

Queer Newark Oral History Project
Interviewee: blair dorosh-walther
Interviewer: Whitney Strub
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Location: Rutgers University-Newark

Whitney Strub: Alright so we're recording. It's Monday, October 12th and blair do you want to introduce yourself?

blair dorosh-walther: My name is blair dorosh-walther. I directed the film *Out In The Night*.

Whitney Strub: And Whitney Strub here interviewing. Maybe you want to just give us a little back story of your own biography, how you came to this project.

blair dorosh-walther: I went to school for film and television and did a number of short documentaries and worked in production design and about three years after I graduated heard about this case and was very interested of still am but especially then was trying to find my—how I belonged in the documentary world as a director and kind what of role I wanted to play. I knew that activism was a huge component. So when I first heard about the case I was really interested and I became involved as an activist for two years and I was really against doing the documentary. The idea came up for a documentary no one in the sort of activist circle I was in at the time had any documentary experience. I said I would help with one but I wouldn't direct it. So the idea came up right away but I was not interested in doing it and solely because I didn't think a white director should. I think that, you know, there are too many times white people are telling people of color stories specifically African Americans that's no less true for social issue documentaries so which I've kind of taken over the last few years so I was an activist around their case for two years and then in 2008 when their

appeals were approaching the media attention had severely died down. The only real activism was around their appeals but it was primarily their attorneys that came on pro bono because they knew the case and that's when I started rethinking it as a potential documentary, so I went to speak with the women and their family members and their attorneys to see if there's interest in the film and if they're interested in me telling their story. So we began this kind of long—at first with most of the women well I'd say for the women is 50/50 but for the family members they were pretty interested right away in the film but that's kind of when I realized that, you know, someone who's not behind the scenes of a documentary don't know what it entails

Whitney Strub: Hmm.

blair dorosh-walther: and I don't know that I necessarily did then knew how what it would take but I did know it was going to be really invasive and really a long process so I wanted to kind of make sure they understood as much as I could explain to them what it was going to take so we kind of began this long interview process of them getting to know me and me getting to know them and partially because I wanted them to—if they weren't going to feel comfortable with me I wasn't going to tell their story and I wanted to make sure they could feel comfortable enough with me to ask the same types of personal questions that I was going to be asking them and then for me I really, you know, I spent six to seven years, six and a half years on this documentary and four of which we were shooting but also **editing** on and off and it wasn't until like the last year I think that I actually shot vérité in behind in like some **B-roll** because I really—I just felt so voyeuristic and I was

realizing that was the worst part of filmmaking for me. So what I realized is that because I had got to know them so well without the camera I kinda knew what things, what I wanted from them to like be seen on camera and kind of how to pull that out so I didn't actually shoot them very much even though it was a seven-year project some of them I shot maybe five times, some of them I think definitely under ten. I don't think anyone that was filming over ten times so you know it was really strategic days that we chose to shoot.

Whitney Strub: Okay.

blair dorosh-walther: So that's kind of how I got involved.

Whitney Strub: Okay. So what were your first—well actually I was going to ask. How did you first hear about it? Was it in the sort of sensationalized like New York **Post press or was it in the gay press?**

blair dorosh-walther: No. It was the sensationalized press. You know most of it, you know, you get so used to read, you know, trying to figure out what really happened but not ever really knowing so some of it, you know, like Post and Daily News they're so sensational but they're sensational about everything but it was the New York Times I recall that really keeps my interest the "Man Is Stabbed After Admiring A Stranger" that I just, you know, it was written by two female journalists and you can't tell me that they've never been sexually harassed on the street before. Maybe it didn't become as violent as this case did but, you know, stopstreetharassment.org did a survey dependent on your gender, dependent on your gender presentation and specifically dependent on your race your assault

or your harassment turns violent quicker so, you know, it's just—they're so quick to judge how these women, how they reacted and what

Whitney Strub: Right.

blair dorosh-walther: their role was and who calls another person who let's say you think the women went too far you still don't call the man an admirer at two o'clock in the morning. That's just so absurd and just don't think there's any way they would've written that had they been white.

Whitney Strub: Which is the point **Angela Davis makes**

blair dorosh-walther: Yes.

Whitney Strub: later in the film, right? Which,

blair dorosh-walther: Mm-hmm.

Whitney Strub: you know, it's great that Angela Davis is there. So had you spent any time in Newark before working on this film?

blair dorosh-walther: No [laughter]. I maybe had been to Newark a couple of times randomly. Yeah but passing through.

Whitney Strub: Yeah. So can you talk a little about that? I mean your experience kind of venturing in to Newark, which you know has a very different social reality than maybe I mean I assume you're living in New York

blair dorosh-walther: Yeah.

