Interview transcript: Anthony Nicodemo

Allee Manning
This is Allee Manning with the Westchester LGBTQ+ History Project on Tuesday, February 20th, at Kenneth B. Clark Academy. I'm here today with Anthony Nicodemo, who is the head boys basketball coach and athletic director in the Greenburgh North Castle school district. When he first came out as gay in 2013, his story was shared widely in national media. Over a decade later, he's believed to be the first openly gay boys high school basketball coach in the New York City metropolitan area.

Anthony has been involved with a multitude of LGBT advocacy groups, including the Sports Equality Foundation, You Can Play Project, LGBT Sports Coalition, NYSUT LGBTQ Task Force and GLSEN. He currently serves as the chair of the City of Yonkers' LGBTQ Advisory Board and is president of the Hudson Valley Stonewall Democrats.

Did I miss anything?

Anthony Nicodemo
No. That sounds good.

Allee Manning
Great. Well, thank you so much for being here.

Anthony Nicodemo
No, thank you. Thank you for having me.

Allee Manning
Alright, so I'm just going to start by asking: Why do you think there are so few openly gay male athletics coaches at the high school level? Or is it at any level?

Anthony Nicodemo
I think there's a culture of this toxic masculinity that exists in athletics as a whole, right? This tough guy, you're not supposed to be vulnerable, you're not supposed to act a certain way. And I think that that's been along for the existence of sports. So I think because of that, there's a fear of not being accepted in male athletics.

Now, countless amounts of times when we've seen it, right, we've seen it at the pro level with Jason Collins or other people that have come out and they are—they generally are embraced. So I think a lot of times, it's the fear of the unknown—not knowing how it's going to go and not wanting to deal with the possibility of conflict in your career.

I mean, in my case, I lived it. It's why it took me so long. That fear consumed me, you know? It kept me in the closet way longer than I should have been.

Allee Manning
Was that—you know, you were in the closet in your professional life, but not your personal life? Or was it really both?

Anthony Nicodemo

I mean, it was both for a long time. You know, I would say—you know, I was in a relationship that nobody knew about with somebody and, you know, we—nobody knew we were dating, nobody knew we were together. We were "friends," so to speak. You know, towards the end, coming out probably, to some people, you know, a couple years before I did, before I came out on a larger scale. But for the majority of that, it was pretty much, you know, living closeted.

Allee Manning
And can you kind of walk me through your own career trajectory and, you know, your personal life, the ways that they were separate and overlapped coming up to 2013?

Anthony Nicodemo
So I started coaching when I was 18 years old—young. I was 18 years old, and I was coaching—I've coached at a host of places locally. I was at North Salem, I was at Croton Harmon, and then I took a job in New Hampshire coaching college basketball. And I also went back to school at that point, up at Plymouth State in New Hampshire, in the middle of nowhere in the mountains of New Hampshire.

While I was there coaching, I ended up meeting a brother of one of my players. I had stopped coaching college at that point. We stayed friends because we were pretty much close to the same age. And I ended up in a relationship with this particular person. And he ended up being a Division I basketball player. So he has his own story, right? When he came out, it was a big story, because he was the first openly gay Division I basketball coach. So that trajectory of him and I being together for almost 10—probably 10 years without most people knowing we were in a relationship.

And at that point, you know, living in New Hampshire wasn't for me. I needed to come home. So I came back here, and I coached once again at a couple of different places. I was at Briarcliff. My first varsity job was up at Dover in Dutchess County. And I was still in this relationship. At that point, you know, he was playing college basketball in Rhode Island, so we were in this long-distance relationship, you know, towards the end of it there.

And then eventually this job at Saunders opened up, in Yonkers, and they were the bottom of the barrel. They were the worst team in the history of the world. People would schedule them just to get wins. And I thought it was an opportunity. I thought Yonkers has a tremendous amount of athletes. So I took the job.

And in a lot of ways, taking that job ultimately put me on the trajectory to coming out. The people in that city, in the city of Yonkers, I hold very dear, you know, from the mayor on down and, you know, what they—the support that they gave me. The school district was terrific. In a lot of ways, it allowed me to get my footing personally and professionally. You know, I coached some terrific kids at that point who I was very close with. And, you know, I was there for about—I was there for 10 years.

