

Queer Newark Oral History Project
Interviewee: Rev. Jerri Mitchell-Lee
Interviewer: Anna Alves
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Anna Alves: Okay, this is the oral history interview with Reverend Jerri Mitchell Lee on Wednesday March 9th 2016 by Anna Alves and we are going to begin with the first set of questions. So the first one is very basic in general and is -- which is when and where were you born?

Jerri Mitchell-Lee: I was born in Brooklyn, New York off of Atlantic Avenue and I was born in 1948.

Anna Alves: And who raised you? Did you grow up in one place or household or more than one?

Jerri Mitchell-Lee: My father was an Army person, so I was an Army brat. I've grown in a number of places across the United States, but I was born and basically did my schooling in Brooklyn, New York.

Anna Alves: Describe some of the places that you've lived in, if you can — I know it's probably a lot! — and then we'll move back into maybe a little bit about the schooling, because that's interesting.

Jerri Mitchell-Lee: Again, I was born and school, started school in Brooklyn, New York. Oh gosh, I've lived in Kansas, I've lived in Nebraska, Ohio, Missouri, Richmond, Virginia, Baltimore, Maryland, I'm just trying to [laughs]— South Carolina. Those are places that I've lived for so -- you know, for a period of time, just say I actually lived there either a year or more. Those are some of the places -- I've been to 47 of the United States, Canada and Italy.

Anna Alves: So how was your schooling amidst all of that? Describe a little bit of...

[CROSSTALK]

Jerri Mitchell-Lee: The world was my classroom; you know, the world was my classroom. **[00:02:00]** I come from a family of teachers and I'm the first female clergyperson to be ordained in our family. My great-grandfather was a Bishop, my grandfather was a reverend, my

father was a deacon and so forth and so on. So I'm the first female to be ordained in the clergy, in the family. But I come from a long line of teachers, professors — basically teachers. It's like in my blood, and so forth and so on. You know, my travels seeing how other people live is -- I've baled hay, wormed sheep, harvested corn. You know, I've had a whole lot of life experiences. So my main way of educating myself was going to school because I played sports.

And in that point in time, like for example, women's basketball was a whole lot more popular in the Midwest than it was in the East. It took a while for it to work its way up here. But it was -- it's always been popular in the Midwest, in Kansas, Nebraska, places like that. The women's basketball budget or sports budget was always bigger in the Midwest than it was in the East. Now it's gotten bigger, but then, it was not. But I've been the whole gamut, I don't know of anybody else in my family that was like into sports like I was, but I did, I did -- I still do marathons, I swim, I work out on a regular, so I don't know what part -- somewhere down the line, somewhere part of my family, there might have been an athlete, I don't know. But my sports, or endurance sports like marathons, [00:04:00] like swimming, continue the things that -- I played tennis, basketball. I refereed basketball, I was the first woman, if not African American woman, in this area to referee basketball, men's basketball. This was quite a few years ago. So I did referee basketball up to the college level and then it was time for me to move on to something else.

So it's like two years after I stopped refereeing, that's when the WNBA came into being, so it's all in the timing right? But by that time I had taken another direction in my life so I didn't bother to do

that. So, I've always been into health, nutrition, majored in psychology and sports training. Psychology, sociology, sports training, that type of thing. So that's been, like, interchangeable in everything I've done in my life. I -- once I came from Kansas I -- my first job in Newark was teaching. I taught at Chad School which was an independent black school in the era of Imamu Baraka [00:05:22] and African Free School and that era there. So I taught at Chad School.

Anna Alves: Level, which grade level?

Jerri Mitchell-Lee: I taught first grade and French. Great combination right? And my French background comes from my grandmother, my father's mother. She was from Haiti. My grandfather met her when he was a missionary in Haiti so I guess I just kind of —“Okay, French is a good language.” So even now I try desperately to learn Spanish. I'll start a sentence out in Spanish and finish it in French. Because the dialect is so similar in many areas, [00:06:00] but I'm gonna keep trying though. Spanish is a good language to know. But I came to Newark as a teacher. I taught Chad School. From there I went to Free School [00:06:14] and Independence High School, which was the alternative high school for teens who had either dropped out or had children and so forth and so on.

Anna Alves: Well around what years was this about?

Jerri Mitchell-Lee: Let's see, okay...

Anna Alves: Or general historical era, I suppose.

Jerri Mitchell-Lee: About '70 is when I came to Newark — '70-'71-'72 — about that era there. And I gauge it according to when I came from Kansas...[laughter] [00:06:46].

Anna Alves: How long were you in Kansas? So at the time you were born, and then at the time I guess, it seems like Kansas was a significant, sort of, maybe settled portion of your life? Would that be correct?

Jerri Mitchell-Lee: Yeah. First of all, it was settled and it was unsettled. I graduated from high school when I was 16.

Anna Alves: Okay and this was in Kansas?

Jerri Mitchell-Lee: No, I graduated -- my father's last tour of duty was at Fort Drum in Brooklyn, New York.

Anna Alves: Okay so at the—

Jerri Mitchell-Lee: Once he retired, I finished high school in Plainfield, New Jersey where they bought a house, and that's how I got to New Jersey.

Anna Alves: So at the time of your birth in New York, your household was made up of yourself and...

Jerri Mitchell-Lee: My mom, my dad and my brother. And my three cousins.

Anna Alves: And then from there, you moved to Plainfield, New Jersey?

Jerri Mitchell-Lee: Yes. Once my father retired from the service, moved to Plainfield, New Jersey, graduated from Plainfield High School.

Anna Alves: Okay, and then when does Kansas come in?

Jerri Mitchell-Lee: Right after Plainfield High School. Once I graduated, I went to college in Kansas.

Anna Alves: Oh okay, which college was it?

Jerri Mitchell-Lee: Sterling College. Real small college and I did intermittently at K State **[00:07:56]** but it was mostly at Sterling College in **[00:08:00]** Kansas. So that was during a time — the only time I really came home was, like, for Christmas because it was so -- even though Plainfield is not a lot compared to it today, but it was a lot then. So you are talking 40 something years ago.

Anna Alves: When you say “a lot,” what do you mean “a lot”?

Jerri Mitchell-Lee: Like two and some change for **[00:08:23]** a round trip.

Anna Alves: Oh I see, you mean in terms of getting back and forth. Got you.

Jerri Mitchell-Lee: Yes, right. So I would come home Christmas and a couple of summers I didn't come home, couple of summers I went -- I stayed in Nebraska with a college mate and worked on her father's farm and so that would be like Thanksgiving I would go to St. Louis with

another roommate. Easter, I would go to New Mexico. So it was that kind of -- it was that kind of thing. I tell people I've always been a gypsy. Always been a gypsy so...

Anna Alves: Do you recall any events that were transitions or turning points around in that early life part? Because we are talking early life is probably right up through college and we talked a little bit about sports but as -- are there other things that come to mind that you can describe or tell a story about?

Jerri Mitchell-Lee: Sports was my pivotal point really. Everything kind of centered around that. I've always been a people person, always wanting to help people and so forth and so on. But sports have always been a pivotal thing and I guess another pivotal point was I can't ever remember my parents saying to me that I cannot do something. So that gave me a carte blanche to leave no stone unturned. And that's what I tell people, I say "Never let it be said that Jerri Lee left any stone unturned, any challenge unchallenged." So and I think that was the biggest thing because, [00:10:00] I mean lots of times I would go on my own and try out for a track team, you know, that they had in the county. So I never remember my parents saying that I could not do something.

Anna Alves: Was that also the case with -- can't remember, you said you had a sibling, yes?

Jerri Mitchell-Lee: Yes, I have an older brother.

Anna Alves: And then you had cousins in the household.

Jerri Mitchell-Lee: Right, well my cousins, they were my mother's sister's sons. They also lived in Brooklyn. So they were like interchangeable households, that type of thing. So we were, pretty much grew up together.

Anna Alves: Oh, okay, so were you in the same household or...

Jerri Mitchell-Lee: No, not in the same house, but two seconds away from each other.

Anna Alves: So in a sense, you sort of grew up all together, although technically you might have gone back to a different house, it was basically a household together.

Jerri Mitchell-Lee: Right, exactly. It's always, as I say, interchangeable.

Anna Alves: And what was -- even though we are talking specifically about your trajectory, what were some, what were theirs, in a sense. Were they similar to yours, in that they also were encouraged to do everything that they wanted or...?

Jerri Mitchell-Lee: Yeah, their life was a little different than mine. They -- it was a single parent home for them, whereas both my parents were there. My aunt, my mother's sister, she was a caretaker as well. She was actually a nurse. A lot of things I find out about my family, years afterwards, like I didn't find out until my father's funeral that he had a Master's Degree. Even though I know he was -- he spoke fluent Italian; he was an interpreter during World War II. So a lot of things I did not find out about my parents until after -- at their funeral or when people came up. Basically because they were [00:12:00] very humble people. They didn't go around saying, "Well I have a Master's Degree." So it was that type of thing but my cousins, the cousin that I was most closest too, he went into the service after graduation from high school and has since retired from the service, started his own business and so forth and so on.

