

Queer Newark Oral History Project

Interviewee: Anita Dickens

Interviewer: Kristyn Scorsone

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Location: Rutgers-Newark

Kristyn Scorsone: Okay. Today is December 8<sup>th</sup>, 2016. My name is Kristyn Scorsone, and I am interviewing Anita Dickens at Rutgers Newark for the Queer Newark Oral History Project. Thank you for doing this.

Anita Dickens: You're welcome.

Kristyn Scorsone: So just to start off, when and where were you born?

Anita Dickens: So, I was born January 2<sup>nd</sup>. Do you want the year?

Kristyn Scorsone: Yeah.

Anita Dickens: Sure. 1972.

Kristyn Scorsone: Ok, where were you born?

Anita Dickens: I was born in Newark.

Kristyn Scorsone: Ok, who raised you?

Anita Dickens: So, I was raised by a single parent, my mother, and I grew up in a household with four siblings. Two sisters, two brothers. So, I could say my mom and my two older sisters pretty much raised me.

Kristyn Scorsone: Are you the youngest or middle?

Anita Dickens: I am the second youngest.

Kristyn Scorsone: And did you grow up in one place, or household, or did you guys move around?

Anita Dickens: We moved around. We started out in North Carolina, ended up in Newark. Actually Newark and then East Orange, Orange and then back to Newark.

Kristyn Scorsone: Ok, what kind of child were you, like how would you describe yourself?

Anita Dickens: Oh, very tomboyish. Yea, athletic, one of the things I appreciate my mom growing up is she always kept me into activities, so soccer was one of them and then volleyball and then basketball didn't come until later.

Kristyn Scorsone: Did you go to public school?

Anita Dickens: I did go to public school.

Kristyn Scorsone: What are some of your earliest memories?

Anita Dickens: Earliest memories, I have to say, starting from the South. Growing up in a household with the cousins, grandmother. It was an experience. It was dark. You know, it was pretty much a foundation of how family can stick together and raise kids in a small environment, but it was more loving in that type of environment.

Kristyn Scorsone: You said, you used the word dark, why?

Anita Dickens: Well, dark because at night you couldn't see anything. But mostly, it was an experience for me. This is where my sister, both my sisters were working on the truck, where they were delivering, or I guess handling, like vegetables, fruits and vegetables, and they used to ride by the house and everything and we used to see them. So you know, we had access to fruit trees, livestock. That was, to me, a good experience, because it was something that, you know, I was growing up and here these people, my family, taking care of me in this form.

Kristyn Scorsone: What brought you guys to move down there?

Anita Dickens: My mom wanted to be more in the city, lookin' for work. So this is why we came back this way.

Kristyn Scorsone: How old were you when you moved to Newark?

Anita Dickens: I would say about 7.

Kristyn Scorsone: Do you remember coming from a rural area to Newark, how did you feel?

Anita Dickens: It was more fast pace, I had to get, or adjust to it, but it wasn't challenging, remembering back then. Again, mom having or family, being there, it wasn't so much as the outside that was, or the environment that made an impact, it was just pretty much trying to adjust to that environment.

Kristyn Scorsone: Which schools did you go to in Newark?

- Anita Dickens: So the schools that I remember were in Orange. Lincoln then Newark. I'm sorry, in Orange, Oakwood Avenue.
- Kristyn Scorsone: Is that grammar school?
- Anita Dickens: It's grammar school. Oakwood Av. Elementary and then it was from there, Camden Street School, again elementary. High school, West Side High, graduated from there. Take it back, 13<sup>th</sup> Avenue School, elementary school and then West Side High.
- Kristyn Scorsone: Is West Side in Newark?
- Anita Dickens: Yeah, West Side is Newark.
- Kristyn Scorsone: Did you go to college as well?
- Anita Dickens: Yes, I did, I attended Essex County College, that gave me my first start to like get myself together, and I learned a lot from there. I have to say that that was a foundation for me as far as education, after grammar school [00:05:00] and then I traveled for, you know, for basketball. I did, let me just go back. I did, right after high school I went to a small two year college, called Allen County Community College and I was in Iola, Kansas. Culture shock for me, but the experience was wonderful. I came home within a year, but it was, I guess, getting away from the city is what really opened my eyes to exploring.
- Kristyn Scorsone: Why did you choose there?
- Anita Dickens: Well they chose me, coming out of high school, playing basketball, so you know, I had to get my grades together. So the **JuCo [Junior College? 00:05:43]** what we used to call it. They accepted me there.
- Kristyn Scorsone: What did you study?
- Anita Dickens: So I studied psychology there. I didn't, couldn't get with it. But you know, at Essex County I studied Liberal Arts so it gave me a combination of everything. Social Sciences, like I have to say, pretty much laid out my life. Understanding just humanity, just understanding how to be and acceptance.

