

Queer Newark Oral History Project

Interviewee: June Dowell-Burton

Interviewer: Whitney Strub

Date: December 1, 2015

Location: Rutgers University-Newark

Whitney Strub: Okay. So this is Whitney Strub recording on December 1, 2015 at Rutgers-Newark doing a Queer Newark History Project interview with June Dowell-Burton and thanks for being here, June.

June Dowell-Burton: Thanks for having me.

Whitney Strub: Our pleasure. And just to get the ball rolling maybe you could sort of introduce yourself and give us a little background, your family background and where you're coming, where you're born that kind of biographical detail.

June Dowell-Burton: Okay. So I was born and raised in St. Louis, Missouri. I grew up in Ferguson, Missouri. These days Ferguson is very popular, you know, with the Black Lives Matter Movement, all of the racial inequality going on but that wasn't the Ferguson that I remember which I'll probably get into a little bit later.

Let's see, I'm the oldest of two. I grew up in a single parent home. My mom, oh goodness what does she do? Everything. You know, she put me through private school from K through eighth all the way through twelfth grade. My sister went to public school. She worked three jobs to ensure that my sister and I were fed and had a roof over our head. And, I mean, that's pretty much about it.

Whitney Strub: And so were your parents from the St. Louis area?

June Dowell-Burton: Yes. My mom was—I'm not sure if she was—was she born and raised in St. Louis? I think she might have been but I definitely know my grandmother is from Tennessee so and she actually migrated to St. Louis when she was younger.

Whitney Strub: Okay. And then what about your father?

June Dowell-Burton: My dad, they were married and they divorced when I was about seven. So that's why I would say single parent home. He was a military guy, entrepreneur and my son looks just like him [laughs] actually. But he was working class dude but their marriage didn't work out and then he remarried and just pretty much had another life that he lived. We try to integrate into that life but it just didn't work well for me. For my younger siblings she was fine but it just didn't really work well for me.

Whitney Strub: So why were you in private school and your sister in public school? What determined that?

June Dowell-Burton: Wow. We both started out in private school but I think when it came to secondary education I think it was just really book smarts and just kind of like I was the one that kind of always followed the rules and my sister was kind of like the rebellious one and wanted to do her own things, so behavioral issues got her into a little bit of trouble.

Whitney Strub: And by private school are we talking Catholic school?

June Dowell-Burton: Yeah, private Catholic school.

Whitney Strub: Okay. So what was that like?

June Dowell-Burton: Let's see. High school, well, I think like anytime you're minority it's always difficult. In grade school, one of two African-Americans in like my class and Catholic school it's kind of like your little family. So you know, once you start with them in kindergarten you will know them for twelve years. I grew up with a lot of the kids and then even went to private school with at least two of them.

It was difficult, just the rigorous rules of being Catholic nuns and just the rules that they had things like old school teachings that they had. I'm going to say some racial prejudice was there as well. I was always sitting next to the cute little blonde, blue eyed chick next to me. And it was frustrating trying to raise your hand and get called on. It was always—I was never the one called on but anytime if there was a note being passed or they'd pick that type of stuff up but never like the academic intelligence.

And it wasn't until like the fifth grade that I actually kind of felt valued. We had the first year she didn't last long. She was the only African-American teacher, probably the first one at that grade school.

Whitney Strub: Yeah.

June Dowell-Burton: I excelled like really well in fifth grade but the second she left it was just like {surprise noise} what happens. She instilled to me she is just like look you're here for a reason. She said use this as—like whatever adversity you have just use it as a stepping stone to motivate you to do better and be better.

She said not too many kids get the opportunity to go to a private school. It was generally a good school. That's it.

Whitney Strub: Was the school in the city in St. Louis or is it in Ferguson?

June Dowell-Burton: No, it was actually on Ferguson, Our Lady of Guadalupe.

Whitney Strub: Okay.

June Dowell-Burton: Yeah.

Whitney Strub: But were you Catholic?

June Dowell-Burton: No.

Whitney Strub: Okay. So was that—

June Dowell-Burton: I don't think so. Let me see. We didn't really—we only went to church when we had to.

Whitney Strub: Yeah.

June Dowell-Burton: And my mom was born and raised Baptist. We never participated in any of that either. No church services.

Whitney Strub: Yeah.

June Dowell-Burton: I mean I appreciated the Catholic church because you were in and out. You know you'd go to black church you'd be there all day. [laughs] You know there all day but yeah it was—you know that's really funny but no I don't—no.

Whitney Strub: Was that a factor for you in school? I mean was everybody else Catholic or not?

June Dowell-Burton: Well I think we went—okay, so let me think because I did have the confirmation and all that stuff so I guess that would—

Whitney Strub: Okay.

June Dowell-Burton: We weren't practicing. I'll say we went through the motions because we were in the school but like when it came time to Sunday morning getting up to go to church on Sunday, that wasn't our family. We were there Monday through Friday, that was enough. So, yeah.

Whitney Strub: Gotcha.

June Dowell-Burton: Yeah.

Whitney Strub: Okay. And so what was Ferguson like? I mean it is so iconic now.

June Dowell-Burton: Mmhmm. Um, wow. Looking at the pictures on TV like I barely recognize the city. I left Ferguson when I went to college my first go-around back in '86. We lived on a dead end street on Thomas Avenue and Thomas Avenue was like maybe three blocks from this city called Kinloch.

They were like barrier separating Kinloch from Ferguson and Kinloch was the all African-American town in Missouri, one of the oldest African-American towns in the country. The population of Kinloch was all black and Ferguson was probably 99.995 percent Caucasian with a sprinkle of African-Americans and you know I happened to be part of that sprinkle.

We never really had any problems there. Did racism exist then I would probably say yes, but at that time walking on the street or having somebody yell the "N" word or something like that, I didn't really experience that part of Ferguson. I want to say that between, what—you know we had white friends and everything was cool. I never really had any issues or racial issues even in the Catholic school at all other than that one incident with the hair in the gym scenario.

