Queer Newark Oral History Project
Interviewee: Peter Savastano
Interviewer: Kristyn Scorsone, Timothy Stewart-Winter, and Whitney Strub
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W = Whitney Strub
T = Timothy Stewart-Winter
P = Peter Savastano
K = Kristyn Scorsone

W = Our friend Hugh wrote a piece about why Disney villains always speak in a sort of gay inflected voice, which is really interesting.

P = Yeah. Well no, this is a documentary that has been done. It's actually showing, I think, at the Angelika or one of those sort of avant-garde film theaters in New York city and it's actually called *Does My Voice Sound Gay?* And so he worked with this speech pathologist and they sort of analyzed what is the gay sounding voice and the part that was so fascinating to me was he had three of his straight male friends on it who's voices sounded so stereotypically gay. So it just dispels the whole idea that there is something like a gay voice. But I've always thought my voice sounds so gay! [laughter]

T = Well I guess it's more important what other people think. [laughter]

P = Yes, but apparently the markers are something called upspeak and then, what is it? Something s's....sibilant s's. Yeah. Which I definitely have *the* sibilant s thing. And occasionally, especially when I'm in my group meditation voice, there's loads of upspeak. "And now we shall all sit and be calm for a few minutes!" [laughter]

W = It's very soothing!

P= It is very soothing! Gay men should always be soothing when they might get beat up! [laughter]

W = But the conclusion is that the voice doesn't actually reflect sexual orientation identity at all?

P = No, it doesn't.

W = So Marcus Bachmann may still be straight?

P = There's still that possibility yes. We'll see. [laughter]

T = We can't rule it out. [laughter] At least not...

P = Not yet anyway!

W = Are we recording?

P = Oh, is this running?? Oh alright! Well, so that was the little thing on speech pathology that's part of this experience! [laughter]

So just to get back to the club life in Newark, particularly in the 80s. This would have been the period that Zanzibar and Le Joc and the sort of reinvention of Murphy's. And then there was also the Cactus Club down in the Ironbound, which was very different. I went to Zanzibar very infrequently and I'm a little fuzzy on which night of the week it was. But there was a night that was considered gay night. And often Larry Levan who was the DJ at the Paradise Garage, where I went quite regularly and frequently, would come to Newark and would spin at Zanzibar and I would often go to that. In retrospect, what I think I liked about that night particularly, was even though it was gay night, it wasn't an exclusive kind of thing. So I always sort of enjoyed the mixture of people. Though I do remember having a sense that you sort of needed to be a little careful and somewhat vigilant about who you looked at and how you looked at them. Mostly because, and I, of course, excuse you from this please, but most straight men tend to think, especially in an all gay environment, that every gay man in the place wants them. So if you happened to look at the clock and a straight guy happened to be underneath the clock, he was convinced you were looking at him with the eyes of lust. So then there was always the chance that you would get some sort of version of, "What are you looking at?!?" You know? So there was always that kind of element of that there for me.

And then I guess also, even at that point, there were some white people there, but mostly not. So there was always this underlying racial tension as well, which I think I also felt at Le Joc the few times that I was there. You know there was another club, over around where Le Joc was and I can't think of the name of it now, that also had a gay night.

So just all of these experiences. The music was great, the dancing was great. All of those kind of things. But there was always this sort of...we're back to the intersectionality once again, this kind of tension around sexuality, straight versus gay. A certain tension around gender- woman versus men, whatever that meant at the time, and then also the racial tension. And learning how to sort of have a good time and navigate those social/cultural realities. It was always a challenge, but kind of exciting in one way or another.

T = So you mention that you went to Paradise Garage a lot...

P = A lot.

T = Was that less uncomfortable...or less complicated in those ways?

P = No, it's just that it was NYC and so it wasn't as pervadingly present. Now the thing with Paradise Garage was, while there was no hard and fast rule about this, it was always understood that Friday night was when mostly straight people went, but there would be loads of gay people there. Women and men, so lesbians and gay men. And Saturday night was predominantly gay night. Now the club was gay owned and operated. Still, even on

so-called gay night, there was that tension. One sort of had to be careful. You know I've always sort of theorized about this and being a grounded theory person myself, theory means diddly squat unless it's been experienced first, but nevertheless I see these kinds of mixing in that way and these issues as kind of the beginning of what I think of now as sexual fluidity. I think we talked about this the last time, how it's so fascinating to me even in the university where I teach that many of these students don't have sexual orientations. They're just sort of, who they are. And if you're a gay and you're dating Joe and then next week you're dating Mary and then the next week you're dating Joe and Mary, then so be it! And I sort of, at least for me, this was kind of the beginning of, I think that starting to sort of manifest as an actual phenomena, for lack of better word. It just seemed to me like the lines were starting to blur. They weren't yet blurred. And I would say that probably more so around sexuality and gender than around race.

W = So were people who identified as straight letting their guard down here? Were they experimenting? Is that what you are suggesting?

P = Yeah, I think there was quite a bit of that going on, without implicating myself! [laughs] Yeah, I think there was quite a bit of that going on. And I think it probably goes on now more than ever. You know this was even before "queer" got reappropriated as to mean the challenging of all norms. Whether it was a gay, lesbian, bisexual, heterosexual norm or whatever the case may be. Still at that point, "queer" and "fag" were sort of the n-words of the world of sexuality. And who got to use those words really depended on whether you were an insider or an outsider in the same way.

W = Just like a point of clarification, the gay night at Zanzibar, that wasn't explicitly announced as such? It was just understood?

P = No, I remember it...I mean I may be very fuzzy on this, but I remember seeing flyers, you know "Larry Levan is coming to spin" and it's gay night. Yeah, I mean that's what I remember.

T = Was "Larry Levan is coming to spin" code for it being gay night?

P = No, I think it was quite out there. It was quite explicit. At least, as I remember it, now I was a different person then. My grounding in reality may have been very fuzzy even then. It was like the whole thing with these traveling dance things [*see first interview*] that I thought, "Did I really experience this?" Until someone else said, "Oh, I was there too!" and I said, "Oh good! Thank god!!" [laughter]

W = I think it would be great to find one of those flyers. Just as a document at this point.

P = Well, I'll tell you what I regret more than anything. I had saved all of these sort of membership cards that I had to all these private gay discos. Mostly in NYC. I taught a class, some years ago now, maybe around 2004-2005 on Urban Anthropology, and one of the kids in the class made his project on club life. And I gave him all of my i.d. cards with my pictures on them. And he was sort of idolizing the Paradise Garage and 12 West

and all of these big private gay discos in NYC. But I used to save a lot of those things and I unfortunately just passed them on. And he's somewhere in the wilds of Brooklyn now! [laughter]

Let me just say, I want to say something about the Cactus Club. So the Cactus Club was down in the Ironbound and it was pretty much the total opposite of everything that I described to you. Everybody was gay, everybody was white, the music was horrible. [laughter] It was all that dreadful, high energy, gay white boy music that only makes it possible for you to move your elbows and your shoulders. You can't sort of get into your hips or your thighs or your pelvis or any of those things. It's just not possible! [laughs] And I very rarely went there, because it just wasn't what I was comfortable with. And even when it began to change in NYC, which would have been in the late 70s into early 80s, the primary reason why I went to the Paradise Garage and The Loft and those kind of places, was because the music was still rooted in that traditional R&B soul kind of music that I grew up with here in Newark and just appealed to me so much. And made it possible for a whole sort of range of how one could use one's body to dance and things like that.

T = Do you remember when the Cactus Club was opened?

P = So I think it probably opened around '79? And it went probably till '84, '85? Maybe even a little later. I mean the Paradise Garage sort of closed down around '88. And I know, that by that point, the Cactus Club was gone and so was Charlie's West, which was up in East Orange on the border of Newark and East Orange.

W = You know I've actually got some flyers from the Cactus Club. I don't know if I've ever shown these to you. I found them at the New York Public Library.

P = Yeah and they have that palm tree! The neon light palm tree.

T = So we know where it was and stuff like that?

W = And was the Cactus Club run by Dan Russo?

P = Yeah, it was, by Dan Russo who was my upstairs neighbor on Mount Prospect Avenue. He lived in the apartment above mine.

W = Okay. Can you tell us a little about him? I've read his book.

P = I didn't even know he wrote he book!

W = Oh yeah, he wrote a memoir called, *Downtown*.

P = Oh, really!

W = Yeah, yeah you can buy it on Amazon. It's self-published.

P = Oh, I didn't know that. So he's still around.

W = As of 2011, '12? It's a complicated and problematic book, but it's got interesting detail. That's why I'd like to hear a little more about him maybe.

P = What I can tell you is that he lived in the apartment upstairs from me. Whenever I encountered him, he was always very kind. He wasn't someone that I hung around with regularly. I mostly knew him from my roommate at the time, who unfortunately is no longer with us. And from a few other people who lived...there were a whole group of sort of white gay men who lived up on Mount Prospect Avenue who I knew just from years of association with them. So I would often meet Dan at parties that they had or see him at the Cactus Club. So that was really it. He wasn't a close personal friend of anything of that nature.

W = Okay, yeah 'cause, I mean he's interesting in that he's this kind of gay entrepreneur, because he runs a bunch of these clubs. Straight and gay in Newark and like Elizabeth, I think.

P = Yeah. That I didn't actually know. I guess I wasn't interested enough. [laughter] Cause you know me! If I'm interested, no stone remains...I'm sorry Dan! ...no stone remains unturned. You know, so...but because that wasn't what appealed to me, it was all sort of peripheral.

W = Yeah, he's an interesting guy. I don't think he identifies as gay. He identifies as bisexual now at least.

P = Yeah well, I'm not saying this is the case with him, but especially in that period of time, because of the HIV and the AIDS thing and the stigma associated with it, there were loads of people who were rethinking their sexual identity. And you know, one of them, who is also no longer with us, who shall remain nameless, had became one of these spokesperson for the evangelical religious right. He was, you know, a fellow Italian American, once gay, suddenly saw the light...

T = Who you knew?

P = Who I knew well. Yeah, very well. Absolutely.

W = The detail I remember about the Cactus Club from Russo's book is they served drinks in plastic cups so that in the interest of feeling safe you never had to drink from a glass that somebody else may have contaminated. That was the early years before HIV had even been identified.