The -- one cousin has passed away from substance abuse. And then the other cousin is living in Ohio now. So I was the only girl, with my brother who is older, he's like six years older. It was always like the role reversal; I was always the aggressive one. The always -- the protective one — and so it was like role reversal. He didn't leave home until he got married, and he was 40-something when he got married, soon as I -- bam, I was gone. Once I moved to Newark for that teaching job, I did not go back home.

Anna Alves: So describe a little bit about, I guess — I'm curious about the neighborhood you grew up in, as well as the neighborhood when you were in Kansas, and then in Newark. But we'll take this one by one, right, well obviously, so...

Jerri Mitchell-Lee: Okay, the neighborhood I grew up in — it was in Brooklyn, it was a international neighborhood. Jewish, Italians, you know, like, I lived near Nostrand Avenue right off of Atlantic Avenue. It was a dead end street, it was towards Alice Court and was **[unintelligible - 00:13:37]**. We lived on Alice Court. 1 Alice Court, Brooklyn 13, New York. You know you always remember something. Now there are zip codes — you don't have the zones. It was Brooklyn 13, New York...

Anna Alves: I didn't know that.

Jerri Mitchell-Lee: ...instead of Brooklyn, New York, zip code... They didn't have zip codes.

Anna Alves: When did they start having zip codes, like you recall?

Jerri Mitchell-Lee: Good question, I don't know. **[00:14:00]** I could not give you an educated answer on that. I'd have to look that one up myself as far as what year, but then Brooklyn 13. I even remember my phone number, "President 25060 **[unintelligible - 00:14:14]** because my mother used to say it when she answered the phone, "President 25060." Like she was in an office or something. And even when I started working, people said "You sound just like a white baby." But anyway... But that was the type of -- we go to the market for fresh fruits and vegetables. My parents were vegetarians when it wasn't fashionable to be vegetarian? So I...

Anna Alves: Is it because they preferred it or was there a particular intention?

Jerri Mitchell-Lee: My father actually taught agriculture in college in Ohio. So he grew his own stuff and what not, especially when we moved to Plainfield because he had a big back yard. So — but when we were in Brooklyn, of course, we went to the fresh food market -- outdoor

market and what not, bought our fruits and vegetables. Once in a while, we'd have chicken or fish, but basically, it was a lot of vegetables, things like that. I was raised that way, so it's not a habit, it was the way that I was raised. People look at me now, "Well do you ever eat any real food?" But, you know, it's a habit. It was the way I was raised, just like some people were raised down South, and they were raised on a lot of pork and a lot of this, that, and the other. My body doesn't tolerate that because I have-- if I eat red meat now, you'd have to rush me to the ER. My system it's, I can't say [unintelligible - 00:15:41] but that was the way I was raised and I guess that's how I got into the holistic health type of thing.

The things that I studied in school and the career journeys that I took kind of intertwine. I did the -- with the sports [00:16:00] medicine, of course you get a lot of medical and stuff with it, and with sociology and the psychology. So I took that, and once I said I wanted to get out of teaching, I went towards that field. I started out as an EMT and a paramedic. And so I built on that, and took the state certification and everything, for those things. I did that for about 12 years. And then from there I went into dialysis nursing. So I built on that, the medical background that I had, and then from the dialysis nursing I went into -- I was working in dialysis during the time when HIV and AIDS was starting to come to the fore front, and most of my patients -- a lot of my patients were in kidney failure because of IV substances.

Anna Alves: And this was in Newark...

[CROSSTALK]

Jerri Mitchell-Lee: This was in Newark, Beth Israel Hospital -- Beth Israel Hospital they had just built a dialysis -- I trained at the hospital for dialysis, but they had just built a satellite unit [unintelligible - 00:17:07] at

Parkside Dialysis Center. And that -- and from the hospital, once I trained there, I worked at Parkside Dialysis Center. Most -- again most of the patients -- a lot of the patients, not most, were there because of kidney failure due to IV substance abuse, and along with that was coming the HIV and the AIDS. So I kind of like fell into that area— once the doctors diagnosed them, because at that point in time, the doctors didn't have a lot of information about it, so whatever information I could conjure up or do, I would talk to them about it. And it was during that era where family members would make them eat out of paper plates and use plastic forks and -- it was a very -- it was '81, '82 around that time there. So, "send them to Jerri Lee, she knows how to talk to them." So I just kind of [00:18:00] fell into that. So from there, I actually started going into the HIV-AIDS education field. I took the first course that the state of New Jersey offered for HIV counselors, certification course. And they had it at Broadway House; they taught it at Broadway House, it was a grueling two-week, eight-hours-a-day class.

Anna Alves: Wow.

Jerri Mitchell-Lee: They don't do it that way anymore; they break it up a little. But this was in the beginning, when they needed people with information and education about counseling, about working with those that were HIV-positive or had full-blown AIDS. So they were in a crunch to get some certified people out there in the field to work with this pandemic then, so that's when I did -- I went into the HIV and AIDS education and counseling. Oh wow— and all along, I didn't want to teach anymore, that's why I started that whole journey but got -- I could have gone [unintelligible - 00:19:11]. No matter what job I was in, I was always teaching something— CPR and HIV-AIDS education, staff development. I was always teaching something so it's -- after a while I said, "Okay..." and I just kind of went with the flow. So even now, I do workshops. Like, I have an

outreach workshop coming up. I developed a teaching manual, doing effective outreach. I developed a teaching manual. I just did a presentation at Princeton Theological Seminary on sexuality and spirituality and the connection and how we can effectively talk about it in the Black church [00:20:00]. So I have a book, it's called *28th and 98th* and it talks about sexuality and spirituality and the connection between the two with all spiritual beings [unintelligible 00:20:10]. So I have a book and then I have a presentation that I do with it. So those are the two things that I've developed with that.

Anna Alves: You're making me think of -- sorry to interrupt because I'm thinking of two things that you mention which is that the teaching is in your blood and you had mentioned that you came from a family with so many teachers. And so there's -- there are two things I kind of have in mind and we'll hit each one, because you also mentioned religion.

So the first one is, as you were growing up, especially at adolescence, were there particular adults — because it sounds like there's a lot of teaching that impacted you -- like, that sort of, impacted your experience or served as a -- you know, besides the people that raised you, — served as maybe either role models or created an impact that has been lasting? That's the first one and that's the --

Jerri Mitchell-Lee: I guess, you know, needless to say, you know, my parents -- my grandmother, who was a very staunch, conservative, Catholic woman. I would spend summers with her— her and my aunt. The first summer that I spent with my aunt, because her children were avid readers— that's when I first begin the love of reading. And also because I took -- I was part of a experimental speed reading class in Rutgers.

Anna Alves: Here at Newark or New Brunswick or...?

Jerri Mitchell-Lee: In New Brunswick.

Anna Alves: In New Brunswick

Jerri Mitchell-Lee: In New Brunswick, because my mother at that time was teaching at Franklin Township. [00:22:00] She was teaching it, and she hears about everything, so she drags me to this speed reading class [coughs] —excuse me. She drags me to this speed reading class at Rutgers. It was an experimental thing, teaching, you know, speed reading, to see how it would go and that, as far as my education, as far as my love of reading, that was a pivotal point because it really worked. It still does. It was like, when I would go to Ohio to visit my aunt and my grandmother, I would sit down and read a book a day.

Anna Alves: What types of books or reading often...?

Jerri Mitchell-Lee: Everything. Everything. Everything from soup to nuts.

Anna Alves: What were some of the, I guess -- I don't want to stick it just to novels, because it could be poetry, writing...

Jerri Mitchell-Lee: When I was younger, it was a whole lot of novels and poetry. History, loved history. Loved -- I would love to go to historical places and have my imagination run as to when people were actually there, like the homes of Frederick Douglass or where the Underground Rail actually — so my imagination would go into overkill imagining people going through these places. Like I've been to parts of Canada where Native Americans had settled and whatnot, just picturing them coming out of the woods or you know something like that.

Anna Alves: And then because you were an Army brat that led to you being able to perhaps explore some of these places?

Jerri Mitchell-Lee: Oh absolutely, absolutely, absolutely. But it's you know the whole - the pivotal thing, “if you can read, you can do anything” was that for me. So, of course, when I was younger and when I say younger -- when I took the speed reading course I had to be a sophomore, [00:23:46] junior...

Anna Alves: So high school.

Jerri Mitchell-Lee: Yeah. So, maybe a little bit younger, and when the -- younger is relative because I graduated when I was 16.

Anna Alves: Yeah, that's true. **[00:24:00] [Laughter]**

Jerri Mitchell-Lee: So I skipped two grades, so that was it. So going to college, it was - the first year was... just trying to mature, what would a 16-year-old **[unintelligible 00:24:15]**.

Anna Alves: Were there particular sort of folks that you met during your college— because you're away from your family — that were sort of impactful in your life or you had experiences where that impacted you because it could be, I don't know...?

Jerri Mitchell-Lee: Yeah, well experience I had, it was a party impact you know? Yeah, so it took me a while to settle down and I got a couple of bad grades. Pull it in here. So that was -- Dr. Santana, he was my sociology professor and -- oh God I can't remember his name, my biology professor, because I loved that class because he allowed me to help -- he was working on an experiment in biology with chinchillas.