Whitney Strub: You spoke about that at the panel we were on, do you want to share that story for the record here?

June Dowell-Burton: Yeah. I was in I think it was I can't remember—it was either—I think it was eighth grade and I played volleyball. I'm very active in sports. So we were practicing at the mother house which is where all of the Franciscan nuns live and so that night we had practiced in the facility, I mean it was beautiful. I mean I wish I have—I can remember exactly what it looks like.

I mean they had like an Olympic size pool, you had to walk down I mean like rubber volleyball—it was pristine and they

had this gorgeous library with this little kind of like sleeping pods. They look—how can I explain? They were almost like hammock-like. It was really great.

But anyway, so the light kept flickery wherein running the stairs and after we finish running the stairs the lights kept going on and off, on and off, on and off and then something happened. I don't know if the lights like the light switch in the hallway controlled like the light to a gym or another room but apparently some lights kept going on and off. I never witnessed the lights going on and off but that's what I was told.

The next you know I'm getting in trouble for my hair turning on and off the light switch. At that time I've distinctly remember that my hair was in two ponytails. So the ponytails are going this way so I don't know what is going on back here. So I have no idea how they had come to the conclusion that it was me who did that.

But any who, so my mother had to go—we lost the gym privileges. So the coach of the volleyball team who is also the mom of that cute little blonde little girl I was talking about and like our history goes so—I mean it's ridiculous. Her mom said—called my mother on the phone and says it's June's fault that we lost the gym and you need to go apologize to Mother Conselia, that was her name I couldn't remember it the other day, Mother Conselia, and say you're sorry and you apologize and so we can get the gym privileges back.

So my mother hang up the phone, asked me what happened and I said I don't know what they're talking about. So the next day everybody was pissed off at me and everything. So my mother makes an appointment and she said Mother Conselia was very hard to contact and she did not speak to her directly. She spoke

to her secretary and so my mother was already aggravated. She's like, well, what is she doing all day.

Then she finally got her appointment scheduled and she went after she—and I'll never forget this because the weekend before she went roller skating with us and broke her arm. So she goes to the mother house and meets Mother Conselia and Mother Conselia is like okay well you're here because we have this incident and your daughter has been identified as the culprit playing pranks on blah, blah, blah, blah, blah.

My mother just politely told her thank you for the facts but how is a child's hair going to turn on and off a light switch. And she's like I comb my child's hair all the time so I know how it was done that day and how could that even be possible. So maybe somebody's child is playing pranks and using my daughter as a escape goat.

So needless to say my mother did not apologize and my mother's like I could give two shits and she did say that just like that I could give give two shits if they use the gym again. And so needless to say we didn't use the gym, but you know they at the end of the day my mom was happy and I mean I admire her for that. I mean because, you know, she could have easily just said I'm just going to agree just so there's no—my mother was never the type to be afraid to ruffle feathers and I definitely know I got that trait from her.

Whitney Strub: Yeah.

June Dowell-Burton: So definitely. Ruffling feathers is not a problem for me.

Whitney Strub: That's great. So did that alienate you from the school administration or did it pass over?

June Dowell-Burton: I think eighth grade came and gone and we were at the end. It was probably like it was the end of the season anyway. But I just think for gosh—and looking back like everything is political. The coach and the daughter they had a reputation or I guess just were kind of end good with the school. I don't know like whether it was philanthropic influence I have no idea but so pretty much whatever they wanted to happen kind of happened in their favor. Everything else just really didn't matter what anybody else said. It was like okay she said it and this is what it was.

She actually like when we—because we went through high school together too and it was the same type of thing except that the racism it really got worse then. And then I started noticing it. There were more African-American folks in my high school but it still was at minimum of like three—I think there were four, no five in my high school class. You know just influence and money and power, you know like how that played itself out.

Whitney Strub: So high school is the mid 1980s. Elementary was what?

June Dowell-Burton: '82, '88. '82 to '86 was high school and then yeah.

Whitney Strub: Okay. And so how did the racism get worse, what did that—

June Dowell-Burton: I know back then I was like a damn good athlete like there was just no way I should have not been allowed to play on my high school varsity volleyball team—

Whitney Strub: Yeah.

June Dowell-Burton: —and I will say this to this day. Definitely with basketball I got cut my sophomore year and I had a dream about it. It was like I was dreaming and then my name was written in red ink

and then it was crossed out and you just saw this little dribble. It almost looked like kind of blood. Like blood.

But the funny thing is I got up the next day after try outs and the last day of try outs I go to look on the list. Sure enough it was in red ink, my name was at the bottom and it was scratched out. Spooky.

It got worse because I mean things like you'll rather put someone on a varsity volleyball team that does not know how to play as opposed to somebody that knows how to play. I think it did stem from my mother—we were going on family vacation and they had like a practice or something and my mother said you're not going. As much as I protested and I was like bad things are going to follow behind this but she really didn't care. She really didn't care. She was like family first and that's what happened.

After that like I dabbled dabbled in a few things. I just bounced from one thing—I did basketball, volleyball then I wanted to be a cheerleader but it just didn't—none of that stuff just really clicked for me. I started like the first black student union at the school. I started advocating for folks that at a very young age

Whitney Strub: Yeah.

June Dowell-Burton: —so even for myself. Grade wise I mean I just think I got frustrated at the—just blatant bullshit that I was being dealt for no reason. And come to find out that—her name is Angie the young lady, Angie Ernst. She later on in life like a few years after high school she like realized that she was like the golden child and was given all of this like privilege. It's kind of like the Matthew Shepard, Sakia Gunn story just in real life, we're here functioning.

She said like things are getting to me that I did not deserve. She clearly admitted it. And I was just like wow. I talked to the basketball coach like after I graduated and I told him you had no idea how badly that affected me. You were messing with my life really and I said because somebody pressured you to do that. You had no idea.