And then, like a lot of things, sometimes you need change. It was time for change. So the change came. I had taught at the Greenburgh North Castle School District my whole career. This is where I was a teacher, even though I was coaching in Yonkers. And there, through budget, some budget crunches here, they had stopped having sports. They came and they were bringing sports back, and I thought it was an opportunity for me to get to become an athletic director and to be a coach here.

It's a little bit different of a level. We're a very small school compared to being a very large school. The talent's very different, but it gives me the opportunity to make change on a larger scale as an athletic director and have a voice in the room where I thought the voice was needed. And I think we've done that a lot, you know, being the head of the sportsmanship committee and things like that now. I'm able to bring my experiences and the experiences of our community to voices that don't necessarily hear it.

So, you know, that's kind of the trajectory. I've been all over the place and coaching in various positions in a lot of different places, but a lot of different kinds of communities.

Allee Manning
Did you grow up locally?

Anthony Nicodemo
I grew up in Brewster.

Allee Manning
Okay. And backtracking a little bit, can you tell me about the time that you came out following the LGBTQ Sports Coalition Summit that you attended in Portland? I'm curious about that summit and how it seemed to have a major effect on you and your decisions.

Anthony Nicodemo
So, when I went to—at that point I had started this blog. Or, it was kind of—the internet was—I don't know if it was new, but it was still pretty new, and I had started this closeted coaching blog where I talked about being a closeted coach. And that linked me up with Outsports, this LGBTQ sports site. And they had come to me a couple times, and the owner kind of knew who I was, of the site, who ended up becoming a good friend.

And he invited me to the summit they were having. It was the second one, and I went and I told people I was going to a diversity summit. You know, I didn't tell anybody what it actually was. And when I got to Portland, I remember the first day they're getting in the elevator, and the two guys were in the elevator, Kirk Walker, who is the softball coach at UCLA. You know, he was one of the first openly gay coaches out there. And then Billy Beane, who is the vice president of Major League Baseball now. And he was the first openly gay baseball player. And I'm looking at these two guys who I knew just from the internet. And I was like, whoa. Like, this is where I'm at.

And over the course of the next couple of days, what happened was, we got put into these groups where we were with openly gay coaches or athletes or whatever it was. And it was empowering because it was the first time in my career that I was around people like me. Like, holy, this is insane. And it was powerful enough that I was there on a Friday, I was supposed to fly home Saturday night—I was supposed to fly home on Saturday night and I actually changed my airfare just to march in the Pride parade the next day with them.

And once that happened, it was enough for me. I had to change. I knew I had to be different. And I got off the plane in the morning and I rolled right into it. You know, I reached out to a friend of mine. At the time, he was working for News 12 or for MSG Varsity. He was Kevin Devaney [Jr.]. And I asked him to write the story, along with Outsports on a national level. And then I started to tell the people that needed to be told. You know, I told my school principal. You know, he went to the superintendent at the time, who actually looped in Michael Sabatino and

the mayor, knowing that it was probably going to be somewhat of a story. You know, some other people.

And then, you know, a week later, I told the kids. I didn't imagine it being the story. I knew it would be locally, because I was a popular enough coach locally in my leadership roles. I never imagined that within 15 minutes of the story breaking, with 15 minutes of story breaking, that the New York Times reached out, and Fox reached out, and everyone reached out, and then I and just went [on] Good Morning America, and all these other things. I didn't imagine that happening that way.

But I am a person now, at this point, I really believe in visibility. I think kids and coaches and other people like you need to see people like them out there. I think that's how we make change. So looking back on it, I think it was really valuable to have that experience and to get out there to hopefully see, let other people see that you can coach, you could be successful, and you could be gay, openly gay. And you know, my—the biggest success that I've had as a coach has come after being out. I mean, I had some nice moments before that. But the biggest successes I've had as a coach have come as an openly gay coach.

Allee Manning
Do you think that's related? The way that you relate to the students, the athletes, the families…?

Anthony Nicodemo
Absolutely. I think—I think it changed things. I think when you're hiding, it changes the persona of how you do things. I think, you know, you're so—you put up that façade, and that façade dictates everything. So you're going to act like someone you're not. You're going to use, like, language that you're not.

