

Queer Newark Oral History Project

Interviewee: Venice Brown

Interviewer: Kristyn Scorsone

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Kristyn Scorsone: Okay, we're here with Venice from *Out in the Night*. So, first off, I guess if you could give us your date of birth and where you were born?

Venice Brown: My birthday is November 2nd 1987 and I was born here in Newark, New Jersey at St. Michael's Hospital.

Kristyn Scorsone: Okay, so who raised you and did you grow up in one place or household or more than one...?

Venice Brown: My mom and my dad raised me. It was like co-parenting I guess. They weren't together, though they were never married...

Kristyn Scorsone: Okay.

Venice Brown: But my dad lived in one place and then my mom lived in another place and I would be back and forth like, you know, like a week with mom, weekend with dad.

Kristyn Scorsone: Yeah.

Venice Brown: And vice versa.

Kristyn Scorsone: Was that tough or was it okay?

Venice Brown: You know, my mom was the hard ass. My father was the "baby girl... this is my baby girl," like he was cool. He was laid back.

Kristyn Scorsone: So do you recall any events that were like transitions or turning points in your early life?

Venice Brown: Like early life, like toddler years and things like...

Kristyn Scorsone: Like childhood, yeah. Anything significant?

Venice Brown: Would that be meaning like anything with my parents or just with my...?

Kristyn Scorsone: Yes, with your parents or like relating to like your sexuality, do you label yourself as lesbian?

Venice Brown: I'm a lesbian, yes.

Kristyn Scorsone: Okay.

Venice Brown: Um, no. They never had a problem with that. I've never had to go through anything like that.

Kristyn Scorsone: Yeah? So did you come out to them at a certain point or did you just like be yourself or...?

Venice Brown: Yeah, like the crazy thing is like I always used to – like I never like really brought boys around, I guess, and if I did they were gay boys or like the girls that I brought around, they were girls, but they dressed like boys, so my mother pretty much figured it out, like she was just like, “Okay, whatever,” you know...

Kristyn Scorsone: Yeah.

Venice Brown: So it wasn't really a big deal.

Kristyn Scorsone: That's cool. What was your neighborhood like where you grew up?

Venice Brown: Oh wow, rough... really, really rough, like extremely rough yeah – murders, drugs, like super poverty...like yeah it was horrible...

Kristyn Scorsone: Where in Newark?

Venice Brown: 16 street and South Orange Avenue. Right across from West Side high school.

Kristyn Scorsone: Yeah.

Venice Brown: That was where my dad lived at though, but that's where I spent most of my time at.

Kristyn Scorsone: Okay.

Venice Brown: But my mom, it was like we lived in Newark but it wasn't like – she never allowed me to live in those areas where she felt like she was putting me in danger, you know, so...

Kristyn Scorsone: Okay, did you feel like extra nervous being gay or did it not matter, because it was just dangerous regardless?

Venice Brown: No. It never mattered, because everybody that I grew up... where I grew up at, I literally grew up with the people. you know like I literally...like you know how, we're not cousins by blood, but your mom is my aunt because we've known each other forever and I'm spending the night at your house and things like that. So I didn't have those issues. Nobody ever had those issues.

Kristyn Scorsone: Yeah. So, do you have – are you religious at all or...?

Venice Brown: I'm kind of like, I believe in God. I do pray, but I'm not like into like reading the Bible. I'm not into going around like preaching or every word doesn't come out my mouth is God or religion or church or I don't even go to church, but I pray and I believe in God and I do know the word.

Kristyn Scorsone: Yeah.

Venice Brown: So I wasn't raised like up in a church.

Kristyn Scorsone: Is it Catholic or...?

Venice Brown: No, Christian. But my dad is Muslim, that's the crazy part.

Kristyn Scorsone: Oh okay.

Venice Brown: My dad's family is Muslim and then he has some Christians. But my mom's side of the family, they're totally like Christian.

Kristyn Scorsone: Okay. Was there any issue there with like your sexuality and religion at home or anything?

Venice Brown: No.

Kristyn Scorsone: What do you like best about being gay and what do you find most challenging?

Venice Brown: I like my girlfriend [laughs]. I think she's dope! But the only thing that bothers me is like when men try to talk to me and I'm like, I'm gay, and they'd tell me I'm too pretty to be gay or they could change my life and all this crazy crap, but other than that, it's like usually though, like my ignore game is strong! [laughs] I don't even! Like if I see it coming or if I hear it, I'm like tunnel vision, like I don't even pay attention to that. But other than that, I'm cool.

Kristyn Scorsone: Yeah, do you mean like street harassment when you're walking around?

Venice Brown: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Kristyn Scorsone: Have you found community or support from other people in Newark or elsewhere like... I think the LGBT Center has only been open like two years, but any like clubs or things like that...? Or bars?

Venice Brown: Is this pertaining to now or when I was a kid?

Kristyn Scorsone: When you were younger or even if you still live in Newark now.

Venice Brown: I live in North Carolina now. But like growing up all of my friends were gay. Growing up, we all did gay stuff, like we all went to the West Village to the pier. You know what goes on down there, you know [laughs] You know, like we all went to the parade. Like here, they have this bar called The Globe...

Kristyn Scorsone: Okay.

Venice Brown: We partied hard every weekend. Just like bunch of lesbians and gay men...

Venice Brown: Like the whole LGBT community, like we partied. When I tell you partied hard, we partied hard...

Kristyn Scorsone: Yeah.

Venice Brown: So it was never like, I never needed an ally or I never needed anybody to talk to like I never needed that kind of stuff, because everybody I hang around was already lesbian or gay or bisexual whatever and then my family is just like I had a gay aunt, my favorite aunt, she passed away.

Kristyn Scorsone: I'm sorry.

