

Queer Newark Oral History Project

Interviewee: Alicia Heath-Toby

Interviewer: Naomi Extra

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Location: Rutgers-Newark

NAOMI EXTRA: It's May 23rd. My name is Naomi Extra and I'm here with Alicia Heath-Toby at Rutgers Newark. I'm doing an interview for the Queer Newark Oral History Project. Okay. From where we last left off, I had some follow-up questions. One of them was you talked about being 18 or 19 and identifying as queer then later identifying as lesbian.

ALICIA HEATH-TOBY: Yes.

NE: How did that shift and why, if you can recall?

AH: Like I said before, queer was neutral at that time. It was an ambiguous language, at least in our community, in the African American and Latin community. It didn't raise flags. Using that language made it safe for me, if you will, to be who I was developing into as a lesbian. That really was it. The transition then happened once I was in school and I was in college. It became evident to me that for me there was an empowering—I felt empowered by the use of lesbian.

NE: Was there anything in terms of political, social context? Was it more just coming into—

AH: It was more coming into.

NE: Okay.

AH: It was more coming into. I didn't become aware of the political element of language queer versus lesbian until I became more present in the eclectic environment of the community. That's when I began to understand that there was a political—what's the word I'm looking for?

NE: Dimension.

AH: - dimensions to the use of lesbian.

NE: To being black lesbian.

AH: Right.

NE: Right.

AH: For me it was really more about coming into myself and the awareness of my sexuality. Yeah. That's really what it was for me.

NE: Okay.

AH: Yeah.

NE: Some questions about your activism and your community work in Newark. Can you talk a little bit about your work at the Newark LGBT Center?

AH: Sure. It dates back to the Center—not the Center. I wanna use the center language so that we're talking about present. The Social Justice Center was birthed out of the church's work specific to the black LGBT community's need at the time, which was our response to the murder of Sakia Gunn.

NE: Okay. What year are we talking about for the social justice?

AH: She was murdered in—13 years ago, right? No.

NE: Was it shortly after?

AH: Yes it was shortly after.

NE: Okay.

AH: It was like the year after or before a complete year.

NE: Okay. We're talking like—

AH: 2003.

NE: Right. So then 2004?

AH: No, actually 2003.

NE: Okay.

AH: Yep. Actually 2003. It was important for us to create a space that the community could talk about the injustices that we were experiencing from, again, the murder of Sakia to the way that police responded to us in our community, the issue of homelessness. All of those things, it was important for us to create that space for us to have those kinds of conversations and safe for us.

I happened to be, at that time, I was part of the church and so it was the natural—we're social justice. Unity Fellowship Church movement is a social justice movement. It came out of the response to HIV and AIDS as

it related to black and Latin men in the early 80s because there was no— first of all there was no room in the black church for someone living with HIV. In fact, they were shunned. The thing was, this is a direct response to God's dislike to homosexuality. There was no place.

That movement, that church movement, became the place that responded to the injustices that black and Latin men and brown men were experiencing. It was the natural progression for us here in Newark in the Newark Unity Fellowship Church, which at the time was Liberation and Truth, that was part of our manifesto. We were committed to standing for justice as it related to us as an LGBT folk of color. That was the birth of the Social Justice Center.

NE: Okay. Where was the Social Justice Center?

AH: The same place it is now.

NE: Okay.

AH: Yep.

NE: I don't wanna interrupt you.

AH: That's okay.

NE: Okay. What role did you play in the development of the Social Justice Center?

AH: When we made the decision to become that, I was on the board. I was a board member.

NE: Okay.

AH: It was all interwoven with the church because I was clergy. We needed leaders and so the leaders were in the church. The leaders became—we birthed the center because it was, again, the natural order. It just naturally was. I was on the board at the time. Yeah.

NE: What kinds of work were you guys doing at that time?

AH: At that time we were specifically addressing HIV and AIDS in our community as it related to men and women. We were addressing homophobia as it related to specifically to this notion of Christianity and the black church and lesbians and gay men and trans folk and the violence against LGBT community.

NE: Okay.

AH: It wasn't like any—it was where the need was we responded to it.

NE: Okay.

AH: If we had the capacity to do so, we did so. It was I think six of us. We were just present when needed. When the sisters, the four were arrested who were accused of assaulting the man in New York, we were the home for those young women. We were the come to. Three of those women lived in New Jersey—four of them lived in New Jersey.

NE: The New Jersey 7.

AH: They lived here. There was nowhere for them to go and thankfully it was us. We did lots of work around that case. We showed up in court.

NE: Oh wow.

AH: Yeah. We created a safe environment for them to talk about what it—the emotional trauma of it all.

