Washington State JEWISH HISTORICAL SOCIETY
Powered by Jewish Federation of Greater Seattle

Recording Date: January 29, 2018
Last Edited: October 27, 2026

Rabbah Rona Matlow

SUMMARY

Self-described as “the only nuclear-qualified, transgender rabbi” in the United States, Rona Matlow was born in Arcadia, California, in 1959. After serving 22 years in the Navy, she retired in 2001 at the rank of Lieutenant Commander. In 2003, she entered the Academy for Jewish Religion in New York as a rabbinical student and was ordained as a rabbi in 2009. Due to injuries suffered during her military service, she has not been able to lead her own congregation, but has worked with The Soldier’s Project to provide free counseling to veterans and Trans Lifeline to help transgender people in crisis. In 2015, she became aware of her gender dysphoria and, after discussions with her wife and family, began to transition to living full-time as a woman. As an expert on transgender, military, and religious issues, she has spoken about transgender/religious law intersections and is active as an advocate for the transgender community.

CONTENT WARNING: This interview discusses themes of mental health, death, and grief.

Lisa Kranseler: I mean, I had to, like, fight every little thing. And finally, I mean, I kind of like it was the most important. I had to, like, go with the most important holidays. I mean, because I knew they weren't even going to, I mean, when they had a major homecoming game on Yom Kippur, for example, that was very upsetting. So I went with them with as many as I could. But I understand it is tough. Yeah.

Jeff Schwager: At least professionally, you're in a place where it shouldn't be an issue. So that's a good thing.

Lisa Kranseler: Exactly.

Jeff Schwager: Being a professional Jew does have its advantages.

Lisa Kranseler: It does. When I first started, I was like, Oh, you mean wow. It's Shabbat. Okay.

Rona Matlow: I don't have to work on Shabbat. What a concept.

Lisa Kranseler: I could work if I choose, but, you know, I'm not going to send out any kind of emails usually, unless I know the people you know. Anyway, I will let you get started. Okay.

Rona Matlow: And grab you my card as well, actually.

Jeff Schwager: Thank you. Yeah.

Lisa Kranseler: So it's the deep dive is on. Uh, I mean, I don't know if you're interested. It's, like, pretty popular, actually. It's at the university on a Sunday. Um, if you're interested, we could make sure you are added to the list. Okay, I'll check it out.

Rona Matlow: You probably have it already, but my website address is on the back of my card. Oh, thanks.

Lisa Kranseler: Okay, thanks.

Jeff Schwager: That's great.

Lisa Kranseler: Okay. Well, has this started?

Jeff Schwager: Yeah. We're going.

Lisa Kranseler: Oh, it is going. Oh, sorry. Oh.

Jeff Schwager: Okay. So got us recorded talking about minutia. You know, great trivia.

Rona Matlow: So thank you for sending the photos.

Jeff Schwager: Oh. You're welcome. Um, if you have other photos of yourself sort of in action, photos that are less portraiture and that more tell a story, that would be helpful to us.

Rona Matlow: Unfortunately, seeing as how I don't have a congregation.

Jeff Schwager: Yeah.

Rona Matlow: Um, or and I'm not working in a hospital or anything. I mean, when you see me in action, I'm sitting at my computer.

Jeff Schwager: Right?

Rona Matlow: And that's where a lot of those photos are taken.

Jeff Schwager: I don't know if you go to demonstrations or if there are any.

Rona Matlow: I did send you one picture that's from a demonstration, although I think I have one that was kind of zoomed in on my face. But I do have a larger one. That kind of shows more of the picture of the demonstration.

Jeff Schwager: That would be good.

Rona Matlow: That was actually on the day the Electoral College met. So that was a cold morning.

Jeff Schwager: In more ways than one.

Rona Matlow: Exactly.

Jeff Schwager: Every day I wake up and I just. Oh, God. Another day.

Rona Matlow: And, you know, my mother didn't live to see it. She. She died a month before the election.

Jeff Schwager: Wow.

Rona Matlow: And, you know, I'm glad that she didn't live to see this.

Jeff Schwager: You know, Leonard Cohen died the night slash morning of the election, and I don't know if you're a Leonard Cohen fan, but it seems somehow. Just for him, he had been very ill. And the fact that he didn't have to live to see it.

Rona Matlow: Yeah. Now, I do have a friend who's a professional photographer, and she actually was going to do some shots for me a couple of months ago, but something with her schedule blew up, so. I'll reach out to her.

Jeff Schwager: Okay. Well, again, we're not, you know, it's not portraiture we're looking for. It's really the things that tell your story. So one of you is in your current mode, plus. You are in the military. That's a wonderful picture. And we'll probably use that as the.

Rona Matlow: It was actually the one that ran, it was one of the Jewish newspapers.

Jeff Schwager: I think it was the Times of Israel.

Rona Matlow: I had seen it before. Yeah. Um, after I was interviewed by Jewish War Veterans and JTA, GTA picked it up. And that was an interesting story too, because the Jewish Community newspaper in London wrote an article about this story. They didn't quote the article from GWB correctly or directly. I mean, but they wrote an article about the article, which was really kind of funny. And a website in Sydney, Australia, also provided links to the article. So it got global notice, which was really pretty fascinating.

