

Queer Newark Oral History Project
Interviewee: Kyshief DeGraffenreid
Interviewer: Naomi Extra
Date: March 9, 2016
Location: Conklin Hall, Rutgers University-Newark

NAOMI EXTRA: Okay. It's March 9th 2016. I'm Naomi Extra here interviewing -- do you want to be called Kyshief or Scooda?

SCOODA: Kind of Scooda.

NAOMI EXTRA: Scooda. Interviewing Scooda at Rutgers-Newark as part of the Queer Newark History Project. And why don't you go ahead and introduce yourself. Just give your name and tell us when and where you were born and a little bit about your early life.

SCOODA: So my name is -- I'm Kyshief DeGraffenreid. I'm known as Scooda in and out the community by my friends and family. I got that name from my grandfather when I was younger. He said I used to scoot around in like the booster seat when I was younger so I just had that name forever. It just stuck with me. Born and raised here in Newark, New Jersey. Attended local schools. I was a graduate of St. Benedict's Preparatory High School. During that time, it was like my senior year in high school is when I really started getting a sense of my sexuality. That's when I started being aware that I was attracted to the same sex.

During that time, I wasn't really lost, I was just feeling like there was a disconnect with me in the presence of that school and I couldn't really identify with no one because it was like a Catholic high school and no one was really out about their sexuality or never even spoke about it. So I had to look elsewhere to identify with others like me. So I came to contact with this program, called Project Y. It was like

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a local like youth hangout [00:02:00] centre over on Central Avenue in Newark.

It was like a place where everybody would go hang out; chill at the school -- it was like this, like the chill spot. You could watch TV, you could listen to music and that's when -- you would go there to vogue, to hang out. I had known about voguing but I wasn't really like -- I didn't know really too much about it. And I knew that they were just imitating it or just mimicking. I knew that they really wasn't experienced voguers. So it was like my senior year in high school and as I was starting to get more comfortable with myself there was a local nightclub called The Globe and it was downtown Newark. It was located next to Symphony Hall.

And I'd heard that was like the hotspot that was like the place to go that was just like -- it was like a Friday nightclub and it was like you just had to go there. It was like -- that was the gay spot. That was where you could just be yourself. So one night me and my best friend, he went to Technology High School, he was like you want to go and we was like okay. So he had got his mother car and came and picked me up and stuff.

But it was so funny because we planned to go but we initially went to the straight party next door. It was like the big high school parties like the Terrace Ballroom, when they used to have the teen parties there, and it was funny because The Globe was like right next door

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to it. So we went there and got on the line with the rest of our friends who we knew from school on a straight party. Went in there stayed till about 12 o'clock. We knew this straight party was going to be over at one o'clock [00:04:00] but we knew that the other party was going to end at like 4. So we were like okay our friends aren't going to see us they are going to probably think we left or whatever. So we had went -- like around 12 we had left and went to The Globe or whatever.

So when we went in there, first of all it was just like soon as we went to the door, it was like this drag queen who had greeted us and like was at the door and was collecting our money and stuff. So I was like that was like my first culture shock for myself. And I embraced it. I was like wow. I always wanted to know what it felt like to be in the presence of just the all gay community and stuff and I was like bam! It just hit me in the face with a drag queen. So that night I didn't see anything really too much out the ordinary and I was like okay. There was a drag queen there, there were transgenders there, there were straight looking guys, there were straight looking girls there. So I was like okay there was nothing out the ordinary. It just feels like the same club, they listen to the same music, you know there's nothing out the ordinary and stuff or whatever. So I started just jamming, just chilling doing my two step and stuff. So me and my friend we are just standing there and enjoying it like we are really here we are having fun they are playing house music.

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So at one particular time, everybody just cleared the floor and just moved out the way and I was like what's going on? All we just heard was this beat. It was like pirika, pirika, pirika ha, pirika -- we was like what's going on? And they had broken out into a circle like it was about to be a breakdance battle or something. But when we had looked into the circle to see what was going on it was like these two drag queens and they was voguing. They was like going wild and I was [00:06:00] oh my God! I was so fascinated because I was like... this is my first time actually seeing live voguing and action and somebody know what they are doing and they was just spinning and twirling and dipping all over the place. It was so fascinating with the lights on in the club. I was like this is the experience I wanted.

So that night I'd left and was more than satisfied. I was so satisfied. Like that week later I was like trying to find like the vogueing beats. I don't think, they didn't have YouTube back then so everything was on CDs and stuff. I think we had MySpace back then. So I was trying to find stuff on MySpace through people's Facebook pages and stuff like then I would try to find like the voguers and stuff, but was like I don't know nobody.

