

Queer Newark Oral History Project

Interviewee: Aminah Washington

Interviewed: Jason Boehm

Date: April 24, 2017

Location: African American Office of Gay Concerns, Newark, NJ

Aminah Washington: Should I close the door?

Jason Boehm: If you want to. You don't have to if you don't want to.

Aminah Washington: It's up to you. I'm gonna close it from the outside sounds.

Jason Boehm: Okay. This is Jason Boehm. I'm interviewing—

Aminah Washington: Aminah Washington.

Jason Boehm: -for the Queer Oral History Newark Project. We are at the African American of Gay—African American Office of Gay Concerns of Newark under the direction of Gary Paul Wright. It is April the 24th, 2017. Okay. Thank you again for doing this.

Aminah Washington: You're welcome.

Jason Boehm: My first question is going to be when and where were you born?

Aminah Washington: Newark, New Jersey at Beth Israel Hospital. It was in 1985.

Jason Boehm: Okay. Who raised you? Where did you grow up? What was your—

Aminah Washington: Family.

Jason Boehm: -environment?

Aminah Washington: Family. Newark. Very urban. Very, very urban. Hands-on been raised, even to this day, by my grandmother. My dad's mom.

Yeah. Urban. I grew up on the south side—South Ward which would be considered the Hawthorne Aves, Clinton Avenues. Our little clique, hood area was called—considered then Nowhere Ave. It's in the Bergen Street to Elizabeth Avenue area from Ridgewood, Badger, Jelliff, so forth and so on—stuff like that.

Jason Boehm: Would you describe your experiences as a child as pre-teen and teenager to be conducive to the rest of the people within your community or did you notice anything—did you feel separate from everyone else at any point in time during your youth?

Aminah Washington: During my youth. Should I start from grade school or—

Jason Boehm: Yeah. Wherever you want. You can go as far back as you want.

Aminah Washington: Well, for me, I've always felt different—in general. Period. I refuse to be the statistic or like anyone else. Ain't no one can do what I do. I do what I do. I don't wanna do what everyone else does. Growin' up, I felt different but I was very relatable. It was very relatable. Our neighborhood generally—we're close-knit. People we grew up that lived in the second floor in our same house—we lived in the first floor—the whole time for years on years. They had kids. We've had kids. Our kids, they grow up as cousins. We grew up as cousins. It was different, but not too far off different. It was more so like a lotta the stuff like as far seeing different aspects of the world and branchin' out was what was the difference between me and a lotta the—growin' up.

Jason Boehm: When you noticed any kind of differences or like your perception was off of what would be considered the mainstream perception,

were there any adults—any people in your life that you felt like were role models or were inspirational to you in any way?

Aminah Washington: Yeah. Of course. Of course my grandma—she's the type of woman I aspire to be when I look at inspirations in a role model aspect. Then there are my teachers who stuck with me from grade school/elementary all the way through to high school like my music teacher, Ms. Kane. She's the reason I'm so heavy into music—all aspects of it be it dance, be it instrumental, modeling, as comfort—all that. Yeah. My grandmother and a few of my teachers.

Jason Boehm: Okay. That's awesome. Was there any role religion played in your life in any way?

Aminah Washington: Well, I am Christian. In the beginning when—I think it's kinda the same with everyone where you grow up—when you're growing up, when you're in between 5 to maybe 15, 16 your parents, your grandparents, and the church is the way to go and do this and do that. For me it was more so like—we went to church, but we went to church as fun—me and my cousins—as it was something to do. Whereas it wasn't pushed on us. At this point in time, yeah, I still am Christian. I do follow my religion. However, I'm not always in church.

Jason Boehm: In keeping with that theme of religion, do you feel like your interpretation of Christianity is not exactly what would be considered the main theme interpretation?

Aminah Washington: Yes. Definitely not. Definitely not. Definitely not. [00:05:00] I feel as though it's over—what? 50 versions of the book of the Bible—

different versions, different creeds of each version. Everyone's saying different stuff. I truly believe within myself there's only one-way to live and that's to whomever your creator—the words in which they were put forth for you to live. For me it's completely different.

Jason Boehm: Okay, yeah. That's awesome. Now being somebody who's lived in Newark your entire life—

Aminah Washington: Yes.

Jason Boehm: Yes. What's your sense and feeling of Newark throughout your life? Do you feel like it's changed a lot? Do you feel like it's changed very little?