Jeff Schwager: So you're world famous now?

Rona Matlow: World-famous rabbi. Yeah, great.

Jeff Schwager: This is definitely working. I'm paranoid about my recording devices.

Rona Matlow: So that's why you have backups? I do, yeah, yeah, yeah.

Jeff Schwager: As a journalist, I've done hundreds of interviews, and twice I've had the recorder not work.

Rona Matlow: Oh my goodness.

Rona Matlow: Yeah. So that's the worst feeling in the world. And then you've got the grinding of the air conditioning compressor, which makes the background noise louder and

Jeff Schwager: Not a problem. I've done enough interviews here that I know it works so well.

Rona Matlow: You always have sound processing boards. You can edit those kinds of things out.

Jeff Schwager: That's right. So tell me about your background to begin with. Where were you born, and what was your childhood like?

Rona Matlow: Born in Arcadia, which is a suburb of Los Angeles in LA County. Um, my mother was a public school teacher. My father did research into solid-state electronics back in the early days of miniaturization and stuff. Um, we moved around a lot in early childhood. Finally settled in San Jose in the '70s. And she worked at the same school in East Side San Jose, teaching ghetto and barrio kids for almost 40 years, teaching them middle school math. And she had the privilege of seeing the grandchildren and great-grandchildren of her students. My sister has followed in her footsteps and is very close to retirement now as a math teacher in San Jose. Her husband is a colleague of hers at the same school in San Jose, and their oldest and youngest are also public school teachers, one in San Jose on the east side and one in Santa Clara. So, you know, education is kind of the family business; my brother is a Captain of the San Jose Fire Department. He's currently on modified assignment because of an injury, but he'll be returning to being the public information officer. And you know, after a couple of years of college, I realized that college at that point wasn't the best bet for me. I enlisted in the Navy and enrolled in the nuclear power program. And while I was in the training pipeline, I was awarded an ROTC scholarship, went to UCLA, finished my college degree, got commissioned, then went to Nuclear Power School in Orlando for the second time, first as an enlisted man and then as an officer. And then prototype training in New York, submarine School training in Connecticut, and then to USS Hawkbill, which is a fast attack submarine in Pearl Harbor. And that was November of '83. And it was a Thursday. I reported aboard the boat the next day I went to Kabbalat Shabbat Services at the Aloha Jewish Chapel on base. I met the woman whom I've been with for 34 years.

Jeff Schwager: Wow.

Rona Matlow: So it's kind of stuck.

Jeff Schwager: Yeah. Yeah. Was your family observant growing up?

Rona Matlow: Moderate. Moderately. So, you know, my father kind of did his own thing, and so, you know, you wouldn't have defined it necessarily as purely Orthodox or anything. Later in life, he said that he identified as an Orthodox Jew, you know, back then, Conservative Judaism wasn't really that big of a thing, and there wasn't that much distinguishing it from Orthodoxy anyway. Interestingly, the synagogue in San Jose that we went to then, and that I go to now when I'm in San Jose at the time was called traditional. So it was basically modern Orthodox with mixed seating. And the youth group was in CSI, which is the Orthodox Union. Now they're conservative. You know, remember, the United Synagogue and their youth group are from the USY. So, you know, that congregation has undergone a transition and that whole area actually has Jewishly. So they have an eruv around that area now. And there are, in addition to a Conservative shul, there's an Orthodox shul on the same block. So it's kind of a bustling little Jewish area, and it's really kind of a cool place to visit now.

Jeff Schwager: So your family wasn't kosher, I guess?

Rona Matlow: No. We were.

Jeff Schwager: Oh. You were.

Rona Matlow: We were kosher. Yeah, we were kosher. And sort of modified Shabbos observance. You know, as kids, we were allowed to watch TV and, you know, I went to high school football games and stuff like that. But you know, we never worked or went to school or anything. And you know, when I took the SATs, I took them on a Sunday, and you know things like that.

Jeff Schwager: Are you a conservative now?

Rona Matlow: Well, I'm not a member of the Rabbinical Assembly, but I am a member of the conservative movement. I was ordained from the Academy of Jewish Religion in Yonkers, New York, and they are the first pluralistic, nondenominational seminary in the country. And AJR ordains people of every every denomination, and they have faculty of every denomination. So it's a really wonderful place to learn, and it's a wonderful place to teach. And, you know, there are some AJ alumni who have joined some of the major rabbinical associations. I haven't, and that is in large part due to my military injuries. You know, when I was stationed on board USS Long Beach in the mid-90s, I suffered from some neck injuries, and at the time, they didn't seem terribly onerous. But towards the end of my career, I started having some mild limitations. And, I retired at the end of 2000. By 2005, I was already in severe pain. And I was in a chaplaincy residency program at a hospital in Philadelphia. So, doing full-time chaplaincy work, and things got so bad that after all of the non-surgical options were, you know, exhausted, I ended up having two operations on my neck. And, you know, I had lost so much training time that I had to leave the program. And I haven't worked since because the pain has been so significant.

Jeff Schwager: Oh. I'm sorry.

