

Queer Newark Oral History Project

Interviewee: Bryan Epps

Interviewer: Naomi Extra

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Location: Shabazz Center

NAOMI EXTRA: Okay. Today is March 24, 2016. My name is Naomi Extra, and I'm interviewing Bryan Epps at The Shabazz Center for the Queer Newark Oral History project. Okay, so I'm just going to get started with the question of when and where were you born, and can you tell me a little bit about your early life?

BRYAN EPPS: Sure, I'll try to. So I was born in Elizabeth, in the hospital, and my family was living in Newark at that time. And I've pretty much lived in Newark for... Yes, I've pretty much been in Newark all my life. My family moved into the house that my parents still live in the year before I was born. My family is not deeply rooted in Newark. They're from -- my father grew up in South Jersey, in [Wilmington], and my mom grew up in between Elizabeth and Woodbridge, New Jersey.

NAOMI EXTRA: Okay. So where did you grow up specifically in Newark? And I imagine maybe you moved around? Where?

BRYAN EPPS: Not really.

NAOMI EXTRA: No?

BRYAN EPPS: Yeah. My parents lived in the same house that I grew up in, on James Street. It's like downtown Newark, very close to Rutgers—in fact, pretty much on campus, for the most part. There's a row of brownstones that my parents moved into. There was only two other families living on the block at the time they moved in. A bunch of the houses were shells and abandoned and everything like that. First black Mayor of Newark, Ken Gibson, he... developed a redevelopment plan that can fix those brownstones up and tried to make a downtown neighborhood **[unintelligible - 00:02:11]** tried to make a downtown neighborhood and gave a lot of folks incentives to move there, and my father was going to business school at Rutgers. My mom was teaching at Rutgers, an adjunct there, and they decided it would be a great opportunity for them to take advantage of that and to help rebuild the city along with the many people

who were already living there who tried to rebuild it after the riots happened, and that someday -- they did that and they stayed, and the community has grown and changed a lot over these 33 years. They're happy with the decision that they made.

Growing up there was very interesting. It's double-sided. Growing up in a neighborhood that had obviously suffered from a lot of decay but also had a lot of really amazing people moving into it slowly over the years. I think by the time I was older and a teenager, people had the reputation for it just being a very solid neighborhood that had everything together and had -- it was kind of like a Cosby thing. It wasn't exactly my experience growing up.

There was just simple things like the city forgetting that people lived there at all and not collecting the garbage to it being targeted for crime because it was kind of an isolated area. It also, it gave us a lot of positive things that came out of this: living next to students, living next to other teachers and professors and professional folks, living next to folks who have been there for... in the city for 50 plus years. As my mother calls it often, it's like a microcosm of the world—very, very diverse in every single way, folks with different ages, retirees, all different races, all different sexualities there. So it's kind of the concept of I guess everybody can [unintelligible – 00:03:58] technically a gentrifier, right? [00:04:00] So everything that you can think of who are gentrifiers were there. And retirees, folks who are single, folks who had young families who are trying to make a new start. So it was really great just growing up in that instead of just coming to this homogeneous neighborhood, but a lot of my parents' peers have moved to the suburbs and just trying to live very clean. So you know had all types of exposure to everything living there. So it just helped, I think, to cultivate my brother and I—I have an older brother who's four years older than me—in just a lot of various ways.

NAOMI EXTRA: Can you tell me a little bit more about your street or your block? What you remember in terms of neighbors, memories, like experiences that kind of stand out?

BRYAN EPPS: Yeah, I think -- again, it's kind of like... if you can get people together and move them somewhere and they're creating a new community, that's kind of what it was, right? So, the folks on my block, they worked very hard to get tight-knit, to know one another. There was always block parties during the summertime, and it's just by the nature of the architecture, right, the brownstones, the people, you see when people leave the house and you come in, just folks are just very aware of one another. And in the spaces, there's no such thing as privacy. You can hear the people next door, smell their food when they're cooking, all that. Even then, when people were moving in and moving out, you know folks were getting divorced so very kind of like an old-school, classy neighborhood in that way, even though it was the '80s and the '90s, right? And most people don't think of Newark, in communities and everything that are familiar like that. And I don't think James Street is really different from a lot of other neighborhoods, I think, in Newark in general, folks know each other and they know folks in the community. [00:06:00] It's a small town in a lot of ways [unintelligible – 00:05:57] in the ways folks interact. And certainly, that existed on James Street, right? And I think just because I was young, a lot of things I just experienced but didn't really know what was happening. A lot of the gay men who lived on the street where I moved in were gentrifiers, like I talked about. A lot of them passed away in the '80s didn't know why, it's probably cuz of HIV and AIDS.

Again, I think something that had a huge impact on me was just the development of the neighborhood. It's a historic district. It's classified as a historic district by the State of New Jersey and the federal government, and the people who moved into it had a real appreciation for the brownstones and for the community. And a lot of the parking lots that

exist now, a lot of the new construction, they were also brownstone. They were abandoned houses, like the one my parents moved into. Some people who moved on to that, they really wanted the entire neighborhood to be preserved and developed in a similar way, and they wanted people to move into those brownstones and to redevelop them.

Unfortunately, a lot of them were demolished and turned into parking lots and turned into Rutgers campus or businesses, stuff like that. So, many envisioned it looking like Greenwich Village and looking like neighborhoods in Jersey City that have become fully residential.

So that had a huge impact on me. Why? Because it was just that the folks who lived there had a strong sense of – they had a strong vision for what they wanted the community to be. It was a constant struggle with the city. So I probably became somebody who was interested in government and policy because of those conversations that were happening about what should a city look like, how can cities grow, how can communities grow, and what's the best thing for communities. And those, who knows what's right? The residents know what's right? Do they count if they only lived there for three years versus them folks who lived there for 50 years? Do people who work in government know what's right? So I just really became somebody who was interested in trying to wrestle with that and figure out solutions and theories behind that, and really in particular for Newark. I went to school for policy because I wanted to help the city of Newark and I wanted to be part of its continued growth, so I think that's something that's had a profound impact on me just growing up as a kid.

NAOMI EXTRA: What are some of your best memories about Newark as a kid?