NAOMI EXTRA: Okay that's great. What year -- you said senior year of high school. So what year are we talking --?

SCOODA: 2004.

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NAOMI EXTRA: 2004. Okay. So I want to ask you, first did your parents know -- did they care, how did they feel, and then can you tell me little about your family?

SCOODA: Okay. Well my family is not very religious. I think they just always excelled and wanted the best for me because I was the first of all my cousins and the grandkids so they really had like big high expectations. I was always like the brainiac, the A student, the honors, so when I got accepted into St. Benedict's it was like a big deal for just me and my family. Just off the prestigious of the school and stuff. They were like wow it's going to be some great expectations there.

I mean they've really never [00:08:00] really -- I don't know. It's like they've never really seen me have like girlfriends that I was dating, but I've had like female friends and so they've probably made the assumptions. But it was -- it's so funny and whatever because one particular story always stands out to me with my mom.

So I had this -- we had this computer desk in the dining room area and I would -- my grandmother would tell me like different ways of how to -- I guess to like prepare me for stress or like write down your feelings and thoughts and stuff. And I had wrote about this one particular experience with me kissing this guy. And I just thought that he was my first heart, my first little world and stuff or whatever and I wrote about it because we had gotten into like an argument and stuff or whatever and I was like he made me so mad, but he did

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something and surprised me. And gave me a kiss or whatever. And it was so like funny because I had come home from -- I had wrote down in a book or whatever and left the book there. And I was like I had no reason to like -- it wasn't no locker. My momma doesn't go through my stuff or whatever. So this one particular day I had come from school and she was like, "So you was kissing John?" And I was like, "What?"

NAOMI EXTRA: How old were you when you --

SCOODA: I was probably like 16. But the boy's name is not John. I just used his name -- just because purposes or whatever. But it was so funny and I was like "What?" And my face had just like, it was in complete shock and I was like "Well, technically he kissed me so..."

NAOMI EXTRA: So this was a story [00:10:00] that you had left and your mom read it.

SCOODA: Yes, about like us, like him getting me upset and how he came to like my school, after school and took me somewhere and made it all better and stuff. And then afterwards like we kissed it was just like kissed it was like so funny because I had wrote it down and she was like read it. And she was like, "Oh he kissed you." and I was like. "What?"

NAOMI EXTRA: Oh my gosh that's funny.

SCOODA: I think it was a process for her to get over, but I think she always wanted me to be protected and to not be at harm's way with just the stigmas or stereotypes that people have with gays. And because I was always such like a small, slender dude she probably didn't want nobody to harm me just for being who I am and stuff. I would have

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not -- I have my days when I feel like I'm like fluid, I'm like female some days, masculine some days, so I just go with the flow of how I'm feeling. So, but yeah.

NAOMI EXTRA: So who did you, who did you live with growing up, did you have any siblings?

SCOODA: Yeah.

NAOMI EXTRA: Can you tell me a little bit about what your family was like, the people you lived with, so we talking about--

SCOODA: I'm sorry.

NAOMI EXTRA: It is okay. We are talking about like when you were 16. What about when you were younger, where were you living in Newark exactly? you move from different places?

SCOODA: I mean so I was born and raised on Prince Street...Prince Street projects, that is really like one of the infamous housing projects in Newark, they're no longer standing. I'm not really sure when they demolished those. After that time, we moved to Westside area like 16th Ave area. During my tenth grade... maybe [00:12:00] like my ninth grade year that's when I was living -- we moved to the South Ward which is off Clifton Avenue. We have been living there until currently.

NAOMI EXTRA: Okay.

SCOODA: Yeah.

NAOMI EXTRA: Okay so lots of different places.

SCOODA: Yeah so still in Newark, but different sections of Newark. So Central Ward, to North Ward, to now the South Ward.

NAOMI EXTRA: Okay.

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SCOODA: Yeah.

NAOMI EXTRA: Can you tell me about some of the differences that you remember in these different neighborhoods?

SCOODA: Well Prince Street was very rough growing up. I mean, it was the hood, it was the projects so, but I think my mother always knew that I always had like a wild creative imagination since I was younger. She knew that that wasn't going to be like the environment for me, like I was going to -- she wanted the best for me and she wasn't going to be a product of the hood. That is why she always wanted me to excel and put me into different activities -- boy scouts, to painting arts and crafts to camp, just different activities just to not have you in that hood environment. I know the streets and the streets know me but that doesn't represent me and who I -- my family so.

NAOMI EXTRA: So how old were you when you moved from Prince?