Aminah Washington: A pretense to the understanding of the how it's viewed and the things we have going on as far as safety, as far as like understandin', as far as monuments, yes—completely it's changed. It's getting better. However, it does have some negative changes as well. But change? Yes, definitely. That's consistent. That's to be expected 'cuz in time, all things change.

Jason Boehm: That's very sage advice there. That's true. The changes that you feel have been negative, is that more systemic or is it the gentrification process that's taking place by and large part to due to Rutgers. *[Laughter]*

Aminah Washington: A little bit of both because sometimes—you know what works or you know what would've been a better outcome. Like I said, consistently, time changes everything. Rutgers has a little bit to do with it, but see, I love Rutgers because they're always on it.

They're always looking. They're always trying to do the studies and take the next step and push to get a better understandin'. Yeah. To answer your question, yes. It has. It is.

Jason Boehm: Alright. Since we're on the topic of Newark, what would you say is the earliest memory of Newark for you? Something that really sticks with you that is symbolic of Newark?

Aminah Washington: Monuments only? Landmarks? Or just in general?

Jason Boehm: Anything. It could be a hot dog vendor. Anything. *[Laughter]*

Aminah Washington: Okay, well it's so crazy that you said that 'cuz the food—back then we had John's Place. We don't really have that good, good food for—Just Fish isn't even the same no more. As far as monuments—yes. The Prudential Center. I love that they bought an arena and it's not just the all Prudential Center—the aspects of just the finances or the office building.

Then it was the biggest in Newark. For us that was like, “Oh! That's a landmark.” That and then the Woolworth there used to be which is no longer. As far as in general—somethin' that's symbolic to me? Always, always, always, always, always, always going to be the Saturday night hangout when I was a kid. Jersey Fried. It's a chicken shack. That was when we didn't really have too many chicken vendors or chicken spots you can go in and grab a bite to eat and stuff like that.

That place has forever been there. The people. I've grew up with their kids and their kids' kids and stuff like that. That for me is just like—it's always good to see a familiar face.

Jason Boehm: That's cool—like community within a community.

Aminah Washington: Exactly.

Jason Boehm: That's cool.

Aminah Washington: Yeah.

Jason Boehm: That's cool. Is there anywhere in Newark that you associate with LGBTQ communities or culture?

Aminah Washington: Well, back then there used to be Broad and Market. It was considered the gay corner—the LGBT corner. Shout out to Sakia Gunn [who was brutally murdered in 2003] when all that happened.

Jason Boehm: Yeah.

Aminah Washington: Not so much now Broad and Market, but then it would have been Broad and Market. Now a days I could say it's the NJCRI area, which is located on Bergen—no. Central and First Street. That more so because that vast community right there—it's not only just another center like such—predominantly most of the LGBTQ community do live in that area. That starts the beginning—middle of north Newark, but not too far from downtown. Yeah. I would consider that to be LGBT-based orientated area.

Jason Boehm: Then I'm gonna move into just [00:10:00] more LGBTQ kind of questions—

Aminah Washington: Okay.

Jason Boehm: -if that's alright. How would you describe your sexual orientation or gender identify?

Aminah Washington: Sexual orientation is me. I'm into me because at the end of the day orientation comes from the aspect into which you're attracted to. For me, I'm more into me. I'm a people person. I don't really have an orientation as far as sexual goes. Gender expression and gender identification I am a transgender woman—African American. It took me some time to be completely comfortable with that. I'm comfortable with that. I'm a transgender woman. Trans is the new in-thing.

Jason Boehm: Could you extrapolate? Could you add to that? What do you mean it's the new in-thing?

Aminah Washington: Every day or on norm, not just in New Jersey, more and more people are living in their truth. Via it be transgender female or transgender male—more and more people are living in their true. Trans as a vast umbrella is the new in-thing. It's a way of self-expression and to better understand who you are. For me, when I say it's the new in-thing, it's more about—it's more respected. Not everyone understands it. Not everyone is willing to understand, but this goes with over time and from then to now it has gotten better. Like I said, over time—however now it is more on the forefront. Now we have people on TV. We have advocates who are really getting the understanding or trying to push the understanding for respect when it comes to trans communities and/or non-gender conforming persons.

Jason Boehm: Do you feel then that the activism that is taking shape around the trans community is by and large been positive and is being—it's making headway?

Aminah Washington: I'm not 100 percent positive. The shit that Trump has—I can say that?

Jason Boehm: Oh, yeah. You can say whatever you want.