- Kristyn Scorsone: Why is that important to you?
- Anita Dickens: So, I mean it's important because, at that time, I'm a lesbian woman. So, it wasn't about fitting in, it was just understanding who I was. And then before that it's growing up, understanding everything that I'm feeling. So it's important, it was very important to me at that time. So, I can definitely say, you know with Essex County, taking those courses, sociology courses kind of like paved the way for my mindset of acceptance.
- Kristyn Scorsone: Was there a particular class that was impactful to you?
- Anita Dickens: Human Sexuality.
- Kristyn Scorsone: How so?
- Anita Dickens: It kinda explored how sexuality is, I guess would be something we identify. So, I mean at times our discussion kinda like got **[Inaudible 00:07:21]** else, [laughs] but it was an experience. And just to hear different people's opinions of what sexuality was to them, and then you know I ended up at Rutgers. Graduated from New Jersey City University, and then you know, living in Newark, working in Newark, I said yes, I wanna go to Rutgers. And so I made it happen, I studied public affairs and administration. So School of SPA. **[00:07:49]**. So, I am Rutgers alum. And you know, it was downhill or uphill after that.
- Kristyn Scorsone: So that was your B.A.?
- Anita Dickens: Oh, NJCU was for my B.A. I studied Criminal Justice, and then I transferred to Rutgers right after.
- Kristyn Scorsone: So you said you'd describe your identity as a lesbian, how did you first become aware of that aspect of yourself?
- Anita Dickens: That's funny. Growing up in the household, you know my family, knew always, probably knew that I was a little tomboyish. Never acted out on anything, you know just accepting this thing, but there was this group called Vanity Six, and then—
- Kristyn Scorsone: Like a music group?

Anita Dickens: Yeah, it's a music group. I think they were managed by Prince. So, there was this one lady called Vanity that just grabbed me, so I had this poster up [laughs]. And it was like one of the best posters ever! [laughs] So yeah, that was, that's when I knew. Cuz it was a strong attraction.

Kristyn Scorsone: Did you say how old you were?

Anita Dickens: I think I was maybe about pshhh, maybe 11 or 12.

Kristyn Scorsone: How did you first learn about the existence of other LGBTQ people?

Anita Dickens: The existence was just being in the neighborhood and seeing women's mannerisms, being very masculine. So, I didn't understand it, but I kinda like was drawn to it. But in the way of just you know what, I had this walk about myself or I'm a little different. So you know, looking at this person as an adult made me feel a little more secure of who I was and you know understood why certain things are, I guess, at that time. **[00:10:00]**

Kristyn Scorsone: How did other people react to that, like was it not a big deal?

Anita Dickens: My family, you know, I didn't come out to them, per se, it was not until maybe high school or college, when my sister recognized an ex-girlfriend of mine, so she said to me, "You know she's a lesbian," and then there was this family discussion about questioning. Not so much as, am I a lesbian, but do you know that the woman that you're hanging out with is a lesbian? So my family took it, as a disappointment, I can't say that they knew even though I was, you know, very athletic, tomboyish, you know growing up, wearing a dress, whatever the case may be, but these things end up ruined. But you know, my family came around, they came around.

Kristyn Scorsone: Are you—has religion played a role in your life at all?

Anita Dickens: I mean, I've gone to church, I believe in a higher power. Do I necessarily identify with Christianity? Nah. Do I believe everything in the bible? No. I would say I'm more spiritual than

anything, and what I mean by spiritual is understanding what you put out in the universe comes back, so I guess that would be science. So, it's accepting more so of not so much the religious aspect, but the spiritual. So yeah, growing up in church, yes I loved the gospel. I love when the word is preached, but then there are other things that was just a major distraction. So that was when, you know, the preacher's talkin' about things that's happening in your household per se. So, you know watching family members of the church get the Holy Ghost, and this was the younger years. So it moved me. I didn't quite understand it, but it was moving. It was Baptist church.

Kristyn Scorsone: Your family was involved in it?

Anita Dickens: My family was definitely involved. It wasn't until later I explored Unity Fellowship, in New Brunswick. Actually, my apologies, the first one I went to, and this was LGBT non-denominational, this was in Brooklyn. So my first experience in that environment was in Brooklyn. I believe I was about 22, 23 years old. That was just on another level of support for me.

Kristyn Scorsone: How did you get there? How did you find out about it?

Anita Dickens: A friend. A friend of mine who I was staying with at the time, who was already involved. So I tagged along, loved it. And became a member of Unity Fellowship New Brunswick, later on, because I guess their chapter started in Brooklyn and then there was a pastor that I heard, Reverend Kevin Taylor. [00:13:40]. I heard him speak, at I believe, one of the conventions, or so, but I could be wrong, if it was a convention or not, but I heard him speak and he said he was gonna be opening up something in New Brunswick. So there I became a member of Unity Fellowship, New Brunswick.

Kristyn Scorsone: Did you like that chapter, that area, that um, church too?

Anita Dickens: I did. I did, it was teaching, it was again, when you're going through different phases in your life you come across people, you

learn different things, there's a different understanding of who you are, what you're supposed to do, what your purpose is, so for that, again it laid a foundation for me. It kinda like—it was a path that I was on, where I accepted that type of knowledge, or let's say, teaching to enter.

Kristyn Scorsone: Did you start going to the one in Newark?

Anita Dickens: **[00:15:00]** I think I went a couple of times, but I kinda like got away. Excuse me. [Takes a sip of water] I did.

Kristyn Scorsone: And, so going back to your childhood for a second, like were there any challenges you faced in childhood, and how did you manage those challenges?

