

Kristyn Scorsone (KS): Hello and welcome to the Queer Newark Oral History podcast. I'm Kristyn Scorsone, your host and a PhD student in American Studies at Rutgers University Newark. This podcast is a part of the Queer Newark Oral History Project, a community-based and community-driven initiative supported by Rutgers Newark and dedicated to preserving the history of Newark's LGBTQ and gender-nonconforming community. In this episode I'm chatting with Sharronda Wheeler, otherwise known as Love. She's the president of Newark Pride, and so we talk a lot about Newark Pride and how it came to be and also the fact that Newark Pride is getting bigger every year. So, like, the first year I went to it, which was probably about three years ago, I think, it was a smaller march and festival in the park. Already in the short time that I've been going, it has grown to more and more marchers and a bigger festival and more organizations and businesses coming out to, you know, participate and more programs during the week leading up to the march, which, in Newark, Pride isn't just one day. It's a four day long celebration. So last year they actually even had Amina Baraka riding on a float as an ally, and her son is the mayor of Newark, Ras Baraka, and her late husband was Amiri Baraka, who is a famous poet, writer, and activist, so that's awesome to have someone like her there to support Pride. And she's an amazing artist, actor, activist, you know, in her own right. So—but I also want to note that Newark Pride came out of a fatal attack against a young gender-nonconforming lesbian named Sakia Gunn, and Love talks a little bit about that horrific hate crime and how it spurred the Newark LGBTQ community into action and things like Pride, as well as New York's LGBTQ Community Center, were created out of this, you know, to protect Newark's LGBTQ youth and celebrate local queer people. Because, of course, we don't march just for joy, you know, we march because we want and we need full equality and protection. So I hope you enjoy my conversation with Love. She is such a strong and amazing person and a tireless, tireless champion of Newark's LGBTQ community. So check it out.

KS: Okay, so today I'm talking to Sharronda Wheeler, AKA Love, about Newark Pride. So Love is integral to Newark Pride, which is a several day celebration in the city of Newark. It starts with the flag raising at City Hall, and it culminates in the Pride parade. But I'd like to—Love, if you don't mind, I'd like to give you, like, the space to just introduce yourself. And so if you could just tell us a little bit about you and your role as the—basically the chief organizer, right, of Newark Pride.

Sharronda "Love" Wheeler (SLW): Yeah, I'm Love, Love Wheeler and I work as the president of the board for Newark Gay Pride or Newark Pride, Inc. is our name, and we're a 501C3 organization, and we're 100%-ly ran by volunteers. And so yeah, we're in charge of putting on the annual festivities and partnering with the other LGBT organizations or organizations that directly service the LGBTQ community and then also putting on events to make this four day of celebration very vibrant in our city.

KS: That's awesome. So I guess just to back it up a little bit, like, how—how did you come to Newark? Did you grow up here? Did you move here?

SLW: Yeah. I'm born and raised, right—right here in the Central Ward. I'm very proud of it. At some point in time, I moved away and came back later in my adult years and when I got back, Murphy's was already closed. First Choice had long been closed and I think that Theresa Randolph, which everyone knows as Ms. Theresa, was the only person that was really hosting gay parties around town. So a friend—friend of mine and I got together and figured that we would start too, to give older women some place to go, and we did. So at some point in time Pride came up in the city of Newark and someone mentioned it and I'm thinking, like, "who's doing this? Because I don't know them, you know, they don't know me, and where's the connection?" So I began to seek out the people who were part of the organization at the time, which, it was ran by Paris, who was the previous president, and attended a few meetings, so I worked—I worked with them about two years on the committee and my goal was really just to be the bridge between the community and the committee so that more people would know that we existed, meaning Newark Pride Inc., that the Newark Gay Pride festivities were going on and to increase the participation, whether be corporate, community level, the city administration level, and so the—and that's what was my goal.

KS: So when you—you said you left the the city of Newark for a little while and you came back. What year was that when you came back?