We talked and everything was discussed and he apologized. But at the end of the day I'm just like well I hope you're better person or became a better coach because of whatever happened. But yeah, this it's just interesting. And then I went to Clark Atlanta University my first year and that was just culture shock.

Whitney Strub: Okay. So before we go to Atlanta, so during high school and your adolescents what was your self identity in terms of sexuality? I mean how did you see yourself or think of yourself?

June Dowell-Burton: Let's see. So I would always get teased because a lot of the kids on the block would say my mother was a lesbian. I had no idea what that was or what that kind of concept—I had no idea what it meant and I didn't know anything about it, dyke, whatever the nicknames were back in the day.

After my mom divorced my father I really didn't see any guys around and my mom had like one boyfriend, but he was around but then I just didn't really see him. And then it was one day we went over to some classmates house and I noticed that their situation was kind of very similar except they were white. So we went over there and hung out and it was a whole bunch of women, no guys, kids and then I happen to have to go to the bathroom that day. So I walked through the hallway and the

door was cracked. There two women that were making out on the bed.

Needless to say I was like I didn't see what I just saw and then I was like why would that be going on. So I go to the bathroom and you know I didn't say anything I'm just kind of like hmmm you know little perplexed. And so I get in the car and I'm really quiet going home and so I talked to my mom and she totally denied the whole thing. She totally denied that I saw the whole thing. She was like oh no you didn't see what you saw. I said I'm not crazy. I know I saw exactly what I saw.

So I kind of had to deal with that but that was the same day that I had my very first kiss with a boy. I think I was like 13.

Whitney Strub: Yeah.

June Dowell-Burton: Yeah. So I was like yeah. I stood there for a while and watched them too but yeah, I'm like something is not normal in this mix.

Whitney Strub: Your mother didn't discuss these things with you?

June Dowell-Burton: No, no. She had a roommate for ten years and her two kids. So we all went to the same school and we're practically raised together and it wasn't until I went to college that that pretty much dissolved and—but yeah they slept in the same bed. It wasn't until I was in tune in what being gay men or being a lesbian meant that I started piece and put in the puzzle pieces together. I was like oh I get it now. But to this day my mother would still deny any of that.

Whitney Strub: Okay. So for the rest of high school your involved with boys?

June Dowell-Burton: I had very cute little crushes though on women or girls. There was two girls they were kind of—and back then in the '80s like punk was like really in.

Whitney Strub: Yeah, yeah.

June Dowell-Burton: But they stuck out like a sore thumb. I mean freshman year they came in, they were just as cute as little buttons, you know perfect little angels. Boy, sophomore year hit the Mohawks and spiky hair and chains and we wear uniforms too. I mean the wild colored hair. I mean but they were really beautiful, beautiful just beautiful. I would probably say like I mean I was just enamored with just their brazenness I guess because they didn't really care and I was like I love this.

High school I mean I had crushes. I thought they were crushes or very strong like best friend like best friends. So it was just really—they were really intense relationships and if something went wrong I was like oh my God I'm going to die. So probably subconsciously I think they were crushes. I had like boyfriends but they were always boyfriends who were very feminine, which is really interesting looking back at it. It's like hmmm. But you know, yeah.

Then right after college, yeah in '86, like '86 '87 that's when I met my ex-husband at Clark Atlanta University.

Whitney Strub: Okay. So can you talk about college a little?

June Dowell-Burton: Sure. Clark Atlanta University, wow. So going from being one of a few to being the majority which I thought was really going to be great but there's just a whole different dynamic. I mean just the culture of an all black university like things like being in the Baptist church or being church oriented or a church

kid, singing, dancing even fashion, the lingo. I just did not fit in. [laughs] It was crazy.

So I went from K to 12 not really fitting in because of what I look like and then it's like I get here and it's like okay but I'm not really from this culture even though I may look like everybody else. So it took a little getting used to.

Whitney Strub: Yeah.

June Dowell-Burton: And where did I find—how did I get there I got a volleyball scholarship believe it or not without even playing from high school team.

Whitney Strub: Wow.

June Dowell-Burton: Yeah. So actually a coach—then I played like not AAU ball but it was kind of like **rec league** something similar to AAU but he was like why don't you play for your high school team and I said that is a very, very long story. He was like I cannot believe what I'm seeing right now.

My high school if you look up Incarnate Word Academy in Bel-Nor, Missouri you will see the records for volleyball state championships. He was like I cannot believe that you are not playing. He's like why are you not playing and I was like I just don't want to tell you. He was like all right look this is what I'm going to do he's like Clark Atlanta University is just getting ready to start their—they're going to start their volleyball program this is the first year, no problem.

So he's like you go talk to the coach, do some little tryouts or whatever and see how it goes. Okay, fine. But then this is the other thing about power and privilege. So my mom's best friend, her father was an alum from the school, and her

daughter was going on a tennis scholarship because—I mean he used to be really big in playing field. So she—we were roommates and so we all flew down together and visited the college and so we met the coaches and so boom.

So I'm not really sure if I really got in truly on my talent or whether it was the connection. But either way I'm grateful but I didn't last long there because just the whole culture of the school. And I partied so much. My mother was so strict and just not being out and I flunked out then you know I was done by my sophomore year.

Whitney Strub: Okay.

June Dowell-Burton: Yeah. I was totally done partied—partied my ass off I was done.

Whitney Strub: Yeah. And by then you had met the man who would become your husband?

June Dowell-Burton: Uh-huh.

Whitney Strub: Okay.

June Dowell-Burton: Yeah, but I still have my little women crushes.

Whitney Strub: Were you tapped into like the gay scene in Atlanta at all?

June Dowell-Burton: No, not at all.

Whitney Strub: Okay.