SCOODA: I can't -- probably like, maybe like...I had to be like...I was in eighth grade when we moved, so like eighth grade it was something like the rallies over the west ward for maybe about three years, it was just like a short time.

NAOMI EXTRA: Okay.

SCOODA: Yeah so we like moved over here to the South Ward, which we have been in for maybe like the past like 15 years, so this home here.

NAOMI EXTRA: Okay.

SCOODA: Yeah this is home.

NAOMI EXTRA: Okay so you have siblings?. Brothers? Sisters?

SCOODA: Brother. I have one younger brother.

NAOMI EXTRA: Okay.

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SCOODA: Completely different. I was probably, I was -- well I don't know... because we both have artistic backgrounds. And like you -- like my creative -- that's one thing, that's one bond that we share about artistic talents and our creative juices. Like my brother would, if he would sit right here he would just like free style just draw you and you wouldn't even know it. Like still figurettes, he is amazing at what he does and that is like our bond that we have.

As far as like my sexuality he is just like okay as long as nobody is messing with my brother we good. And it is crazy because I will always been his bigger brother in age. But he has always been my bigger brother in height. Like since he was like younger my brother he is like four years younger than me but he has always been like way quite bigger than me and stuff. But I guess it is all in respect and how you were brought up and how the streets treat you and stuff.

Because I have never really had like my share of feeling like an outcast being a gay. I always felt like I had like a privileged just because of the boys respected me and know who I am. I had to knock a few people out here and there in the streets a couple of times to let -- get your hands and knees dirty but to let them know like I'm bothered, I can bleed and fight just like you. I have earned my respect in my way throughout my different communities in Newark that is why I'm able to walk gracefully wherever I go.

NAOMI EXTRA: Right. So younger brother, mom and also grandmother?

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SCOODA: No, just me and my mom and my brother. My father has always been around but he [00:16:00] hasn't been living -- he doesn't live in the same household. He has always been supportive, whatever I do, always had my back 100%. Whatever I need make it happen for me so I always had like a great, great family support system, even from like my extended family. I have like a million cousins and like only one female cousin. Like it's crazy like we have maybe like ten boys and maybe one female cousin.

So I don't take it, it is funny because we feel like we are the most protected because we are seen as the most fragile. But hey, I take it as a blessing. I feel like I know if I need somebody to come my way and to give some extra muscle, hey I know I have got cousins that do the damage. I don't take it and abuse it, e but it is good to know that you have family out there that supports you and let you know and put it out there like he is protected.

NAOMI EXTRA: So you grew up with a lot of extended family and they are in Newark? What was that like?

SCOODA: I think that is why I have probably been able to grace the way I have been like far as like embracing it. I think that is probably like me coming into myself and embracing it. It feels like it was a slow process of people who get to see me develop who I am. Like you have probably always seen that I have like always been a soft guy but I have never been like really aggressive. But to see me gain confidence in myself and to be -- have like, yeah, confidence now

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with what -- who I am. I think that is what people respect the most about me.

NAOMI EXTRA: So what did your mom do for a living?

SCOODA: Well my mom is a daycare teacher.

NAOMI EXTRA: Okay, so she's [00:18:00] involved with education.

SCOODA: Yes. So that is where most of the creativity comes from. She always used to come home with tons of arts and crafts projects. So we would like -- she would test projects on us. Or be like "What do you think we should do?" -- on the weekends she would be at home out shopping with her sisters and they would come home with like tons of gadgets, gadgets, crafts and just on Sundays she would just go away for things that she would want to do that week with her kids in her classroom. And that is what I think I probably get so much of my different creative resources that [unintelligible - 00:18:42] has always been so innovative and hands on and resourceful with things around me, just turning nothing into something, yeah.

NAOMI EXTRA: So is that -- so with mom and brother and extended family were there any traditions that you guys had? Can you tell me a story from when you were little?

SCOODA: Okay, okay so this was a culture shocker for the family. So Thanksgiving no -- I think when we -- when I got into high school. I was able to have a little bit more... what do you call it? Freedom with your family with holidays, but you would have those dedicated holidays where you know you have to go to and attend. Because holidays now have become such a commercial event. We use those as an excuse just to party. I just remembered every -- in high school

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every holiday was an excuse to go to a party. But Christmas and Thanksgiving is always a necessity no matter what. You could party hard all year long, but those two are check-ins for the family no matter what. So it was -- so after college [00:20:00] I mean sorry, after high school, I'm out, I attended Montclair University, but during that time I had a lover. And this was somebody who I was dating and like my friends and family, they never knew much of anybody who I was dating because I really haven't -- I'd probably say that's like my little boo or like that would be -- friend was the word at the time. You know that's like my friend or somebody, but it was nobody who I actually had a title and brought around. So there was this one particular person and he was like my first love.