SLW: Oh gosh, let's see. This is 2019. So I'm thinking that I came back almost 10 years ago.

KS: Yeah.

SLW: Yeah, it's been almost 10 years, so somewhere about 2010. Two—yeah.

KS: Okay.

SLW: I came back to Newark, yep.

KS: And you said Paris had started Newark Pride. What year—do you know around when he started it?

SLW: Well, he didn't start it. The founder of Newark Pride is June Dowell-Burton, right, and so the start of Pride came in 2005 and you know how the story goes and maybe you don't. After the killing of Sakia Gunn and all the movement around that and the protesting around that really started the entire Gay Pride movement here in the city of Newark, although gay people and gay activity has been going on here all of my life. So that's when it got started. Paris was actually the

second president. He did about five—he did about five years as president. So yeah, and then I came on board afterwards.

KS: You mentioned—you mentioned Sakia Gunn. For those who don't know, could you explain a little bit about what happened?

SLW: A 15-year-old lesbian young lady who was partying in New York City like many of us did at a young age.

KS: Totally.

SLW: Traveling back to the city of Newark from New York City and became involved in an altercation on Broad Market with an older gentleman. You know, the story—the story goes, I believe he was trying to talk to them or something to that effect, but it ended in her being stabbed and ultimately dying. And, you know, as—as—as a person in the community, LGBT person in the community, certainly as a leader and a leader of an organization, that's one of the things that I try to focus on mostly is creating an atmosphere, creating events, a Pride festival and parade that people—that our people here in the city could be proud of and that we not have to travel to New York City to be prideful, to—to be free, to be vibrant, that we have that right here in our own city.

KS: Right, yeah.

SLW: So I work really hard to do that.

KS: And I feel like Sakia, she—she galvanized a lot of these initiatives, right, like, the—

SLW: Absolutely.

KS: The—the Newark LGBTQ Center, right, so it's tragic, but it was good. I'm glad that a lot of good came out of—

SLW: Right.

KS: The aftermath, the unfortunate aftermath. So when you came and took—and took initiative with Pride, what was that like for you? Getting started.

SLW: It was, I mean, I was passionate. I mean, I—I had my vision of where I wanted to see this thing go and grow, and—and it was just exciting. It was—I mean, I have a nine to five, but I did much more work in this volunteer position in the community than I—than I did at—then on my

paid job. The other thing is it gave me an opportunity to meet other people in the city, organizations, LGBT-centered or not, but people who were doing positive work to make positive change in our community. So that's what it was like for me. I ran around town meeting everyone, selling them the vision of Newark Gay Pride, asking them to join forces with us to help make it greater, bigger, more programming to the needs of the people who are here, and I got a lot of support from around town.

KS: That's cool. Yeah, I'm trying to think, like, so, like, say, somebody's listening to this and they're in their own town. They're like, "I wish I could start a Pride here. "What are some of the first steps that they can take?"

SLW: Well, I think the first steps is finding out other people who are interested in doing so and start to meet and talk about what does that look like in your town? What do you guys actually want to do? I think that our Pride is very unique because it has four days, but we also need four days. We have Queer Newark, we have AAGOC, we have churches, we have youth organizations, we have a lot of organizations and people here to service over a four day period. We could, you know, have all of everyone participate and get a really good look at what the LGBT community looks like here. So that's what I would say to any other community that's starting. First, sit down, find out what you would like for that to look like in your—in your community, and then go from there in terms of planning.

KS: What are some of the, like, biggest obstacles you've faced or challenges?

SLW: The biggest obstacles and challenges, I guess, would be raising the bar for—in terms of sponsorship to get to where we would like to go. I think that every year, that we grow with a new signature sponsor, which is—which is giving us about \$5000, you know, per organization. It helps us grow because when I came aboard three years ago, we didn't have any corporate sponsorship. We hadn't yet had our 501C3 either, and we have those things and insured and all of those things help with donations.