Whitney Strub: at the time.

blair dorosh-walther: Yeah. Newark feels like a devastated town to me and I went to a, I don't know if this is accurate or appropriate to say but I went to New Orleans right after Hurricane Katrina and you know helped out with some of the rebuilding efforts there and it kind of feels like that to me. It just feels like a town that's been devastated and hasn't had a real chance to have some of the work that is being done brought to a bigger scale

Whitney Strub: Mm-hmm.

blair dorosh-walther: and similar with, you know, many other towns in the US. You know there's something really intensely beautiful about... specifically the community that Patreese and Venice came from. There's like that entire block of both their families live on, you know, it's a quite dangerous block. They've had countless family members shot or murdered on that block before, during, and after this case but there is something also really protective and familial beyond some of them actually being related about that block and you know when I first started coming in I also knew I didn't want to be coming in especially being white but with a camera. It's usually only me and my director of photography but he's black and I made sure that if we ever brought more crew in the majority of the crew would be black but Daniel Patterson shot the whole length of the film with me

Whitney Strub: Hmm.

blair dorosh-walther: but I did try to go and I went a lot without a camera and part of that was to get to know the family members and kind of get a sense of they were going to be interested but also just be on the block and show that I'm around for the women separate of the film and you

know there's I think only one person in the entire film of the 250 hours that we interviewed that hadn't met before and spoken with and he actually just really wanted to be on camera the day camera was there but part of that is also so that they could get to know me a bit

Whitney Strub: Mm-hmm.

blair dorosh-walther: and they could sense with that person especially the way he was talking about—he was tiptoeing around some of what he thought the underlying issues were and maybe everybody was I don't know but I felt like it was because he didn't know where I was coming from so I don't know. At the same time, I'm feeling like a devastated city that is in need of so much work. It also has this very beautiful community that is, you know, because when I started coming in it was clear that I was not wanted and then after, you know, I was there for so long

Whitney Strub: Mm-hmm.

blair dorosh-walther: they know me and it's okay and, you know, it's not a issue but I think that that tends to happen with cities or communities that are devastated whether it's, you know, natural disaster or economic disasters. You build community because the source of like the resources aren't supporting you.

Whitney Strub: Mm-hmm. What kind of conversations did you have with the women in the film and their families to build sort of rapport or trust?

blair dorosh-walther: I told them how I got interested in their case and I, you know, over those two years as an activist I stayed away from meeting them

directly because I felt like there was enough people kind of, you know, there's a core group that was really working directly with them but then I felt like it was kind of people that just wanted to meet them and,

Whitney Strub: Mm-hmm.

blair dorosh-walther: you know, **they'd just been incarcerated and there was nothing that**—I could do a lot behind the scenes. I didn't need to meet them. So when we finally did meet I told them, you know, that I had been involved for two years and why I was so interested in it and one reason is also that, you know, if it would've been, I mean I've kind of said this, but if it would've been a group of me and my white friends, you know, this never would have happened. We sure **as hell wouldn't have been** called a gang and

Whitney Strub: Mm-hmm.

blair dorosh-walther: they have some friends of, you know, don't back down and want to keep

Whitney Strub: Yeah.

blair dorosh-walther: the yelling match going and I'm not saying that that was necessarily the case with them but I do think that, you know, so I was talking to them about that and kind of some of my personal backgrounds with loss and, you know, specifically with Patreese and her family, you know, and I would make sure that they—I said some of these things because I understand losing a sibling but I also would say things like, you know, but I can't imagine what it's like to lose a sibling to a police officer. So, you know, I would try to I guess say that there are some, you know, deep feelings that I

feel like I had that are similar but also things that I'm aware that I don't, I could never feel or I have never experienced. So those types of conversations, you know, went on, were ongoing.

Whitney Strub: Yeah and so when you actually met them that was...

blair dorosh-walther: They were all incarcerated.

Whitney Strub: Okay.

blair dorosh-walther: Yeah.

Whitney Strub: So then you would meet with their families?

blair dorosh-walther: Yeah. So I actually got pretty close with Kimma—Terrain's mother-- and her and I were talking every day. In fact, we probably talked every day for many years and Tanisha, Patreese's sister, also was speaking too quite frequently

Whitney Strub: Mm-hmm.

blair dorosh-walther: and when I go to Newark I usually meet with her. Yeah those were the two that I was the closest with. I met Renata's mother only once before she passed and then Venice's mother I was speaking to on and off. Her mother lived in North Carolina so

Whitney Strub: Mm-hmm.

blair dorosh-walther: sometimes when they would come up I would meet with them **and either go see Venice** with them or just hang out with them while they were up here.

Whitney Strub: Okay and so I mean there are not a lot films shot in Newark. It's kind of—I mean there are, there's like the *Dark Knight Returns*

[sic—*Dark Knight Rises*] was shot here but there aren't a lot of movies that are shot in Newark using it as setting and I think I mean *Out in the Night* is rare in a lot of ways, right? I mean it's a rare story about black women, it's a rare story about black lesbians but it's also a rare story about Newark and I think you resist the kind of like the easy tropes of, you know, ruin porn and the kind of

blair dorosh-walther: Yeah.

Whitney Strub: clichés of how to show a postindustrial city. What were your thoughts going in to that?

blair dorosh-walther: That was quite intentional. I initially wanted to make the city of Newark and the west village of New York City **also be** additional characters. That kind of didn't come through as much because there were four people we were focusing on but I tried to show some of the beauty of the physical parts of Newark.

Whitney Strub: Mm-hmm.

blair dorosh-walther: You know we drove to some high places to try to shoot the city at magic hour at dusk. When we shot from the industrial steam pipes or whatever those are, I don't know what those four giant pipes are with smoking coming out, I don't know.

Whitney Strub: Yeah.

blair dorosh-walther: There are like four—

Whitney Strub: I know what you're talking about.

blair dorosh-walther: [Laughter].