And I just remember -- I remember what happened... so funny because I was just like he's coming to Thanksgiving with me and he was like -- he wasn't really nervous, he was just like okay you know, I'm yours or whatever. So we will be there together. I was like my family cool; they will probably just ask you a million and one questions and stuff so -- but I said I'll be there so you'll be good or whatever. So we went and it was just so funny because I'm so short and he's like -- he was like six foot three at the time and they was just like so fascinated because they didn't know what to expect of that or whatever.

And because he wasn't -- I think when people have these ideas in their head of gay they automatically have these stereotypes of

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feminine men in their head. So when my family came over -- I mean when we came over to my family house for Thanksgiving, I mean he kind of just blended in like it was a regular family, he was a little shy at first so whatever. But once he had him a little eggnog, just little punch, he was -- he blended right in, he's playing video games with my cousins, chilling, hanging out, just eating like he was a regular so it was good to know that my family embraced it. And to know like no one -- made no one feel uncomfortable like their presence or our presence wasn't felt uncomfortable, I felt like oh my God like I could really bring -- like my family is cool with it.

I'm like even -- you know how you -- you know how people like won't say nothing to respect you just because -- like I didn't feel like oh they're just being quiet just because it's me whatever. I felt like they're genuinely like accepting this as family. And I was like oh my God, I was feeling like a lovey-dovey moment.

NAOMI EXTRA So were you out at this time?

SCOODA: I was pretty much -- I wasn't really -- I was comfortable with myself, I wouldn't say I was going around saying I was gay, but it was quite obvious, it was known through my mannerisms and my behavior. I mean I never really wore the rainbow flag or anything, not contradictory to me but I just -- that was never a form of representation for me. I feel like that was -- I mean at the time I felt like the rainbow thing was a sense of acknowledgement or attention seeking to me from a -- for a gay man.

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I felt like it was more a lesbian thing for pride and stuff, it wasn't -- you commonly didn't really see gay men wear that unless you were in the New York area. Or unless it was like extremely like a feminine guy and I wasn't -- it really wouldn't have matched with my attire anyway.

NAOMI EXTRA: So Thanksgiving [00:24:00] has been a time when immediate and extended family can of come together in your family, okay. And you said your family's not religious, so explain that a little bit; you mean completely not religious or?

SCOODA: I mean we have like -- we don't force anything on no one, everyone could sit at the table, but we've always -- we've never had pork in the household because my aunt's husband is of Muslim faith. But it's funny because like my -- it's just like a melting pot of things like my mother, she's a Christian, she goes to Church and because I was brought up in a Catholic high school I know that way of thinking, I know like the Bible. I believe in goodness, we've always believed in like a high power or whatever you choose to identify and call it -- we're more so spiritual and not so following in different religion of like -- always taught in karma, whatever you put out there and whatever -- is going to come back to you.

And so always believe in -- and to meditate and to have time for yourself, those are like fundamental values that my family like are really like big on. That we've been growing up on and whichever path you choose, we just accept it because some of us are -- not some of us, but some of them are Jehovah Witnesses. They are to the

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extreme so it just be like a melting pot of things going on and we feel like Thanksgiving is more gathering a family where it's not a religious thing. Whereas though Christmas, the whole Jehovah Witnesses won't come because that's like a religious thing, so -- and it's just crazy because like my little cousins even though their father is a Muslim, we still give them Christmas presents and stuff so. It's like a melting pot of things just happening [00:26:00] so that's why Thanksgiving is more so the big thing of just coming together to see everyone, check in, what's going on, hey, okay, get it together so yeah.

NAOMI EXTRA: Right, what was it like not being religious and going to a Catholic high school?

SCOODA: At the time I just did what -- I just did what was taught of me. I felt like that was the expectation, that was normal -- what was expected at the school and it was interesting. Because even though it was a Catholic high school, they had people of Christianity, they had Muslim, there they had Jewish people there which was like really, really interesting to me and even though we'd had like mass and pray in the morning, everyone participated. And everyone did their own way of embracing their God which I thought was very unique, but do standard like mass and we would have like commutations and different things. Those were things that I didn't know about so I felt like it was something interesting for me to always experience because I always thought that -- though I always had questions.

