Q: Tell us about your ‘coming out of the closet’

Burton Bagby-Grose: God blessed me with an opportunity to be in a family that, from my viewpoint, theologically, really understands, uh, religion and, and the beauty behind the, the underlying message of Christianity, and so they were a very loving family. So I really feel like the doors were open to kind of experientially develop and realize pretty young. And so, really, by the time I was 14, um – and it wasn't like a light switch went on at 14, but, uh, by the time I was 14, um, I talked to my best friend about it. And, and I – and God blessed me with his mother who was wonderful to me. And it's, it's, it's really great for a young teenage person to have an adult that you feel like you can really trust and open up to and say anything to, and she just totally gave me permission to talk about anything. I can remember many a, a Saturday afternoon, you know, sitting up on the counter in her kitchen and just talkin' and talkin'. He'd be out cleaning the pool or somethin', and, uh, and she was very nurturing and encouraging, and it's something for which I will always be profoundly grateful. I think I was a little conflicted, uh, in high school 'cause, you know, there's a lot of pressure. Um, but I'll tell you, uh, just to tell you a little bit about the Baptist church where I grew up, Kenneth Chaifin was the pastor, who's now deceased, and I, I s, I just started talkin' to him. And he was like, you know, I'd really like to talk to you about this, but I don't have a lot of time and so it sounds like – 'cause he could tell I was bein' real hesitant. And it's a big deal, you know, to tell your Baptist minister, you know, pastor or whatever, um, that you're gay. And, at that time, it was a Southern Baptist church. It's no longer a Southern Baptist church. They've withdrawn. Uh, but – and you know what he said to me? He looked at me. He put his hand on my shoulder, and he said, you know, the church is either for everyone or no one. And I thought what a beautiful statement. So that's just one example of the kind of nurture and encouragement that I was blessed with. Uh, you know, you hear the stories of the people who will never go back to a church, who were, in the name of Jesus or God or whatever, who were treated horribly and, and really oppressed. And I don't have one of those stories.

Q: Do you ever feel a conflict between your religion and your homosexuality?

BBG: I don't. I think that growing up in a mainline church – you know, South Main was the leader of the moderate pushback against the fundamentalist takeover of the Southern Baptist Convention when I was in college, and, because of that, it's always been a church that encourages questions and dialogue and conversation because it was this, hey, feel free to ask, and we don't have all the answers. I mean, there's some central truths that we believe about the trinity and Jesus and, you know, that we all kind of hold onto. But because they're so open, uh, and because it's not a literalistic view of scripture – I look at scripture. I believe in the authority of scripture. I think that, uh, scripture was written by, by men and women but inspired by God. And I look at s, the Old Te, uh, the New Testament, for instance, and there are really two passages that are used. I don't think that's what they say, so I don't have a conflict. One of them is – and most scholars that you really press on this, even pretty conservative, uh, biblical scholars, it's talking about pederasty, which, in Corinthians, which is man/boy. And that, you know, that wasn't okay, and it's not okay now. I think most people would agree to that. And then the other one is in the context of all this conversation about idolatry and promiscuity because you could go to the temple, and they employed, at the temples, they employed male and female prostitutes, and you
could pay your money and go and choose. I want a man, or I want a woman. And that's what they were talking about. They weren't talking about committed, homosexual relationships. The word homosexual didn't even exist until, you know, about 125-30 years ago, so, no, it's not in the Bible.

**Q: Have you ever experienced any discrimination from other ministers due to your sexual orientation?**
BBG: No. And, you know, probably a lot of that – I, I'm sure it's out there to experience, uh, but I just – you know, those aren't the folks that I've embraced and, and been in community with. I go to a monthly clergy meeting here. But, you know, the, the clergy meeting I go to here is the Affirming Clergy Network. It's all clergy from churches that either are welcoming and affirming, which is me, which means they embrace the idea of full equality for people and certainly for gay people in all aspects of church life.