And then being open and being more part of my community allowed me to embrace other things. You know, someone being feminine, the trans movement, things that I didn't—was never involved in. So, that allowed my mindset to change. And you know, if you watch me coach before 2013 and watch me coach now, I'm a very different person. The words, the way I coach, the way I embrace things: I see things much more holistically now and am much more caring in some ways. Much more empathy than I had previously. And I think part of that was letting that wall down, letting that curtain down and being able to be who I truly am.

Allee Manning
I like what you're saying about visibility being important. I can see that here in your classroom with the posters and flags that you have up. And I read somewhere that you wear a pride pin when you're coaching as well, sometimes.

Anthony Nicodemo
Yeah, I mean, COVID took away suits in the old days. We wore suits before COVID, and then after COVID, everyone wears these things now. So it's not quite—but yeah, I mean, when I go to events, that's always on. When I was in, you know—when I was openly gay coaching and you know, in front of 7,000 people at the County Center, you know, I wore that. You know, we've had pride games at Sarah Lawrence that my kids played in. My kids embraced that. Nike's come in. They've given us rainbow stuff.

And one of my favorite moments or favorite stories is that first year I was coaching. One of our first games was at White Plains High School. We were playing and Nike sends us all the B-True shirts, which was their LGBTQ line. All right, so I gave them to the kids. And the game comes.

And the night before, the kids I coached, were [like] 'We're wearing the shirts for warm-ups tomorrow.' I was like, what? And, you know, it put a little bit—I was—I was kind of shocked, because it wasn't something I prompted. The kids did this. And I was worried a little bit about blowback. I didn't know where it was going to go. I didn't want it to become a news story, you know? And all the, you know, indoctrination in doing this.

And we weren't there yet. If that happened today, it would probably be a completely different story than it was then. But there was no blowback. And, you know, the kids did this on their own. So they embraced this as well, right? They learned about the LGBTQ community. They were part of this journey, so to speak.

So I think that's an important piece, because every one of those kids that I coach, whether it's 15 kids a year that are on these teams, are going to be adults. They're going to college, and they might have a gay roommate. They might have a trans teammate. Whatever it may be, they're already 10 steps ahead of somebody else who hasn't had the same experience as them because they get it. You know, they were part of the GSAs at school. They were the ones walking through the school, you know, policing language, so to speak.

So I think there's power in athletics. I think athletics as a whole dominate our culture, right? You look at the top 10 TV ratings of the year, it's a football game, always. So if you get your kids embracing it and policing the hallways, there's not going to be, like, bad language. There's not going to be that poor language because the kids aren't going to allow it. So I think coaches have really the opportunity to change lives, and I think I've been lucky enough and fortunate enough to do another level of that with the kids that I coach who come from tough communities. And yet they're able to embrace this, and make change for the better.

Allee Manning
Definitely. I want to go back to one thing you were saying about, you know, how there wasn't a whole lot of blowback or reaction at that point. My question really is, what do you think has changed in the past 10 years for better and for worse?

Anthony Nicodemo
Well, Donald Trump has changed. I mean, that's the biggest change culturally in this country, is Donald Trump. Donald Trump not only changed people on his side of the aisle, he changed the Democrats. If you watch Democratic political campaigns today, they're nastier than they've ever been. That's because of Donald Trump. His way of running has changed our country forever. The way the presidency is looked at has been changed forever. And I don't know if it's for the bad or the good. It's probably for the bad.

So I think one of the things that happened is Donald Trump and his people have attacked this, what, this made-up word of "wokeness." So one of the ways that they're trying to—people they try to attack is teachers. It's educators, right? We see this across the country with some of these crazy laws that are being passed. So if today I went out, and I had just come out, and my kids wore those shirts, there would be the Moms for Liberty and these groups that would come out and talk about them being indoctrinated. You didn't hear that back then. It wasn't something that was there. There was no conversation in 2013 about teachers making their kids gay or teachers promoting these things.

Today, it's become a conversation. It became a conversation because of Donald Trump and because of the MAGA movement that exists. So I think that's the issue. I think when you make progress—which we have, right? Marriage equality, things like that, GENDA in the state. There's

always going to be pushback because people get scared of things they don't often know about, but they do get scared. So I think that that's the blowback.