P = And that became sort of standardized practice. I mean, if you want to switch gears for a moment, I could also tell you because I, at the time, I was working down at U.M.D.N.J., so I was kind of part of a...it was called the AIDS Friendship Group and we used to go

around visiting people who were in the hospital when people knew nothing about AIDS. And I could tell you that I saw things that really both broke my heart and horrified me. At the same time, about how difficult all of this was to deal with within the context of Newark, because it became a vector. You know, I sort of even theorized about this in some of the early writings of the Newark Project that you know, HIV/AIDS became a vector for a number of social issues. Many of them having to do with identity. It became a vector for sexual orientation, it became a vector for race and class. It became a vector for gender. It became a vector for religion. It became a vector for the use of various drugs. Both legal and illegal. It just sort of teased out all of those issues. And to do that in a place like Newark at the time...and you know, forgive me Clem for saying this once again...based on my 12 mile 10 year theory, you know that how close or far you were from NYC, was how close or far you were in the present or in the past and you know Newark really lagged behind. And this was even with Pat Closer there, who really became one of the prominent medical doctors in AIDS research. In dealing particularly with HIV/AIDS and women and then there was Dr. Oleski - AIDS and infant children.

You know all of that was going on in Newark. But going around, I just remember one of the most painful experiences was...I guess this must have been about '82, '83...a young black man who was an artist, who his skin was just peeling off his body. He lost the ability to sweat and we don't realize how much the ability to perspire keeps our skin on our bodies and keeps it flexible. And I would just watch this young, beautiful man writhe in pain. And you know, I would help him go into meditation so he could somehow deal with it, because nobody knew anything to deal with any of these things. I mean, this was just such really frightening stuff.

T = This was at University Hospital where you were...?

P = Yeah, I was at the time the Executive Assistant to the CEO of the hospital. This was before I became the administrator of neurosurgery and certainly long before going back to graduate school and getting the PHD for sure. In fact, I had no degrees at all at that point. I had maybe three semesters of undergraduate school under my belt. Partly because as a young man I was always out dancing and going to parties and just couldn't seem to get to school. [laughs]

W = Well actually, I hate to jump back, but can I move us back one more time before moving forward? Because the other bar you had mentioned was Murphy's, but we didn't really talk about it. Can we talk a little bit about it before moving forward?

P = Oh yes, so I just loved Murphys! I would go to Murphys with friends every Wednesday night. And you know, there were loads of gay people there. Here's what I remember. So I remember loads of gay men and loads of straight black women. All of whom loved to dance. And we would just all hang out and dance with each other. Again, I was probably among the few white gay men there. And I would go with a group of friends of mine, which consisted of a few other white gay men and black straight women. And we would all just go out dancing together. In fact, I would go dancing with the same group to the Paradise Garage and to Zanzibar sometimes. And Murphys was just, you

know the dance floor was really small. I don't know if you ever been in there, but the bar was probably the biggest thing in the place. And then there was some tables and the music was absolutely stupendous. And you could go there on a Wednesday night, even though you had to go to work the next day. So you could go and dance from 8 to 11:30 and still get home and go to sleep, and get up and go to work the next day. And all of it was sort of in preparation or anticipation of going to the Paradise Garage in NYC that weekend, where I would see loads of people from Newark. So I wasn't the only person from Newark there. There was this kind of movement back and forth.

W = Then you would have been pretty young when the court case happened, but do you have a recollection of the raids of Murphy's in the 60s and the NJ State Supreme Court case that they won.

P = I don't actually.

W = Okay, because they did win in '67 against the Alcoholic Beverage.

P = Yeah. No, I don't actually. I mean, I was in 1967, I was 16 years old so...

W = Yeah, I figured I would just check.

P = Yeah I mean certainly I was doing loads of naughty things then! [laughs} But I don't remember being in bars very much. You know as I said at our last time that didn't come till I was around 19 or so. So definitely slightly after Stonewall. Although I by no means consider Stonewall to be the beginning of the so-called gay liberation movement. Now the gay domestication movement but never the less! [laughs] Since we can all get married. Did that happen since I last saw you? Actually, it did, cause it hadn't happened yet. Right? It happened three days later, cause I was here on the Tuesday of that week.

W = Yeah, it was a Friday.

P = So it's a whole different world now! Wanna marry me? [laughter]

T = Well, NJ allowed it before.

P = Yes, that's true. That's true it did.

T = All 50 states yeah.

P = All 50 states now.

T = So you went to Murphys on Wednesdays only?

P = I would go on Sundays sometimes too. Very rarely. Usually on Sunday, you know, you didn't leave the Paradise Garage till 10:30 Sunday morning! [laughter] So you

needed sort of a little time to sort of recover to go to work on Monday. Which didn't always happen, but...! [laughter]

T = And you went to those two places with the same people?

P = Yes, I often went with the same people. But remember also I grew up in Newark. I lived here all my life, so I knew people everywhere I went. In fact, when finally we get to the Newark Project part, it was really that in many ways that opened up Newark to the Newark Project. I was sort of the person who could make all of those connections, including the connections here at Rutgers.

But yeah, I pretty much went with the same people, but that did not mean that when I got there I wasn't going to see other people that I knew well, because I had either grown up with them or I had worked with them at UMDNJ. I mean, there were a lot of gay people working at UMDNJ and you know, just a lot of interesting people who were comfortable with all of those intersections or uncomfortable, but willing to be with all of those intersections that I spoke of a bit earlier today.

T = When you worked for the CEO [of the hospital] were you out to him?

P = I was very out. I was always out. When I finally came to terms with who I was. As you know, which was kind of a struggle. But even in the midst of that struggling of being an "out" gay man and then an "in" Catholic monk, I told my mother from day one. And of course my mother had the very typical Italian American Catholic mother response, which was, "Oh, I always knew it and it's totally alright!" Which actually wasn't the case! It was totally alright as long as you never mentioned it- was what she meant! But she failed to say that part! [laughs] So yeah, I was pretty much out there.

T = And you had worked tending bar and....it just doesn't...I don't know. I don't think of a hospital in the early 80s as a place where it would be easy to be an out employee.

P = Well, I didn't have a big rainbow flag in my office! [laughter] I wasn't wearing the pink triangle, any of those things. But I had just decided, hey listen, I'm going to have to be who I am and the chips will have to fall where they may. And I think there was sort of...just this kind of tacit acceptance of that. As long as you didn't make an issue of it. I certainly knew enough in those days, you know, this is not a place to get political, so to speak! [laughs] I was just interested like everybody else in doing my work, being able to pay my rent, put food on my table, and make no waves so I could just be. I mean, that was I think sort of the model at that point in a lot of ways.

W = Can I ask a completely out of left field question?

P = Why of course! [laughter]

W = I don't even know what inspired me to think of this, but we had talked last time about when you were a teenager reading radical literature and you had been reading like

LeRoi Jones. Now by the 70s, I mean you know he was Amiri Baraka and he was Newark's most prominent intellectual figure, but he was also increasingly homophobic. Right, I mean from like the late 60s onward. How did you respond to that? As somebody who you had read and respected and who certainly embodied Newark to the outside world. I mean is that something you were engaged with in the 70s and 80s?

P = Oh definitely. So this has been some of the hardest lessons I think I've had to learn in my life- about race and sexuality. I think we talked about this the last time. I think the reason why, prior to the very late 1960s early 1970s, I identified so much with the black community and with civil rights issues was cause I was an oppressed person and I knew what that felt like. And I think I operated in those days very simplistically on the idea that I'm oppressed, you're oppressed, surely I supported you, you would support me. It wasn't until I got to graduate school that I learned the painful reality, that sexuality and race, they may intersect, but they are not the same issues. They have different histories and one should not expect that kind of quid pro quo, so to speak, that in fact it's a lot more complicated that that. So at the time I don't think I was capable of sorting that through in a way that I could after a PhD education that dealt with issues of race and all. And I have really sort of had to train myself to, in as much as we can possibly do this, not think in simplistic generalizations. While there may be a lot of black people who are homophobic, not all of them are. So it's not right to say the whole black church is homophobic or all of black Newark is homophobic. I don't think I could think that way in those days. I have really worked really hard to treat individuals as individuals and not get caught up in any of those things. In the same way that I know very well that there are loads of gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender white people who are horrifically racist. But in those days I had simplistic thinking. "What do you mean Amiri Baraka, you're homophobic! I was there! I walked in all those marches! I read! I admired your work!" That's probably where I was at then and I struggled mightily with that. And then I struggled mightily with it also at the beginning of the HIV/AIDS thing, but just around religion and the church in general. But I think it would have been easier, and it was easier in those days for me to sort of indict the whole black church or the whole black community, because in my mind they were black church, black people, Islam, they were all sort of elided with each other. So that was really rough I think in those days and it was very painful and hurtful.

T = When you say you struggled, what did that look like?

P = Well, I felt betrayed. I felt like, you know I was there for you. I walked in those civil rights. I put myself on the line. I was your ally. You're not my ally. You think the things about me that my own church thinks about me, that my own people think about me. How could you do that to me?

So I didn't have the capacity in those days, even though I was a bookworm and very well informed, I had not learned to try to interrogate and understand those difficult issues until I got to graduate school. And so I think I had really, sort of, very unsophisticated, backward, simplistic thinking about these things in those days. And I have to say, probably, and this is probably still the case now, white people in general who grow up in this country, we sort of all *have* these implicit, *uninterrogated*, unconscious deeply

internalized racist attitudes and I just never know when one of them is going to pop out! I mean even now, as I'm thinking about everything that I said, I'm going over in my head, "Did I say anything *for which* I could be indicted as a racist?" Well, probably! What I've always been grateful for is when that's happened people have pointed it out. They haven't always felt very good when I've pointed out their homophobia or their heterosexism! But never the less! [laughs] I mean, they've often said, "Oh no, that's not heterosexism, it's religion!" [laughter] I always loved that sort of explanation! "It's my religious freedom! It's my belief!" Well, all of these are beliefs and beliefs get lived out in social structure, in cultural contexts, in institutions! [laughs]

W = Do you know Nyle Fort? He's a local ordained minister. He's young. He's really charismatic. He just co-authored a piece in *Ebony*. A sort of internal critique of the black church's homophobia, which is great.

P = Wow, no. I'd love to see that. I don't know him.

W = He just spoke at our WGS Symposium last semester and was just fantastic. And I mean, Darnell Moore is doing similar kind of work.