**Q: How would you describe your approach to religion?**
BBG: I'm very middle of the road. You know, in the broader context of American theological conversation, I'm in the middle. And, you know, and I hate to use terms like liberal and conservative 'cause they mean so many different things. They're such subjective and, really, almost meaningless terms anymore in our culture. But because I'm in the middle, it's very appealing to people. And I'll ta – I, I talked to a guy Sunday. Two different people Sunday said when are you going to start a church? When are you gonna start a Baptist church? And I was like, well, why are you asking me this? 'Cause, you know, you wanna know what's behind this question. And the one guy said because you're like me. You're in the middle. You don't wanna just throw it all away. Because a lot of the really left-leaning, really, truly, liberal Christians, uh, just say I don't care about that. I just cut that part out. And even ministers will say that. I don't worry about that. They wanna church where it's okay to ask questions but we still hold these central truths to be important, and we're not afraid to say that. I, I would say that, uh, there's a real yearning and hunger, especially in this part of the world, for a more open Christianity. You know, that's a long way around, uh, but that's, that's what I find that, that people say to me, uh, quite frequently is we have a real gap, uh, especially in Texas where you can't swing a stick without hitting a Baptist church.

**Q: How accepting is your church towards transgendered people?**
BBG: Well, and I – you know, I think it's important to recognize that the church is made up of people, and so there's no broad sweeping statement, really, on any topic that you can make and say this applies to everyone in this place. So there's a variety of experience. We did have, uh, a transgender couple come to a Sunday school class and were not warmly received, and the chair of the diaconate, which is the board of deacons, which is kind of the leaders of the church, the lay leaders of the church, heard about this story, and he was horrified. And he called the person, and he said I wanna sit and meet with you and had coffee with her and talked to her and said I'm sure we can find a Sunday school class and sent her to my Sunday school class, which is very diverse. I mean, we're, you know, the only gay folks in our Sunday school class. Um, but – and came, and was welcomed with open arms. So I think that – you know, the trans issue is still one of, of great challenge in our culture. People don't understand. There's been so much conversation about gay and lesbian people on TV. You know, there are all kinds of TV shows, Will and Grace and blah, blah. You know, there's all this stuff. So people have been pretty exposed to that in the last decade to 2 decades, uh, but the trans stuff is still more of a challenge.
Q: Do you think there’s a growing societal acceptance of the GLBT community?
BBG: I think we're there with people who are of a homosexual sexual orientation. I think we're really getting there. You know, they just did Gallup – or some real credible polling, uh, organization just did a big survey of the military, and they found out that the rank-and-file military under 35, when you ask 'em about the don't ask/don't tell and gays in the military, they just look at you with this blank look, and they're like, why are we talkin' about this? Of course that's not an issue. They're here. I mean, I, you know, so what? It's the old guys, you know. It's the generals who've been there, you know, who are 60 and, you know, older, uh, who have the problem. And, and I think that's true in the broader culture, you know, when you talk to younger people. But I think we're, we're really still challenged on bisexual and the trans stuff. I think it's very challenging. Um, and we're gettin' there. You know, it's a lot easier. When I was subsequently president of the Houston GLBT Community Center, which, at the time, was the Houston Lesbian and Gay Community Center, and when I brought that up as, as board president in, I guess, 2003, uh, to change the name and the mission statement, they were like, oh, okay. Motion, second. Uh, discussion, discussion, you know, as the president? No? Okay. Favoring all the – unanimous. And we went on with the next item on the agenda. I mean, it was completely different to what the caucus experience had been just a few years before. Um, so we're gettin' there, uh, within our own community. 'Cause, remember, 15 years ago, we weren't there in our own community. I mean, the trans folks were beatin' all over the human rights campaign and even more recently than that, uh, over not having an END, an inclusive ENDA, you know, an inclusive version of the Employment Non-Discrim, Non-Discrimination Act that includes sexual orientation and gender identity.

Kevin Kong: Right.