Anita Dickens: The challenges that I came across was basically, you know, growing up poor. Again, single parent, four siblings, five, you know, children in the household. I watched my mom struggle, but I didn't witness her necessarily lose her mind raising us, so it was challenging for me, when it came to education. So, this was grade school. It was scary for me, and I don't know why, but I love the arts, so I think that was one of my best classes and physical education. So, I think, for the most part, you know, just getting the extra help, having the support from my family, because I did have an older sister who actually, you know. My sisters were already in high school. So they were helping me along the way. So that was one of the challenges. Identifying myself, or just say, ok, what's going on with me because I'm attracted to women? That wasn't so much of a challenge until I got older. When, starting, you know, started wearing clothes that's meant for men, or whatever, and you know, questions, "Okay, well, why is she wearing this?" Like I said, I wore the dresses, but I just didn't want to stay there. I wanted to be more comfortable. People from my younger years, they knew, pretty much, I was either gay or they just knew that I was very tomboyish.

Kristyn Scorsone: How would you characterize your gender identity?

Anita Dickens: Female. I would say. Very laid back though. Welcoming. Helpful, I guess. Yeah.

Kristyn Scorsone: What did your mom do for a living?

Anita Dickens: My mom had an 11<sup>th</sup> grade education, and so, she did mostly like, cleaning jobs. Again, raising 5 kids. That was something that, you know, I watched her be at her strongest point. And what I mean by that, is having lack of education, or graduating from high school, she managed to raise 5 kids, you know. Two of us went to college. And then, my oldest sister became a Newark employee, you know, for the city of Newark, and my oldest brother, he—I'm not sure what he did, but it wasn't, he eventually moved to Atlanta and got married, you know. My youngest brother is still trying to find his way through, and then me, graduating, getting my master's. I'm the oldest, the only one, that actually went that far. There were a lot of challenges, but I feel like, when I reflect back on my mom's strength and what she did for us, it—I was determined to make a better life for myself. I guess playing basketball in high school they thought I was gonna be the one to bring that money, but you know there was an incident with my knee, so it kinda like yeah, took me out of the game. But I still played and got offers or whatever. It pretty much carried me through maybe first two or three years of college with a full scholarship. So, took advantage of it, but again not having that discipline set me back as well. But—

Kristyn Scorsone: Like when you couldn't play anymore?

Anita Dickens: Couldn't play anymore. Again from grade school, there was never a time where I could recall sitting at the table doing homework. **[00:20:00]** Not really sure where I lost, or where the disconnect was as far as the discipline. I mean, but I knew that it effected my college performance, but I didn't give up. I was so determined, so yeah.



- Kristyn Scorsone: What position did you play in basketball?
- Anita Dickens: I played center in high school and small forward in college.
- Kristyn Scorsone: What did you love about basketball?
- Anita Dickens: Oh, just team spirit, and traveling, and getting to know different, you know, the teammates. It was beautiful. I was like one of the top scorers so I was getting special treatment, which I really feel like it didn't help me because, as a key player, maybe I shouldn't say this, but I'm gonna say it, you know, your grades was everything so if I wasn't doing so well, then I got a passing grade regardless. Those are some things that pretty much, you know, crippled me as I've gotten older as far as education. I look back on all of those things and say, "Wow, I came a long way, but I don't know."
- Kristyn Scorsone: Would you have done it differently?
- Anita Dickens: Absolutely.
- Kristyn Scorsone: What would you have changed?
- Anita Dickens: Probably—I can't say basketball because I had so much fun, and I loved the sport. I would say just really would've been more disciplined in getting the work done, and getting the help if I needed it, like the tutoring or stuff like that.
- Kristyn Scorsone: What do you like best about living in Newark?
- Anita Dickens: What I like best about living in Newark is, seeing where it was, and seeing what it is about to become. I am, again, a Newarker, born and raised. My partner and I have a business in Newark. And so yeah, I like so much what's going on, because we fit in so much, as far as, on a business aspect of it. So yeah.
- Kristyn Scorsone: And you're married to your partner in the business, right?
- Anita Dickens: I am, yes.
- Kristyn Scorsone: How did you guys meet?
- Anita Dickens: So we met, years ago, years ago. She and I were both applying for a position at Newark airport. So not the same position. She was

going for more of the ticket agent at the airport and I was going for ramp agent. And we ended up on the same bus or shuttle to get to and from the interview site, and she had these cards, where it had every state or airport code on them, and she shared them with me. I didn't know that she was from Newark, but going out, let's say, social gatherings, I see her, and we end up friends. I used to look for her, we'd have lunch and things like that, and this is strictly platonic at this time. So, we met at the airport. [laughs]

Kristyn Scorsone: That's sweet. When did it become a relationship?

Anita Dickens: I would say, a relationship? I would say, right away maybe. Because again, we were there, we were getting to know each other, and then I guess, one thing led to another. It wasn't until maybe a year later or maybe two years later we actually made it semi-official.

Kristyn Scorsone: Did you get legally married?

Anita Dickens: We did.

Kristyn Scorsone: What was that like?

Anita Dickens: That was a beautiful time. That was a beautiful day for us.

Kristyn Scorsone: When was it?

Anita Dickens: This was May 12<sup>th</sup>. Ok, so May 12<sup>th</sup> we had a ceremony. In Punta Cana. So this was just a ceremony, but not until, when things [00:25:00] became legal for all states. We did that right away. So I can't give you a date, sorry. I can't give you a date, but we definitely have our—we were married as soon as we got the word that we could.

