

Queer Newark Oral History Project

Interviewee: Gary Paul Wright

Interviewer: Whitney Strub

Date: February 22, 2016

Location: Newark, NJ

Whitney Strub: Okay, it's February 22, 2016. This is Whitney Strub, for the Queer Newark Oral History Project recording with Gary Paul Wright at the offices of the African American Office of Gay Concerns in Newark, New Jersey. Gary Paul, thanks for doing this for us.

Gary Paul Wright: You're welcome.

Whitney Strub: And if you wouldn't mind introducing yourself and saying a word about when you were born, where you were born, your family backdrop. Just to sort of provide some biographical context.

Gary Paul Wright: Okay. The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog. Okay. Only you would get that.

Whitney Strub: The transcriber will know that.

Gary Paul Wright: [Laughing] You can explain to them why would you say that. All right, let's see. Gary Paul Wright is my name. Born and raised in Dallas, Texas, December 19, 1953, so that makes me 63 years old. Unfortunately, side note. My office faces an alley, so okay, I was one of the – a corner office and this is what I got.

Whitney Strub: It's the sound of the city.

Gary Paul Wright: There you go, okay. So, what do you need to know? Let's see. Born and raised in Dallas. I left Texas after college. Some years in college, a couple of years in college because I wanted to be an actor and I joined the Robin Hood Players and I toured the United States. It's a children's theater company and I have pictures to prove it. But yeah, that was 1975 when I went on tour. Because it was '75-'76, the bicentennial year, which is important because the two plays that we did were *Cochise*, *The Young Apache*. I played Cochise. The other one was *O Say Can You See*, which is the story of the making of the Star-Spangled Banner and I played Francis Scott Key. So you can imagine – I got the southern tours, so you can imagine me in places like Alabama, Mississippi, North

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Carolina, South Carolina and you had a black Francis Scott Key. Let me tell you something. It was not pretty, okay. It was like, “Get me the fuck out of here.” My company was based in Arizona and they were like, “Come on, Gary, you can be a credit to your race.” And I’m like, “I don’t wanna be a credit to my race. I want to be alive, okay. Get me out of the South.” Which is how I ended up coming to New York for the very first time. So this is why that was important. 1976 was the first time I ever came to New York. After the tour, I knew I could not go back home to Texas for many reasons. I just knew I was out gay and all these kind of stuff and then – it would not be easy for me so I decided to move to California. I lived in California for like nine-and-a-half years, about 10 years, almost 11 years, which was when the AIDS epidemic or HIV epidemic first started. Around that time, we were calling it GRID. Well, we weren’t calling it anything. We were calling it the Gay Disease. I was doing some acting in California. In fact, I was doing a play which was in the – I don’t know if you saw the presentation that I submitted to you.

Whitney Strub: Yeah, yeah.

Gary Paul Wright: So early part of that, I was doing a play called *Pumps*, which was taking place in a gay gym in Los Angeles. That’s when I really first saw the disease really written down on paper, okay. And we had a character or two that were getting sick and coughing and things like that. So we alluded to HIV/AIDS in the play. It was at a gay theater, as a matter of fact.

Whitney Strub: Which theater?

Gary Paul Wright: It was called the Déjà Vu Coffeehouse in the Fifth Estate Theater. I don’t believe they’re here anymore, but if you go into theatrical archives in Los Angeles, Déjà vu Coffeehouse in Fifth Estate Theater.

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Whitney Strub: Okay. I lived in L.A.-- [crosstalk 00:03:49].

Gary Paul Wright: Smitty was the guy that manned that. I mean, it was pretty famous for its time.

Whitney Strub: Where was it?

Gary Paul Wright: It was in Los Angeles. In Hollywood, as a matter of fact.

Whitney Strub: Okay.

Gary Paul Wright: So yeah. Anyhow, so that's when I started really thinking about the HIV, not working in it but on a personal note, you know what I mean? We were all kind of like scared. It was like, "Oh, shit. Now we got to start using condoms? Are you kidding me?" But we did. We did what we had to do. Anyway, it was around that time we're living in Los Angeles. A couple of friends of mine started getting ill and it got to be really, really, really scary. I'd had my share of STDs. We don't need to talk about that too much but I frequented the L.A. Free Clinic for the Gay Clinic there. Anyhow, around this time, I also decided L.A. was boring the hell out of me. I wasn't making any money as an actor. Everything I was doing was in advertising, I thought. [00:05:00] The boyfriend I had at the time, or the lover that I had at the time, we broke up and I just thought, "You know what? I don't need to be here in Los Angeles. I really don't. I'll go to New York." I remembered going there and it was fabulous so let's go to New York. I decided in 1985 to move to New York City. It was an eye opener, let me tell you. Culture shock was like, "Mmm..." But it was like okay. It was either this or Texas. Let's go to New York. I always said I was only going to be here for like two years and then maybe go back to L.A., but I wasn't sure. Bottom line is the energy here in New York was just absolutely fabulous. It was right up my alley. I thought, "Okay, this is where I need to be." So I'm still here.

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What happened was HIV was like really more on the gay people's minds here in New York than they were in California. California was all about getting tan and looking beautiful and all this kind of stuff. New York, you could be ugly and earthy and still have a fun time. Since I was more earthy than beautiful, I had a great time. I wouldn't say I was a slut, but I was damn close to it, okay. I shouldn't really say that, should I?

Whitney Strub: Don't worry, that's important part of history.

Gary Paul Wright: Okay. So I had a good time. And one of the things that – one of the reasons why I left California – okay, I dated black guys, white guys, Mexican guys. I never dated an Asian guy because I never had a chance to. It was weird in the black community. I was known as one of those guys who slept with white guys and black guys. There is a famous writer and I'm not going to tell you his name – can you pause that for a sec? [...]

Whitney Strub: Okay, we're good.

Gary Paul Wright: Okay. So anyway, thank you for breaking so I could find this. There was a writer friend of mine who was pretty prominent and we had sex several times but he also knew that I slept with white guys as well. He was the one that came up to me at a restaurant once and said, "You know, I'm not speaking to you. I'm distancing myself from people like you." I'm like, "What do you mean people like me?" He said, "You guys are the ones that are giving – bring us down and you're sleeping with white boys and you're all going to infected with AIDS and you're going to all die and you're going to kill us and 'you're bringing it into our community." I was like – my first thought was, "You know, fuck you." You're the one who's having sex with me. You got a wife and two kids at home and all this kinda stuff and yeah, you got to

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come to me in front of your little black friends and put me down in front of my little friends because of my sexual preferences.

It really surprised me a couple of years later when this book came out and I'd heard rumors that this writer was sick. As you can see, he was writing this in 1988. So this was around the time right after I left which was 1985. Anyway, he got sick and he died. When I saw that he had chronicled his illness – you want to take it? Well, you can find it. You got the book, right? He chronicled and I remember thinking, “Okay, you hypocrite!” After publicly denouncing me and telling me that I'm gadadadada and now you've turned around. It's not like I'm happy that somebody died or got HIV and AIDS and died. It's like be careful of who you accuse of things because even today, I am HIV negative. I'm very proud of that. You know what I'm saying? After being a slut/whore all these years, to still be HIV negative, God has something good for me or has been good to me and I acknowledge that.

Whitney Strub: So was the subtext of what he was saying though, that it was white men who were bringing HIV into the black community?

Gary Paul Wright: Right.

Whitney Strub: But that was a –

Gary Paul Wright: Yes.

Whitney Strub: Was that a pervasive sentiment or belief at the time?