KS: That's cool.

SLW: Yeah.

KS: So what was that first pride like for you?

SLW: I mean, all of them are so exciting.

KS: Yeah.

SLW: I mean, I'm telling you, I mean, I sometimes—I—I don't know if I can use this word. Sometimes I bitch and cry—

KS: Yeah, yeah, go ahead.

SLW: About how much time the work is—takes.

KS: Yeah.

SLW: And you know, when I come, I—I usually—I—I'm usually outside and at the location of Pride, probably about 6:30, 7 AM that morning.

KS: Wow.

SLW: Because I watch it from the stage getting built to us coming down Broad Street, and it's just an amazing, amazing feeling to be a part of something that, you know, brings joy and pride into a community on people's faces. And people—some people attend and they not even know, you know, how this happened or how it got together, but it really doesn't matter. The fact that people and children and families are running around enjoying themselves, making connections, and networking, is what it's about.

KS: Yeah. Where does the route start and stop?

SLW: Well, right now, this will be our second year leaving from Lincoln Park from the parade, right, and we come straight down Broad Street to Washington Park area, which—which is where the festival, the street festival, takes place. Yeah. So we—we—we used to march maybe about a block or so, from Military Park around to Washington Park, and then someone asked in a planning meeting, "why can't we leave from City Hall?" and I'm like, "we can!" You know, and so when I wrote the permit out, I asked to leave from City Hall and we did that for about two years and then someone said, "why can't it be longer?"

KS: Yeah.

SLW: And it was—and another reason why we needed or wanted it to be longer is because there were buildings on the other end of Broad Street, like Newark Symphony Hall.

KS: Right.

SLW: There's a new—there was a brand new RPM building there, 999 Broad Street, and both of them had bought into Pride by hanging flags outside of their facilities and we wanted to honor them and show our support—

KS: Right.

SLW: By walking past there and during our march too, so we extended it. So right now it's about a mile long from Lincoln Park to Washington Park.

KS: And do you want to talk about what the festival is like at the end?

SLW: Okay. So yeah, the festival—and they start at the same time, noon time, so the idea is when the—when the parade and we all come marching down the streets, we walk right into the festival and there are people at the festival there cheering us on and welcoming u. At the festival is usually tables and vendors, first and foremost of our—of our LGBT organizations here in Newark and surrounding areas, and along with our sponsors who` usually have a table, and then there's some vendors where you're buying Pride paraphernalia or entrepreneurs, authors, books, that kind of thing, and pretty much, that goes on all day and on the—on the stage we have entertainment. Basically local, a lot of local entertainment of LGBT artists, straight artists, whoever, but just really good entertainment.

KS: Yeah, I remember last year seeing Lovari—

SLW: Yes.

KS: Who's one of our interviewees and Ms. Theresa was a host, right?

SLW: Yes.

KS: With—

SLW: Derek Doll.

KS: Derek Doll.

SLW: Yes.

KS: Yes, who's so awesome. He's really great. Yeah. And—and there—there was, like, a fashion show.

SLW: Yes, Struts Fashion Show that was put on by the Rutgers Intercultural—

KS: Oh, Resource Center?

SLW: Resource Center.

KS: Yes. LGBTQ Resource, yes.

SLW: They put that on as an excellent show of LGBT—LGBTQ designers, as well as models, and I mean, it's a phenomenal show.

KS: Yeah.

SLW: And it's coming back again this year.

KS: Yeah.

SLW: Yeah.

KS: And I remember Amina Baraka was there too.

SLW: Yes, yeah, she marched with us. She rode on the float with us. She's been a great, great supporter of the movement from the time, you know, it started. Yeah. And she continues to support us. She hung out with us all day, yeah.

KS: That's really cool. That's really cool. I got to go to her house for—

SLW: Did you?