Kristyn Scorsone: What was the ceremony like?

Anita Dickens: The ceremony was beautiful. Again, it was in Dominican Republic and we had about 30 plus people that was there with us. So it was nerve-wrecking, but it was, the whole ceremony of the washing of the hands, it was a symbol, I would say our love for each other. It was beautiful. It was in a beautiful place. We had people there

who, you know, cared about us. So to share that. My family, I would say, my niece came out, my mom couldn't make it. Her mother was there, her brother was there, then we had friends. It was a wonderful time, we had a butler. So we were there for like a week or so, we can have—so it was just fun having friends and family there all at once, having a great time.

Kristyn Scorsone: So when you say you see her around in Newark, is there like, did you ever go to gay bars here or anything?

Anita Dickens: Yeah, I did. It was I believe, Shadows. Shadows on Central Avenue at the time. I don't actually know the year, I really don't, I'm drawing a blank right now. But yeah, I saw her there and I guess, I found her very attractive, but I didn't pursue her. I just knew her from working with her. You know, at the airport. But yeah, I used to see her around different gay bars. Shadows, Murphy's, these were wonderful gay bars in Newark.

Kristyn Scorsone: What is Shadows? I haven't heard of that one.

Anita Dickens: So Shadows, again was a city bar or lounge. Nice, spacious, it was pretty cool.

Kristyn Scorsone: What kind of music?

Anita Dickens: So house music for sure. House music for sure, that's pretty much it.

Kristyn Scorsone: Did people dance there?

Anita Dickens: Yeah, a lot of people danced. A lot of people danced, socialized, had some drinks or two, conversated and laughed. It was a good time.

Kristyn Scorsone: What was the crowd like?

Anita Dickens: So, the crowd was mixed, men and women. Young, old, I don't know how young but yeah. It was definitely a mixed crowd. It was really a great experience.

Kristyn Scorsone: What's your perspective on Newark's connection or relationship to other places around here, or I guess how does it compare to like the

Oranges, or you know, Belleville, or you know Harrison, and all these other places?

Anita Dickens: So the connection is that there's always urban. An urban community, poverty. So, that will always be a connection. The fact that they are like 15 minutes apart, from getting, to and from. You know some of the people that I grew up with in Orange, I see in Newark. They say I still look the same, I tell them the same. You know, it's just good running into those people between those different towns. So the connection is definitely just having that urban type, I guess, feel.

Kristyn Scorsone: Besides like bars and clubs are there any other places in Newark that you associate with queer people?

Anita Dickens: I did, at the Center.

Kristyn Scorsone: The LGBTQ Center?

Anita Dickens: Yes. I used to serve on the board for Newark Gay Pride. Really that's it, and then you know just us being friends, we would go over to each others' homes. And just you know have fun, as far as, play games and things like that.

Kristyn Scorsone: What are the responsibilities of being on the board for the Newark Gay Pride?

Anita Dickens: So, [00:30:00] volunteer. I started out as a volunteer there and then moved in towards maybe like a little bit of the fundraising part. That was a challenging experience for me, because I haven't done fundraising, but of course, you know, taken public administration courses here. It tapped into it a little bit, but again you know it wasn't actually me, you know, starting a fundraiser. But that's the role that I played. I was on there for about maybe 2 or 3 years. I volunteered 2 years, then finally got asked to be a part of the board.

Kristyn Scorsone: So you touched upon this a little bit before, the revitalization of Newark, so you see it as a good thing. How do you feel about downtown?

Anita Dickens: Downtown is beautiful. It's historic. You know just coming back from the riots. Obviously, that was a, you know, turning point, you know, for African Americans there. There was a lot, that, you know, we struggled with. Right now there are still a lot of property that is abandoned. Inner Newark is still the way, is ruins, honestly. But the revitalization of downtown Newark, if that's what starts bringing in more people, or more income, to fix up around and inner Newark, I'm all for it. The thing is, what's coming in? What is available for the people of Newark? That's important. So the city of Newark, because I'm in the position that I'm in today, they've allowed me to open my doors to teenagers for the summer.

Kristyn Scorsone: You mean like your house, your home?

Anita Dickens: No, no, no, for the business. So they give us a couple of workers for the summer. The first year doing it, it was cool. It was a learning experience. I enjoyed it because I grew up working the summer. Summer Youth [00:32:44] employment, training program at the time. So the experience was really really good. So, again, the revitalization if it brings in money to help inner Newark, absolutely I'm for it.

Kristyn Scorsone: What do you think of the stigma about Newark that outsiders have?

Anita Dickens: I don't blame them. I mean Newark has some deep rooted issues. Again, but you know, it comes down to poverty. How do you attack that? What are people to do? Although yes I'm a product of Newark, I made some decisions. I can't say that for the people that are still here struggling, you know, deciding to do or stay, not explore. I don't, you know, it's troubling, but I understand, they're stuck. Services are out there, but I can't say that they're necessarily

effective. But it does take the person, a person to make up their mind, to make the decision to want to change.

Kristyn Scorsone: When did you open your business?