Gary Paul Wright: At the time, it's like the poster that's out here, AIDS is a white man's disease. That's what we all thought at that time. I don't know why black men thought that we were immune but we didn't that the commu– the way it was happening, we thought AIDS was a white man's disease. That it was gay and it was white and that we were pretty safe or whatever. But I guess his assumption was that since I'm sleeping with white boys, then I would be the one to

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bring it to the black community. [00:10:00] He wasn't really blaming – he was blaming white boys, but he was blaming me for – as a surrogate or as the bridge to the black community. It made me feel bad. I thought, “Okay. Well, you know, if I'm going get it and I'm going die, then fine, fuck it, but at least I'm honest about myself.” So that was my issue with him. When I got to New York City, everybody was cautious but it was still like wham, bam, thank you, Sam. Everybody was still having sex with everybody. But then again, I was young. I was skinny. I got a Jheri curl. It was a fun time. The late '80s and the mid '90s. All the bars in Christopher Street were humming. That was just really great. But that shadow of HIV was still there. I think what happened was I ended up still in New York. I think I was living in Astoria at the time. I decided to go to something that GMHC here was having. It was like okay, Gay Men's Health Crisis. It was like, “Wow, you could say gay men out loud around here?” I went to one of their little workshops and I really thought, “This is good for me. This is good.” I've always been a kind of a social activist at heart. My parents were. They were part of a lot of interracial clubs and things like that, so we had white folks in our house, plus we were Catholic. We were like one of three black Catholic families in our neighborhood. So we went to the white schools. I had no problems.

I decided, “Okay, maybe I'll volunteer with GMHC and just to help people out.” I ended up becoming a buddy and we had teams – I think I was called the crisis management buddy or crisis management partner at the time, so CMP. We had meetings and things like that and we all had – we were a buddy. We were paired with somebody who had HIV and AIDS. The guy that they chained me up with was a Latino guy who had a partner who was

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not infected but he was very ill and they need things done so that's what we did.

So I worked with him for a couple of years, then he passed away. Then I think what happened was I went to a couple of these workshops and then I got trained to facilitate some of the workshops and I thought, "You know what? There aren't any black guys coming to this workshop," you know what I mean. So what we did was I started, tried to do real outreach to the black community and for somewhere down the line, I ended up meeting who was the head of the department and things like that and hanging out with Craig G. Harris who was working there at the time. It was Craig who suggested, "Maybe you should come work with us." I'm like, "Oh, no. I can't work for a gay agency. I love being gay but you can't do that." He was like, "Why the fuck not?" So, I ended up being hired in like 1989, for Gay Men's Health Crisis for the Education Department and it was great. It was like, "Oh man, what a wonderful job. I get to watch porno. I get to do this." It was like, "Yeah." But we have work to do. So we did. So we buckled down and we started doing outreach to the gay community, the black gay community. There weren't a whole lot of agencies, black agencies, addressing HIV/AIDS at the time, I mean, but it was also a time when the black community really, *really* started getting heavily infected and it was like a time when we had all stood back and go, "Oh, shit. It really is happening and it's happening now." You know, the Minority Task Force on AIDS, they were around. There were a couple of black women's AIDS groups were being formed. It was late '80s, early '90s, was really the time when the black community woke up and said, "This is real and it's happening to us." So I actually wrote a workshop called *What's In It 4 Me*. I thought it was real cool because it was

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what's in it 4 – the number four – me. I had never really seen it. Everybody uses it now but I thought I was so avant-garde saying, “What's in it 4 me.” So it was nice. [00:15:00] It was a cute little workshop. Me, I actually gleaned a lot from some of the existing GMHC workshops. The Men Meeting Men, all these other things. But they had to like look at it and read it and dissect it and things like that to make sure I wasn't going to be doing any harm. So we did that. It was pretty good for a while. From the first year or so that we actually did the workshop, we got a lot of people coming. But then, I think within the community there's only X amount of active people that you can really get and bring in during a cycle. I think cycles in our community is like three-year cycles. Every year or every couple of years, it's a whole new group of people coming through and the leaders and the... So I think I tapped out just about everybody who wanted to come to a workshop like that. So I thought, “Okay, fine.” That's when I found out about the House community. I've never heard of the Ballroom scene and it was like, “Oh, wow. So Gregg Bordowitz, who is now working somewhere, I can't remember, but he was a film guy over at GMHC. He and Jean Carlomusto, they started talking about these balls and they were going to the balls and they're going to be filming at the balls and I'm like, “Tell me about these balls.” These are white folks telling me about balls. I was like, “Okay.” So I thought, “You know what, maybe we could do this.” So I contacted a couple of people to see if we could go in because they didn't want the white folks coming in and telling them what to do. Even to give them condoms. So I said, “Why don't we do this?” So we created a team of some of my volunteers and we just called ourselves the House of Latex, because we go to the House of Avco, the House of Pend'avis, the House of this, the

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House of that and dadadada. In fact, here's my trophy from... we walked one ball and this is my trophy from the David Ultima 1992, the Mother's Day Ball. So I actually got one. But the first one I got was the House of Africa. I had braids then so...

Whitney Strub: This is for walking – you walked the runway or this is for doing the...

Gary Paul Wright: Well, no. At the time we weren't really walking the runway. It was just me and my volunteers to be dressed up in tux, shirts and red ties. We used Xerox paper boxes, put aluminum foil around them and like the old cigarette girls in the '40s and the '50s, or '30s and the '40s, but we had condoms. We had lube. We had all these kinds of things. We just kind of walked around, trying to be unobtrusive, just to let the kids know that we were there. They gave us a shout out. We actually had a meeting with the House parents, some of the House parents. I remember [Avis] was there. Tracey Africa was there and Renault who was the father of House of Africa then and some of the other houses and then some of the other agencies around. To me, it was like the very first meeting that the Houses got together to talk about HIV/AIDS. After I left, Arbert Santana took over and he really took the House of Latex to the heights. They have Latex ball every year. I think they're on the 25th or 26th one.

Whitney Strub: When did it get started exactly? Just for historical...

Gary Paul Wright: I started – the very first – our first was 1990. The House of Africa Ball in 1990 was our first venture to the Houses officially as the House of Latex, but it wasn't until like maybe four or five years after that that they actually started walking balls. Arbert, he really became the House mother and really took it to where they are now. To me, when I was there, we were just going in these interventions and every once in a while, if there weren't anybody walking a ball

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or the hair category, something like that, I would just for the fun of it, but we weren't really there to compete. The fact that I got two trophies is just like – it's kind of like icing on the cake. I can show kids now that, "Hey, I've been there, done that, okay. That was 30 years ago."

Whitney Strub: That's cred.

Gary Paul Wright: Yeah. There you go, okay. I think [unintelligible - 00:19:33] even I'm getting bald and got a comb over, the only reason I keep the dreads is because it still give me a little street cred. You know what I mean? Just a little bit. But I know I'm a tired old black queen. They call me grandpa. I'm like the great grandfather of the House of Latex. That's fine for me. It just kind of proves that I not only talked the talk, but I walked the walk. When I could. [00:20:00] I can't anymore. Don't ever ask me to pop, dip or spin because I could pop dance... I could get down, but getting back up is another fucking problem, okay [laughter].

Anyhow, okay, so that leaves us to – that brings up to Gay Men's Health Crisis. I stayed for a little while longer. Then I ended up – I came there from working from an advertising background. I had no idea that I've – social work and that kind of stuff, it's just like wasn't in me. I didn't go to school for that. Well, I went to school. I didn't do anything I went to school for. I went to school to pursue an education and that went out the window my first D in pre-calculus. Fuck that, man.

Anyhow, Advertising was good and I enjoyed it and I – but this other work was like more important. I just felt like it was just more me. After GMHC, I – what did I do? – I ended up going to work for amfAR. I ended up working for the American Foundation for Aids Research mainly because my boss, who was at GMHC, Maggie Reinfeld, was now over at amfAR and she had

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a position open and something I was really not qualified for but since she knew me and she would make sure that I did a pretty good job, she said, “Oh, yeah, come on board.” So I spent three years with amfAR. In fact, they ended up getting rid of the department that I was in and Maggie left and got married, became a Reverend. Now, she’s in Florida. But I ended up with the Needle Exchange Programs. I was doing all the buying for the Needle Exchange Programs, which was really controversial at the time and really kind of illegal, too.