So he allowed me to do the dissections of when something would happen, that he allowed me to help him or actually do some of the dissections to find out why the chinchilla died, and what the biological process and so forth, what had happened and documented it and stuff like that. So I was -- but even in grade school, my science teacher was my hero. Mr. [Jinglelesky], I don't know how I remember these names, but ask me what today's date is, I had to ask you, right?

So, science has always been an interest for me which gave me a real solid background for going into the medical field and other things that I wound up doing in my life. So yeah that was, you know, a lot

of the things was because I read a lot, because I had been exposed to a lot. "Oh, you think you know everything," [00:26:00] Yeah I had to kind of work with that syndrome that people would have of me that, "Oh well what's that? I know you know because you know everything." I said, "I read a lot."

And after a while I said, "I'm not making any excuses for who I am or my life experience." And then as an adult, kind of not always sharing information that I have outright. I'll share it in another manner maybe, in something in writing or teaching or something like that. But outright, I was a little kind of shy of -- because of people. It is what it is. It is what it is. So that's -- I've just had a wealth of living experiences, wealth of the living experiences. I came to Newark. Because I played sports, I had no official coming out.

Anna Alves: What do you mean by that?

Jerri Mitchell-Lee: If I were -- if you were a female, and you played sports, you were automatically a lesbian. It was just assumed, "Okay whatever you say" and it's kind of like— I kind of let it go with that, and just kind of walked in it. Most of my friends were male, you know, football team, and they would come over on the weekends and we'd have fish fries, and they cooked! Most of my friends, I think I had one female best friend that we had a lasting friendship. So that was pretty much my coming out. My parents, my father, I feel like a chicken that hatched a duckling, that was his way of acknowledging who his daughter was. Yet I remember...

Anna Alves: What, sports was the way of acknowledging or when did he...?

Jerri Mitchell-Lee: Just him acknowledging that I was a lesbian [00:28:00]. So back then, the terminology wasn't as open as it is now, but then I feel like a chicken that hatched a duckling. And I remember my prom, I was having this discussion, "Oh no that it is just too frilly,

[00:28:15] I cannot wear that.” So we compromised on a nice pink lace dress...

Anna Alves: You and your father.

Jerri Mitchell-Lee: Yeah, kind of tailored, cuz you know, daddy's little girl. So it was a nice, tailored, V-neck, lace collar dress, "Okay, I can work with that." So that was that type of thing. But I remember my mom taking in one of her friends who had lost her apartment because they found out she was a lesbian. And she lived with us maybe four or five months before she found another place. She was a teacher -- no, she was a librarian.

So I remember experiences like that, I remember having the organ— [00:29:03] choir director over for dinner and his mom— Cecil. He was also a hairdresser. So I remember things like that in my life, not necessarily them verbally saying, but living it, that they were accepting of people and then I guess for my...

Anna Alves: That your family was accepting the people and the community...

Jerri Mitchell-Lee: My parents.

Anna Alves: Your parents.

Jerri Mitchell-Lee: Not necessarily -- my -- and one of my cousins. Not necessarily my brother. My brother's Jehovah Witness. So he was Jehovah...

Anna Alves: So how did that...?

Jerri Mitchell-Lee: Once pretty much he was out on his own, you know. [00:29:45] Not out on his own, but an adult, you know. Late 20s, early 30s. So even with that, so they were the most accepting. I never really had conversations with any of my other [00:30:00] family members. I'm on Facebook with it, I mean it's not a secret. I'm on Facebook, except they never approached me about it and I've never, you know, anything.

Most of my family you know have said, "We've got to keep in touch!" I said, "Yeah" and part of that is you calling and not me calling all the time and seeing how are you doing, you know, that type of -- Even with my brother, if I call him today, I might get an answer three weeks from now, yeah. And I just have to work with that; my brother is a breast cancer survivor. Because they don't expect it in men, by the time they discovered it, he had to have a complete mastectomy, [00:30:36] lymph nodes and all that [00:30:41]. So he's like an eight-year survivor now. Breast cancer. So during that time, I tried to connect and it was— I just did the best I could. (laughter) With that. So it was that I come from a very -- on my mother's side of the family, it's very conservative. So that...

Anna Alves: But not your mother.

Jerri Mitchell-Lee: Huh?

Anna Alves: But it doesn't sound like your mother is.

Jerri Mitchell-Lee: My mother was conservative, yet a woman before her time. She graduated from [unintelligible 00:31:20] University in 1936, unheard of, pretty much, of a black woman graduating from college. But she had six -- she had five siblings, six including herself, who all had the oppor -- her mother, her parents, made sure that all the siblings had an opportunity to go to college, whether they took it or not. So she was the main one who took the ball and ran with it because she went up to a Master's Degree in Remedial Reading [unintelligible 00:31:47].

The others, my -- her sister Aunt Martha, she was a nurse. She had a brother that worked for the government. I think he had a couple of years of college. [00:32:00] She had a brother that was in the postal service all of his life. Her sister, who died in an early age of Alzheimer's, she was in her 60s. So there was three girls and three

boys. They're all deceased now, but they all passed away in their 90s.

Anna Alves: Long lives.

Jerri Mitchell-Lee: Yes, yes, as well as my father's side of it.

Anna Alves: I was going to say and how about your father's side...?

Jerri Mitchell-Lee: Yeah, my father's side they were long livers. His father actually lived with us until he passed away. He was blind...

Anna Alves: How old were you around then? When you were much younger?

Jerri Mitchell-Lee: When my grandfather lived with us, we were in Plainfield, so I had to be — junior or senior in high school. So he would be teaching me braille and the whole nine yards. Now, my father's father was a reverend and also a teacher, so it was that piece of it and whatnot. So my wild side comes from my father's side of the family. My mother's side -- I remember my grandmother, my mother's mother being very prim [00:33:21] and proper.

My mother saying, "Well I'm not going to give you a lace tablecloth, you'll never use it. I'll give it to your brother's wife." I said, "You're absolutely right, I'm not going use a lace tablecloth." So she was very proper. But I still remember how to set a table, you know, the basic things, so I can maneuver in any world. I can maneuver in any realm, so that was one good thing about that. I can maneuver in any realm. I can hob-nob with the best of them, because I have a variety of... I know how to act in *this* situation, [00:34:00] I know what to do in *this* situation.

If you have five forks, and you know, everything, I know how to start from the outside-in, you know, the whole nine yards. That was that piece which came from *her* mother. Her mother was very... [unintelligible 00:34:15]. So my mother was very conservative in her own way but she was a trail blazer. She was a trail blazer,

always starting something, again finding out different things. You know, she sat at the lunch counter.

Anna Alves: The lunch counter—

Jerri Mitchell-Lee: --at Woolworth's---

Anna Alves: --describe a little bit about that.

Jerri Mitchell-Lee: During the civil rights movement she, and my brother! I didn't realize my brother had done this until I saw a picture of them.

Anna Alves: Was your mother in high school or college at the time or she...?

Jerri Mitchell-Lee: No, she was an adult.

Anna Alves: She was an adult and she went down and she did that.

Jerri Mitchell-Lee: She did that. So that -- I had to be kind of -- she was out of college. I had to be kind of young because I don't remember it going on. I don't remember discrimination until I went to school in Kansas and a little white boy walking down the street said, "Hey nigger, where are you going?" That was the first time I had encountered racial prejudice.

Anna Alves: What was that like?

Jerri Mitchell-Lee: At first I said, "What'd you say?" Because I had lived in New York, lived, you know, East Coast. It was -- I mean there was discrimination during that period, yes, but it was not as pronounced, because that was the journey of the Underground Railroad. So and it was clearly something his parents, you know, kids that age, you had to learn it from your parents or whatever. Even though there were -- I was on a college campus, I think there were like 20 African-Americans.

Anna Alves: Out of, like maybe, in general...

Jerri Mitchell-Lee: 500/400, somewhere, it was just small.

Anna Alves: Because it's a small college.

Jerri Mitchell-Lee: Yeah, **[00:36:00]** a small college. So, but there were African-American families that lived in the town, so if you wanted to get your hair done, you did have some place to go. But there was

clearly prejudice that you had some students who -- or people who are very curious about that. Of course they did not see black people that often within the town, because you know, if you went into town to go to the bank or go to the restaurant or whatever, that type of thing.

So that was my first encounter with outright prejudice because I was so used to, you know, "so you can do anything you want" and I pretty much did. So that was my first encounter with that. Once my father passed away, and this was years later, I moved to Baltimore. I know on my trip going to Baltimore, I brought some of my -- by then I had been ordained as a deacon at that point in time, but I was more...

Anna Alves: So you were ordained in Kansas?

Jerri Mitchell-Lee: '97. No, I was ordained here in Jersey.

Anna Alves: Okay, so you were in Kansas and then...

Jerri Mitchell-Lee: I came home.

Anna Alves: You came home and then you went to Baltimore.

Jerri Mitchell-Lee: Yes.

Anna Alves: Okay.

Jerri Mitchell-Lee: I mean there's a big gap because I was in Newark a good 20 or something years before I was even ordained. I got ordained at a later age, like I was 50 or something, my first ordain.

Anna Alves: It is, like at this moment then, we can go back to that other question I was going to -- because we had started to slip in, is like, what role has religion played in your life from the early years on through now? You've kind of talked about it a little bit but...