Venice Brown: When we were incarcerated. It's fine. 2007. And she was a stud! And we looked just alike. Same eyes, everything. So I'm like well she's a stud, she's gay, whatever. Like I didn't have that issue. Like I didn't need to. You know what I'm saying? Because my family was already, "Okay Aggie's gay. Oh, Venice is gay. Whatever." You know? It was never anything like that.

Kristyn Scorsone: What does stud mean?

Venice Brown: Stud is like the aggressive role. I've been down south for so long so I don't say AG or aggressive anymore. I'm like, stud! You know, I'm picking up their slang.

Kristyn Scorsone: Oh, they use it more down there?

Venice Brown: Yeah, for aggressive females. Like to identify you know, they say stud.

Kristyn Scorsone: Is aggressive female then more like a Newark saying?

Venice Brown: We say AG. Short for aggressive.

Kristyn Scorsone: Okay. How would you define yourself?

Venice Brown: I'm a femme. I'm a lady.

Kristyn Scorsone: Yeah.

Venice Brown: [Laughs].

Kristyn Scorsone: Do you date other femmes or other butches? How do you feel?

Venice Brown: Well, I like femmes. I love feminine women. But I like studs. But then I don't like my studs to be like butchy and like, "Grrrrr!" Or like a man. Like I don't like that. I like for mine to be like soft, or like a femme-aggress. Like you can...like your face is feminine, your body is feminine, you're feminine, you totally sound feminine, but you just like to dress like that, like I like that.

Kristyn Scorsone: Can you tell me more about The Globe, or like maybe types of nights they have there or anything?

Venice Brown: Well, his name is, the dude that used to do it, is Omar Legacy. He threw parties for years. For years. He is an older guy. I don't even know if he is gay though. But, or if he has gays friends or whatever, but it was just like he would throw his party every single Friday. Every, like...no stopping. And it would be like, he would have like voguing competitions between the gay boys. And then the drag queens and stuff, they would come in there and they would be dressed up and they'd be like voguing and voguing. And then he would have like, oh my god, like...just like, just it was so much! Like it was just so much, like it's so much! [laughs] Like it's so much!

Like he just used to make sure that whenever we came in there and spent our little ten dollars, he made sure that we left out looking way different from the way we came in there, honey. Because, I could never go in there with this [gestures to hair] cause when I came out it would be like a

mushroom. Like all over my face and everything, because you would sweat so much, because it would be packed. And the music. Like the music used to be so loud that you could literally like just feel the vibration like in your body and you would just wanna, it just was dope.

Kristyn Scorsone:

Yeah.

Venice Brown:

So it wasn't ever like, he would party like on Sunday night at the pride. Like he'd throw a Pride Party, cause you know pride is always, New York Pride was always the last Sunday in the month, so he would throw parties for that. He would give birthday parties, like allow us to have birthday parties there.

Kristyn Scorsone:

That's so cool.

Venice Brown:

Yeah, it was dope.

Kristyn Scorsone:

That's awesome. What years was this, do you know?

Venice Brown:

Ummm...2004, 2005... last party we went to was before we got arrested in '06... 2003, 2002, like the early 2000s was lit.

Kristyn Scorsone:

Were you out of high school then or...?

Venice Brown:

Well, I never graduated high school.

Kristyn Scorsone:

Okay.

Venice Brown:

What happened was I got into an altercation at West Side high school and I got kicked out of school. I didn't get kicked out of school, I got kicked out of day school. He made me go to night school, but I'm like, being young, you know what I'm saying? Being young, I'm like night school? All my friends getting out of school, it's the summer time. I'm not going to school. But mind you, my father is a heroin addict. Well, he was a heroin addict my

whole life, but he's always been a dad. Like a functional addict, you know what I'm saying, but he is a heroin addict. So like I say he's lenient. So it's like my mom is at work, "Go to your father house Venice. Vincent, make sure she get to school." That's my father name, Vincent. Venice. Kinda corny, but. [laughs] But you know she is like go to your father house and father's like okay, but he high. So I'm like, "Alright Dad, I'm going to school!" [laughs] And I ain't at school, I'm in the village! I'm with all my friends, I'm not going to night school! That's crazy! But I wish I would have though, but...

Kristyn Scorsone:

Like the principal wanted you to go to night school?

Venice Brown:

Yeah.

Kristyn Scorsone:

Well, you mentioned your aunt. Were there adults in your life who shaped your childhood or your adolescence besides the people that raised you? So you said your aunt, like, I guess friend's mothers or fathers... things like that.

Venice Brown:

I had like cousins around me. Like I play with my cousins. I have a cousin. We call him Chunk. And my birthday is November 2nd '87. His birthday is December 2nd '86. So like we were first cousins. So we grew up in the same house as brother and sister. So I grew up with him and then his sister. Then I have a cousin... I have cousins galore. And then my father had seven brothers and sisters, so yeah, it was eight of them together. So we all grew up in the same house and things like that, so I had adults everywhere. Then my mom had a brother, her other brothers passed away and her sisters. But my grandfather, my grandmother. I had four

grandparents. Two grandfathers and two grandmothers and things like that so.

Kristyn Scorsone: So, what schools did you attend? Grammar school and high school?

Venice Brown: Honey, [laughs] I started at 13th Avenue elementary school. Then I went to...I went to 13th Avenue from kindergarten to third grade, that was Ms. Williams. Fourth grade was Ms. Cooper. So I went there from kindergarten to fourth actually. Then I went to Jackson Academy in East Orange for fifth. Then I went back? No, and then for sixth grade I went...no, then I got transferred and from there I went to Chancellor. Girl, there were so many schools. Chancellor Avenue...

Kristyn Scorsone: Did you move around a lot, is that why?

Venice Brown: Yeah. Chancellor Avenue, then I went to Vailsburg middle. Then I went to Saint Rocco's. Then I went to Bragaw Avenue, then I went to George Washington Carver! [laughs] Yeah, so it's a lot. Like, it was a lot of schools.

Kristyn Scorsone: Was that hard?