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So the fact that I was in this environment and I wanted to learn about it and the fact that I was actually practicing it, it gave me a hands-on to questions that I always wanted to ask about things related in the Bible. And I get to get it from concrete people that's actually living it on a daily life, you feel me? And I think that's why now I choose to be more spiritual in my way of thinking and not choose to practice one way of -- one direct religious, because I just think religion is just a form a way of -- it's just a form, a way of doing things for that culture or it's just different forms of meditation that tell you how to pray [00:28:00], to me.

NAOMI EXTRA: That's interesting, I want to come back to that, but I want to go back to family a little bit more and I want to ask you were your parents -- extended family were they from Newark? Or did they come -- so everyone's -- so your mother, born and raised here?

SCOODA: Yeah my father born and raised here.kay so my mom has three -- no two, she has a brother and she has a sister. But her grandmother has about five or six sisters and brothers who all their kids probably like combined -- okay I was probably is the first of eight grandkids, so I was the first. So I did -- and everybody just came right behind me so I'm currently 29 now so my cousin just turned 29 in February. And then it's 27, 28, 26 -- everybody's like right after each other, it's crazy.

NAOMI EXTRA: Okay, so that's interesting. So both of your parents born and raised here, what about grandparents?

SCOODA: See I'm not really sure how far back, but I know and somewhere in my mom's house is a picture where -- we're part German descent, so

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like if you look at some of the old pictures like my mother's father's side of the family, is where the German decent comes from. And you can ask where -- that's where the Jehovah Witnesses and all those [00:30:00], that side of the family come in from. So that side of the family is very high yellow. They are -- down south that's like the DeGraffenreids', that's the North Carolina, Greenspoint, so a lot of my family is from down there and my mother's mother, not really sure where she's from, but that's most of my African-American side of the family. But I just claim African-American just because I know the way I look. I'm not going to say I'm you know --

NAOMI EXTRA: So your grandfather or great grandfather was German?

SCOODA: Great grandfather was German.

NAOMI EXTRA: Great grandfather.

SCOODA: Was German.

NAOMI EXTRA: Interesting.

SCOODA: And if you look at some of the pictures like you'd be like who are these Caucasian people? But then like you can see the next layer where you see the multi-dimension and like just the color of the skin. You can see that there was a fusion during that generation of the family. I'm like wow so that's where I get some of my high well just the high yellow pigmentation, but some of them are much yellower than me in my family.

NAOMI EXTRA: So, parents born and raised here so that means aunts and uncles born and raised here too?

SCOODA: Yeah.

NAOMI EXTRA: Did everyone live close to each other in Newark?

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SCOODA: So what I know -- so as far as I know, from what I do know, my grandmother and grandfather was born and raised, or they raised their children in Newark and before the Newark riots, my grandmother and grandfather had this store and he was the prosperous business owner. And all I -- from what I know, even though they lived in... [00:32:00] okay before they lived in the projects, they were supposedly like very like wealthy or was well off then didn't need and was very influential in the community and stuff. It's crazy because now I know it's making me think back to certain -- now that I'm like speaking these thoughts I'm thinking them back to certain things that's hopping into my head. And from what I recall, I know my aunt may have that particular article because it was a major, major incident in Newark where my grandfather was shot in the neck by a cop and I think it was by accident or something. I'm not really sure -- I couldn't get -- I could try to find that article or stuff but --

NAOMI EXTRA: When was this around, approximately?

SCOODA: That's what I'm trying to think maybe like the --

NAOMI EXTRA: It's okay.

SCOODA: Yeah maybe like the early, early 90's like maybe even -- maybe like the early, early part of the 90's. If I could, I could try to... now you make me want to go look at that article and stuff. But yeah t after his death and stuff, that's how my family basically gravitated to the high rise community because it was more so affordable housing, it was much more easier. We had family currently living there so it was just like okay. We knew people that lived in there so we was like

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okay it's -- well from their perception from what I was told and stuff because I really didn't know. That's how they transitioned into the area, into that community, but it was like so many different housing projects during that time. That was like one of the big things.

NAOMI EXTRA: Right.

SCOODA: You know coming out of the riots was putting up those high rises [00:34:00] to try and stabilize and maintain people. Make them contained all in one spot and stuff, you know.

NAOMI EXTRA: So your grandparents owned a store? Did you --

SCOODA: They had a little convenience store.

NAOMI EXTRA: Visit the store?

SCOODA: I was so young I don't even -- could have remembered.

NAOMI EXTRA: Right and some at some point, your grandfather was shot and killed?

SCOODA: Yeah.

NAOMI EXTRA: In Newark.

SCOODA: Yeah.

NAOMI EXTRA: Do you know how?

SCOODA: On Irvine Turner [Boulevard], at the stop light or something. I don't know the full like details but now you're making me want to go --

NAOMI EXTRA: Right.

