

Queer Newark Oral History Project

Interviewee: Douglas Says

Interviewer: Naomi Extra

Date: May 31, 2016

Location: Jersey City

Naomi Extra: [Pause 00:00 – 00:10] All right. Today is May 31, 2016 and this is Naomi Extra here interviewing Douglas Says at his home in Jersey City for the Queer Newark Oral History Project.

Douglas Says: It's actually pronounced Says.

Naomi Extra: Says. Says.

Douglas Says: Mm-hmm.

Naomi Extra: I knew that. I'm sorry.

Douglas Says: It's okay.

Naomi Extra: [Laughter] Thank you for correcting me. Douglas Says. For the first question, I'm just gonna ask when and where were you born, and can you tell me a little bit about your early life?

Douglas Says: Yes, I was born in Newark, New Jersey. Martland Hospital. Which is—what is it called now? Do you know what Martland is called now?

Naomi Extra: Mm-nnn.

Douglas Says: Oh, my God. Right there on South Orange Avenue and Bergen [snaps].

Naomi Extra: Oh, gosh. I don't know, 'cause I'm new to Jersey.

Douglas Says: Oh, okay. Okay. I can't figure the name out.

Naomi Extra: That's okay.

Douglas Says: I wanna say UMDMJ. Yeah, UMDMJ. Yeah.

Naomi Extra: Okay, UMDMJ.

Douglas Says: It was called Martland Hospital when I was born. I was born in '61, my mother's first child, I never knew my father, and yeah. That was probably about it. Born in March, so I'm a pisces. Yeah.

Naomi Extra: Okay. What do you remember about—well, specifically well maybe before I ask that, where do you remember living?

Douglas Says:

[Sighs] I have a very clear recollection, and I always asked questions when I was growin' up. I asked my mother, I asked my aunt, so I knew a lot of the family history because I asked so many questions, but I remember that we lived on Waverly Avenue in Newark, which is right off of Springfield Avenue, which is right over there where they just built all of this—what is it? Home Depot.

They just build the Home Depot and this whole new area over there, so yeah, we lived on Waverly Avenue, so I actually have—my mother had five kids. I'm the first. Then my brother came a year after me, and then my sister came maybe like when I was five or seven, and I'm gonna say seven. Yeah, she just turned 50, and I'm five, yeah, 'cause I'm 55 and she's 50. Yeah, and my sister came. It was just us three for quite some time, and her father lived with us.

We had different fathers. He's the only father that I knew, or father figure that I ever knew. I loved living there on Waverly Avenue, even though I was a kid, but I remember. I remember the schools that I went to, and my aunt lived down the street. My favorite aunt lived down the street, so I got to see all my cousins very often 'cause they lived right down the street. Then, we moved from there to 18th Street, to South 18th Street, which is my fondest memories of growing up.

Naomi Extra:

Okay, how old were you when you made that move, about?

Douglas Says:

We—hmm. It wasn't very long after my sister was born, so I know when we moved to 18th Street, it was the late '60s. 'Cause if I was five, that would be '66, so I'm gonna say we moved there in probably like '67, something like that. We stayed there until like '77. It was just this one block where every—it was kinda like Cheers. You ever see the show Cheers?

It was kinda like Cheers. Everybody knew everybody's name, everybody knew everybody's mother, father if they had one. Everybody had been in everybody's house, so there was a lot of familiarity growing up on the block, and not any fights or anything.

You got a little mad at somebody you might—by the end of the day you were back together again. Yeah, but for me, moving there, I met my first best friend, who happened to be gay. It's so funny, 'cause today I was thinking to myself.

I had a flash in the kitchen where I was bussed out from—I was going to South 17th Street school at that time, and then when I got to probably the fifth grade, I got bust out from South 17th Street to Newton Street School.

When I started to go to Newton Street, there, I had a couple of friends that lived in that area. Newton Street was down the hospital, by UMDMJ actually, right off of South Orange Avenue, and I had some friends that you just connect with.

Today, I'm ironing and I'm thinking of Walter, one, his name was Walter, and the other well his name is Bernard, and a guy named Ricky. Years later, I just thought we just got along really well, but years later, I would find out that they were gay.

I got to see them at the bar Murphy's which was a popular gay bar downtown in Newark, but it didn't dawn on me then that they were gay, because I didn't really know I was gay. I played with dolls. I knew that I liked dolls, but I didn't really think about it.

Naomi Extra: Right, so when you moved to 18th, South 18th, there was a change—you said that was your favorite, or those were the good memories?

Douglas Says: That was my favorite placed that I've ever lived, still to this day, and my sister too. All of us, my brother, all of us, we feel the same way. Then also, that's when I came upon haters. It wasn't anybody on my block, it was the people on the next block or the people around the corner.

If I had to go around the corner to the store. Actually, it was one at the end of the block, the far end of the block. He had a brother named Ricky, and Ricky and me were cool. Matter of fact, the last couple of years I ran into Ricky at a party. His brother's name is Barry, who's now a cop.

Could you believe it? Every time I would go down the street, he would beat me up and chase me right down the street. He was older than me. He was way older than me, 'cause Ricky was my age. Until my mother—'cause my mother—just don't mess with her kids.

Until my mother got my cousin to come over and handle it, and then after that he never bothered me again. If we had to go to the meat market, which was on 16th Avenue.

We lived on 18th Street between 14th and 15th Avenue, and the meat market's on 16th Avenue, so we'd have to walk one block to get there. If we did that, it was another boy who used to bother me all the time and chase me and beat me up. His name was Jeffrey 07:35, I'll never forget him. My brother's name was Jeffrey 07:35 but he used to beat me up all the time, and he had like—it was like seven of them, brothers. All boys.

All of them, all the brothers, except for Jeffrey 'cause he was younger, all of the older brothers worked at the meat market where were trying to go

to. When I say we, I mean because at a certain point in my life, my—two of my cousins came to live with us, because their mother had died, so my mother was actually the baby of her family.

One of her older sisters died and she had five kids. My mother had five kids and she had five kids, and all of my mother's other sisters, they had—one of my aunts had three kids, three boys. My other aunt had one, and my other aunt had one, and my uncles, they had a lot. Yeah.

Naomi Extra: Lots of family?

Douglas Says: Yeah, yeah. Lots of family. My aunt that had five kids, she—'cause I asked my mother later like how was it that they got to come live with us, and she said that her mother told her and her other sister to take the kids, because even though my aunt was married, her husband didn't want to take the kids, so they was gonna put them into the system. Welfare was gonna put them into the system. My grandmother said, "You two take 'em."

My mother took the two youngest, which was closest in age to her kids, and my other aunt took the three oldest, who were closest to her kids in age. She had all teenagers and my mother had all younger. My two cousins, one was the exact same age as me and one was two years older than me, so she became the oldest, 'cause now she's not a cousin, now she's my sister.

That was interesting, because she—it didn't dawn on me until years later how that might have affected her because you go from being the baby of your family to now being the eldest with responsibilities to your aunt's family. They felt a little Cinderella-ish.

My mother was a great mom and good to them and anybody who came on the block, and if you came to my house, you ate. My mother fed you. She just showered you with love. There was no prejudice. I had a cousin, my oldest cousin, my favorite cousin was a drag queen, which was also my mother's—my cousin's name was Leegee 10:23.

That was her drag name, but his real name was Willie, Willie Henton 10:29. My cousin was the favorite of the family. The golden child. There's never any prejudice. For some reason or another, my cousin lived with my other aunt, not his mother. My other aunt, her name was Chichi 10:49. He was living with my aunt Chichi, and Chichi is the one who took the three other kids, and she had three other kids, so now she's got six so she really got seven, 'cause Leegee stays here too.

They were all in the same age group. They would be like 18, 19, 20 and up, whereas we might've been let's say eight, seven. Numbers, stuff like that. My mother was very close with my cousin Leegee 'cause they were close in age. My mother was the baby of her family and my cousin Leegee was actually the first grandchild of my grandmother's.

Over the table with relief. My grandmother's oldest child had her—she only had one daughter, which is Juanita 11:49. Juanita was born a year before my mother, so my mother and Juanita are the same age, and then Leegee was after them. They grew up together, so they were all—Leegee used to borrow my mother's shoes and pocketbooks and things like that.

It was never any animosity. I grew up around gay people, because my cousin always—I can always remember a lot of drag queens coming up to the house. From the realest of real to the not so real. Again, there was never any prejudice. Yeah.

Naomi Extra: Where was your mother from? Was your mother from Newark originally?

Douglas Says: My mother was born from Martland Hospital also.

Naomi Extra: Oh, wow.

Douglas Says: Same hospital as me. Mm-hmm.

Naomi Extra: Then do you know generations before, how far back does it go? In terms of Newark?