Whitney Strub: Yeah, I was going to say, what were the legal –

Gary Paul Wright: So we had a lot of fights with a lot of – not government people but a lot of – no, yeah, people in government positions because they hated it, they didn’t want it, especially in New York City. There were a couple of people that were on our side, but for the most part, it was like, “Oh, no. You’re giving needles to drug addicts and prostitutes,” and things like that. But amfAR, since it was a viable organization, had a lot of money, had a lot of cred and they had Elizabeth Taylor, so we were able to get away with a lot more stuff out. We could fund the underground exchanges. I think I had 13 or 14 programs that I was working with. And I’m telling you, there’s some serious people. And when they got pissed off, man, it was like, “Oh, man.” I remember one thing I had to go to – and I didn’t realize it that amfAR had gone a large sum of money from somewhere. I had no idea. I think it was from the CDC or something to do with a certain program, but they forgot to tell me about it, but the community knew about it. And so I walked in this meeting, this Needle Exchange meeting, and these people just attacked me. “You have all this money and you just got this grant.” I was like – Housing works was like mean to me and I was like – I wanted to cry, but I’m like, “Thank you, let me find out.” I

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kept my composure but I wanted to just run into the hallway and just go, “[Mumbling/imitation-crying 00:23:32].” But we danced, but anyway – so it was a tough crowd, but they got their needles, they got their syringes, they got the wipes and all the supplies that they need. It was really, really good and it was the last program for the Education Department. They changed it to Social and Behavioral Research Department.

After amfAR, I said, okay, well, it’s time for me to get out of here because the whole department is gone and I’m by myself and they were mean to me. And also, I was living in New Jersey about this time so at some point, when I was working in GMHC, a friend of mine who was one of the founders of the Body Positive, Paul Wychules. He lived in New Jersey, in Jersey City, and his roommate was moving out or he had a house and the other guy had the downstairs, so he asked me if I wanted to move in there. And I thought, “Well, New Jersey [mumbling].” But it was like a lot less money and when I went there and visited, there were like birds singing. I went, “Oh, I could do this.” So I moved to New Jersey.

Whitney Strub:

To Jersey City.

Gary Paul Wright:

To Jersey City, and at some point in time, no, I was – [00:25:00] I met Peter, my husband, my now husband, when I was still working in GMHC. I remember that now because I remember him coming in, picking me up one time. Actually, for our second date, was I had to work a ball that day for our second night together. We met on a Friday at Two Potato and went home. Turns out he lived in New Jersey and I lived in New Jersey and then I’m like, “Jersey is where he at, ain’t it?” So then the next night, I had to work a ball, the House of Milan ball, and it was at the LGBT Center. And I asked Peter if he wanted to go see it. He had never been to a ball and we went and there was violence and I saved his – I didn’t

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really save his life, but at one point, I picked him up and went down the back stairs because there were fighting and shit like that stuff. I was his hero. Anyhow, to make a long story short, remember you were the one who came to see me. So I thought maybe I'd get a job in New Jersey because Peter was a nurse. At the time, he was nurse manager of the surgical unit and he worked at UMDNJ and I thought, "That's cute." So I said, "Okay." He had a nice apartment and I was always in New Jersey anyway. But he also had connections with the AIDS Education and Training Center, which was at UMDNJ. A position opened up, a temporary position opened up, and he wanted to know if I thought I could do it. It was like the resources manager or something for the AIDS Education and Training Center. I thought, "Well, I can try it." So I did and everybody liked me, I liked them and it was okay. So I took a position over there. I'm trying to think what year that was. I can look at my resume, but anyway, so I started working over there.

Whitney Strub: Was it roughly mid '90s?

Gary Paul Wright: No, it was – I can't think exactly when it was. September, maybe. You want to pause for a sec?

Whitney Strub: Sure.

Gary Paul Wright: Let me just put GPWG. [...]

Whitney Strub: Okay, we're back up.

Gary Paul Wright: So yeah, just looking at my little resume here. GMHC was through 1989 to 1992. I did a little stint for the Balm in Gilead, which was Perness Seele and that was like for me Harlem Week of Prayer for the Healing of AIDS, which she's now gone national and actually she's international now. Balm in Gilead, if you want to look them up, I worked with them for a little while [now an

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international organization involving faith-based groups in the fight against HIV/AIDS].

Then American Foundation for AIDS Research was from October '93 and I worked there until February 1995, yeah, 1995. Then I was at UMDNJ from June '96—I guess I took some time off--to September 2001.

Whitney Strub: Okay. Is that what brought you into Newark then?

Gary Paul Wright: Yes.

Whitney Strub: In a meaningful way?

Gary Paul Wright: Yes.

Whitney Strub: Can I pause and ask two follow up questions when you moved in Newark. There's a million things I'd love to ask but I know you've got finite time. I want to hear about the '70s. But we'll reorient toward Newark. First, the Needle Exchange and amfAR. Just to be clear, so that was an official part of their program or that was like under the table? Because I'm not clear on the legality.

Gary Paul Wright: Okay. No, it was official as far as – yeah, it was official. That means, they had RFPs, you had to apply for it and we had grants and things like that. I can't remember what the amounts were, but no, it was an official amfAR event. It's just like some of the research programs that they did do. No, it wasn't – when I say it was kind of underground, it was because of all the illegal – because it was – really it wasn't legal at that time. I think at that time, they finally got to the point – and don't ask me this because I'm sure you can do the research – but it got to the point where they were allowed but they couldn't use any federal or state or any kind of government money whatsoever for this because they considered it illegal activities and things like that. So yes, the answer to that question is there was an official program. Funding the needle exchange programs was official program for amfAR.

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Whitney Strub: Okay, and even the Clinton administration opposed this, right?

Now it's...

Gary Paul Wright: Everybody did.

Whitney Strub: Then the second thing. Because I don't know where else –

Gary Paul Wright: Although the science kept saying needle exchanges are good, but you [unintelligible – 00:29:58].

Whitney Strub: Right. Yeah.

Gary Paul Wright: [00:30:00] Just the people with the money were saying, “Fuck you.”

Whitney Strub: Yeah. Then can we talk just a minute about your sort of literary work. You're in this book, *Gents, Bad Boys, And Barbarians, New Gay Male Poetry* from 1994. You were involved in the literary scene with Essex Hemphill and all. Can you just talk a little about how you wound up in this world and a few more?

Gary Paul Wright: I wish I could find a sensuous book and I can't remember the name of that book. Anyway, I will find it out while we talk. So what happened was, of course, I told you I was trying to be in actor and all this kind of stuff. When I decided to move to New York, I thought since I want to be a writer, too, I'll get some writing experience. Basically, I've been writing since I was a wee child. Not anything good, I've gotten - I've written several plays. All of them really suck. They were all kind of personal so they're all kind of cathartic. I should revisit them and maybe I could whip one out, but they've never been produced. I have several plays under my belt. Singer/songwriter. I was a singer/songwriter for many years and still am kind of still, I just haven't written anything. I performed around town. In fact, that's why I perform every year at the Essex County Executive's LGBT celebration or whatever. And I've done a couple of the health fairs. I've appeared at our Pride events here. Yes. So I've been around for a

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while. It was really great in the '90s because I was hanging around these people that were like really, really good. A lot of these guys used to hang out at the Center and they used to be like open mikes and things like that. Craig G. Harris, who's passed away, was a very, very good friend of mine and a very, very good writer. I probably have some of his stuff up there, too. But he is the one that sort of got me involved with that group. Really, the only real poem that I wrote out of that era was called the – the one that's in here. *The Heathen*. I enjoyed performing it and I went to a couple of black gay conferences and I was always asked to do that poem. But yeah, but in my opinion, there were a lot of really, really good black gay writers and I really... not that I didn't want to compete with them, but they wrote some good stuff and it was just like I can't. So I did what little I could do. I'll stick with strumming and making cute little ditties, but I'll leave the heavy shit to them. It was a good time. Unfortunately, most of them are dead. Marlon Riggs who did the – I got to meet him. He did *Tongues Untied*. Yeah, I was blessed to meet a lot of those people. So, anyhow.

Whitney Strub:

No, that's nice. Thank you. I guess we can pick back up in Newark then. So had you spent any time in Newark before coming here for the job?