I think the blowback is we've made such strides in the last 10 years that now the pushback has occurred. And eventually, the way this country works—and I'm a historian at heart—the way this country works is that we'll get over that, and then it'll be something else. We're dealing with migrants right now. You could go back to the 1800s and talk about it. The Know Nothing Party, the Know Nothing Party was created, a literal political party to push back on immigrants. I mean, this is not new. We see this all the time in this country. We just repeat it. And eventually, we get over that hump and something else. So I think we'll get there. But I do think that we had a setback with the MAGA and with Donald Trump becoming president in this country.

Allee Manning
Yeah. And I know that in recent years, you've experienced some incidents, some bigotry, or—yeah, things I'm thinking of include a Yonkers City Council member who once spoke out about Yonkers Pride, and there was an event in 2018 when there was a suspension from the Section 1 Athletic Council. Can you talk about incidents like these?

Anthony Nicodemo
Yeah, I mean, the Section 1 Athletic Council thing was a witch hunt. I'm not so sure it was because I was gay. And I just think the people in charge—and I'm one of them now, I'm on that same council now, which is one of the reasons I wanted to become an AD. I thought the voice was needed. I thought that a lot of people in that room didn't operate the way they should. I didn't think there was a voice in there, a voice of reason, so to speak.

And now being on the athletic council, I make these decisions. And hopefully if something like this comes up, you know, the decision was that—was, you know—there was this battle over the Westchester County Center that became political. And it became a backroom situation over playing in a venue. And the Section 1 just had their wrestling tournament. There's a reason they're going to that venue. It's because it's the greatest venue for kids locally. It sells out. It's history.

And a group of people decided because there was just, you know, a pissing contest, so to speak, over this. And they pulled us out of there. And as the head of the basketball association, it was a travesty. I didn't agree with it. And I took to the streets and got people rallied around it. And essentially, in my mind, I exposed a lot of the leaders at Section 1—at the time, there's new leaders now—the leaders at that time for being fraudulent in a lot of ways. And I was very colorful in my language with it, and I wasn't afraid to speak my voice.

So we had had the Pride event at Sarah Lawrence, which is a terrific event. Jason Collins sat on our bench. And what they did is, they found some loophole where my athletic director, not me, didn't sign a form for this particular event, and they chose to come after me and suspend me for that. The problem was, once again, visibility. You chose to go after an event that's raising money for LGBTQ youth and now, instead of being a positive event, you made it into a negative event.

Once again, would they have done that for an African American event or a women's event? I'm not so sure. I think a lot of times these leaders don't get as fearful making a decision that's going to affect the LGBTQ community. Right now in Rockland, there's a situation going on with this. We could talk about that, with the Human Rights Commission over there. And I've been very vocal saying, this is—you wouldn't have done this. It was an African American person. A lot of

times we become the bottom rung of the marginalized communities. And I think we need to speak up.

And that's what I did, in that case. You know, I served the suspension, my kids and the other coach who was suspended for no reason as well, wore T-shirts the next year when we played, and we made our point. And like I said, I went through it and, you know, a year later, two years later, I became an athletic director. And now, you know, I have a very good relationship with my peers that are athletic directors. We work well together. The section has done a tremendous job on DEI, trying to make change from some other incidents, racial incidents that occurred. And I think they're going in the right direction with that.

You know, as far as the city council situation—you know, this is a guy who is a MAGA guy. You know, he wants to embrace and be an extremist and he wants to choose drag queens to try to make a point, to try to win votes. That's all it is. You know, at home that probably don't even care. That's what a lot of these people, right? They do it because of political points.

And once again, as a member of the Yonkers community and as a leader in the Yonkers LGBT community, I'm not going to allow anyone in my community to be a focal point and to be attacked for votes. Never happening, you know? And we've had this conversation. I've had this conversation with the mayor about Chick-fil-A opening there, and I'm very close with the mayor. He's supportive of me. I'm supportive of him.