Anita Dickens: So, me and my partner opened our business back in 2011. It started out has her business, Off the Hanger, and not until 2013, I wanted to add something more, which is a men's collection or men's fashion, shopping experience, which is A Girl and Guy Thing. So, although it's men's fashion, A Girl and Guy Thing was the name. So between 2011 and 2013 we evolved to this, to have this shopping experience for both male and female.

Kristyn Scorsone: Do you consider yourself an entrepreneur?

Anita Dickens: Yes.

Kristyn Scorsone: Was anyone in your family, like growing up, an entrepreneur?

Anita Dickens: No. No, but my older sister had a skill of making clothes. So, I grew up in a household with a seamstress. In high school, she made my prom dress. So that was the last time I was like, in a dress, but you know, she made this thing. They wanted to see me in it, and I wore it. It was beautiful. So, but she didn't, you know, make her, start a business or anything, but whatever, she had a skill, that she could have easily become an entrepreneur.

Kristyn Scorsone: Did she ever teach you anything, like how to sew?

Anita Dickens: No, and now I kick myself today because I didn't sit there learning. Imagine, [laughs] like all the things I could be making now. And that's actually a passion of mine, if I could find a seam, a tailor, yeah, I have the vision. So, yeah, I consider myself a designer as well. So yeah, when I have something in mind and take it to, let's say Marco Hall, my plan is to work with him.

Kristyn Scorsone: Who is Marco Hall?

Anita Dickens: Marco Hall is a designer in Newark. He's on Halsey Street. He's the one that walks around with the dog, sometimes the dog matches, outfit matches what's in his window display.

- Kristyn Scorsone: That's the dog that's in the window?
- Anita Dickens: Yes.
- Kristyn Scorsone: Oh, I love that dog!
- Anita Dickens: Yeah, there are some plans of connecting with him to actually bring the brand out more. And the brand is Off the Hanger, the brand is A Girl and Guy Thing.
- Kristyn Scorsone: That's really cool.
- Anita Dickens: Thank you.
- Kristyn Scorsone: So, what goes into starting a business like that? Like what is sort of the, I don't know, like the little details that people don't realize?
- Anita Dickens: So the details for me, it was first, visioning it, wanting to—that vision turns into speaking on it, and then it comes to connecting with the right people to help you bring that vision. So a lot of preparation is reading it on how to become an entrepreneur. Taking a couple of business classes—writing things down, although I was not a fan of that. I actually took a business course a while ago, at Rutgers. And earned a certificate. So that was pretty cool. It opened my eyes up to entrepreneurs in Newark, and I can't give you a year, but I know it was at least, maybe 10, 12 years ago. So definitely the preparation, and for me, the vision. It starts with the vision, and planning.
- Kristyn Scorsone: Do you need like start-up capital, or how do you get a permit?
- Anita Dickens: So, the permit part of it, we applied, we submitted an application. All of that, registering the name, had to make sure that the name was available. So we went through the city of Newark first to, you know, earn, or gain a certificate of formation of the business name, and then going through the state of New Jersey to register, which they didn't provide you with the EIN number. That's a business ID number. From there, you pretty much take off. It's like getting wings and you fly, just soaring.
- Kristyn Scorsone: Do you rent the space or do you own it?

- Anita Dickens: I rent the space.
- Kristyn Scorsone: How would you describe the inside of your store, what does it look like?
- Anita Dickens: It looks like—it's colorful. It looks like it belongs in Brooklyn. So, yeah, it's colorful. It's urban. And what I mean by urban, it has an urban feel to it because of the items that are in there. Me and my partner actually designed it. **[00:40:00]** With the help of some contractors to lay down the floors and, you know, the lighting and everything. But we pretty much designed, color schemed, and everything. It's not rainbow colored, but it's definitely colors that she and I thought would bring out the store. So when you go in it, it will, to me, blow your mind, cuz when I say that we worked to the day of the ribbon cutting with the mayor, the morning of. So, it's a beautiful store.
- Kristyn Scorsone: What was that day like with the ribbon cutting?
- Anita Dickens: It was exciting. It was exciting, I was nervous, I guess she was nervous. But people knew that we were serious about opening up a business in Newark. I mean there were some little pop-ups that we did, you know, to let people know that we're coming. But when we actually finished it, it was like, wow, and that's what we got, the day of, was like "wow, you guys really did a great job in here."
- Kristyn Scorsone: What's a pop-up?
- Anita Dickens: A pop-up is something that started in Newark. Pop-up shops. So it's pretty much vendors at certain locations, showcasing what they have, clothing, accessories, anything pretty much what an entrepreneur can offer you. So soaps, scrubs, all of that. So, we were asked to be a part of it. And we started out with coats, winter coats. And it was very successful.
- Kristyn Scorsone: Is that how, is that a good way to, I guess is that a good way to get a clientele or like a following?



Anita Dickens: Absolutely, and you know through social media we put it out there, and then locals actually came through. So, our clientele has definitely grew over the years.

Kristyn Scorsone: The one thing about the inside of your store that really struck me was the attention to detail. Like everything in there is definitely like carefully chosen it seems, and really cool.