BRYAN EPPS: There's so many. I didn't even -- again, it's like I went to private school, most for elementary school and for middle school outside of the city. And I just remember, even as a kid, folks talking negatively about the city. Again, it just wasn't my experience. I think bad things happened, but overall, it's a really great place to grow up. I was on the Newark swim team, and we swam at the public pool at JFK, the recreational center

probably five days a week, it was this great [unintelligible – 00:09:02] of the city, played little league in Roosevelt park. My parents took advantage of the city, everything it had to offer, so I went to museums, we went to the Newark Museum and we learned, me and my brother we learned art and crafts and took classes. Anytime there was a concert and I was free, we went to it. We went to it and took advantage of it. So I feel I had the best the city had to offer. And so, talking to one woman, maybe about five years ago, and she had worked for the Sharpe James administration, she kind of took me back to that era. [00:09:40] There was a time when he was the mayor and there was a lot of campaigning around keeping Newark clean, and there was like this heart-shaped thing on billboards and posters, and it felt like there was like a really good feel that everybody had in the city about building for the city to have a renaissance and to grow again, but I think I grew up in that: that the city has extremely valuable, extremely social, and this is a kind of the way I felt about the city growing up there.

NAOMI EXTRA: So we're talking about the late '80s into the '90s?

BRYAN EPPS: Yeah, exactly.

NAOMI EXTRA: Right.

BRYAN EPPS: Yeah.

NAOMI EXTRA: Tell me a little bit about what it was like going to school. Where did you go to high school, and what was that experience like?

BRYAN EPPS: So I went to St. Benedict's Prep, which is also in downtown Newark. It's about a 15-minute walk from outside Newark and, I did not want to go there, at all. My older brother went there, and of course I knew it was coming. He didn't want to go there and his resistance was futile, so I knew mine would be about the same, but I really did try for about at least -- even after I was in for at least a good year and a half trying to transfer to the point that... I didn't want to go there because I thought the school was too strict. It was kind of opposite of how I was raised. There was a lot of rules and uniforms, all boys. It was just nothing that I felt I was. I think

my parents sent me there because they wanted me and my brother to have more structure. I think they knew especially as black males that we probably needed that kind of bond with the other black males or that we needed to be aware that we were black males in the world that we lived in that kind of thing, and just in preparation for college or higher education, they wanted us to have those tools. Probably as working parents, they couldn't babysit us all the time. We had to get instruction from elsewhere, so we got and it was a fully formative, generally affordable education that actually has results for young folks, so it's a school folks went to Ivy League schools and all of that stuff. The tuition was only \$5,000 compared to other prep schools, boarding schools where you're paying \$30,000, \$40,000, \$50,000 for high school, so it's just a really good option for folks within the city who can pay for—even \$5,000 is a lot for a lot of families—but who can pay for that, [00:12:00] it's a no-brainer for them in a lot of ways. And so, I went there, really kind of kept to myself. I had a close-knit group of friends, maybe four or five people. It's a really small school. I graduated in a class of 96 students, so I knew everybody, still see most of my classmates around the city of Newark and New York and everywhere else when I travel. So, it was very good in that way that it was very easy to make friendships. It wasn't the high school that you see on a television show where you're kind of lost in a crowd. It wasn't that kind of experience at all. But also, I still don't believe that it reflected who I was as a person. And maybe sometimes those experiences are also good for you to have to do some things that are outside of yourself. That's how you learn about yourself sometimes.

NAOMI EXTRA: So, St. Benedict's was high school?

BRYAN EPPS: High school, yeah.

NAOMI EXTRA: Okay. What about -- where did you go before high school?

BRYAN EPPS: Elementary school, I went to a school called St. Cecilia's. It's no longer open. It's a parochial school in Kearny, New Jersey. It was a very small school, had about 200 kids in it from pre-K to 8th grade, so very small

classes. I was probably the only black kid in most of my classes with the exception of maybe two or three years. All of the families, again, knew each other. So I think my parents also wanted a serious contrast to that environment. Again, in terms of what I talked about knowing ourselves as black people and all that. We got a strong sense of it at home. My mom is a doctorate in American Studies, she teaches Afro-American history, **[unintelligible - 00:13:38]** extremely conscious. But, you know, there are external factors that have a strong influence as well there. So, they definitely wanted us to be more in tune with culture and more in tune with blackness, I think. But again, it was a very friendly environment. My mom has lupus, and she became very ill when I was about three and didn't really get better until I was a teenager. **[00:14:00]** So it was a type of school where my mom was just really very sick during summertime. She asked the kindergarten teacher, "Can you take care of Bryan?" And I just sat in the classroom all day. It was like my own personal daycare, afterschool program all summer long. So it was that kind of place, which is kind of -- you know, you can't do that now for free. So it was just the kind of school where people took care of you. They call home. Christmas concerts that we had were really like a family event. It was a very small, tight-knit place.

NAOMI EXTRA: So what were the main differences between high school at St. Benedict's and middle school? Was it just the racial demographic, or was it -- were there other things about the school?

BRYAN EPPS: I think that -- it's hard to pinpoint. So they're both Catholic schools, right? Definitely, demographically different in terms of the folks who went there, although, there's a lot of kids who went from Kearny who went to St. Benedict's as well. In fact, the principal of that elementary school I went to sent her only son to St. Benedict's, so there's connections. But there are extreme differences as well. I think the folks at St. Cecilia's Elementary School, they try to be culturally competent, they weren't. I had one teacher who told me that cotton didn't grow, and I brought a cotton

ball and she was like cotton doesn't grow [unintelligible – 00:15:27] where did you get that from? I think they also -- so that just tells you in terms of what they know about American history; and what they know and what they were able to apply to all of us, not just me as a black kid but to all the students in terms of reality, right, stuff like, cotton grows and it's a huge part of our economy and culture. That's just some basic education that can teach you that. [00:16:00] But it's very different in that way. But also so, St. Benedict's, I think it was about 65 percent black when I was in there. The same things happened here because majority of teachers were white, the administration was white, so there's also some cultural competency there that's missing there as well. I think there were -- for St. Benedict's, in contrast to St. Cecilia's was a prep school and more invested in the direction of the students. They wanted to know where you were going once you left there, where St. Cecilia's is kind of just like, if you are a baby in the family, you're just kind of existing. That's kind of how it was. They didn't expect everybody to go to college. In fact, a lot of my classmates who went to St. Cecilia's didn't go to college. A lot of folks got married after high school, that kind of thing. It is what it is. It was just very different in terms of expectations for how you live your life. Not to say one was better than the other, but it was just loads of difference. And I think that just the environment in which the two schools are in, so Kearny is a working-class town; it's not wealthy at all. It's a private school, so I'd say probably the wealthier families in Kearny, in Harrison probably sent their kids to this school. But there was just kind of more of a howdy doody feel, like people didn't care when their kids got home. There was no talk about there being danger around, whereas St. Benedict's was a gated school, and they talked about what happens inside the school, is different from what happens in the community, right? So, there's like this lurking fear that we have to save these young men who go to the school because of the danger around. They're coming from families that

might not be guiding them in the right way right, so that's -- it's not a small thing, it's very present in many of the things at St. Benedict's.