Whitney Strub: I'm failing as a Newarker here. I don't know either.

blair dorosh-walther: So that and some of what we would see when we drive in. My cinematographer is just very artistic so we would kind of discuss some of the beauty of just industrial machines but not everybody finds them beautiful so we drove around a couple of different days in Newark just to try to figure what we wanted to shoot and

Whitney Strub: Mm-hmm.

blair dorosh-walther: and one day we were under this bridge and there were these beautiful sunflowers and so, you know, we shot as the sunflowers in the foreground and those four steam whatever, I don't know what they're called, in the background and part of that is to juxtapose beauty thriving in even devastation and then, you know, likewise with their block I think that a specific—I don't know if it's specific to a black cinematographer or the type of cinematographer you choose but one thing happens in films a lot in documentaries but fiction as well is that people with darker skin are shot horribly. I mean their skin is just like flattened, it's cloudy.

Whitney Strub: Mm-hmm.

blair dorosh-walther: If they're next to someone with really light skin or someone who's white, the light and the everything is set to that skin tone, not the darker skin tone [...]

I don't care where your heart is. If you give them dignity, you spend time on those things and that was really important and we

talked about how we would interview people from the very beginning.

Whitney Strub: Mm-hmm.

blair dorosh-walther: When we actually did sit down interviews with the women, you know, we were not walking outside, they were sitting down, there was a bunch of lights set up. It was a very planned out interview and, you know, with very soft lighting, very rich colors, and it was to show them having the authority of this topic, you know, instead of having the quote- unquote “expert” opinion or the

Whitney Strub: Mm-hmm.

blair dorosh-walther: scholar. It was to give them authority and to shoot them how oftentimes only the lawyers or the scholars or the whoever are shot. So that was another reason why I don’t want to shoot vérité is I wanted to really give them all the validity

Whitney Strub: Mm-hmm.

blair dorosh-walther: that I could for specifically for people who might not intrinsically believe what they’re saying. So, you know, that part was a long process but just going back to the Newark, I had one day Patreese’s sister drove us around to show us all these different, you know, everything that she could think about Newark. We were talking about, you know, beautiful things like some of the skyline. She helped us with where to go for that. Some of the roads under the bridge she said that might be interesting to shoot

Whitney Strub: Yeah.

blair dorosh-walther: and then I had also done the interview that's not in the film with the Newark Pride Alliance with LaQuetta Nelson who is really involved after Sakia Gunn's murder. I walked around with her and she showed me some of the old kind of gay spots of the city and so,

Whitney Strub: Yeah.

blair dorosh-walther: you know, I had different people that were interested in really showing me the landscape of Newark so I also had a chance to kind of see different things and to see what we wanted to shoot.

Whitney Strub: Okay. There's one shot, I think it's like the camera is right down on this sidewalk and I think it's the corner of Broad and Market. Is that...

blair dorosh-walther: Oh that. Oh yes. Yeah right on the opening. Yeah.

Whitney Strub: Yeah, yeah. So is this—I don't know anything about the logistics of this kind of like fairly DIY filmmaking, do you get permits for that or are you just kind of shooting guerilla style at this point?

blair dorosh-walther: Some things we got permits for. Some things we shot guerilla. Some things we try to get permits for and then shot guerilla if we couldn't get them. On the street that day, we shot guerilla and it wasn't—but no one's faces in focus

Whitney Strub: Mm-hmm.

blair dorosh-walther: and that shot wasn't necessarily **planned**. We were just walking and Daniel saw the bronze emblem in the cement

Whitney Strub: Mm-hmm.

blair dorosh-walther: and the sun was glaring on it in this very particular way and so he grabbed that shot.

Whitney Strub: Yeah and I would say it's a beautiful shot and it's kind of haunting because it sets up, I mean, it's almost exactly where Sakia Gunn was killed,

blair dorosh-walther: Yeah.

Whitney Strub: right? Like later in the film that

blair dorosh-walther: Yeah.

Whitney Strub: **it comes back.**

blair dorosh-walther: Yeah but that's also part of having a really smart cinematographer I think

Whitney Strub: Mm-hmm.

blair dorosh-walther: because he saw just this little emblem in the cement that had the sun at this perfect angle and I think that, you know, when you're talking about, you know, glorifying a devastated city that's what you miss and I think when you just show buildings with old boards on the windows.

Whitney Strub: Right.

blair dorosh-walther: It's just, I don't know, you just feel bad for people. I didn't shoot this so you'd feel bad for the women. I mean the women are—they're badass. I mean part of the reason I was interested is because they really, they were this pocket of resistance both that night

Whitney Strub: Yeah.

blair dorosh-walther: and again in the courtroom when they plead not guilty so I think that, you know, making sure you shoot exteriors the same to kind of prop them up is how you want them to be portrayed as important.