Anita Dickens: Yeah. Everything in there was handpicked by us. And it's funny that you mention that, because we hear that a lot. There was this one gentlemen who I remember coming in the store. And he watched, he saw how the pants, how the creases in the pants were lined up and he said "Well this is quality. This is, I like this store. How the creases are together, I love it, I'll be back." Haven't seen him yet, but I'm sure he'll be back.

Kristyn Scorsone: That's a great compliment. What challenges did you face when you first started?

Anita Dickens: I would say, start-up capital. Luckily we were in a position, where we relied on retirement. So, we were both state of New Jersey employees, so we went there and, you know, got what we needed. The challenge was that it was cold also. We had our contractors working in the cold, cause we didn't have any heat. Another challenge was just basically us trying to deliver what we pretty much envisioned. So there were many times when there was paint spilled on floors and they had to be repolished, or stripped again. So, it was those little things that almost, just really, became really challenging. Yeah, those things right there, start-up capital, working in the cold, and you know, spills here, spills there, and you know, not finding the right contractor because the hangers actually, that was a huge challenge. So we had to find the right people to actually put it up and luckily we did. We actually went to a Newark entrepreneur, a welding company to create the hangers.

Kristyn Scorsone: Can you describe them a little bit?

Anita Dickens: So, the hangers are actually, Off the Hangers logo. So they're metal, they're iron, and they are huge, oversized hangers with clothes hanging off of them, just like the logo, Off the Hanger. So, on the men's side, you have this whole, I would say industrial, you have the piping that are made into the shelving system. Again, this is everything that we said that we wanted to do [00:45:00], and we delivered. And, again, when people come in they really just love the store. Some people just want to come in just to have a conversation with us, we're cool with that. We even offer them a glass of wine, on certain days. But they come, they love being in the store. We keep hearing how the energy is so good there, and that's important to us, because it meant a lot to us, when we actually put it together and bring it to Newark.

Kristyn Scorsone: You talked a little bit about social media. How do you use social media?

Anita Dickens: In many ways. I'm still trying to get better at it. Because again, I do have a 9 to 5 and like to sleep, and my partner, Lynette, she has definitely mastered it. So social media, Facebook, Instagram, Pinterest, I think I have a Twitter, I may or may not. [laughs] We attack all of those.

Kristyn Scorsone: How about your website? You have a really beautiful website.

Anita Dickens: Which one were you on?

Kristyn Scorsone: I don't know, I think it was like white mostly.

Anita Dickens: Ok, we do have separate websites so it's one Off the Hanger, but you can connect to A Girl and Guy Thing for the men's collection. So if you didn't get a chance, just check it out. I'm still in the process of uploading inventory because there's so much stuff, I'm just gonna minimize and focus on those key things, but I plan to launch it January 1<sup>st</sup>, if I'm awake, as far as the night before. [laughs] So yeah, that's when I plan on launching the website for A Girl and Guy thing.

- Kristyn Scorsone: And you said you still have a 9 to 5, is that government still?
- Anita Dickens: It is.
- Kristyn Scorsone: Does that make it difficult, like hard to manage both?
- Anita Dickens: Of course. I mean being an entrepreneur, you know, you take control of your business with little to no help. And then you have your 9 to 5 that's very demanding, as well. So at times I'm getting like 5 to 6 hours mostly, to sleep. So I'm still trying to catch up. I finally decided to take some time, you know, off from work, because I have time, If I don't use it I lose it. You know, it's kind of helping me to balance out. So, that was challenging as well, trying to juggle the two.
- Kristyn Scorsone: Can you both take off together?
- Anita Dickens: No. Lynette is definitely planning, and I support her. But for me, no we both can't take off together.
- Kristyn Scorsone: Do you have employees?
- Anita Dickens: We have my mother-in-law, who's very helpful. A great salesperson. Honestly, it's a motherly love type thing when you go in there. If she had cookies to offer you, and milk, she'll offer it to you. [laughs] She's great. And then again, in the summer time, the city of Newark, this year, have helped us, again, with giving us three teenage employees. So that was wonderful.
- Kristyn Scorsone: Is it hard to manage them? The teenage employees, and also to work with a relative, I guess?
- Anita Dickens: Well definitely to answer the first one. It's difficult to manage the teenagers, but I believe, you know, a couple that respect the business. They were there on time, they wanted to learn, they were very eager to help us out. So that was, it was a learning experience. So, they called us and asked us if we're interested in next year, absolutely. Because at the end of the day, it's about helping a younger generation to understand what it means to be entrepreneurs and how to run a business. So secondly, mom, yeah

you can't tell mom, "You can't eat in front of the store, while people are here, you can't be on the phone." [laughs] You can't tell her, but then it gets very very, like awkward at times. She's pretty much on top of things.

Kristyn Scorsone: How about with you and Lynette, do you have like a symbiotic relationship as far as running the business?

Anita Dickens: We have our differences. We pretty much try to meet in the middle. There are certain things that I feel like she can take control over, because again she's like a trail blazer when it comes to certain business aspects. The social media is one of them. You know, she wants to do other things as far as helping people brand or grow their business, or to understand what it is. And I said, I'll be the first person to learn, you know, or that you can experiment or whatever. Yeah, we definitely have our differences, but we try to meet somewhere in the middle. She's my wife, so it's like "Ok, dear, we can do this." But there are my ideas too, that I wanna incorporate. [laughs] So she's open to it.