Rona Matlow: Yeah. You know, this is my course in life, and you know, along with the neck pain and associated body pain come at times really debilitating headaches. And that's the biggest thing that keeps me from working because they're unpredictable. And at times, you know, all I can do is, you know, crawl into bed and hide under a pillow. You know, it's hard to maintain scheduled work hours when you have a situation like that. So, you know, I'm innovative. I'm, you know, very well connected online. And I've established myself as a very strong resource for people who are struggling. And I serve people in the Jewish community, veteran community, the transgender community, sometimes the intersection of two or more of those. But always connecting with people on Facebook who are struggling and offering services. In addition, I provide support services through the Soldiers Project, which is a nonprofit that provides free professional counseling to active duty members, veterans, and their significant others for post-9/11 service. And so I'm currently working with the partner of a combat veteran who has very severe PTSD because they're having a lot of family issues because of his coping issues. So, in that case, you know my client is the partner, but PTSD is a family disease. When it reaches that level, and you know, one of the things that is coming out about PTSD, especially with combat PTSD, that we're learning is that it actually causes structural changes in the brain that look like the structural changes as a result of physical trauma. And so if you run a functional MRI of somebody with severe combat PTSD, it'll look like somebody with a severe brain injury.

Jeff Schwager: Wow.

Rona Matlow: And so, you know, it's not just people faking it. It's not people trying to, you know, get out of something or, you know, all of the negative stigma applied to mental illness. You know, we're coming to find out that, you know, the neurochemistry and the biology of the brain are very different when people are suffering. Yeah. And so this is a medical condition. It's not just, you know, a psychological thing. And so you have to do, you know, holistic treatment, which means coordinated approaches with medical people, psychologists, and psychiatric people. Psychological people. Family therapists. I mean, you have to have a lot of different people involved in that in order to heal a family that's going through something like that.

Jeff Schwager: Yeah, that's wonderful work.

Rona Matlow: It's it's wonderful. It can be very trying at times. I bet. And as a general rule of thumb, every counselor is supposed to have a counselor that they see. So I was joking with my counselor about this the other day that, um, you know, if you have, um, different levels of skills and experience, you know, it ends up being like a pyramid. Well, where does the person at the top of the pyramid go? And she framed it for me a little differently. It's not quite like that. It's more like you have multiple groups at each level. So even at the top level, you have. You know, you don't have just one person at the very top. You know, you may have 100 people at the top. So, you know, if you're at that top level, there's still somebody you can turn to for help. You know, they don't end up going all the way to the bottom of the heap to find somebody for support.

Jeff Schwager: Well, that's a very hierarchical way of looking at it. I was thinking it would be more like a circle.

Rona Matlow: Well, if everybody were of equal skill and experience, it would be. Yeah. But, you know, I'm not the same level of skill as somebody, as a doctor or psychologist who's been doing it for 30 years, right? Yeah. You know, there are certain inherent skills that you're given the ability to intuit what people are going through, and you recognize the signs and understand what the triggers are, and to be able to connect and be compassionate. But beyond that, you really do have to have a certain amount of knowledge and skills and experience and you know, because with 30 years, you've probably seen it before, and if you've seen it before and you've dealt with it, you know what works. Whereas, uh, you know, as a relatively inexperienced counselor, I may not have all the answers, but I'm pretty, you know, pretty resourceful. If I don't have an answer, I know who to turn to to get an answer. Right. And, you know, we have that support in the soldiers project. And I have that support with my therapist and with others who do this work. So it's really pretty simple. Well, it's fascinating.

Jeff Schwager: I want to go back to your military experience a bit. Can you tell? Can you talk a little bit about what you did in the Navy?

Rona Matlow: I can so the first few years were different schools and training, which I already described. The enlisted nuclear power pipeline, the ROTC, and the Officer Nuclear Power Program. Then USS Hawkbill, which was a fast attack boat in Pearl Harbor. I was assigned as the main propulsion assistant, so I was in charge of the turbine engines that drove the ship, the turbine generators that created power, and all the associated steam piping in the engine room. We did an ice operation that was extended time under the ice, and as a result, I suffered an injury to my ear, which led to my being disqualified from submarine service. So after that, I transferred to USS California.

Jeff Schwager: When you say I'm sorry, when you say under the ice, you were in a submarine under.

Rona Matlow: Under Aalayer of ice for weeks at a time.

Jeff Schwager: And in what body of water was this?

Rona Matlow: I'm not allowed to say that.

Jeff Schwager: Oh, wow. Okay.

Rona Matlow: There are certain things that I still am not allowed to discuss.

Jeff Schwager: Okay.

Rona Matlow: So please forgive me.

Jeff Schwager: No, no. That's fine.