SCOODA: Re-read that article and stuff to get the full like details and stuff.

NAOMI EXTRA: And that kind of changed things. Wow! So tell me more -- you were starting to tell me about your cousins and how like where everybody lived. So like did you have cousins like on the next block next to you, were in school with cousins?

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SCOODA: In the same building -- the same building. Well it was fun because it was like; they were like my younger years. It was like you felt comfortable with having your kids run downstairs because you know your cousins, you could hear them run down. Your mother could say, "Go down stairs to fifth floor," actually I remember we was on the ninth floor my cousins on the second floor. And it was nothing to just get on the elevator to go downstairs as opposed to crossing the street to go across the street to -- you know your kids would be down and you could just call and be like, "Yeah" or to just see them get on the elevator because they are going to get off on the second floor. So it was more convenient and just good knowing that you actually have like family there or like if you didn't have something hands -- in the refrigerator, your family there, or if your mom needed to drop the kids off somewhere you'd be like, "Oh go downstairs to your cousins' house or something."

NAOMI EXTRA: That's nice.

SCOODA: I just think that that was a whole -- I mean me growing -- I mean being born and raised on Prince Street and to know like what it is and how people described the ghetto [00:36:00] and stuff. I think it was like a very unique humbling experience for me. Like I feel like I can be able to appreciate where I'm at today. To know that I am -- I feel like I am a class above, but I don't forget where I came from.

It's always like and to be humble at any stage of your life because you never know -- because at the time I thought that that was -- I thought that that was like maybe a high rise. I didn't at the -- you

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know to your perception I didn't feel like I was living in the projects or what people would perceived of the projects because we had cable, we never you know my mom always worked and stuff. We've never been without -- I always had like the latest sneakers, the Jordans and we went to the Chuck-e-Cheese and stuff. So we had like house full of things and toys and stuff so when people had this perception of I guess it's what you make out of it or what people perceive. I guess it's what you environment paints for you or what you make of your environment.

NAOMI EXTRA: So cousins lived in the building when you were at Prince Street. So did you guys ever get into any trouble together?

SCOODA: Hell yeah, all the time. Especially when it was like and that's one thing that you could count for like if we had to, if it was like fights or something in the neighborhood like family fights. You knew that you ain't got to worry because your cousins right there, why come outside. I remember this one particular time; it was this one boy who used to always bother me. Boy used to always bother me and stuff or whatever and it ended up being like a big family brawl because they knew that he was like bullying me and I was like you know. But it had gotten so involved that adults was fighting and -- but it's good to know that we had that family there, in a hop, skip, jump [00:38:00] in the nick of a second because there's nothing like family that's going to protect you and have your back.

NAOMI EXTRA: So once you left Prince Street, you weren't -- were you still as close to family, like in terms of --?

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SCOODA: Because it's crazy because when, after the whole high rise demolition, there was like a transition of townhouse units all around Newark. So that's what the new affordable urban housing is around the city of Newark. Everything's in that townhouse format. I guess it's to give people that illusion of being a home time, a homeowner or try to give people the expectation and to move them into the mind frame of owning and maintaining a house supposedly. But it's funny because when we all transitioned into townhouses; they lived not too far maybe within like a walking five-minute distance because that was the new way. And it's crazy because even now that we transitioned, in the South Ward they are only like a five minute... everybody's like really like a five-minute ride from each other. Like my -- like we're by Clinton Avenue and the next set of family is downtown by [Spruce] Street, then the next set of family is over there by West Kinney by the Dunkin Donuts.

NAOMI EXTRA: Okay.

SCOODA: So it's like we're spread out, but we can still be reached and then the next set is over there in North Newark, so it's like we're spread out but everybody is still in distance of each other.

NAOMI EXTRA: Wow! That's really cool. I want to go back to high school. So tell me a [00:40:00] little bit about the beginning of your high school experience.

SCOODA: Okay.

NAOMI EXTRA: So you talked about, you know, how you became kind of a spiritual person, coming out of high school. Can you take me a little bit on that path?

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SCOODA: Okay. So when I went -- I guess when I started St. Benedict's I knew I believed in God, I prayed, I went to church with my grandmother, my mom a few occasions and, you know, we practiced Christianity and stuff. I think my grandmother more so developed my sense of -- helped me develop my inner spirituality just because she was very spiritual and because she has practiced various religions. And she has talked openly with me about how she's felt and how she has liked certain things and -- in and out each of the different religions. She has practiced Buddhism, Christianity, Catholic, Islam and maybe two others. This is throughout her journeys in life. My grandmother, she is an openly, bisexual woman.