P = Yeah, Darnell is.

T = Just to take stock, are we done with Murphy's?

W = Yeah, I think so.

P = Well, let me just go back to Branch Brook Park for a moment. One of the offshoots of all of this, was also we would take music and go up to Branch Brook Park and find a field under a tree and dance all afternoon. So we sorta had Dancing Under the Trees [laughs] going on as well that sort of grew out of these club experiences that Newark offered at the time, when it did offer them. It's just that there was kind of a whole web of connections here. These would all lead to parties in people's houses. They would extend from Newark into East Orange into Elizabeth into Orange into Irvington. You know it was just kind of a whole grid or a very interesting network. Once again, you know predominantly in the African American community and kind of a replay on some level of, "It's okay if you like to dance, you might be a fag, but dancing is okay." I mean, I know that's also a stereotype that all black people can dance and white people can't. I, of course am living proof that that's not true, but nevertheless. [laughs] So there's just all these kinds of things that would, or moments, or opportunities, for dancing and socializing in a mixed race kind of way that these club experiences sort of facilitated and they just kind of went into where you worked, or where you lived, or where you prayed or whatever you did. [laughs]

T = What about Charlie's West?

P = Well Charlie's West was a little more, not much, a little more racially integrated than the Cactus Club was.

T= It was in Orange...?

P = It was in East Orange. Very close to Newark, but in East Orange. But there the same problem was the music, the kind of music. I didn't last very long. You know about as soulful as they got was Tina Marie. [laughter] What was that song? One of her more famous songs...not Zanzibar...another one.

W = No, I'm lost.

P = Maybe it will come back to me...

T = But it was a gay bar?

P = "Square Biz"! That was it! "Square Biz!" That was the name of song! It wasn't Larry Levan spinning "Ain't Nothing Going on but the Rent" [laughter]

W = Yeah, the synthesizer replaces the bass.

P = Yes, totally!

K = Did people hook up with each other inter-racially or...?

P = Of course, absolutely!

K = So there wasn't any like, "Oh no..."

P = Oh no no no no...well, maybe some people...I wasn't one of them! [laughs] Although, that would not have been the language we would have used in those days. That's really a result of the internet that we would even have language like hooking up.

W = How would you have phrased it?

P = Ummm, a one night stand or something like that...or we got it on! [laughter] As opposed to Marvin Gaye's "What's Going On" [laughs] that's usually what was going on!

W = Is there any other lost lingo we should recover? Slang of the past that nobody uses?

P = Well, those were the days of a lot of this gendered language, "Miss Thang" and **“**Oh, girlfriend, please!" and all that sort of stuff. Like and as I said the last time, for whatever reason, whether I have up speech or whatever those s's are, I was always pretty gender traditional. My name was Peter, I didn't want to be Patricia or Patty or Mary, you know, just none of that ever appealed to me. That kind of camp, I guess.

K = Did they have any drag shows at the clubs?

P = Yes, they did. Certainly they did at Charlie's West. I think there may have been one or two at the Cactus Club. I don't remember there being anything like that at Zanzibar.

K = Drag queens only or drag kings as well?

P = No, no, no. No drag kings in those days. Definitely not. That would have been a later phenomenon. No, you know, I do have to say, in terms of the presence of women in many of these places, it was mostly gay men and straight women. You know, who were, the lingo for those women in those days was "and your fag hag," which was not always the case. And there was a whole horrible stereotype that went along with that, which was you were fat and no self-respecting straight man would be interested in you and so therefore your lot in life was to hang out with gay men. [laughs] You were as marginalized and subaltern as they were. Of course, in a patriarchal, heterosexist system all women are subalterns sadly enough.

T = What about at Murphy's, were there drag shows there?

P = Well, if there were, I wasn't there for them! [laughter]

T = Not on Wednesdays!

P = No, not on Wednesdays! No. [laughter]

T = Why Wednesday?

P = Well, it was the middle hump night. It was the middle of the week, right? So in those days, for a lot of different reasons, your mentality was, you know, if you could just get to Wednesday, you'd be okay and then there would be the weekend, which would be through Sunday!

T = Did people say "hump night?"

P = Oh definitely! Not "hump" as in sex or frottage or whatever the case may be! [laughter] It was more the hump of the week. Like once you were through Wednesday it was smooth sailing from there. You could suffer Thursday, cause you knew Friday was coming. And you could go out Thursday night cause you knew Friday was okay, you could sleep late on Saturday morning.

T = So it wasn't that Murphy's had a particular event on Wednesdays?

P = No, they just had...well, there was a particular event. It was music and dancing, because you got to remember during the days, Murphy's was a place where businessmen from Prudential got, I don’t know, a martini and a cheeseburger. [laughs] You went in Murphy's during the day it wasn't what you saw on Wednesday night or Friday night or Saturday night or Sunday night. And I did go there sometimes on those nights and it was always wonderful, but it was much more talking with people...

T = Not dancing.

P = There was some dancing, but not in the same way as on a Wednesday or on a Sunday. And I can remember meeting some of the nicest men there and some of the best, deep conversations. They weren't all that campy stuff. You really connected with somebody. And I don't mean in a sexual way you. I mean, you got to talk with people and learn about who they were and vice versa. There was a lot more self-revelation and disclosure going on, I think.

T = You said businessmen from Prudential would go there during the day...

P = Yeah, I mean, and women too!

T = I mean, non-gay?

P = Yeah! It was just somewhere where you went to get...it was like all the gay parts of Murphy's were gone from like 11 in the morning on a weekday until 6 or 7 at night.

T = That's very interesting. There's a place I know about in Chicago that was like that, that because of it's location presumably enabled them to have this dual clientele.

P = Yes, because of it's location.

W = I mean this kind of redirects us then, but can you tell us about how you first became aware of AIDS? When it first entered your consciousness?

P = Well, yes, so that actually, believe it or not, would have been in 1977 when I was bartending on Christopher Street, because I worked with two guys who suddenly, out of nowhere, died of a rare Peruvian lung disease.

T = Where were you working at?

P = I was working at Boots n' Saddles on Christopher Street. So I worked very closely with a guy, Steven, I can't remember his last name, and he suddenly died of a rare Peruvian lung disease. That's what we were told and it wasn't until two or three years later that I started to connect the dots in that way. Of course, it was then being referred to as a strange gay cancer. Gay-related GRID: gay-related infectious disease. You know everybody was sort of thinking very essentialist about this. They developed all of these horrible categories, the risk groups: gay men, intravenous drug users, Haitians go figure, and hemophiliacs. But most of it was just so...I mean, absolutely frightening.

I just remember for years, even an ingrown fingernail or toenail was reason. And I, of course, the worst part was worked in a hospital, so I was going around driving every doctor I knew nuts! No matter what the symptom was! I would appear, leave my desk and appear in their office and you had a certain kind of informality that you could do that,

because you worked there and you worked with these doctors every day. They often couldn't function without you. You know, I coordinated their schedules and I was the executive assistant of the CEO of the hospital. The big honcho man so to speak. No one was going to turn me away.

And I just remember spending so much time constantly vigilantly policing my body for, you know, no matter what it was. I mean, I remember around that time, I got a really bad case of something called folliculitis. Nobody knows why that happens. All the hair follicles on some part of your body become extremely irritated and you get all of these...I was convinced I was dead! It was only a matter of days I was going to die! Every cold, every canker sore, every unusual pimple! No matter what it was, there I was the next day tormenting somebody! I think after a while they started to run when they saw me and I wasn't the only one! I just lived in constant terror!

I remember being obsessed constantly figuring out where my lymph nodes were, feeling them. Of course they were swollen, I couldn't keep my freaking fingers off them! [laughter] I was constantly irritating them! [laughs]

So it was very scary. I mean, really scary. And then you had all the way the media dealt with it. All the religious rhetoric. Even with all of my struggles in my life with religion, I could tell you that really did a number, a big number, on me.

T = You mentioned religion being a factor and I was curious...

P = So you know this was God's punishment for homosexuality. This is what happens, this is the contemporary Sodom and Gomorrah story, here it is! You want to live that lifestyle, the vengeance of the Lord is now upon you my dear child.

T = You heard this?

P = Well, sure it was in the media, it was Jerry Falwell, it was locally...

T = Where locally? How locally?

P = In the churches. It was shocking to me in retrospect, the things that people said. Things that would be very hard to get away with saying today. Not that there aren't people who still say and think those things, because they are and I'm sure there are loads of them right here in Newark and in the surrounding area. But in those days, no one was going to challenge you if you said those things.

K = Would they say it on the pulpit or the congregation would be talking about it?

P = Oh, definitely. Definitely. Absolutely.

T = Do you have particular memories of encounters or were incidents locally that...?

P = Well it was chaplains in the hospital where I worked. Conversations with some of them. Not all of them, but some of them. Or trying their best when, how they were going to skirt that kind of rhetoric if they could. And also, I became very astute at reading code, you know, with what they were saying. Like those were the days of, I mean if this wasn't code what is, "love the sinner, hate the sin!" I mean, what does that mean!? [laughs] You know what that means! One of the big questions we asked in the Newark Project, not to skip too far in the future, but, "Did you ever stop to think exactly how loved those sinners feel by you?" Not very! So thank you for sharing! [laughs]

W = What about the social impact on the networks you are talking about? The clubs, the private parties, interracial dancing...how does that play out? Is it an immediate change...is it...?

P= No. I mean, cause let's face it, we all know the reality of human sexuality. Right? While I have loads of problems with ancient Greek and Roman culture, at least in terms of men, they were absolutely right to refer to the penis as "the rod of necessity." So you know, epidemic, whatever the case may be, so while I think people tried very hard, most people can't be abstinent now, when things are a lot better! [laughs] Certainly for me, as someone who grew up Catholic, that meant to submit to what the church wanted me to submit to. It was bad enough I was homosexual, but my lot in life is to never engage in it. To be celibate for Jesus or whatever the case may be.

Did any of you see the recent documentary on Larry Kramer on HBO?

T = I didn't!