Gary Paul Wright:

No. No. Peter worked in Newark and eventually we lived together in Jersey City. Circumstances turned – ended up that – let me explain to you. I was one of those serial monogamists. I was like, "Okay, you're mine, we're exclusive. But after three months, get the fuck out of here." [laughter] So really when I met Pete, I just figured he was going to be one of the same and we had a good time. I really liked being with him. We were in P-Town one time and it's almost a year later after I met him and my good friend, Paul Walker, said to me, who's now passed away, he was there and

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he looked at Peter at one point, he goes – we were having lunch – he goes, “Why are you still in the picture? Why are you still here?” Peter was like, “Huh?” He was like, “Generally, after a couple of months, he sends them packing. Why the hell are you still here? What are you still doing here?” I think he was just being catty. But it really scared the fuck out of Peter. He was like, “Oh, shit.” I didn’t know this till years later that he actually went back to work the next day, he was like, “Oh, he’s going to drop me. He’s going to blah, blah, blah because his friend pointed out that I’ve been around for a long time and dadada.” Me, I took the absolute obvious thing. I was like, “Goddam, he’s been around almost a year? Wow, that’s...” [00:35:00] And I didn’t even think about it. Then it turned out it was going to be just about a year - no, we met in August. It was after that first year, it was like December, and his lease was going to be up. He lived in Little Falls or something Falls, Baby Falls, Little Falls, something. The guy that I was living with said, “Oh, you know – “ because Paul had AIDS, too. The other Paul had AIDS and he wasn’t doing very, very well and he said he was going to leave home, so he wanted to know if I wanted to stay in the house that we were sharing. And I’m like, “Well, you know, I can’t really afford it,” and blah, blah, blah. It just so happened, Peter was – his lease where he was leaving was ending so it was like we looked at each other and then I was like, “Oh, do you [mumbling].” What do you do in that – it’s like staring you right in the face. You got to like – you just say yes or no. And I said, “Well, you know...” So like, “Pete,” I said, “Well, you know, do you want to move in?” He was like, “Yeah.” That’s what happened. Then 25 years later, we’re still together. We actually officially got married once the law got passed.

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Whitney Strub: Congratulations.

Gary Paul Wright: Yeah. So we got married at Broadway House for Continuing Care, which used to be an AIDS hospice, but it's a – they fix them up and patch them up and send them out again, but it's a long-care facility and I'm on the Board of Directors there so they allowed me to use their little chapel and it was really cute. You can watch the video. The video is on YouTube.

Whitney Strub: Yeah? We'll put it up –

Gary Paul Wright: Yes, it's – just look at Gary Paul & Peter get married exclamation point. All caps, exclamation points. The and is the ampersand and will take you right to it, okay. YouTube.

Whitney Strub: I can find that.

Gary Paul Wright: It's only like 23 minutes long. I'm a big brother with the Big Brother program and one of my little brothers is now a Marine. In fact, it's his fault that we got married. I know we're off subject, he went off to – I have two of them and they're real brothers, and he went off to the Marines and he said, "You know what, if you guys ever get married, if they ever pass a law that you can get married, I want to make sure – I want to be there, okay." And I was, "Okay." Sure enough, they like passed the law or whatever here in New Jersey. Then I heard that he was going to be home like for two weeks or something like that in December and we thought, "You know what, if we're going to do this, why don't we go ahead and do this?" So December 1st, he was here, he got dressed up in his blues and everything. You'll see on the video. But it was also really nice.

Anyway, his mom was one of our bridesmaids. So it was really sweet. Anyhow, back to where we were.

Whitney Strub: So you were working at UMDNJ...

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Gary Paul Wright: Yes. And it was okay there. It was doing good. One thing about working with UMDNJ is they had money to send people to conferences and things like that, which I had never really – I'd gone to a couple with GMHC, but anyway. I ended up going to a conference that was held in Philadelphia, I think. No, it was at Brown University. It was like a Black Gay Men's Conference or something. Several people from New Jersey also went to that conference and when we got back from that conference, we were like, "You know, nobody's really addressing black gay men here in Newark." Really in New Jersey, I knew that the State had a couple of programs but I hadn't really heard anything about what they were doing. So it was like, "Fuck it, let's do it ourselves." So we actually had a meeting in our kitchen and I actually – this is the picture. If I had to, I can find the actual date this was taken. But it was September 2000.

Those are our founding fathers. That's actually my kitchen.

Whitney Strub: Is this picture on the website?

Gary Paul Wright: It probably is.

Whitney Strub: It's familiar.

Gary Paul Wright: Yeah. I have it in every goddamn presentation I've done.

Whitney Strub: Maybe it was on your slideshow, that's it.

Gary Paul Wright: Okay, yes. But it may be on my Facebook, really. Look at all the hair I had back then, man. I was so cute and fine back then. Anyhow, so we said, "Maybe we can do this. Let's go ahead and start our..." [00:40:00] Let's start something. I kind of used my background from GMHC. I wasn't really in ACT UP, but they had a black version of ACT UP called the Black Mobilization something or another. I participated in some of their stuff. Anyway, I had a lot of activism type stuff under my belt, but I never had any of this legal stuff. So it was like, "Okay, so let's

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figure it out.” The good thing about working at UMD at the Continuing Education Department, where the AIDS education training – AIDS Education and Training Center was housed within the Continuing Education Department, it got me confused for a while at first, but it’s cool.

Whitney Strub: That’s what you were doing at UMDNJ? You were, at that point...

Gary Paul Wright: Yeah, I was working just basically – yeah. Basically working with the AIDS Education Department because they did – they put on programs and things for people around the state and eventually, nationally. So my job was to like, all the references, put them all together and I had a newsletter – I can’t remember the name of it – but I did that. I also joined NEMA, which is the planning council for Newark. It’s called NEMA, which stands for the Newark Eligible Metropolitan Area Planning Council. They distribute the Ryan White Funds. They figure out where the Ryan White Funds come in the city. The city of Newark is the grantee. The Health Department is the grantee, but they are the ones that put all the priorities and things like that together. So I joined them for a while. I was a member of that. Then I became chair of the Gay Men’s Workgroup or whatever. Anyway, so people were like looking up to me and saying, “Okay, you’re going to do the gay men [mumbling].” So all of a sudden, I was like the gay men’s group guru for this stuff. My boss at the time at UMD was – he was kind of new to that position and he basically let me do whatever I wanted to do.

[...]

Anyhow, so I went to him and I said, “Look, this is what I want to do.” It was kind of taking me this much time and blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, and he was like, “You know what? I don’t care.” He

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said, “You know, as long as you get what I need done from you, as long as you get it done, I got no problem.” I made sure I did. But then I see, you know – so I started investigating how to get the 501(c)(3) and all this madness. Then somehow, the word got out that we were trying to do this and we got some assistance, some capacity building systems assistance from, and I can’t even recall where this came from. I don’t know if it came from the state or what. It may have. Anyway, so they helped us to apply for the 501(c)(3) and we got a writer and all these kind of stuff. We got our designation and then somebody at the State Department helped find out or something and said, “If you guys get this together, maybe we’ll fund you with some money.” And we’re like, “Okay, well we need that. So okay, tell us what we need to do and dadada.” So we actually submitted a proposal to the State of New Jersey and they accepted it and it took us from 2000 to 2002 to open this office, but this office was opened March 15, 2002.

Whitney Strub: Okay, it’s been at the same place the whole time.

Gary Paul Wright: Yes, this is the – we’ve been trying to move, but things have fallen through and things like – we had a really nice space right down the street. Almost got it, but the landlord decided he was going to keep it to a retail space and goddamn. I really want a store front. I don’t want to be up two flights of stairs because of kids in wheelchairs that can’t come up here and shit like that. But in 2002, finding a space downtown for what little money that we had was like “Yay.” So that’s why we’ve been here.

Whitney Strub: Can you say a quick word about the cohort who founded the AAOGC? It was you and these several other men. Who were the other guys who were involved here? What kind of background are people coming from?