Jerri Mitchell-Lee: Well, my parents were Presbyterian when I was like 16. I was in high school, graduated from high school. They allowed me to make my own choice of where I worship. So Presbyterian Church was not for me. If you said "amen" or "hallelujah," they call the

[00:38:00] rescue squad, you know, they were just very conservative. But that was fine for them because they were kind of a consecutive people, not so much my father as my mother. But I went to a Baptist church, and Reverend Cathy— his wife I believe is still pastoring there if I'm not mistaken. I run into her name and her picture, you know, periodically, through Newark School of Theology, some classes there.

Anna Alves: So this is in New Jersey?

Jerri Mitchell-Lee: Yeah. So it's, you know, once I came back it was all in Jersey [00:38:31]. So it went from graduating from high school to Kansas, graduating, coming back to Jersey and teaching. So once I started that period, I went from teaching to EMT paramedic to the dialysis nursing to the HIV/AIDS counseling and mental health counseling. So that was over a period of 20-something years.

Anna Alves: All in Newark?

Jerri Mitchell-Lee: Right, all in Newark, all in Newark. So I was actually in Newark 25/26 years.

Anna Alves: What's your earliest memory of Newark, that you can recall?

Jerri Mitchell-Lee: Well, of course, when I first came to Newark, when I first went to Newark I taught at [00:39:10] Chad School and that's when the whole African Free School is going on and Imamu Baraka [00:39:14] and I actually wrote for the Black Panther Newspaper in [00:39:18] Jersey City. So I was into that whole, you know, African-American Black Power movement-type thing. So that was my, of course my earliest recollection of Newark, and how it was. Now, I was in Plainfield intermittently because I was in college when the riots took place. So, the riots took place in Plainfield as well. And I remember my father having -- we had to keep my father in the house because he was-- [00:40:00] he was your complexion [lighter-skinned]. He was African-American but he was your complexion, so at a glance, they might take him being so light –

right, so we have to really be like a little protective in the vicinity. And no, no, no because at a glance, might mistake him for a white person. So that was, those were my earliest recollections of Newark, what not. Scudder Homes Junior League, the league is still there, the baseball league is still there. I was one of the founders of that.

Anna Alves: The baseball league in...?

Jerri Mitchell-Lee: Scudder Homes. It's on Court and Howard Street there. There's a field there. It needs a lot of work now. But the city gave them a field. Volunteers from the Housing Authority, the Scudder Homes Housing Authority, they actually started it, Luther Robeson and Charles James. Richard Woods was a teacher at Morton Street School. I don't know how familiar you are with Newark or anything but...

Anna Alves: I am sort of getting a little bit. Yes.

Jerri Mitchell-Lee: But the school was here, the housing project was here, and they gave us the field here. So it was a community, community-type of thing.

Anna Alves: And the baseball league was for – like who often...?

Jerri Mitchell-Lee: Little League.

Anna Alves: Little League, okay.

Jerri Mitchell-Lee: Yeah, it was Little League. So the field is still there, they still— now Luther Robeson's son is running the league in that community. So, again, going back to my sports thing. So that was a piece of it too. Then, let's see. When did I start refereeing basketball? Oh God.

Anna Alves: You also refereed here then?

Jerri Mitchell-Lee: Yes. I refereed Branch Brook Park. I refereed the high schools, some college, and what not. But Bill [00:42:00] Jones was a former NBA referee, is the one who trained me.

Anna Alves: Oh wow!

Jerri Mitchell-Lee: So kind of ride on his coattails [00:42:08]. And just the basking in the being the only female doing this at the time, you know, I had to change in the bathroom.

Anna Alves: Yeah, I was going to ask what was their facilities were like, yes.

Jerri Mitchell-Lee: There was no facilities for female referees, so yeah, so.

Anna Alves: What was the reception to it?

Jerri Mitchell-Lee: Different. Different receptions. Some were very receptive, some were “What are you doing out there?” and so forth and so on, so...

Anna Alves: Because you would be refereeing high school basketball games and some college?

Jerri Mitchell-Lee: And high school, generally high school, summer league, some college. Most better known summer leagues around here.

Anna Alves: Did it eventually sort of become less sort of odd as time went by, like how did – or was the period of time so short that you couldn’t really make a comparison?

Jerri Mitchell-Lee: Well for me, it was “This is what I’m supposed to be doing. I inherited it from Mama. I was a trail blazer, you know. Any challenge, bring it on. And that was it. But I loved it. It was very enjoyable. I coached the Youth Games for two years, the girls’ basketball Youth Games.

Anna Alves: What are the Youth Games?

Jerri Mitchell-Lee: Okay. It’s each city across the United States, they have teams, and they have Youth Games in the summer. I don’t know if they still do or not. But each city, like Boston, Newark, and what not, they come with basketball, track. Those are the two main events they have during the Youth Games— basketball, track, and what not. So I coached the girls’ team for two years and I said, “I am not a coach. Because girls are too emotional.” [laughs] Too emotional! You know, we were in DC, we were up by 10 points, we started losing our lead and they “Oh my God!...” It’s like “Come on, come on,

come on” [slaps hands together]. So that’s when I wanted to
[00:44:00] referee. That’s when I went towards the refereeing, so...

Anna Alves: How has Newark changed since sort of your earliest memories?

Jerri Mitchell-Lee: Oh my goodness! I still do a lot of walking around Newark in that area, in the Scudder Homes area. JFK Recreation Center is still there, but where a high-rise housing projects are, there are town houses now. So it’s like a different neighborhood. With Prudential Building downtown, a lot of that area has changed, of course. I went into partnership with four friends who I’ve known for like 15-20 years. Store is still there, Artisan Collective. I did it for, like, four years. And then I backed out – not backed out but I came out, because there were other things I wanted to do. So the shop is still there, Artisan Collective on Halsey Street. It’s a craft shop – not a craft shop, but everything in the store is handcrafted. I did the bags from recycled fabrics; still do on an intermittent basis and what not, so.

Anna Alves: Can you describe some of the changes you’ve maybe seen in terms of, I don’t know like, if you walked over there back in the early days as opposed to sort of like if you went down there now?

Jerri Mitchell-Lee: I still go to JFK to swim. But as to the projects, it was nothing for me to walk the projects, 10, 11 o’clock at night, I was not afraid. And people knew you. People were more connected. People were more connected because I did – I worked for the city, I did a brief stint in the JFK Recreation Center. And I’d be going to work saying, “Hi. Here’s-- here’s your lunch” [00:46:00] and they'd come down and get me lunch. So it was more of a connected place in the communities. Communities were more connected. There weren't a whole lot of grants for programs and things like that, but because the community was more connected, you had things for the kids to do. You had— people volunteered to...

Anna Alves: People took personal initiative to create things, so.

Jerri Mitchell-Lee: Right, right, like parents would come out and help with other people's kids and things like that.

Anna Alves: And so how do you see it now, in a sense?

Jerri Mitchell-Lee: Well, needless to say, it's not as connected because people don't know each other like that. It's a different generation. It's a totally different generation as to what they think. Parents are younger, so their ideas are a lot different. I say my generation, and you know even, like I have grand kids, 14 and 11. My daughter is 40. So even her generation, I made sure that I passed the baton of information, of history, and things like that. But not every grandparent does that.

Anna Alves: Right.

Jerri Mitchell-Lee: So he can do that, because she has the information. And her children will be able to, because they have the information, but not everybody. The baton has been dropped. A lot of people of my generation, "All these kids they'll curse you out" and things that. Well, so what? But you have to take that chance to do that. Like I was on the bus one time, and this young lady, she was sitting right in back of me, cursing up a storm. And I guess she was going to get off the bus and said this, "Excuse me miss, could you ring the buzzer for me?" I said, "I'll be more than happy to ring the buzzer for you, if you stop cursing in my ear." Like she looked at me "Oh what, you were sitting right here." "Of course it was you, but I'll be more than happy to ring that buzzer."

Anna Alves: What did she say?

Jerri Mitchell-Lee: You know, she didn't say anything, she said "Thank you."
[00:48:00] But at least I said something.

Anna Alves: Yes.

Jerri Mitchell-Lee: At least I said something.

Anna Alves: Do you think there's maybe a communication....?

Jerri Mitchell-Lee: Oh absolutely. I don't know if they're afraid to say-- Well I know they are. A lot of grownups, they're afraid to say anything because

they don't want to be cursed out. And who's walking around with a gun? Or a knife? Or whatever. So it's a fear factor as well as to what they will do, because they read it in the news every day. They've been known to, you know, do things, but sometimes you just have to take a chance.

Anna Alves: So you mentioned your daughter. So back up a little bit and tell me about that period for you?

Jerri Mitchell-Lee: Okay. Well I have three children. I have a son. I have two daughters and a son. My son is in St. Petersburg, Virginia, right now. He was – well, they're all very smart — and he was the one, so smart he couldn't tie his shoes, ya know, that type of smart. So he's teaching at some college in St. Petersburg. They're all adopted. He could never come to terms with having a mother who played sports or refereed basketball. So he was all in another world.

Anna Alves: Were they all adopted during your time in Newark?

Jerri Mitchell-Lee: Yes.

Anna Alves: They grew up in Newark.