Whitney Strub: Mm-hmm and **what sort of** I guess sort of activist or political infrastructure in Newark did you interact with while making the film. I mean you mentioned Newark Pride Alliance and—

blair dorosh-walther: It was primarily Newark Pride Alliance. I had screened two different 20-minute versions of the film that have screened at Rutgers-Newark many times throughout the years

Whitney Strub: Mm-hmm.

blair dorosh-walther: and they really—Rutgers has really been great. I was really interested in Newark Pride Alliance because of showing a generational difference in activism

Whitney Strub: Mm-hmm.

blair dorosh-walther: so with FIERCE in the West Village

Whitney Strub: Yeah.

blair dorosh-walther: is queer youth of color and, you know, Newark Pride Alliance is like elders of the

Whitney Strub: Yeah that's right.

blair dorosh-walther: LGBT movement and also LaQuetta, you know, I'd seen her on Democracy Now when Sakia was murdered and also I had wanted

to try to get that footage in there but, you know, she had a different perspective that I thought would be really great to have discussion about. In the end, it really became that we just had so many people and since we already had four main characters to focus on and their families were important to focus on. It was just too hard to bring in

Whitney Strub: Yeah.

blair dorosh-walther: another voice but I was really curious about the generational difference in activism but yeah her and James Credle

Whitney Strub: Mm-hmm.

blair dorosh-walther: was the other person who... he brought me around Newark as well

Whitney Strub: Oh.

blair dorosh-walther: kind of gave a little bit of history and then I think I met James initially at a panel at Rutgers and the panel was talking about how people felt about—Oh, what is that documentary about--

Whitney Strub: *Paris Is Burning?*

blair dorosh-walther: *Paris Is Burning.*

Whitney Strub: I figured.

blair dorosh-walther: [Laughter]. So some people that were focused on in *Paris Is Burning* were on the panel.

Whitney Strub: Mm-hmm.

blair dorosh-walther: So I met James and then Chas Brack who did the documentary

Whitney Strub: Yeah.

blair dorosh-walther: on Sakia and Chas and I kind of had a parallel life I think. We had a similar background so those two I was really—I guess Chas would be the other person although

Whitney Strub: Yeah.

blair dorosh-walther: he's also **a lot** in New York City but I kind of—that panel I met a lot of people that kind of just gave some type of perspective

Whitney Strub: Yeah.

blair dorosh-walther: and mostly the perspective was and it might sound really naïve of me not to have known but sometimes you just to need to hear from people that were there is about activism specifically Queer People of Color activism in Newark

Whitney Strub: Mm-hmm.

blair dorosh-walther: because if you go to Newark one thing I will say that I was really surprised about again sounds stupid I don't why I was surprised but there's a lot of lesbians in Newark [laughter]. There are a lot like you walk downtown Newark I'm like this is more than the West Village.

Whitney Strub: [Laughter].

blair dorosh-walther: I mean it's crazy. There should be tons of things to do here.

Whitney Strub: Right.

blair dorosh-walther: Oh and then the other thing that James actually talked about and gave some parallel kind of insight to was the Newark riots

Whitney Strub: Mm-hmm.

blair dorosh-walther: and Patreese's dad actually talked a lot about that as well and kind of that being this pinnacle moment of I mean police brutality was

Whitney Strub: Right.

blair dorosh-walther: huge [unintelligible - 00:24:47]

Whitney Strub: Yeah.

blair dorosh-walther: you know and James was I think he was in Vietnam in the war at the time

Whitney Strub: Yeah.

blair dorosh-walther: and when he came back and saw what happened in the city it was a big moment for him. I don't put too many words in his mouth but that, you know, and so I think that part of that was though showing this long history of people rising up in Newark and I think sometimes it really doesn't get credit for people

Whitney Strub: Mm-hmm.

blair dorosh-walther: doing work here because the infrastructure is just not set up so I think people don't see it.

Whitney Strub: Yeah, yeah, yeah. It's true. I mean groups like the People's Organization for Progress

blair dorosh-walther: Yeah.

Whitney Strub: come out of that exact

blair dorosh-walther: Yeah.

Whitney Strub: circle or moment, right?

blair dorosh-walther: Yeah.

Whitney Strub: We have an epic interview with James that we've done. He's

blair dorosh-walther: Okay.

Whitney Strub: **[unintelligible - 00:25:32]**.

blair dorosh-walther: Excellent, excellent.

Whitney Strub: He's actually very interested in anything Newark related. We're organizing a panel on the history of his Fireball coming up in a few weeks

blair dorosh-walther: Okay.

Whitney Strub: **It's on the safer sex** ed ballroom show that he organized in the 90s

blair dorosh-walther: Okay.

Whitney Strub: making a comeback.

blair dorosh-walther: Okay.

Whitney Strub: Sorry a side note

blair dorosh-walther: Mm-hmm.

Whitney Strub: but what about

blair dorosh-walther: **That's alright.**

Whitney Strub: the Booker administration? Did you interact with them at all?

blair dorosh-walther: I tried. I kind of jumped in front of Cory. He was at the—It was actually at, I think, the first conference

Whitney Strub: Oh the Queer Newark conference

blair dorosh-walther: Queer Newark conference.

Whitney Strub: in 2011?

blair dorosh-walther: Yeah.

Whitney Strub: Yeah, yeah.

blair dorosh-walther: I haven't received any response back from his administration so when he spoke I ran out and literally jumped in front of them of course people were this like **ah**. You know and he gave his "Oh yeah I love to be involved blah, blah, blab, whatever".