P = Oh, you should see it. First of all, I realized watching that, that he was so vilified, because he was seen as asking us to forfeit the little bit of liberation that we had achieved. And I realized that that wasn't the case. He was actually asking us to stop being so superficial and cultivate values, whatever that means, you know. And to have some sense of morality about things. You know, I don't mean that in some rigid Manichean Puritanical kind of way, but just that there was more to human sexuality than just what the body can do. There is truly a spiritual and an emotional dimension to that. And my own experience has certainly been that there was something markedly different about sex and sexual experience when you are emotionally connected to someone than when it's recreational sex. And he was asking us to be mindful of those things and I don't think that was something, back then, any of us could take in. That was sort of an issue I struggled with my whole life from my history with religion and so forth and so on. And I continue to struggle with that to this day on some level.

T = You talked about this young patient in the hospital whose skin was peeling off. Do you have other...I mean it's not easy to talk about obviously, but what are your other memories of people getting sick and dying?

P = Well, I lost a lot of friends, needless to say, who got sick and died. I mean they were there and suddenly they were gone and fast. I mean just dancing in the clubs, you don't

know everybody, but you recognize faces, cause you're all there together every week and suddenly all those faces were gone. And it's easy to say, "Oh they must've moved to California!" No, they didn't move to California. They left the planet. So you started to sort of...the silences and the absences speak volumes. So there was a lot of that. There were people at UMDNJ that I worked with who had AIDS, HIV infection, and full-blown AIDS. This was prior to protease inhibitors. People went very fast. So all of that was...I mean, I didn't sleep good. You know, I strove more than ever at that point to cultivate spirituality, because I was scared to death. I just wanted the universe to be merciful unto me and unto us. You know it's the only language I could come up with to talk about it, really. You know, it's hard to talk about.

W = Can I ask a time question about it? Because you had mentioned 1977 as the year that you began to lose people and it's not until 81 that there is an official recognition of AIDS. I mean, in the intervening years did you continue to witness people dying?

P = Oh yeah, one of them was a very dear friend of mine who suddenly died of a strange pneumonia.

W = How are you making sense of this? Because clearly, young otherwise healthy people are not supposed to be dying.

P = So you go everywhere with that. Even considering, are those priests and ministers right? Oh god, what am I going to do? I'm a Buddhist! Have I chosen wrong? [laughs]

W = But I guess what I'm asking is what is the consciousness then of this pattern? I mean, there's not yet a word, there's no GRID or AIDS or anything before 81 and yet people are dying.

T = Did you think it's sexually transmitted for example or are you...?

P = No, not then. My putting two and two together only happened after there was literature and information and you would read that, what was appearing in 1981 was already happening three or four years before and suddenly I would go, oh Steven and the weird Peruvian lung disease was pneumocystis carinii and not weird Peruvian lung disease.

T = So it went from being a total mystery to being this...

P = Yes, total mystery and what you thought was this strange isolated case. So it goes from that to suddenly you start to connect all the dots. And of course, the more…I think the other thing I always had a very hard time getting tested. My default emotion is anxiety generally, still to this day. [laughter] So I'll do anything to avoid anxiety and I'm not very good at it. Trust me, I'm a highly accomplished meditator. You name it, I'm Mr. Tranquility! I always tell people who say to me, "You know, for a guy who meditates, you're awfully anxious!" And I tell them, "Well, if I didn't meditate I'd be the chainsaw

murderer! So what do you want? A highly anxious guy who mediates or a chainsaw murderer??" [laughter]

Just that, that suddenly...I just was in such anxiety. I couldn't sleep. I couldn't focus on anything. I couldn't do anything. And I'm just an obsessive-compulsive type, particularly around certain thoughts or ideas. It's really about this feeling of helplessness and having no control. Right? I mean, still to this day if I get a weird thing in the mail from PSE&G saying they're changing who is giving me my electricity, I become obsessed with this and I can't sleep until I've talked to them and tell them, "I didn't choose this! I don't want it!" [laughter] These are the kind of things that drive me nuts! I mean the letter that comes from some company on a Friday night that you can't get on the phone again until Monday morning. Well, my weekend is shot! I'm on the sofa thinking about this! I can't eat, I can't go out! I can't sleep! I can't talk to anybody! So you can imagine, transfer all that to these number of years ago around dealing with the AIDS stuff. It just was...

And then at the same time, bizarrely enough, and I think this is the case for any group of people in crises who are also oppressed, to let go and party, so to speak, is your only outlet. So it became all the more intense for that reason.

T = So by the second half of these...you know there is antibody testing, but still no effective treatments.

P = No. None. AZT

T = Right, there's AZT.

P = There's AZT made from egg yolks or egg whites or whatever it was.

T = What was the trajectory of your experience going forward? You told us about the transition to the early 80s, how do things kind of play out over the period until protease inhibitors?

P = I think very touch and go. Hit or miss. At least me, I became good at compartmentalizing. I always had a hard time going and getting tested. I wouldn't do it very regularly. I would often have to be scared into doing it. And then, gratefully, it has always been negative. Partly because I just never engaged in what was considered really high-risk sexual activity. Not that I didn't engage in sexual activity, but certain things I just did not do. And I just wouldn't do whether it was AIDS or not. So I thought I was preserved because of that. But I just think it was really all very scary and so much so that I guess around 1987 until around 1997, 1998, I became totally celibate. I never masturbated. The only time I had an orgasm was nocturnal emission. I just, that was how I dealt with it. But doing that also made it possible for me to come to terms with that I had been sexually abused as a child. It made it possible for me to figure out that I hated healthcare administration and I needed to go back to school and you know get that...

T = Wait, being celibate enabled you to figure that out?

P = Yeah! It did.

T = Why?

P = Because I was sort of operating on autopilot. I was sort of doing what society expected me to do. I think that was mixed with the kinds of things that people who are raped and sexually molested do. Loads of sexual activity, being intoxicated, depressed, self-medicating in one way or another. All of that stopped. And it became possible for me to start to sort out the different components. And one of those was, my whole life has been about the pursuit of spiritual things in one form or another and that's what I want to do with my life. And I'm going to go and finish all my degrees. That meant my Bachelors Degree in Religious Studies and Philosophy, my Masters of Philosophy in Religion, and my Doctorate in Religion.

T = So when did that begin?

P = That began around 1988 or 89. By my going back to school part time while I was working at UMDNJ. Taking two courses at night each semester and one in the summer until December of 1994 when I finished. And then getting accepted to graduate school and being able to go on a full scholarship full time and have the job with the Newark Project. And that's how I got through those seven or eight years of graduate school.

W = Can I back up?

P = Yeah!

W = Before celibacy, you had mentioned last time, a sort of offhand comment that I wanted to come back to, because I think it is an interesting reflection of the anxieties of the 80s. I think you suggested that at some point in the 80s you felt safer picking up straight men. Could you elaborate on that? Because last time we kind of just let that pass over as something much future, but I think that's interesting historically. So could you talk a little bit about that?

P = I think in retrospect, and this is probably generationally, this is also about, you know that very simplistic, gender, sexuality concordance. I think I believed in those days, "Well, I'm a gay man. So I’m not a real man. Straight men are real men. And so I’m attracted to real men, not other fake men like me!" So that was sort of part of what the logic was in those days.

W = Yeah, yeah, [laughs] but it's a good segue point I guess, because I do have more age-related questions. I mean partly because in Newark, the demographics of Newark made for an epidemiology that was different from say NYC where gay men were much more overrepresented in New York, whereas in Newark, poor African American women and children were vastly disproportionately affected in the early years of the epidemic. How

visually did that play out in the city? I mean, how aware outside of gay culture in Newark were people in the city? I mean was AIDS...

P = Not.

W = Could you elaborate on that? How that silence worked in Newark, because people were dying?

P = Yeah, but I mean, people were in denial. When you can't take in that this may not be the gay plague that you think it is. I mean, first of all, I think whatever the rhetoric was, whatever the epidemiology of Newark was, these women and these children were being infected with HIV and I just think that when you take issues of intravenous drug use and issues of sexuality there are no rules for people who are desperately in need of money to get high. And so to think that all these straight men were somehow only contracting HIV infection from using dirty needles is to filter out so much more of the reality and that reality is, just like if you go on Craig's List now, you'll see loads of guys selling themselves, right, for whatever reason. And they'll do anything and everything to get the money that they need and I think that was going on then too. So it was a lot more fluid and the lines of sexuality were a lot more blurred. Even more than they are now that's, you know, for sure or that we thought they were. And so this kind of model of Newark's epidemiology, I think is much more complicated than the picture we were given. Although at the time that was the picture and I think people just had a really hard time wrapping their brains around it.

W = And what about at the hospital? I mean it had to be hyper visible there with women and infants. How are people at the hospital responding? I know there's a lot of paranoia at other hospitals that's documented. Can you talk a little...?

P = I have to say, at least what I observed, and particularly on the part of the doctors, they were really pretty wonderful with few exceptions. I do have to say that. And there was one pretty prominent doctor there who died himself of AIDS who was a closeted gay man.

T = Who you knew?

P = Who I knew, definitely. So I think there were people who worked on the floors, you know health care aids, orderlies as they were called at the time, who may have been leaving trays outside and not going into rooms, but that was not what I witnessed with doctors there. And not even with many nurses.

K = You said some of your coworkers had AIDS, they didn't experience any workplace discrimination then?

P = Well, no, because I knew because I was sort of on the inside track these were other gay people. So we had our own, sort of underground world network of communication and we all kept each other's secrets, so to speak, because we knew what the consequences

were if you didn't. I mean there was one guy I worked with there whose mother worked there also. And she was one of these high holiness church ladies and she knew about her son. He would tell me...

T = About her son's being HIV positive and being gay?

P = ...about her son's being HIV positive and being gay and he had a rough time with her. A really rough time. So imagine if others knew, right?

T = Did he eventually have to stop working?

P = No, in fact quite bizarrely enough, I haven't seen him in years and the other day I was driving my car and there he was crossing the street looking fabulously wonderful! I only wish I had realized it was him sooner than I did! I would have backed up and got out and talked to him and hugged him and everything! But you know it was not a situation where I could do that.

W = Could you talk more about the AIDS Friendship Group?

P = So the AIDS Friendship Group was actually started by myself, another gay man who worked at UMDNJ and still works there to this day, and the Catholic pastor at the time and a holiness Pentecostal woman minister. In fact, I have a photo of us somewhere. If I can find it, I will. It was in a UMDNJ paper, as a matter of fact. I'll have to look in my little time capsule and see if it's still there.