Venice Brown: Yeah. Having to adjust over and over and over and over again. And then I went back to St. Rocco's and then high school I went to West Side and I went to Immaculate Conception.

Kristyn Scorsone: How was the kids? Did they treat you nicely when you moved?

Venice Brown: Yeah, I have never gotten bullied before, like I have never gotten bullied. I have never been a bully. I used to take up for kids that got bullied. Like I used to step in and be like,

you know, I used to try to fight the bullies. I'm like anti-bully... I hate it. I hate it.

Kristyn Scorsone:

Yeah, me too.

Venice Brown:

Yeah.

Kristyn Scorsone:

So, when did you realize that you were gay?

Venice Brown:

Crazy thing is my god sister, right? She always told me like, "You're always asking about gay people" or "You're always staring at gay people." "You're always like interested" like...because I was the kind of kid, like very outspoken and I was very smart and very aware. And my son who's five, he's the same exact way. He is like, "Oh mommy why does that smell like that?" Like he's just like outspoken. He says whatever! And I used to always ask questions like as a child. My god sister, she say, "You're going to be a lesbian." I was like, "No, I'm not!" But it's just something that like...

Kristyn Scorsone:

How old would you say you were when you were asking these questions?

Venice Brown:

Like I had went to Seattle, Washington to babysit my god sisters for the summer for my god mom, so...I had to be about eleven, not eleven... yeah it was like eleven, yeah.

Kristyn Scorsone:

So when did you start...?

Venice Brown:

Indulging...?

Kristyn Scorsone:

Yeah, I guess so or feeling like that was your identity and not so much a curious...?

Venice Brown:

In 2003. When my friend, Sakia [Gunn] got murdered.

Kristyn Scorsone:

Oh, you were friends with her? I'm sorry.

Venice Brown:

Yeah, we all grew up together. Went to Vailsburg middle together and West Side and things like that, but and then

we used to be down here, I don't know if you know anything about the Gay Corner? Honey [laughs] on Broad and Market Street.

It used to be hundreds of young black, white, Spanish, like it didn't matter... if you were gay, you used to be on the corner after school every single day like clock work Monday through Friday. Monday through Friday. The same corner that Sakia got killed on. Across from there. So, that's where we all, all of us used to hang there. And I had like fifteen girl friends. We all used to be on this chat line called The Loop, so everybody meddled in things like that and I was just like, I'm like this is cool, like...

Kristyn Scorsone: Yeah. What's the chat line?

Venice Brown: It's called the Loop. It's old.

Kristyn Scorsone: It's like a phone thing or...?

Venice Brown: Yeah, yeah... it doesn't even exist anymore, it stopped in like 2005, 2004, yeah.

Kristyn Scorsone: How did you get on the chat line?

Venice Brown: You would call that number, I don't even remember that number. You would call it though.

Kristyn Scorsone: So you guys would just hang out there and then like, go out from there or just...?

Venice Brown: Go out. Like it depends if it was a school night, I had to go home, [laughs] but if it was like a night where we were going out... The thing about that going out thing, right? Back to that, not to be off subject. My mom was so supportive. She is still, to this day, my biggest supporter, my biggest fan, but she's always been so comfortable with my sexuality. She...her and my favorite aunt Tammy, her

and my mom they were both like this... and they used to go out, because my mom had me at 27, I'm 27 now, so she had me when she was 27, so my mom was still out partying. Working and taking care of me and partying. You know? She used to drop me off at the gay parties. She would come in there like if I don't answer my little cell phone, she would come in there and party with us, looking for me. Partying with my friends. Like how fucking dope is that? You know what I'm saying? Because a lot of people they have hard times, I never. She would come and get me and they were like, "how your mom doing?" Like my mother would invite them over for dinner. They would spend the night at my house like and she never, "Sleep with the door open!" or "Don't sleep in the bed with her!" Like she was never that type of person, ever! Ever.

Kristyn Scorsone:

Nice. So in 2003, that's when you had a girlfriend or you just realized...?

Venice Brown:

I just was like, this is the lifestyle that I know that – I mean you know it's not a choice...

Kristyn Scorsone:

Yeah.

Venice Brown:

So, I'm like this is my life. This is my life. I still like men though, too. I did. I still like men. I liked men up until I had a son.

Kristyn Scorsone:

Yeah.

Venice Brown:

So that's obvious. I liked men up until I was like...2008 maybe? Nine. Nine, it was 2009. I liked men. Like I was like, okay well, if I got a girlfriend, I'm gonna be with my girlfriend and that's it. But if I had a boyfriend, but I've never had a boyfriend, but if I'm dealing with a dude, I'm

only dealing with him. Like I'm not dealing with him and then dealing with my girlfriend. That's crazy. You know. So I then probably only had – I mean probably never had a boyfriend. So like I guess though like chat line relationships don't count, because we all used to do that, but I probably only had three real girlfriends and that's including the girl that I'm with now.

Kristyn Scorsone: How is your son? Is he fine with you being gay? Does he have issues with it or...?

Venice Brown: Ahh, Josiah. Let me show you a picture. They can't see but, let me show you.

Kristyn Scorsone: [laughs] How old is he?

Venice Brown: He is five.

Kristyn Scorsone: Five?

Venice Brown: He is the greatest, like...I feel like God gave him to me for a reason, like he is great. Like he is cute, like super cute. He is funny. He is very charismatic. He's very in tune with a lot of things that are going on around him, but he knows how to be a child. He knows his place. I don't kiss my girlfriend in front of him. We all live together. We are a family. I don't kiss her in front of him. I don't allow him to watch obscene things, to play obscene games...

Kristyn Scorsone: Right.

Venice Brown: You know, like he stays in his place and he likes girls. Like he *likes* girls. [laughs]
Like he will see a pretty girl and go, "Oooo". If I get dressed, like if he was to see me now all made up, he hates makeup, everything, and I don't wear it a lot, but if he sees me like, if I get my hair done or if I get my nails and my

feet done, he like, “Mommy, you look so pretty.” Like he notices those things, like he...let me find the picture...You can ask me questions, I’ll show you.

