERO)
JL: HERO was one of the best and worst experiences of my advocacy activist career. I was involved from the very beginning and the LGBT community really came together and worked beautifully together for a good period of time. And I think just to kind of preface that it started with when the national conference Creating Change came to Houston and had their national conference here in, I don't even remember what year it was. 2014, was that it, okay? Because we planned that conference. Like, HERO was on the back of that. So everybody was united. People who didn't know each other before, knew each other and we all became friends and worked together really well. And HERO, you know, went before city council first. So, the goal was to get it, to get city council to pass it and make it a reality and it, you know, there was a lot of that advocacy piece of it. Which was you know, working your back, your behind the scene connections and you know getting, gathering your intel. And you know kind of meeting with council members and figuring out who was on board and who wasn't and who needed a little bit of convincing. And there was also the activist's piece of it with the organizing of the communities and we did trainings, lots of, several trainings for people on how to give effective public testimony. And we spent two days in city council, 12 hour days at a time in chambers, everybody in red, telling their stories to council members and asking questions or answering questions as they had them. And it was really emotional to hear people share. They got very, very personal. You know, because we're talking about discrimination. And I would say that just about everybody in the LGBT community has faced some kind of discrimination. My testimony was focused on healthcare and you know how we don't want discrimination in certain places and how it becomes a public health issue, things like that. And when it, when city council voted to create a non-discrimination ordinance it was so awesome, we were so happy. It was just the best feeling. Because you know we don't win that often. And there was just effort and emotion that went into it. It was fantastic. It was a fantastic feeling. And you know, I honestly thought HERO was going to pass. I really did. I was so passionate and so invested in it. My kids block walked. We stood on the corner of Westheimer and Montrose with signs for; you know during the, on Saturday afternoons and saying, honk if you love HERO. And, you know registering voters and talking to people and we, you know, these are our family members and our friends and when it failed so miserably it was just a slap in the face.

Q: Current relationship with her family
JL: They're still pretty conservative but they've grown and I like to take some credit for that especially with my dad. My dad, you know, just grew up in a different time like I said in East Texas and he and I have a really good relationship and he has always felt comfortable coming to me and asking questions. If he has questions about things that he hears. So he's got into a really good habit now of, if he hears something, he doesn't really watch Fox News, thank goodness. But you know, if hears things, he'll come to me and say I heard this, you know, what does this mean and he and I will have a discussion and I'll kind of try to break it down for him and show a different viewpoint. And he's always really grateful. You know, I think they think my work is interesting. I don't think they understand it. They probably don't totally understand why I'm so passionate about it and why it's such an interest. But I think they've learned. And that's what it's all about, is you know, knowing people and having safe people that you can go to and you can ask questions and I've always, always kindly pushed back on my family when they say inappropriate things or do, you know, we're just in kind of interesting situations, it's 2018. So, I
definitely do push back. They've learned, they've gotten better but we're still I would say at different ends of the spectrum.

**Q: Advice for advocates/activists**

JL: I think a big thing; we have to take care of ourselves. Our physical and our mental health because it's a lot to deal with and you have to be healthy in order to fight the fight. And so understanding that it's okay to step back and you don't have to do everything. Pick something that means something to you and put your energies there. Don't feel like you have to address every single little thing, because it's just too much. So, taking care of yourself is a big piece of it. You know, choosing your news sources wisely. I know there's a lot of fake news out there right now. But just you know, being educated, taking care of yourself, staying engaged, figuring, you know, realizing you don't have to organize the biggest march in the world. Go to the letter writing campaign. You know, send an email, do a tweet. Do whatever it is, you know, pick one little action a day that helps and you know if everybody's doing that then collectively it makes an impact. One person can't do it all. It has to take all of us.