Douglas Says: Well, [sighs] it's funny that you say that because my niece is—I guess my niece is about 30 now. She just recently did one of those searches on Ancestry.com or something like that, but it doesn't go—they only update every ten years. Did you know that?

Naomi Extra: No, I didn't.

Douglas Says: Yeah, that's not so great, because at the point where she had gotten—at the point that she had gotten it, they haven't even gotten up to 1941 yet. 1941 is when my mother was born, so therefore, my mother's not in there yet. It does show my grandmother and my grandfather, and where they came from and when they moved here, how they lived here.

The census that they used to do every—whenever they would come around and you'd have to fill out the census form and stuff. I guess that's how they got a lot of the information back then, back in the day. How many people live in the house, and you'd give it out, and all that stuff.

Yeah, but my grandmother was Boston and my grandfather was from the Carolinas or something like that. I never met my grandfather.

I wasn't born until after my grandfather passed, which is [Laughter] probably why my mother was still around because he probably would've killed her. She was the baby, she had to be. She had me right after high school, so that's actually a picture of my mom right there. Both of those are pictures. That's her high school picture and her prom.

Naomi Extra: I want to wear that dress, oh my gosh.

Douglas Says: Yeah. Yeah.

Naomi Extra: She's beautiful.

Douglas Says: Thank you. People think that's me.

Naomi Extra: Gorgeous.

Douglas Says: They're like, "Is this you?" I'm like, "What?" I'm like, "How can you—"

Naomi Extra: There is a resemblance.

Douglas Says: Yeah, but I don't see. You know what I mean?

Naomi Extra: Yeah, I wouldn't—

Douglas Says: Yeah. I mean, for people that really think that that's me in a dress. I'm a little bit more glamorous in a dress, but yeah.

Naomi Extra: Your mother and also then your aunts, all born and raised in Newark?

Douglas Says: In Newark. Yeah. Mm-hmm.

Naomi Extra: Okay.

Douglas Says: [Clears throat]

Naomi Extra: I wanna then go back to some of the haters in the neighborhood. Where did that come from? Was it just childhood meanness?

Douglas Says: I guess it always exists. Well now they're calling it—what are they calling it? We called it bullying then, but what is it now? 'Cause it's gotten really big online and all that stuff that—

Naomi Extra: I think it's still bullying. Yeah.

Douglas Says: It's still bullying? Yeah, peer pressure, bullying, whatever. It always existed. There was a boy who lived around the corner from me, and we were cool. We were pretty cool. I remember when I was in grade school, before the fifth grade, he went to the same school, and occasionally I would go around the corner and play with him or play at his house, and if at school somebody bothered me he would take up for me.

His name was Fleming 15:59 and he was a bully, but for some reason, he would take up for me. He had a glass eye, so a lot of people were scared of him because he had a glass eye, and—fast forward down the road, I remember one time I was on my block, we had grown out of that in probably—now I'm probably in high school or whatever.

Not high school, 'cause I went to Newton Street from fifth to the eighth grade, so during that time period, I don't know what school Fleming went to. He probably went to 15th Avenue or something. I'm down the street at one of the boys' houses, just on the block. His name was Greg 16:42.

Greg, I know I'm standing out there, and Fleming was out there, and Fleming said something to me shady-like, and then he punched me in my chest. He went from being my protector to being now my bully. Fast forward to 1999, I run across Fleming again, and actually even before that, [makes noise] go back a little bit. Because what would happen is I would later find out that Fleming was related to me.

Naomi Extra: Wow.

Douglas Says: Yeah, right? This is how he was related to me. My cousin Leegee, the drag queen, right? Her father is his uncle.

Naomi Extra: Wow.

Douglas Says: Exactly, so we would later discover that.

Naomi Extra: He didn't know that either?

Douglas Says: He didn't know that, right.

Naomi Extra: That's so interesting.

Douglas Says: We would later discover that. He had a brother. His brother was into karate, so his brother's name was Monty 17:50 and he knew karate, so he was a little scary, Monty, because he was a black belt. Whatever, whatever. Now, years later, this is years later, at this point, one of my good friends, he tells this story all the time.

We were going out one night, and by this point I'm older. I'm out of high school, anyway. We were going out to a club in New York which was called Better Days 18:18 which was a major club on 49th Street in New York, and so it's me, Lemwood 18:25, my best friend Lemwood and my best friend Willie.

We take the train to New York, and we get on the PATH train. The PATH train was configured totally different than it is now, so we get on the train, and these boys get on the train. The PATH train seats were more like the buses are, the way they are in the back of the bus. We're sitting on the train, and these boys get around.

They just all spread out around us. Now I know one of the boys is Monty, which is Fleming's brother, so I don't feel any kind of way, 'cause I know Monty. They're talking to us, they're trying to rap to us or whatever, like, come on to us.

Or, make us feel like they're coming onto us, whatever. When we get to 33rd Street, the train pulls in, and this is—it's almost about midnight, 'cause that's the time we go out, so the train pulls in, and then we start walking. Willie says, "Let's all lock arms." 'Cause he felt something.

We all lock arms, the three of us, and we're walking. When we come through the turn stout, we go down stairs to take the next train that would take us to 49th Street, they follow us, and at that point, one of the boys grabs Willie and trying to take his bag and trying to rob him, telling us to give them money.

We all start to run, but then when I look back, Willie is not running, he's tangled up with the boy. I go to say, "Let him go. Let him go." Now at this point, I've moved off the 18th Street, I live on Avon Avenue 20:17 now which is hell for me. Hell.

Naomi Extra: How old are you right now?

Douglas Says: I moved off of 18th Street in '77, so in '77 I'm 16, but at this point when I'm going out, I'm at least 19, 20. We're [clears throat]—I look back and Willie is entangled with the boy, so by this point I've started carrying weapons, so I got a ice pick. I usually even have a ice pick in my back pocket or a meat cleaver in my cowboy boots. They're locking, and I'm like, "Let 'em go, let 'em go."

I pulled my ice pick out. When I pulled my ice pick out, all the boys disperse except for the one that Willie has. Willie actually is beatin' him up and has him in a headlock and is beatin' him. Monty's like, "No don't stab

him, don't stab him. Let him go, let him go." I just stabbed the boy, in his butt, with the ice pick.

Then Willie lets him go, and some stranger comes and breaks us up, so they go off about their business, and Willie's like, "No, no no he got my bag." I was like, "Let him have it. Let him have it." He was like, "No."

Because what it was was I let him hold my bag, which was really a jacket. It was this jacket that turns into a bag, and the boy had snatched it from him, so Willie went back and we walked up and got it back, and then we went to the club.

Our night was ruined. Well, we just sat there all night, dumbfounded, because it was ruined. That was, yeah. I used—I can't even tell you how many incidents I had with either I'm—especially livin' on Avon Avenue.

When I first moved to Avon Avenue, during that time I started modeling, so I was taking modeling classes at Ebony Manor 22:21 which was downtown Newark, and so [sighs] I was coming home from one of my classes, it was me and my cousin Mark 22:31, and not only did I have—not only was my cousin Leegee gay but my cousin Mark was gay also, and Mark was older than me.

Mark was my aunt's—the five kids? He was one of the three that went to my aunt. He was older than me, and he lives with my aunt, but we were really close, but he was really closer to Leegee, 'cause Leegee was older and they were closer in age, even though Leegee was older.

I think Leegee had influence on Mark and me without knowing it, me without knowing it, Mark, definitely, 'cause Mark was Mark was very effeminate. Mark was a shake away from being a drag queen. I'm just looking and I think, "Well Leegee was definitely was my inspiration and my introduction to fashion."

Because looking at Leegee, all I saw as a kid was hair, and makeup, and drawing, and sewing. She did all of that. I wanted to be like Leegee. I remember she had a boyfriend, oh my God. He was so fine. I'm just a little boy, but he—it's so amazing. I thought of this yesterday, the other day.

When was I? I was someplace, and I have a preference for really dark-skinned guys, like jet black, and I said to myself, where does that come from? I know where it comes from. It comes from Leegee's boyfriend. His name was Tinsley 24:07, and I just had him and also it's a movie called Sparkle. You ever seen Sparkle? The original Sparkle.

Naomi Extra:

Oh, yes. Wait, the original with Diana 24:16. No, is it?

Douglas Says: No, that's Mahogany.

Naomi Extra: That's Mahogany? Who's in the original?

Douglas Says: Oh, it's Sunny Kabrich 24:25.

Naomi Extra: I know I've seen it.

Douglas Says: Lanetta McGee 24:29, which you know, she wasn't the lead, and Irene Carroll 24:33. Irene.

Naomi Extra: Anyway, sorry.

Douglas Says: Okay, so anyway, so the guy who—well you've seen the one with Whitney Houston right?

Naomi Extra: Mm-hmm.

Douglas Says: Okay, so the one who beat up the sister?

Naomi Extra: Mm-hmm.