Kristyn Scorsone: Do you split shifts?

Anita Dickens: Technically, no, but they're after hours. Her mother is there from 9 to 5. Sometimes a little longer, until Lynette gets there, or I get there. I work closer, so usually I'm there first. And then when Lanette comes in, we're all together.

Kristyn Scorsone: What would you say are the top three skills, or you know, top one or two or whatever, needed to be a successful entrepreneur?

Anita Dickens: I would have to say communication—what other skill? Definitely communication—technology—and customer service.

Kristyn Scorsone: What have been some of your setbacks with the business and how have you learned from them?

Anita Dickens: So setbacks, pretty much, is not on our end, but maybe it's a combination, but because we don't own the location there're certain things that happen in there where we rely on management

to, you know, take care of. They've been great with getting to it, but that same problem will come back. With us, being the entrepreneurs there, a setback could be supply. So, low supply, and then we have to work, work, build and let people know it's there. So, I would say those two are the main ones.

Kristyn Scorsone: Are there any issues as an entrepreneur that you deal with that are specific to your identity as a lesbian or as a woman, or in regards to, you know, any of the facets about you?

Anita Dickens: So, the reason why A Girl and Guy Thing came about. See, I was a woman that was actually shopping in the men's department. And one time, I ended up in the men's dressing room, where there was men changing their clothes because they thought, or the woman that I went to thought, that I was a guy. So she sent me in there, and I'm like "wait a minute, no. Ok." So to me that was a problem, it became a problem. So, and then going into the ladies room, you get like a stare. [laughs] So I'm like ok, wait a minute, if I had a business would I want this to be for women only or men only? I want a place where people, women like me, are comfortable to shop and you don't have to worry about whether the dressing room says men or women. It's open. It's for us. It's for me, more so than anything. So I wanted to create that experience, when you come into the store that if you're a woman that wears men's fashion you can find it there. You're going to be comfortable there because I'm there. Dressed. Styled. And what I wear so I definitely believe in what I have. Again, that whole experience pretty much motivated me to bring this experience to my LGBT community.

Kristyn Scorsone: Do you find you get a lot of customers who are queer?

Anita Dickens: Absolutely. Absolutely.

Kristyn Scorsone: What do you think is the best thing about having your business be in Newark? [00:55:00]

- Anita Dickens: Oh the fact that I was born and raised here. So technically, it's a way of me giving back because I am able, or in a position, in a position to actually do something or offer a service to the community. Employ.
- Kristyn Scorsone: Do you ever wish you could, do you ever find your stress level gets you to a place where you wish you could pack it in and just do your 9 to 5?
- Anita Dickens: No, no. If anything, it would be the opposite. I would definitely give everything to my business. And I feel like that's been challenging because I haven't been--there's no—it's a balance, but I feel like, you know, with the demands of the government job and then my own business. Something is gonna fall by the wayside until my partner says "Hey listen, no, we need to do this." It would be the opposite.
- Kristyn Scorsone: Do you think in the future, you can see that happening, like where you could just work out of the store?
- Anita Dickens: Absolutely. Absolutely.
- Kristyn Scorsone: Do you feel like being an entrepreneur gives you a sense of control or agency over your life?
- Anita Dickens: I would definitely say some sort of control. It's definitely power. For me, yeah, definitely control. It's kind of liberating, it's very uplifting, sometimes I have to say, you know, to my wife, "We really opened our store in Newark and it's beautiful, look at this place." I have to take a step back every now and again and just like take it all in.
- Kristyn Scorsone: Has your family been to the store?
- Anita Dickens: Oh yeah. My mom lives in Florida. She hasn't come up yet, but definitely my family was there for the grand opening. Ribbon-cutting ceremony with the mayor. Yeah, my niece came from Atlanta, Georgia. So, you know, my mom, again, couldn't make it, yeah, she couldn't be there. But definitely family was there.

- Kristyn Scorsone: How do you define success for yourself? Do you feel like you're successful right now?
- Anita Dickens: I definitely feel like I'm successful, right now, because it's actually something that I can touch, feel, see, work at. So, yeah.
- Kristyn Scorsone: Do you ever feel like pressure to live up to kind of like the, you know, the heteronormative kind ideas of what success is, like buying a house, or marriage, or child, things like that?
- Anita Dickens: Yeah, that's important you asked. Because we are a lesbian couple and we're married. We did get some pressures, although it wasn't verbalized, but we kinda like sensed that there were some pressures that we need to live up to. So yeah, we are two women that want better things for ourselves, so we're gonna go after those things and nevermind what other people say. So that's our whole approach to it, not so much as being, like, arrogant about it. Because again, you know, we thought of bringing the store here, because we were in Bloomfield, we, or opening our business, it was because we wanted to show people what we were capable of. I guess, not so much as proving ourselves, but to let them know, that listen, we can do it too. At the end of the day, we're two women. And that's the bottom line.
- Kristyn Scorsone: You live in Newark now, too?
- Anita Dickens: No.
- Kristyn Scorsone: Where do you live now?
- Anita Dickens: In Harrison. It's quiet. [laughs]
- Kristyn Scorsone: Do you like it there?
- Anita Dickens: I do, the only thing is that it flooded during hurricane Sandy. It was terrible. We both lost our cars. Yeah, we got like six and a half feet of water. Because we were right by the river, but we survived it. They cleaned it up pretty well there. It's very quiet for us.
- Kristyn Scorsone: Is that why you moved there, because it was quiet?