Whitney Strub: Right.

blair dorosh-walther: This is what I'll say about Cory Booker. I don't feel like I maybe think as poorly of him as so many people seem to. I do think that he has a lot of interest in this like larger than life image and he seems like the type of person that only wants progress when he is leading the charge but not to support other people that might be more successful or might have a better idea or whatever the case is and that is so frustrating. I'm so frustrated when I meet with people like that you know

Whitney Strub: Yeah, yeah.

blair dorosh-walther: and I think that, you know, and that's not to give, you know, props to **Sharpe** James before him but, you know, he was a different, you know, different entirely but in the end kind of had the same

conclusion that, you know, there is still a huge lack jobs, a huge lack of training or education

Whitney Strub: Right.

blair dorosh-walther: or emphasis on training or education, mental health and substance abuse issues. I mean these things should be basic. They should be more accessible around the country. Newark in particular needs a lot of infrastructure

Whitney Strub: Yeah.

blair dorosh-walther: in those areas. Yeah. Oh and so one other thing to the point of just how like showing Newark and kind of their community.

Whitney Strub: Mm-hmm.

blair dorosh-walther: One thing that I also thought was very important was to show that they didn't come from homophobic families

Whitney Strub: Mm-hmm.

blair dorosh-walther: because that is so much the narrative

Whitney Strub: Right.

blair dorosh-walther: that black people are more homophobic than white people and it's just like **I just**—that is such a bogus, racist idea. I mean that has no basis, no factual basis whatsoever and I really enjoyed that, you know, especially when Tanisha's like who cares. Oh my god, you know, she's my sister

Whitney Strub: Yeah, yeah.

blair dorosh-walther: and at one point, there is some funder saying that “Oh you should ask these, you know, go in to this more like I can’t believe they’re families are you know.”

Whitney Strub: Mm-hmm.

blair dorosh-walther: No. I’m not going to say do you wish she wasn’t a lesbian or whatever, you know, so wanted to just make it default like they had supportive family members and they did

Whitney Strub: Yeah.

blair dorosh-walther: and they had a supportive community and they did and maybe there’s some people in their community that didn’t, you know, is kind of, feels weird about it but there are definitely people in my family that feel weird about it so it just didn’t

Whitney Strub: Right,

blair dorosh-walther: but it never stopped them from supporting them 100%, you know, and then going back to Booker administration. You know he did symbolic things also, right? And sometimes symbols are important

Whitney Strub: Right,

blair dorosh-walther: like the flag over the city hall

Whitney Strub: the flag over city hall.

blair dorosh-walther: but symbols only are as important as the work you do to back them up and, you know, I think that he was initially going to make a community center

Whitney Strub: Yeah.

blair dorosh-walther: after Sakia and then I think that ended up morphing into like a gay high school, an LGBT high school in another school

Whitney Strub: Yeah.

blair dorosh-walther: and that also has some issues with it and now, there is an LGBT center and I know that it needs support. It needed support of somebody like the mayor

Whitney Strub: Right.

blair dorosh-walther: to get it really off the ground. So yeah I don't know. I mean yes it was awesome—I don't—Was Booker the mayor when Sakia died or did he just speak of her?

Whitney Strub: No he—

blair dorosh-walther: He just spoke, right?

Whitney Strub: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

blair dorosh-walther: Yeah.

Whitney Strub: He got elected a few years later.

blair dorosh-walther: Yeah. I mean that's great. That type of thing is so necessary. It helps, you know, kill homophobia just a little bit,

Whitney Strub: Right.

blair dorosh-walther: you know, but, you know, he likes **to toot his own horn as it were.**

Whitney Strub: Yeah he's kind of the ultimate neo-liberal

blair dorosh-walther: Yeah.

Whitney Strub: politician, right?

blair dorosh-walther: Yeah, yeah. I mean I think the best example is when he like chased down a purse thief on camera or on foot it's just like...

Whitney Strub: And shoveled driveways.

blair dorosh-walther: I mean come on just I can't, whatever

Whitney Strub: Yeah **and then he** very effectively won the hearts of like suburban voters

blair dorosh-walther: Yeah.

Whitney Strub: and I think it yeah,

blair dorosh-walther: Yeah.

Whitney Strub: it did not necessarily speaks the needs of Newarkers

blair dorosh-walther: Yeah.

Whitney Strub: But it's your interview, I shouldn't editorialize.

blair dorosh-walther: No, no. I agree. Just because you live in the projects now it doesn't really mean anything.

Whitney Strub: Right, right. So one of the things that the film I think is fantastic at is capturing that ugly racist homophobia of the New York City press. The lesbian wolf packs,

blair dorosh-walther: Mm-hmm.

Whitney Strub: lesbian gang all that was that the sapphic **septet** was it? I mean just ridiculous. You got a reporter from The Star-Ledger in the film but I don't think there were any headlines from The Star-Ledger. Could you talk a little about the coverage locally

blair dorosh-walther: Yeah.

Whitney Strub: because I actually don't know anything about that? I would love—

blair dorosh-walther: It was actually **great**

Whitney Strub: Yeah.

blair dorosh-walther: and I tried to get that in the film but again it was more a matter of time.

Whitney Strub: Yeah.

blair dorosh-walther: New Jersey coverage was almost 100% different. I mean it was just day and night and primarily Star-Ledger coverage. It was inquisitive. It kind of laid out what happened. It may not have been radical coverage but it felt like journalistic reporting.

Whitney Strub: Yeah.

blair dorosh-walther: There was a journalist who I did want to interview but she had some personal things happening in her life so we're never able to schedule it but Reva McEachern who I have in the film wrote an op ed for them and so I think we just showed her headline

Whitney Strub: Mm-hmm.

blair dorosh-walther: but I was also told that there were some things that they did that they could've maybe pushed a bit further but yeah it was what the New York Times should've been

Whitney Strub: Mm-hmm.

blair dorosh-walther: and the New York Times I think did. They got better once the women's sentences were announced, you know, it should not have been that long the sentencing is ridiculous but it, you know, I think they wrote half a dozen articles and they got better each time but it still took them a minute to get there.