Douglas Says: The sister, the light-skinned one who left the house? With him? Him, but him in the original. 'Cause him in the original is jet black. Him. His name is Satin Krugers 25:02 in that, but between him and Tinsley, that is the man that I've been looking for all my life. Really and truly.

I've found him a couple of times, and the sad thing about it is that I've found him a couple of times and he never has to measure up to anything because he's the illusion of a man in my head. All he has to do is just be willing and he could get the world. I've realized that. Anyway, one day—I jump all over the place.

Naomi Extra: That's fine.

Douglas Says: [Laughter] One day, I'm at my cousin Leegee's house, and my cousin Mark and Leegee are in the bedroom talking.

Naomi Extra: How old are you at this point? About?

Douglas Says: Oh, I might be 12 or something like that. I'm sitting in the kitchen, and Tinsley is in the kitchen, too, and Tinsley says to me, he says, "Are you gonna be like your cousin when you grow up?" I did just like that.

Naomi Extra: [Laughter]

Douglas Says: I did just like that. Nodding my head, shaking. He was like, “Imma be waitin’ for you.”

Naomi Extra: Hmm?

Douglas Says: He’s older than me, he should not be coming on to this little young boy. He kissed me once, too. It was New Year’s, and happy New Year’s, but we were upstairs in my aunt’s house and nobody else was around and he kissed me, so he kissed me on the mouth but he had me, he had me open. I’m so glad I was—anyway. That was Tinsley. Tinsley, he’s still the—

Naomi Extra: Yeah, the model. The exemplar.

Douglas Says: The played. Yeah, exactly. Exactly.

Naomi Extra: When did you move to Avon? How did that move happen?

Douglas Says: [Sighs] Wow. Well. You really should read my book. [Laughter]

Naomi Extra: Yes, I want to!

Douglas Says: Well, you know, it’s so funny because I told my sister that. My book is not gonna be released until my death, because it’s so revealing that I wouldn’t want my nieces and nephews to read it and I’d be shamefaced for my sisters to read it because I’m telling everything, so there’s—I’m naked. I’m completely naked. Matter of fact, the name of the book originally was gonna be called Naked After the Feast.

Naomi Extra: Ooh, I like that.

Douglas Says: Yeah, but I changed it to Always a Dime.

Naomi Extra: Oh, I like that too.

Douglas Says: Because I’m always finding a dime. Like if I sit here, a dime usually falls out my pocket. If I’m walking down the street, I find a dime. I find other coins, but I always find a dime, and when I pick it up, I’m like, “It’s always a dime.” I took that to be God saying, “It’s always a dime.”

Because there’s also another meaning for Always a Dime. You know when you’re younger, when I was younger I was very insecure about the way I look, about everything. Total insecurity. Now when you look back at pictures of that time period, you’re like, “Wow, I was really cute!”

I say to myself, “You were always a dime! You just didn’t know it!” We went to this party, me and this guy who was my best friend at one point, and it was a private party, and when we got there, he says to us, he’s like, “You two can come anytime, ‘cause y’all are both dimes.”

At that point, I didn’t know what a dime meant, this was awhile ago, but when my friend explained it to me, I’m like, “Oh, okay. A dime.” That’s the reason why the book is called Always a Dime, yeah, because within it I have to reveal when I realized that I was always a dime, or whatever. Yeah.

We moved off of the block in ’77. That means I was 16. In ’77, my cousin died, Leegee died in a car accident in Germany. Now Leegee was in the service, in the army, for—don’t ask me how she was able to pull off being a drag, but I think off-base, she would be in drag.

‘Cause she wasn’t like—she didn’t have breasts or anything. Everything was pads and stuff like that. She wasn’t doing hormones or any of that stuff, and she was not the realest woman. You just—I loved Leegee.

Everybody loved Leegee, and I guess amongst her friends, she always came off like she had more. She had more than everybody, ‘cause she had a job. During that time period, in the ‘60s and in the ‘70s, it was illegal to be a drag in public. Did you know that?

Naomi Extra: Mm-hmm. Yeah. Mm-hmm.

Douglas Says: You would be arrested. I used to always wonder why they used to carry these big pocketbooks, and that’s ‘cause they changed their clothes and their weapon. Yeah, I say all this in my book, too. Yeah. I remember in ’77, I used to write Leegee a long time in Germany, and it’s the craziest thing, ‘cause I still have those letters. I keep everything.

I still have the letters that I got from Leegee and the letters that I wrote to Leegee, and I remember I wrote to Leegee—I’m a kid so I’m not really even—I’m really bothered, I’m annoyed that you don’t write as often as I write. Not thinking that you got a job and you’re in the service.

You’re in Germany, and why you don’t call? All that stuff. Leegee had a best friend, which was Gigi 31:12, who helped her come out and be the woman that she could be, so Gigi was her best friend and Gigi was always around, so Gigi was my cousin too. You’d call her my cousin. Gigi was big. Big. Tall.

Not convincing, but with real breasts and everything. It's funny, because there was another drag queen who lived on my block named Taytay 31:46, and Taytay was very flamboyant and just a broke queen. Really broke.

I guess she used to hit on the boys or whatever, and at one point she was bothering me. She would—'cause during that time period, this is when we lived on 18th Street. During that time period, I didn't think that you knew that I was gay. Not that I was in the closet because I was me, but I just didn't think you knew unless I told you and I didn't tell you 'cause I didn't know.

Taytay obviously knew her own, you know what I mean? She would call me out in front of the other boys, which would piss me off and make me mad, and then I'd go home crying. My mother got Gigi to come and talk to Taytay.

Naomi Extra: Taytay. Mm-hmm.

Douglas Says: She got her straight and she never bothered me again.

Naomi Extra: Okay.

Douglas Says: Because Gigi came to whoop her butt.

Naomi Extra: Mm-hmm. Your mother was a good protector.

Douglas Says: Oh, my mother. Oh, please, don't mess with her kids. 'Cause what I was saying also, when I moved to Avon Avenue which was like '77. Okay, wait. 'Cause I need to—okay. I wrote Leegee and then the letter came back, right? Actually, I found out that Gigi died probably a day or two before the letter came back which was marked deceased.

Luckily I found out before that. When I was told, when my mother told me, I remember I ran—'cause by that point, my cousin Mark was living on 17th Street between Madison 33:32 and Avon. Which would be around the corner from where we would actually be moving, but of course I didn't know that at that point, because we weren't moving at that point.

I ran from my house all the way to Mark to tell Mark that Leegee died. I just felt that Mark wasn't affected like I was affected. My whole world just ended, and Mark was just like, "Oh, really?" I'm like, "Huh?"

Anyway, once we did move over that way, and so I'm coming back from my modeling class walking up Avon Avenue with Mark and a girl who he lived with, her name was Bertese 34:16. She was not cute, she was not cute.

She was always—you know how they say how when something—the antagonist, like you're antagonized? People are antagonizing you, and then you turn around and you do the same to other people. I would do that to other people, not knowing any better or not knowing—I'm jokingly—I'm playing with little boys on the block and calling them girl's names, and they're not even gay, but I'd give them all little girl's names or whatever.

Here it is, Bertese. That was her name. Bertese and Mark were walking up Avon Avenue. We get up by Avon Avenue school, which is past Sean (35:11) and Avon, which you don't know because you don't live in Newark.

We're walking, we get there, and as we're venturing up, I see a group of boys coming from a block, like a side block. I said to Mark, I said, "Oh, we should turn around." He was like, "No." Mark always fancy himself being a karate expert. He ain't never went to no karate school, but back then, it was karate movies every weekend, and he would watch the karate movies, and he just knew he knew karate.

We were walking, so he says, "No." Then the boys come from the block and they just surround us, and they walk up. One walks up to me and he just hits me. He has got brass knuckles on his hand, so when he hits me, it's like a X right here, like where I had stitches. He puts a hole in my face and blood starts squishing out.

Then I just run. He starts running after me, but I run all the way home, and by the grace of God he doesn't catch me. I don't know what happened to Mark and Bertese, I mean they survived but I don't know what happened, because I was in my own chair right there.

I get home and I come in the house, my mother sees me and she's upset. She gets a butcher knife and she wants to go back outside and get them, and I'm like, "No, no no. You gotta take me to the hospital so I can get stitches." We go to the hospital, I get stitches. That was my welcome to Avon Avenue and it never got any better.

Once, somebody tried to—one boy threw me up against the wall, like the building, and took a baseball bat and tried to hit me in the head, but I ducked. They used to throw bottles at me, they used to throw stones at me.

One boy was sitting in the window as I came home every—whenever I came home from school and just hurdled obscenities at me, so one day I just had enough and I came home and I put all my stuff and I was going back outside to fight him and my mother stopped me. I said, "He keeps—" "I'm crying.