Jerri Mitchell-Lee: Mhmm. They grew up in Newark. Tania's in Mississippi now; she is a nurse there. She has two children.

Anna Alves: Your grandchildren.

Jerri Mitchell-Lee: Yes. She has a son and a daughter. And then Joy is the oldest one. She is in South Carolina.

Anna Alves: And what was that household like, bringing your children up in Newark?

Jerri Mitchell-Lee: Rebellious, you know, rebellious. When they were all old enough to understand it, I explained that they were adopted and did they have any questions at that point in time—

Anna Alves: Did you adopt them on your own or did you have—?

Jerri Mitchell-Lee: Yes. Well I started out adopting [00:50:00] with a partner. The last adoption was the youngest one and he didn't want any part of it, so I had to go back in and adopt as a single parent, on that one. But,

you know, “You know what adoption is?” “Oh yeah, I know what adoption is!” And then they run in the wrong direction.

[unintelligible - 00:50:16] “See, this is adoption” and I said, “No, adoption, we’ll wait a while, we’ll wait a while until you’re a little older, you’re not quite grasping it.” But I never kept it a secret from them at all. Now my daughters ask questions, I got as much information as I could. My son even now needs some counseling because he definitely has some psychological issues with that. He never asked questions, he didn’t want to know who his parents were, he didn’t want to know where he came from, he had no questions— he didn’t want to talk about it, about this adoption. So, that was, you know, after a while that was his choice, but clearly as he came into adulthood, these issues, anger issues, things like that, turned up in his behavior. He was very smart, very intelligent. The youngest daughter in and out **[unintelligible - 00:51:15]** yet he was scoring in the 90s and 100s on the HSPT scoring, he no longer can – “He’s too smart, we can’t help you.”

So, it was that type of thing, it was – and because they were raised where I was home all the time, and when I say home, I mean I worked, definitely worked because I worked in the hospital and everything, but I was there when they got home from school and what not. “Why aren’t you going out? Why you home all the time?” But with my mom, it was the total opposite, She was always away at a convention, she was always at a meeting, she was always doing something in the community. So I was pretty much an independent child **[00:52:00]**, so to speak. My father was there but I was – independent. I grew up independent. I made decisions about things — weren’t always right decisions but I made them – and that space where I made decisions about things, because she was not always home, sometimes my dad would, as I got old– in high

school, my dad would go with her, but he'd go maybe like for a weekend or something like that.

So, I grew up as an independent person not having to answer to, you know, a lot. So going into adulthood, there were times when that was a challenge because I had to – vocally, you've got to answer this.

Anna Alves

So then how was that when you were in your household with your children then?

Jerri Mitchell-Lee:

Again, I was home with them. They were very well supervised. Even when I refereed basketball, I bring the baby sitter to the basketball game with me, they sit in the stands. I do the game, get paid and go home. So, it was a different thing so they – I allowed them to do, to sit and watch, “Oh, yeah, I want these.” Then it wasn't \$200 sneakers but I said, “Okay, bring a pair and I'll babysit or whatever and I'll help you out.” So I always instilled in them that independent piece, that thinking. I encouraged them to make their decisions, right, wrong, or indifferent. Of course there are some decisions, there's no discussion. But because nowadays in school, everything is doled out, decision-making-wise, is, “Okay, you're gonna to do this.” It's almost like they're incarcerated. “You've got to do this thing, do this thing.” Even in school. So when they graduate from high school, they don't have decision-making skills. Because they have not been allowed to make any [00:54:00]. Everything's been dictated to them, because they're afraid they're gonna to go off or whatever the case might be. And that's an important skill in life. That decision-making piece.

But once I was ordained into the church, kids were all gone by then. Again, I came into clergy late. I was 50 – well, actually, I was like 40-something, late 40s, when I started, 50-something when I was

ordained. And as far as my children being accepting of it, of the clergy and the lesbian piece, took my son awhile. He wouldn't even come into the church. Like he was afraid somebody was going to gobble him up or something. But, you heard of Unity Fellowship Church Movement? [affirmative noise from interviewer] It's the one [00:55:02] I was very active in-- still very active in. In fact, this is the building that we had our workshops in and when we had convocation last year. Conklin Hall and Engelhard [Hall].

[00:55:14] They allowed us to use classrooms for our workshops when we had our annual comprehensions, so. And we had our Youth Summit there as well, so that was good. But, so my daughter said she was okay with it, but she would come out in her conversation, in homophobic ways, but because I had custody of my granddaughters for a couple of years, and they grew up thinking, "Oh, wasn't that normal? Isn't it normal for a guy to be dating a guy or a woman to be dating a woman? Isn't that normal?" So, they grew up in that atmosphere because they would babysit them, the guys would do their hair...

Anna Alves: You'd bring them to service...

Jerri Mitchell-Lee: Right, they'd come to service, they were very active in the church, in the youth [00:56:00] ministry and so forth and so on. But it was always an integrated church. When I say integrated, those that were there, brought their aunts or uncles, their mothers, their fathers were straight, wanting to share with them their worship experience. So, it was always -- it was never a thing of -- even in Newark -- it was never a thing of it just being lesbians and gays. They were always exposed--

Anna Alves: All were welcome but--

Jerri Mitchell-Lee: --Always exposed, so when they did a report in school about what is, what is love? Or what is, something? They used myself and my partner -- well, now my wife -- as an example of what love is,

Auntie Gayle and Grammie. So for their realization, they have no clue as to why there's big hubbub about it, because they were raised that way.

Anna Alves: How long did you have custody of them?

Jerri Mitchell-Lee: Three years. Yeah, my partner and I—

Anna Alves: Three years. And they were about how old?

Jerri Mitchell-Lee: When we had constant custody, they were – we had them from 2nd, 3rd, and 4th grade.

Anna Alves: Yeah, it's an impactful time.

Jerri Mitchell-Lee: Yeah, so, and that was here-- well I lived in East [Sorensen]. I had come back to Jersey then. So, that was that time. So the oldest one, she's getting ready to go to high school next year. And the youngest one is 11. So finally my daughter pulled on to that parenting thing, thank God. Because I was getting too old for that, [chuckles] but—

Anna Alves: Do you still see them often?

Jerri Mitchell-Lee: Yeah, well they're in South Carolina. That's where they seem to flourish. My daughter lived there actually for eight years until— she was 27 when she was pregnant with the first one, with Julia, and then three years later, [00:58:00] Day, so that was then.

Anna Alves: Was she in South Carolina during the time that you had them? And then, or were you both in Newark and you just were taking care of them?

Jerri Mitchell-Lee: No, she, let's see— she came back to Newark briefly because that's where she was from. And she was, like, bounce back and forth. You know, bounce back and forth. But she was in Newark when I had custody. [00:58:26] Yeah, she was back.

Anna Alves: In terms of living in Newark, what do you like about living in Newark, or what do you find appealing about living in Newark?

Jerri Mitchell-Lee: Because I've been here so long, you know the people, you know the lay of the land, [00:58:41] but knowing the lay of the land is not

really why, because when I go to Baltimore, it's in quadrants, same way, any city. You know one city; you can learn to know them all.

Anna Alves: How would you describe Newark? Like if you just said Baltimore is in quadrants, how would you describe Newark?

Jerri Mitchell-Lee: Newark is a historical and cultural town, you know, with its history of jazz. With its history, period, of the things that have happened — Kwame Touré, Stokely Carmichael. I think one of his last speeches was here in Newark, at the church on Broad Street. So, yeah, historical and cultural, type of thing. There's an imbalance, in of course, wealth. And now with the — like, they have the Teachers' Village downtown and different things like that -- and they say they're building affordable housing, but affordable for who? So I think that is driving away the minorities. And in their effort to bring in the [01:00:00] professionals, so to speak, who can afford \$1200 and \$1300 a month for a efficiency apartment, [laughs] pretty much, pretty much, so...

Anna Alves: Are those some of the things that you find, that you find difficult or frustrating about Newark? Like the way things are sort of developing in that sense or...

Jerri Mitchell-Lee: The housing piece-- It's the whole community piece because Newark used to be a strong community-based city even with— what was that mayor who served for 100, I say 100, years? Italian guy— I can't remember his name. But he served quite a number of terms because after he came out of office is when they passed that law, that a mayor could only serve two terms. Oh God, I can't think of — this Italian guy, North Newark, Newark. but... [Hugh Joseph Addonizio]

Anna Alves: I can make a note to look that up.

Jerri Mitchell-Lee: Yeah. I'll remember when I'm not thinking about it. So, that was — then you had the first black mayor...

Anna Alves: And who was that? For the record.

Jerri Mitchell-Lee: Oh, Gibson, yeah, Kenneth Gibson. I believe he was the first black mayor. And then of course after him, you had Sharpe James. And now you have, so for the past – decade, more than a decade after – he left, was no longer Mayor of Newark, we haven't had any minorities that served as Mayor. So that, even though we've come far **[01:02:00]** in that area, and Newark the area as a whole-- Cory Booker today as well, so. But the mayors are younger now, so their mindset is different. Cory Booker established the LBGT commission and a number of other things putting into place, things for LBGT persons, youth and adults, so...

Anna Alves: You see that continuing as well with this term?