BBG: And there's also a challenge because the trans folks are not as willing, themselves, to fully participate in the broader community. You know, I was president of the Houston Gay and Lesbian Political Caucus, uh, in 1998, and I led us through a process to change our mission statement. And then, subsequently, in the last several years, they changed the name. We didn't change the name then, but we changed the mission statement. And we didn't get a response. And you can imagine how frustrating that was because here we are. We say, hey, we're gonna make this the GLBT organization. We're gonna call it, you know, gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender and add that to our, our public policy statement. And, you know, the caucus lobbies for legislation. You know, it's an advocacy group. It's the oldest GLBT civil rights organization in the South. And they didn't come. And I think a lot of that – meaning the trans folks. I think a lot of that stems from they have so much more that they're dealing with, not just – I'm not talking about medical stuff. I'm just talking about in societal acceptance. They're so much more likely to be severely oppressed that they're just not ready to do something extra. You know, a lot of people will consider politics kind of an extra. If you've got a decent job and you got a decent place to live, then I'll come to your meeting on the first Wednesday of the month.

Q: We know that you've been in a relationship with Ron Bagby-Grose since 1989. Tell us about your relationship.
BBG: Well, we met at a dinner party. A coworker of mine invited me to her, to a dinner party. I think there were maybe half a dozen, uh, folks at a dinner party, and, uh, Ron was one of them. And we did each – we, we kinda, uh, did things with each other in groups. You know, we went,
like, with a group to the movies and to the beach. And so it was, really, a real healthy thing of kinda slowly getting to know somebody but not too much pressure, you know, right there, just the two of you sitting across the table at dinner, looking at each other, you know. Eek. What are we gonna talk about? Um, and then, uh, decided, uh, that we wanted to be in a, you know, permanent, ongoing, committed relationship and so made that choice and moved in together. And our families have been wonderful. The relationship has grown, and it's, it's a lot of work. It's like any relationship. But we have a lot of, of, of nurture and encouragement, and, uh, I think it helped bein' in a big city. I think it helps when people are around a lot of different people. I think it helps in terms of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender acceptance because they're already exposed to a lot of different people who aren't the same as them, who don't talk like them, who don't look like them, who don't act like them, and it's helpful.

Q: Are you legally married to Ron?
BBG:Uh, we are. We – and, you know, we're not in Texas because Texas has a Defense of Marriage Act

KK: Right.

BBG: whatever they – I forget exactly what they call it, but it's that equivalent. Uh, but we were married in a beautiful Baptist church in Massachusetts, a beautiful 229-year-old congregation there. You know, everything's old in Massachusetts. And it's a, quite a grand edifice. It's a beautiful place to be married. It's not your typical plain, red-brick, white, uh, trim Baptist church like you have in the South. It's, it's a grand cathedral-like edifice with big, round windows and the words of scripture in gold on the walls inside and, and big bell tower with a 12-bell carillon. It's the seminary church. Uh, it's the church that was the, one, part of the driving force behind the founding of the seminary, so it's, of course, older than the seminary by a few years. Uh, it's at the bottom of a hill, uh, where the seminary is. And, uh, we had just under 200 folks come, so we had kind of a real traditional wedding with a big reception in the, uh, fellowship hall there. Beautiful, you know, high ceilings with dome, with, uh, you know, be, wood beams, beautiful, uh, room itself. And I wore my kilt and my Bonnie Prince Charlie outfit is what they call it, but, you know, it's the formal with the silver buttons and the black jacket. And so I joke and say I was the one in the dress, you know. And Ron's mother walked us down the aisle. Uh, and so, yes, we have a marriage license. Uh, we didn't get married until April 25, 2009 -

KK: Oh, wow.

BBG: - so not very long ago. Well, remember that when, uh, same-gender marriage because legal in Massachusetts, uh, Governor Romney, the Republican governor at the time, decided that he was gonna enforce a 19, I think it was 1912 or 1913 law that said you had to be a resident, that one of the people had to be a resident. Now, granted, they've never enforced that on heterosexual people. But, suddenly, they decided they were gonna start enforcing that. And, subsequently, they repealed that law. And right after they repealed that law, Ron and I were talking and said let's do it, so we did. And we had a whole bunch of friends fly up from Texas, and it was just great. It was really cool.
Q: After marrying Ron, you changed your name. Can you tell us why you made this choice, and a little about the actual process?
BBG: Well, you know, I was born Clarence Burton Bagby. And if you Google me, you'll see that name.

KK: Right.