June Dowell-Burton: My first experience with a gay male was when I had my first job in St. Louis at Hardy's restaurant. They would tease the guy who was behind the counter flipping burgers. I'm like why—what is the big deal and he was gay, gay man, gay, gay, gay. He had this pink sneakers on so he had no problem expressing himself and that was back in the day when AIDS

was first, you know, we don't want you touching our burgers and stuff like that.

So we actually became really, really close because his brother died and I don't really know what happened to him but I mean I went away in school. He had to be—I was 16 and I was—he probably had to be like in his early 20s. He would take me to like St. Louis' downtown club scene. My Mom is like where are you going I'm like I'm going to hang out with Carl. I'd get to see drag shows and stuff like that.

But tapped into Atlanta's gay scene absolutely not. That was one thing I can definitely say about Clark Atlanta University, homo-pho-bic, definitely.

Whitney Strub: So nobody was assigning like Audrey **Lorde** or Barbara Smith.

June Dowell-Burton: No. Even if I was in class enough to even see what was the assignments. They had great parties though. I mean I was just not for—how can I say it. Because I graduated high school a class of 105 I think my class ranking was 103. I know that was just out of sheer frustration with the structure of that whole program and I was just like this nobody gives a shit about me and like all they want me to do is either play ball or do this and then when I don't suit their needs so I just had to fuck it. Literally, I swear my grade point average is like . . . wow I want to say it was an F back then. It was still on the 4.0. I think I literally had like **a sea of 3 [?]**. [laughs] It was down there. **(28:29)** It was done there.

And then Clark when I found out because I came home for the summer and my ex-husband and I we got engaged like as soon as—I mean we dated for six months so that was the first semester and we were engaged by the next. He popped the

question really fast and he was the campus whore, frat guy, very popular, very smart, dual engineer, made dual degree engineer major. I mean I'd hooked a good one.

But sophomore year I went to the financial aid office and I'm like okay I'm here to register for my class, and it was like well, Ms. Dowell, you don't have the grades. We can't give you no money if you don't go to class. So I was like all right fine. So I took a job with Kroger's, my mom had moved to Atlanta. I think she followed me around the country to make sure I was all right.

So I took a job at Kroger's, stayed there for a couple of seconds and then he decided to go to the military and then yeah that was it. And then I think we had kind gone through a little fuzzy patch in our relationship, but then you know he was serious after he got out of officer training school and then I moved to Pensacola then next thing you know a nice little bundle of joy called Michael was on his way and then that was pretty much it as far as the husband thing.

Whitney Strub: So was your relationship good? I can't completely read.

June Dowell-Burton: Yeah, it was interesting. I mean I was a caretaker, I mean definitely. I made sure everything he had he needed. I made sure that his sister had—I was the baby sitter for her two kids while she was going to school and June was the one that was not going to school. There were issues around religion as well. They belong to one of the big box churches I'd like to call and it just seemed a little cultish to me, so I wasn't really feeling that.

So then it was a pull from his sisters like okay if she's not in the church you can't marry her and blah, blah, blah. And so that

was very stressful and when I didn't get it like I said she wasn't around when we're together. I mean I had no issue with the church per se but I just didn't feel like I needed to be there like seven days out of the week. That was just too much for me.

And his sister has a lot of influence in his life just simply because his mom also was murdered when he was younger so that was another whole another set of struggles that we had to deal with in our relationship. The change actually happened when he had to go out for his first tour, I ended coming up to Jersey. So this is when the gay thing starts to happen and manifest.

So he goes to tour. My mom now has relocated to Jersey so she was like—and my son was already a year and she was like well he's gone out to sea, it makes no sense of you being in Florida by yourself raising this kid with no support. So I come up to Jersey I start working for State Farm. My mother was there, has been there and retired from there. She's like I'll get you a job and you don't have to worry about money and it was more money than I was ever making down in Florida making I mean I think I literally—it was like \$4.75 an hour and then I get to State Farm and I'm making like \$30,000.00 in the mail room. So who wants to leave?

I didn't want to go anywhere and at that time—I mean it was okay. He has away saying I miss you, I miss you, I miss you. And then it was just that strange, freaky type accident like you're just going to look got a piece paper and you're not really snooping or whatever. I mean I knew who he was when we got married and engaged and you know throughout that whole process.

I knew he was that guy that you know he had to be the center of attention or with all the girls or both. But it wasn't until like he was coming home from tour so I came back to Florida and I just happened I had to pay a bill that day. I popped open the briefcase because he like took care of all the bills and everything. I popped open the suitcase and there was a stack of letters.

I remember before we got married he was like could you send this letter or you know drop it in the mail and I was like okay no problem. I didn't even think about it but I did look at it and it was like somebody in Corpus Christi, Texas. Who is this? But I was like you know just threw it in the mail, but come to find out this was somebody that he had a relationship with. So while he was on tour and we were married there was this big stack of letters that had accumulated that he kept like dummy.

So I read every last one them and then when he came back from tour they were all stapled from the door. The one that had, ugh, like that was just the worst—that had most information in it to say okay it's time to get divorced that was the one that was on the front door and then the entire apartment had letters like all around. So highlighted, highlighted letters so he got the point. But yeah, I mean that's really what happened with that.

Then I come back up to Jersey and—

Whitney Strub: Are we talking Newark here?

June Dowell-Burton: Yeah, Newark. Yeah, yeah. My mother lived in Piscataway, so when I came back it was in Piscataway with her. But then I met my first girlfriend actually at Club Zanzibar bar and it was during that crazy time period and that was just when—that was

Pandora's Box right there and it was done. She was dancing to "Was That All That Was" by Jean Carnes.

And I'll never forget like she was up—she was just dancing with herself in the mirror and the room was like smoky blue and it seemed like we were only two people in the entire space but I knew there had to be more people there but that's how I remember it. She turned around and that was the end of that.