KS: Yeah, when we interviewed her for the project and I—my favorite part of her home, I mean, she has a beautiful home. But my favorite part was all the books. She has so many books, like, just everywhere.

SLW: Yeah.

KS: It's just, like, I just love it.

SLW: Yeah, that family—he family's history here in the city is incredible.

KS: Yeah.

SLW: it really is. And she's incredible.

KS: So what, you know, you mentioned that it's four days. What are some of the other events that happen?

SLW: Okay, so on Thursday, this year Pride is going to be held from July 11th through the 14th. Our theme this year is the Sounds of Pride Newark and if you saw some of the logos, it had some cymbals and instruments around it and so people thought it was, like, going to be, like, a music concert kind of thing.

KS: Right.

SLW: But the Sounds of Pride really stands out for the marching, the sounds of the marching feet, the protests that have taken place as well as the music and the—and the, you know, just the—the liberation, the sound of liberation and people.

KS: Love that.

SLW: And so that's where we got the theme from. We start off with the flag raising that's—that's usually given by the LGBT Commission, the Mayor's Commission, at City Hall. We're going on from there. We have many balls, we have brunches, we have day parties, and different organization—one of the organizations that's new to our event calendar is the queer trans people of color. I've never—I had never even heard of them. Young group of conscious individuals that have their own movement, their own concentration of—of people, and they're—they're going to be partnering with us this year.

KS: Is that—are they Newark based as well?

SLW: Yes.

KS: Wow. Cool.

SLW: The Circle of Friends is back doing their annual dinner and scholarship giveaways. We have Project WOW NJC—or NJCRI.

KS: Right.

SLW: With Project WOW, they do a lot of youth events, like skating, skate party, the Kiki Ball at the library, as well as a PrEP brunch. So we have a lot of things. Ms. Theresa is actually hosting a trans pageant.

KS: Wow.

SLW: So she's going to be doing a pageant for trans women on the set—on Saturday night, and that—that—those people will be able to ride on the float with us on Sunday for the parade. So those are some of the things we have going on.

KS: That's so cool.

SLW: During those four days. We have a walking tour.

KS: Nice.

SLW: By Queer Newark.

KS: I like the sound of that.

SLW: Yep. So, because I think that, I mean, we need to concentrate on all aspects of what we have to offer here in the city and people are going to be coming through, you know, LGBTQIA, allies or whatever, that may be interested, and we want to have something for all of them to do. We're doing a—a pre-Pride event next Tuesday called Tuesday's Tea and it's a panel discussion. We're taking everyone from the LGBTQIA, finding an individual to sit on the panel representing those letters in—and—and talking about—talking about Newark. What was it like for you coming through Newark? I mean, obviously, when I was a kid, we didn't have things like you and I are doing now.

KS: Yeah.

SLW: We didn't have Queer Newark organization. We didn't have a center or any of that. And you have kids that do. So it's our idea to have an intergenerational panel to have these discussions, you know.

KS: Yeah.

SLW: And put to death—put to death some of the myths, you know, some of the—

KS: Yeah.

SLW: Curiosity about what it was for—for older people and the younger generation, so we're going to do two of those called Tuesday Tea.

KS: That's cool.

SLW: Yeah.

KS: I should ask you, where do you fit in on the spectrum?

SLW: I'm a lesbian.

KS: Yeah.

SLW: Yeah. I like to refer to myself as just being gay.

KS: Yeah.

SLW: That's per—that's very personal, you know, so yeah.

KS: That's cool. You mentioned Kiki Ball and mini balls. For those that don't know, how would you describe those?

SLW: I mean, those are, like, those are, like, phenomenal events. I mean, the whole—the whole idea of a ball scene, the ball houses and how they were constructed and what they really mean and represent, I think, is—is big. But I describe balls as almost, like, I—I don't know if I can say this and I hope it's not offensive to anyone in the ball community, but it's almost like a public fashion show cause you could show up there and if they call a category, you know, anyone—you could walk. I mean, of course, you probably get better applause if you're part of one of the houses.