BBG: Um, and I never really liked the name Clarence and s, and I stopped – I, I – a lot of my college friends called me Burton, and I just slowly, uh, evolved into that. And on formal documents I used to say Clarence Burton Bagby, but I just slowly, over the last several years, have evolved into just dropping it completely. And Ron brought up, when we were talking about it, before Rosalee was born, Ron brought up, you know, we're gonna be a family, and, uh, we, we wanna figure out how to make sure that Rosalee, you know, is a full and complete part of that, as far as our name. And so he really wanted us all to have the same name. And I thought about it. I thought okay. He's right. And I told him, you know, I don't have any big hang-ups about being the, who's the man, who's the woman. I mean, anything that, anybody that knows anything about sexual orientation and same-gender relationships knows they, they don't follow those same patterns that heterosexual relationships follows, so you can't – you know, I can't tell you how many times in college people would say so are you the man or the woman? You know, it's like, well, I'm not the woman because that's the whole idea here. There isn't a woman. No offense. Love ya, but, you know, don't wanna sleep with ya. And, and so we, we talked about it. And I said, you know, do you want me to just – I can change my name to your name or – I was totally open. And he said no, that he wanted to do the hyphenated name. So in the process of doing that and talking to the lawyer, saying that's what we wanted to do, she said, well, I can just do a name change 'cause we changed it legally in Massachusetts 'cause you put it on the marriage license saying, you put what the married name's gonna be. And we changed it there. So in all the states, New York and, you know, all those states that recognize, even, uh, where same-gender marriage isn't legal but they recognize out-of-state same-gender marriages, we're, you know, we were already, you know, Burton Bagby-Grose and Ron Bagby-Grose. But I still had the Clarence on there. And so I told the lawyer – 'cause the lawyer said, well, we'll just draw up the paperwork, predicated on this name change, and then the same court, the same court, right before it, we'll just do the name change. You know, you pay a couple hundred bucks, and the judge does that, and then you go into this. And I said you know what? Here's my chance to chop that first name off. And so – and I didn't – I figured Burton Bagby-Grose is long enough. I don't need a middle name. And so that's now my legal name. Um, and Ron just kept everything the same, just changed his last name.

Q: We know that you have an adopted baby girl. How was the adoption process?
BBG: Well, you know, because, uh, we knew the person, the, the biological mother. She's actually a fa, a family member. She's related. And so, because of that, it's somebody we knew, um, I think it was probably less complicated than it would be going through an agency. So we found a wonderful, uh, adoption attorney who, at the time, when we started the process, I think, had been doing it 12 or 13 years, a long time. And she took us through the process. She was wonderful to work with and love her, uh, Connie Moore. I'll give her a little plug. Uh, and she was just great. And we went to Bexar County, which is interesting, uh, because Bexar County is so solidly democratic. Uh, they have more progressive judges, and they have exponentially more
same-gender couples adopting in, uh, adopting in Bexar County than any county in the state. The reason it's important is because in Harris County they have a lottery system, so you don't know what judge you're gonna get. And we've had friends that have walked into the family courtroom, and the judge opens it up and looks at it and looks at them and says we're not doin' this. And you're out of luck. You gotta start over. So we knew who the judge was gonna be, and it was great. He was delightful. That morning, on that Friday morning, there were six couples, one opposite-gender couple and six same-gender couples that adopted seven different children. So it was really a lot of fun. It was very festive. And by the time you get to that point, it's a fait accompli. I mean, it's gonna happen. You know, if there's gonna be a problem, the social worker or somebody, you know, tells you bef, your lawyer tells you beforehand. And she kept tellin' us that, but, of course, we were very nervous. And we're standing there holding the baby, all dressed up. She was in a beautiful little linen outfit, you know. And, and Ron's parents were there with us, so the four of us, with the baby, are standing there. And the judge says, in a very serious, and he leans forward – and he's up, too, 'cause you know how the courtroom is. You're kinda down. I'm sure is all psychological 'cause you're looking up like you're looking at your parents when you're 4 years old, you know. And he says, well, there's something you need to know, and he's real serious. We have, in this courtroom, a strong policy of no returns and no exchanges. And then he laughs and, you know, totally broke the ice, and so it was just a great experience.