Aminah Washington: The shit that Trump has us going through in trying to restrict the trans community from—that's not positive. However, we have now more come to the forefront. It is a bigger understanding on some aspects. Whereas before they classed and grouped being transgender, which is self-identification, with being a cross dresser and/or a transvestite, which is completely different things. People don't know that. They don't understand that. They're not knowledgeable about that. That's what creates the issues when it comes to activism and people being able to present the comfortability and living in their truth.

Jason Boehm: That's awesome. I like that term—living in your truth. I think that's a very powerful statement. I think a lot of people, regardless of sexual orientation, wear a mask every day.

Aminah Washington: That's so crazy that you said because I was just thinking when you said the whole aspect about the trans being able to be understood—what does it mean that trans is the new thing. You can still identify and have the self-expression that you are a transgender person or a gender non-confirming and don't have an orientation and/or still like the opposite sex.

At the end of the day, it's about living in your truth. You don't

have to be transgender to live in your truth as long as you're true to yourself and how you identify. Identify is the theory in which you present and for which people should be able to reciprocate and have that understanding that—to call you or to respect what you're presenting to them. Yeah.

Jason Boehm: How did you first become aware of that aspect of yourself where you knew that at one point you were not being true to yourself and you wanted to be true to yourself? Or do you feel that you have always been true to yourself?

Aminah Washington: In life we learn and we go through some stepping-stones. Your first time around the mulberry bush is not always the easiest. It's not always gonna be all smiles and rainbows. For me, I always stay true to who I am when it came to doing what I needed to do and focusing on me. However, when I first took that step and made up my mind and never looked back—that transitioning to come full circle was what I wanted to do—was when I actually graduated high school.

It was at that moment that I felt as though I've played and I've respected the rules and understandin' of society's—how they would portray—want me to portray. Whereas at this point I've achieved getting my education. I'm taking the next step to become an adult. Why not present myself in the manner in which—the way I would feel more comfortable [00:15:00] as well as want to be respected. For me, it was after high school, age of 17. It was, I wanna say, September—in August, early September 2003 when I was like, “Hey. This is where I'm at. I'm about to start college. Let me just get into me on those levels.”

Jason Boehm: Now when you became aware of this and you said, “Alright, I’m gonna be me,”—

Aminah Washington: Mm-hmm.

Jason Boehm: -it was 2003? Do you feel like there were people who led the way for you to make that transition easier or was it a total nightmare? How was the transition process for you?

Aminah Washington: It’s still a total nightmare.

Jason Boehm: [Laughter]

Aminah Washington: However, in terms of someone prior to me to make it a little easier—I won’t say per se it was what made it easier. For me it was the comfortability and understanding of my peers around me who were already transitioned and who were—who did have the proper tools and the proper guidelines to lead me in the right direction. I can say I have been blessed with people, who actually were willing to take the bull by the horn and support me through it. Not everyone has that walk and that same understanding and the same sense of guidance. Whereas for me, I did have that available to me.

It’s not easy. It’s still sometimes is a nightmare—still sometimes. A lot of thoughts and confusion go on in your mind. However, at that point in time—I did have a little guidance. It’s more so about finding a path and following it all the way through.

Jason Boehm: That guidance, did that from people you had known most of your life? Was it a new community that you had—

Aminah Washington: Aha! [Laughter] The guidance for me—because outside of society and everything, I am into the ballroom scene. The ballroom scene is alternative lifestyle transitioning when it comes to the aspect of arts and theaters. Ballroom scene acquires—it's about vogue and modelin' and best dress and sex siren and an aspect of realness—the new thing that everyone's so focused on.

Realness is the understandin' to which—how far along you've come in your transition to see if you've and/or whoever your opponent is clockable so to speak. That's in the aspect if you look like a man or if you—your process is working for you. I had my friends in the ballroom scene, who I grew close to over time.

While I was in high school—once I actually did graduate and I actually did make that decision, those were the ones who were in my inner circle who we communicated with. On that level, that was the time where I'd say it still is a nightmare sometime. It's certain vast situations—certain situations in general in life where you just don't fit in with your immediate family or biological family. That's when you create a family of your own or you become a part of an outside family. That's what the ballroom scene kind of was, too.

When it came to those support systems, it was close friends who I stayed in touch with—who stayed in touch with me who were willing to see me through it. Extended family so to speak.

Jason Boehm: Is that your family now?

Aminah Washington: Yes. Yes. Yes. Yes, it is. We communicate. We do the things that matter as well as we continue to try to stay focused in real life. The only thing I will say with the ballroom scene, even though that was the support system sometimes—people can't distinguish the difference between fairy tale and reality. For me, I'm able to not

teeter-totter on that line and get sucked in. I still continue to stay focused.