So what we did was we went around. I would go on my lunch hour and I would go around and visit people. I would sit and talk with them. I would meditate with them, if they wanted to meditate, to help them. I mean, it's kind of ironic, I'm such an anxious person and I was trying to help people calm down while I was a mess myself. You know this must have been a way of deflecting from my own great anxiety about it. So that's what we would do.

W = When did you start that?

P = I think we started that around '83, '84?

T = That's early.

P = It was early. It was very early.

T = What led you to start it? Was there an impetus?

P = I was just concerned. I realized people were suffering. And this was also around the time, all of that kind of new age Louise Hay stuff came out, "All you have to do is think it, that you're healthy and you will be!" and people were getting healed from AIDS spiritually. I was very "new agey" in those days and I wanted somehow that to be true.

You know, I read all this stuff by these medical doctors, the Simontons, who had worked with cancer patients and drawing your cancer cells and killing them and the impact that all that could have on your immune system. I totally bought into all that.

T = Yeah there was macrobiotics, stuff like that. Interesting.

P = And all of this sort of prosperity thinking, you're healthy if you just think abundance, money will start pouring in. None of that seemed to work too good! [laughter] But nevertheless, at the time, it was grasping for me at straws.

T = Well, when there is no treatment that is at all....

P = Exactly.

T = What was the AIDS Friendship Group?

P = It was a group of us all who volunteered at University Hospital and on our lunch hours, or whenever we had breaks, we would go and visit someone in the infectious disease unit who had HIV or AIDS.

W = How long did the group stay active?

P = I think only until about '88, '89?

T = And it was formal? Formal enough that you were photographed.

P = Yeah, it was formal enough.

T = And you had the word AIDS in the name and were willing to be photographed and be associated with that...

P = Yes I was.

T = ...and so were these other people.

P = And so were the other people.

T = That's sort of interesting.

P = But remember it was all done under the rubric of pastoral care.

T = Right! Right.

P = You had to have some sort of official body that was going to sustain and sanction this and that was the department of pastoral care.

T = Which you didn't work for...

P = I didn't work for. No.

T = But some of the other people did?

P = No, none of the actual volunteers did except for the two pastors that were involved with it. And the reason why that happened is, the CEO of the hospital's office was right down the hall from the chapel. So there is a chapel, as there is in most hospitals, and because I was a meditator, I would go into the chapel everyday and meditate for 45 minutes or an hour. They probably thought, "Look at this nice homosexual boy! He comes and prays everyday." I'm sure that's how it was read and it is sort of prayer, but not in the way they were thinking I was doing it. [laughs] So yeah, so that's how it kind of operated.

W = Now my sense of the '80s, in terms of city politics, Newark is mostly just ignoring the crisis up until the very late 80s. I think the first AIDS commissioner in Newark is 89?

P = Yes, that's right.

W = Is there other AIDS activism in Newark during that time that you're aware of in that period?

T = Or service organizations?

P = None that I was really aware of. I mean, when we get to the Newark Project part, we learned an awful lot about some of the things that were going on in Newark around HIV and AIDS that was just totally, I mean it was a social scientists biggest dream come true to find the things that were going on. The way people learned how to navigate the system to get what they needed and the unofficial networks of support that people themselves had set up in a very grassroots kind of way. But at this point, late 80s, I knew none of that.

W = Were you aware of the People with AIDS Coalition that Derek Winans set up? Were you aware of that?

P = Yes.

W = Were you involved with that?

P = Later on I was, yes, through the Newark Project. And a little bit before that actually through a good friend of mine who I had grown up with who was a nice Italian Catholic boy who said, "Screw you Catholic church! I'm becoming Episcopalian! These people will actually acknowledge my humanity in a way that you would not!" And so it was really through him. He knew Derek and I got to know Derek through him.

W = Did you know Raymond Proctor at all who died of AIDS?

P = I did. I did. I actually knew him, because he became connected with the Newark Project. We had a whole AIDS thing in the Newark Project that...and if my memory serves me well, I remember him in the very early days of it, but he died very shortly after the beginning of all that.

W = Okay, I was just curious. I'm interested in Proctor. He was the head of CORE, the Congress of Racial Equality, in the 60s, and a sort of fascinating queer Newark figure who wasn't out until the 70s. But anyway, that's neither here nor there for our purposes. I was just wondering if you knew him.

Before moving to the Newark Project...and I'm sorry to ask this, because this is going back to some of the painful memories. I was wondering if you could tell us about friends in Newark that you lost. What it was like to die in Newark in the 80s.

P = Well, one of the big problems that everyone faced was...it was not acknowledged why you died. It was all sort of glazed, glossed over. Your family came and did a traditional funeral for you. Why you died was not printed in the obituary. It was all code. Everything was code. So who you were, who your life was, all of that was just rendered invisible. So that was really very painful and so one of the things that some of us used to do is have memorial services. We would just get together in very informal kinds of ways and acknowledge the reality of people's lives.

T = Memorial services that were separate from the funeral?

P = Yes, in people's living rooms. We would light a candle and friends would come and talk about the person.

T = This was when families were taking over the funeral?

P = Yes, totally. And remember you had no say in anything, right? Whether someone was your partner, your boyfriend, you did not exist as far as the system and the law was concerned. So we had to find ways to deal with our own grief around the loss of people and if anthropology is correct, human beings are ritual creatures as much as they need to eat food, they need to have ritual. Whether it is the ritual of how you drink your coffee and get dressed in the morning to more formal kinds of rituals. So we found ways to do that however we could and in whatever ways that we could.

K = Did you go to the family funerals as well or were you not welcome there?

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P = I didn't go mostly 'cause I just couldn't bare it. It was just too painful. You know and I mean, this is another issue but, I just think still to this day, the way that we deal with death in the United States is barbaric. Right? I mean even death is a commodity.

Barracuda, piranha capitalism once again. You know, twelve thousand dollars for....you're dead! Why do you need to be embalmed and in a beautiful bronze casket with rhinestones that will last for all eternity! So to me, that's barbaric. And to stand over somebody's coffin and say, "Oh he looks as good as he did when he was alive! I love the suit and his watch is gorgeous!" I mean, that to me is just horrific. Horrific! So I tend to not go to those kinds of things and find other ways to express my condolences to the family and deal with it in some other way. Certainly my own arrangements are no embalming, no funeral, immediate cremation, and frankly I'm dead, […] [laughs]

But we found ways you know. We found ways. Even if it was a dinner in their honor or to light a candle and sit around and talk about them or celebrate their lives in one-way or another.

T = Do you have particular occasions that stand out or were especially meaningful along those lines?

P = Well yeah, there was this one fellow who died who a friend and I had sort of been his...what's the word...his buddy. We were kind of his AIDS buddies. We took him to his doctor's appointments. We made sure he ate, had clean clothes, wasn't left alone. He lived alone in isolation too long. You know, you bond with these human beings and suddenly they're gone. And with this one fellow, that was what happened. I think it was at that point, I had enough. I just...I was burned out. I couldn't do it anymore.

T = Couldn't do...?

P = I couldn't do any of that anymore.

T = The buddies...

P = Yeah, I just couldn't do any of it anymore.

T = How had you become his buddy? Did you know him before?

P = No, he was friends with a friend of mine. So we knew that he was infected and he was in trouble.

T = Do you remember when he died?

P = I was still at UMDNJ, so I think it was late 80s--89, 90. I didn't leave UMDNJ until...well, I left in August of 94. I finished my last semester of undergraduate work. By that point I was already working for the Newark Project, but I didn't get my degree until that December. But I was in school full time working for the Newark Project, so it was just before that...it was just before that.

W = If you had to put a number on it, I mean, how many friends did you lose?

P = Locally or you mean NYC?

W = How about each?

P = Locally, fifteen, maybe twenty.

T = Locally means...?

P = Newark, NJ area. Overall that I know of, sixty-five people. Maybe seventy. Not all of whom were men, by the way. Not all of whom were gay.

T = But most?

P = But most. Yeah.

It was just a really weird, weird period. It was definitely Twilight Zone.

W = Did that follow the national statistical curve beginning in the early 80s ending in the mid 90s?

P = No, I think probably it was less. I think that there are people...I mean I know someone who I used to teach with actually, who wrote a book all about the Gay Men's Health Crises and all that. And he lost over two hundred friends and I think that's much more what it was like for most people. I mean, I think one of the differences, for me anyway, was I've never been a ghettoized person, so to speak. I cannot imagine my life without women in it. These were gay men who lived only with gay men in a gay male world and that was just not me ever. That's not how I thought about things. I just was never one to sort of organize people into tribes and say, "This tribe is in! That tribe is out!" I just still to this day, I will not tolerate gay men saying negative things about women. I'm sorry. That's just not going to happen and I will call them out on it.

T = Do you remember when people stopped necessarily dying? Or when?

P = There's no way we can talk about this without talking about the Newark Project, because protease inhibitors appeared on the scene when the Newark Project was up and running for about two years. And that changed everything. That changed everything. I mean, suddenly people who thought they were going to be dead in three weeks were back in life again, so to speak. And so that would have been mid 90s--95, 96. That's what I remember. I mean for some people, unfortunately, it was too late. Some of the people in the ballroom community in Newark, who we worked very closely with, who are not with us know. For some it was too late, even with the protease inhibitors. So that was when I remember a big shift in things...a big shift.

T = How did that feel? I hope that doesn't seem like a dumb question.

P = No, it felt incredibly helpful. I guess, because I was still very celibate at the time. You know, for ten years I no longer needed to get tested. [laughs] I no longer needed to do any of those things, because there wasn't anything happening! So I think I felt...

T = Your celibacy ended not long after that right?

P = Not long after it, that's right.

T = And is that part of why, do you think?

P = No. It was because I felt ready to open myself up to the possibility of relationship again. And it was also because of my graduate school education. One of the things that really motivated me to go to school and study the relationship between religion and sexuality and gender was I just was not a person who could believe that sexual pleasure or sex or pleasure was always a bad thing. It was always a sin. I mean, growing up Catholic you're sort of told tacitly, if it feels good it must be a sin and I could just not believe that. By that point, I was reading all these really radical religious writers about issues of sexuality and celebration of being embodied and having a body and all of those things. So that was really what drove me to end the celibacy. I mean, the celibacy thing went with all of these sort of...you know I was a vegan, I was...I mean, what broke that was my PhD mentor saying to me, "Oh my god, you're a food fundamentalist!" [laughter] And I thought, "Get me a hamburger! Get me a hamburger and a glass of wine and a milkshake while you're at it!" [laughter] So it was like, "See ya, St Augustine! I'm going in another direction baby!" [laughter] So it was really much more that. It was much more that. But then that did raise...that meant going back to getting tested and all of those things that just, still to this day, drive me up a wall.