Q: Did you ever make a decision to adopt a daughter over a son?
BBG: I – you know, I told Ron, I said, I can think of all kinds of reasons why it would be wonderful to have a little boy, to have a son, and then I can think of an equally long list of reasons why it would be so wonderful to have a little girl. So I don't get that people, you know, I want one, you know. Somethin's wrong with that, I think. I – you know, we're just glad that she's a healthy, happy little baby, you know, who sleeps through the night and –

KK: That's a plus.

BBG: Yeah. Yeah. She doesn't wake up at 4 a.m. She did that for a while, uh, but she doesn't do that anymore.

Q: Do you plan on talking to Rosalee about how she might have ‘different’ parents from the other kids?
BBG: For everybody now in our culture, a, a majority of children are not in a two-parent household, two-biological-parent household

KK: Right.

BBG: in America. And so I think it's so important to realize that already our families are very diverse. You know, we have families where there's a stepmother or a stepfather or the grandparents are taking care of them or, you know, aunts and uncles. There are all kinds of combinations. So the idea that everybody looks like Leave it to Beaver, uh, with momma in pearls and her high heels vacuuming, you know, nobody ever did that, uh, is just felon – you know, there's just, that's, obviously, just ludicrous. But we are, obviously, in a position where we won't be able to hide it.
BBG: If, if you're an opposite-gender couple and you adopt a child, you can hide it, which I think is damaging. We have family members who had that hidden from them, and they suddenly found out when they were 40 years old. Can you imagine? And to, and to feel so betrayed and lied to by, you know, so many in your family who knew. And, uh – but we can't do that 'cause once she under, has any kind of understanding of biology,

KK: Yeah.

BBG: she knows these two guys didn't produce – it doesn't work that way. And so we, we talked about it even before she was born that we would, um, be very open about that. And so I think if you're affirming and nurturing and she's loved and treated well, I think, ultimately, that's what matters.

Q: We know that you worked as a campaign manager for Sheila Jackson Lee. Can you tell us a little more about the experience?
BBG: You know, Sheila and I became friends, uh, when she was running for judge and then, uh, became better friends when she was on the city council. She was an at-large city council member. And she was always really interested in, um, several issues that I've actually worked professionally in and have a real interest in, uh, historic preservation, economic development, uh, affordable housing, and homeless issues, and those were some of her really big issues. She was one of the people on city council that I really liked where she was comin' from, so I started working with her closely and was in her office a lot and, you know, volunteering and helping. And so then when she decided to run for Congress, uh, it was just logical to be involved in that. And, um, then I worked in her office, uh, her district office, here and really enjoyed that. Never really was interested in the allure of Washington. Uh, I left the congressional office but then, subsequent to that, for, for several years, uh, continued to work on campaigns and, uh, managed several campaigns after that. And, uh, you know, we get along great.

Q: When did you start your activism in the LGBT community?
BBG: Uh, I saw a guy who was very effeminate who really presented strongly as gay, um, get pushed down and actually kicked, and I saw who did it. And I was in key club, which is a service organization, you know, and so I went right to the sponsor of our key club, who happened to be one of the ass, associate prin, uh, one of the assistant principals. And he was this wonderful black man, and he's just this great, great man. He's wonderful. Hannibal Myers, Mr. Myers. I went to Mr. Myers, and I told him about the experience and what I'd seen. And he called the guy in, and I stood right there and said, yes, that was him. And, you know, that was a tough thing to do because the guy was right there. There was no two-way, you know, one-way glass or whatever. You know, and it's a big public high school in Houston, you know. Um, but I think he was a – at that point, he became a little afraid of me, uh, 'cause he thought I could get him into trouble, which, obviously, I could. Um, and he was too dumb to deny it, and he kind've immediately was, well, you know, he bothered me. I don't like people like that or somethin'. So then the, then Mr. Myers just descended upon him. He was like, that is not okay. We don't tolerate it. You know, this was not a time when there were gay-straight alliances in Houston public high schools or there was any kind of focus on, on expunging anti-gay hate language from
the schools. So this was pretty huge. He was definitely a forerunner. He was definitely an activist. But I think that's one of my first little bits of activism.