Jason Boehm: Now, what do you mean by the fantasy and reality in terms of—

Aminah Washington: Ballroom scene, it's just all fun and games. For me it's always been the aspect to dress up and let off some steam be it voguing or being just being around a whole bunch of high energy, nice costumes and stuff like that. Whereas after it's all said and done—'cuz you only rent a space—it's just like when you do a symposium. You have that space for X amount of time. You gotta make it happen within that time, have your fun, mix and mingle, and then you gotta get right back to the drawing board for the next event or for the next day-to-day—so forth and so on. When I say the term fantasy and reality—it's like, that's only temporary. It's only about the fun—the games. You can't say, "Hey, I walk this ball, and I want that ball," [00:20:00] and that speaks volumes over having a high school diploma and/or ACT—ETC. That's crazy.

Jason Boehm: Right. Now the ballroom scene as it has been playing out for you through your life, how much is it a part of your life? Is it a major part of your life?

Aminah Washington: Out of the 100 percent? Right now today it's maybe—maybe 8 percent of my life. As it stands within the ballroom scene, yeah I have obtained a status. By status I mean like of relevancy of it comes to—it's star, statements, legends, icons, hall of famers. It's like in the music industry—an A list, a B list, a C list, a legend, an icon—stuff like that. That's what it is. It's kind of like the same. For me, yes. 7, 8 percent. I say that because I am the type of

woman—I aspire to be the type of woman who’s established. Who’s not working paycheck to paycheck and who’s not a statistic transgender woman that has to or relies on street work or extracurricular or prostitution period for my means of living? It’s not that way for me.

Jason Boehm: Then for your, as you’re transitioning—was there a period where you were more heavily involved in the ballroom scene and then you kind of, for lack of a better term, matured and started to come out of it?

Aminah Washington: Yes. Yes. Yes. Yeah, because you know what? Being LGBTQ is so many components. It’s so many trials and tribulations. People think that all, for lack of better terms, gay people are completely happy. No, we got blue life. All gay people are not HIV positive either. Those are the statistics they throw at us. However, you know for me that was just the time of my life where I was searching to find and to fit and to get on my path. Yeah, I walked functions, balls, and those and had fun. I won. I met great people along the way. However, I just know that that wasn’t the last stop for me.

I also felt as though you can do all these things and travel here and travel across the world for balls, but when it boils down to it, living in your truth has to consist of more than just staying in a fantasy world. You have to be able to balance and you have to understand that, “Hey, I can still live in my truth, but I can still blend in with society and do what needs to be done in real life.” I refuse to be the type of—if a person working a 9:00-2:00 or 9:00-5:00 can get them a car, why can’t I work to get me a car?

If a person is communicatin’ that hey they wanna go to school for their bachelor’s or master’s—I can do the same. For me, that’s

where it was just like, “Okay, I can dip in, but it’s not main focus.” I know what I mean—what I want to do, what I’m aspirin’ to do in real life. Being at the balls is not gonna be conducive to that. For me it was like—enough.

Jason Boehm: The perception of your identity has changed over time—for you personally?

Aminah Washington: For me. Yes. For me personally, yes. That’s the thing. You get some people who’ve seen me on these ballroom dvds or clips, and they only go on what they’ve seen or what they think they know based on ballroom scene. Life is so much more than just in the moment. That’s another aspect of fantasy and reality. Fantasy is for the time being. Reality is gonna consistently keep coming. That’s how it all becomes the aspect in which time is consistently changing. People don’t think like that.

Jason Boehm: That’s a good point. Then what do you like best about your self, your identify, who you are?

Aminah Washington: Well, I don’t actually like, I adore the fact that I’m my own person—that over time I was able to hold grasp of what works for me and stay in my own lane when it comes to it. I can give a number of girls advice, but it’s totally up to them to take what they need from the advice and make it their own. And vice verse. For me I adore the aspect that I am myself. I don’t attempt, strive, try, or any of that nature to be or do what anyone else likes for me to do. [00:25:00] Then the fact that I’m a little hardheaded. It works in my favor because you know? Only I know what works for me just as God knows what works for me. I can’t say, “Hey, do this, this, this and this and this and it’s gonna work for you,” ‘cuz

you are you. For me being independent is what I absolutely adore about myself.

Jason Boehm: Do you find conversely there's things that are challenging?

Aminah Washington: When I'm independent?

Jason Boehm: Yeah, in terms of just being you. What do you find most challenging on—day-to-day, let's say?