She's like, "Why? What?" I said, "He keeps bothering me. He keeps saying something to me." She was like, "You know what?" She said, "They used to talk about Jesus Christ. What makes you think that they're not gonna talk about you?" I said—I mean I never heard that before at that point, and I'm like, "I guess you're right." I ignored it. We stayed there till, I'mma say '81, so '77 to like '81, maybe '80, maybe like 1980.

Naomi Extra: Let's pause for one second.

Douglas Says: You need to stop?

Naomi Extra: Yeah, but that one [recorder] is still going.

Douglas Says: Uh-huh.

Naomi Extra: I'd like to have both of them.

Douglas Says: Yeah, [clears throat].

Naomi Extra: Still going. I'm sorry about that. Well, let's keep going. I think this one's okay.

Douglas Says: Oh, so until like 1981, because by then, I started going to design school when we moved away. Oh, my God that was the happiest day of my life. Even though, it's so funny because when we compare notes, my sisters and—mostly me and my sisters are like, me and one of my sisters are close.

Well, my whole family is close, but she and I are closest. I guess for anybody it's really like—it's a job to try to get close to me, especially these days, to try to get close to me because I'm in my own world. I'm by myself all the time. I don't call people. [Clears throat] It's funny how I did a whole full 360.

When I was younger, I used to try to—if I thought that I wanted you to be my friend, I would make an attempt. I'd call you. "Let's go out." You know.

All that stuff. I'd be the one who initiated all the phone calls and all the drop bys and all that stuff. I don't do that anymore. Now, I don't even care if you call me or not.

I don't care if anybody calls me. I'm fine. I'll be right here working, doing what I have to do, and that's that. [Clears throat] My sister will call me from time to time, if she hasn't heard from me in a couple of whatever.

When we go over our recollection of Avon Avenue, that was her favorite time.

Naomi Extra: Huh.

Douglas Says: She loved 18th Street, but she was older on Avon Avenue, so that was her favorite time and my worst time, and then the place that we moved after that which was North 13th Street, I did not have—okay, the only problem that I had with that place, ‘cause the space. Okay. When we first moved there, we were supposed to move to the second floor.

All my life, my mother has never lived on the first floor apartment, and she would never live on the first floor apartment, which is something that we also picked up. We would never live on the first floor, because easy access for people breaking into your house and stuff.

Even though I live on the fourth floor and somebody tried to climb through my window before, that’s another story. [Sighs] Yeah. We had to—the people on the second floor didn’t move out yet, so we had to take the apartment on the first floor, so I had my own room which was in the back, but that old broken down little house that we was living in, two family house.

It was a two family house with a attic. The first floor apartment, they had so many mice in there, it was crazy. It was crazy. They were rude mice. They would just walk across here while you was sitting here. It was hateful, and we all hate mice.

All of us. Finally the people moved out upstairs so we moved upstairs. I think the mice moved so we moved upstairs, so us moving upstairs gave me the attic room, and it was two rooms in the attic.

It was a door between the two but we nailed the door shut, so my brother was in one room and I was in the other room. We had to nail the door shut ‘cause by that point, my brother had gotten—when we were living on Avon Avenue, he started getting really out of hand. Really on 18th Street.

He started drinking, and he’s really young, drinking, so he’s an alcoholic at this point. He was going in my room, taking things or whatever. My mother’s boyfriend nailed the door shut so that he couldn’t get in, and then I had a padlock on my door, because even when we lived—well, that’s the next place we moved after that. They would still—anyway. [Laughter] Oh, Jesus.

Naomi Extra: Lot of memories.

Douglas Says: Oh, my God. I just—anyway, but I loved that room because it was huge. This attic room was huge. It was like an apartment for me. I called it my apartment. Really, it was huge. I loved it there.

Only because of the space, and it was—to get to it, it was a little out of the way and almost a little scary, because we'd take the 21 bus home. Yeah, we could take the 21, the 34, or the number 5, and if we took the number 5, it would be the last stop of the bus. Where the bus would pull in.

When the bus pulls in, you either—to get to our house, you either had to go through this tunnel or you had to go over a bridge. Either one at nighttime is scary. Nothing ever happened to me going that way. It wasn't like Avon Avenue. Nothing ever happened to me living there.

Naomi Extra: That's good.

Douglas Says: Yeah, right? Wendy didn't like that place. That's my sister. She didn't like that 'cause of the mice.

Naomi Extra: How old were you when you moved to 13th?

Douglas Says: By that point, that was like '82, '81, '82, I was 21. 20, 21.

Naomi Extra: Yeah, in your early 20s.

Douglas Says: Mm-hmm. Yeah. Well, it's so funny because I have—I used to—I can't put my hands on it now because it's in the trunk, but I had during that whole time period.

I used to document—downtown Newark, there was a penny arcade, so I would go to the penny arcade every—I would go once a month, but it'd really be more than once a month, 'cause I would go to—they had a photo booth. You put a dollar in, you'd get a polaroid. I would take a polaroid supposedly at the same time every month. I'm documenting my change in age.

Naomi Extra: Oh, wow. Do you still have those? Oh, wow.

Douglas Says: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm. It's online, it's on my Facebook page, but the actual pictures are in the trunk. Yeah, so I would take a picture every month so you would see the growth and the change from whatever haircut or whatever, whatever, whatever. I can look at those pictures and know what I was doing at the time.

Naomi Extra: Right. Tell me about some of the places you went out in Newark.

Douglas Says: Well, in Newark, we nev—okay. Well, okay. Well, I was gonna say we never really had any place, but that’s untrue. In the late ‘70s or the early ‘80s, we had a lot of different places. We had clubs in Jersey that people would come to from New York.

Well, we had Zanzibar, which I’m sure you’ve probably heard of. We had a bar called Murphy’s. We had a bar called First Choice. Back in the late ‘70s, we had a place called the Showcase, which by day was a modeling school and a daycare center and by night it was a club.

The Showcase, which was fabulous. We had another one called Le Joc. We had another one called—hmm, what was the name of that place? The Executive Suite. We had one up in East Orange called The Back Door, we had another one called Sultan’s Palace.

Naomi Extra: Hmm, where was Sultan’s Palace? Was that in...?

Douglas Says: That was in East Orange.

Naomi Extra: Okay, in East Orange?

Douglas Says: Mm-hmm, in East Orange. We had The Docks. A place called Docks, that was—it was Docks downtown on East Orange. We had—all of them were really—played great music. I mean it was peaceful, there was no fighting. None of that stuff. It was just the kids came out to dance.

Occasionally, there would be a fight or something like that, but for the most part, people came out to dance, and show off their new outfit. All that, everything.

There was a lot of individuality back then. People wanted to look different, and special, not everybody with their jeans hanging off their butt or same big white T-shirt or whatever it is that they’re doing. Yeah.

Naomi Extra: Did you have any favorite places that you really loved to go to?

Douglas Says: Well, [Laughter]. Ooh, Jesus. Yes, I did. Well, as far as clubs go. Well, we went to Murphy’s maybe twice a week. Murphy’s was a bar, which is right downtown Newark where the stadium is? You know where the stadium is, right?

It was directly across the street from there. Yeah, we would go there Wednesdays, they would have a Wednesday night kinda thing, and Friday and Saturday. [Clears throat] The DJ was really fabulous.

Actually I dated the DJ for awhile, but the DJ also worked in New York at the clubs in New York where we would go to the Nickel Bar or 96 West or Peter Rabbit's or Keller's 48:06 or The Garage, Better Days. The Gallery.

There's so many places, and there's none now. It's sad. Just New York period was just a big party. It was anywhere you went, like especially in the village which they whitewashed that. 42nd Street was—actually, 42nd Street was akin to Sodom and Gomorrah, it was just a mess, but now it's like Disney.

Naomi Extra: Yeah. [Laughter]

Douglas Says: Yeah. In the village, you could go to the village and they practically were having sex on the street. It was just any nook, any cranny, any anywhere. It was just a mess. I mean luckily for me at that time, I wasn't actively sexual. I was prudish and innocent for a long time until I wasn't anymore, and then I took that to the extreme.

Naomi Extra: When did you come out officially? I mean not officially but what was that process like?

Douglas Says: Well, I don't think I ever really came out officially, I just lived. From day to day, I just lived. I always lived. It's like the weather changes and whether it's hot or cold, you either put on more or you take off more. It just was like that.

The weather changed, I took clothes off or put clothes on. I continued to evolve as an artist, as a designer, as a model, and all of that was a part—it was accepted as a part of everything. When we were coming up, it was a lo-o-o-o-otta gay. We had a lot of gay bretherens or whatever you call them.

There was so many people. There was a group of us, and we all hung out at the same bars, the same fashion shows, the same—we all ran into each other. There was Michael Wright 50:21, there was Lester 50:23, there was Richard Curetin 50:25. Now all of those are dead. All of those are dead. There was Bob Henry 50:29, there was Ronald Petty 50:31.