So, I was able to really be carefree, to talk openly more so with my sexuality and my spirituality together. And I think that's how through her, I think I kind of developed the sense of -- through my sexuality, I learned to -- learned about like giving away your energies and do sex and stuff and, you know, to be cautious of who you have sex with because people can take energies just like you can. So, you know, [00:42:00] that was something I was learning throughout my high school and stuff and she was saying it because she knew that I was a gay man and she knew that I will be having sex with other guys and stuff whatever, you know.

Even with anyone but she just was saying like, you know, just giving me guidance on how to read people, when to -- how to read different energies and stuff around me and I'm like... At first I really didn't

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pay any attentions and stuff. Like when she would tell me how to speak to your spiritual guidance or your spiritual protector and stuff and it is so crazy because like, when I remember when I was younger, do all that high school and stuff or whatever as I was telling her the different things that we will be going through, that we would be doing and religion like I was -- some of that stuff I was like really, really, really fascinated about like Communion, like the blood of Jesus with the grape juice and the bread and stuff. You know I was just so fascinated with -- I think their energy and compassion for it makes you get compelled into it and makes you, you know, a part of their culture. And I don't disagree with it but I just feel like that's every -- I still have too many unanswered questions on different religions and I feel like as long as you -- I feel like I believe in the universe and I believe in different energies.

Energies are neither created nor destroyed, and it grows in and out through different people and stuff. So, you know, the different people who you connect with is how you different -- you vibe and stuff. It's crazy because, you know, she was telling me that because she felt like she saw me being set up for a platform ahead of myself as I was embracing my sexuality. She was telling me to balance myself out by embracing my spirituality and by doing that I think [00:44:00] that's how I kind of really immersed into the whole thing with school by, you know, practicing it more and you know -- but it wasn't until like my 11th grade year, and I just was like, you know, I started having like too many questions because I was like even

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though at school, they never talk about homosexuality and we never talk about things I wanted to talk about it because I need to know.

If I'm the one having these feelings and thoughts, you know, I need to know if it's completely normal or not because I'm like on one end, I'm going to a school where first of all it's an all male school and I'm like, "They're highly catholic so I'm sure that this is not going to be a sex-ed or they're going to teach me the basics." And I'm like I can't fault them for their -- my unanswered questions, these are self-discovery things that I have to find out you know, on my own and stuff or whatever. And I think what kind of helped my family too was because -- my grandmother because she was a bisexual and she used to take us out on different trips and stuff.

Like after -- this is my father's mother. After her last husband passed away, she really became more expressive. She felt like I was at the age to be expressive as far as me knowing what was going on and stuff. And I do remember one particular time where she had more dominant looking women and her presence and we all went out to the beach instead of boardwalk and stuff and they'd held hands. And my mother paid it, you know, she didn't say anything about it and stuff or whatever and [00:46:00] I was like, you know I'm cool with it, you know, of course I'm fine with it because I'm just like: "Yes honey, as long as they buy me wherever I want - I really don't care what's going on", but I was like, but I was more so fascinated that we was on a boardwalk and they was two elderly women

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holding hands and the fact that no one said anything disrespectful to them.

No one said anything mean to them, like people just paid it like it was nothing, like they were an older couple. And that was one thing that I always -- was like I always wanted to do was like, I always wanted to be unbothered in public with my -- holding my partner's hand. I didn't want to do it in NYC, I wanted to do it in the streets of Newark. Have I done it yet? No. Are we there yet? Not yet. Could I be bold? I could be bold, but I'm not ready for all that and it's more so will my partner be able to be ready for that, you feel me? But I'm not saying I'm not dating anyone right now so -- but, I just said a mouthful, right?

NAOMI EXTRA: It's great. So was that the moment when you found that your grandmother was bisexual or, you know, have there been other moments?

SCOODA: I mean I have always been -- even when she had her husband and stuff and I would talk to her about my sexuality, she was completely open as far as sex talk. She wanted to be realistic and honest with me about what I was doing and how -- you know, what I was doing. So, I knew what female sex was and what it looked like and so I've never seen it, but I always heard her talk about it.

You know I've always -- as well as gay sex. She told me like you know this is what -- men engage in and stuff and this is what happens and stuff or whatever, so you know I'm not telling to

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[escape], I'm just telling you what goes on or what happens, you know, because you'd rather learn it from home. [00:48:00] And because if you get put in the situation you want to know how to handle yourself and what to do if you want to engage or do something. So, you know --

NAOMI EXTRA: So this was like in high school, you were getting this really kind of educational talks with your grandmother.