Rona Matlow: So after that transferred to USS California, which was a nuclear-powered guided missile cruiser in Alameda, California. I was assigned as damage control assistant, so it's kind of like a fire chief responsible for all of the personnel and equipment associated with saving the ship in the event of fire, flooding, collision, or nuclear attack, you name it, that's under my bailiwick. And during that time period, I qualified to stand all the engineering watches. I qualified as a nuclear chief engineer, and qualified as a surface warfare officer, which is this pin here? And after that tour, which was about two and a half years, we did several deployments and transferred back to nuclear power school. And you know, I joked, well, they're going to keep sending me back until I get it right. So my third tour at Nuclear Power School, I was a teacher and I taught chemistry materials and radiological fundamentals to enlisted operators, and then after that tour, I went to Department Head School in Newport, Rhode Island. And then I did a tour as weapons officer on board USS Capodanno, which was an anti-submarine frigate, also in Newport, Rhode Island. And we did a Mediterranean deployment while I was on board her, as well as, you know, a Caribbean deployment and some escort duties and things like that. After Capodanno, I transferred to USS Shenandoah, which is a nuclear-capable repair ship that was stationed in Norfolk. And we also did a Mediterranean deployment, and that was during the time of Desert Storm, and provided comfort. Right after the shooting war, we had special forces in Turkey who were providing support to Kurds who had been basically kicked out of their homes in northern Iraq. And our assignment was to provide material and repair support to the amphibious task force that was operating in support of providing Comfort. And then we also did various other operations on that ship after that, USS Long Beach, the first nuclear-powered cruiser. And I was assigned as the main propulsion assistant again. Now, you may be wondering, I'm a Lieutenant Commander now with 12 years of service, and I have the same job I had as an ensign with no years of experience. Well, there's a little bit of a difference. Long Beach was the first nuclear cruiser. She was actually originally designed not to be nuclear, and they made the decision late in her build-out to put nuclear power plants in. And so she had the layout of a conventional boiler-powered ship with fire rooms, where you have the boilers, and engine rooms where you have the engine machinery. So the propulsion machinery had four main spaces, which is unusual for a cruiser. And so

everybody in the engineering department was more senior on Long Beach than would have been the case on any of the other cruisers. So that's why I was the main propulsion on Long Beach. And then after Long Beach and we did a six-month Caribbean counter-narcotics operation, and then we went into the shipyard and decommissioned her and cut her apart, took out the reactors and all the associated piping. And then the rest of her hull was towed here to Seattle to go to the Ghost Fleet, ultimately to have the reactor rooms cut out and shipped to Hanford for disposal.

Jeff Schwager: Interesting. So you were a Lieutenant Commander?

Rona Matlow: I was a Lieutenant Commander?

Jeff Schwager: I don't, I'm not very familiar with military ranks. Where does that fall?

Rona Matlow: So, the Navy and Coast Guard use one set of ranks for officers. The Army, Air Force, and Marines use a different set, but across all the services, you have pay grades. So, in the officers, you have O-1, which is, for me, an Ensign and has a single gold bar. Then O-2 is Lieutenant, junior grade, which is a single silver bar. Um, then there's Lieutenant, which is two silver bars, Lieutenant Commander, which is a gold oak leaf. Commander O-5 is a silver oak leaf. Captain Oh Six is an eagle. And then you have the Admirals, and those have one, two, 3, or 4 stars. And in the enlisted ranks in the Navy, you have seaman recruit, seaman, apprentice seaman. And those are E1, E2, and E3, E4, E5, and E6 are petty officers third class, second class, and first class. And then E7, E8, and E9 are chief petty officer, senior chief petty officer, and master chief petty officer. So you can see a progression there in how they run. Now, in the Navy and Coast Guard, the chief is kind of a special beast in the Army and in the Air Force. The E-7 is a senior NCO, but doesn't look any different other than their stripes from the rest of the troops. But in the Navy and the Coast Guard, the chief is kind of like a semi-officer, and they wear the same uniform as the officers do, and they're given significantly higher responsibilities. And one of the first things they teach you when you're an officer going through training is to listen to your chief. You know, especially as a brand new ensign, let your chief tell you what to do, because he's not going to guide you wrong, and he knows what's going on already. So if you learn, listen to your chief, and learn from your chief, you're going to do well. If you go in there and say, Well, damn it, I'm the officer, you're the chief. You know, sometimes you have to do that, but you have to really reserve that for very rare occasions. Most of the time, you have to be very open to what your chief is telling you, because your chief knows the systems.

Jeff Schwager: Okay. Well, that's a good starter course for me on the military.

Rona Matlow: So I'm not done yet.

Jeff Schwager: Oh, okay. Sorry.

Rona Matlow: Two more tours. After Long Beach, I transferred to Commander Operational Test and Evaluation Force in Norfolk, and I was in charge of managing and testing the global command and control system and all of its service-specific subordinate systems. So it's basically networked command and control gear using off-the-shelf Unix computers rather than purpose-built military hardware computers. So it was a huge change in the way the military was looking at building and acquiring, designing, and managing systems. And by using off-the-shelf hardware, of course, you can upgrade much more easily. You know, Unix is kind of a universal operating system, and it'll work on almost any hardware. And so, you know, even if you start out working with HP and Sun, you know, eventually you want to switch to somebody else. No big deal. They run Unix, too, so you know, it adds a lot of flexibility to that. And then my final tour was back to Pearl Harbor, where I was assigned to Pacific Fleet headquarters, and I was in charge of cruise missiles for the Pacific Fleet. And during that time period, during my first year in that job, President Clinton expended almost $1 billion worth of different cruise missiles globally, including in Iraq, in Kosovo, and in various other places that the JCS said we were not allowed to mention the locations of. And, you know, when I retired, I signed a non-disclosure agreement which says I will never talk about things that were classified while I was in service. So even though the smart person can find out where those were. And in fact, CNN was reporting them as they were happening. I'm not allowed to say them.