We didn't start off like in a relationship. I mean we definitely started out as friends and then my sexual encounter happened I think like one night after the club we went to her house and then we were watching what was it on—Malcolm X. It was a bootleg VCR cassette tape. But the tape was so lousy it was just fuzzy and I'm just like I'm looking at her I'm like this is fuzzy and the next thing you know like we're kissing and then that was the end of that. So no more bootleg or Malcolm X.

Whitney Strub: Wow, that might be the only erotic encounter Malcolm X inspired. [laughs]

June Dowell-Burton: [laughs] Yeah, I don't know but it was interesting. And then shortly after that I was just like you know it's not me it's you. I mean, I'm sorry, it's not you it's me and you know I just told him that this had to—and by that time he had moved on anyway.

Whitney Strub: What had brought you to Zanzibar bar in the first place? Were you—because you were not thinking in terms of like looking—

June Dowell-Burton: No, actually one of—when I was in Jersey and it kind of hops around because like that's the only way I can piecemeal it. So what happened is at the time my younger sister also who

moved to Jersey with my mom and lived in Piscataway, she got a call from MTV to go to audition for The Grind.

So my sister asked me—she was like look I don't want to go to New York by myself why don't you go with me and next thing you know we're both auditioning for The Grind. They end up picking me and not her. So needless to say I'm still paying for that you know twenty years later.

Through working with The Grind I met Anthony who is a local what's his last name. Hmm, any who. I can't think but he's local and does a lot of stuff and so he was actually a dancer on The Grind and was from Roselle but he was always down at Zanzibar bar hanging out dancing and whatnot. So that's how I ended up getting to Zanzibar bar through Anthony. And then it was that introduction to Zanzibar bar that kind of opened up the door to everything rainbow for me.

There I met this guy named Arrow Claxton and Wink and they would—Arrow was fashion designer, dancer as well and Wink also made like—I think they were just ahead of their time because Wink would do these designer jeans and like now, you know he's no longer with us but now looking back I'm just like wow like you were just so ahead of your time. And they were both gay and so then we will go to all the gay clubs. So me and my new female friend which we weren't together at that time yet because it just kind of happened slowly but, yeah.

So that's how everything opened up. And Zanzibar bar was like the place if you were gay and you were black. I mean even white I mean we had so many—and you love house music and I didn't even know what house music was until I got there so

because I was a pop, rock, punk chicks so I had no idea. But Zanzibar bar that was definitely the turning point.

Whitney Strub: So that would have been around?

June Dowell-Burton: '93.

Whitney Strub: Okay. So you were on The Grind as a dancer?

June Dowell-Burton: Yeah.

Whitney Strub: Wow, for how long?

June Dowell-Burton: I think I made it like two years. I think it was two years.

Whitney Strub: Did it pay well?

June Dowell-Burton: It didn't pay jack squat.

Whitney Strub: Oh. [laughs]

June Dowell-Burton: And that was the problem because my job at State Farm I would have to tape every Friday. We do five shows every Friday so I'd have to take off every Friday and just being there, you know.

Whitney Strub: Yeah.

June Dowell-Burton: Yeah.

Whitney Strub: Got you.

June Dowell-Burton: It was fun though. And then I was hanging out with a bunch of New Yorkers so just imagine I mean I'm this Okie from Muskogee I'd like to describe myself as and being plopped right into the middle of New York City as a mom, you know. I don't know I just felt like I was living my teenage years like all over. I think I was in my late 20s at that time in '93 around there, yeah.

Whitney Strub: Can you flesh out Zanzibar bar a little more because—

June Dowell-Burton: Zanzibar bar, wow. Okay. So first of all you had to be dressed to impress at Zanzibar. So we—Melvin was at the front door. Dark skinned gay. He was the gatekeeper. Always—whatever the fashion was he was in it or he was creating his own.

So there was this velvet rope and you had to stand in line and unless you knew somebody you know you were standing in that line. So most of the time I got in around the rope just simply because who I was with. Thank God because some of those people standing in the line I mean it's like Newark's only Studio 54, like that's really what it was.

The bottom floor is where kind of like you would have the house dancers that would sprinkle the powder on the floor and twirl and slide. They would kind of play the old school like house music and then upstairs that's the larger space with the strobe lights and the ball and you had like stage. I think I performed with—because Wink and Arrow they also did choreography so you know I'd end up dancing. I can't remember the artist but yeah we ended up performing for somebody. I mean the space was huge. I mean it was just huge.

I remember like this old velvet red couches for some reason. I don't know that might be old, fuzzy memory. But yeah the space was just huge. I think that's when you had the—I mean it was just something for everybody and anybody in there just dancing. I mean like performers would come on a regular and they would not close until literally like 3:00 or 4:00 in the morning.

Whitney Strub: Yeah. Was it—it was gay and straight mix?

June Dowell-Burton: Yeah.

Whitney Strub: Okay. How explicitly gay was it?

June Dowell-Burton: Oh it was gay.

Whitney Strub: Yeah.

June Dowell-Burton: It was gay. You knew. You knew.

Whitney Strub: And the straight people knew too?

June Dowell-Burton: Yeah, yeah. Actually I think—yeah, they knew.

Whitney Strub: And they were cool with that?

June Dowell-Burton: Yeah they didn't care. They didn't care. I mean because there were places like within Zanzibar like you could go express yourself further like and that was usually downstairs. Downstairs was kind of like the little mood room. It was dark and you know, yeah.

Whitney Strub: Okay.

June Dowell-Burton: Upstairs was like lit and it was just everybody it was just packed from what I can remember.

Whitney Strub: Wow. So in those days you said you were kind of making the scene around other places. I mean are you talking mostly in New York City or other places in Newark?