NE: Right.

AH: A space for their parents. We did some co-partnership with Fierce at the time who had taken up the case for a bit, Fierce in New York.

NE: Okay.

AH: We just responded where the need was. If we could, we did.

NE: Okay. Wow. One more follow-up question about that and then I wanna ask about the shift to becoming called the Newark LGBT Center.

AH: Okay.

NE: Where did you guys get—did you guys have outside funding at the time?

AH: The funding that we received was state funding to do HIV prevention.

NE: Okay.

AH: It allowed us to keep the doors open and to do that HIV prevention work as well as the social justice work at the same time. I think it's clear that they're both one and the same, right?

NE: Right.

AH: It was again, the perfect opportunity for us to respond in the ways that was needed.

NE: The folks working at the time were all from then Liberation and Truth?

AH: Most of us. Most of us. We did have staff that were family of clergy. We were a small staff. The majority of us at the time were all members of the church.

NE: Okay.

AH: Yeah. The state actually came to us, to the church, and offered us a small grant because the state was interested in looking at the implications of black church to HIV and what the black church was doing in response to the epidemic. They came to us and said, "We would like to provide resources so that you all can do this work in terms of HIV and AIDS as it applies to LGBT folk and heterosexual women."

NE: Was it a very limited window that the state was giving that funding or did they continue to?

AH: Yeah. They funded us for, oh my gosh, for a while. For at least a year.

NE: Okay.

AH: We had to write up RFP and the proposal and all that, but yeah they funded us for a while.

NE: Okay.

AH: The church also had a drop in center on New Street, which was funded by the state.

NE: Okay.

AH: At that location, we did testing, counseling, people came in for food, snacks, bathing. We had laundry services. And case management. That's what we did there. At the center, what's now the center, but it was Social Justice Center it was just like open space where we did groups and testing sometimes if we needed to. It was that kind of—we had two spaces.

NE: Okay.

AH: Then when the funding stopped, we lost New Street because we couldn't afford to keep it.

NE: Right.

AH: We still have the LGBT Center.

NE: Has the mission shifted with the change in name?

AH: No. No. It hasn't. The reason I hesitated is the only difference is that the focus is not HIV prevention. The shift has been just wellness in general and safe space. Wellness and safety is the primary focus of our mission.

NE: Okay.

AH: Yes.

NE: Can you talk a little bit about what you're doing, your role there now?

AH: I'm the board president and I was appointed, if you will. I have been on the board for a long time, since its inception, so before it was the LGBT Center. I was ready to shift. We have had lots of change for a host of reasons. We were at a place where our board was small and we needed a new chair. They were like, "What do you feel about being the chair?"

I had reservations, not because I'm not committed to the work. I had reservations because I've never been a chair of a board. I felt like not equipped and didn't have the intelligence in board development intelligence to do this and felt limited. They were like, "You're not doing it by yourself. We're the team and you have our support." I agreed to do it. I've been the board president for, at the end of this year I think it'll be two years.

NE: Okay.

AH: Yeah, that's my role now.

NE: Okay. Cool. The rally to reform Newark police when are we talking about and—

AH: Newark policing.

NE: Yeah. How did you get involved?

AH: How did you know that?

NE: I do my research.

AH: I see. When you said it was I was like, "Ew!" They came to us. I always get the whole abbreviations wrong. The ACLU came to us and said, "We would like for you all to join this movement around Newark policing and accountability."

NE: "Us" is at Unity or at the—

AH: At the Center.

NE: - Center. Okay.

AH: At the Center. Let me back up. I think that it might help how the shift from the Center to the LGBT Center.

NE: Okay.

AH: It came out of a discussion around Newark needs an LGBT Center. It needs to be very clear that it's a space for LGBT folks. A group of leaders who had been part of our family for years said, "Why don't we just rename this place the LGBT Center?" We said, quite frankly, "Why not?"

NE: Okay.

AH: So we did. Now, when Sakia Gunn was killed, at the time Sharp James was mayor. He made promises that there would be support to have a Newark LGBT Center and those promises never came to fruition. Then Corey Booker said the same thing and it didn't happen under his leadership. The community said, "Let's just do this."

We don't receive funding from the city. We don't receive funding from the state. All the funding comes from donors. We, at this current time, are volunteer run. Some of those leaders who said, "Let's make this happen" still are on the board and some of them have gone on to do what they do, but are very committed to supporting the presence of the Center in the city in the best ways that they can. That's how that happened. When the policing became an issue—

NE: Let me just ask really quick, what year are we talking about the LGBT Center being named?

AH: In October it'll be four years.