Jeff Schwager: I see. Well, I guess that makes sense. Yeah.

Rona Matlow: So, my injuries to my neck occurred on board the Long Beach and started getting worse while I was at Pacific Fleet. I retired from the Navy at the end of 2000. We moved to Philly, and I started grad school at Gratz College, getting a master's degree in Jewish Education and Jewish Studies. And then I went to the seminary at the Academy for Jewish Religion. And at the same time, earned two units, which is a total of 800 hours of clinical pastoral education towards certification as a chaplain. Certification requires a minimum of 1600 hours or four units of training, along with experience and examinations, and stuff. And it was during that training that things got so bad that I ended up having to leave the work. And I served a couple of different congregations along the way. Right now, my life is basically just helping people where I can.

Jeff Schwager: That's a good life.

Rona Matlow: Yeah. And, you know, the odd political action, protests like the Electoral College Day program. I'm also involved with the Jewish Federation Government Affairs Working group. And being in Olympia, they call me to go make testimony at hearings sometimes. Um, and some of those events are on my website.

Jeff Schwager: Yes.

Rona Matlow: Although I do think there's one that I have to fix.

Jeff Schwager: Okay, while you were in the military, I'm curious if, as a Jewish person in the military, that was ever uncomfortable for you or if those days are past.

Rona Matlow: Well, there were rare occasions when people tried to proselytize, but I'm pretty bullheaded. And I'm not afraid to tell somebody to bug off. And I would just warn them that they're in violation. And, you know, if they keep pestering me, they're going to get written up. And in general, people don't keep pestering me. Jewish observance in the military was relatively easy during my time. You know, I was never operating in the Middle East on land, so I didn't have to deal with any of the issues there. You know, I know there are some Jewish chaplains who won't show their Jewish Chaplain Corps insignia when they're in the Middle East because of their discomfort, but you know, it just depends, as far as you know, I wasn't super observant most of my time in, but I started getting more observant towards the end of my career, and I actually got permission to wear a Kippah all the time, even though I was a line officer, not a chaplain. And when my father passed away, I actually had permission to not shave during Shloshim and wear the uniform. So, you know, the Navy was really pretty flexible about things.

Jeff Schwager: Um.

Rona Matlow: So it worked out pretty well.

Jeff Schwager: And were you dealing with gender dysphoria throughout your time in the military as well?

Rona Matlow: It's a tough thing to say. I mean, there are some transgender people, all of whom, like Jazz Jennings, know, without a doubt, from the time that they're sentient, that they are trans, and that they have to transition. There are others like me who take longer to figure it out. In looking back on my life, a lot of the signs were there. A lot of the characteristics that I displayed, both my personality as well as bodily characteristics, indicate that, yeah, I was, you know, I've been trans all along. It just took me a while to find the language and figure it all out.

Jeff Schwager: Mhm.

Rona Matlow: So.

Jeff Schwager: And was your, um, you started your transition after your military service. Was that part of your reason for leaving the military?

Rona Matlow: Oh, no. Um, no. I, uh, topped out at Lieutenant Commander, and so I had to retire, and I was ready to retire at that point anyway.. You know, I had been in for 22 years and was fortunate to not have had combat and, you know, nobody's death on my conscience, which was a good thing. But I was ready to go to the next phase of my life. That was the end of 2000. It wasn't until 2015 that things started getting so loud in my head that I had to start looking into what was going on and trying to figure it out. So I was about 40 when I retired and about 55 when I started transitioning.

Jeff Schwager: Mhm. Um, and I don't know how much you want to talk about that.

Rona Matlow: You can ask me anything you like.

Jeff Schwager: Of this. Um, you mentioned that you've been married for 30-plus years.

Rona Matlow: Right. We're coming up on 34 years in a couple of months.

Jeff Schwager: So, how has your wife dealt with your transition?

Rona Matlow: Well, she has actually said that she likes me better as Rona. I'm a lot more easygoing. I'm a lot happier. Uh, anybody who knew me before and knows me now has commented on how much happier I look. Um, you know, I'm a lot more relaxed. And, you know, a lot of that is attributable to the estrogen therapy, which for trans women is life-saving. Um, and you know, everybody

wants to know about the sex, but, you know, the general rule is you don't ask somebody who's trans about what's in their underwear.

Jeff Schwager: I wasn't going to.

Rona Matlow: But, I will tell you that you, you know, my wife is over 60. I'm approaching 60. You know, we have bodies that aren't young and functional like they used to be anyway, so it's really not nearly as much of an issue as it might be for a couple in their 20s.

Jeff Schwager: And has your family been accepting?

Rona Matlow: Yeah, my sister is a huge, huge queer ally. And in fact, her classroom has been a safe place for queer students at her school for as long as I can remember. Long before I revealed to her that I was trans. My brother took a little bit longer to come around, but he has done. And my dad died in '99, so I don't have to deal with that, which is a relief. Fortunately, to be quite honest, my mother, August, before she died, said to me, You know, she didn't really understand this whole business of my being trans, but she was my mother, and she was never going to turn her back on me and reject me. And that she didn't understand how any mother ever could. And I can tell you that in trans advocacy and activism and support, I have dealt with so many kids whose parents have rejected them. You know, the largest percentage of homeless kids are queer kids whose parents would rather see them dead than queer.