W = Do you want to talk about the Newark Project now? I mean, we know what it is, but maybe for somebody listening in or for the transcript for historical purposes you could just give a synopsis of what we are talking about.

P = So the Newark Project was out of Drew University, where I went to graduate school, and it was originally funded locally by the Victoria Foundation, by the Prudential Foundation, there was another one in there...I can't remember what it is...and the idea was two-fold. One was that Newark would become a field site, so to speak, for students who were working on masters and PhD in some area of religion and they would study every facet of religious life in and around the city of Newark. Not only what was going on in churches and synagogues and mosques, but everything and anything that was going on. So that was one component of it. The other was to provide field based education for students in the seminary who were studying for the ministry. To give them...I mean, one of the things, [to Kristyn] you're a graduate student right? So you know how abstract and theoretical everything can be, so part of the thinking was these people are going to sit around and talk about scripture forever and never have any contact with real human beings until they finally get a congregation and they are going to know nothing. So the idea was to get people working with other human beings. And so eventually we got huge

funding from the Ford Foundation and the Newark Project existed from approximately 1993 until about 2002, 2003.

W = And this was all directed by Karen McCarthy Brown?

P = Well, not initially. Initially it was a joint faculty endeavor. Being on a faculty, you know what that is like. [laughter] Getting faculty to cooperate with each other, to actually love each other, to not want to step all over them to get to the top of the ladder first. All of those kinds of things eventually unfortunately led to Karen becoming the executive director. And pretty much with few exceptions of faculty, it was Karen and those of us who were part of the Newark Project team. So that was myself, the Reverend Eugenia Lee Hancock, who is no longer with us. I don't know if you know Lee. So Lee was a Presbyterian minister. We went through the PhD program together in Religion and Society. After she got it, she became the dean of Auburn Theological Seminary in NYC, which is related to Union Theological Seminary. But she was a Presbyterian minister, straight woman, who was before coming to graduate school the associate pastor of Judson Memorial Church on Washington Square there. She was among the first people appointed to the NYC Commission on AIDS and she was an extremely courageous woman. She would go, at a time when no clergy would do this, she would go into gay bars in NYC at midnight and two in the morning and lead memorial services for people who had died of AIDS. In fact, the title of her dissertation, it's all about AIDS in Newark, It was called "AIDS is Just a Four Letter Word."

So it was her, myself, we were the program development people. When I first met Karen, I discovered that she and many of the other faculty knew nothing about Newark. I knew everything about Newark. It was a match made in heaven, so to speak. And because I worked at University Hospital and because I had always been the sort of border crosser kind of person that I was, I knew somebody or somebodies in every community in Newark you could think of. I was politically well connected, socially well connected, all of those things, even religiously well connected. So I kind of became the person that's called a gatekeeper in anthropological theory. So I was sort of someone who could open the gates, so to speak.

So when we got here, one of the first places I led people to and Lee with her background in NYC was into the gay community and the HIV/AIDS community in Newark. And this was really the beginning of some pretty sophisticated theory that we didn't even know we had stumbled across at the time. And it really challenged, in many ways, the traditional model of religion that most social scientists were operating under. We discovered that for poor people and for people who have to live with HIV/AIDS who are disenfranchised from the system for reasons of the color of their skin, their gender, their sexuality, there was a whole different model going on. And it was what we were calling at the time, "the therapeutic model of religion." So people were in search of healing and community in one form or another. And so these people did not identify as
"I'm a Methodist," "I'm a Muslim," "I'm an Episcopalian." They were just going and getting the spiritual goods from wherever they thought they could get it. And this began

to somehow register to us that religion was a lot more fluid than we thought before and religious identity was a lot more fluid.

One of the things that I became really interested in...you know, I had grown up with this model and the model was -there's god and there's gay. The two do not go together. God people are not gay and gay people do not have god or spirituality. Right? They just don't. And I thought to myself, I want to find out if this is true. So I designed my research project to be...I was going to do all these oral histories with transvestite sex workers and ballroom voguing kids and I was going to find out if this was true. And then there was all of the African diasporic religions that were going on- Santeria, Candomblé, Vodou in Newark. What is this about? These traditions traditionally welcome people who are sexually different. It was just a whole different model.

So this is what sort of got us to start to do research and have all of these, what I like to think of is mutually respectful relationships with communities that had been very poorly treated by institutional religion and to really find out how they made a spiritual way for themselves. If it is true, as anthropology thinks, that there is a spiritual dimension to being human, whether you are a religious believer or not, you could be an atheist and still have a spiritual dimension to being human, so I wanted to know how that worked in a world where you were told "No," where you were shut out. What did you do? What did you piece together for yourself?

[Gets choked up]

I don't know where that came from.

T = Do you want to take a break?

P = No. What did you piece together for yourself when nobody would give you anything but condemnation. How did you survive? What did you do? I wanted to know that. How did you deal with suffering and poverty and hope and death and rejection and isolation? How did you deal with that? For all the reasons, you know and in some cases it was for all, for gender, for race, for sexuality, for poverty, all in one person, all in one life. Right? How did you deal with that? Where did you go to get sustenance? What did you do?

So that's how we became involved with...I can't even remember what we called it now...we created together this huge coalition. You know, James Credle, all these people that you guys know. All became a part of this. All the houses...it was the Houses of Newark Coalition. That was what we called it. And I did what good anthropologists of religion do. I cultivated relationships with the mothers and fathers of these houses. We created opportunities for them to express themselves. There was a trade off. The trade off in my case was, "We'll tell you what you want, but you have to dance. You have to walk in those balls. You have to learn to do it!" And I did.

They told us their stories and we created opportunities. Whenever they would have those Fireballs, we would sponsor a category with the money we had from the grants. We

would create a cash prize. You come and create something that memorializes the people in your house that have died over the last year. We had an altar project one year. You had to, at the Fireball, create an altar that memorialized the people in your house who died. Whether it was being killed for being a sex worker or from HIV/AIDS or some form of violence. And you know, through that, we would get together here...often here on this campus thanks to James, his position here at the time. We would enter into these incredible, hard discussions about race, gender, sexuality, poverty, and I'm not talking about nice academic discussions, we all had to face the ugliness in ourselves and talk those things through and come to some kind of mutual respect. And that was often really difficult. I mean, it was really hard for people to hear each other. And I can tell you there were times we just screamed at each other and it was not pretty. It was not pretty.

So there was that going on and then, there was, like for example, I taught a course for the Drew seminary on location here in Newark. Sometimes it was taught here on the Rutgers-Newark campus. Other times it was taught over on Halsey Street through the Liberation in Truth church. It was a course called Religion and the Social Process. It was all of these seminarians from the Drew seminary. Many of whom were these fundamentalist, born again, really narrow-minded ministerial candidates. So you had to come and take the class and you also had to do an internship. So I would take the most homophobic, uptight, rigid, Pentecostal ministerial candidate and his or her internship would be at the African American Office of Gay Concerns. [laughs]

T = So why would these ministerial candidates take your class or did they have to?

P = Well, they had to take Religion and the Social Process and there were a number of different tracks. Most of the tracks was Religion and the Social Process and you went to Ghana or you went somewhere else. But there were groups of people who could not do that for various reasons. They had families, whatever the case may be. And there was also a big shift going on at the time in anthropology particularly and that shift was...

T = To study U.S.

P = Yes, I mean it was a horribly, imperialistic, colonialist kind of thing that some white anthropologist would go and study some exotic natives on some island somewhere. Instead, we began to realize, you know, anthropology studies human beings everywhere. Who said the rule is you have to go to Maui?

[At this point, the interview was interrupted and subsequently moved to another room.]

P = So we would do that and then we also had some very traditional projects going on where people would go and study specific congregations in Newark. My own dissertation, as you know, was out of Saint Lucy's church. It was very nontraditional and somewhat subversive, but nevertheless, it was in that sort of context. So we had all these things going on. And then we were interested in looking at how the social service system cooperated with, or didn't cooperate, or helped people who were in need and what were the spiritual dimensions in that. So for example, we placed students in various social

service organizations. AIDS organizations particularly, as well. And then the masters and PhD students, many of them did their dissertation, so we had one woman, for example, she didn't do her dissertation, but initially she did an extensive research project with the Muslim community in Newark. And she was not a Muslim and she covered and she went to the mosque regularly and she went with them on these sort of mosque trips and all. And then when that particular project is over, we would have the communities come to Drew and we would have these discussions. And in this one particular woman, you know she announced to all these Muslim woman, "Listen, I'm a lesbian. You know, you've been side by side with me. I've covered, I've prayed with you, I've listened to you talk about lesbians, talk about homosexuals, you know, I just want to let you know, this is who I am." And those were like, just incredibly fruitful discussions. It was amazing to me...I mean, talk about generalizations, that you know it's not true, not all Muslims are homophobic. Not in the least! They were loving, wonderful women. You know, these were Muslim women. They were just wonderful!

There was just so much. We had to train students, you should not think, for example, that a plaster duck on someone's lawn is just a plaster duck. They might be a practitioner of Santeria. You should not think that a bathtub on somebody's lawn with plants on it is just that. You must learn instead to see religion in the places that you have cultural filters against seeing where it is. I mean, this what I discovered. I discovered that some of these children in these voguing houses had altars at home where they prayed everyday. I remember interviewing one guy who told me, "I get all dressed up every Sunday like a black church lady with a big hat and nobody knows that I'm a guy and I go and listen to the sermon. And I let the hateful things that the minister says about me just wash over me. And think, thank you Jesus!" I mean, to me this was just like, "Oh my god!" you know?