Q: What do you believe was your biggest contribution to the LGBT community at large, and what organization, if any was it associated with?
BBG: I think that's always really tough. Uh, if – and, and I don't know that I'll ever answer that question with, with one answer. In the church, I think that, um, being an example of somebody who hasn't rejected the church, who's found a place in Christendom, uh, for GLBT people, and many GLBT people have already done that, obviously. It doesn't have anything to do with me. But I like to think that that's a big contribution. We had a stellar year when I was president of the political caucus, I mean, just stellar year. We mailed out 25,000 voter guides, and these were big, you know, tabloid-size voter guides. And, you know, our screening was outstanding. We had a big gala at the Warwick Hotel, I mean, you know, with the mayor and senator and representatives. I mean, you know, we had a stellar year. The only contribution I made that year was that I identified people who knew more than I did about different things, and I brought them in to do those things. I – you know, I thought the affordable housing stuff I did, I loved working on that, and I loved thinking about the long-reaching impact that helping a family having a decent place to live and knowing that those little children grew up in this well-constructed, nice little house, uh, where they could come home and be safe and, uh, and feel comfortable in and feel proud of. Uh, and I hope that, that, that my biggest contribution there was to empower other people.

Q: What are your future career goals?
BBG: Well, you know, I have to tell you, uh, we really feel blessed with, uh, the opportunity, uh, for me to be a full-time dad right now. And I am just loving being the primary caregiver. And if you told me 2 or 3 years ago that that's what I'd be doing, I'd say I don't think so. But I'm just loving it. And – but I feel like God has spoken to me in my call to Christian pastoral ministry. I certainly hope that, uh, and pray that, that I've gotten that right and that God will, uh, guide me to a congregation. I've thought about starting a congregation. I've thought – you know, there are congregations here that I think would be interested in at least talking to me and, uh, hearing me speak and preach and lead and, uh, facilitate.

Q: Tell us about your education.
BBG: Andover Newton Theological School is the only, is the oldest seminary in America, and it's the only Baptist welcoming and affirming seminary. Uh, Andover Newton actually created things like a master of divinity degree, which is something that – now, that's what every minister gets. You'll hear them say MDiv or master of divinity degree. Andover Newton originated that idea. It was the first graduate theological institution in the United States. Andover Newton is, is one of the – you know, God blessed me with this wonderful opportunity to go up to New England and go to this great seminary, and it's, it's really one of the stellar schools. I mean, when I was talking to my, uh, friends at Harvard Divinity School and I said something about, uh, Mark Heim, and they said, oh, that's right. Mark Heim teaches there. You know, we use his theology textbooks in our classes, and you have him in class every week. So, I mean, there are just some really internationally known, just amazing faculty there. Um, I'm taking classes here at Houston Graduate School of Theology, uh, and I'm loving that. I'm just – I just took one 'cause it's really hard to take with a baby, uh, and I'm doin' it at night. I'm takin' class on the book of Revelation,
uh, which is a fun – you know, it's like watchin' a horror movie, uh, 'cause, you know, it's full of all this kind of apocalyptic language that's very symbolic. And it's just not something I ever really focused on a lot in my own church life, and so it's been a great education. And, actually, the professor who teaches it there is a nationally-known Rev, book of Revelation scholar, so it was a great choice 'cause he's written several books, um, on that subject, and so I'm really enjoyin' it. And he's also very open. Um, he's not saying this is the answer. He's sayin', you know, it might mean this. It might mean this. Eventually, you'll get out of him what he thinks, but, uh, so I'm continuing that. And I – you know, it may be that I, I pursue a, a doctor of ministry degree. You know, the – if you're gonna be in a, in a church setting, you usually don't get a Ph.D. Ph.D. is usually designed for folks who want to teach. And a doctor of ministry degree is a practical degree. You may not know this, but, in other words, you have to be a pastor. You have to be in a ministry setting, uh, to even be in the program. That's the way all of the doctor of ministry programs are designed. It's a practical, uh, degree.