Jeff Schwager: Mhm.

Rona Matlow: That's sad. It is very sad. And it really comes down to grossly misguided misreadings of the Bible by evangelicals. Uh, everybody gets hung up on Leviticus 1822. And the way I translate that verse is you, male, do not have penetrating sex with another male in the ways plural, of having penetrating sex with a woman. It's an abomination, a very precise way of reading it than it's normally rendered, but that's the verse that they get hung up on. They always forget about Leviticus 18 five, which says, These are the things that you shall do to live by them. And Rashi says on that, and not die by them. Rambam and Rambam both say this means that to save a life transcends the Shabbos and every other mitzvah. In the Torah, life-saving transcends Shabbos and every mitzvah. And it's well established that allowing a transgender person to transition is life-saving. Yeah. The National Transgender Discrimination Survey shows that over 40% of trans adults have attempted suicide at least once. And the research is very clear that this is not because there is a correlation between being trans and being mentally ill, but rather it's due to all the external stressors the disability, the inability to get work, the lack of family support, the lack of medical care, the inability to transition because of family situation, employment situation, whatever it is, the lack of health care insurance. You know, it's not inexpensive to transition genders. Yeah. And, with the exception of those who live on the West Coast, it's very, very difficult to get insurance coverage.

Jeff Schwager: Mhm.

Rona Matlow: And so, for transgender issues, it's a really huge problem.

Jeff Schwager: Um.

Rona Matlow: And, the other thing that we keep coming up against is these anti-transgender bathroom bills because they don't want us, horrible, evil trans women in the women's room because, don't you know, we're just men in dresses set out to rape the women? Well, of course, first of all, you ask almost, I won't say every trans woman, but you ask almost any trans woman who is on estrogen and testosterone blocking therapy. They will tell you that they can't sustain an erection anyway. Besides, this isn't about sex, and it's not about perversion. It's about trying to live. Yeah, and the other thing that they don't realize with these is if they pass those kinds of laws, then transgender men with beards will be forced to use the women's room. And transgender women, someone dressed like me is in the men's room. Well, then you don't know who's who. And you really have the potential for problems. Yeah. Um, you know, two years ago was a short legislative session here in Washington. There's supposed to be a fix to the McCleary Bill, which they never did. Yet there were six different bills in the legislature, too. To prevent transgender women from using public restrooms. Yeah.

Jeff Schwager: It's amazing. Yeah. My brother lives in North Carolina.

Rona Matlow: Oh, HB2.

Jeff Schwager: Yeah. He and his wife were out protesting.

Rona Matlow: Yeah. North Carolina has lost so much money. Right. Because so many major organizations. You know, I imagine

that, if they could, without having super-unbearable expense. B of A would probably pull its headquarters out of Raleigh.

Jeff Schwager: Yeah. Yeah. I'm sure. I remember when Bruce Springsteen cancelled his concert in North Carolina. Right. Very proud to be a Springsteen fan when he led that charge among rock stars to, uh. Yeah. Yeah, I'll.

Rona Matlow: I've never been a fan of The Boss's music, but, you know, to each their own, you know. Major props to him for, uh.

Jeff Schwager: You're a fan of his politics, though. Yeah. Yeah, yeah. Um, let me just check my notes here. I've got an awful lot of things here that I wanted to ask you about. Um, how about the rabbinical community? Have they been accepting? Have they been welcoming to you?

Rona Matlow: The liberal community is absolutely in love. They are thrilled to have more transgender people around there. Actually, I'm not the only transgender woman rabbi in Seattle, in the Puget Sound area. There's another transgender woman, a rabbi, who lives in Seattle, and there are various trans rabbis throughout the country and outside of the US, including Israel. Um, the Orthodox community is a little bit different in some cases, supportive, you know. In some cases, not so supportive. Um, when I wrote an essay last year saying that gender transition should be considered an obligation for transgender Jews based on the principle of life-saving. I had an Orthodox rabbi who read it, and, well, he didn't write an endorsement, you know, to go on it publicly. He did state that he thought it was a very well sounded out argument that I provided, looking at a lot of the different Halakhic issues in, suicide in the Shulchan Aruch, you know, like the principle that you don't everybody knows that a suicide can't be buried in a Jewish cemetery, except, the rule says that if somebody, if an adult was shallow, which means not in their right mind. Well then, yes, you can. And anybody who commits suicide is definitely shallow. It's definitely not in their right mind in that moment. Um, you know, so right away you have to be more accepting of people under stress. Then I get into the Mishnah in Yoma, where it talks about if a person is ravenously hungry suffering from what they call in the Greek Bullmoose, which is the same as the word bulimia. Um, it says that you feed them as much as you can until the light returns to their eyes. And the Mishnah says if there's no kosher food available, you feed them treif.

Jeff Schwager: Um.