June Dowell-Burton: No, it was—well, definitely Newark they took me to every—okay. So I went to First Choice which was the ladies spot because I went there with her. And then a couple of—**Tange and Di [43:25]** used to have these house parties. Where else did I go? Margarita had parties back in the day. Then where else did we go? Murphy's of course. If we weren't in Zanzibar and I mean there were certain nights, so you know

you did Murphy's I think it was Thursday—I don't even remember, gosh this is all fuzzy. But any who, Murphy is definitely was one of the places.

Whitney Strub: What was Murphy's like by this point?

June Dowell-Burton: Murphy's was like the small—the music was great but everybody went for the drinks. I mean you talk about just potent. I mean 12-ounce—it was bigger than that like 14-ounce glass full of—so for example you order a long island ice tea, so all the alcohol goes in well you know the ice and all the alcohol and literally a splash of coke. Splash like just for color like. And it also was like a little drug spot too.

So I'd probably say the drinks first—the drinks or the drugs first I don't know it depends on what your preference was. It was just a good time and the music was really good. You know one again it was like house music was the thing that kind of unified everybody in the gay community. But that was the spot to go. It was a little whole in wall about it wasn't even goodness 2,000 square feet it wasn't even that big.

Whitney Strub: Yeah.

June Dowell-Burton: It was small. It was just a bar, you walk in the door and then there was this U-shape bar, old wood and there was paneling just 1970s. And that's really what it was. You had the two sexy bartenders behind, male of course with no shirts on and you know. So it was just that type of environment.

First Choice on the other hand for the girls, that's when I saw the girl strippers for the first time. But again it was small like a little small space probably like double size of this office.

Whitney Strub: Where was that located?

June Dowell-Burton: First Choice was located down in the Ironbound section of Newark and I don't even remember what the name of the bar was that hosted it because gays would only be allowed at night.

Whitney Strub: Oh, okay. So First Choice wasn't the name of the bar?

June Dowell-Burton: No.

Whitney Strub: It was name of like the—

June Dowell-Burton: The night or whatever, right.

Whitney Strub: Oh, okay. That had not been clear to me before. Okay, thanks.

June Dowell-Burton: And that's it really. But Newark didn't really—I mean those are only the two spots that I hang out at. But Zanzibar was enough.

Whitney Strub: Yeah.

June Dowell-Burton: And then when Zanzibar closed it was just kind of like everybody just started going to Murphy's. And then it was either Murphy's or the city. Then once Murphy's was gone it was just like oh God what happened.

Whitney Strub: So during that moment do you come out to your family and your friends? What position are you in as you're embarking on your first relationship with a woman?

June Dowell-Burton: I'm married. I told my mom and she was like why do you want to do that. I told ex-husband and he was kind of crushed. He didn't really get it. I mean it just happened. But it wasn't like oh I'm out. It was definitely, I mean because like once the husband component was gone from my life then it was like okay well now who am I in this situation because I had my son with me and then that was a nasty court battle that was just disgusting.

My relationship with her didn't last that long either. I mean she was Caribbean and then that was a whole 'nother—it was like I got with her and then it was okay you're always around but now that we live together and then all the picture and stuff are being shoved in a closet somewhere making it look like I'm not even here and I'm just like, *meh*. So of course I was like okay am I making a mistake.

I even back to him after that relationship faltered but I just couldn't, you know, it's just something that was you know really innately just who I was and I just couldn't go back for the sake of raising my son unfortunately. If anything about the coming out that's the part I regret the most is just how my son was affected in the situation.

Whitney Strub: You mean because your ex-husband used it against you in the custody?

June Dowell-Burton: Yeah, uh-huh.

Whitney Strub: Could you talk about that a little more?

June Dowell-Burton: Sure. So when I got divorced he knew who I was so that was back in '93 and then I met someone else and so like we're talking maybe a couple of years later. So like '95, '96. So I was thinking about because this is when like we could do commitment ceremonies and stuff like that and I was really in love at the time and my son we had a shared custody.

But then when I mentioned to him that I was getting ready to do a commitment ceremony then it was just like no holds bar and the next thing you know I'm getting a piece of paper in the mail saying their son won't be coming because you are an unfit

mother because you are embarking on this lesbian relationship with this woman. I was like but he knew that already.

I didn't really feel like I had support at the time because I knew like my mom what her situation was, you know, and how she lived her life but then I couldn't afford an attorney so I kind of felt like I was in Florida. It was just the worse. I just kind of like looked at it and just said okay you're going to do whatever you want to do anyway. So he basically won by default.

Whitney Strub: So he had the State of Florida declare you unfit.

June Dowell-Burton: Yes, yes, yes.

Whitney Strub: Specifically for being—

June Dowell-Burton: Lesbian, yeah. It was in the divorce decree. It sucks. My son was—his dad being like this right wing, Christian type dude and anyone who he affixes himself to is going to have his ideals. So I didn't want my son growing up like hating me for who I was or hating me for leaving me or hating me for choosing to be who I am, which really wasn't a choice but you know according to the paperwork.

Whitney Strub: Right.

June Dowell-Burton: And he suffered some abuse by my ex-husband's second wife and her two kids. They would tell him like I'm dead, I'm going to hell and he was like at the time I think he was like seven maybe. So I really didn't know what kind of damage was being done while I was not around. My mom still had contact with my ex-husband and so she would go out to them because they had moved to the west coast. So she would go out to San Diego to see him and whatever but it was just crazy.

It wasn't until they moved back to the east coast that I just made a decision I'm like this is my kid and like fuck what what the court say. I'm like this just has to stop. So they got back and my mom setup a visit and I came with her and needless to say that's when all hell broke loose. He literally looked like he had seen a ghost like when he saw me for the first time I mean it was for Christmas. I won't forget that.

Whitney Strub: How old was he at this point?

June Dowell-Burton: He was like seven.

Whitney Strub: Okay.