KS: Right.

SLW: But I've also seen people who are just attending walk a ball and, you know, and have fun with it. So I think it's—it's a real public way of showing your expression. It is very, very creative.

KS: Yeah.

SLW: I mean, to say the least, it's creative, you know.

KS: Have you ever participated? Have you ever walked?

SLW: Only because I was a judge once. They asked me to be a judge and then so at the beginning they called all the judges to walk. So I'm very—

KS: That's cool.

SLW: I'm shy with stuff. Yeah.

KS: That's really cool. So how has Pride changed over the years?

SLW: I think we've grown.

KS: Yeah.

SLW: I mean, I would—I would say growth, I would say more unity. I—I—I always like to say that I—I work for the Newark Pride organization but Newark Gay Pride belongs to us all. You know, it belongs to Queer Newark. It belongs to NJCRI. It belongs to us all. And so that—I think that that's one of the things that has changed in over the years, is that, you know, we've created a—a circle where everyone fits in. Everyone has a part in it. I'm constantly saying to people, like, do your own event. I—I wanna see it on the—on the event calendar because then we fill up the pockets cause what you may like may not be what I like. I'm—when I go to pride I'm looking for a good party.

KS: Right.

SLW: I'm not necessarily looking for the book signing, you know, but—but we have some bookworms and some tech heads.

KS: Right.

SLW: And some children, you know, some young people who are involved and we need to have things for them all. So I think that that's the thing that has grown over the years is that everyone is taking a—an integral part in—in Pride and planning events and things like that, so.

KS: Do you have to plan all year round?

SLW: Well, I should be planning all year round. I mean, it's not always something we can do. One of the other events that we've been doing annually is Pride Night with the New Jersey Devils, and that usually happens in February. So we've been playing a Canadian team for the last

couple of years, we go there, we have a nice Pride Night, you know, where we are—we're participating in everything from the singing of the national anthem to holding the flags and having a pre-game event and things like that and other organizations can be a part of it as well. They hold, like, a 50/50 raffle that we can name the organization that would receive the monies from it. So we're helping each other and building.

KS: Yeah, it seems like Newark Pride, like, you guys participate in a lot of different events throughout the year too, right?

SLW: Yeah. Yeah, yeah, yeah. I mean, I'm willing to partner with—we're willing to partner with any and everybody who we can offer something to and again, to be a part of what's going on in the community, so.

KS: That's really cool.

SLW: Yeah.

KS: Do you have a favorite year that happened or a favorite memory?

SLW: No, I think—you know what? I think that every year is a great year. I mean, I've said this before in my Queer Newark Oral History Project that we did. What a lot of people don't know is during that time of the year is a really hard year for me, right? It's—it's a track—it had—it was a tragic time of year for me almost 12 years ago.

KS: Okay.

SLW: So the fact that I'm working, like, really intense and hard during this time of the year. is a little sad, but it—then it's great as well, so it always balances itself out.

KS: Do you mind me asking what?

SLW: Well, I lost my son, July 15th, 2007.

KS: Oh, I'm sorry.

SLW: So it was so—when I first came on the Pride Committee and we're planning, right, and it's like, "Okay, when's Pride?" and they put it on the board and I'm looking, like, you know, because that time had always been reserved in my life for grieving.

KS: Right.

SLW: You know, and it was like, "okay, grieve or do this thing that makes you—"

KS: Right.

SLW: "Very passionate, this thing that you're very passionate about, the thing that brings the fire up in your gut."

KS: Yeah.

SLW: And I decided to, you know, to go with being on the planning committee and becoming president and a board member and things like that and—and I love it.

KS: Yeah.

SLW: I know it's not the same thing, but we—my wife and I lost—she lost her younger brother pretty recently and the same thing, like, our families, like, we were devastated. He was only 27 and he was the baby in the family and I've known him since he was 10 years old, so.