Whitney Strub: Yeah.

blair dorosh-walther: I don't know if The Star-Ledger was because the women were from Newark they have a different perspective

Whitney Strub: Mm-hmm.

blair dorosh-walther: and maybe didn't **other** them as much but the coverage was remarkably better and it was pretty consistent. The Star-Ledger covered the case

Whitney Strub: Yeah.

blair dorosh-walther: pretty thoroughly trying to think how much they covered it after their appeals but they did.

Whitney Strub: Okay and the lawyers for the women are they New York lawyers?

blair dorosh-walther: New York. The trial attorneys too were public defenders, who were paid attorneys. Actually, Renata ended up firing her public defender and

Whitney Strub: Mm-hmm.

blair dorosh-walther: got two pro bono attorneys who I have in the film. They're appeal attorneys. They're appellate attorneys were—I think FIERCE put some work in to finding them.

Whitney Strub: Okay.

blair dorosh-walther: I know Alexis Agathocleous he was at the public defender's office but he said they rarely request cases but he requested it because FIERCE had also reached out to him and then Karen Thompson was at a bigger firm and, you know, she's able to do X amount of pro bono cases and so she chose this one specifically. Now, she's at The Innocence Project and Alexis is at the Center for Constitutional Rights.

Whitney Strub: Mm-hmm.

blair dorosh-walther: So those two kind of are pretty badass and have been—

Whitney Strub: Yeah.

blair dorosh-walther: Also, Alexis did a lot of work with Renata. I got her in touch with the social worker and kind of has stayed in touch with her. Karen has definitely been still helping Patreese out, got Patreese her first place when she got out of prison

Whitney Strub: Mm-hmm.

blair dorosh-walther: because they tried to put her in a shelter in Brooklyn, a place she'd never been to before. So they definitely stayed on top of it but had been reached out to. Venice and Terrain's attorneys—I think Terrain's attorney was also reached out to by FIERCE. I'm not

sure if Venice's was. I think she also was, her appellate attorney,
yeah

Whitney Strub: Okay.

blair dorosh-walther: but yeah they're all New York based.

Whitney Strub: Okay I got you and so over the course of filming and even since its
release I mean how is your relationship with the women **from the
New Jersey four** changed or has it been stable?

blair dorosh-walther: I mean I've talked to at least one of them once a day.

Whitney Strub: Yeah.

blair dorosh-walther: Yeah I mean they're traveling a lot with the film like I said the film
came out in June 2014 and since then we've all been traveling with
it. Sometimes we do things together. Sometimes of two of us,
sometimes I send a couple of them or one of them. So it's nice
because it's five people that you can split screenings between

Whitney Strub: Yeah.

blair dorosh-walther: but you know there's a lot that once you get out of prison that you
need and I think one thing that has been nice with the film that I
didn't necessarily think about ahead of time was, you know, when
they come out after a screening people are so excited to see them.
It's like

Whitney Strub: Mm-hmm, right, right.

blair dorosh-walther: them in the flesh and especially on university screenings is giving
them both the access to keep telling their own story but also to
kind of to see what college life is all about. So now, this semester

all four of them are in college. It's the first time that's happened. Patreese and Renata were in school last year and you know like they're all going for their associate's but now Renata has started talking about going for her master's and so I think the more speaking they do

Whitney Strub: Mm-hmm.

blair dorosh-walther: and now their network is also so large

Whitney Strub: Yeah, yeah.

blair dorosh-walther: that it's become this I don't know. It's a different world and they are because of the activism and then also because of the film being brought to all these different universities their opportunities have I don't know if necessarily grown but have—well grown but also become visible to them

Whitney Strub: Mm-hmm.

blair dorosh-walther: or are becoming visible. So we do, you know, like we talk constantly about school but also, you know, just scheduling between school and the film and sometimes they're bringing contacts that want to screen the film but yeah I mean now we're family. I mean it's been almost ten years. We're family.

Whitney Strub: Yeah.

blair dorosh-walther: Annoyingly **we're family** [laughs]. My next film is going to be historical and not have any living people in it but yeah we're family now.

Whitney Strub: Yeah and they all come through in the film so well. I mean I suspect it's probably partly attributed to them and partly attributed to you as a filmmaker and partly just something about the dynamic but I mean

blair dorosh-walther: Yeah.

Whitney Strub: they're all just such... they're so great on screen. I mean,

blair dorosh-walther: Yeah.

Whitney Strub: you know, they're able to joke but they're also fiercely political and I mean it's just really effective.

blair dorosh-walther: I do think one thing that works well for me being the director is just that we vibed

Whitney Strub: Yeah.

blair dorosh-walther: really well and we kind of all have this similar sense of humor so that definitely worked in their favor.

Whitney Strub: Yeah and I think it comes through in the film and it's good I mean it's a reminder of a certain form of resilience, right? It's like they don't give up their sense of humor. They're making

blair dorosh-walther: Yeah.

Whitney Strub: jokes about

blair dorosh-walther: Yeah.

Whitney Strub: you know, underwear.

blair dorosh-walther: Yes. Yes.