NAOMI EXTRA: [00:18:00] At St. Benedict's, you talked about it being kind of strict, and I'm wondering in what ways that environment kind of shaped or directed you in one way or another, like graduating or moving through this environment.

BRYAN EPPS: I guess that just speaks to contrast that existed between St. Benedict's and my actual family. So, again, my mother was an educator, and she was strict when we were younger, when I think she had the energy to be strict. During the summertime, we would have to do homework for her, and you know, write in bluebooks and have to read assigned books on mathematics, all of that kind of stuff. That kind of went away. So by the time I was an older kid in high school, there wasn't that kind of structure in the household. And, I think, interestingly enough, St. Benedict's had that for a lot of students, it had that for students who are just really... I guess prepared they're getting that from home, and so they're very academically inclined. I was a smart kid who didn't do homework, so I would just go to class, not do my homework, come back and take the tests, and still get a B. That wasn't an A. So the administrators at St. Benedict's didn't worry about me. I kind of just flew under their radar in terms of that type of strict guidance that the school gives to really high-performing students. And also, they're really good at catching students who are falling through the cracks. So if you're getting Fs at St. Benedict's, they're really after you to try to do better. A student like me that was kind of just aiming to fly... you know [hand clap] get by. And I really wasn't getting that at home either, I think my parents, of course they cared about how I was doing, so my report card, they'll say, "Well, why aren't you getting As?" But that's kind of the end of the conversation. So I guess to answer your question, it was strict for everybody. There's mandatory stuff that all students had to do, like say things like hiking a trail that all freshmen have to do when they first get there. [00:20:00] It's

about a month of preparation, so there's many hikes that lead up to this long weeklong hike that all of the freshmen have to do. The first day and the first week that all freshmen are there, they have to sleep in the school gymnasium it's kind of like a boot camp. So like always makes me think of the military, like you have to walk along the wall and sing songs and be shoulder to shoulder and learn all the school songs, eat strict dining. It was kind of like a hazing thing, I'm not into this at all. It was kind of like immediate enculturation to the new school, definitely an orientation of everything the school is. I knew I didn't want to do any of that. I didn't need the orientation. I didn't want to wear shirts and ties and shoes to school every day. So I was looking forward to high school as a time when I can really be more expressive and be more individualized, learn who -- I was not going to be able to do that there at St. Benedict's. Also strict in those ways is the group culture that's also there. It's designed to make sure that students don't fall through the cracks. So instead of homeroom, all the students are broken into several groups. They're named after previous alumni who went to the school, so they're responsible for making sure the students are active in sports and getting good grades or attending school every day, so they have to read off the attendance, yada yada yada. And also, compete against each other for -- the best group for grades, the best group for academics, the best group for [unintelligible - 00:21:39] studies. So that --I guess the culture of militarism was kind of always there, even if a student like me was kind of flying through the radar and trying to leave at three o'clock every day and not to play sports and not to really care. [00:22:00] So I will say I was attached and detached at the same time.

NAOMI EXTRA: Right. So, what kinds of things were you doing either outside of school or as a part of school for fun? Where were you going...?

BRYAN EPPS: So I was kind of a geek, and I was kind of like, I still am. I just, like an alternative geek, so I was very interested -- so my parents would have conversations with me, and it was like this one time that just stuck out to

me because my mom told me about it later on. She was trying to talk to me about general stuff, girls, whatever, and I'm like, "I had just seen this documentary about the boat people who live in Hong Kong." And I was like, "Let's talk about this," and she was like "nah I don't want to talk about that."

NAOMI EXTRA: This is in high school?

BRYAN EPPS: Yeah. So that's the kind of kid I was. If an older person would start talking to me, we'd just have a long conversation. And all my friends I had in high school were like that too. It's like on some other stuff. I was not interested in playing sports in school, not because I wasn't interested in sports but because I knew that if I played sports that I would have to be more attached to the school itself. So, sophomore year, I started working. I worked for a small theater in Montclair called the Luna Stage. I did properties management there. Later on, I got a job at the mall, worked there. I just spent free time going home, talking on the phone, riding my bike, you know, regular...nothing, nothing less.

NAOMI EXTRA: So...

BRYAN EPPS: Not doing homework.

NAOMI EXTRA: Sounds like high school. Sounds like high school, I'm not gonna lie. I want to just ask you kind of one, maybe a few more, but I will say one for now, one family question. **[00:24:00]** So what about your grandparents? Did you have any family in Newark as well, or...?

BRYAN EPPS: So my father's parents passed away before I was born. They probably passed away when my father was in his twenties. My mom's mother passed away when I was three or four, and she's the only grandparent that I remember. Her father passed away at the same time, but I don't remember him. I have -- my parents also have family that's abroad, so my parents were really good at creating a singly dope extended family. So like it probably got started from my godmother, who lived in South Orange, her parents were like grandparents would call each other grandma, grandpa, then call me grandson. Like if there was a

grandparent's event at school they were there, if I had the flu or chicken pox I went to their house right. My parent's friends they grew up with and went to college with, every holiday, even like Easter Sunday, we'd all be together. Something like 30, 40 people, they all raised us together, kids including me together. They're like extended family, aunts and uncles. So that's really it, I had an uncle who passed away about three years ago who lived in Burlington, he would travel up for holidays. My mother -- that's my father's brother. My mother's brother—they both have one sibling—he lives in Ghana. He's lived there since I was about maybe 12 or 13. And he was around when I was very young he became a little estranged, going further, and as I was growing up. We never talk to him a lot now, but he's, Ghana's a long way.

NAOMI EXTRA: Right, right. Have you been to Ghana?

BRYAN EPPS: No, no. I haven't been there.

NAOMI EXTRA: That's very interesting. **[00:26:00]** I want to ask about religion, because the school you went to, both of those were Catholic. So, was your family religious? Are you religious?

BRYAN EPPS: Yeah. We grew up on this church in Newark called Bethany Baptist Church, and we grew up there. My parents are very active in Church still. My father's a deacon and my mom is a deaconess. They were when I was growing up. But I would say it's a fairly progressive church in its theology. Conservative in a lot of other ways like there's no drum playing, **[unintelligible – 00:26:35]** in church or anything like that, it's very [handclap] calm. They weren't --my parents weren't into indoctrinating us growing up in terms of religion. We went maybe twice, three times a month, if we missed a Sunday, no big deal. I asked questions about religion, like learning about contradictions. My mom will say, "Well, there's contradictions. It is what it is." It wasn't the type of thing where you have to believe this, you have to do this. We were free to think what we wanted to think. Again, that's another family situation. There was a lot of young kids when I was growing up there. We sang in the

choir on and off, so that was something that was definitely a part of my life. I don't really go to church that often now. If I do I church hop, if anyone invites me I'll go. And I go because I like to hear what preachers are saying, what imams are saying, or you know what rabbis are saying. It's kind of similar to a community. I'm going to call myself more spiritual again, just in terms of how I grew up, just not having to follow any type of doctrine.