Kristyn Scorsone: That’s nice. Yeah, that’s really sweet. So when you had him, were you still in Newark or living in North Carolina?

Venice Brown: Well, he was conceived here, but he was born in North Carolina.

Kristyn Scorsone: Okay.

Venice Brown: So he’s a country boy. Where is that picture...Let me try...Oh, here it is...trying to find a recent picture, because he is like totally a big boy now...and he is momma’s boy. But yes, yes...He doesn’t want to give me a break. I can’t do anything. Everywhere I go, he has to come.

Kristyn Scorsone: I guess I’m going to ask you some questions about Newark.

Venice Brown: Okay.

Kristyn Scorsone: Has Newark changed a lot since when you were a child to now?

Venice Brown: Yes.

Kristyn Scorsone: In what ways?

Venice Brown: Horrible, like...

Kristyn Scorsone: Yeah, worse you think or...?

Venice Brown: It’s...you know when you’re from somewhere and you know what it used to be and you see now. It’s like, like I’m scared up here, like literally. Like at night, oh my god [laughs], like oh my god. Like I went to see my daddy yesterday and at the bus stop, I’m looking back and forth like, oh my god. Like I hope nobody starts to shoot, or I hope – and don’t get it twisted. Like they be bugging in North Carolina.

Kristyn Scorsone: Yeah?

Venice Brown: But, when you go from wilin out every day, hearing people wilin out every day, seeing the stuff, you become accustomed to it. But then when I go down there to being able to live there and not hear or see it and it's slow and it's laid back and stuff. But when I come up here, it's like I'm petrified up here even though it happens down here.

Kristyn Scorsone: Right.

Venice Brown: But things like, I'm so slow now. Like yesterday, I got here and I was walking around. I had to take a walk from my hotel room to just be like, okay I still know. I got it. Because I've been down there, well, since I came home. I came home in '08...I've been down here six years.

Kristyn Scorsone: Okay.

Venice Brown: Like completely six years, but a total like before I went to jail and things like that. My mom we had been down there. This year makes ten years, almost 11 years.

Kristyn Scorsone: Wow.

Venice Brown: Yeah, so...

Kristyn Scorsone: So when you got out of jail, you didn't come home to Newark, you moved down there?

Venice Brown: No, I came straight here.

Kristyn Scorsone: Yeah?

Venice Brown: I came to Newark and I lived here.

Kristyn Scorsone: How was that?

Venice Brown: Girl, I was ready.

Kristyn Scorsone: Yeah?

Venice Brown: I was a *read-dy*. [laughs].

I was all the way up in Albion. That's by Canada. It was freezing up there. No family. Nothing. But they came to see me. But it's like, I'm home and then, who goes to prison? Like I've never been in that situation before. Baby, I came home, honey [laughs] and I partied like I've never partied before in my life!

Kristyn Scorsone:

Yeah?

Venice Brown:

Yeah.

Kristyn Scorsone:

So everybody was really welcoming and everything?

Venice Brown:

Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Kristyn Scorsone:

That's awesome.

Venice Brown:

Yeah....Here he is. Here is Mr. Josiah. Let me try to get a clear picture...

Kristyn Scorsone:

Oh, he's so cute!

Venice Brown:

[Laughs].

Kristyn Scorsone:

I like that hat! He is so cute!

Venice Brown:

Thanks. He is a trip!

Kristyn Scorsone:

[Laughs]. He's so well dressed too! He's stylin!

Venice Brown:

Thank you [laughs].

Kristyn Scorsone:

How do you feel about like Newark's connection like to other nearby areas or do you ever hang out in other towns around here and...?

Venice Brown:

Not in New Jersey.

Kristyn Scorsone:

...in comparison I guess.

Venice Brown:

Not New Jersey, like I have friends in East Orange and Irvington and things like that, but I really don't go in those areas when I come here.

Kristyn Scorsone:

Yeah.

Venice Brown: Like when I'm here, I'm in Newark downtown area at one of my real close friend's house. And like I go see my dad, go see my grandmother. I can't wait to see her when this is over. She doesn't know I'm here.

Other than that, we love New York. We love New York and that's it.

Kristyn Scorsone: Yeah. With your grandmother, are you out to your grandmother?

Venice Brown: I'm sorry...

Kristyn Scorsone: Are you out to your grandmother?

Venice Brown: Oh yeah! She loves... she gets all my girlfriends confused. She's like, "Ain't you the girl with the red car?" And she'll be like, "No, I got a blue car" and she be like, "Oh, okay." And I'd be like, "Grandma!"

Kristyn Scorsone: [laughs] Blowing up your spot!

Venice Brown: Right! What is wrong with you?! [laughs] She was the grandma like, "You better get your ass in this house!" Like she was drinking—and she quit drinking like fifteen years ago—but she was drinking and you know, like she would cook and she like raised all, because like a lot of my uncles and aunts were addicts too. So she had to raise all their kids. Luckily for me, I had my mom and my mom wasn't an addict. So she raised all of their kids, all my uncle and aunt's kids, all my cousins. So it was like, she was our grandma. Like my grandfather drinks so we used to be turned up in the house! [laughs] So she wasn't like a holier than thou, I'm walking around carrying a bible. She wasn't like that.

Kristyn Scorsone: What happened that night when you went to the IFC Theater? When you were outside of it, I should say...

Venice Brown: [sighs] What happened... We had all been like, first of all, mind you, this happened in summer of 2006. That had to be the best summer of our lives.

Kristyn Scorsone: Yeah, how come?

Venice Brown: Oh my god, like we were all just like on the same block. We all worked over there. Either you live there or you were there every day.

Kristyn Scorsone: Which block was this?

Venice Brown: 16th Street.

Kristyn Scorsone: Okay.