Whitney Strub: What about—I mean the film has clearly been a breakout hit. I mean people love it. It's done so well. What about in Newark? I mean how is—what kind of reactions have you gotten locally and then where have you shown it? I think Patreese mentioned a screening at the community center that wasn't super well attended.

blair dorosh-walther: Yeah. They were disappointed in that.

Whitney Strub: Yeah I mean can you talk about just sort of local reception a bit.

blair dorosh-walther: You know we've screened in Jersey a number times. Montclair had a screening like I said we did a number of screenings at Rutgers with the shorter version. Essex County will have a screening coming up. I don't know. Some of that is I don't know really what to say but some of it is just infrastructure and that screening at the community center I think we were all very excited about and it was very—it was a big letdown. I think Patreese especially felt letdown, you know, because also a lot of her family members that, you know, don't really leave Newark she thought should've come

Whitney Strub: Mm-hmm.

blair dorosh-walther: because we've had so many screenings in New York but, you know, for some folks that's not feasible or whatever haven't seen it and I think also for the kind of queer community not coming out was a disappointment. Now, Patreese has started getting very interested in kind of marketing the community center and

Whitney Strub: Yeah.

blair dorosh-walther: getting the word out. This is sort of how I think of it. I don't know if this is appropriate but, you know, there's—when women were in prison, you know, there's a significant amount of people that didn't write them enough or at all

Whitney Strub: Mm-hmm.

blair dorosh-walther: and I remember once when Renata just got out we were at a fundraiser and Patreese's girlfriend at the time was there and Renata, you know, just got in her face and was like, you know, "I have to listen Patreese cry herself to sleep at night. You should be writing her." You know all this and this is two years after she's been incarcerated. Well what's not in the film is that Renata ended up having to go back to prison. They wouldn't negotiate a deal so she had to go back for a year and a half. So she's out for six months and didn't write and then—I mean she started to but also there is, you know, it's a little different because if you are convicted you can't write

Whitney Strub: Mm-hmm.

blair dorosh-walther: to somebody

Whitney Strub: Mm-hmm.

blair dorosh-walther: who's convicted in prison, stupid rules. So that was a fear for her for sure and I at some point was constantly the go between for people in different prisons to write to each other.

Whitney Strub: Yeah.

blair dorosh-walther: I know that fear was real. When she ended up getting out at the end and also with Venice, I know that it killed Patreese to not

receive more letters from them or hear from them without her kind of yelling at them to hear, you know,

Whitney Strub: Yeah.

blair dorosh-walther: or me doing it but I also know the struggle that they were dealing with when they got out and that struggle was real and Renata went through, you know, pretty much hell

Whitney Strub: Yeah.

blair dorosh-walther: for a number of years and she had a family, you know, and I know Venice was struggling so I think that it wasn't malicious and they thought about Patreese all the time but their life was really—it was an uphill battle at that time

Whitney Strub: Yeah, yeah.

blair dorosh-walther: and so sometimes I think with, you know, I think with Patreese's immediate community or immediate family that she felt letdown by sometimes it's easy to focus on the crap you have to focus on than kind of getting outside of that and sometimes that's very physical and sometimes it's mental and

Whitney Strub: Mm-hmm.

blair dorosh-walther: sometimes it's external and sometimes it's both or sometimes it's all of it. So I think that there's just so much that needs to happen in this city that it was really unfortunate that more people didn't come out but I sort of feel like, you know, the women are becoming activists and I think kind of I mean they definitely especially Patreese and Renata had the activist spirit

Whitney Strub: Mm-hmm.

blair dorosh-walther: but are kind of slowly or quickly, **however you want to look at it.**
defining what kind of activist they want to be or

Whitney Strub: Yeah.

blair dorosh-walther: how they want to operate in the world so I think that it's also a
learning curve for them on that, you know, in that way because
now they almost have this—they're stepping back to see this
outside perspective in a way because, you know, they're like when
Renata got out she flew to see Angela Davis in California

Whitney Strub: Mm-hmm.

blair dorosh-walther: and that was her first time on a plane and, you know, Patreese's
first time without family,

Whitney Strub: Right.

blair dorosh-walther: you know. They're traveling now all over and they're meeting all
different types of people and all different types of people are
showing them support. They're getting this really well-rounded
education essentially, you know,

Whitney Strub: Yeah.

blair dorosh-walther: and so I think seeing that in Newark for Patreese kind of hit a
nerve and she's like still kind of figuring out why that was **but I—**
people just have a lot going on

Whitney Strub: Right.

blair dorosh-walther: and it's when you don't have stability it makes everything harder

Whitney Strub: Yeah.

blair dorosh-walther: just makes everything harder and who wants to go see a depressing movie [laughter].

Whitney Strub: [Laughter].

blair dorosh-walther: It would be, you know, shit's not going right in your life then no need to see the movie to know that Newark is hard, you know.

Whitney Strub: Yeah. We talked **about that**, Patreese and I, and yeah she was happy to hear that I was at the second anniversary party for the LGBTQ community center just the other week and they actually got a bunch of young people out. I mean

blair dorosh-walther: Oh good!

Whitney Strub: I think you know they're building—

blair dorosh-walther: Was Patreese there?

Whitney Strub: She wasn't

blair dorosh-walther: [Laughter].

Whitney Strub: but I mean they're—

blair dorosh-walther: Yes I heard Patreese was there [laughter].

