

Part I: Getting Acquainted

Interview Questions for Alumni

1. Can you introduce yourself with your name, pronouns, and class year?

Hi, I'm J Madden from the Barnard Class of 2022. I use they/them pronouns!

2. What do your queer identities mean to you?

While I don't like how limiting labels can be, I've really enjoyed claiming terms like lesbian, gay, trans, and queer. I think labels are fluid and that there are no prerequisites that are required to claim a label. For example, I'm not a woman but I can claim the label lesbian. I might like some non-binary and men, but I'm still lesbian.

My identities are extremely personal to me, and I feel drawn to them for different reasons. It's a personal experience where I am in control of what labels I want to use. At the same time, these labels are also extremely communal, in the sense that they connect me to a community and collective.

Part II: Campus Life/Organizing

1. What impact did Barnard have on your perception of the identities you just named?

Before coming to Barnard, I would claim the labels of lesbian and gay, but it wasn't until after my first year that I began claiming queer and trans. I realized that I wasn't a woman after reading Judith Butler and Sor Juana in my FYW class.

2. What kind of organizing did you partake in?

I began by joining queer clubs like GendeRev, Barnard Q, and Columbia Queer Alliance at the beginning of my experience at Barnard (precovid). These groups were very much just to build community and connections between people which is step one to organizing. I think getting to know each other and your community is necessary to organizing. Barnard Q Club died out and lacked the ability to sustain itself.

Later in my junior and senior year I wanted to make a more advocacy centered group, but due to covid we had to start right at the beginning with building connections and community. Boys Butches and Bros is a collective where we acknowledge and honor our differences and work to build solidarity with each other. We fight to survive together. We also focused on affirming and accepting trans and non-binary students at Barnard.

a. In your experience, how did the queer activism you engaged with navigate gender identity?

I was able to meet people of different identities who had similar yet different experiences than me at these organizing spaces. I could learn and grow from these people and reflect on myself and my identities. I think these spaces allowed me to realize I was non-binary/genderqueer. They definitely helped me accept and celebrate my queerness.

b. Do you feel that lesbian identity informs your understanding of gender?

I think in a way yes...I remember being a terrified 10th grader in therapy crying over how I couldn't be a lesbian because in 6th grade I had a crush on a boy. However, I learned then to let go of rigid and limiting identity categories. I learned to accept and claim a lesbian identity even if I didn't fully understand it yet. I grew since then and loved my lesbian identity despite my feelings not fitting directly into the box that I thought defined lesbianism.

So when it came time to understand my gender identity, I leaned into this experience with lesbianism to understand that I didn't have to nearly fit into the box of man or woman, and that I could embrace fluidity.

3. How, in your opinion, did the lesbian community manifest on campus?

I think like almost everyone at Barnard is gay or lesbian. But that could be because most of the people I hung out with were queer. So I perceive the community as very big and like everyone knows each other at the same time. I do think there are some lesbian friend groups that try to be above everyone else due to their looks, wealth, and fashion. But overall, I think Barnard is a hot spot for lesbians and those figuring out their identities.

4. In hindsight, what work needed to be done to strengthen the lesbian community?

We should definitely keep building community between lesbians so that we can advocate for ourselves and our peers. To be honest I think some queers on campus need to get off their high horse and stop focusing on being perceived as "cool". Instead of worrying about a social hierarchy, we should get to know each other and celebrate our similarities and differences. Accept and affirm people in their entire selves instead of making people feel like you are above them or "cooler". It's not cool.

Part III: Joy

1. How, if at all, does the term 'queer joy' resonate with you?

Um yeah!! Queer joy makes me smile when I hear it. Reminds me of all the joy and love I have cultivated in my life due to my queerness.

2. Can you tell me about a time you've experienced queer joy during your undergrad experience? (This experience does not have to have to be directly affiliated with Barnard.)

I had my first kiss of my life in Barnard Hall 304. It was with a pretty girl who I had a lot in common with. I felt on top of the world! I skipped home to Brooks 7 and then tried to study for my Psych final that was the next day in...Barnard Hall 304! I couldn't stop smiling and even during my final I kept giggling. It made me so happy!