Venice Brown: We partied every day, because it was the summer time. Renata had a car, so we went everywhere. She was the only one with a car. She was the oldest. Only one with a license, so we went everywhere with her. We stayed out. We used to sit on the porch every day and just break dance until the sun came up. Talking and drinking. We kids! We smoke weed. Like, we chillin.

We all decided to go to the village. Mind you, it was like, the village. Like everybody, we go every weekend. And we're going now and we got on a bus. First of all, the bus took forever so we were like about to go back in the house. It was so many signs telling us not to go, but we kids. We like, we ain't living our life according to no signs. Like we chillin. We ain't going out here to start nothing.

And some guys on the bus were talking crack. Then we almost got into an altercation. We like, "Yeah, whatever!" We moved to the front of the bus. Then we got to the train

station—Penn Station. The train took forever to get here, to get us. We like, we about to go home and they're like, "Ya'll corny, stay with us!" Half the girls like, "Ya'll corny stay with us!" Because there was originally seven of us. So we're like, "Alright, we're gonna stay."

We stay, we get there. We walked from Christopher Street to West 4th Street. Soon as we got to West 4th Street, "Eh, let me get some of that!" Some of what? What do you mean? He talking to Patreese. Patreese like, "Some of my soda." We thought he was a bum. Patreese handed him the soda. He was like, "No, I don't want none of that. I want that!"—pointing to her vagina. She like, "No, I'm good. I'm gay." That was it.

We were waiting for the light to change right in front of the IFC crossing the street to McDonalds. So it was just out of habit that every time you got to West 4th Street, we'd be crossing the street going to McDonalds. It was just out of habit. You know, and as we're at the light, it's a couple girls in the front and then it's the rest of us are in the back. You know, we like holding each other arms like this, you know, through the other person's arm...

Kristyn Scorsone:

Right.

Venice Brown:

...crossing the street, we were all together. All you know is, "Fuck all ya'll gay bitches. I'll throw all you bitches back straight." [Make a noise to mimic the sound of him spitting] He spit in Renata's face and that's all I remember. That's all I remember.

I know that he was choking me like my face was this color. He was trying to...he was choking me. He had Renata and

Terrain, I mean Renata and Shanice head by their dreads, banging them like with the dreads. When he let them go, Shanice dreads, the whole middle of her head look like a swimming pool. He pulled everything out. She was bald. Renata has epilepsy. He had Renata on the ground with his knee on her throat and like, you know what I'm saying? Like trying to....So after that, we kept trying to walk away, he snatched my hair out. We kept trying to walk away. And he kept following us, kept following us. Some gay boys came, three of them. "They women. Why are you fighting with women? Fight us." Next thing I know, the guy picked him up, boom! Slammed him. It was just...after that, we tried to walk away and the cops just came and that was it.

Kristyn Scorsone:

Unbelievable.

Venice Brown:

Yup. Next thing I know, I'm in a court like *Law and Order*. Like a scene out of *Law and Order*. Like what is this? Like it was so surreal. Like being in a courtroom, being in that situation. Like I would just sit there like this.

Kristyn Scorsone:

And the court was in Newark?

Venice Brown:

New York.

Kristyn Scorsone:

Oh, New York, it was. Okay.

Venice Brown:

In New York Supreme Court. They had the walls and everything lined up with people like we was John Gotti or somebody.

Kristyn Scorsone:

Right, yeah.

Venice Brown:

Like I was like a drug lord and a vicious killer. Like we were all of that. Cameras in our face. News. Every week it was different article slandering us. Making us look like

animals. But we kept fighting though. That's the thing. Like we kept fighting, you know what I'm saying? I felt like if we give up, we won't be like we regret what we did. We regret what happened. The only thing we was doing was defending ourselves, because I don't know nobody out here right now in this world that's going to let somebody do something to them, if they have complete control. If they are able to have control or to protect themselves. It's either you or me and I'm not ready for that, so I had to protect myself and I feel like we should have a right to protect ourselves. Like how do you make it mad, because I don't want to talk to you? Like this is my body. I'm my own person, like you don't even know me. Why are you that hard? I mean you got people, somebody that might be willing to talk to you, which is just not me! I'm not the one for you [laughs]. Like leave me alone! How do you not understand that? Yeah, it's crazy.

Kristyn Scorsone: I believe that, because men are, they're so...I've been...I've seen so many situations.

Venice Brown: Yeah.

Kristyn Scorsone: Similar, and these kind of men can be such aggressors.

Venice Brown: Yeah.

Kristyn Scorsone: Was that after what happened with Sakia, your friend?

Venice Brown: Yeah.

Kristyn Scorsone: Was that in the back of your head I guess, too?

Venice Brown: That's what, we would have been dead. One of us would have been dead if we didn't protect ourselves or each other. Me and Patreese been friends since we were two years old, like literally best friends. Like that's my best friend in the

world. That's my son's godmother. So we lived across the street from each other our whole lives, you know what I'm saying? So we if leave together, everybody's expecting us to come back together, because every time we go somewhere, they're like, "Oh where Venice at? Where Patreese at? Oh, she went somewhere with Venice." So where there's Venice, there is always Patreese. Like you can't see one without the other. Frick and Frack. You know what I'm saying? So how would that have looked if she would have went to New York, we would have went to New York together, but came back without one another? How are you going to explain to my mother that you let this man kill me and vice versa? How am I going to go back and bear that bad news? You know what, I'd rather take care of you, the same way you have been taking care of me and whatever happens it's just going to happen.

Kristyn Scorsone:

Yeah.

Venice Brown:

We wasn't supposed to go to jail though! [Laughs]. That was crazy!

Kristyn Scorsone:

That's insane.

Venice Brown:

Insane, right? [laughs]

Kristyn Scorsone:

Well, how was your family and people back home? How did they react to what was going on in the newspapers and how they were portraying you?