Jerri Mitchell-Lee: Yes, Ras Baraka, his sister, who was lesbian, was killed a number of years ago. His mom, Amina Baraka, has participated in our spoken word events, sometimes, so that's always good, and I see her from time to time, wonderful person to talk to. So, with me, it's a connections of the past, of that era, because the whole Baraka thing, I was in the midst of it, I walked it, I lived it. So, that, but yeah, I would say, the lack of community, a lack of community. It's like trying to come back, but of course it will never be the way it was before. It will look different, I think people are at least making an effort to try and do that now because of the school situation. I mean, what city do you live in that the State has had control of the schools for the last 20 years? And it was supposed to be a temporary thing. When are we going to get our schools back? Self-governing in Newark and not run, you know, the state coming in and running our schools. And they haven't done any better a job. In fact, they've done a worse job, because they're not of community, you know. They're not of community, so I think that has a lot to **[01:04:00]** do with that piece, it has a lot to do with that piece.

And even aside from that now, you have the first – I think the only LBGT Community Center on the East Coast, or in the state anyway, from Halsey Street. So that was a big step in the right direction and what not. They've expanded the Gay Pride Parade from Broad Street or Boulevard to the Washington Park. You know, before it was on Halsey Street but now, so it's that expanded – so everything, everything in time, everything with time.

Anna Alves: In that vein, what places in Newark do you associate with LGBTQ people or communities or activity?

Jerri Mitchell-Lee: I do, I teach some – I use the LBGT Community Center to teach some of my outreach classes and things like that. And different activities that go along that aren't necessarily labeled LBGT but LBGT are the ones sponsoring it.

Anna Alves: And this is in around like what streets or blocks [01:05:18] or areas of the street?

Jerri Mitchell-Lee: Right, it's different areas, like the Pride Committee, they're doing a number of fundraisers at 27 Mix. So whenever they happen, let me see if I can find [checks iPhone for links] – and of course in New York, okay like [01:06:00] [unintelligible - 01:06:01] Gay Pride, public planning meeting, different things like that. There was an art thing going on– and then I do the Kwanzaa LBGT every year and, you know, outstanding activities that might be going on in New York over there.

Anna Alves: What's your perspective on Newark's connection or relationship to other nearby places or cities or suburbs, like surrounding areas? How do you see Newark in relation to those?

Jerri Mitchell-Lee: I worked in Jersey City for a couple of years, so Jersey City as to– I worked at the Hudson Pride Centre there, on Jones Street. So, in relation to Newark, I think Jersey City is, of course, on a smaller level than same thing is going on in Newark. But, things aren't as open to the LBGT community or for— there are things going on but

they don't advertise it and put it out there as much. So, that would be the difference – outwards some things and saying are here.

Anna Alves: Do you think Newark is a lot more, or has become a lot more – I don't know what the word would be, *present* in terms of the having outreach or events or resources?

Jerri Mitchell-Lee: You mean as far as LBGT community is concerned? Yeah, yeah, and to say that that's what they are, you see what I'm saying?

Anna Alves: Yeah, yeah.

Jerri Mitchell-Lee: It's one thing having the event and it's another thing saying, having an event and saying, "This is an LBGT event."

Anna Alves: In relation to other surrounding cities or suburbs?

Jerri Mitchell-Lee: In surrounding, sure, sure. [01:08:00] Yeah, I would say Newark is becoming – I think Sakia Gunn incident has opened up a whole Pandora's Box as far as being more out and open with it.

Anna Alves: In what way is like— can you give examples of it?

Jerri Mitchell-Lee: When you demonstrate on Broad and Market, you know, on the anniversary of Sakia Gunn, on the steps of City Hall and different things. So, it's more open and it's more out whether you agree with it or not, it's here, it's here. But not only that but in the -- advocating for the schools, not to necessarily have special programs, but to have safe spaces for students. That's a real important piece that I think, especially the LBGT Commission out of City Hall has been working towards making sure that there's a safe space. Because LBGT does not mean necessarily in the same spirit and especially in the high schools. Because girls proclaim themselves lesbian as a protective piece, or as a way of belonging into a certain clique or whatever the case might be, when in actuality [01:09:18] they may be just questioning, they're not necessarily lesbian and what not. So, and I guess when I talk with young people, because I do work with young people quite a bit, it's

– I don't have the same experiences that they do. You know, a lot of them have been put out of their homes and so forth and so on.

I know you've heard of the RAIN Foundation, in Newark. It's a LGBT youth shelter, where those... youth can go. Well, not really a shelter, it's a transitional housing. If they've been put out of their own homes and things like that. So we've got a [01:10:00] couple of youth from our church that have gone through there, and completed there. One guy completed his trans, completed medical training, so he's working in a medical office now, so. But it's a safe place; it's called the RAIN Foundation. So, that in itself— let me see... So there are a number of things happening specific to that because the young people, those are the ones we need to protect, at this point, because they are the ones that are going to be taking over.

Anna Alves: Are there any other ways that you think Newark's changed that you think most people are not aware of? Or that maybe they should be aware of? That you can see.

Jerri Mitchell-Lee: That I can see. I mean, there've been changes there, you know, the more things change, the more they stay the same. I don't know-- the Prudential Building, their headquarters here, took up a lot of parking space. Wasn't too good for business but— I guess the biggest change would be the businesses. I can see a turnaround for businesses, like Nike Factory Outlet on Fourth Street, restaurants that are coming up. So there's some place to eat when you get on Fourth now, you know, what a variety!

Anna Alves: Yeah, then maybe not too many people are yet becoming aware [01:12:00] of because it's still emerging?

Jerri Mitchell-Lee: Yeah, but it's – well okay where Prudential Building is, in Military Park [01:12:06], if you walk towards Market Street, okay, just in that three or four block radius right there, you have a new pizza

place, you have Nike, you have Starbucks, all these places weren't there before. And you walk further down, there's a couple other new eateries, but most of them have been there. It's quite a number of new eateries on Halsey Street. There's a sandwich shop, there's Chickpea, health food and what not, there's the Harvest Table and then there's Dunkin' Donuts. So you have a variety, a variety of eating places.

Anna Alves: So there's just a lot of new, I don't know, [01:13:01] entities coming that you don't think people are aware of yet but that they--

Jerri Mitchell-Lee: I think people are getting curious. You have a men's shop there, right on the corner of [01:13:09] Cedar and Halsey, the main store...

Anna Alves: Does it change the neighborhoods a little bit, do you think or— ?

Jerri Mitchell-Lee: Oh, absolutely. Halsey Street is the change. If you go from Central Avenue to Market Street, you see the change, the different shops they have now. Yeah, the dress shops, like [unintelligible - 01:13:25], the designer is there. You have-- well you have 27 Mix, so the shops have changed. Even Queen Pizza came back. Queen Pizza used to be where Prudential took over. Those stores that they're putting on now, or retail space, on that corner of – used to be Queen's Pizza. So they're like right across the street now. Very nice place, new place.

Anna Alves: What kind of neighborhood does it feel like now, as opposed to maybe the kind of neighborhood it might have been in years past or different kinds of [01:14:00] neighborhoods that you've seen evolve?

Jerri Mitchell-Lee: When I was at the Artisan Collective, in the shop more often than I am now, the most common phrase is, "I always feel, feels like it's New York." It reminds them of The Village in New York, that's what they say. It reminds them of the type of stores and things like that that are on Halsey.

Anna Alves: You mean now. Or before?

REV. JERRY: Mhmm.

Anna Alves: Gotcha. So now we're gonna move to a grouping of questions around identity.

Jerri Mitchell-Lee: Okay.

Anna Alves: So how would you describe your sexual orientation or gender identity?

Jerri Mitchell-Lee: What they say, fluid. [Laughs] Because I come from a strong background of sports, I tell people— I identify as a lesbian, but my aggressiveness or non-aggressiveness is according to how my life is going. When I was struggling, when I was going through other things, some things I was very aggressive, people might have seen me as a butch. But when things were going well, even the way I dressed, it was more feminine. I will always be a conservative dresser, pretty much. But, I would identify as lesbian but it – and I think it's not just me, I think it goes according to anybody, it all depends on what's going on in my life and how people perceive it.

Anna Alves: So, I know we talked a little bit about – the question is, how did you first become aware of that aspect of yourself? And you kind of explained it a little bit earlier that it was sort of during sports?

Jerri Mitchell-Lee: Yeah, I never – I was in high school, when it was time for the prom, “Oh, I need a date.” And I wound up going with a family member, so it was no – I had...

Anna Alves: Who did you go with from your family? **[01:16:00]**

Jerri Mitchell-Lee: Well, an extended family member. It was a friend of my – father's friend. It was – his son was home from a service, Robert Wright, so that was safe. Because we were friends, and we had no other intentions and no other – so that was it. I don't know, I never – it was just the way I was, my interest in boys went through sports. My interest in girls, when I was nine years old, Leda Morgan that was my first lesbian experience.

Anna Alves: What was that all about?