June Dowell-Burton: It was just sad that he had to be put in a situation like that. He loves his dad to death like his dad could do no wrong. Sometimes I wish it wasn't like his bond wasn't that strong and he'd just kind of say okay well mom he did do this and that and that and that. But I think in the end it just kind of made him a little more open to other things. After all of that was gone wife number two was out of the picture because their relationship wasn't working. So then there was a little bit more understanding and me and my ex actually had a conversation and then he came around. He and my son came up and they even hang out with me and my other partner. It was a good time.

You really don't know like if it was really coming from him or the ex-wife, I don't know. I just wanted to make sure my son was okay in the process. And then afterwards my son is like what do you do mom like what do you do. So in 2008 he had the opportunity to come for Pride weekend. And so he got to meet Darnell and I called all the boys and so of course he fell in love with the fashion like Darnell's sneakers.

Whitney Strub: Oh, yeah.

June Dowell-Burton: He understood now like what it was that mommy does. He's like it's not all that bad. And I showed him the divorce decree. I was like I did not leave you, this is what happened. Honestly like even in high school like he has been like the biggest ally to like a lot of LGBT kids in his school—

Whitney Strub: Okay.

June Dowell-Burton: —and stuff.

Whitney Strub: That's great.

June Dowell-Burton: Yeah, I mean through bad stuff, good stuff happens.

Whitney Strub: Yeah.

June Dowell-Burton: So I love my little one.

Whitney Strub: [laughs]

June Dowell-Burton: I get teary-eyed talking about him. Because I mean I missed out on so much. I missed out on so much. I didn't—Jesus, I missed out five through high school. It's a long time. But we have a really good relationship now and so that's all I can ask.

Whitney Strub: I'm glad to hear that.

June Dowell-Burton: I know it could have turned to—it could have been so much worse.

Whitney Strub: No, definitely.

June Dowell-Burton: [laughs]

Whitney Strub: So where does that leave us in the narrative? I mean we're in the mid-90s in Newark.

June Dowell-Burton: So '90s, the Grind, the divorce, my relationship with my son so that was kind of like '93 to 2008 to now. So how did Newark Pride start I guess that's probably—

Whitney Strub: But wait, there's a decade in between here. So were you in Newark the whole time? Because I remember—I thought you had said something about moving to—

June Dowell-Burton: To New York?

Whitney Strub: Yeah.

June Dowell-Burton: Yeah. I left Newark—I was in New York from '96 to like 2003. Yeah.

Whitney Strub: Okay. So what took you back and forth?

June Dowell-Burton: A relationship. Definitely a relationship. I met somebody I moved over there and then I met somebody else and stayed there. Yeah. And then I ended back over here it was about in 2003, yeah 2003.

Whitney Strub: So where in New York were you?

June Dowell-Burton: In New York.

Whitney Strub: Where?

June Dowell-Burton: Where?

Whitney Strub: In the city where?

June Dowell-Burton: In both times I mean, so when I was here the first time Zanzibar days I was living in Piscataway but then my first girlfriend she lived borderline Irvington and everything we did was in Newark.

Whitney Strub: Okay.

June Dowell-Burton: And then I moved over to Manhattan, literally Manhattan and I was on 103rd in Central Park West and then I moved up to Harlem. And then after Harlem I came back after Hazel died and that was like 2003 and then here I was ever since.

Whitney Strub: Okay. Is that something you want to talk about?

June Dowell-Burton: What Hazel?

Whitney Strub: Yeah.

June Dowell-Burton: Oh, um, I mean I just kind of think like what I was going to talk about at the panel was just kind of how everything that any struggle as a gay woman, bisexual woman because you know I don't really jump in box but a lot of times people try to put you there. So I dealt with coming out, being married, kind of like a late bloomer gay person, dealing with the first girlfriend, dealing with the whole different cultures and LGBT issues.

She was fine being with me but wasn't fine with her mom knowing, even though I told my mom but my mom was like okay you could just be married and just do it on the side. So you know two different versions of pretty much the same story of denial. Then you know just with the injustice in the courts with being called an unfit mother just because I was gay. Then fast forward to like when my partner Hazel died.

I was with Hazel for five years in Manhattan. She worked for Columbia University in their real estate department and she was a recovering addict and if you had me her you would have never known unless she disclosed. I mean like there were no physical signs of addiction and just the way she carry—she just didn't fit the profile.

She was estranged from her family for being gay and she was also an aggressive. I would almost categorize her now as like a transman just simply because she had facial hair and probably if she could have surgery she probably would but she didn't have any breast to begin with. When she passed away, her family so her brother was a Muslim, her oldest sister was a Pentecostal head of a church and her youngest sister was kind of like the—they called her the crazy one because she tried to set the house on fire when she was younger so that was her category.

When Hazel passed away, she liked Moshood and Moshood is a designer in Brooklyn and so she was buried in—well, for her funeral in New York she had on Moshood outfit. I guess—I think the symbol—it almost looks like a skull with crossbones but her sister—the oldest sister made a comment about it and I paid for it.

Hazel left me her life insurance policy. We lived in the apartment in Harlem but I had no rights to that because we weren't in a legal type relationship. We didn't get married anywhere or have any paperwork. And then we also had purchased a house in Plainfield which she had sold prior to her death.

So when her family got down it was like down to—when they came up it was all about like where is the money, where is the house, where is this. How about you say how are you June, but then the really didn't know who I was to tell you the truth. I knew all of them and they still weren't really even speaking to her. But she called her brother every once in a while and would kind of give him info about what was going on in her life.

But I knew every single one of them and just kind of like in my grief just to be looked at like who are you. Or just not even to seen really was kind of bad. That was one of worst times in my life but that just made me more fiery. I had just started—that was my first year of undergrad at Rutgers in 2003 when she had passed away. That was really difficult.