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Gary Paul Wright: Well, I will tell you. We'll go one-on-one, okay. Actually, cohorts, one of those words that I don't know very well. Okay, first of all, there is me. There's my husband, who is a nurse. [00:45:00] By this time, Peter had – he was no longer working in surgical ICU. He was actually working for the ID practice over at UMDNJ under Dr. [Pat Kloser]. So it was like all of a sudden, we're both working in HIV/AIDS. It was like, damn. So we became the “integrated dream couple” already. Frank was working – when I met him, he was working at NEMA. He was working at the Planning Council. Larry Williams was working for – I think he might have been working for the Hyacinth Foundation. But they weren't specifically targeting gay black men or MSMs. It was good having him on board. Dwight Peavy, he is now the executive director for NEMA, but at the time, Dwight was working – I think he was taking some courses, but he wasn't really – he was kind of like semi-retired and he wasn't really going to be working but he used to do some stuff for the AETC, the AIDS Education and Training Center, with the consumers there. That's how I met him. But he had also gone to that conference that I went to. That's how he had – Robert actually was a... I think he was working for La Casa Don Pe- – no. . He was working for an HIV/AIDS agency. I can't remember the name of it because they've now been taken over by somebody else, but he was working in an HIV/AIDS. Larry was just a friend of everybody. So I mean, he had no – he wasn't actually really involved in HIV/AIDS at all. Then Christopher was also a nurse. I think he was at Rutgers at the time. He ended up at Rutgers for a while. But Christopher – I can't remember his – not Columbus, Coleman. Christopher Coleman. A lot of these guys were – most of them are professionals, but – no, I take that back. Only half of them are

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really professionals with degrees and shit. And the rest of us, we're just community members.

Whitney Strub: Okay. But it was a group with a lot of kind of institutional wisdom then about bureaucracies and things like that.

Gary Paul Wright: Yes. At least we pretended we did.

Whitney Strub: Just so I'm clear, the first batch of funding that allowed the AAOGC to come in and it was from the state? Sorry, okay, go ahead. **[Crosstalk 00:47:36]**

Gary Paul Wright: Everything that we needed to do to get off the ground, the 501(c), that came out of our pockets.

Whitney Strub: Okay. Then once you started getting funded though, it was through the state rather than federal?

Gary Paul Wright: State. To this day, we still get – we get federal funding – we get city funding but we get it from the state. It's funneled through the state. We do not get direct funding from the CDC.

Whitney Strub: Okay. What kind of budget kicked it off? How able were you to fulfill your mission and what kind of money...?

Gary Paul Wright: I think when we first – I think we – like \$200,000. \$25,000. No, \$2,500. Yeah, \$2,500.

Whitney Strub: Okay, was that enough to get the job done?

Gary Paul Wright: It was. We don't get that much more now. Trust me. We're still under – our budget – the year that we did Status Is Everything – I don't know if you know about that campaign.

Whitney Strub: Yeah.

Gary Paul Wright: There was some CDC money that the state said – they want us to do this and that. So they contacted us to try to do this campaign for testing. And we did, but then that was like an additional \$300,000. So for that one year, I had a budget of half a million dollars. Ain't seen it since. Just to be honest, I'm just not the fundraiser. I'll go speak. I'll do presentations. I'll do whatever I do.

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When it comes to writing grants and shit like that, I'm just – I do the best I can, but obviously, since we're still poor and we're still here, I'm not the best at that. We had one CDC grant. I think we came – we rated enough that we could get funded but because of all the applications and things that they had, we did not get funded. That year, a lot of money, most of the prevention money is going down south anyway. They're really doing a push on the south. So it's like, "Don't forget about us, the north, okay? Don't forget us Yankees. We still need funding." So there you go.

Whitney Strub: Okay. [00:50:00] When you started, where did gay black men or MSM behaving men fit into the sort of larger demographics of HIV/AIDS in Newark and service providing? We know Newark's always been an underserved city, period. So where did gay black men fit in to that existing infrastructure?

Gary Paul Wright: Existing – when we first started, they didn't fit in at all. I think the only reason now there is so much tension now is because it's – I think the CDC and everybody has realized that what we've been throwing at gay black men has not been working. A lot of the things that – even when we first started doing stuff, we were doing a program called Partners in Prevention was the name of the CDC effective behavioral intervention that we were doing. To me, basically, it was like this is my work for heterosexuals and my work for white boys, but it ain't going to work for the brothers. Then they came out with *Many Men, Many Voices*, which is what we still do now, 3MV. To me, off the record, to me, off the record, 3MV is really just Partners in Prevention in black face. The just threw some key words in there and they said, "Okay, this is for black guys."

[Gary Paul clarifies his meaning here: "I feel the CDC has not really been that responsive to the real needs of gay black men. For instance, to me, *Many Men Many Voices* (3MV) is simple an older intervention, Partners In Prevention, re-purposed in blackface."]

I still think it's lacking. They tried to improve it. But then you know, when you meet the people that actually wrote the damn thing, turns out to be a white woman. It's like – okay, so my fears were like – yeah, she was very sweet. Now, she's talking about

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PrEP, things like that. But it's like, "Okay, you have no idea really what it's like to be a gay black man." My problem now is I don't know what it is to be a young gay black man because I've been married and for 25 years or so, so everything that I'm doing I'm trying to get from the community. Community is still very, very, very suspicious. So now everybody wants us to PrEP and very suspicious about PrEP. Who's going to pay for it? Side effects, dadada. In fact, our Chat-and-Chew, we have monthly groups that we talk about and PrEP is the one on tap for this Wednesday. In fact, I just got this new PrEP thingy and of course, it's mostly white folks. But yeah, I don't know why our community – when I say our community, especially young gay black men – we still haven't gotten on the complete bandwagon. It's like studies have been proven that gay black men still – they use condoms just as much as white folks do. They do this just as much as white folks but because the pool of HIV-infected is so predominant and now it's like there's not a whole lot interracial dating. It's like black on black, white on white, and things like that. The pool of partners that these guys are choosing from, especially if they choose over black gay men, my age and in the '40s, 30's, that age, a lot of them are infected and they don't know about it, or maybe they know about it and don't want to know about it, but that's how all these young ones are being infected. I know the Health Departments always want – they want us to direct the young people, address young people. But to me, I think there's that middle age and that older age generation that's still out there that are still getting it done that are not being that responsible. I know I could probably get in a lot of trouble by saying that, but we assume that because kids have been – because we've been talking about HIV and AIDS for 30 years that these kids growing up know everything there is to

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know about it. They think they know everything there is to know about it. Some knowledge is there but the behavior is still the same. Until we get that behavior to change, it's still going to happen. Even with PrEP, we're going to be pushing PrEP because that's what the CDC wants us to push, that's what the state wants us to push, but we also don't want them to forget about condoms, because now, in fact, we have a call into the State Health Department now. Syphilis rates have risen or stayed steady for gay black men. Chlamydia, gonorrhea. Now there is a strain of gonorrhea – there is a medication that works for everybody except for gay men, not just black gay men, but for gay men for some reason. [00:55:00] Because we've become resistant. There's been so much crap going on that they've become resistant to the new medicine that's out there. It's like, "God, and if this happens with HIV/AIDS, we're really up a creek without a paddle." You know what I mean? So the fight is still there. It would be great if everybody was on PrEP and nobody got diseases but that ain't happening. I don't have the answer to that.

Whitney Strub: Yeah, so let me ask a sort of change over time kind of question. As far as reaching black men who have sex with men in Newark between 2000 and now, how have things changed? What have been the challenges in reaching this demographic and what have you seen as somebody who is in the trenches here in this struggle?

Gary Paul Wright: I think they're still a lot and I hate this term, downlow. But I still think there's a lot of – let me go back. We talked about MSMs, men who have sex with men. We talked about gay men, gay-identified men, gender non-conforming. Or SGL, that's the latest one, this same – what is it?

Whitney Strub: Same gender loving?