Jerri Mitchell-Lee: Just an exploration, exploration. We lived on a dead end block and we were at her house. I lived at 1 Alice Court, she lived at 13 Alice Court, which was the last house on the block, and we were in her basement. And it was just a sexual exploration, when you know that you know that you know. So, I was nine years old, and I remember – I often wonder, “I wonder where she is now? I wonder if she’s still a lesbian?” Yeah, so that was my first, you know, so I think from that realization, just going into it, not really having anybody. Like when I started my cycle, my mom says, “Did you hurt yourself? Is that why you’re bleeding?” It’s that kind of thing; my mother never really had that talk, instead of explaining what’s going on with your body and stuff like that. So, that was my experience. It was kind of like, I just kind of like fell into it. I didn’t have any horrific rejections or anything [01:18:00] like that. I played sports, so automatically I was a lesbian. I said, “Okay.” So there was no convincing anybody or explanation. They just assumed it because I liked sports.

Anna Alves: When did you sort of, I guess -- I don’t know if the word is self-identified — but sort of like, because people assumed it, and you were just like, “Yes” sort of, I don’t know if I’m framing that correctly but – instead of sort of allowing for others just to say, “Oh, this is what you are” while you’re like, “No, I am this and I am...”

Jerri Mitchell-Lee: Right, I think when I started going to Unity LIT, when we were at Trinity--

Anna Alves: And around like—

Jerri Mitchell-Lee: And I was going to church there and some of my friends had seen me, and after, “Oh, I saw you in front of that church.” They knew it was a gay, predominantly gay, and lesbian place, so church--

Anna Alves: And this was on the return to Newark at that point?

Jerri Mitchell-Lee: Yeah, so—

Anna Alves: And how have your racial and religious identities affected your LGBTQ identity?

Jerri Mitchell-Lee: I haven't really thought about it because I was raised in a universal world, like White, Hispanic, Portuguese, Italian. So, race as far as who I connected with or who I talked with or, was never – it was whoever was interested. I never dated outside of my race, never had – I don't know if I maybe — [01:20:00] one Hispanic woman, but I never really ran into anybody and it wasn't a thing about race. It was a thing about interest, how you know what kind of interest.

Anna Alves: And how, I guess -- how has being lesbian made your life different from the way it would be if you did not have this identity?

Jerri Mitchell-Lee: I don't know. I mean I've always pretty much had the identity or knew who I was. Like when I went to visit my mom and I brought some of my lesbian friends with me. And she knew that I was being ordained in the church and that I was active in the church and what not, then she asked one of my friends, she says, "And what church do you go to?" "Oh I go to the same church as your daughter." "Ohhh," you know. That was a 'Oh, you're one of them,' you know. I mean not saying, "Oh I understand that." "So when are you guys coming back for dinner again?" So she was -- you know, she wasn't going to talk about it. She knew about it. She understood about it-- "So when are you guys coming back for dinner again?" So that was her, you know, take on the whole thing. So I don't know if my life would have been any different. I hung with straight people, I hung with lesbian people or gay, the LGBT community. Even today I do things are not necessarily geared LGBT, just in the realm of what I do. [shows website page on her phone] This is the home for LGBT youth. Rain Foundation. And young adults and services, programs, promote self-sufficiency and independence. [01:22:00] This is the house.

Anna Alves: And where is that located?

Jerri Mitchell-Lee: It's 168 Park Street, East Orange. Yeah, well they call it a homeless shelter--

Anna Alves: It's pretty. It looks very comfortable—

Jerri Mitchell-Lee: Yeah, a friend of ours, Elaine, she and her soon wife to be started that foundation there.

Anna Alves: Has your mother or father ever come to service?

Jerri Mitchell-Lee: They are both deceased now, but when I was in Baltimore, my mom came to service.

Anna Alves: What was that like?

Jerri Mitchell-Lee: Oh, you know, she talked to Pastor Tom-- well, then Pastor Tom, cause he's a bishop now. And she was saying, "It's a little—" but she was like in her 90s when she came in-- "The service was a little long, but it was nice." She told *him* that, Pastor that. So yeah, she's come to church with me, because she would stay with me after she broke her hip. She couldn't live by herself. So she would live partly with my brother and I was in Baltimore, and he would bring her to to me to give them a break, he and his wife a break. That's, you know, that's how that went.

Anna Alves: That's cool. And then, what do you like best about being lesbian and what do you find challenging?

Jerri Mitchell-Lee: What do I like best? For the most part, the socialization. You know, just being comfortable with other women. Again, coming from a background I didn't have female friends, you know, all my friends were male. And even now, I have more female friends than I have ever had so that -- and sometimes that's limited because, "Oh, what do you want to do that for?" You know, **[01:24:00]** I will go into any venue and I'm fine. If they know I'm gay, if they don't know I'm gay. I mean, you can't go tiptoeing around. You have to walk into who you are, if that's who you are going to be.

Anna Alves: Have you-- are there aspects that are challenging that you can sort of share stories about or-- ?

Jerri Mitchell-Lee: Into some entities that you go into, like I went to Princeton Theological Seminary, did a presentation this past weekend and I brought my wife with me, "This is my wife." But that was a piece of that weekend, of that conference, "Sexuality, Spirit and Connecting the Two in the Black Church." And a big part of that was the understanding of same sex relationships and things like that so-- actually my wife was a novelty because nobody else brought their partners there. So she was in seventh heaven, "Oh babe, I tell ya they just kept **[unintelligible - 01:24:58]** -- I don't know, because like my aunt used to tell me, I don't have sense enough to know when I'm in trouble. I just, you know, go gung ho, **[01:25:22]** so I don't really know unless somebody says something. The challenges about being a lesbian, if I'm going into a space, if I'm doing something, if there's a challenge in it, I'm not recognizing it because of my determination of whatever it is I'm going to do.

Anna Alves: Do you have an example about maybe a time when you got one of those challenges and you sort of were right in the middle of it and suddenly there was this, like, "Oh, I've walked into this thing!" How did you handle that or what was sort of like your observation of how it happened?

Jerri Mitchell-Lee: **[01:26:00]** It's like with me coming out as clergy. I don't go into a space saying that I'm a lesbian. I don't necessarily go into a place saying I'm clergy, unless the occasion calls for it. Because, like, when I get out of church on Sunday, I immediately take off my collar. Because if I have my collar on, like, sometimes I forget I have it on and I'll go into the grocery store and people be "Oh how are you?" It's a whole different-- "Oh that's right, I forgot I had on my collar." So it's the same thing with that if I go into a situation, and there is a negative piece going on about LGBT or comments or whatever, I will immediately come out and, "That's not a good thing. Why are you talking about-- you know, they're regular,

[01:26:48] just like everybody else." So I don't allow negative conversations to go on about gay and lesbians. So I step in as a lesbian, "You sayin' that around me?" [unintelligible - 01:27:03]. You know, most of the time -- "You don't look like one." I think that's the dumbest comment, but anyway. So again, I don't always reveal that I'm a Reverend until the occasion calls for it in a conversation [unintelligible - 01:27:23] as far as theology or something like that, whatever the structure might be. So then, "What about your pastors?" I say, "Well, we have co-pastors — one is gay and one is lesbian." But we have an integrated church, straight and-- so it's not a gay church. So it's the same concept with the lesbian piece. Most times, I don't intentionally walk into a space sayin' "I'm a lesbian and I'm coming in to your space!" I walk into the space [01:28:00] and when the occasion calls for it, if the conversation calls for it, and so forth and so on. So it's not a thing of hiding if it comes up. I think sometimes as LGBT persons that we become overbearing with it. We become overbearing. Now if, of course, if a gay male, flamboyant gay male, they're gonna know! There is no question about it! So you know he's or she is going into that situation like that, so that's more obvious. But as far as-- I mean, you have a lot of gay males -- suit and tie, beard, they look just as straight as the next person. So it all depends on the situation.

Anna Alves:

Have you found community or support from other people in Newark or elsewhere? You talk a lot about the church, so that's definitely like a significant community for you. Are there other sort of communities — or, I don't know if networks is the right word -- that you've also found support and or a sense of community with? In Newark or elsewhere?

Jerri Mitchell-Lee:

In my writing. I've written four books.

Anna Alves:

What kind of books are they?

Jerri Mitchell-Lee: First book was *Floating In and Out* and it's dedicated to those over 50 who thought life was done. Life is never done. You know, "50 and so, oh no!" Put ya in a rocking chair. [01:29:31] But it's called *Floating In and Out* and the premises of the book was that, you know, we all are fluid. We feel certain ways as lesbians and gays, and whatnot. But if you read the book, some of the pieces are specifically LGBT, but some of the pieces are not. So that was the first one, *Floating In and Out* and then [01:30:00] *When No One Else Will*, dedicated to those who came before us whose shoulders we stood on and stepped up when no one else would, you know. So it's a combination of those who stepped up in LGBT community and a combination of the two. Shirley Chisholm, Angela Davis, you know, and these were like short stories and poems dedicated to these people. Book was dedicated actually to my aunt, Effie Lee Newsome, who was my grandfather's sister, who wrote the first children's book for African American children in 1942 that celebrated African poems.

Anna Alves: What is it called?

Jerri Mitchell-Lee: *Gladiola Gardens* is the name of the book. [01:30:43] It's out of print now, but you can get it on Amazon with some of her writings on that. So I dedicated it to her. And the next book was *28 to 98: Sexuality and Spirituality, The Connection Between the Two*. And it's a book of tasteful erotica, bringing people to that place of, you know, sexuality and spirit. When you have orgasm, is that not spirit? [01:31:13] -- you know, so that type of thing. And I use that as part of a teaching tool as well, when I do the presentation of, you know, sexuality and spirituality. And then I did a book on outreach.