All of them are dead. Two in that group were murdered. The rest of them died from AIDS. Yeah, it was a crazy, crazy time. I guess if I had to equate it with anything, it would be like the gypsies. They were doing sit-ins and love-ins and stuff. That's what it felt like growing up then. Yeah, it was very peaceful.

Naomi Extra: Was there a coming out to yourself because you mentioned there were points where you were like, "Oh, I didn't know yet." Was there a point...?

Douglas Says:

Well, I can't say that I didn't know because I always played with dolls, and I had my best friend who lived across the street from me, Kenny, he played with me, with the dolls, and then some of the boys on the block would play too, but they played with my G.I. Joe as the husband to my Barbie.

My dolls were setup on the back porch. My dolls, which were actually my sister's dolls which I took from them, but it was set up like a soap opera. When I came home from school, I would just continue where I left off with a little story. Then sometimes the boys would play with me, but I always played with dolls.

I always sat just like this. My sister teasing me about me sitting with my legs crossed all the time, but I was always this, which you see, in front of me. I probably was even softer then because you pick up things.

My later best friend Lemwood 52:19, he was more closeted than me, so he would—if we were talking and I'm talking with my hands—heads down, put your heads down. I would sit there, pull out a little compact, and put a little lip gloss on. He'd be like, "Put that away!"

Whatever, you know. It was too much for him. I'm coming, I'm coming from looking at my cousins, so—but I mean I'm glad that he did all that he did because I probably would be way out. I did anything that I've ever dreamt to do, I've done.

I remember there was this—oh, my friend Kenny, who was my best friend at the time, who lived across the street from me who played dolls with me? A mess. He was such—now I didn't know this at the time, but he was such a liar.

Everything that came out of his mouth was a lie, but I trusted him implicitly, anything that he told me. If he told me that the moon was flat, I believed him. I looked up to him, I really believed everything he said. There was some stupid stuff that I was believing.

Oh my God, if I told you, you would just be like, "You were so dumb." Anyway. Me and Kenny, we just would be gay up and down 18th Street on our own, like we would be on the back of our street with our cherry tied in a knot with little hot shorts on. Flip flopping up and down the street.

I mean the boys—all the boys on the block would mess with Kenny. They would beat him up. Some of them would sneak around to his house when

it was dark to have him. They wouldn't mess with me, because I was always one to wrestle. I wanted to wrestle and I would always wrestle the biggest of them and fight, wrestle.

Naomi Extra: You had all those cousins.

Douglas Says: Right, but like I said, the block was cool. They were really cool, but with Kenny, it was only Kenny and his sister. Kenny was the oldest, and his sister was little and his mother was always at work. He was always by himself, but Kenny was a busybody. He was always talking and lying, and we was always up in some grown person's face. Always. Especially men.

Especially the men on the block. There was stuff Kenney told me that even to this day, I can't even—I don't even know if it was real. Just ridiculous. There were men on the block, grown men that we set our sights on, and we would be up in their face every chance we got. Okay?

[Laughter]

Douglas Says: One day, he told me. It was this one that I was crazy over. His name was Van. He had a motorcycle and whatever. It was one named Van and one named Bruh 55:21 that I liked. He told me that Van said to come up to his apartment.

I went up to Van's apartment, and I swear I was thinking about this the other day. I'm like, "Why did I even go and knock on the door, and go to...?" I don't know what this man must've thought. Anyway, I did it. I said, "Kenny told me you wanted to see me."

I don't even know what they thought with these little boys who just kept throwing themselves at them, really. I don't even know. Then we would sometimes go around the corner, 'cause mostly we stayed on our block, but we would go around the corner to 19th Street, and as soon as you turned the corner, the first house on the corner, there was these two brothers. Old men. We thought they were sexy as hell.

[Laughter]

Douglas Says: One's name was Curtis, and the other one, I don't remember what his name was 'cause I liked Curtis. Curtis had that big bushy chest full of hair. I never really liked hair on the chest, but. They had afros and sideburns and the whole bit. I just thought he was just so sexy. He moved from there maybe a block away, and I used to go to his house, and he would let me sit in.

This is all on what Kenny said that he had them, or they been, huh. There had to be something there, because you're allowing this kid to come and be—there was another one who lived across the street from him. His name was Will. Me and Kenny both had a crush on him, too.

Will, bunch of hair on his chest. Don't act like I never liked hair on the chest but he had a bunch of hair on his chest, but he had the thick—both Curtis and him both had the real thick mustaches where you can't even see their top lip, and Will was dark-skinned. He wore glasses, really thick Coke bottle glasses but he was sexy.

I think he ran track in high school or whatever but they were older. I would just be up in Will's face all the time, and Will had two Doberman pinchers. Dogs. I would go around there, me and Kenny or sometimes by myself and sit on his porch and talk to him. I remember once I was in his house.

Me and him. His mother lived there, too, but she was old or whatever. I was sitting in the living room with him, and we're talking, and he says, "What do you want to be when you grow up?" I said, just as happily, "A drag queen."

Naomi Extra: [Gasps] That's great.

Douglas Says: He almost fell out the chair. He's like, "A what? Why you wanna be a?" I was like, "'Cause my cousin's a drag queen. I wanna be like my cousin, blah blah blah."

He just didn't get it. Fast forward years later, who do I run into at Murphy's downtown? The gay bar? Will. Will was about it. I went home with him, spent the night with him, but we never did anything. He didn't do anything but we never did anything.

Naomi Extra: Wow, it's so interesting that you met people some years later.

Douglas Says: I say mind-like people associate. That's what I always say. If you're in the company of somebody, it's because y'all have something in common, or there's a commonality. That's what friendship is. Yeah.

Naomi Extra: Tell me about your trajectory in terms of your career as a designer. I know—well actually before that, can you tell me a little bit more about the modeling? 'Cause you mentioned that you had been doing some modeling. Can you say a little bit more about that?

Douglas Says:

Yeah, yeah. Well, I didn't even know I wanted to be a model or I didn't know—I knew that my cousin was fashion to me but I didn't know what fashion was. I didn't even know the word fashion. I just knew what I saw.

'Cause my cousin went through all that time, my cousin would draw and I would find these sketches around the house, I'm like, "Oh, my God. Who did this?" My cousin Mark would take the credit like he did it but he didn't draw, so it was really Leegee but Leegee was never around.

I remember in high school I was coming and going to class and I found a flyer on the floor which was for modeling school. This was the first time that I'm like, "Oh, modeling school. Imma go." I contacted the lady about the modeling school and I started to go to the modeling school.

My cousin Mont 01:00:12 went also my friend Lemwood went too, because whatever I did, they all did. Which, well, there was a couple of hold-out things that they wouldn't do that I've done, but I've done everything I've dreamt to do. Even did drag for a long time, for too many years.

But, I did it as an entertainer, I didn't do it like my cousin Leegee did it. So then, I found the flier. I found them. I started going to the modeling school, and when I started going, it was only about maybe five of us in the class. I was the only guy.

My teacher's name was Angie Rivers, and her sister actually brought the fliers to the school. Her name was Rhonda, Rhonda Rivers, so we would do these classes which was at Ebony Manor, which is where I walked from that time that I got jumped, but anyway.

We would do these classes there at Ebony Manor, and there's really not a lot for a guy to do in modeling, so once I was taught what I was supposed to learn, I just sat back and watch her teach the girls, and eventually I started walking like then, and then I started teaching girls how to walk. That's how that came about. Now back in the day, we had to supply our own clothes to be in fashion shows.

We had to bring our own outfits. I in high school, probably like the 10th grade, 9th or 10th grade, I took a men's tailoring course. When I took that, that's how I met Lemwood actually, so the men's tailoring came before the modeling, so 9th grade I did the men's tailoring, and Lemwood was in that class, too.

[Clears throat] We didn't like each other, but after the summer, when we came back to school, I went to modeling class and he too went to modeling school. He went to FTD, which was the daycare at the daytime in the

modeling school and then the disco at night, and then I went to Angie Rivers.

When we came back for the 10th grade, we both had something in common to talk about, which was modeling. Yeah, so I went to my school was called BUG&G, which stood for Beautiful Girls and Gents or something like that, I don't know. Yeah.

Now I'm in high school and I'm making modeling, I'm starting to learn how to sew, which my mother always had a sewing machine. My aunt had a sewing machine, my cousin Leegee had a sewing machine but my mother wouldn't teach me how to sew.

I'm in school learning, and I made a shirt like this little shirt that I would wear. I made a robe, I made a vest. Then after that I started making my own clothes and then Lemwood started making and then we started working together and making clothes, and then since we had to make clothes for—'cause all the little fashion shows had scenes.

The bright white, whatever the stupid scenes were, so you had to make clothes for the scene. My muse, well back then, okay. What made me also go into modeling was this girl moved onto 18th Street so this is way before I left 18th Street.