NAOMI EXTRA: [00:28:00] So tell me about what happened after high school. So you graduated and you decided to go where and why?

BRYAN EPPS: Couldn't wait to go to college. One, because my mom again was an administrator. She was – her work life was always talking about school, the crazy things that kids do. My parents growing -- me growing up with my parents and all of their friends who went to college together, it was just always filled with college stories, so I just knew it was the best four years of life. That's all I heard growing up. I just couldn't wait to go probably way before high school. The process of applying was a little rough. Right before I went into senior high school, I ran away from home. So it's kind of a tense year being in the house. I applied to maybe six or seven schools. My first choice was going to American University in D.C. I didn't get into that one. And pretty much after that, I really didn't care where I went. I just applied to schools I thought would be good for me, not too small, not too big, and near urban environments, I knew I wanted to continue to be exposed to different things. I wound up choosing Rutgers, it's the same school my parents went to. It was probably my last choice in my head, but I thought it was probably the cheapest school to go to that also allowed me to get the best education. Of course, I knew people going there cuz it's a Jersey school. I knew that – it was semi-close to home, but I knew nobody was gonna bother me there and I could have my own life there.

NAOMI EXTRA: Right.

BRYAN EPPS: It's still close to New York City

NAOMI EXTRA: Which Rutgers?

BRYAN EPPS: At New Brunswick.

NAOMI EXTRA: Okay.

BRYAN EPPS: Yeah. So I went to Rutgers College and lived in Rutgers College campus all four years. It was a pretty good experience. You know, I think... so probably during my last year of high school, I realized that [00:30:00] I was gay/bisexual and had ran away from home to be with a boyfriend, and was only gone for a couple of days. But to think I was a really -- me, I had really just did it for fun, but my parents were like, "Whoa, what's going on with you?" for you to leave and -- it was really out of character, right? So, I think they just kinda worried about me that whole year. But anyway, I knew that I wanted to go school and just continue to explore sexuality, continue to develop different types of friendships and continue to learn. I think Rutgers afforded me that. It's also a really large school where it was very opposite to St. Benedict's and to St. Cecilia's and to the family I grew up in, where you have to find a community there, to be honest. It's not something that's a given, it was 28,000 students like, you have to—me and my friends we worked really hard to try to find a community there. So it was very different in that way.

NAOMI EXTRA: What year did you start at New Brunswick?

BRYAN EPPS: I started in 2000.

NAOMI EXTRA: Okay.

BRYAN EPPS: I finished in '05.

NAOMI EXTRA: Okay.

BRYAN EPPS: So that was probably the worst part of Rutgers for me, just the socialization part. I lived on -- freshman, sophomore, and junior year, I lived in a dorm called Mettler. It has a floor that is called the Paul Robeson floor and it is designed for students who are black or interested in black studies, culture, you know. I think that made it a lot easier. It was maybe easier and harder because it was focused on blackness, and of course, not sexuality. But it just definitely made the campus feel a lot

smaller. And I mean, it was a good four years of just really exploring everything. [00:32:00] I came in and studied political science and Spanish, anthropology, [unintelligible – 00:32:05] a lot of different things. Again, my parents were of course concerned about my studies. They weren't—they didn't micromanage my studies in any way, let me change majors and pay for it, which was crazy. And I just had a really great time of growth there.

NAOMI EXTRA: So, you mentioned that that floor focused on the African-American/black studies piece but not in sexuality. Did you find that somewhere else at Rutgers?

BRYAN EPPS: Again—no. So I think -- I mean, I think it existed. Where it did exist, I thought -- I was actually very scared of those places because it was probably too gay for me, in my mind, at least, at that time, or too white for me or just too exposed. I wanted to -- again, at that time, people that I thought were like myself, which is like the opposite of what you should be doing. I wanted to probably have boyfriends but not live a public life of being gay, just where I was at that time. And it was also 2000 when I got there, and there was like this whole obsession with DL culture and hypermasculinity that I had probably bought into a lot. So I was very interested -- I think when I first got there, escaping campus and going into New York City to go to clubs. Eventually, I think as the years went on and I started to progress, I wanted to create community at Rutgers in a way that I hadn't found when I got there. So, became a chair for a group called the Rutgers Programming Council and developed -- I started just developing programs. Anything that I could find out was available to me, just doing it, even if there were five people attending the program. So, I -- it was a time when Patrick-Ian Polk had just kind of came out with his first movie, *Punks*, so I had a screening for that and just blasted it all on campus trying to do apprenticeships with the fraternities and sororities there, trying to give folks exposure. So I found a lot of ways I could

create that community there, even though there was definitely gay life, it wasn't you know-- I wasn't interested in entering those spaces.

NAOMI EXTRA: Okay. So I want to ask you more about that, but before -- so you said you didn't really -- that you had bought into DL culture. What do you mean by that?

BRYAN EPPS: Yeah, I think that -- so I think that a lot of my friends now, I think they—I think they talk about growing up and not realizing that you could be black and gay. I don't think I ever felt that. Maybe it's because I grew up around -- I had gay black men as neighbors, which was -- I always knew that that existed but didn't know where they existed or how or who those people were. So when I just imagined gay, black men, I imagined people who were like myself, or... I think there was also, well I know there was just like -- there was a time when people were talking about gay rappers in a bad way. But I felt that it actually existed in the real world, where I could just meet doctors and lawyers and people on a football team, basketball teams, talk to them and be real with them, we're all gay, but we don't even talk about being gay we just hang out and be gay, and you know there had to be like gay flags or ... So it was definitely -- so there's just so many layers to that right, because -- so I guess the funny thing about the media or some things like Vibe magazine [00:36:00] or when [unintelligible – 00:36:02] sensationalizing the fact that a rapper could be gay, because it's supposed to be in contrast to each other for a lot of different reasons. And I was looking at this thinking, "Well, this is not a contrast," which is maybe good, right? But there's also nothing wrong with being a dancer and being gay or being something that's not typically seen as hypermasculine or masculine at all and being gay, right? So I was just like yeah.

NAOMI EXTRA: That's really interesting.

BRYAN EPPS: So I was shying away from the folks who were obviously gay on campus, right, in search for the other thing, right, so many different...

NAOMI EXTRA: Well, you -- it sounds like you were imagining a way that made sense to you...

BRYAN EPPS: Yeah.

NAOMI EXTRA: ... of being a gay black man...

BRYAN EPPS: Right.

NAOMI EXTRA: ... on campus. And so you created spaces.