Aminah Washington: That's crazy 'cuz I don't really think—I wouldn't consider it to be challengin' but it is an annoyance at the fact that, for me and being me, I've been burnt to the point where it's just like—it's in my nature to be nice and to be humble and to do what works for me. Sometimes my—no, quite a bit my kindness gets takes for a weakness. That, to me, on a day-to-day—that's why sometimes I just get to the point I don't really wanna be bothered with people. It's like you could lead a horse to water but you can't make him drink. What's the point of me presenting and providing my time to take this horse to the water if ultimately in the back of your head you already what you're not gonna do or what you're not willing to do. I would say that is what becomes more challenging. I try to balance the aspect and continuin' to be nice but still try not to discredit or—still try to attempt to be that support for the next generation or someone who may come to me for that advice.

Jason Boehm: That must be even harder being—given where we are right now—given what you do.

Aminah Washington: Yeah.

Jason Boehm: You're kind of immersed in that every, single day.

Aminah Washington: Yeah. Yeah. You know what it is? Working in a community-based organization in general, even for healthcare providers, transgenders are not at the forefront for everything. They're the least pop—the population that's at the bottom of the totem pole. I find that sometimes we kinda get that statistic and just take on it without tryin' to change it. The trans don't really care to want and/or receive the beneficial health.

That quickly is the issue because it's like I can do A, B, C. You might have to do D, E, F. If you're not willing to do D, E, F what was the point of me doing A, B, C? That is where it just becomes like, "Well, I'm here for my job," but it's more so I'm like, "Ugh, I'm strugglin'." Even though it's a job, that don't necessarily mean that I'm all into doing the job. That for me is a day-to-day struggle 'cuz it's like, I love my job. I also feel as though I can only do what I can do. I can do my part. Anything else outside of my part, it's totally outta my hands.

Jason Boehm: With those challenges that you're speaking of, do you feel like those challenges come from a perception that people have of the trans community—that gets inspired by that? The people that you meet, especially younger people—where they're trying to fill a role where they feel that even though it's outside of the dominant norm, they think, "Oh, well trans people should be like this," or, "This is how I'm going to be." Or is it just human nature? Or is it a byproduct of living in Newark? What do you think makes the majority of people that you work with follow—go down the hard road so to speak, as opposed to trying to aspire to know their truth, to be successful?

Aminah Washington: I find them within the transgender community specifically in Newark because this is my norm—this is the norm around—everyone’s so crucial and so critical on each other than rather than to try to build each other, especially with the younger generation, they’d rather be in competition with each other, not realizin’ that at the end of the day, whatever path each individual take, it’s totally theirs. You’re in competition for nothin’—pointless when you could be trying to build each other up as opposed to break each other down.

Then you sit here and you’re in this person’s face momentarily. Then low and behold you’re sittin’ here and the next group or around the next set of people and you’re talkin’ about this person and then that’s where it becomes you build—you break yourself and others down from within. It’s a product of—for one, not just—it’s not just Newark, [00:30:00] but I see it more so in Newark ‘cuz it’s where I’m born and raised, but it’s a product of the aspect of not wanting—not wanting, not really caring. You focus on the complete and wrong thing. Then at that point it becomes your loss. Being lost is—it will restrict any and everyone considerin’--hey, you’re not tryin’ to put your best foot forward for takin’ that initiative. That’s just what I think.

Jason Boehm: Do you think that that is kind of indicative of, for example, when you look at a poor community where there’s not a lot of money or systemic support of any kind regardless of any of the other demographics—you’ll see that competitiveness going on. Everyone’s looking to get their little bit.

Aminah Washington: Right.

Jason Boehm: Whereas if everyone came together and had some solidarity, they'd probably all—

Aminah Washington: Grow better. Yup.

Jason Boehm: -universally achieve more. Do you think it's a combination of the culture of Newark and the culture of the trans community combined? I guess what I'm driving at here—do you feel like there is, systemically speaking, you've been so ousted as a community that you're isolated and because you live in this isolated environment, it breeds that kind of contempt?

Aminah Washington: Yeah. That's exactly what it is. That's exactly what it is, but it's for all the wrong reasons. It's not what people call you. It's what you answer to. You don't have to sit in here just because you're ousted and take on that aspect and then the same thing that society do to you, you do within your community. It's just like, eh, now you can't feel no kinda way if society's doin' it 'cuz you're doin' it yourself. That's what it all boils down to.