So then we did this, we called it the Religious Mapping of Newark. So every year we would choose a ward of the city. We would get a map of the ward of the city and we would give...this was before everyone had smart phones with cameras in it...we would get these cheap, portable cameras and we would give that and a bunch of film to all the students and we would tell them, "You take these blocks. You take these blocks. You take these blocks. We're doing the North Ward this year," or the East Ward, "and you just go out and take pictures of everything that you see that represents religion." And we would say, "And take pictures of things like churches that are now Dairy Queens. Diary Queens that are now churches. Banks that used to be synagogues. Synagogues that are now banks." So we began to build up this incredible visual mapping of the religious aspects of Newark. Both the traditional ones and then what we called at the time, religion in between the cracks of the institution. I mean, that's the part that I was most interested in and the sort of moving around that people did to get what they needed when you were unacceptable to the system.

And one of the things that we participated in at the time was also an underground pharmacy. Where people would take their AIDS related drugs that they weren't using and there was a whole network that we documented of people would distribute them to other people who had no access to these through the system.

T = Is this after protease inhibitors?

P = Yes, it was after protease inhibitors. Yeah. And we called it the Newark Underground AIDS Pharmacy. So we documented all of this.

I can't tell you, I did volumes of oral histories of gay men all over Newark. Not only gay men. Also women living with AIDS. I did on my own- volumes of these. And with Karen and Lee, we began doing video interviews as well, because the technology was changing. So we were sort of there....you know, all of this began, I remember my first semester in grad school, you know email was like this sort of strange thing! Like, "Ooo, how interesting!" [laughter] But you know, it wasn't like everything was virtual and electronic and digitalized like it is now. What we didn't know was everything was about to change. Not only because of protease inhibitors, but more so, because of the technology! You know? I mean, that was the real...how you got educated was gonna change, how you read was gonna change! [laughs]

T = So I have a question, you mentioned that Karen and other faculty connected to the project didn't know anything about Newark and that you did and that you connected the project with folks and communities in Newark. Can you say more about how that happened or what it was like for you?

P = Yeah, so here's how it happened and it's kind of a funny story. So when I was in undergraduate school just finishing up.

T = Which was at Montclair State?

P = At Montclair State. I did an independent study with a Ghanaian professor who was both a Presbyterian minister but also a traditional...he practiced traditional Akan religion. And I did an independent study with him on...we were calling it at the time Afro-Caribbean Religions. I was really interested in that there were gay people in these religions. And I was more fascinated by the notion that there were actually religious traditions that the more different you were, the more holy you were, the more priestly you were as opposed to you were going to hell! Right? So this just fascinated me and in the course of it, I read this book called, *Mama Lola: Vodou Priestess in Brooklyn* by Karen McCarthy Brown. I was fascinated by this book, because in this book was a chapter on a Vodou spirit called Gede, which you have my article on and there was a picture of my family's patron saint, St. Gerard, whose shrine is right over here in St. Lucy's Church. And I was like, what the hell is this?! What do you mean, my family's patron saint is a Vodou spirit? So I became obsessed with this. So I wanted to talk to this woman who wrote this book. And so I lied! I called her up and I said, "I'm very interested in going to graduate school and I'd like to come to talk to you about it." I didn't want to...I had real grandiosity. I was going to go to Harvard, Columbia, Yale, Princeton, not Drew! So I went under the pretext that I was going to go to graduate school. And when I got there she said, "So were are you from? Where do you live?" and I said, "I'm from Newark. I

live in Newark. I work in Newark." And a little light went on in her head! Right? And so she encouraged me to apply. She told me about this Newark Project.

I had, as an adult, totally redeemed myself at Montclair State. I graduated with more than a 4.0 GPA, which is virtually...so I graduated summa cum laude, whatever the magna cumma whatever the freak it is, you know, all of that. So I had a stellar academic transcript. Excellent letters. And I got in! I got awarded a full scholarship. And but prior to that, while I was in the process of applying, they offered me this job to be the administrator. I was a fairly experienced administrator from UMDNJ. So they figured out that while maybe some of them knew about Newark, they didn't really know people in Newark. So basically really what I did in all honesty was I just started to call on my network of friends-who knew people-who knew people-who knew people. And so I would do things like take all of these visiting scholars of religion from the top universities in the country on tours...religious tours of Newark. I would do things like arrange for a gay Santeria priestess to talk with these scholars at an Episcopal church in Newark where I happened to know the priest who was very liberal and would lend her church facilities. Or I knew a local imam very well. I would take these scholars to talk to these cloistered Dominican nuns over in the West Ward of Newark. All these kind of things. Or to talk with my friends who were the directors of social service agencies in Newark. Or I knew everyone at UMDNJ. I could arrange for faculty and students to talk to doctors, you name it. Somehow I could figure it all out and set it all up. Because I was a known entity in the gay community at the time that opened loads of doors. And they, of course, knew people who weren't gay in other venues. So that was how it worked.

I just thoroughly enjoyed doing it, because I was actually really engaged with this as opposed to just perpetuating bureaucracy, which was what I was doing as a hospital administrator. I mean that was a thing I thought, if I have to fill out...every April I fill out the same forms, every September I fill out the same forms, every November I do this. If I have to do this for the rest of my life, I'm going to kill myself. Right? I mean, of course now we're all mired in perpetuating bureaucracy. [laughter] It's only now I'm tenured to do it for eternity! [laughs}

So it was a very exciting time for so many reasons that I don't think I fully realized in the moment. I mean, first of all, we were sort of, unbeknownst to us, on the cutting edge of what's fairly common understanding about the nature of religion in the academic world now. You know, I mean, you've got all this global spirituality, inter-religiosity, people who are now claiming that the Divine is calling them to seek her, him, it outside of all organized religion in a totally unchartered kind of way. Well, you know all of that came out of some of the things that we discovered. And at the time, Karen had the ability, because of her own renown and her connections to people at Harvard and Columbia to sort of put these ideas on the map. And they all came out of the actual, on the ground, grassroots kind of research that we were doing and students were doing.

W = And then you made St. Gerard the topic of your own work!

P = And I made St. Gerard the topic of my own work.

W = When we put this online, we'll obviously link to that and talk about it. I assign it in my class. I think maybe you do too. [talking to Tim} I think maybe I took it from your syllabus. What was that like? I mean, turning this thing that was a very intensely personal thing for you, about white gay Catholic men in Newark, into an academic pursuit? I mean, how did you reach out to these guys that you interviewed for that?

P = Well, some of them...I mean it didn't happen quite that way, right? I sort of went there. I didn't want to go there. I thought my dissertation was going to be about voguing Houses and transgender and all of this non-traditional, off the beaten path spirituality. And Karen said to me, "I think you should consider...this is a perfect moment in the Anthropology of Religion where the model is: send the anthropologist back to his or her own community of origin where you can explore all of these issues about insider/outsider status and I think you ought to do that. And so I resisted this like the plague! You know, I had been totally alienated from my own Catholic upbringing for obvious reasons at the time. I hadn't been to where I came from in Newark for years and years. I just never went down there. I just never did. It reminded me of just a very painful period of my own upbringing.

T = Even though you stayed in Newark? That's what's interesting.

P = Yeah, even though I stayed in Newark. Even though I stayed in Newark. No, that's true. But remember I stayed in Newark and what I was exploring was astrology, tarot cards, Tibetan Buddhism, Hindu Tantra, you know things like that, not Catholic Newark and certainly not Italian Catholic Newark.

So I went through all the proper procedures to sort of go down there and begin doing field work and it wasn't until I began interviewing people that, you know, a certain group of men down there...you know, I don't know if gay-dar is true or not, but you know, their gay-dar was up and they figured out, this dude ain't straight! [laughs] Up-ended speech and whatever those s's are and look at the way he moves his hands, come on! I know Italians move their hands in all kinds of ways, but this is just way too gay! [laughs] So they just started talking to me. So that was how I discovered what I suspected was there all along, based on my own thoughts. I couldn't put my finger on it as a kid, but I always thought there was something. I don't even know that I had the words for it, but I just knew there was something about St. Gerard and that statue and that procession that tapped into a part of me that not everybody else had. I only knew later it was...there was something gay about it for lack of...it wasn't, I mean, as my writing says. It's really about the iconography and the style of the imagery that makes it look that way. I don't think St. Gerard was gay. We went through all the Foucaultian stuff around that the last time we were together.

But I went down there and I went down there very defended, because I know what the Catholic church teaches about gay people. And certainly then, it was a lot worse than it is now. And I also knew that the community that I come from is very socially, politically conservative. So I sort of felt like I was just down there among all of these Republicans!

[laughs] Which I was! You know? So of course I discovered, like with most things, nothing is ever black and white. It was a lot more nuanced and complicated than that. And I think that they were as suspicious of me as I was of them. But what really helped was that there were people there that had grown up with my mother and father and who knew them and who knew my grandparents. They just heard the name, Peter Sa...."Oh my god! You're Louise's son! You're Pete the Peddler's son! Oh, I went to school with your father! I know your Uncle David really good!" And so that really helped immensely. That really helped immensely.

And so that was how...and then there was, I had already been doing field work in a Haitian diasporic community in Irvington and so I became interested in the Haitians going down there. And I discovered there was the whole Vodou dimension to St. Gerard, just like Karen had written about in *Mama Lola*. Right? So...and then I discovered talking to people that I began to realize, while the Catholic church and while Catholicism is so authoritarian and dogmatic, like with most people in life, you know the reality in your life...what's that famous bumper stick you used to see? "My karma ran over my dogma." Well, what does that mean? That sort of means, the reality of your life, "Sorry about the dogma, I know you said we can't get divorced, but this bastard is beating the living shit out of me everyday and I'm praying to St. Gerard to help me get a divorce!" Right or, "I know you're not supposed to use contraception, but I keep getting pregnant so I'm praying to St. Gerard to help forgive me for using contraception." Right? So I realized it was not just about Haitians and gay people. It's about a whole group of Catholics that are finding a way to practice their religion that correlates with the reality of their lives as opposed to what the hierarchy or the...you know, this is Max Weber's ideal type versus the reality. So there is the ideal type and suddenly I began to realize nobody lives up to the ideal type of any religion. No matter who you are. We all have some area of our religious tradition, if we have one, where we cut corners. Because it's just the reality of our life.

So that was what that whole sort of process was about for me. Sort of discovering that and coming to appreciate also what's called in the scholarship vernacular, religion. The different creative things that people do with religion. I became interested even beyond the ballroom community to people's home alters. "Do you have an altar? Can I interview you about it? Can I take photographs of it?" So that became another component. And then I got into body art, because some people have their altars on their bodies in the form of ink! What's that about? So I mean it just sort of blossomed out into all those sort of very different areas.