BRYAN EPPS: Yeah.

NAOMI EXTRA: And people came.

BRYAN EPPS: Right. Yeah, yeah.

NAOMI EXTRA: So did you -- tell me a little bit more about perhaps the friendships that might have emerged out of those spaces. At this time, were you still friends with folks from high school and when you... ran away from home, the guy you were dating, did you stay friends with some of these people? So did these friendships kind of like...?

BRYAN EPPS: Carry on?

NAOMI EXTRA: Yeah.

BRYAN EPPS: It's probably very interesting because it's probably something -- there's lot of continuity to the people in my life. I still talk to all of those people. Probably not a lot of interruption with my life, there's not a lot of space in between. And I think that people I needed to see me were happy were able to see me when I hadn't even seen myself, so people were just very proud when I started just organizing on campus and doing that stuff. A lot of folks who had already graduated, who I never had conversations with came back to those events. [00:38:00] So [unintelligible – 00:38:00] scary to me and also just extremely special the support, you know?

NAOMI EXTRA: So was college at Rutgers-New Brunswick this space where you started to come into yourself?

BRYAN EPPS: Mm-hmm.

NAOMI EXTRA: Can you say a little bit more about that process? So I know there's the activism, kind of creating those spaces. What else kind of helped you grow in that way?

BRYAN EPPS: What was going on?

NAOMI EXTRA: Yeah.

BRYAN EPPS: I think that I was probably just around a lot of folks who wanted to do things and wanted to create spaces in various ways. So one of my good friends now, Natasha Carter, she had—this is something I probably have to take out later—she was trying to join a sorority, and that didn't happen, right? So, she started creating women's groups **[unintelligible – 00:38:59]** on campus, NAACP on campus. So this was in a very similar way that we were all just trying to figure it out, we had this -- again, it's a very large school, it's very resourceful. We figured, "Why can't we do it? Why can't we create these spaces here?" There's no reason why we can't or why the school can't fund this stuff. We can rent out that room to do it. There's just no reason why we can't do these things here, everybody else is doing all these other things, you do this here. So I was just hanging around those people who were coming up with ideas and so -- but finally, then collectively talking about it, it just all organized in our own ways. Again, I don't like to take a lot of credit for it. I think I came from a family, again, who had a lot of vision and was organizing in our own ways, so I think a lot of it, I just grew up in and it just kind of came out as I was getting older, but yeah, that's what happened there.

NAOMI EXTRA: **[00:40:00]** So how did you bring that consciousness back to Newark? Did you start doing that during college, or was that something that happened after...?

BRYAN EPPS: It was something that happened after. So, by the time I was a senior... well junior, I decided that my way of being connected with the world was going to be through government work, through policy work. My major was history, and minored in African studies and anthropology. I knew I didn't want to teach which is what a lot of folks were doing with history degrees. I just really loved history, just wanted to learn about it. But there was a history department there. Our campus had a lot of strong connections to government offices. They had a program there that

allowed me to study how to get experiential learning and to work in a state department office. So I really loved it, it was one of the best experiences of that time for me. I was working with an organization called the Africa-America Institute, working with leaders in Africa, everything from judges to presidents to community activists who were coming –who were visiting the United States, and I would set up their trips. So basically, I was doing all of their itinerary work, and I also got to travel with them and learn about them. So I knew I loved that kind of connection to people who were doing great things, also knew I wanted to do it. I did not want to do it on an international level. I wanted to do it locally. I wanted to do in Newark. So I just applied to graduate schools and went straight through after graduating. Wounded up going to the New School and taking advantage of their urban policy program, living back home with my parents while I was doing that. And I just -- when I moved back home, I realized that again, just growing up, I had envisioned this community, that was always trying to grow and trying to progress, and I felt like I moved back in when it was stagnant it's like kind of like [unintelligible – 00:41:56] of me, but I just felt like the folks who were there were just kind of maybe tired of fighting the city, [00:42:00] tired of fighting each other. There was this empty lot that had been there forever on my street. And I was just really interested in parks at that time. Eventually, I began working for an organization called the Greater Newark Conservancy. I said, “This is a really great way for us to organize together again,” because everybody here is interested in housing, architecture. Everybody’s got an interest in this lot, how about we turn it into a community garden? So I wrote them to consult -- I wrote this letter, it was a really long letter, to the neighborhood association and half the people were offended, half the people were excited. But it’s just like, “God...”

NAOMI EXTRA: Why were they offended?

BRYAN EPPS: I think some people -- it was probably mixed, like, “Who the hell are you writing us a letter? Writing us a letter, we’ve been active and we’re adults

here.” Other people were like, “Nah, we shouldn't turn it into a community garden. That should be another house,” another apartment building. They're trying to fill in these teeth that're missing in the community. And then, again, a lot of people were excited, like this is something we can do with this. Again, we're on the same page that's that kind of money, but that conversation engulfed me into what was happening in terms of the neighborhood association. I eventually became president of that association and district admin for the area. That was really my entry... that and grad school became my entry into what was happening in Newark just generally, in terms of politics and activism.

NAOMI EXTRA: So were you doing this while you were in grad school?

BRYAN EPPS: Yeah.

NAOMI EXTRA: Wow.

BRYAN EPPS: Yeah. So I eventually started working fulltime and going to grad school fulltime. Yeah, it was crazy.

NAOMI EXTRA: So, okay. Gosh, there are so many questions. I'm trying to think of how to order them. This is a little bit of like a moving away from what you were talking about, but I want to go back to it as well. [00:44:00] So you mentioned that during college, you were going and hanging out in the city. And you went to New School, right? Tell me about some of these spaces that you were going to and how -- I mean, did you meet people there that kind of shaped you in some way, any mentors?

BRYAN EPPS: Yeah. Well, maybe informal -- just people that taught me life lessons. So, one of my best friends, Jermaine, we worked at the mall together, at The Gap, and we would -- if there was a closing, if we were working closing, the store would close at 10, we would be there until maybe midnight because you were working, phone calls, whatever. We would of course be hungry because we worked all day. So, me and other coworkers would just go out. We-- always somewhere local -- Jermaine drove, so that was a big plus. My parents were like, “If you want to work, you're going to catch the bus. If that's what you want to do, you're on your own.” So I