Jason Boehm: That's a good point. What do you think, then, trans women's place is in the umbrella of the entire community itself, both the community of Newark and the LGBTQ community? If you had to classify in terms of relevancy or impact, whether positive or negative. Do you feel like there's a social stigma? Or is there a general conception among trans women?

Aminah Washington: It's a social stigma, and the general conception, because people, for one, don't understand. Just because you may dress a certain way, does not classify you as a trans. Just because you may not dress a certain kinda way does not classify you as a trans. It's all

about identification. Whereas in the same understandin', if let's say a trans person is—I'll use myself. Whereas I walk down the street and I work here—the heart of Newark. [Extraneous conversation: “So have them fill out the papers, and then bring it down”]

I work here in the heart of Newark. When I walk down the street I can speak to every, single person outside. Every, single person outside will speak to me and they respect me as Miss. Whereas you'll get others who may not, A. look the part or may not carry themselves as the part. They would purposely either be disrespectful to people and people don't necessarily have to be disrespectful to them, but it's more on how you portray yourself when it comes to those aspects. It's kind of different because you know what? The girls that were before me that I've kind of had the guidance by—it's a completely different breed. It could be being a product of Newark partially, but you know what? You're only just a small percentage of what you allow yourself to be consumed by. For me, I can't honestly say on that aspect because nowadays it's a lot of the younger trans that are all over here. It's this, this, this, and this and this. Some of them, it has to do with—again, how they carry themselves. Some of them it has to do with their looks. Some of them it has to do with they think that—they haven't grasped the understanding that being trans does not mean that you have to be sexually attracted to this person. Some of them only be trans or portray trans to deal with sexual aspects and sexual—that's just the confusing part.

Jason Boehm:

You just mentioned the people who came before you and the younger community now. In my brain I broke that down to three groups. Do you feel like there is that kind of distinction generationally speaking?

Aminah Washington: It definitely is. [00:35:00] Definitely. There's no way around that. A lotta the young girls be like, "Oh, the old girls." Then all the young girls don't grasp—don't have respect for themselves first and/or the people who made it just that much easier for them to be able to attempt to walk and they choose to live their life. Yes, it is. Generations have—they play a great deal in it.

This lady, I look at her as a mother figure—her name is Angela Raine. She has a magazine. She's an activist. She's well spoken. She was doing studies as well as speaking at colleges and stuff a few while back. When I first met her she had—was informin' me about safe sex and education and telling me to join the community advisory board and so forth and so on. She spoke to me—had she not expressed it, I would never had knew she was trans at first. Nor the way she communicate gave me so much that she came to me with respect that there's no way around but to respect her. Nowadays you can be presenting yourself with the upmost respect but if a person just don't have it in their mind they wanna respect you, they're already gonna shoot you down and/or run away from what they're not used to. Yeah. Yeah. Hell, yeah.

Jason Boehm: Do you think that that respect for the generation that came before, is that getting worse as time is going on? Or is it fluctuating? Or does it really just come down to people—individuals?

Aminah Washington: It fluctuates. In certain situations, you can't discredit a person for the role that they have to take to get to where they need to get. At the same time, we are all human. We are all people. Give it be a straight male, gay male, bisexual, heterosexual, swinger, however—it's just that at the end of the day respect is due to anyone.

It's up to you to decide and accept and to know, "Hey, this is how I wanna present myself. This is what I will accept back. This is what I won't accept back. This is what I will do. This is what I won't do." Like when you go on a job interview. You're not going to a job interview in jeans and t-shirt because you're not going for no play pal type job. You want a Fortune 5000 company. What are you gonna do?

Jason Boehm:

That's a good point. Yeah. Now, in keeping with this narrative that we're following here. Do you think ever that there's a stigma on the LGBTQ community whereas straight people or hetero people or people who are just completely ignorant of the entire community over sexualize the LGBT community? I know that I— from my back of where I'm from—people will automatically like—like everyone's a serial fornicator. Do you resent that?

Aminah Washington:

I do resent that because that's what—in the LGBT community, yes. It is that stigma straight head-on. Now for trans it's like ten times worse because 90 percent of the men who interact with trans only wanna really want to interact on a sexual level. They don't really have no 100 percent ties or feel as those they could completely be with this person for who this person are. I did deal with that beforehand. Now I can say I'm better off.

Yes. It definitely is that aspect. That's not just in Newark. That's in general. That's in New Jersey. That's in New York. It comes to the aspect that over time, since the 1960's they've always said that gay or bisexual men are all about sucking dicks so that's—it becomes with what society put on you. This is what it's gonna be regardless. Again, it goes on—it's not what they call you, it's what you answer to. It's not what you will accept. It's not what they're gonna give you, it's about what you will allow, what you will

accept.