Venice Brown:

That's how they found out! 'Cause I called my sister, my father's oldest daughter, it's just us two and two on my mom's side, and my sister called her crying and she said I'm about to call you mother. She was crying and everything. My mother thought I got killed, because the

cops called her first homicide...I mean, not homicide, um...I think it might have been, because the dude...no, it wasn't homicide, because the dude didn't die. Who was it? Anyway, somebody with authority called my mother and she was just like, "Oh no!" And then like it was all in the newspaper, all over the news, and that's how my family found out. They were just like, "What!" Like they were just devastated, because we weren't in the streets and things like that, so like, "how the hell do they go to jail?" Yeah, it was big, like it rocked. It rocked our community, rocked it.

Kristyn Scorsone: Yeah. Did people show up at your house, like reporters and stuff or were they just more writing about you guys?

Venice Brown: Yeah, yeah. They did, but my family didn't any information, any pictures, anything. Like they didn't want any more slandering done to me, anymore.

Kristyn Scorsone: So the trial, that's when the judge, I just watched the documentary last night and the judge he made a big speech about like being in an orchestra...? [laughs]

Venice Brown: Explaining the charges, he explained it wrong.

Kristyn Scorsone: Yeah.

Venice Brown: That's how we won our appeals, because he gave wrong directions.

Kristyn Scorsone: What did he do?

Venice Brown: He was supposed to tell them, "Look. This is what it is. This is how you are supposed to handle it. This is how you are supposed to vote on it and it is what is." He confused them people. Them people were confused. They didn't know what the hell he was talking about, because we didn't either. We were like, "What? Like what are you talking

about? This is not Mozart. This is court. What do you mean? [Laughs].

Kristyn Scorsone: The guy was there, too, I'm guessing. Right or...?

Venice Brown: Like once, but he was irate. Like when they were asking him questions, he was yelling and cursing and screaming like a psychopath. [laughs]

Kristyn Scorsone: So, you've all been friends since you were younger or just you and Patreese?

Venice Brown: I met Renata on the Loop. And she always thought that I was going to be ugly, because we only go by voices.

Kristyn Scorsone: Okay.

Venice Brown: So, I used to smoke cigarettes and things like that so my voice I used to always be like, "Hello!" Like I was sick! [laughs] Like I had a deep, raspy voice and then when she saw me, she was like, "Ohhhh!" Like you know? But, you know, but that's how we met. And I met Terrain. I met Terrain on the gay corner like just out of nowhere. But I've known them both for years. But Patreese and I since we were two and she's 28 and I'll be 28 next month. In three weeks, November 2nd so, yeah.

Kristyn Scorsone: You and your girlfriend, you are not married, right?

Venice Brown: Not yet!

Kristyn Scorsone: Do you want to get married?

Venice Brown: We are, actually, we just went and looked at some rings. We found our rings. We do live together. She is amazing!

Kristyn Scorsone: Yeah? Will you marry in North Carolina or will you come to Newark.

Venice Brown: We don't know yet. I think we want like a destination wedding.

Kristyn Scorsone: Yeah.

Venice Brown: Yeah, I don't know, like I want a big, Cinderella fairy tale, horse and carriage, nice dress, makeup, sculptures and lights, and glitter and all of that! And she's just like, "Yeah, whatever."
So, I'm not sure, but if I do, I definitely want all of my family to be present.

Kristyn Scorsone: She has met everybody?

Venice Brown: No, she hasn't. Like she doesn't know my father's side at all because she's down there. She's from there.

Kristyn Scorsone: Okay.

Venice Brown: They're up here. My mom's side, they're spread out, so it's just me, my mom, my sister, my son, my stepfather, things like that down there. But she knows my mom like we are all really close. I'm really close with her family. I know her whole family both sides, because that's where they're from.

Kristyn Scorsone: Yeah.

Venice Brown: Yeah. But I am going to bring her up here next year to meet my family.
When she gets some more time off of work! [laughs]

Kristyn Scorsone: That's awesome.

Venice Brown: Yeah.

Kristyn Scorsone: So, I guess how do you feel about the documentary and about your role in it, or your portrayal, or anything like that?

Venice Brown: I think Blair did an excellent job.

Kristyn Scorsone: That's the director?

Venice Brown:

Yeah, yeah, that's the director. I think she did an excellent job. She gave us a voice, because if she wouldn't have, nobody would ever – you guys wouldn't even know who we are. You guys wouldn't know anything about anything, you know what I'm saying? Which would suck, because this is such a big deal. And not just because it's a film out, because we want to give people who are afraid to be who they are and who are afraid to come out the closet and who go through harassment and things like this on a daily basis and bullying and things like that, we want to give them a voice. We want them to know it's okay to stick up for yourself and it's okay to be exactly who you are, you know what I'm saying? I feel like this film came right on time. And not for us, because I would have been okay with just getting my life together and moving on with my life and you know what I'm saying, but it's a film, like around the world, though.

Like it's not just New Jersey. It's not just New York. It's not just North Carolina. Like it's Chicago. It's Detroit. It's Los Angeles. It's all parts of California. It's South Carolina. It's Georgia. It's Texas. It's Boston. We will be in Boston next week. It's Spain, Africa, like everywhere.

Kristyn Scorsone:

Yeah.

Venice Brown:

Like you know what I'm saying? So you know in countries like Africa and things like that, like they get crucified and things like that for being gay, because they don't like that in their religion and their country. They don't have that. So we give them hope. We give them a voice, you know what I'm saying?

Kristyn Scorsone: Yeah.

Venice Brown: I've never even been to Africa and they know who we are, like how sick is that, you know?

Kristyn Scorsone: That's really cool. How about your friends and family at home, have they seen it and what do they think?

Venice Brown: Yeah. They saw it when it premiered on PBS. Their biggest thing is like, "We didn't see you a lot!" But my thing, I live in North Carolina, and you know when you're shooting, shooting costs money. You have to pay for the time. You have to pay the people that are shooting. You have to get to and fro.

Kristyn Scorsone: Right.