was just taking advantage of people who drove to get me back home quicker, like an hour quicker than the bus would be. So, one day, me and Jermaine and this other guy who worked at **Chiton?**, and we were like, “Why don’t we just go into Manhattan?” We were so hungry, and there’s plenty of places open there. We didn’t know where we were going. We were just going to find something. And we were just driving around, my parents -- my mom, especially, she would just take us to Greenwich Village all the time, we’d go to movies, we’d go shopping, whatever, we’d just walk around. Both of my parents loved Manhattan. And it was like just in my head, why don’t we just go to Greenwich Village, we’re going to find some food there. We wound up -- eventually, finally, we went to Christopher Street by a complete mistake, honestly, and it was just like a different time on that street, where people were just out for no reason and just walking on the street. There was gay-centric shops everywhere, bars everywhere, right. None of that exists there now, there’re like two bars there now. **[00:46:00]**. So we just got out the car, somehow lost each other, I think... we’re all gay now, we hadn’t had that conversation at that point. And that was just my entrance into this new world in that way. I was only 16, and that became -- after that day, I just really became like a second home to me, so I would just go in there, couldn’t get into a club or anything else, so I would just go there and walk around, go there and hang out on the piers. And it was just -- again, it was like a different environment. People would just walk up to you and talk to you—not even for sexual stuff. They’d just walk up and have a conversation, “What are you doing? What are you doing tomorrow?” So it was... it really became an informal meeting place, informal playground for me. I met folks who just wanted me to join a house, or folks who just generally, I think, again, saw me for who I was, knew I was from Jersey, knew I was in school, and looked out for me, like, “No, You can’t do this. You can’t go here, and you can’t go with her.” **[Unintelligible – 00:47:11]** it was a very safe thing. I think it’s a miracle that I just never -- I was always kind of

interested and kind of living on the edge but just never got into trouble. People used to always look out for me in that way. So just a lot of, people whose names I can't even remember just looking out for me all the time and telling me where to go or who to hang out with. You turn 18, you can go here, but don't go there.

NAOMI EXTRA: And this is in New York?

BRYAN EPPS: Yeah.

NAOMI EXTRA: I'm curious to know, was there this kind of space for you or did you know about it in Newark as well?

BRYAN EPPS: Never.

NAOMI EXTRA: So was it mostly in New York City where you would find this?

BRYAN EPPS: Yeah.

NAOMI EXTRA: And in Newark, you would go back and you would have the rest of your life.

BRYAN EPPS: **[00:48:00]** Yeah. I think it was strange in that -- again, I found Christopher Street by mistake, and I really wasn't -- again, I definitely had it in my head that this type of community existed and there were other gay black men out there. I don't know if I was exactly looking for it at that time, so it didn't even occur to me to look for it in Newark or to find someplace more local. It made sense to me that it was in New York and I just kind of what I went with. By the time I might have tried to look for it, I had enough friends and knew enough people in Newark where they'd also existed differently. It might not have been a street full of gay folks walking around, but you know, it was somebody's house party or the organizations that I joined up later on. It's just a strong community, if not stronger in Newark.

NAOMI EXTRA: So I want to go back then to your community work and activism. So, at what point did you begin working with the Newark Pride Alliance?

BRYAN EPPS: Yeah. So I first -- this is probably when I was in grad school. I did look for gay organizations in Newark, and what I found online, the African-American Office for Gay Concerns guy's gonna kill me, cuz I kind of

messed up his name. Okay. Found them online, tried to go to their office, but it was closed. I rang the doorbell and everything. And then I don't know how I heard about this, but I heard about a picnic in Lincoln Park with Newark Pride Alliance, probably when they first were starting up. And I went to – James' probably with me, he'll remember this, I was just there, the youngest person there, helped him set up and everything like that. And then I just looked around like everybody way too old for me, [unintelligible – 00:49:51] then winded up making [unintelligible – 00:49:57] [00:50:00] really through Darnell, Darnell and I met, he moved on to -- right off of James Street. And he was just very interested in what was happening to gay life in Newark, and I don't know how he was introduced to James, probably through some sort of Rutgers connection, with [unintelligible – 00:50:18] something like that, and James is like -- he was a different person in my eye, like doing his own thing, when I met him in the park that day, he was trying to bring me in through like manual labor. It's not what I was interested in. But in the same way, that seemed kind of like. Okay, all hands on deck. It was like, "What're you doing in this school? Okay, great. You can do this for us." It wasn't any type of hierarchy in terms of you have to wait your turn, you can't use it because you don't have -- it was just if you were willing to say yes, you were involved. That's what it was. And we all became just very involved.

NAOMI EXTRA: And so, Newark Pride Alliance was through that line, through that channel?

BRYAN EPPS: Yes, absolutely, if I'm remembering right, yeah. So, we just started volunteering, went to meetings, started giving input. We would help out with events, got acquainted with other folks, other organizations that were doing work. A good friend, Dinean, who was -- Dinean and Darnell come from very religious backgrounds. They wanted to be part of a faith community, and Dinean would go to Liberation in Truth, and she was like, come to service with us, she would tell me like, come to service with us, and it just meant like the full array of one position happening. So

probably, around that time as well, I had just bought my house in Newark and had two neighbors who introduced me to the Ironbound and the parties that took place there and the communities there. So it was a [00:52:00] really gay time in terms of just seeing the city in a new way.

NAOMI EXTRA: What year are we around right now?

BRYAN EPPS: So it started -- the New School, in 2005. I met Dinean and Darnell in 2007. So, this was 2007, 2008.

NAOMI EXTRA: And you were in leadership role at the Newark Pride Alliance, right?

BRYAN EPPS: Yeah, I eventually became an executive director there, yeah.

NAOMI EXTRA: Can you talk a little bit about that and how you came into the role, and what you did?

BRYAN EPPS: So, James [unintelligible – 00:52:41] founded Newark Pride Alliance, of course, and I think that if, and I think that if I had to guess, I think that they started the organization because there was a need and really didn't see themselves as driving the ship. They wanted-- they founded this organization because Sakia Gunn was murdered, a 15-year-old, young person was killed, and they wanted to see young people around. That's why he was so comfortable with embracing all these younger people at that time to bring us into the fold. And we just came with a lot of gusto and a lot of different ideas, and it just, embraced that fully, right, it was kind of like this natural progression of things in terms of the work that the organization was doing, which we'd change it, well we don't want to do that anymore, let's do this. NPA existed as a group that was just doing a lot of events and programming on behalf of young folks. Again, there wasn't young people at the table actually designing the events and programming. And I think when I came in, when we all came in, we said, Well, you know, NPA is a small organization in terms of budget, in terms of capacity and resources. How about [00:54:00] if we just really design this organization in a way that it can actually just be a support to other organizations that exist instead of doing programming and events that compete with other organizations. So why don't, say if Liberation in Truth

is doing something we just need to be the hands that support them, or the place where people can go to basically find connections between each other, between LGBTQ groups and Weequahic, connecting to groups in Ironbound. There's really this kind of this "umbrella" group, there's also this desire to develop the center, which now exists. That was one of the main requests of NPA when it originated was that there has to be a place for folks to organize, to come together, to celebrate in Newark, because that was kind of the thought basis around folks [unintelligible – 00:54:53] just going into the city. It was kind of a different narrative than I felt I had, maybe it is the same thing, that people -- I wanted to go there, but I guess a lot of folks felt like they had to go there, to Christopher Street to other spaces like that. And so, folks wanted a space to be in Newark and that was one of the main objectives of NPA. And so, we being in this policy, community development world, and I had, the group had, a strong voice with NPA. And again, just a natural progression was taken up for it, taking responsibility for making sure it happened.