Jeff Schwager: So, you know, right there, you see that saving a life overrides the obligations of keeping kosher. Um, then they explore the question in Gomorrah: what happens if a building collapses on Shabbos and you suspect there are people in the building? The things that the Gomorrah says, you're obligated to go in and search for them. And you do not go first and ask for permission. And if you do, you're considered guilty of Tamim, which literally means spilling blood. In other words, if you go and delay getting permission in this case, and somebody dies, their death is on your hands. And so, you know, and then I, because I needed to be brief in this article because of where it was being published, besides my website, I didn't get into the articles in the Shulchan Arukh that correspond to that in the Talmud, but I cite them. So ultimately, you know, this follows through in Halacha that the acts of lifesaving definitely take precedence over other ritual obligations that we have in Judaism. And, you know, that essay got the support of a black hat Orthodox rabbi. So you know.

Jeff Schwager: And have you faced any sort of overt discrimination?

Rona Matlow: Not in Olympia.

Jeff Schwager: As a rabbi, though in general, in the rabbinical world.

Rona Matlow: No. Not really. No. Well, you know, at the time I was going to B'nai Torah, which is a United Synagogue Congregation in Olympia that's kind of faltered since then. But when I told them about my transition, the only question they asked me was, Will you still be able to do everything for us that you've been doing? I said Sure.

Jeff Schwager: Mhm. That's good to hear. Yeah. Um, how did you end up in Washington?

Rona Matlow: My wife's family lives in Steilacoom and Tacoma. And you know, after all the years of moving around for my military community and then to Philadelphia so I could go to grad school. In seminary, realizing that I wasn't able to look for a job after seminary, I asked her, Where do you want to live? She said, I want to be near my mother. So we moved to Olympia.

Jeff Schwager: Okay, I'm just going to check how we're doing on time. We're good. Tell me about how you feel about the current political climate and how you want to affect it.

Rona Matlow: You're talking about it in the States.

Jeff Schwager: Yes, in the United States, to begin with. But wherever you're interested in affecting things.

Rona Matlow: You know, obviously, I generally tell people to try to be an influence in their own zip code and not try to take on the whole world right from the start. I also know that I am not going to be running for political office, even though I have a lot of very strong ideas about how things could be done better. But that's related to my disability. I just don't have the energy to commit to being a politician. You know, even on the city council level, the demand is so high that I wouldn't be able to do it. So I exert my influence politically by being a member of the Government Affairs Working Group at Federation and in testifying for various bills in Olympia. Some of them relate to transgender issues, some to Jewish issues, some to other issues. I mean, you know, the Government Affairs Working Group followed McCleary very closely, even though it's not a directly Jewish issue because it's of huge interest to those of us in the community. You know, I am a member of the actual, I'm a registered independent. I'm not a member of the Democratic Party anymore. I got really disgusted with partisan politics. And so I don't send any money to either party. Um. I would really like to see a strong third party in this country, but I'm told that the Constitution doesn't really support it. I'm not a constitutionalist, and I haven't looked into that. And, you know, but if there are people who are running for office whom I support, you know, I'll write them checks. I'll, you know, I'll do work to help them campaign as appropriate. You know, so that's politically my involvement right now. Um, periodically, there are rallies and protests in Olympia. And if I'm able to attend those. You know, as long as I'm physically able and as long as it's not on Shabbat or Yom Tov, then I'll be there. Um. You know, I do vote in every election, even though in Washington, the vast majority of elections are ridiculous. It could be combined into many, many fewer elections. But, you know, uh, and of course, we're all praying, you know, as, as was said in Fiddler, you know, where the member of the shtetl asked the rabbi, Rabbi, do you have a blessing for the Tsar? May the Lord bless and keep the Tsar as far away from us as possible. So that's my blessing for Donald Trump. Yeah. Um, as far as Israeli politics, I believe Netanyahu has to go. The problem is that they have too many political parties, and it's really hard to build a coalition. And it just isn't. Doesn't seem to be possible to get a coalition without the support of the Haredi community. And they are pushing too many social things that are undoing all of the history of what Israel is. And in addition, Netanyahu is pushing settlement in the West Bank, which is very troublesome. Um, you know, in a perfect world, I would love to see all of Israel be Israel. You know, the mandate and the partition plan gave Israel the Jewish home in Palestine and Jordan as the Arab home in Palestine. But Palestinians are not welcome in Jordan. And they're not welcome in Israel, and they're not welcome in Egypt, and they're not welcome in Syria, and they're not welcome in Lebanon. So where are they supposed to go? And you know, the reality is, you know, just like Gaza is no longer part of Israel, the West Bank is not going to be a part of Israel either. And so, you know, there's plenty of land that can be built on in Israel. Israel is the only country in the Middle East that has turned desert into an oasis. Israel is the only country in the Middle East that has industry outside of energy, you know, tech industry, medical industry. You don't see that in any other country in the Middle East. They have so much to offer, but they're being so horribly, horribly clobbered by bad politics and bad decisions based on hatred and ignorance.

Jeff Schwager: Well put.

Rona Matlow: So I do find it interesting the number of people in this area who are Rachel Corrie types, who would like to see the Palestinians, you know, see Israel returned to the Palestinians, disregarding 3500 years of history. For a group that didn't even exist until 1970 and didn't have the land until after we were kicked out, you know, after the destruction of the Second Temple. Yet they don't think twice about living on land taken from the First Nations people. It's kind of ironic.