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Gary Paul Wright: Same gender loving, yeah. I got a battle with the person who started that whole shit, too. I made some enemies along the way. Anyhow, more people keep saying, “It’s those guys who sleep with white guys [mumbling]. So it was like, well, fuck you. And if you’re so great, why are black men still number one?” Okay. But I think there are still a lot of people who don’t identify as gay who are actually MSMs, men who have sex with men. Now I know the State Health Department, we now want to say these programs are for gay men. So they’re saying gay and bisexual and other men who have sex with men. So they’re keeping that MSM, but I think there’s a lot of guys out there who, for whatever reason, are not out gay people, that are still having sex wherever they can get it. We have sex workers and young and they come in and they tell us stuff. So I think there are still a lot of in the closet. There’s a lot of down low. Even though we keep saying gay men are using condoms, I think they’re still not using condoms. There’s still a lot of raw sex. When a 14-year-old kid says to you, “Oh man, I don’t like condom. I like it raw, man. I like it dirty.” It’s like, “Okay, you’re 14 years old, what do you – what the fuck do you even know about it?” But I get it. I lost my virginity at age like 13, 12 or 13. So I can’t put a kid down for having sex at an early age and enjoying it. In my case, it wasn’t rape. It was like – I didn’t know what the hell and I thought I was pregnant for a while and I thinking, “My parents are going to kill me because I’m going to have a baby. Oh my God. When is it gonna come out?” And I didn’t have anybody around to explain that to me. Anyway, so I can’t put anybody down for having sex at a young age. It happens. It happened to me. Yeah, but then again, in the old days, I just get a shot and you’re done. You’re good to go. You got to wait a couple of weeks but then you’re good to go. But with HIV, it’s

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like lifetime, baby. Anyways, to answer your question, I think we're still at an impasse. I think there's still so much stigma about – not about HIV, about being gay in the black community. It's still there. We made a lot of progress and we have the commissions and all these pro-gay stuff, but deep down inside, I think the community is still like “You're going to hell and Jesus don't like it.” That fundamental black shit is still in the way. I think people are more open to hearing about it because they have no choice. It's staring at our face. But now that it's not the epidemic that it was a few years or now that it's not so much in the white community, we're not hearing about it in the black community. I think it's our community – that's what they're calling the community viral load or whatever the term is. It's still very, very high. Still very, very high. Thank God we made strides. Black women with HIV is on the decrease. Babies being born with HIV is like really almost down to nothing. Thank you, Jesus. [01:00:00] So we made some inroads but for gay black men, and then when you add the transgender whole thing which is, “Oh my God.”

That was something totally new to me. Which is why when we first opened the office, we really were for gay men, black gay men. That's who we wanted to help. That's who – but then you know, somebody's kid started coming in here and we had a couple of transgender affirming posters up there. The bionic woman is my favorite when there was like – and all these posters around here in this office, they're all mine, from my collection. I guess they figured that it was a safe space. So they started coming in and going into the bathrooms and coming out with little wigs and going out to the street, doing a little shopping and a little mopping and running back up in here and things like that. It was like, “Okay, we got something going on here.” All I knew about the trans

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community was drag queens who performed, and things like that. I knew nothing about – I knew there were some who had the operation. Everybody knew about Christine Jorgensen and she was the first one and dadadada and you could actually get a pussy made out of your penis and all this kind of stuff. That’s about all I knew. When these kids – some of these kids would come in drag to our Many Men, Many Voices, to our intervention on a Saturday afternoon but they weren’t getting it. A lot of it wasn’t addressing their problems. It’s like, okay, there’s the dynamic here that we need to like investigate. So I had to like change my tapes. I had to rethink everything. I had to like relearn everything I knew about the trans community. I had no idea about trans men. I knew that it was possible, but I never “met” one. I’ve never really met anybody who had the surgery and all these kind of stuff. So I had to like relearn and then talking to the kids that came in here, and they’re the one to tell us, “Oh, you know, we don’t like hanging there.” The boys would say, “We don’t like hanging around with the girls.” And the girls will, “Oh, we don’t like them boys, but you know, we want to ‘em and all those kind of stuff.” It’s like, “Oh, God.” Then you got the whole ballroom community which is like, “Okay.” You got house mothers and house fathers who were not necessarily male or female. You got butch queens one day and there are fem queens the next day and things like that. It was like, “Oh my God.” There’s still so much work to do. I really wish I could go back in time and really become one of the house members and really get that, but it’s too late for me.

Whitney Strub:

So how has trans awareness impacted AAOGC? What has AAOGC actually done in response to sort of awareness of trans youth in Newark?

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Gary Paul Wright: Well, what we did was we got permission and actually what happened was I hired someone who was trans and actually when this person first – well, Anastasia was who it was. When she first came here, she was a boy. At the time, going through some staff changes and I needed somebody to sit in the front desk and he was available at the time. Very pleasant. I knew every once in a while, he did drag or did, I don't want to say drag, but really drag. But so I hired him and then all of a sudden some of her friends started coming in. All of a sudden she became more and more fem. She was like really left the headrags and became Anastasia from [Demar] was her real name. Some of her friends started coming in. So I was like asking, "What do you all need? What do you want? Blah blah." So we knew that we had to have some sort of intervention for them, specifically for them. I knew that the state had a program for black women called SISTA. S-I-S-T-A. So we asked them if we could do SISTA for our trans girls. So they said, "Well, you could send them to training. We'll see." So we sent Anastasia and Carla who works with me. She's downstairs. Heterosexual. So we sent them to the SISTA training and then we said, "At least let's find out what they're telling the women." Even though we got a trans girl, at least they're identifying as women so we might as well get that information. [01:05:00] Then I heard about the transgender center – no, let's see. The Center of Excellence for Transgender Health at the UCSF, University of California, San Francisco. Joan Keithley and her group. They're like... every congress now – everything anybody does for trans, Joan Keithley's got to be on it. I've since known her and I'm going to see her next week since we're on the same national adviser committee for a group. Anyhow, so we got permission from the state to get training for them because they had adapted

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SISTA for transgenders. So we said, “Okey-dokey.” So they came down and we got permission to have them come down because I guess the state paid for most of the – and they came down and really trained us on how to do an adaptation of the SISTA thing so we ended up having SISTA T. So it’s SISTA but it’s for trans women. So we started that in, I think maybe three or four years. I could get those dates, but we’ve been doing that for a while.

Whitney Strub: That’s 2012-ish roughly?

Gary Paul Wright: Pause. [Audio gap] So, yes, so my staff started getting training around 2011 and so we’ve been doing SISTA ever since then. And it’s hard. It’s hard to recruit because a lot of girls just don’t want to be in the same room to talk about HIV/AIDS. We’ve done okay but it’s tough. It’s tough because they’re all multisession interventions which means they need to – they’re supposed to come back every week and dadada. So we tried changing it to two sessions a week and blah, blah, blah. You start out with eight, you end up with four. Retention is a really, really big problem. Really, really big problem. But one of our successes is Mascara. I don’t know if you know about Mascara. Mascara is the trans forum that we do every year. It’s a one-day symposium we call it. We’ve done it at Rutgers for the last four years maybe. We actually just finished our seventh one. So basically, what it is, it’s an all-day thing and we get funding from the Department of Health to do that. The first one we did, which was seven years ago, we did it on Valentine’s Day and we called it the St. Valentine’s Day Mascara. It was a play on St. Valentine’s Day massacre. But of course, none of the girls got it. It was like us old folks know about that. So it went psssh right over their heads. Anyway, but it was Valentine’s Day and we had a nice little turnout. We used to do that at the

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Academy Street Firehouse. We've done it in a couple of places. When Maren Greathouse got to Rutgers, that's when we first started having it over there. It was just like, "Oh, thank you, Jesus." It's just like being – the last one we had, we had like maybe 130 participants and it was really, really, really good. So we do that every year. This was the first year that – and that's when we started having – we always had a trans woman panel or something like that. Harmonica Sunbeam has been our hostess with the mostest for the last few years. Over the last two years, we've had our trans men panel. This year, we had a trans men keynote speaker, Mr. Chris, from CK Life in Brooklyn or somewhere in New York City. So that's been very, very successful. It's the one event that people really look forward to and it's good for not only consumers or community but also for providers and things like that so they can actually learn stuff about the transgender community from the transgender community. I might say the local girls were like – Rutgers was like willing spend money to bring somebody in, a national figure in. Our planning committee was like, "Oh, fuck that. We want, you know, if you're g pay money, we want the money, we need the money. Keep the money here. Dadadada." So we were like, "oooooh, Community has spoken." I know Maren was like, "But, but, but." It is like, "Maren, they don't want to, you know." She had thrown out a couple of names.

But they were right. So we got a lot of New York girls this past year and it was great. [01:10:00] It was great. I could send you guys the video. I haven't seen the final video yet but, yeah.

Whitney Strub:

No, I know you probably have things to do and I don't know how much time you got, so before we run out of time, I just want to be sure to ask you one other thing, which is local politics in Newark

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and where your work fits into that. When AAOGC started, Sharpe James was mayor. I think it's fair to say that he was fairly, explicitly homophobic, at least a lot of the time. Could you just talk about that? Like where you fit in to the local political structure and community in that way.