NE: Okay. So, what, 2012?

AH: Yep.

NE: Okay.

AH: Yep, 2012.

NE: Okay.

AH: In I guess it was 2013 maybe, the Newark Policing Accountability Group came to us.

NE: Okay.

AH: They said, "You guys are a perfect fit to partner with us in this effort." There was, as you know, the police were, not targeting—I don't wanna say that because that's not fair. The unjust policing activities were also affecting trans folk. We were like, "Absolutely. This is a perfect fit." We partnered with them and we were present at a few of the rallies. What happened that kinda ended that partnership was simply having a person be able to be present at those meetings and stuff like that. That's really what happened.

NE: Right.

AH: We still are in support of them and we still do what we can when asked. That's how that came to be.

NE: They wanted a voice, a presence kind of.

AH: Yes, from the LGBT community.

NE: They came to you.

AH: They came to us.

NE: Interesting.

AH: They came to us.

NE: Have they asked beyond that for any other kind of presence like perhaps within an actual role? Have they developed any new roles or initiatives or things like that?

AH: No, not yet.

NE: Not yet. Okay.

AH: Not yet. Not yet. I'm certain that if the opportunity presented itself, they would.

NE: Okay.

AH: Yeah, but not yet.

NE: Interesting. Okay. Thank you.

AH: You're welcome.

NE: The last question I wanted to ask you about was the Supreme Court decision with gay rights in New Jersey and your role in that.

AH: Same sex marriage.

NE: Yeah.

AH: We were at an event in New York, me and my wife, and a friend of mine was with us. At this event, Lambda Legal was tabling and they were asking for couples to sign up if they were interested in being plaintiffs for the Harris vs Lewis case that they were building. My friend submitted our name. We didn't even do it. We didn't do it.

We got a call from David Buckle, who no longer is with Lambda Legal, awesome man. He came and he interviewed us. We were then invited to be part of the lawsuit with six other couples. We were the only African American lesbian couple. There was an interracial lesbian couple. There were two white lesbian couples and a white gay couple.

Initially I didn't wanna do it. I didn't wanna do it. I didn't wanna do it because I was doing a lot. I was doing a lot. I was in ministry. We were doing prevention, HIV prevention. We had the Social Justice Center. Life was going on and I didn't wanna do it. My wife said, "That's not an option. We have to do this." I said okay.

It was five years and it was rewarding, but yet it was very—there were times where we felt very unsupported. There were some threats made. Overall it was a wonderful experience. The other difficulty was that we were the black couple.

NE: I was just about to ask about that.

AH: There was an expectation. We had our own expectation of what that meant. We were clear about two things; one is that we were asked because

we were African American. We were clear about that. That was very clear. Two, we had a responsibility to see this thing through and to be the face of what it meant for our community to engage, at least, in the conversation of marriage, of same sex marriage and have the opportunity to do so. It was a lot of pressure. Everywhere we were invited to go, we went. Wherever we were asked to speak, we went.

There were times when we would look out into the room and as usual—you know, it's one of those things like you know when you're growing up and you're the only black or one of three in the space, that that feeling never goes away no matter how old you are. For me, it was difficult looking out into the audience and not seeing many of us. At some point, really resenting that here we are fighting for the people and where are the people? Where are our people? That was hard.

What kept me grounded was is the bigger picture, which was the opportunity to marry your same sex partner and it not be a big deal. That we could do that. That that was an option for us. While we're in it, again we're traveling a lot, which was wonderful. It was wonderful. Meeting amazing people. It also, because it was us, we also—then there was the movement, right? The movement was excited that we were part of it because the movement had had its reservations about same sex marriage and what it meant. We really brought a face to what it was. That was very powerful. It was a journey that I'm glad that I took. It was important.

NE: And very public. I saw this wonderful interview with I think it was on Democracy Now.

AH: Okay. Yeah.

NE: It was so fantastic.

AH: Yes.

NE: Just to think that somebody can Google that and be really inspired.

AH: I'll have to Google it.

NE: You have to. It's wonderful.

AH: Okay. Okay.

NE: Just to say that I'm sure folks out there in the internets have access to that.

AH: Yeah. Okay. It's so funny that you say that because the other day I was doing something, probably was driving, and I was thinking, "I wonder if that footage is still available?" Wow.

NE: It's great.

AH: Okay.

NE: I think that's pretty much it unless if you have anything that I didn't cover? Okay. Thank you so much.

AH: Thank you.

NE: Again, today is May 23rd. Naomi Extra here with Alicia Heath-Toby at Rutgers Newark for the Queer Newark Oral History Project.

AH: Thank you.

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