NAOMI EXTRA: That's great. At any point -- did you join a House? Because you kind of mentioned-- did anyone try to get you to join a House?

BRYAN EPPS: Yeah, yeah. I didn't even know what Houses were. So it was just something that I just didn't have a connection with until later on in life, but during that time, folks would ask me a lot. It was just something that I didn't -- the first time I went to a ball, it was the latex [00:56:00] ball in probably 2006. So it was past my college time, past, you know...older.

NAOMI EXTRA: And what was that like for you? Did you become active or present in any way, or is that kind of like you had a lot of other stuff going on? So I imagine that was also -- what was that like?

BRYAN EPPS: The thing was for me it was really great to see -- again, it's like an entrance to another world. Folks talk about the lives of queer people. I speak at a high school, at St. Benedict's every year about being gay. My life is very unique, right? This it's just like you can't lump everybody together just because we're gay, like we all live different lives. That was

like dope, it was so dope to see. Like with Darnell, he's interviewing Naomi, right. We went to a house, we went to a ball (excuse me), and again, it was like I can be 33 years old and be around black and brown queer folks and we're not the same, we're operating differently and it's different ways to be exposed to people's experiences, right? That was just really great to see.

NAOMI EXTRA: I want to ask you about -- you kind of talked a little bit about coming in to queer gay identity. What was the coming out process like? I know that it's not necessarily a five-minute, you know, it happened and then it's over. So, when did that start, and what -- did you talk to family about it? What was that like?

BRYAN EPPS: It was slow; it was very slow. So again, I think in my head, [00:58:00] I knew, but I had a very difficult time just seeing myself as gay, because gay to me, again, meant the white guy on campus, and that just wasn't like -- so I, again -- if I had to go somewhere to prepare myself, like a person in New York had to find had to find Christopher Street, I wanted to find a similar community, right? So it was very difficult for me to articulate my identity for a long time, probably all throughout college, even when I was organizing events and programming. Even when I was doing all that stuff, it was just -- I would never have called myself gay, even when everybody knew. It wasn't like a shameful thing, it's just I don't know how to identify myself. I didn't know how to verbalize that. And same with my family, [unintelligible – 00:59:03] we never had that conversation with them. And so, that's kind of how life was, especially up until I was organizing with Newark-Essex Pride Coalition and NPA. I think maybe if there was a pivotal moment, it was one time -- well, the first time Newark Pride Alliance did a conference, and it was a conference about religion. And we were looking for somebody to do an introduction for... I don't remember the pastor's name, out of Atlanta and I told, [unintelligible name – 00:59:47] he was living in Newark at that time, told [unintelligible name – 00:59:50] and Darnell "How about we have my

mom do it? She's an academic. She can articulate that she's the mother of a gay kid." And I asked my mom, "Can you do it?" and she said, "Yeah. Of course I can." [01:00:00]. Again, not having a conversation with mom about my sexuality, [unintelligible – 01:00:02] you know, I know, come do this thing. Yeah, she's supportive [unintelligible - 01:00:08] having a conversation [unintelligible - 01:00:17] I'm having a conversation with a gay man. And even still, to this day, it's kind of just how I operate. It's exactly what I wanted, just being myself and out, maybe that kind of label runs out. Wanting to be myself, which I knew was different, and not wanting to live as an outcast, in a way. So it's kind of pivotal moment for me. Since then, I talk a lot and make speeches a lot. I feel the need to identify myself for the sake of the room, for the sake of other people's journeys, and even just in terms of my continued growth, like when I talk to the high school, when I talk to other people who question my identity and it just continues how we grow, you know.

NAOMI EXTRA: What about your brother? So did you have -- was it a similar thing with your brother as well? You said your brother is older?

BRYAN EPPS: He's older, he's four years older.

NAOMI EXTRA: Okay, how much? Four years older?

BRYAN EPPS: Almost five years. Yeah. He was also queer. Again, we never had a conversation about it and don't even know a lot about his journey in terms of coming out. The first time -- I think, we had a conversation about it in the family context was when my brother had a partner who was killed in an arson fire, and my mom was like -- my brother's living in Ohio at that time. She told me, "Your brother's partner [unintelligible name – 01:01:53] was killed in a fire." Of course, they thought it was my brother, it wasn't, it was because, you know, that's the first person they go to [claps] when somebody dies, they go to the partner first. [01:02:00]. And that's what she told me. She said they'd taken [unintelligible – 01:02:04] your brother, he's gonna come back home for a while, he's going through a lot," me in typical fashion, I just listened. I didn't say anything back.

But again, it's like getting another pivotal moment in terms of my mom just telling me about his sexuality, talking to me, wanting to be affirming about it. Me and my brother, we're very similar, we're also very different. He's an actor and a teacher, and... probably just into different environments, expresses himself very different, also expresses himself when he talked, same cadence, not gonna make complete sense unless **[unintelligible – 01:02:50]** he's on stage. Same mannerisms, and everything like that. So it's very interesting. We get along for about five minutes, and probably our sameness and our differences makes us clash, and we have to go to other sides of the room, until we can come back together again, after like an hour.

NAOMI EXTRA: Okay, so Newark Pride Alliance. What happens after that?

BRYAN EPPS: So, I'm trying to think of when that stopped. In 2012.

NAOMI EXTRA: Okay.

BRYAN EPPS: So... is that right? Maybe 2013. So we -- I guess I think the organization and a lot of the work we were doing, the board wanted to go in a different direction, I think it wanted to be... to do more programming, more events, instead of capacity building work, that we had been on course to do. It was cool **[01:04:00]** because, I think it was the right time. A lot of the folks who had come into NPA had already left, had even left the city or had left that work to be **[unintelligible – 01:04:08]**. We all started doing just other things, like writing articles, collaborating with groups from New York City and just around the country, and really connecting that work, that kind of grassroots work, to use it for **[unintelligible – 01:04:26]**. That was kind of how I wound up here, in a lot of ways, in terms of people had come to know me as a person who can work closely with organizations, nonprofits, and that I'm really going to be interested in seeing them grow. I came here in 2014—as the executive director—and I think that's just one of the things that they saw since, it's kind of like, the time was just right in terms of, I became a lobbyist and was working primarily with nonprofit groups, colleges, hospitals, university groups,

trying to show they have connections to government, trying to make sure they had full access, and -- so just kind of something I became known for. We were also just injecting the voice of queer folks into those places, especially here, so that people don't realize that parts of history, parts that are important to their work and in terms of the population.