SLW: Wow.

KS: But yeah, we—we also tried to kind of—instead of spending that time mourning, which we did, but we also decided to take that and—and make a family vacation and, like, just be together and do something positive with it. So I really admire that you were able to, like, channel that into, like, helping the entire LGBTQ community in Newark, like, and bring so much positivity, like, every year.

SLW: Yeah.

KS: I know I look forward to it.

SLW: Cool.

KS: You know, and that energy that's there is so beautiful and, you know, everybody is so excited and kind to each other.

SLW: Right.

KS: And you see, you know, like you said, that whole spectrum is there and you're all there to party together and have a good time and it's just very, very nice and it's nice of you to bring that into the world, you know.

SLW: Yeah. Well, I appreciate that. Thank you. Yeah, that is definitely my goal.

KS: That's cool.

SLW: Yeah.

KS: So what can, you know, do you have any visions for future Prides or where you want to take it?

SLW: Listen, I—I—I know that one day that just as we see, okay, so here in the city of Newark, we have a lot of festivals, right. And probably the three largest festivals I would go with is the Portuguese Day profess—Festival, probably brings 100,000 people or more into the city. We have Lincoln Park Festival, three days weekend. I mean, I can't even imagine how many people it brings in the city. And then we have the K-Con, you know, and—and not—

KS: What's K-Con?

SLW: K-Con is, I—I believe it's the Korean festival that happens here.

KS: Oh.

SLW: And it also is a very, very large festival. And I just think at—at—at some point in time, Newark Pride, Gay Pride here in the city of Newark will be that large and it's not—it's certainly not in competition. It's really in—in—in effectiveness and how we affect the community and we're able to round up that level of support. This year I, like I mentioned prior to our interview, the city of Newark is going to partner with us and that has never happened in the 14 years that Pride has been going on and I think that that's a major step for the residents, for the administration. Like, they need to see that level of support coming out of—coming out of our City Hall. And I think that that—that's a—that's definitely a positive growth to this year and the years coming forward.

KS: That's awesome. What are you looking forward to most this year's Pride?

SLW: I don't—you know what I always look forward to? Jumping on that float.

KS: Yeah.

SLW: And riding down Broad Street.

KS: Right.

SLW: I really do. It's—it's very liberating. I like—I like the fact that the—that people, the children, they will walk along the side of the floats and just kind of vogue and just be free. It's an amazing feeling. That's it. I mean, even if I'm not on the float, cause I'm usually jumping on and then jumping off and grabbing strangers, saying "come on," that kind of thing. But that's—that's what I look forward to most cause I know it is definitely—it's not even the flag raising. It's really getting on that street on Broad Street and walking down the middle of the street and saying, "hey, we're here, we're queer, we ain't going nowhere, we're powerful, you know, we're worthy and we're doing our thing."

KS: I love it.

SLW: Yeah.

KS: Thank you so much.

SLW: You're welcome.

KS: Thank you for all the work that you do. It's—my hat is off to you.

SLW: I appreciate that.

KS: And I hope everybody comes out July 11th through the 14th for Sounds of Pride Newark. And we're gonna have a great time. So thank you.

SLW: Yes. You're welcome. Thank you for inviting me.

KS: The Queer Newark Oral History Podcast is produced by me, Kristyn Scorsone. This episode was recorded in the Queer Newark office, located in Conklin Hall at Rutgers University, Newark. You can find the Queer Newark Oral History Project online at queer.newark.rutgers.edu, as well as on Facebook and Twitter @QueerNewark. Our theme song is "One Black Glove" by Two Tears, and it's in honor of the radical life and memory of Newark's Ray Rivas, as well as Sakia Gunn, Shani Baraka, Eyricka Morgan, Rodney Gilbert, Miss Pucci Revlon, and all the queer Newarkers who have gone before us. We stand on their shoulders. Thank you so much for listening.