But you know, I've kind of said, "Listen, you're going to lose the LGBTQ community if you ever show up and you support—I understand that we can't stop them from opening, totally get it. But at the end of the day, you need to stand with us because they are, you know, an anti-LGBTQ organization. I'm not saying you got to do boycott them, I'm not asking you to do that, but you can't—you can't laud them. You can't celebrate them coming here."

So I think that's part of the role of being a leader. I think it's really easy to become an administrator in education. You go get a piece of paper. It's really easy if you get elected, if you have money behind you. But when you become in those roles and you have to actually make decisions, that's hard. So it's easy to be—my favorite line now is, it's easy to be an administrator, but it's hard to be a leader. You know, good leaders and good administrators make tough decisions that might not be popular, but it's the right thing to do.

Section 1 chose to suspend me as a way to get back at me. It was the wrong—it was stupid. It was dumb. And the person who was there and made that decision is no longer there. You know, they didn't make it through the year. So I'm still standing, and I think that's important. And I think I'm still standing in a lot of ways through the fights that I've had is because I try to do the right thing, and I always try to scope it out as doing for me is kids. 95% of everything I do is kids. So if I try to put my kids first and make the decisions with kids being the reason I'm doing it, I think more than not, you know, I'm going to be in the right and I'm going to have the support of people.

Allee Manning
And this is something you try to model for them so that they can become leaders as well?

Anthony Nicodemo
Absolutely. I mean I've been in a situation where I've coached urban kids and inner-city kids for, you know, 15 years now, right? Saunders before. Before that, I taught here but I didn't know. But

I mean, I see horror stories. I see kids that are homeless. I have kids that are living in shelters. I have kids that can't afford sneakers. I have kids that are just disasters at all times.

You know, and this is not something you put out, “I'm buying sneakers,” or “I'm buying food.” I mean, my kids get breakfast. Like this is part of what we do here in this community because here – in Yonkers it was a little bit bigger an animal. I wasn't in control. I was in control of my 15 kids.

Here, I'm in control of every kid that walks through this building, essentially, between [being] the union president and the athletic director. And I have a terrific relationship with the administration here. Collaboration is a good thing. I have to do things differently. My brother is a coach at Tuckahoe. He has a very different situation with those kids than I have. I'm picking kids up in Brooklyn. I got kids that are taking trains. I got kids that have to go to social work at points. I got kids that are on parole. It's a very different circumstance in this particular place.

Yonkers was a little bit different, but there's different plights for the coaches that are coaching in the urban communities. And I think we need to figure out a way to handle this. That's the reason that Yonkers sport doesn't win anything. They don't win anything because no one's figured out how to fix the situation over there yet.

But you go across the road to Scarsdale, you go across to Mount Vernon, and they win. Mount Vernon has the same exact problems as Yonkers has. Why do they win? They win because they have the right people in charge of their athletics there, figuring out how to fix the problem. And I'm hoping that at Yonkers, the new people that are there are going to do that.

But, but it's—you know, where you coach and where you live is big. I grew up in Brewster. I didn't have any Black kids. I didn't have any minority kids that I grew up with. They were there, but they were very, very minute. And then I put myself in a situation as an educator where I'm around minorities all day, and I see different problems that I never would have known. And I think there's a lot of ignorance out there, not knowing—not a bad ignorance, just not knowing. And I think you need to be in the communities and see the problems firsthand to understand what these kids face and how to make the change.

So if I can model and I could teach them, you know, that's a good thing. When I have assistants who were now my assistant who played for me at Saunders, they know my system. They know what to expect. They're going to do the right thing because they played for me for 4 years. And then they went to college. Now they come back and they're almost paying it forward with the new kids, you know, and that's an important piece.

Allee Manning
Yeah, speaking of paying it forward—in addition to being an athletic director and a coach, you are a social studies or history social studies teacher.

Anthony Nicodemo
Yep.

Allee Manning
I guess, speaking from that side of things, what do you want the next generation of LGBTQ youth and allies to know about, you know, being an LGBTQ person in the world?

Anthony Nicodemo

I think visibility, right? Visibility, visibility. I think that they need to understand that the way we're going to make change is by people being themselves. I mean, prom kings and queens are LGBTQ now. You have out gay athletes. They're there now.