Gary Paul Wright: Okay. Pause for just half a second. I'm going to bring something up for you to see. [Audio gap] Okay, this is something that I cite in just about all my presentations. The fact that when we started our office, Sharpe James was the mayor. Bless his heart. A homophobic and even that's like *grrrrr*, and Cory Booker who was a city councilman at that time, he was – because he was unmarried and things like that. Sharpe would refer to him as the faggotty white boy. That's the –

Whitney Strub: Just for the historical – that's a quote.

Gary Paul Wright: That is a quote.

Whitney Strub: Okay.

Gary Paul Wright: That is a quote. I'm sure I could find the original article if you really needed that. But I think –

[Crosstalk – 01:11:26]

Whitney Strub: I think it's from the movie *Street Fight*. It shows it. If I remember.

Gary Paul Wright: You got it. I think it is. Yeah, that's the – Cory turned out to be a good friend, personal to me and Peter, but also to the agency. When we did the Status Is Everything campaign, he allowed us to use the City Hall and we launched it at City Hall and he was our keynote and all those kind of stuff. He was our friend. But when we first got here, it was like there's nothing that we could do was right. We tried to get permits to do outreach. We got kicked out at Penn Station. Anastasia was – they were going to arrest her for solicitation because she had condoms. She was handing out

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condoms. Now, we have to get a permit. We have to like get all the shit with the Police Department and things like that. It still ain't kosher, but I think everybody is just trying to cover their asses and that's okay. Yeah, but it took a while just for us to be accepted as a normal thing. And it really happened during Cory Booker's reign and he started the commission, the LGBTQ commission, which I was on. I was appointed to that the first couple of years. Then Essex County did their commission or the advisory council and I'm still on that right now. So yeah, it was, politically speaking, we were like nobody and we still have never received city funds. Because we're not care and treatment, we can't get Ryan White Funds and there was – at one point, they said, "Come down," and when Dana Rone was on the City Council, she actually – bless her heart – she actually worked to try to get us one of those community block grants and we were like this close to an award. We went to a big meeting and things like that. We had to stand up and, "Oh, yeah, the gay people are here. We're going to be part of the city." Yeah, then we get a letter saying, "Oh, you filled out the wrong form and you did this wrong, you did this wrong, and dadada, and the time is up now. So you know, fuck you." That's really what it felt like. Then just so you know – I'll share this with you. Then the minute that our new director – I know and I guess I was just known as a Cory Booker person. Even though I wrote a letter that was printed in Star-Ledger and Cory's people got really pissed at me because I wrote an article in the Star-Ledger and it basically said the mayor promised us a center. He's promised us this and that.

Whitney Strub: Yeah, I remember that.

Gary Paul Wright: Okay. Man, I got in big trouble like – oh man. Bari Mattes [Cory Booker's campaign manager] still won't speak to me. I don't

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know if Cory will speak to me anymore, but it was like, “Oh my God.” Then Ras [Baraka] got into town and let me show you this. The week that he, almost like the day after he was elected, I got this letter. [01:15:00] I got that letter the week – I got it that Monday that we were doing Gay Pride here in Newark because we don’t do it in June, we do it like in July or whatever and I got that right at the end of May.

Whitney Strub: So this is a letter from May 2015 from Joseph Divin...

Gary Paul Wright: Oh, wrong one. Wrong one.

Whitney Strub: Okay. I wasn’t sure where the mayor -

Gary Paul Wright: Yeah, from the mayor. Which one is the...

Whitney Strub: This one’s got Ras Baraka’s stamp on the back.

Gary Paul Wright: But this is July. This is what I got. The first one I got. This is the good one. This, I mean, yeah. This is...

Whitney Strub: Wow. So I’ll just read the key section of this. This is from Ras Baraka, Mayor of Newark. July 7, 2014. Dear Gary Paul Wright, I hope this letter finds you well. On behalf of the City of Newark, please accept our appreciation for your service and dedication to the LGBTQ Advisory Commission. As we prepare to transition the city while maintaining the beacon set forth by past legacies, we have found ourselves at difficult crossroads. In bold print, effective immediately, end bold print, your services on the LGBTQ Advisory Commission will no longer be required. Wow. So what’s the story there?

Gary Paul Wright: You got me. Then it goes on to say isn’t it great being a mayor? Actually, so what happened was I posted it on Facebook. I said, “Oh, wow, looks like the new mayor [mumbling].” So now I started getting all these phone calls. Saying, “No, no, no, you weren’t supposed to get that letter.” Remember, this is the start of Gay Pride week here in Newark and there were really only a

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handful of people like really working. People like Perris [Straughter] and Reverend Jackson and things like that, but the commission was the one putting on that – I thought, “Okay. Well, if you don’t want me fired, I got no problem with that.” Ain’t it great being a mayor? Then I got this phone call. “Oh, no, no, no. You weren’t supposed to get that letter. We need you and can you decorate City Hall and can you do this?” We actually – City Hall looked fabulous and we could find pictures from that day. But the week went off great and everything like that and I thought, “Okay. Everything is fine and I’m still Commissioner.” It was September I got that letter.

Whitney Strub: Whoa. September 23, 2014. Once again? However, at this time your services to the LGBTQ Commission are no longer needed.

Gary Paul Wright: Okay. So it’s fine. All right. We gave you your goddamn show. Now, you don’t need me again. I keep these just to remind me, the good stuff that I do do and I’m going to give you a copy of that. I have no problem with them, okay? But it’s just so funny is that I get this one and then all of a sudden it’s, “Oh no, no, no, no. We need you. We need you. We need you.” So we do what we needed to do and then they go, “Okay, we don’t need you.” I was like, “Okay. I understand that different regimes need different people. But it’s like, “Okay.” So I really haven’t heard anything from City Hall since.

Whitney Strub: Yeah. So what’s the commission been doing under Mayor Baraka?

Gary Paul Wright: Actually, you know what, I’m going to say this. I take that back because I did get a call from Sue Stewart, who I think she is – I don’t know if she’s chair of commission now or just on the commission, but she’s actually trying to put together some sub committees. She said, “You know, we need you and we need your

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input and..." She's going to be sending me some stuff.

Unofficially, they'll still ask me for my input and my help. But officially, she told me, "You know, we aren't the ones that do the committees or the commissions and things like that. So we have to go to the back door and things like that." The people that are on the commission now are still my friends or acquaintances. I said I'll work with them. It was just kind of dirty by the way that it happened. I don't think if I hadn't put it on Facebook...

Whitney Strub: Right. Using social media to shame.

Gary Paul Wright: You know what I mean? It was all politics. But I try not to play politics. I really don't give a fuck. But anyhow, shit happens. Anyway, yeah.

Whitney Strub: So what else have I not asked you about that I should ask?

Gary Paul Wright: Well, let's see. It had to do with Queer Newark, right?

Whitney Strub: Yeah, yeah.

Gary Paul Wright: **[01:20:00]** I don't know. I hate that everything that I do is framed around HIV/AIDS, but that's the only gay money that I'm getting. I'm not really getting any real support from the community. It's not really the community's fault. I haven't really begged for it. We are accepted in Newark and surrounding areas. For instance, East Orange, I'm always doing stuff in East Orange. Everybody wants us on Black AIDS Awareness Day and shit like that. Essex County, Rutgers. I think they've all made LGBT strides in the last few years and I really think that AAOGC, as small as we are, we have been very, very – a big part of that. The fact that I just ended up being chair of the HIV Prevention Group, even with that group which is a state group, we started the MSM workgroup. Now, it's a whole MSM committee. That's some of the things we started. And the visibility and of course, the transgender outreach now. Other agencies have hired transgender people but they haven't

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really had a trans program. NJCRI with project WOW, they've got a dynamic person over there, Tyra Gardner. I think she's dynamite. I think she's very young, very loud, very brash. But she's of the house community and the children listen to her. If I had somebody like that on my staff, I would love it.

[REDACTED section, in which Gary Paul comments on how hard it is to keep a competent staff, and that last year, returning from vacation, two of my staff were recruited by another, larger agency (who shall remain nameless), which actually left me with half of my staff. Months later, we still have not fully recovered.]