She moved onto 18th Street, her name was Rosemary Couza 01:04:04, and she was the first model I ever saw, and I thought she was just this little skinny thing with this long neck and she had such carriage, and I'm like, "I wanna be her friend." She dressed differently.

Back then, she used to buy a lot of stuff from the thrift shops like Pedal Pushers, they weren't even wearing that stuff. These little jackets and these little—she was stunning, and she carried herself with such grace and poise, and so I became her friend, and eventually I started making clothes for her to bring to the fashion show. This is Rosemary here in the red.

Naomi Extra: Oh, wow.

Douglas Says: We're still friends to this day.

Naomi Extra: She's gorgeous.

Douglas Says: That's my book, Amuse, and that's Rosemary on the cover.

Naomi Extra: Ah.

Douglas Says: I started making clothes for Rosemary and then eventually for the other girls that were around like Yvette Carr 01:05:04 and Rosalind Johnson 01:05:07, so next thing you know I started making clothes.

Less modeling and more clothes. I would put modeling down and later pick it up again in later years and then I would go to London and I'd start modeling in London, I'd start modeling in Japan, and then I went to back designing. I never left designing, just stayed with that.

Naomi Extra: The designing began what, like in the late '70s?

Douglas Says: When I took that men's tailoring course in high school, and then started making the clothes for the girls, for Rosalind.

Naomi Extra: Okay, wow.

Douglas Says: Mm-hmm.

Naomi Extra: Tell me about the period during which you were doing drag.

Douglas Says: [Sighs]

Naomi Extra: Was that in Newark?

Douglas Says: No.

Naomi Extra: Okay.

Douglas Says: Later it would be but not in the beginning because I didn't want anybody to know.

Naomi Extra: Mm-hmm.

Douglas Says: Well before, I say that I'm the original everything. I say that because well before—let me think. Before I started doing drag—yes. Before I started doing drag—okay. [Sighs] Now here it is, high school, right? I hated school, I always hated school. Despised it. Okay, anyway.

More than hating school, I hated gym. I would never take gym. I would always, "I got a headache. I got a stomachache. I don't feel well." From a little boy to 12th grade. That just lets you know that they wasn't gonna let me out of school because I didn't complete gym. Why do I need gym?

Don't I run around on my block on my own? What? I just didn't understand it. I didn't like it because of the bullying, and the guys who are so all into the basketball, the football, the baseball and I don't wanna play that.

You don't wanna pick me for your team. Anyway. I just pretended to be sick. Come into the year of the 12th grade, I couldn't graduate because I didn't have those credits. They wanted me to go to summer school for gym.

I'm not going to summer school for gym 'cause I wouldn't take gym all my—anyway. I had to get my GED. I went to Essex County College to get the GED. When I'm at Essex County, I had to write a book report. I went down to the bookstore to find somebody to write a book report on. I go. I'm looking, I'm looking, and I find this little paperback book.

I'm trying to find the easiest thing I can. I find this little paperback book. I read the back of it and it's talking about this woman and she—I'm reading and I'm like, "She's incredible. Oh, my God. Who is this? I wanna know more." I started to look in the archives and find all this stuff on Josephine Baker, which I had never heard of. Why is that—this is '79, and I've never heard of Josephine Baker.

I started reading everything about her and I become just caught up. Next thing I know, I wanna dance too. I always wanted to dance, but that wasn't really one of my specialties. Josephine Baker was—you're familiar with Josephine Baker, right?

Naomi Extra: Yes, mm-hmm.

Douglas Says: She went to Paris and she danced on the stage in the banana skirt and da da da. I wanted to dance now. That was my new passion. During that timeframe, like I said, New York was full of decadence, so they had burlesque theaters that you could dance at. I went to—they were always—they used to have magazines that would tell you where everything was. I found this one which was called The Gaiety.

I went to The Gaiety. I made an appointment to go to The Gaiety to dance. I wanted to audition. 'Cause I was living the life of Josephine Baker out. I went and I auditioned for—this is long before any male dancers. There was no such thing as male dancers, like now, it's saturated, you know what I mean? I went to try out for this place.

What happens is you come at a specific time, they have seven shows throughout the day, and you would be put on after their last dancer. They judge you, and if they like you, they book you, and then you get paid for the booking. I went out there and I gave them everything I had, I gave them the kitchen sink.

I flew everything into that dance, which was a mistake. Oh, my God. On top of that, the way that the theater was setup, 'cause it's a theater, like a movie theater, but the theater was setup like a runway, so I just lost my mind on this little runway.

[Laughter]

Douglas Says: You know how they say leave it on the stage? I left everything on the stage. Now with those places, it's a burlesque theater, you have to strip down to nothing, so in the end, you're just dancing with your shoes on, your boots on. I do that. Now, I wouldn't take gym for all those years because I refused to take off my clothes.

I wouldn't put on my gym shorts because I didn't wanna be in the locker room with the boys and get aroused looking at the boys so I wouldn't do this. Here it is, I've now decided that I'm gonna be a dancer and I'm up in here butt naked. I didn't get the booking. It was just way too much for them. I gave them just way, way too much.

[Laughter]

Douglas Says: I went to the next place. Not immediately, I had to consider what I had just done and go to the net place.

[Laughter]

Douglas Says: The next place was The Ramrod, which was on 49th Street, which was a block away from Better Days. It was on 49th Street off of Broadway. I went there. I danced for them, and I got the booking for a weekend. The projectionist, he's like, "Well what's your name? Your stage name?"

I'm like, "Mm." He's like, "I'm gonna name you Bubblin' Brown Sugar." "Okay, I'm Bubblin' Brown Sugar." I'm Bubblin' Brown Sugar. I'm the youngest there, 'cause at this point I'm barely 18, 19 or something like that.

I look like—I always looked way younger than I was, and at that time I had braces, so I even looked even younger, which only meant for those old men that was in there, yummy. Pedophile, whatever.

At that time, I was at Essex County College studying to get my GED. After school, I'd go there and dance, and study after I finished dancing.

First I was only booked for the weekend. If you're booked for the weekend, it's only Friday and Saturday, but they have extra shows that they put on Friday and Saturday, so you would be booked from 8:00 to midnight. I

did those shows. My first week there I met this guy. This guy came onto me, whatever. Older guy. Back then, oh my God. I may have been insecure but I was an insecure bitch. I really was. I had so much attitude that it was just like—I couldn't even stand me sometimes.

This guy comes onto me, and I didn't like him. Black guy, and he looked like George Jefferson. He really looked like George Jefferson. Okay, who is it? His name was Peter. He's trying to talk to me. This is after the show. I'm sitting in the audience, studying or whatever. He's trying to talk to me. I'm like, "Ugh. Just leave me alone. Go away." Or whatever. He leaves, and then come the second show, he comes back to see the second show.

I was impressed because you had to pay to get in again. He comes back. This time, 'cause the second—say 8:00 and the next show is 10:00, so now you're back at 10:00, so this time when you come back, I talk to you. You're talking to me so I talk to you. 'Cause I'm hungry now.

I ain't got no money and I'm hungry and you just offered to take me out to eat. Okay. I go out to eat with him. Then, he brings me back to the theater, and then I got like one more show, and I think the next show's midnight and then he offers to take me home afterwards, and I'm like PATH train...?

'Cause at this point I live on Avon Avenue. PATH train or Peter taking me home? I said, "Okay. Yeah." Everything my mother taught me went out the window with don't get into the car with strangers, don't talk to strangers. All of that stuff went out the window. Peter takes me home. Perfect gentleman, takes me home. He's there the next day at the theater. Sits out all my shows and everything.

Takes me home again. Peter becomes my boyfriend or whatever. I was so innocent. I didn't really even—I didn't even understand what was all going on around me. I can't even explain how innocent and insecure and all of that stuff that I was, but people who've been in my life for all those years, they could tell you and they'd be like, "No, this is not the same person that was there."

[Clears throat] Eventually, I got Lemwood to start dancing there, too, so I wouldn't be alone. [Laughter] Peter would take us both home, whatever. Oh. What I did like, after the show, there'd be like—there's seven of us, or if it's the weekend, it's like 14 of us in the show, so there's a little dressing room.

All the guys in the room. After every dancer does their set, we leave the stage, and then at the end of the show all the boys come out, line up across the stage. Now what's supposed to happen, it doesn't happen for me, but

what's supposed to happen for everybody is they're all supposed to come out displaying an erection. I'm not doing that.

I'm too princey, I'm not doing that. All the boys come out. Then afterwards, they just all disappear. I'm sitting there doing my homework and I don't know where they go. [Pause 01:16:46 – 01:16:51] It took a minute before I learned where they go. They all were prostituting. The people in the audience were old men who wanted to rent their services. Directly next door was a bathhouse, so they could just go right to the bathhouse and have them, come back and they got money. Anyway. That was all going on.