And I think a big thing—and I think the Black Lives Matter movement was a big piece of this—kids are much more vocal now than they were even 10 years ago when I started coaching. It's a very different, different thing now. And I think a lot of coaches are like, well, you know, the kids haven't changed. Nonsense. That's what—these kids have changed. Kids have changed because society has changed. So everyone's changed. I think that, you know, they're more vocal now, and that's what we need: to keep moving in that direction. They're not afraid to speak up for themselves.

There's been a bunch of different racial incidents that have happened in sports locally, and the kids have spoken up. The kids are taking to the streets. The kids are doing walkouts. That's where the change starts. Cause those kids are going to become our leaders after you and I are way gone. So I think being activists is a, is an important piece of what we do. You know, when we... during the Black Lives Matter movement, during Black History Month, I bought my kids Black Lives Matter shirts. Now, it was the COVID year. So we really barely made it through the season because it was like wacky, wacky with everything going on. But I thought it was important for my kids who are African Americans to wear those shirts.

I'm sure some people would have seen them and went crazy. What's this guy doing? This is their culture, you know, and they need to understand and embrace their culture. And I think a lot of times, these kids don't understand that, you know, when I teach slavery, some of the kids kind of make jokes. I'm like, “Guys, this is you. These are your ancestors. You're making jokes about being whipped and being tortured and being beaten. Like, you guys gotta understand that that's where this is all coming from.” And I think we as teachers as educators need to keep hitting that.

And that's why there's such a push in schools for the LGBTQ curriculum, is that it's not necessarily taught across the board. There's not—the word LGBTQ is not in the New York state health curriculum. That's insanity. That means that a trans kid, or a lesbian or a gay male, whatever it may be, however you identify, sitting in health class, and they're not learning anything about the way gay men have sex or the way women have sex with women. They're learning—like, whoa, that's a problem. You're not helping these kids.

I mean, I've had conversations with kids here where I've had to pull them in because I'm listening to what they're up to. You know, my, my LGBTQ students. And I'm like, “Guys, you know, the highest rate of STDs in this country is young Black males. That's you guys. So you guys are off doing whatever you're doing that you're bragging about. I'm listening, and I know this is going on. You guys got to wear protection.”

Now, that's me. I can say that. I'm not afraid to say that, but not everyone is. So I think that these kids need to make sure that they consider to understand that they are the activists and they are the future. And understanding the past is a huge piece of that. I think a lot of these kids don't understand what went on in the AIDS movement. And I think that Hollywood has done a good job recently of showing this. I think there's been shows, you know, like Ryan Murphy and, you know, there was just that show about HIV. They've done it.

They've covered it, the Velvet Rage—not the Velvet Rage, the Lavender Scare. The show that was on, “Fellow Travelers,” that was on HBO, Showtime, about, you know, the purge, essentially, of

the LGBT community in the 50s, the government. That's important, because kids are watching TV, Netflix, HBO Max, and the shows. So learning that is important.

You know, I've been lucky enough to have Michael [Sabatino] and Robert [Voorheis] as very good friends of mine and, you know, they've taught me a lot about what it was like and the movement that they had and the HIV crisis. But the younger kids now, you know, you're talking about someone who's 20, you know, Michael and Robert are 70. That's 50 years. Now, I'm 45. Hey, it's not that bad of a gap. I still hang out with those guys for drinks and I hear their stories. I travel with them, whatever it may be, but now there's a bigger gap.

And the bigger gap now is me to those kids. So I need to teach them what, you know, my—what my older people taught me. That's a big piece of what we do, because we can't forget that, because these purges did happen, right? 49 people were shot at Pulse. You know, you had the upstairs—the bar in New Orleans where these LGBT people were burned to death. You had the AIDS movement, you had the Lavender Scare. We need to understand that we have been persecuted for all existence. Because if we forget that, that's when it happens again. So we have to keep teaching and reminding people of these things.

Allee Manning
Absolutely. Couldn't agree more. I think that's all that I have, unless there's anything else you want to talk about.

Anthony Nicodemo
No, I was letting you do whatever you want to do—and that wasn't 30 minutes though. That was a quick one. How was it?

Allee Manning
Very close. Yeah. But all right.

Anthony Nicodemo
Thank you.