- Anita Dickens: We moved there because we wanted to get out of Newark because of so much that was going on, and we didn't see other options at the time. We are looking to live/work [01:00:00] in Newark, so live, work, play in Newark.
- Kristyn Scorsone: How do you unwind from work? Or, like what, do you, I don't know, some people watch TV, or they'll read or whatever—
- Anita Dickens: A glass of wine helps. We would catch up on our, you know, shows or we would talk. We used to take vacation, this is the only year that we haven't taken a vacation. Yeah, that's what we do. We listen to music, and we kinda like go in our corners or in our separate rooms and then just process the day and then come back.
- Kristyn Scorsone: So you said to, that you also identify as a designer. Do you, how do you come up with ideas?
- Anita Dickens: Just being inspired in everything that's around me. People that come into the store, we collaborate with them. Just visually, you know, it inspires me to add something to something. Again I can't sew, so I have to kinda like have to mix some stuff or add a patch here, things like that. But again, working with Marco Hall, I'm gonna give him this thing that I'm visualizing and work with him as far as bringing it.
- Kristyn Scorsone: So you sort of like manipulate existing clothes to change their style?
- Anita Dickens: Yes, some, yes.
- Kristyn Scorsone: That's really cool.
- Anita Dickens: Yeah, I think so.
- Kristyn Scorsone: Do you have a personal mantra or anything, or like motto that you go by?
- Anita Dickens: A personal? Not really. Not really. A personal thing that I go by, no. I would have to say because of working on the business, it's, you know, AGT is not only a brand, we're a movement in support of equality, diversity, and tolerance for all people.



- Kristyn Scorsone: So you almost kind of say like, the store's contributing in that way to the community?
- Anita Dickens: Yes.
- Kristyn Scorsone: Is there anything like, about running a store that, kinda like, a lay person like me wouldn't think of, or understand, or know happens, you know?
- Anita Dickens: Can you repeat the question?
- Kristyn Scorsone: Like, in running a store, is there anything to it that like people that don't have like this insider view into running this kind of business wouldn't understand about like that day-to-day struggle of this kind of entrepreneurial project?
- Anita Dickens: So is there like something that I can offer?
- Kristyn Scorsone: Like, I guess, like for example I spoke to Joyelle Chandler, who DJ's, and she was like, "You know people don't realize that it's aggravating when people come up and request a song."
- Anita Dickens: Oh yeah, definitely.
- Kristyn Scorsone: You know? Like is there things about that, that people don't realize that you have to go through, or that you enjoy?
- Anita Dickens: Well we offer a service for personal shopping. Like we're hand-picking everything that's already there, there are many requests for other things and that's from clothing to the furniture that we carry in the store, and it's not just that simple. To just, you know, they're expecting us to find these things for them, and it's not easy. We have a couple of times, but we've learned that it's taken a lot of energy to actually satisfy that customer, and we're very fortunate that that customer will return and purchase something else, or they will continue to say, "Oh, I'll be patient, just let me know. Here's my number, email address, just let me know when you get it, I'll come and get it."
- Kristyn Scorsone: Have you made friendships from customers and things like that?

- Anita Dickens: Definitely, we actually host an event each month at the store. We have one coming up. So each month there are new people coming in, and we have some that continue to support us. **[01:05:00]** In the events, as well, so, it's like by word of mouth people are coming out, but then we have those people that who are loyal customers also that come in. When we collaborate with different designers, they become friends of ours, as well.
- Kristyn Scorsone: What is your like perfect day, look like?
- Anita Dickens: Making money, at the store, selling a product, selling furniture. My wife being happy, you know, that I'm posting on social media. So, if I could do all of those things that's a perfect day for me.
- Kristyn Scorsone: If you could, or did anybody give you any advice when you were first starting out that really helped you?
- Anita Dickens: Yeah, we connected with UEZ, urban enterprise zone. So, David Moretti **[01:05:55]**, we met with him, and such a cool guy with giving us information on how we could save as we're building our store. Also, with being Rutgers alum, attending events and meeting people in the business field, how they can actually help us, you know market, things like that. A lot of advice has been given, it's just finding the time to actually sit with the people and actually making this thing happen.
- Kristyn Scorsone: If you could have done anything different with the store would you have?
- Anita Dickens: Nothing. No.
- Kristyn Scorsone: Where do you see yourself in like 5, 10 years?
- Anita Dickens: So, still married, bigger store, a manufacturer, a designer.
- Kristyn Scorsone: Is there anything that I didn't ask you, or is there anything that you want to add, or that I didn't ask you that you wish I had asked?
- Anita Dickens: I think you've pretty much covered everything. Yeah, I think you've pretty much covered everything.
- Kristyn Scorsone: Do you have a favorite memory of the store?

Anita Dickens: Of the store? Yeah sure. A lot, it has to be the signing of the lease, which made it a reality of a new beginning and actually becoming that entrepreneur in Newark.

Kristyn Scorsone: That's really great, thank you so much.

Anita Dickens: You're welcome.

*End of Interview [01:07:59]*