Jeff Schwager: Yeah. Um, so I think that covers all of the questions that I had. Okay. I'm a little. I guess I'm. One thing I was curious about is how you viewed the Chelsea Manning situation as both a trans activist and a military veteran.

Rona Matlow: Well, I can tell you that there is a split in the military veteran community between senior and junior, between older and younger. The more senior, the older people tend to see her as a traitor. The younger people tend to see her as a counterculture folk hero.

Jeff Schwager: Mhm.

Rona Matlow: And I do tend to see her as a traitor, even though she wasn't convicted of treason, and that she should have served time in Leavenworth. Now locking her up in solitary the whole time, that was not the way to deal with it. Um, it was also problematic that she was getting transgender treatment when active duty military people who do their jobs every day and follow the Uniform Code of Military Justice were not getting these therapies, you know, that's problematic also. Um, you know, President Obama commuted her sentence but did not pardon her, which means that she is still a convicted felon. And yet somehow, the way the law is in Maryland, she can run for national office in Maryland, which is beyond me.

Jeff Schwager: And, well, let the voters decide. Well.

Rona Matlow: The problem is that she'll you know, she, you know, Kristin Beck four years ago ran in the primary in Maryland for a Democratic representative seat. Kristin Beck is a retired senior chief Navy SEAL who is transgender. And she wasn't able to win

that primary election. You know, winning a representative seat, which is a much smaller district, is a piece of cake in comparison to winning a Senate, seat, which is the entire state, right? Yet Manning seems to have some traction.

Jeff Schwager: That's because our politics has turned into a celebrity.

Rona Matlow: And in addition, she's hanging out with the alt-right now.

Jeff Schwager: Yeah.

Rona Matlow: And so, um.

Jeff Schwager: You know, it was as a spy in their house.

Rona Matlow: Methinks she doth protest too much. Um, she's losing credibility among a bunch of the people who liked her. Yeah. Um, my take on it is she has no experience, and she doesn't know anything. Yeah. Um, she would be an awful legislator. But, you know, as for the people of Maryland to decide, isn't it? I guess if she were running here. Um. Well, if it were the choice twice between Chelsea Manning on the Democratic ticket and Caitlyn Jenner on the Republican ticket. I would choose Chelsea Manning if there were alternatives who were cisgender but were better candidates. I wouldn't vote for either of them because it's about bettering the country, which betters the lives of transgender people.

Jeff Schwager: Yeah.

Rona Matlow: Having transgender people in Congress would be nice, but it's not necessarily the best way to advocate for a better life. Yeah.

Jeff Schwager: Well put.

Rona Matlow: Thank you.

Jeff Schwager: Is there anything I have not asked you that you wish I had?

Rona Matlow: Well, people always want to ask me about my medals, but those are all in my bio, so you can just pull them right off my bio if you need to.

Jeff Schwager: Okay. Well, do you want to tell me about your medals?

Rona Matlow: I can do that. Um, going from top to bottom, the Meritorious Service Medal was for my job at Pacific Fleet, and for the summation of my entire Navy career. Navy Commendation Medal green with white stripes. Two stars represent the second and third awards of that. Um, for doing a really good job. And the Navy Achievement Medal. Green and orange with one star represent two awards for doing a pretty good job. Then this one here is the Navy Unit Commendation. Uh, Pacific Fleet headquarters was awarded that while I was stationed there. Um, this next one is the Navy Meritorious Unit Commendation, which is lower than the Navy Unit Commendation. I got those on USS California and USS Shenandoah for things that we did.

Jeff Schwager: Okay, that you can't talk about, right?

Rona Matlow: This is the Navy E there are two awards, one for USS Hawkbill and one for USS Long Beach, for meeting all of the testing, inspection, and examination requirements that the squadron has for you. And those are not awarded very often. So it's pretty cool to get that Navy Expeditionary Medal for doing stuff. National Defense Service Medal for fogging a mirror during a time of war. Southwest Asia Service Medal. Desert Storm. Sea Service Deployment. Ribbon with a bunch of stars for times away from home. Port for greater than 90 days, Arctic Service ribbon for operating in Arctic ice down to and including the marginal ice zone. So, you know, normally you think of Arctic service as above the 70th parallel, which is the Arctic Circle, but there is sustainable ice, or at least there used to be, below the Arctic Circle. I can't tell you where we were, but I can tell you that I'm not a bluenose, which means we didn't cross the Arctic Circle. Okay, okay. The next one is the Coast Guard Special Operations Service ribbon. In Long Beach, we intercepted 70 tons of cocaine. Wow. Yeah. This is the Kuwait Liberation Medal from the government of Kuwait for Desert Storm. Pistol Marksman ribbon and this is not an official ribbon, but that's a Cold War Victory Medal. Veterans are allowed to wear it, although people on active duty are not. And this other one here is for a ballistic missile patrol. I did one patrol on Mariano Vallejo when I was a midshipman. Uh-huh. So that's all the garbage I wear there.

Jeff Schwager: Wonderful. All right, well, thank you so much for coming here and doing this and taking part in. Thrilled to be here. Exhibit. Yeah. Good.