Yes. Definitely. That is so crazy because prior to this I had did something at the Broadway House. One of the ladies was like, “Oh, you look so cute in your pants and so nice and stuff.” Then my boss goes goes, “Yeah, well her pants don’t have to be that tight.” I’m lookin’ like, “This is how I dress.” I understood now. I’m already viewed one way. This is only enhancing the view. But yeah.

Jason Boehm: There’s that stigma—that social stigma visitation [00:40:00] on the community where, oh this is a good place to go just for a quick sexual experience.

Aminah Washington: Mm-hmm. Yup.

Jason Boehm: That’s not somewhere you go to form an actual relationship.

Aminah Washington: Right.

Jason Boehm: Then it’s kind of like the snake eating its tail. It’s a cyclical kind of thing that just works itself out.

Aminah Washington: Yeah. Oh my god. I can’t believe that you asked about that. That is so true. I do kind of dealt with that before I got into a relationship.

Jason Boehm: Are you in a relationship now?

Aminah Washington: I am.

Jason Boehm: Okay, and it’s long-term?

Aminah Washington: Yes. Yes.

Jason Boehm: That's going well so far?

Aminah Washington: That's going amazing. It's so crazy because who I'm dating—we knew each other from school. He knew more about me than I even thought to know about him. Over time we went our separate ways. We never were like close or communicated this. Then when we finally got to that point, he was just like, “Yo.”—telling me everything I knew about you. It's been smooth sailing ever since. Yeah. Yeah. I'm in a relationship now.

Jason Boehm: Excellent. That's good to hear. I'm gonna change tack just a little bit because there's one question I promised Whit I would ask. How do you feel that the experience and/or perception of the trans community as pertains to the police department in Newark? When you see a police officer are you like, “Oh, I'm safe.” Or when you see a police officer are you like, “Oh, boy. Here they come again.”?

Aminah Washington: For me?

Jason Boehm: For the trans community in general or for you personally.

Aminah Washington: For me it's an in and out—for me, I don't feel safe when the cops are around. That's from personal experiences. However, at the same time, I just feel as though when it comes to the trans community at large, completely—no matter where it is—cops are so, so, so misinformed. By them being misinformed, it creates that understanding of disrespect because they don't respect the gender pronouns and/or what's being presented to them. Never mind a

person's voice or a person may not—or doesn't completely have the look.

It's all about respect. If you could just accept and/or be willing to put the effort forth, you'll get that in return. When it comes to cops in the transgender community, they—I feel like it becomes the aspect into which they get aggravated. They get annoyed. Instantly their first instinct—second nature is always to go for the low blow “he” or discredit what's being presented in front of them. It's more so about their not knowledgeable. They want to do their trainin' and their whole, little—what is it called? Do the force and go and do trainin' and stuff to try to get there—in academy.

They didn't have a session that say, “Hey, this is how we deal with transgender or gender nonconfirming people. They just know male, female, and then they go from there. Some cops are so lazy to the point where they even say outta their mouth they don't wanna do or they're not gonna do paperwork. They prefer to just either A, throw you to the back and say, “Fuck it,” or B, just not do with you period. I do feel that it is—it's the fact of not being knowledgeable. I don't think they have the know how or actually care to take that next step to say, “Transgender or the nonconfirming people are actually real. They're human.” So that's better be able to accommodate or understand so at least we can respect them on that aspect.

I was walkin' down the street two weeks ago and one of the ladies who come here, she was—there was eight cops around her because she just argued with a guy in the store who was disrespectful to her. She's spending her money here. She don't have to spend her money in your establishment nor do you have to be disrespectful. Then the fact for you to call the cops and the cops to sit there and all of them to be attacking to her—you have people who are here every day of the week sellin' drugs, but ya'll completely look over

that. Ya'll disregard that, but you all wanna sit here and be attacking on this one transgender who didn't even discredit ya'll or disrespect ya'll. That is—it kinda don't add up. It just don't add up.

Jason Boehm: Do you feel like that ignorance in general with—throughout the Newark Police Department is—that kind of breeds a contempt—

Aminah Washington: Yeah. Yeah.

Jason Boehm: -so the minute they roll up, they're treating—

Aminah Washington: Yeah.

Jason Boehm: -trans people—

Aminah Washington: Yeah.

Jason Boehm: -like the enemy.