Just going through the struggles, just even with the funeral or like the morgue, are you the—because I didn't want to have an autopsy but I wasn't a family member. And apparently I really believed that the guy on the other end of the phone had to be gay because he was like look I got you. Because I mean I was just—thinking about it just makes me want to cry. But I mean, you know, just like I didn't know like how I was going to live because I wasn't working at the time I was getting ready to go to school full-time.

It's like you know you have this money coming and just having like one person hold it up just because they don't like who you are, what you represent but he looked me out. He looked me out.

Whitney Strub: Yeah.

June Dowell-Burton: So that was pretty, pretty deep. And so when she was buried the older sister was like she asked me and I'll never forget this, does she have anything more feminine you could put her in. And so Hazel used to tell me that like when she would go home and see her mom that she would shave off all of her facial hair and it wasn't something that she was trying to grow it was just naturally there. She would shave off her facial hair and dress like in a you know. And the last time she saw her mother

before she—her mom passed away she went as herself in pants and who she was.

So when they took her body back to Florida for the other funeral arrangement they—from what her cousin told me, she sent me the picture. She's like you're not going to believe this. I was just like that's just a body, the spirit is gone, that's just a shell of who they want her to be. They took her hair and did it all up in some girly way, put lipstick on her. It was just terrible. I was just like they could do whatever they want. That was a rough time. That was a rough time.

Whitney Strub: That sounds rough, I'm sorry.

June Dowell-Burton: That's okay. That makes you stronger and then I ended up—that's when I ended up this way. I mean I think the universe just kind of has a very strategic way of putting me where I need to be at the moment that I need to be there. That's when I met my ex-wife because I did get married again. She was actually working at Columbia during the exact same time that Hazel was working.

We just became friends and when everything happened, I think the blackout had happened in New York around that time and she was able to contact me. She was like okay you're the only one I know with a landline because all the cell phone towers were dead. She was like could you please call my mom. So I called her mom and we were just cool after that. She was helping me through my grief and she was like one of the—and I hadn't known her that long but she was maybe the second or third people that I called when Hazel had passed.

I just got to the point I was like I know Hazel don't want me to be miserable, I know it is—it was like maybe about a good

eight months afterwards. Some folks would say are you sure, it's a little fast and I was just like Hazel wouldn't want me being some old mourning her whole life away. That's how I ended up back here because Jana had lived in Newark in the West Ward.

Whitney Strub: But she was still working in Columbia?

June Dowell-Burton: Yeah. She was doing summer camp over there and then it was her first year when we got together. It was her first year of being a Newark public school teacher.

Whitney Strub: Oh, okay. And this was summer of 2003-ish?

June Dowell-Burton: Yeah, 2004. Hazel died in August, yeah. So it was like right over—yeah I think it was 2004. Yeah, either '03 or '04 one of the two. I think it might even be '03 maybe. And then that's it. So Jana and I were together until 2008. A lot of stuff I mean another Caribbean woman, still issues with parents even though she had a relationship prior to me but was never really out about it. I mean well she's out now.

Then Sakia Gunn happened. We happened to be around at the time and knew people that—then it was called Liberation In Truth Unity Fellowship Church. So we would show up—you know we go to church every once in a green moon, but I really wasn't about church. I had been burned too many times so I'm just okay I think it's great it's all about woman, empowerment, at the time and I'm just like okay this works but I don't want to be here all day and I don't want to sign up for a committee like don't **tether me** to anything.

So Sakia happened and then there was Newark Pride Alliance. I was pretty outraged about it just because it was just stupid and senseless. So I met Laquetta and James. I think I met Laquetta

first and she was just like this big boisterous lesbian and loud and present. Almost scary though and intimidating, her persona. But now I understand why she has had that too.

I was the newbie on the block but now I understand why she had to be that way. And then I just started being active. Newark Pride Alliance was just founded based off of the Sakia Gunn death and they wanted to bring awareness about LGBT issues especially safety which is because I think back then there's also a string of gay murders that was going on at that time. Just to say okay look this crap has to stop.

I just became active. I was busy, I was engaged. We pulled off the first prom back then with them but then also life takes a toll on people too personalities, egos and the City of Newark and some of the organizations that were involved. I mean it just was not an easy, it was not an easy task to unify all of the nonprofits. All the LGBT nonprofits in Newark. It just wasn't easy and James was the more passive one and Laquetta was more the bulldog which I understand why she needed to be. I'll keep saying that and you'll understand why.

Just because—I mean anytime you're trying to do something you surround yourself with people who are going to be supportive and anybody who is not supportive over your vision, there's going to be conflict. I think what happened is some of the egos in Newark's LGBT history, they wanted recognition for already being here, being present and doing something as opposed to aligning themselves with like somewhat of an umbrella organization. So they kind of felt like they were just kind of going to get dismissed in the wash so to speak.

And then you also had **Garden State** Equality which was the money in the outside, the outlier I would call them at the time because he had his own agenda and—

Whitney Strub: He?

June Dowell-Burton: Steven Goldstein had his own agenda and really didn't factor in what would be important to African-American LGBT folks in Newark and that was very problematic at the time as well. So I just think through bickering and just being miserable and just not having enough human resources, not enough money, not enough strings to pull with the media, I just think people became discouraged.

And you know as Gary Paul was so eloquently quoted in the journal. What was it. NJ.com—The Star-Ledger—he was like we'd have a convention center before we have a LGBT center and he was right. And anytime like—and Sharpe told me this personally and I mean you know when I'm talking to him about issues he's like there are no gay people in Newark. He was like show me the votes and I was just like I don't think there's a LGBT line for like to say what party you're going to vote for. I'd show you the votes what you need a hundred LGBT people to for you, is that going to get something done?

That was my frustration and nothing against the Sharpe administration let's just be clear here, I'm just going by what he said. And me being a young transplant from Newark who was eager to do something I didn't expect the mayor of the freaking city to say something so insensitive.

Whitney Strub: Yeah.

June Dowell-Burton: If that's being nice the way to put it.