But it was hard to go there and I still...I go there sometimes, but I still find it hard to go there. It's ironic. I teach in a Catholic university right? [laughs] But I find it...I know when I'm not welcome. And it's not...nobody says it, you just know that somewhere there is somebody thinking about me, that I'm sort of morally and intrinsically disordered in some way. That becomes hard to sustain on a regular basis.

I admire these gay men or these gay Catholics who can do it and just ignore. I can't, you know? I can do it for a while and then I just start to suffer horribly. So there's sort of a trade off. If you're willing to put up with that and live with that feeling, I've just never

been good at sustaining it. I mean, I'm one of these people who became, on some level, what I researched. I'm just making my own way. [laughs] And if I can plug in when I want mass, I go to the Episcopal church. I mean, it's very English. I'm a Mediterranean. There's no candles, there's no Madonna anywhere, there's no statues for me to kiss and hug! [laughter] No icons for me to kiss and bow down before. But you know what? It's totally okay to be gay here and transgendered here! And you know, they'll marry you if you want! So there's the trade off. Right?

W = It looked like you had a question. You can go first.

T = My question was just about how does Newark Coalition or piece of the project came into being, but...?

W= Yeah, no that's great. I'll follow up on...I have a whole different question.

P = Well, that came into being as a result of our interaction with James Credle, who was very connected to all of the Houses and then through these other groups of people who were not directly involved..there was a whole group of women that we interacted with. They were all former sex workers, all infected with HIV and some of...Lee, for example, did extensive work in that community. So we just began to pull all of these people at the table and originally it started as...we called it The Greater Houses of Newark, but it became more than that. It became a coalition of these other organizations too and I can't remember, I'm sorry to say, what we called it. But you know, if you asked James, he might remember or I could look in the literature to see and it's definitely in the Newark Project archives.

So it came together because we...here's what we had. We had funding and we also had a grant office that would give us a person who would write grants for this coalition. So one of the things we were working on, before all of this started to fall apart, was getting a lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender community center in Newark. And we were together as a group writing grants for funding. And we in fact applied to HUD for a building. We got rejected twice and then for various reasons Karen began to get sick with her dementia. We were done...some of us were done. We had got our PhD's and were on the job market and there were also big changes going on in the Houses of Newark and all and it all just sort of gradually fell apart in that form. It didn’t fall apart completely, because obviously James is still here. There's still stuff going on. I remained as directly involved as I could, until it became impossible because of the all-consuming nature of, first of all, being an Assistant Professor in a tenure track position, you have a whole set of hoops that you need to jump through there. And so now, it's only now, after tenure and promotion, that I've begun to think about reviving some of this and working on making Newark...establishing a field school in Newark that our anthropology students can come back and do similar kinds of research that we did at the graduate level. It would have to be at the undergraduate level, because we only have an undergraduate anthropology program at Seton Hall. But it's only now that I’m able to think about those things once again in a way that I just wasn't able to, well, as you know, poor Tim, as you go up for tenure and all of those kinds of things.

W = That actually ties exactly to what I wanted to ask about, which was your experience as a gay scholar on the academic job market in religious studies in the early 21st century. I mean, first off the job market is terrible and you managed to land a tenure track job exactly in the right location and at a Catholic university that as I understand it is pretty conservatively run. How did that happen? And what were your experiences on the job market, getting this job, and dealing with the job?

P = So remember that I started at Seton Hall in 2003, so things were not yet as tight academically on the job market as they would become...

W = Oh definitely, but they were still pretty bad, right?

P = Yeah, they were still pretty bad. I guess, just because of the colorful character that I am, [laughter] I actually got quite a few interviews and I got very close to getting positions at some fairly progressive places. But in the meantime, I was adjuncting. I was teaching at Montclair State and I did like a year's...what's that called...I was on a one year contract full time at Drew and then from there I got this one year contract to teach at Seton Hall. And it was in the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at the time. I knew someone. I had a good friend who was on the faculty there and he encouraged me to apply for this one year temporary teaching position. It would give me a salary and health benefits, while I continued to be on the job market.

I did not do what many gay men do who are academics who study these things at the time, which is remove certain things from your cv. I had queer everything from my cv from day one and my philosophy was, let the chips fall where they may. So it wasn't like Seton Hall didn't know who I was. And at the time, I was also the co-chair of the Gay Men's Issues in Religion Group of the American Academy of Religion, so you know. [laughs] And all my stuff on St. Gerard and gay men was out there. All of it was out there. The talks I had given on gay life and religion. All those things were there and I was on the job market continuing and they got a line for the position that was vacant. It was in anthropology and they encouraged me to apply. And I didn't want to do it actually. I thought, how will I survive here?

But as it turns out, it is true, I mean I have total academic freedom at Seton Hall. Nobody tells me I can't teach anything. What I do in the classroom is totally my purview. It is true, it's an Archdiocesan owned and operated university and there is a mission around those kinds of issues and I sometimes find that a real challenge. But my colleagues are wonderful. My students are wonderful. And it is sometimes a very strange experience and I find myself thinking, the universe has an incredible sense of humor. There is such irony about this, but everywhere else that I interviewed being who I was, was sort of, seen as being very sexy in a lot of ways. Now I will also say, none of those were other Catholic universities. I mean, some of the places I interviewed, Haverford, Williams College, places like that. I mean, those are far from conservative Catholic universities. And I'm probably...there's only two of us on campus who are openly gay faculty members and I'm one of them. And it's just never...it's never caused me a problem personally.

W = Wow. Unlike the chaplain...

P = Yes. Well, you know the way the university dealt with that was to say, "Well, that's not about the university. That was an Archdiocesan decision. That's about clergy and yes there are clergy who teach at Seton Hall, but Seton Hall is a university with an academic mission and they are two different things."

W = Right.

P = But it is sometimes...makes me feel very sad. It disturbs me when those kinds of things happen never the less. And you know, I gave a talk here two or three years ago at the Women's and Gender Studies Conference and you saw the way I was challenged by people in that audience who had gone to Seton Hall themselves and said, you know, "How could you teach at a homophobic institution like that?" and "How did you get away with doing this kind of research?" [laughs] I didn't know what to say to that and it really upset me. And I went back to my colleagues and said, "Hey listen, this is really upsetting that I was publically challenged. This is the image that our university has. And it's by your own graduates no less!" You know that's a PR issue they have to work on if they have any interest in it. But it is a very strange situation to be in. I do admit it. [laughter]

But you know, I don't know, I just sort of think part of the whole academic...I hate to use capitalist terms...but academic enterprise is about being in those ambiguous, nuanced kind of situations. That they really force you to think in ways that you may not have to think at somewhere where all the ducks line up. Right? But here's the other side, like, I interviewed for a position at Montclair State, which I was the candidate of choice for, except unfortunately it was when a new Provost was coming in and he had a different vision for who was supposed to be in that position. But you know I realized you guys have all of these really rigid state regulations that I don't have to deal with. All of these bureaucratic procedures. I mean, bureaucracy is everywhere, but those bureaucratic procedures are far more imprisoning than I'm ever going to experience at Seton Hall.

W = Yeah.

P = I mean, I could into my classroom and say, you know, "We're all going to meditate together today" and no one is going to say, "Oh prayer in the classroom! You can't do that! This is a public institution!" [laughs] Right?

W = Yeah.

P = So there are a lot of advantages to that sort of ambiguous, nuanced, kind of paradoxical situation that you guys don't have. [laughs]

K = What topics do you teach in your class?

P = I teach Anthropology of Religion. I teach Anthropology of Consciousness. I teach Ritual Studies. I teach Religion, Sexuality, and Gender in Cross Cultural Prospective. Anthropology of Catholic Mystics and Mysticism. Those kind of things. Medical Anthropology, particularly Alternative Ways of Healing and how they are connected to religion.

K = Do you find like, do you have any LGBT students that find solace in your classes?

P = Absolutely. Yes. We attract all of, I mean we attract many students, but we definitely attract all of the LGBTQI students, all of the religiously non-conforming students. All of those, yeah. Definitely.

K = That must be pretty cool for you. Cause if you struggled with like, growing up Catholic and feeling rejected by it, then to give peace to some students who might feel the same way.

P = Yes. Yeah, absolutely. I could tell you just this past spring, I had a young woman in my office in tears, because she went to talk to her local priest about why cannot women be priests in the Catholic church. And he told her, "If you don't like it, get out." And she was in tears in my office and I said, "Listen, if you need to talk to a priest about this, I'll find you a priest who I know personally, or two or three who I know personally, who will talk to you about it rather than tell you, if you don't like it, get out. You should have come to me first."

K = That's really cool.

P = Yeah, so it's not just about LBGTQI issues. It's about all kinds of issues.

W = What else should we ask?

P = I don't know.

W = So what about the role of Newark in your personal life. You know, since becoming an academic and teaching in the area. What role do you still see Newark playing?

P = Well, like I said, I'm sort of revisiting how to do that now. And I actually am hoping we can talk about how we're going to cooperate with each other to make that stuff happen. I mean not just around women and gender and sexuality issues, but more so than that. I think that there's a lot here and you know, I would like to find ways for us to bring our classes together and maybe teach some classes together on location. Even though my students will be registered at Seton Hall. Get them out into the city. Get them out taking pictures again, interviewing people, and talking to people and you know, visiting, not just religious institutions, but whatever institutions. I just think there is a lot to do. And so I've been thinking over the last year about this more so than ever and I don’t know really what that means concretely just yet, but it's certainly on my mind.

W = I don’t know if you have been following our new chancellor, Nancy Cantor, but she's really into civic engagement and getting the university into the city.

P = Well, I heard her talk at the panel I was on in the fall and I was very impressed by her. So definitely.

W = Yeah, I think that's really central to how she sees Rutgers's mission kind of evolving. Which is great, I think it's a really opportune moment to be here.

P = Yeah, I agree. Yeah, so I'd love to explore ways that we might make that happen.

W = I mean, anything else that we should include in the oral history, before we end?

P = Uhhh, nothing comes to...

W = I mean, we've covered so much. [laughs]

T = Yeah, we covered a lot.

P = Come on, I gave you guys like eight hours! What do you want!? [laughter]

T = Actually, it was only...seven. [laughter]

P = Oh, it was seven, sorry! I owe you another hour! [laughter]