Naomi Extra: Right next door?

Douglas Says: Directly.

Naomi Extra: Was it—

Douglas Says: Directly.

Naomi Extra: Do you have to go out, or?

Douglas Says: Yeah, I don't even think that you had to go out. I think it was like you come up the stairway and it was door there, door there, but it was a long time. I don't even remember. I know it was Broadway Arms, that was the name of the place, and The Ramrod was the theater.

Naomi Extra: That's interesting.

Douglas Says: Yeah. The place is still there, but not as it was. It's something else now. Yeah.

Naomi Extra: How long did you work there?

Douglas Says: [Pause 01:17:51 – 01:17:57] [Laughter] The first I was booked for a weekend, and then I was booked for another weekend directly after that and then I was booked for a week. Then I went away, my first away trip. Peter took me to Washington, D.C. Then when I—he didn't want me to dance anymore, but you couldn't tell me to do.

Naomi Extra: Right. [Laughter]

Douglas Says: Plus, Peter was married with children. He had a wife and two children. He lived in Brooklyn. Whatever I wanted, he got for me. I said I needed

clothes, I said I needed clothes. He said, “Okay, Imma take you shopping.” He took me to Barney’s. He was like, “Get whatever you want.” I was looking at price tags.

Naomi Extra: Yikes.

Douglas Says: I was like, “This is ridiculous.” I said, “This cost too much. You could take me to Daffy’s 01:18:52, and I could get five pair of pants for what this costs.”

[Laughter]

Douglas Says: That was my mentality. I wanted some cowboy boots. He took me to this place called To Boot, which was on Lexington Avenue across the street from Bloomingdale’s, and he got me some turquoise snakeskin cowboy boots. Whatever I wanted, he got me. Yeah. Yeah.

Naomi Extra: Wow.

Douglas Says: It was cool. [Sighs] Then, so yeah, drag didn’t happen until—well, I danced there, and there was maybe like four or five other places that I danced. Sometimes I would pretty down, start doing something else like start doing makeup. Start doing—whatever it is, whatever other thing I start to creatively do.

Naomi Extra: That’s very creative.

Douglas Says: Then I would go back to dancing again. Yeah. It was—

Naomi Extra: How did you—did you just taught yourself to dance there...?

Douglas Says: Well, back then, we all danced. I was in a couple of dance contests and one or two, but there was this free—this whole free thing. We were just really free and young. We were really young. My dance on stage was nothing. My dance on stage was very limited. I didn’t do it. I could not be a dancer today, because now everybody does that little Jamaican whinin’ and stuff. I can’t do that. That alone would catapult you to—but no, I was very basic. I mean it was a very basic dance that I did, but.

Naomi Extra: What kinda music were you dancing to at that time?

Douglas Says: When I first did the Ramrod, I danced off Grace Jones. Slave-- Slave to the Rhythm. No, I’m sorry. Not Slave to the Rhythm. Excuse me. Do or Die. She had her first—this was her first album, Do or Die. Then on the backside it’s a cut called “Repent” [“Repentance”]—it’s a whole little series, so I danced off that. Then I later danced off a Patti Labelle song--

“Music is my life!” The last time I danced which was probably in ’95, I danced off of Groove Theory. You know Groove Theory?

Naomi Extra: Is it “Tell me if you want me?”

Douglas Says: That was my song.

Naomi Extra: Mm-hmm.

Douglas Says: That was my song. Yeah.

Naomi Extra: You could pick your songs when you went on stage? Okay.

Douglas Says: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm. Well, back then, they had costumes and all that stuff. You had a couple that had costumes. Some of those little white boys that were—‘cause it was so interesting, I would just quiz all the boys, because most of them were runaways, or they moved here from someplace else.

They didn’t have the story that I had. I’m still trying to get my degree or my certificate or whatever, and I go home to my family, and they don’t know I’m here and none of my friends know I’m here, and that’s why I got Lemwood to do it so that I wasn’t by myself. In New York in this gritty neighborhood, dancing naked on the stage and followed home by—yeah.

Naomi Extra: Did you only dance in the city?

Douglas Says: Mm-hmm.

Naomi Extra: Or were there places to dance in Newark?

Douglas Says: No, I would never dance in Newark. That one is—

Naomi Extra: Oh, too close to home.

Douglas Says: Yeah.

Naomi Extra: Okay.

Douglas Says: ‘Cause I was being DL, before DL.

Naomi Extra: [Laughter]

Douglas Says: I guess DL was always around. Even when I started doing drag, I would not do anything in Jersey 'cause I didn't want anybody to know. Eventually they—I mean I had to select people that I would let know, because my first show, I invited my friends to the show, and they came. My first drag show. It was a place in the village on the waterfront called Peter Rabbit's. It was a contest, like a gong show. You know what a gong show is, right?

Naomi Extra: When—wait, tell me.

Douglas Says: Well, it's a talent show, but—

Naomi Extra: When the ben—

Douglas Says: Right. Exactly.

Naomi Extra: Right. Yeah.

Douglas Says: [Laughter] I did this show, and I told Lemwood, I said—what happened first was that we were at Murphy's one night, and the DJ who was one of my boyfriends at the time, he brought over some acts from New York. From Peter Rabbit's. At that point, I hadn't been to Peter Rabbit's. He brought some acts over from Peter Rabbit's, and they did a show at Murphy's. My mouth was open, because one of them was a Shirley Bassey impersonator. You know Shirley Bassey?

Naomi Extra: No.

Douglas Says: I love Shirley Bassey. I love Shirley just as much as Josephine Baker.

Naomi Extra: Okay.

Douglas Says: She's a British artist, but she's what Barbara Streisand is to Great Britain, but she's black. She also was one of the theme song people who did James Bond. Like she did Diamonds are Forever and she did Goldfinger. Are you familiar with those two?

Naomi Extra: I don't really know that one, but okay.

Douglas Says: Those are James Bond movies. This person did Shirley Bassey and she was fabulous, and I wanted to go to that club. Well, the next day, after I saw this, I went and bought every Shirley Bassey album I could find, 'cause she was just—I loved her at that point. I was a bit extreme, I suppose.

Naomi Extra: [Laughter]

Douglas Says:

Yeah, I bought every album I could find. I still have them in the closet. Occasionally, I play them. Record player's in the room. Then I wanted to go to Peter Rabbit's to see the show. I went to Peter Rabbit's. I saw the show. Show was fabulous, and then I got the idea that I can do this.

From that point, I started listening to my Shirley Bassey albums and listening to albums and trying to see who I would do. What record I would do. I'm doing this, and at this point, nobody knows I'm doing this, and not even Lemwood yet. Until I get the song down pat. I get the song down pat and then I tell him, "I'm gonna do the show at Peter Rabbit's."

By this point, it's probably like '83. He said, "No, you ain't." I said, "Yeah, I'm gonna do it. Imma do it." "No, you are not gonna do that. If you go, then I'm gonna go with you." "Okay, okay." This one night, I decided to go. It was pouring down rain. It was a rainstorm. It was pouring down rain. We met, went to Peter Rabbit's. It was raining so hard we didn't think anybody was gonna come 'cause it was just raining so hard.

Eventually it stopped raining and people came. I went there, and introduced myself, signed up for the thing, went into the bathroom, that was the dressing room, and by that point I'm doing makeup. I started doing makeup.

I got my makeup case and I've been there doing makeup. All of this was in my book also. I'm doing makeup, and the other participants start to come, and nobody had two nickels to rub together. None of the other people.

They're borrowin' this and borrowin' that from each other, and I got everything. I've had my wig cut like Gigi. Gigi cut a wig for me. She actually cut it from my show, I gave a fashion show. My first fashion show, which was in '83, which was downtown Newark at the Hilton Gateway.

It was called Legends. Me and Rosemary did it together. I opened with all these girls in different wigs and duress and I had Gigi cut all these blunt cut wigs, so I wore this wig in this function and I did these dresses, 'cause I just graduated design school in '83, so I wore one of the dresses that I done for that. I actually did a cut by Marilyn Monroe, a song by Marilyn Monroe which I loved at the time, it's called "After You Get What You Want, You Don't Want It".

Naomi Extra:

I don't know that one.

Douglas Says:

I know.

[Laughter]

Douglas Says: I did that. You know my friends came, everybody came, so I did the show. Again, this is a competition, and I actually won.

Naomi Extra: Oh, wow.

Douglas Says: I got—winning was cash and a booking for the next week, and during that time also there was a show that used to come on TV called Star Search. Familiar with it?

Naomi Extra: Mm-hmm.

Douglas Says: During that time, they had a model category, and there was a model called Tracy Ross, that she was winning every week. She had a bob cut. Everybody called me Tracy Ross because of this cut. Also I was something that they had never seen before, because of my modeling history, my design history, my makeup history, my being able to teach girls how to model. All of that went into stage, and went on-stage. They were doing whatever they were doing, but I was a class act. I won. That was it.