But anyway, so we need to rebuild our trans thing right now. But what I did, up until last month, I did still have somebody trans on board. She left and I didn't replace her with another trans person because my job is not to fill a position just for the trans person. I think I let the boys down over the last couple of years because I've been doing so much for the trans community that I need to revisit why we started this in the first place. Now, I have two guys. We do testing now, HIV testing. We didn't do it when we opened. We now do HIV testing, rapid testing and we need to like create more programs for the guys. So now I have two new staff members. They are getting trained now with the state. This year, we're a little slow starting off because our grant period with state – excuse me, just a sec. We're good.

Whitney Strub: We're back on.

Gary Paul Wright: I don't get treated this well often, so. And you're nice enough looking that – I'm serious. If you were an ugly son of a bitch, you would not still be here, okay?

Whitney Strub: That stays on the record. I'm actually putting that on my CV.

Gary Paul Wright: Okay. Yes. Not ugly, okay. I'm just kidding. But I will say when I first started with my training with HIV/AIDS at GMHC, the guy there was doing my initial training, all about – talking about GRID.

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His name was Barry Gingell. He was an MD and he was the most handsome person you ever want to see in your life. He was like a ton also of all these things. We we're all going to be dead by the end of the day, but it was like, "Thank you God for sending an angel to deliver this message." Anyway, it helps.

Whitney Strub: This is sort of shifting gears but taking up from that, you've got a very upbeat disposition about your work. But you've obviously seen a lot of suffering and death. How do you navigate that? How do you stay positive and charming in the face of decades now watching what you've seen, people suffer and die?

Gary Paul Wright: Well, truthfully, it's just my nature. Even when I was on Planning Council or anything that I do, there's always just a little humor in what I do only because I feel like you can learn, but you can still have fun in learning. Sometimes, a little joke here and a little joke there as long as it's not improper, it helps. It goes a long way. [01:25:00] I think it also had to do with just like facilitation trainings and things like that. If you come on with fire and brimstone, people are – they may listen to you, they may not listen to you. They're going to be scared of you and things like that. No, I think, having a little sense of humor or just being as – it's a personality thing. I can't help it. But no, I guess it does help when you're dealing with doom and gloom all the time, it can stress you out. All kinds of things. I admit, I do take a lot of my stuff home. I'm on BELSOMRA or whatever that sleeping pill is or whatever because I got insomnia. I do have a sleep aid. But... yeah, yeah... And Peter and I, we also kind of – one of the things we make sure we do is we have dinner every day. We have dinner together. Even if I have a meeting to go to, we'll eat later, whatever. We try to – I don't want to say vent. – What's the word I'm looking for? Debrief. We try to debrief because he tells me about his patients.

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What he does now is he works for the FXP Center at UMDNJ, which stands for Francois-Xavier Bagnoud Center. They are like an HIV Center. They work with the AIDS Education and Training Centers as well. But he also has clients, he also has patients. He runs the family clinic, HIV clinic for the FXP. He sees patients all the time, too. We do have a cocktail hour every goddamn day, I'm going to tell you. Then we let loose.

So that helps. It helps having a partner involved in the same stuff that you're involved in.

Whitney Strub: Are you still living in Jersey City or you guys live at...

Gary Paul Wright: No, we live in South Orange. We lived in Jersey City until... I think 1999 we moved to – we got a house, we bought a house. Well, mortgage company owns the house, but so we got – we became homeowners in 1999. We live in South Orange, three dogs...

Whitney Strub: On a personal level, so how has life been as an interracial gay couple in South Orange, or socially in Newark?

Gary Paul Wright: I don't know. I mean, I do know but it's been not a problem for us. Because, I don't know maybe because of who Peter is. He's British. He's from England.

Whitney Strub: Okay. It disarms Americans just by being...

Gary Paul Wright: Kinda, sorta

Whitney Strub: Different already.

Gary Paul Wright: He went to Princess Diana's wedding.

Whitney Strub: Oh my!

Gary Paul Wright: That's a whole chapter there. He worked for Di's father, Lord Althorp, I mean, Lord Spencer because he had an aneurysm and almost died and Peter was a "male nurse" in London and they needed somebody to do private duty for him so Peter got the gig. He ended up going to live with Althorp for a while and that's

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where he met Diana and he was working for the family when she met Charles and got engaged. So he got to go to the wedding. In fact, when she died – I wish I – I keep to trying to find it on YouTube or whatever. So long ago, but when she died, Channel 7 News came to our house and Joe Torres or whatever his name was, came and watched the funeral at our house. This cameraman was really cute. Oh man, this Asian guy is just – oh, man. He had these little shorts on. Anyway, so Peter was interviewed and so the news program for the news telecast that evening, Peter was a big portion of it and it was showing the casket going down and Peter's voice is in the background. They have a picture of the Christmas card Di had sent us with Prince William, his first Christmas. So it was really cute. Anyhow...

Whitney Strub: Wow.

Gary Paul Wright: Back to your question. So having that and me being who I am, I had dreadlocks before the all hip guys started wearing – when I started wearing dreads, everybody was bald. Then I thought it was like so cute and all of a sudden, like hip hop got into dreads and it was like – so now these guys are walking around with this hair and mine is falling out. So fuck you all. So yes, we're just – we're kind of like – [01:30:00] But also I think, one of the things going for us is we've been together for so long here in Newark and everybody knows who we are, is that we're kind of like, I don't want to say role models, but we are. I'm hoping that some of the young people growing up can say, "Oh, I want to get married. I want to..." How long have you guys been together – 25 years, ah damn. Things like that.

So we're happy with that. We do not mind being the older gay couple. But now as far as living in South Orange and like that, actually we're kind of at a disadvantage because all of the gay

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families there, they all have children. It was like, “Oh, my God.” I remember going to a concert at South Orange PAC, SOPAC, and it was like a gay event. I can’t remember the name of the group. It’s an a cappella. What was it? Something wire, Live Wire. No. Something – anyway, wire something. They’re all string instruments but they’re all gay. Fabulous. Cute, too. We knew there’s going to be a lot of gay couples there just because it was a gay group. We’re like sitting there and everybody is like, “Oh, yeah. We have to do a diorama for such and such classes and...” Everybody’s got little kids and we’re like sitting, like, “Oh, my God. We just have dogs.” We felt so inadequate. But South Orange is a great place. We live three blocks from Seton Hall and we have students living next door, which has been a problem. It’s not a problem now. We got a good bunch of kids now. But we’ve had sororities and fraternities and I was in the evening Star-Ledger on a story about Seton Hall kids. God, I hated them. I hated South Orange for a little while. But everybody got over it. Anyway...

Whitney Strub: Okay, you mentioned the attitude in LA in the ‘80s about – other black men being suspicious of you, being involved with white men. Do you encounter that in Newark still or not?

Gary Paul Wright: I have not.

Whitney Strub: No? Okay.

Gary Paul Wright: But since I’ve been here, I’ve been with one partner so I wouldn’t notice it. None of the kids that I know of here are involved in interracial relationships. None.

Whitney Strub: Right. That’s why I asked, because there is such segregation.

Gary Paul Wright: If you talk to like James Credle, who’s been around forever. I will say he’s been around longer than I have, at least in this area. I first met him, when I first knew him was through black and white men together.

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Whitney Strub: Right.

Gary Paul Wright: Then of course, men of all colors together, MACT. He might be able to tell you a little bit more the local history about that. .

Whitney Strub: Yeah. We will be having an interview with James. He's great.

Gary Paul Wright: But no, I haven't had to. I mean, yeah. I haven't noticed it or— it ain't happen and actually to me, I just don't think it's happening. We had to go to a wedding in London over the holiday, this summer, and we thought we're going to be the only gay integrated couple there. We were like so proud but then it turns out that it was a friend of the family. The oldest son was getting married. Well, it turns out that his best man was a black gay man from Africa and his white lover, Isaac, was from Nicaragua or somewhere. So it was like goddamnit. You stole our thunder. We thought we're going to be the only ones. Now we're the old ones. [...]

Whitney Strub: Well, Gary Paul, I just want to thank you for doing this interview. It's been a real pleasure to hear the stories. I think it's going to add so much to the Queer Newark Oral History Project archive. Thank you so much.

Gary Paul Wright: Okay. You're welcome. /AT/rj/jn