Aminah Washington: You get your one or two officers who's very understanding and will accommodate you and will be respectful of you. Those one or two officers are not always gonna be on every, single scene when things happen or when a trans life or wellbeing is at stake. Then it becomes the aspect of you're playin' Russian Roulette because—granted even if you're the one who called the cops [00:45:00] for your protection, you have to worry about if they're gonna sit here and over look that or disregard that to understand that you are a transgender so they don't really care. Yeah, but it's an immediate, blatant disrespect.

Jason Boehm: Being that you earlier had said the trans community has—in terms of population the lowest on the totem pole so therefore by definition you lack institutional power ‘cuz the only way we get institutional power is with a lotta, lotta money or a lotta, lotta people—do you feel then, administratively speaking—the mayor’s office, the different people running the city themselves—do they do anything to intervene in that culture with the police? Any kind of meetings, open dialogue?

Aminah Washington: Meetings? Yes. Dialogue? I have yet to see as well as I haven’t actually seen each and every councilman and/or woman or someone on those boards to come in and say, “Hey, what we bring or we are trying to get a better understanding,” or to sit on the trainings that they offer in New Brunswick or anything therefore they can be more well-rounded when it comes to the LGBT community. They have the know-how. I’m pretty sure they can take an hour lunch—they can postpone their lunch and do a skip out on their lunch to get proper knowledge so they can deal with people who aren’t in their community on a daily basis.

Jason Boehm: Right, and one would argue they are people who are most in need of their services—

Aminah Washington: Exactly. Exactly.

Jason Boehm: -as a marginalized population by and large—it’d be nice to have some protection.

Aminah Washington: At least some understanding. It gotta start somewhere. With understanding comes respect. With respect comes the protection. I get it. I get that if you don’t really know somethin’, sometimes you

are afraid of it. If you don't take the opportunity or want the opportunity to get to know it then it's like, who's to blame for it? You gotta think about it like that. That's with anything, not just LGBTQ. It's more so it's just like when it comes to raisin' a child. You not just gonna sit here and be like, oh, just go on hearsay. You're gonna really take that time to get to know and to do what's best for that child.

It's the same with anything that's goin' on with—when it comes to the whole trans community, when it comes to LGBT, when it comes to communication with your doctor. You still have to want to know how. Get that understandin', build that level of consideration to get that respect—even if it's for the moment. Even if it's your first encounter. That goes a long way. That's what makes the difference.

Jason Boehm: Do you see any—that was a very good explanation of what the best solution would be, but do you see any practical solutions to the issue with the police right now? Or is it kind of a helpless situation right now?

Aminah Washington: Well, they've put so many new cops on the streets it's like—I don't know. I really wouldn't be able to touch on that. Practical? Probably not unless of course it would take a person and/or persons—see? That's the other thing. Not too many officers of the law, even if they have dibbed and dabbed or are—this is their lifestyle—I think it would be the understanding of not wanting to be ridiculed that they wouldn't stand up for it. Reality, everyone has a crack head and/or a gay person in their family. If you speak up and just consider the fact that, hey, that could have been your family member. How would you want a person to treat your family member?

Jason Boehm: That's a very good perception there. This is my last question. It's kind of my question. It wasn't on the sheet or anything. I was wondering being that potentially someone could listen to this in a hundred years—they wanna know what a trans woman experience is like Newark and they pull out your tape and they listen to it, what would you say to that person or to the trans community a hundred years from now?

Aminah Washington: What was my life like? I like to think that I am in a league of my own. For me, from the girls who've come before me and the ones I see coming after me—I'm on a different playing field. Nothin' that's out of reach for you. Being trans does not define your restrictions on life as well as living in your truth—you have to stay true to your truth. By stayin' true to your truth is more so about having an understandin' [00:50:00] that any task, any obstacles that are thrown at you does not have to be the one that defines or takes away from your credibility or what you're attemptin' to obtain.

Continue to push, strive for, and hold on to the understandin' that you know what? Life, whether you be trans or not—LGBT or not—it's not easy, but you never know what's on the other side of the door until you walk through it. With that understandin' just stay focused. When it comes to stayin' focused, that means by any means necessary. Don't expect it to be a walk in the park, 'cuz it's not. However, the silver linin' at the end of the rainbow—the cloud—it'll be worth it. It'll be worth it. Definitely be worth it.

Jason Boehm: Excellent. Thank you very much again.

Aminah Washington: No problem.

Jason Boehm: I appreciate it.

Aminah Washington: You're welcome. I had fun.

Jason Boehm: Good.

[End of Audio, 00:50:53]