NAOMI EXTRA: Can you talk a little bit more about your work as a lobbyist?

BRYAN EPPS: Mm-hmm. Yeah. So, I was working for Mayor Bloomberg as the city policy analyst -- again, working for nonprofits, developing policy for them, just kind of the odd duck there. And without maybe knowing, I had done a lot of work for lobbying firm because the clients were nonprofits. And so, they kind of basically, they were basically recruited me, working with me a lot, [01:06:00] through the phone calls, just checking up on their groups. "Why don't you come talk to us?" So I came there [unintelligible – 01:06:03] was really this dope opportunity to work with nonprofits in their way, because a lot of people see lobbyist as these evil folks. But it's like everybody was kind of [unintelligible – 01:06:17] article, talking about voters, especially here in New York, where our populations are so high and the population of colored people, population of queer people who are all giving into the system, we deserve to have our fair share of it outright. So if there's going to be lobbyists, if people are going to be lobbying government for something, we should be the main ones getting our share, right? So it seemed like a really good opportunity to do that and to advocate on behalf of groups who were doing work for young black girls or doing work for incarcerated folk, right, who were doing work with colleges and the hospitals. All of these people actually need the resources of the city and the state, right? I started there in 2012 and really was doing a lot of work for nonprofits, also started doing work for campaigns, so I would just write about local campaigns here in the city, in Brooklyn, the Bronx, and then eventually started doing topic campaigns, so trying to campaign for the affordable care act, campaign to

ensure public financing in the city, making sure that the financing campaigns was equalized. So some of the great work, really dope stuff.

NAOMI EXTRA: And so this was 2012, 2013?

BRYAN EPPS: Yeah.

NAOMI EXTRA: Wow. Can you talk about what you do here at The Shabazz Center?

BRYAN EPPS: Yeah, so the center ****[unintelligible – 01:07:51] Malcolm X was assassinated, and it's primarily a memorial. So when people come up here, to pay homage to Malcolm, but Dr. Shabazz [01:08:00] was kind of the architect of this place and preserving it, along with, of course, a lot of community members who fought to preserve it. After he passed, the idea was that this is a great space, there's a ballroom and it's a memorial site. It should be more than that. It should be an educational center. Dr. Shabazz was so dedicated to education that it was a natural fit. So a lot of folks come looking for a museum experience, but I think it's dooper than that in that it's a memorial site and it doesn't look like a memorial, but it's also a site where you put on dope exhibits and have educational program and events and everything from music series to conferences and lectures and film screenings, the full gamut of activities that promote the legacy of Malcolm X and Dr. Shabazz. It's really cool to, because I get to put a millennial twist on it, trying to bring communities that would typically feel safe in this space, trying to, you know, history is theory [unintelligible - 01:09:01] theory about things and just kind of putting that out into the world that this place should not just continue to be a place but talks about Malcolm X and Dr. Shabazz, but should also continue a legacy of social justice and progressiveness. Malcolm X was somebody who was thinking ahead of his time, like the things he was talking about 50 years ago are still applicable now that we should also be in place, that's talking about things that our people do 50 years from now, so it's just really cool, you know, really cool work on to be able to make a lot of connections and partnerships with everything from Black Lives Matter movement and to folks who go to Tibet in terms of social justice in Palestine, all

these things around the world. So things are just kind of a continuation, I feel, of the work that started in Newark or on Rutgers campus, not even on a wider scale, just like on a different scale.

NAOMI EXTRA: You just mentioned some connection to the Black Lives Matter movement. Can you tell me a little bit more about that? [01:10:00]

BRYAN EPPS: So, one small shop. I have four employees here, but in terms of Black Lives Matter, we've drafted policy on body worn cameras here out at the center. We again have conferences, everything from this year we're having a week-long conference that's talking about the 50th anniversary of black panther party in conjunction with Black Lives Matter, so we're just kind of bringing that in to contemporary conversation, so the full gamut. We've done small organizing events who are activists within Black Lives Matter is here. Folks who come together and talk about everything from how to support themselves while they're being an activist to how to handle actions when they take place in terms of what happens once you get arrested and incarcerated. So it's the full gamut of things you can think of in terms of making sure people feel they have a home, that they have a base, that this building should be it, this should be a place where folks feel supported in their activism. And we can also help in terms of the very few resources that we have to put out policy papers and to do the work that people feel like that's not even happening from...

NAOMI EXTRA: I guess as a last question. I want to ask, what ties do you still feel like you have to Newark? Or how does that, how do those ties manifest?

BRYAN EPPS: Definitely, immense ties. I think that Newark is probably like the most important place in terms of creation, like in this area, I tell people that all the time, like if we're looking for an artistic place, like outside of Times Square, Newark's probably got the most going on, in terms of this region, even beyond the development stuff [unintelligible – 01:11:42]**** familiar. I live there now, and you know, continue to build my home there. I feel like just in terms of activism, there's just like so much more to be done. [01:12:00] And then if you think about any city, Newark is

probably at the edge of promise and also despair, right? So, what happens there politically in terms of organizing is so important. I think -- I don't know. I'm not old, but I feel like also, people stepped aside and let me take ownership with the city. I think it's also time for other folks to do that now, and to give support in a way that I can, ways that people want me to be. People send me e-mails, I'm constantly answering them, tryin' to give them the history of things. History's important, just trying to lend a helping hand when I can and try to be the most active in terms of just going to events in any way that I can. But I think it's a city that deserves involvement in terms of thought and leadership, because there's so many solutions that can take place in different heads to wrap around things. It's definitely something that I saw growing up was people staying in places too long. So, I think there's some folks who were mad, just maybe hurt about folks transitioning. I think it's just like a group, the group that I came into activism with there, and also like...we did our part for that moment, and there's other ways we can participate that don't require us to have our names associated with positions with titles or to start new organizations that other folks have to join. I think the work that we did allowed a lot of other folks to feel comfortable trying to feel like they have a voice, I think. When we started in '06, '07, they saw leadership there they didn't feel like they could enter, they were just waiting for people to enter, they couldn't be happier that we did that. Now it's a place that -- in terms of activism, [01:14:00] in those organizations, folks feel like anybody can feel like they can join in without any hesitation, and that's dope.

NAOMI EXTRA: Thank you so much.

BRYAN EPPS: That's for sure.

NAOMI EXTRA: It's March 24, 2016. Naomi Extra here interviewing Bryan Epps for the Queer Newark Oral History Project.