Venice Brown: You know, I'm living all the way in North Carolina. She came down and she shot my entire baby shower, but it has to make sense. Nobody knew when I was coming home, because everything happens so sporadically, you know. Nobody knew, you know what I'm saying? I left, like I left. I came here. I got out October. I went home in January. I went home in December for Christmas. November for Thanksgiving and came back to finish in February. Finish my case and left for good like I left. So I believe that, I mean, I like it. I think it's dope.

You know, my friends and my family they like it. My is like...my mom doesn't like it.

Kristyn Scorsone: No?

Venice Brown: No, my mom doesn't like the film. She's like...she watches it, you know, or she talks about it and things like that, but she doesn't like it because she feels like it could've been more of me, but I had to sit down and

explain to her that's not the point. It's not about that. It's not about that.

Her thing was like, "They are going to forget about you!" How could you forget about somebody who is trying to make a difference, like you know? I have to. How many people are behind the scenes, making great things happen? Like you don't see Steven Spielberg, you don't see Spike Lee in his movies, but you know who he is, because you see the difference that he is making in the entertainment industry, you know what I'm saying? So that's the kind of what I...

Kristyn Scorsone: Yeah, I can't blame her though as a mom to feel like that.

Venice Brown: Yeah.

Kristyn Scorsone: That's nice.

Just to backtrack a minute, like when you brought up the bullying and stuff, because you know you said you were passionate about that, did you see kids in Newark getting bullied for sexuality at all or was it just general bullying?

Venice Brown: Yeah, it was just some general bullying. And like this girl I went to school with was this big bully, a boy, and she was like West Indian or something like that and so she had really coarse hair, which her mom would braid it in big plaits. And she would wear glasses. She had, you know, her teeth weren't straight, but she is a child. Like what can she do about that? She has to listen to her mom. She has to look at, her mom is making her look. Like she is. You know what I'm saying? Like why are you bothering her? I got kicked out of school that day, like for good. They

expelled me, because I just went crazy on her. I cursed his ass out!

Yeah, like what are you doing? Like, “Why are doing that?” I said, “but you won’t bully me though. But you’re bullying her because she quiet and she gets straight A’s and you’re dumb. You get all F’s.

Kristyn Scorsone:

Yeah.

Venice Brown:

“Why are you bothering her? Maybe you are insecure. Maybe you have issues because you’re fat!” [laughs] I cursed him out! Oh my god, so bad, like I made him cry. I made him cry. Yeah, you don’t do that to people. You don’t do that. Or like people that are addicts. My father has been an addict my whole life. I fought my cousins for being disrespectful to my father. That is my father. He is still a person. You are going to watch your mouth. You understand? So when I see people treating people bad, I just be like, “What is wrong with you? Like they are people, like what is wrong?” You know? Everybody’s different I guess. You have some people that are just ignorant like that, like just ignorant.

Kristyn Scorsone:

Overcompensating on things...

Venice Brown:

Right, exactly.

Kristyn Scorsone:

Is there anything from your upbringing, any stories you want to share or anything you can think of that you might maybe think we’d find interesting?

Venice Brown:

I just want to bring into play. Like right now, like today, I’m a licensed hairstylist. I did get my GED. Remember I told you I didn’t want to go to school? I did get my GED. I was homeless like after I came home.

Kristyn Scorsone:

After jail?

Venice Brown:

Yeah. I was homeless after that and it was like not that I didn't have anywhere to live, but where I was living, I didn't want to be there. Like I was living with my grandmother. Drugs and everything. In and out the house and all of that. So I would sleep from pillow to post. I couldn't get any assistance. Like my mother would send me money, but I didn't have clothes. So I had to buy food and how long is that going to last if I'm not working? But I used to be hungry like...like I couldn't. Like I didn't have a GED. I didn't have any money. I didn't have any education, like I didn't have anything. Anything. And I'm telling you, I used to cry. I was still young. I was still a kid. I used to cry. I had a son, but I had sent my son with my mom. Like I was always a full time mom, but I didn't want my baby up here, living up here at all. And I sent my baby to live with my mom in August of 2010. Ten? Eleven, twelve. 2012.

Kristyn Scorsone:

Where was she?

Venice Brown:

In North Carolina where we live at.

Kristyn Scorsone:

Okay.

Venice Brown:

2012. And I spent two months away from them, every day I will cry. Every single day, because I'm like, my child, my baby, like I always said I was not going to be one of those mothers that were going to allow anybody to take credit for raising my son into the greatness that he is going to be. You know? And when I tell you hungry, and just like wearing the same clothes over and over again. Sleeping, like not waking up. I don't know what I'm going to eat for dinner.

Like what I'm gonna eat? Now though, I went back down south, because I couldn't live without my son. I couldn't do it. I went back down south after 60 days and stayed. Like you know how I hate it down here? Well, for my kid, down here is the best thing for him and I don't have no motivation. Nobody motivating me. Not none of my family, nothing like, it's horrible. So, I'm going home, and I went home. I got my GED. I went to school and I stuck it out, because I have been back and forth to school eight times before I was like, "Okay, I'm going to get it!" Went to school, got my GED November 2013. Went straight to hair school January 2014, no 2013. No, I got my GED November 2012, went straight to hair school January. Like the day I got my GED, I went to the hair school and registered for school like that day, because I called and I told her, "I coming back." Because usually sometimes you could, while your getting your GED and you're close to graduating, they allow you to start your training. Down there, they don't though.

Kristyn Scorsone:

So this is up in Newark where you got your GED?

Venice Brown:

No, in North Carolina.

Kristyn Scorsone:

Sorry.

Venice Brown:

I said, "I'm coming back." They were like, "Okay." Then next week that lady seen me and was like, "You did it." I said, "Yeah, my son deserves everything great. He ain't asked to be here."