Whitney Strub: Yes. They're... No but they really are working against, you know, pretty insurmountable odds just financially even just

blair dorosh-walther: Yeah.

Whitney Strub: **just to keep afloat** I mean they're doing good work so yeah I totally understand.

blair dorosh-walther: Yeah.

Whitney Strub: I know we need to get you back fairly ASAP.

blair dorosh-walther: I had to be there at 5:15, so.

Whitney Strub: Okay. So we only got a couple **of minutes**. I did want to ask about what you're working on next and I also wanted to ask about how many hours you shot and what else wasn't in the film. So maybe you could speak to those as briefly or as, you know.

blair dorosh-walther: Yeah so we had roughly 225, 250 hours **ish** of footage and that includes archival things that we got along the way. The big thing that isn't in the film that I really wanted to be film was **gentrification** in the West Village

Whitney Strub: Mm-hmm.

blair dorosh-walther: and it's kind of how I

Whitney Strub: Mm-hmm.

blair dorosh-walther: think that played a role. We had—FIERCE had done this study a couple years prior to—basically the study was talking about how the West Village was considered one of the safest neighborhoods in New York City

Whitney Strub: Right.

blair dorosh-walther: but at the same time their police force that year they had gained twenty new police officers and so that's to protect property and

wealthy people and I say that because then I had the police officer who's in the film—oh I tried so hard to get this part of his interview in the film but we just couldn't make it work was that, you know, he was like if you had money you had the mayor's ear and it was Bloomberg at the time and he's like, you know, and I saw this happen especially after 9/11 but even just before when, you know, that sort of broken windows theory of cleaning up,

Whitney Strub: Right.

blair dorosh-walther: cleaning up the West Village. They put curfews on the park and the West Village holds 80% of homeless youth of New York City and the majority of whom are LGBT identified so that was cutting down shelter essentially even though

Whitney Strub: Yeah.

blair dorosh-walther: it's outdoors but a safe space and it was also the noise complaints was from people who **owned**

Whitney Strub: Right.

blair dorosh-walther: so, you know, the officer said that had this happened in the Bronx or Brooklyn he didn't think it would've received the same type of media coverage which then in turn wouldn't have gotten the prosecutor's attention because he said when reporters have, you know, police scans and something happens in the West Village he said by the time he arrested the women and came back to the precinct there was reporters all over

Whitney Strub: Mm-hmm.

blair dorosh-walther: so and that's where they grabbed the picture of Terrain. So I think that **gentrification** was a huge thing that I really wanted to put in.

Whitney Strub: Yeah.

blair dorosh-walther: We just didn't have—it was just those two talking heads and it was hard to work them in anymore.

Whitney Strub: Yeah.

blair dorosh-walther: We had—I did a 90-minute cut two or three years prior to this cut and it had that in depth but it was a really boring cut. It was just talking heads [laughter]

Whitney Strub: Mm-hmm. [laughter]

blair dorosh-walther: and, you know, I realized after I watched it with people I was

Whitney Strub: Yeah.

blair dorosh-walther: “Okay this is—I'm interested in this topic and it's boring me.” So that's something and Angela Davis we did a sit down interview with her

Whitney Strub: Mm-hmm.

blair dorosh-walther: that's beautiful. Reva the journalist had a great interview. So those things I'm definitely going to put in the DVD extras

Whitney Strub: Oh cool, cool!

blair dorosh-walther: eventually because it's I mean and everything that we even touched on we just barely touched on it. It was,

Whitney Strub: Right.

blair dorosh-walther: you know, I wanted to make sure we made a film about incarceration that wasn't saying, "Oh this case is isolated" and, you know,

Whitney Strub: Yeah, yeah.

blair dorosh-walther: poor this group and then just at the end stick some stats I just—I really wanted to make sure we talked about the complexities both their intersecting identities and also all these intersecting issues. So that part was why it took so long to edit and I think a big part of besides funding which is terribly difficult it took so long to do because I really want to make sure we tried to touch on each of these.

Whitney Strub: Yeah. [...]

blair dorosh-walther: **I don't know.** Anyway.

Whitney Strub: [laughs] We'll end on--

blair dorosh-walther: Oh I know what I was going to say. So not—but one thing we are working on with this film is an outreach strategy to kind of have the film turned into action so we're working with a number of different

Whitney Strub: Mm-hmm.

blair dorosh-walther: organizations to kind of see how the film can benefit them because, you know, it's not like there's one issue in the film

Whitney Strub: Right, right.

blair dorosh-walther: so we have kind of eclectic group and then we are working on **pardon** applications for them

Whitney Strub: Mm-hmm.

blair dorosh-walther: and I think it's an uphill battle. I don't know

Whitney Strub: Yeah.

blair dorosh-walther: how much of a chance we really have but I think it's worth a shot and we have so much information now about the case

Whitney Strub: Yeah.

blair dorosh-walther: that I think there's no reason to not do it so that is the other thing that I'm working on.

Whitney Strub: **Well that's fantastic.**

blair dorosh-walther: Yeah.

Whitney Strub: You know there is a ton I would love to keep asking you

blair dorosh-walther: Mm-hmm.

Whitney Strub: but I know that you've got to run so thank you so much for doing this.

blair dorosh-walther: Yes.

Whitney Strub: We really appreciate it and meant a lot to the Queer Newark Oral History Project.

blair dorosh-walther: Excellent thank you so much.