Naomi Extra: Wow.

Douglas Says: Well, actually, Imma show you a picture of—

Naomi Extra: Oh, ow. Oh.

Douglas Says: Mm-hmm. [inaudible 01:29:09] [Pause 01:29:09 – 01:29:21]

Naomi Extra: Okay. I wanna ask you—well first, when did you stop doing drag?

Douglas Says: The last show that I did was actually for Rutgers University, 2005.

Naomi Extra: Oh. Oh, really?

Douglas Says: Yeah, in a fair that was given there.

Naomi Extra: Okay.

Douglas Says: With Empress 01:29:40. Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm.

Naomi Extra: Oh, okay. All right. 2005. Were you involved in the—were you active on the ballroom scene, and if so how?

Douglas Says: Not really active. I participated a teeny, teeny bit. For awhile there, I ran around with Chipper, Chipper Pendaves 01:30:04, and we did a couple of balls, and then I was with the House of Richards for five minutes, which

Toragi Richards 01:30:15 was the mother and Richard Richards 01:30:17 was the father.

I walked Butch Queen in drag and I walked on runway, but the Ballroom has never been my scene. I never understood their politics. I think it's a lot of unfair favoritism that goes on there, and it's so odd because now I have—maybe two years ago, I got an icon ring from one of the balls, now I'm considered an icon and I'm considered a legend and this is ridiculous to me, because I really have not even participated in the balls.

What they say is during—there was a time period, like the '90s, where all of the fem-queens in New York were—all of the top fem queens like Danielle Revlon 01:31:14, Octavia 01:31:15, St. Laurent 01:31:16, Porsche 01:31:17, Tracy Africa 01:31:19, Angenay 01:31:24, Tenay 01:31:25.

All of those girls who were legendary were wearing my clothes to the balls, so they were buying things from me and they were wearing them to the ball. [Clears throat] Because of that, and they won their categories.

I've always done what I do. I'm classic, and—they brought a lot of attention to me, and because they were the girls of the moment, all the other girls wanted to wear me or find out how to get me. That's how I'm a part of the problem.

It's amazing because knowing that something that you did early on, it's something that you're famous for later. I mean, I don't know. That's interesting to me, and when I did the Luna, it was basically around that whole thing. He wanted to talk to me about that, so I reveal a lot in the Luna show talking about The Ballroom, those girls, and my clothes, and my books.

Naomi Extra: We'll view the show on YouTube, right?

Douglas Says: Yes. Yes.

Naomi Extra: I'm just—okay. [Laughter]

Douglas Says: Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah. It's on YouTube. Yeah, the Luna show. Yeah, that was a great honor. That was really cool to do. Yeah.

Naomi Extra: How did you meet some of the folks that you mentioned that were in some of the photos like Empress and Tracy Africa?

Douglas Says: [Sighs] Wow. Both names—both of those people are like family. My best friend Tommy MacDonald, who I've known ever since Rosemary.

I've known Tommy since the '70s, Tommy—I met Empress through Tommy, because Empress and Tommy got married. They got married. That's how I met Empress. Tracy, I met Tracy in the '70s as well, the late '70s, via fashion shows. Somehow I passed—crossed backstage at the fashion show.

She wanted to borrow one of my outfits. I let her borrow it. She kept it for far too long. Then finally when I got it back from her, I asked her to do a photo shoot in the outfit, and she did. That wasn't when we became friends, 'cause that's like late '70s, like '79. We didn't become friends until '87, around that time.

Her sister saw me at Murphy's one night and said, "You should go see Trace. You should go hang out with her, 'cause she doesn't go out. She doesn't do anything. You should stop by and see her." I didn't really even know her like that, like I didn't know Tracy or her sister like that, but I was like, "Okay."

Went by to see her and she was a joy. She—this was behind the mask. She had such a personality and she was so funny, and we just got along, and from that point to today, we've been friends.

I mean, of course, a lot has transpired between that like she became my niece's godmother, when my niece was born and it was like my niece picked her. Really into it, my niece picked her godmother and godfather. My niece is amazing.

She picked both of them, and me and Tracy are inseparable. She goes nowhere without me. I go with her to all the balls, that's another situation, the balls. I only go because I'm going with her. Other than that, I would never go. I would never pay to go, but yeah.

Naomi Extra: You mentioned earlier that things have changed in terms of spaces, places to go? Like nightlife. Can you say a little bit more about that, specifically in Newark? Like what's the change that you see?

Douglas Says: Well the change is that we have no place to go. There's no gay spots. None, absolutely none. Once Murphy's left, that was the last of it, and Murphy's had been around for about 20, 30 years.

I remember when I turned 18, Tommy took me to Murphy's for my first drink, and [Laughter] he left me there for a few minutes. He went someplace, I don't know where he disappeared to, but when he came back I was completely falling off the barstool because men were buying me drinks and sending me drinks, and he was like, "Oh, my God. How am I gonna bring you back to your mother, and you're—you know."

Yeah, but now there's no such place. No place in New York, no place in Jersey. It's like we've been shunned, kicked—it's like we've been pushed back in the closet. I mean of course time has changed and now life is lived on the internet, in which it's probably—not even probably, it's not safe.

Because people hide behind the internet, and you don't see their real face or who somebody really is. At least across a bar, across a drink, you see who they are. Yeah.

Naomi Extra: Why do you think that is? That that changed happened. Did you notice it happening at one particular point, or was it like a gradual?

Douglas Says: It's—wow. I guess it was gradual, but it kinda came down like a sledgehammer, because at one point—I mean, change is gonna happen. Everything must change as the song says. I saw the Village go from one extreme to the other, where it was like a free-for-all to now it's like babies being pushed in a carriage.

It's just become whitewashed, and the same thing with 42nd Street, where 42nd Street at one time—I mean, 42nd Street had really died. It was sleazy. It was sleazeville. Now it's the other extreme. It's like—

Naomi Extra: [Laughter] You said Disneyland.

Douglas Says: Exactly. Thank you, I couldn't find it.

Naomi Extra: [Laughter] Yes.

Douglas Says: It's like Disney now. I don't even walk through 42nd Street. It's so crowded. I don't even walk across 42nd Street anymore. It's crazy. There was a time where you would not—especially there.

I remember one time, we were on a train and somebody says—I think it was a joke or something. It was a joke in a movie. Somebody—we were—they were sittin' on the train, and they said, "You wanna see me do a magic trick? I'm gonna make all the white people disappear at 96th Street." At 96th Street, everybody got off the train. Only the black people were on there. Now, forget it. They ride all the way up to Harlem, and go into their places in Harlem. It's—

Naomi Extra: Gentrification, too.

Douglas Says: Everything has been gentrified. Everywhere and everything, and they really behave not left any room for us, they're just pushing us to the deepest, darkest, recessions of wherever. Like in New York, everybody's being

pushed to The Bronx. In Jersey, everybody's pushed to—from Newark to East Orange. East Orange used to be really a nice place. It was beautiful spaces, but now, it's scary.

Naomi Extra: When did you leave Newark?

Douglas Says: I moved out of my mom's place in the beginning of 1990. I moved to Jersey City, and I stayed in Jersey City for about a year and a half and then I moved to Manhattan, and I stayed on East 12th Street for about nine months, and then I moved here. I've been in this apartment for like 22 years.

Naomi Extra: Oh, wow.

Douglas Says: Yeah.

Naomi Extra: Okay.

Douglas Says: Mm-hmm.

Naomi Extra: My last question is we didn't talk a lot about how you, or the progression of different fashion shows that you've done, and then when I spoke to you briefly on the phone last week about pop-up shops, you mentioned that. Can you just talk about where that's been happening, and just over the period of time?

Douglas Says: Well, with the pop-up shop, that's new. That's Melvin Syke's 01:40:18 invention. [Clears throat] Which is amazing, because it really gives me an opportunity to put my clothes at the forefront, 'cause I'm not in any stores. For the most part, everything is custom-made, so I have a group of women that support me, so to speak. Buy my clothes.

It's great, finding new customers and new customers finding you at the pop-up, and some of them take my card, call me or email me, and they're wanna be—kept abreast of what I'm doing new, so that's great. Other than that, I do an annual show, which is at the Newark Public Library.

The end of March, the last Saturday of March I usually do my show. I've been doing that since 2012. I actually first did my first show at the library in '99, but I come back and forth, so since 2012, it's been every year. It's usually a great turnout. Yeah. Just tryin' to make it do what it do, for as long as I'm here.

Naomi Extra: [Laughter] Well, thank you so much.

Douglas Says: You're so very welcome.

Naomi Extra: Just to close, it's March 31st, this is Naomi Extra here with Douglas Says in Jersey City for the Queer Newark Oral History Project.

[End of Audio]