So I finished my hair school program. This is not about my program, but my favorite cousin had got murdered up here...May 22nd 2013. Which had to be worst experience

my life. I don't even want to talk about it, like... I had to take a month off for that, you know? Coming back and forth for the children, making sure everything was okay. I graduated in ten months though. With the hair school. The day I graduated hair school, I went to this lady like, "I need a job in your shop."

I worked there for two years. And now I'm at a different shop and I make good money. I have own apartment, my own car. My son is taken care of. I never ever have to worry about if I'm eating, if I'm sleeping. If I'm hungry, I'm going to eat. I go in my refrigerator and I'm going to eat. And I got the money in my pocket to buy things, you know what I'm saying? Like my son, he's well taken of. He has his own room, his own everything. He is in a great school and I state all of this to say like well you, at your lowest point, like in life, when you don't know how you going to make it, you got to sit down with yourself. You got to get in tune with yourself. You got to cut off all the negative energy and you got to really go get it. You got to go get it. If you tired, you're going to know when you tired, you going to know when you fed up. Like I was 300 pounds. I'm like right now, I'm 178 pounds, so like I came a long way. Like I came a long, long, long way. So it's always hope. Like it's always hope, like it ain't never too late. It aint never too late.

Like that is the most memorable thing to me, because I wasn't raised, like my mother always made sure I had. I didn't have to go through that, but when I was in prison for almost three years. No kid. I needed to get that out my

system. I needed to come home and I needed to find myself, because when I came home I was still willing, partying, and drinking, so everything.

Kristyn Scorsone: How come you didn't live with your father?

Venice Brown: That's where I was living at. But my father's a heroin addict, but this time it's like I'm sniffing heroin and I don't see nothing but heroin. And you know, heroin isn't like crack. Crack, you could get up, but when you on heroin you're like... You don't get up and you don't need to smoke crack. You want that. It's a mental thing, but when you sniff heroin, you get up and can move. You shitting all over the place, throwing up, everything if you don't have it.

Kristyn Scorsone: Yeah.

Venice Brown: And he wasn't ready to go through that. He wasn't ready to break away from that.

Me, I was tired. I don't even smoke crack. I took a piss test, crack was in my system, because crack in the house.

Kristyn Scorsone: Yeah.

Venice Brown: I don't even smoke crack! [laughs]

Kristyn Scorsone: Yeah, that's insane, yeah.

Venice Brown: So, it was like I'm going to put my son through this? Hell no! Hell no! My mother, only reason why I seen and went through a lot of things that I went through and things like that, was because my mother like, I'm not taking my child away from her father. Because I don't hate my father and my mother. If she would have, and me and my father like this, always been like this, you know what I'm saying? Me and my mother, always been like this. So I'm grateful that she even allowed me that, you know what I'm saying?

Kristyn Scorsone: Right.

Venice Brown: Because a lot of parent are like, “Hell no!”

Kristyn Scorsone: Right.

Venice Brown: But she ain’t never do that.
He’s always been a good dad, but sometimes you’re addicted. When you got that kind of addiction, that disease, because heroin is that’s a disease.

Kristyn Scorsone: Yes.

Venice Brown: You got that kind of disease? He ain’t shoot it up, he sniffed it, but still. You still get high, you still a dope fiend, you know what I’m saying?

Kristyn Scorsone: Yeah. When you said you lived like when you were homeless, was it that you lived in shelters or you were just kind of bouncing around from place to place?

Venice Brown: I stayed with one of me and Patreese’s other close friends. I stayed with my cousins. I stayed with my aunts. I stayed – but you – one thing no matter how close you and your family are, living with them is totally different from living with your mother or living with your father. Like when I lived with my mother, like I got freedom to do whatever I want to do. I could come, I could go. I could do whatever, that’s my mother, but when I’m living with my cousins, it’s like, “Don’t eat that, because that’s mine. Don’t eat...”
“Well, what the fuck!? I’m hungry, what can I eat?”

Kristyn Scorsone: Right.

Venice Brown: You know what I’m saying? So like I was everywhere. Everywhere. And I just was like you know I’m tired. I’m tired.

Kristyn Scorsone: Did you have a girlfriend during that time?

Venice Brown:

Yeah, Asia. I did have a girlfriend and we were together for about from...she started writing me in jail, but I've known her my whole life. I hated her, hated her, but then I seen the grow up! She was sending me pictures. I was like, "Woah!" [laughs] Like look at this! And then I came home, we got in a relationship. She was supposed to be helping me raising my son. You know she wanted a baby and things like that. And now it's like, she do things [?] Like she just left from down there. She drives from here to see him and everything. But you know that was a relationship to leave. Like it was like a lot of verbal abuse. I've never been physically abused, but the verbal abuse was just like I was fat. She was messing with some other girls, because long distance relationship. Cursing me out. Hang up on me. Like she got the best of me. And I was so depressed, that's why I was eating like that and that's why I came back up here. Follow her and all of that crazy crap. I said, "You know what—this was '09 when we got together. In 2012—I said, "You know what? I'm done."

Kristyn Scorsone:

Right.

Venice Brown:

Girl, I got down. I was in my room butt naked on my floor just crying and praying. Just crying and crying and crying. And I was like, you know what? I'm going to let it go. I started with losing weight, then I started GED, hair school and things like that, so everything that I went through...and that was the first real relationship that I ever been in...

Kristyn Scorsone:

Okay.

Venice Brown: Ever. So I think that along with prison and things like that, that made me just the person that I am now, you know?
Yeah.

Kristyn Scorsone: That's really awesome. You have a lot to be proud of.

Venice Brown: Thanks.

Kristyn Scorsone: I guess, I think that's everything, but is there something that I missed or anything else you would like to say or...?

Venice Brown: Um? I don't think so. I think you've pretty much covered everything. I think you've covered everything.

Kristyn Scorsone: Alright, awesome.

Venice Brown: This was a cool interview though. Good job.

Kristyn Scorsone: Yeah, thank you so much! Thank you for taking the time.