Anna Alves: Outreach?

Jerri Mitchell-Lee: Street outreach. It's more of— it's an instructional book. I use it in my workshops, when I do street outreach.

Anna Alves: Very wide ranging.

Jerri Mitchell-Lee: Yeah, it's a lot. So now I'm working on my experience. I'm writing -- I don't know if I have that -- developing a storyline in writing a novel. You know, it's pretty much going to be an autobiographical thing, [01:32:00] but yeah, so I'm gonna keep my hand in that.

Anna Alves: With the writing, is it that you are also involved in a writing community that supports you in the writing and so that's-- [01:32:10]?

Jerri Mitchell-Lee: Yeah, absolutely that's a connection and it's a mixture. It's not just LGBT people it's, you know, those. Like my granddaughter at the LGBT Center, they had a -- this was a couple of years ago -- they had a class, a six-month program for LGBT youth, that my daughter -- my granddaughter is straight, as far as I know -- and it was photography and writing. She took it and she was the youngest one there. They let her in on a trial basis to see if she could hang. And she was able to hang. As a result, she actually has a book with a copyright and everything. Went through the whole process and they— she did a CD with a group about bullying. As part of this program that she was in, with that. So that was, you know, a big piece of that. So it's-- yeah...I think it's about a writing community because that's what I do-- that's expression.

Anna Alves: Yeah.

Jerri Mitchell-Lee: You know what I'm saying? There's a place other than the therapists' couch to express yourself.

Anna Alves: So the part of your community also includes some writing groups that you are involved in and fellow writers that you check in with?

Jerri Mitchell-Lee: Exactly. Like I think really I want to try my best to make it over there to the Black Writer's Conference at the end of this month over in New York. So, definitely just to be exposed and meet and talk with, you know, with different writers, different styles and what not. Actually I had two of my books at-- I don't know if you heard

of BookCon? They have a thing at the Javits [01:33:46] Center every year.

Anna Alves: I think so, yes.

Jerri Mitchell-Lee: Right, a couple of years ago, I had two of my books there.

Anna Alves: That's... there's a lot of people that go to it.

Jerri Mitchell-Lee: Yeah, that's a big exposure, yes. [01:34:00]

Anna Alves: It's huge.

Jerri Mitchell-Lee: Yes, that's a big exposure.

Anna Alves: So then terms of, I guess, a general overview part now, are there particular major events that impacted your life — and we're talking like big historical events like say-- um, you've mentioned a little bit of those things, like your mother sat at a Woolworth counter, [01:34:16] you talked about the riots that happened. I mean, are there certain major events like that?

Jerri Mitchell-Lee: The Million Woman March in Philadelphia.

Anna Alves: And what year was that again?

Jerri Mitchell-Lee: That's going to be like 20 years next year. [1997]

Anna Alves: Can you describe a little bit about that?

Jerri Mitchell-Lee: I still have the poster, I still have the t-shirt, and I still have the scrapbook of the pictures that we took. And it was such an interesting thing because we sponsored a -- you know a couple of friends of mine -- we sponsored a bus ride to the Million Woman March. So, I was, you know, "You wanna see? You wanna see?", you know. So and-- it's the women when they found out, you know, it's part of a lesbian group that we're going, you know, "As long as they don't bother me." "They won't bother you, please come on." That's the whole thing of it. Why would that be the first thing to come out of your mouth? This is the Million Woman March, you know? So that was definitely a thing, [01:35:12] just to see that many powerful women in one place, and kept some of the connections and what not, over the years, and what not. And just to

see women, you know, like this is Women's History Month, so I kind of, like, did a little collage and I'm going to take it for our Women's Day Sunday. Hopefully I'll finish it in time and put it up there. But I have just read an article -- okay, "Black Women Business Owners Outpace All Others," and I sent it to [01:36:00] my former business partners, about the amount of money and employment that women as business owners bring into, you know, across the United States.

So, you know, I spread stuff like that around. You know, that's my -- I've always been a health advocate, you know, wellness advocate so— I had to come to the terms that I was a seed planter, because a lot of the ideas that I planted in communities and my church, in various areas, after I leave is when they come to fruition. "I tried to contribute, why didn't you do that when I was here?" You know, it was like the church I was co-pastoring at in Baltimore, they have this whole -- I've seen them on Facebook -- they have this health and wellness going on and I started back then like in 2002. Just, you know, "Hey, wellness! Eating!" We do health fairs. I'm going back to Baltimore and help them do a health fair.

So, different things like that and, you know, and to the other places that I've been, you know, two years later I turn around and, "Oh wow, they're really coming at it!" So I've really had to come to terms that I'm a seed planter, I'm not necessarily there to make it happen, but I am there to plant the seed and the information and it will happen. It's all I have to be. But this piece here, "Black women business owners outpace all other startups, six times the average. The number of businesses owned by minority women has increased one to six [01:38:00] since 1997, while non-minority women owned firms grew 40% 18-year time span, [01:38:08] firms grew

322%.” I was trying to get the other statistics they have here-- I can't find it right away-- [01:38:25]. So I sent it to all my, you know, business partners and those women in business.

Anna Alves: In light of that then, I guess, what are some of your goals and plans for the future?

Jerri Mitchell-Lee: Well--

Anna Alves: Besides the book--

Jerri Mitchell-Lee: --Doing what I'm doing now, continue-- I have more time to write now. I'm not in the store, you know, so it gives me more time to do some things. Like the presentation I did at Princeton. Like working on my book. I still make bags, you know, because it's therapy and just kind of take it-- I guess mostly right now, I would like to expand my writing.

Anna Alves: Expand in what way?

Jerri Mitchell-Lee: Into a larger venue, a larger venue. Like I've done book signings and things like that. So I want to get, like, more national, I think.

Anna Alves: Because what venues are you in at right now?

Jerri Mitchell-Lee: As far as my books? Well, I did-- I self-published so I kind of do, like, I have a vision of having a book expo, book fair, whatever, here in Newark. Okay, how can I make that happen? You know, what connections? So that's why I'm working on those connections because I haven't... if it's happened, I haven't heard about it. A book, you know, a book thing inviting authors to come in with their books and sign their books and talk about-- like a mini-Book Con.

Anna Alves: Kind of like those book festivals that have like... [cross-talk - 01:40:00].

Jerri Mitchell-Lee: Exactly! Like Baltimore has a nice book festival, and things like that.

Anna Alves: Well, is there anything else you'd like to add? We're at the tail end here. Any stories that you want to share that we haven't covered or--
?

Jerri Mitchell-Lee: No. I just, you know, if I left this world today, I have lived a lifetime. My experiences with people-- you know, for years I had issues my mom, always being gone all the time, but then she instilled in me so much as to women. You know, I look around, I'm like, "God! I'm my mother!" [01:40:45] You know how you say, "I'm not going to be like my mother," every day you turn around and start looking more and more like her. But yeah, just as long as God allows me just to be adventurous and just go after the thing because those words -- or non-verbal words -- continue to resound in my mind, you know. My parents never said I could not do anything. So that has always been my attitude, you know, until I find out I can't do it or there is an obstruction or something where I can't do it now, but I'm gonna do it. And I'm sure to some people who know me, there's frustration, "Why she keep doing that?" [01:41:36]. But again, it's coming to terms with being a seed planter, especially people of my generation. And people say-- I tell people, as you get older, people say you're supposed to slow down. But it's not about that. As you get older, you just move at a different rate, just move at a different speed, but you're still moving [01:42:00]. So, that would be it. Just to contribute as much as I can to the society. I encourage young people especially, or even older people, to leave a written footprint.

Anna Alves: Which is what this is.

Jerri Mitchell-Lee: Yes. To leave a written footprint. Because in the age of technology when we've lost a lot of the oral history, the way history used to be passed down or information used to be passed down, and then when we had books and writing in paper, you know, we lost even more of the oral because people couldn't write it down. But now we've lost the writing it down because we have the age of technology. So it's real-- but even in the age of technology you can leave a -- like with all my books, I register with Library of Congress. I get my

copyright from the Library of Congress. And just taking people through that very simple process: you go online, Copyright Office, Library of Congress, and you fill in information what kind of book you download a sample or the full book, and you immediately get a copyright number. And then they send you a hard copy of the actual certificate, you know, anywhere like six weeks later. But at least immediately, because before you used to have to wait six weeks. Now you can make a copy of it as soon as you put in the information. So that's your written footprint. That's a written footprint -- you can do that as you're finishing whatever piece that you're writing.

Anna Alves: That's a good piece of advice to know.

Jerri Mitchell-Lee: Yeah, and I don't know, before I leave this world I might want do a PhD in philosophy. That's-- I always said if I ever did a doctorate, it would be in philosophy.

Anna Alves: That would be wonderful. Thank you so much for sitting with us today.

Jerri Mitchell-Lee: Thank you. Absolutely.

Anna Alves: I'll go ahead and switch that off. **[01:44:00]**.

[01:44:03] [RECORDING STOPPED]