SCOODA: Yes, it was -- you know, that's one thing-- I think it kind of was -- it was good because my mother was -- I feel like my mother was like a overseer, she just wanted to make sure nothing happened to me. She just embraced it; she really didn't know how to have the conversations and the talks with me about it. She just like, any little thing that I would bring to her -- like I didn't put it into her face like bam! I gave her -- I fed her little things. Like when I would bring my friends around, like my senior year when I became more comfortable with myself and I would be able to go out and start hanging out with friends. She would be like, "Well your friends look like..." -- I think you like once again. People had this stereotype of what gay is in their head.

So I think that when I started bringing my friends around and she started seeing like, "Wow they are -- they look like him. Like they look like regular boys, like I wouldn't know who, you know, was gay and not or whatever out the click and plus --" ciao! I was that -- first of all, I was that nigga in high school, not to say it like that. I kind of like broke the barriers in high school within that community.

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I was already like just popular from -- just me, just being me. Just me being a genuine person, from being like cool with all the basketball jocks and stuff like I was known as Scooda. Like I was just that person -- that level of personality.

So it was so funny because I had these two particular friends in high school or whatever and [00:50:00] it was -- I remember it just happen just so randomly and it was in math class and this one particular boy just was like, "You know how you know somebody is the gay boy, but you don't -- but he has respect but you don't mess with him because he's the gay boy?" And I felt like I was the -- well I knew I was the soft one like in high school but I was so loved and stuff whatever, but I never acknowledged myself as being gay or anything.

But okay -- so it was this one particular -- I remember this, I remember this because it was the catalyst for all it. So it was in math class and there was this guy who sat in front of me and we was handed back tests or something and he was handing me the test or I was handing him the test or something and he was like, "This fucking gay boy something, something." I would just laugh at him, I was like, "You could say whatever you want to say," I said, "You call me gay again I swear I'm going to F you up."

And he was like, "Gay boy," and when I tell you I destroyed that classroom. We destroyed that classroom, but I think it kind of like

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set this mark in the school like, "Oh he's not to be fucked with. Like he's not to be -- he ain't no punk neither like you're not going to be messing with him, like you're not going to push him over." Even though I was quiet and I never had any incidents and stuff like, don't mess with me.

So after that happened that's when -- it was like -- it felt like I was like going -- I'm fighting for like the unspoken gays or something, because it was so funny because these two particular boys gravitated towards me during that -- my 11th grade [00:52:00] year. This was like towards like the end of my 11th grade year. And when I would -- we had these special benches like everybody, you know how -- when I tell you even though we were in an all male high school it was still categorized seating as far as your geeks/nerds.

I don't say geeks/nerds, I mean like your Pokémon, anime guys, you get your want to be Goth guys, you get your very religious guys that's into like the school and wants to elevate that level. Then you got your basketball jocks and then you got your soccer people, but -- and then you get your regular black jocks. Hood, not hood but your regular popular ethnic people because it was a mixed school. So I was considered one of the very well-known popular guys at school. You know always cute, well identified and I hung out with the popular guys.

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So when that happened it was kind of like, "What happened?" Because after that I remember in particular I did not sit with them the next day because I probably just got suspended or something. But I came back or whatever and I sat down at a different table from my normal friends and stuff and the two other guys came and sat with me and it was like a big thing because they'd always had like -- people always said like little things about them being gay and stuff whatever because the other guy he was like extremely feminine and stuff and whatever.

And he had characteristics where it was just extremely -- it made some people really uncomfortable in the environment just because it was an all boy catholic high school. But he bent like he -- yeah, he made people feel uncomfortable, but it was [00:54:00] needed. But the fact that he just came and sat with me and the other person came and sat by me, I remember that one particular lunch period, it was like everybody all eyes was just on us or whatever like, "What' the fuck is Scooda doing sitting over there? He's really like embracing himself like what's going on."

And then I remember like after school or whatever like my normal boys was like -- what was up with lunch or whatever and I was like, "I'm going to sit with them and stuff or whatever." And it just was like they didn't say too much about it and stuff or whatever and we just went and walked downtown like it was normal, like we would normally do, like my regular guys and stuff or whatever.

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And it was funny because like as I started -- I integrated them into being -- I don't want to say accepted, because it was kind of a call to shock on both ends for them to see me over there and for me to be trying to incorporate them into the jock table. But I kind of meshed it and I kind of -- and at the end of the day we earned our respect. We earned our respect amongst the boys in that school and it was like -- we felt like family towards them at the end of the day.

It was like we knew we had our little booth who would flirt with us or stuff or whatever, the boys in the school and stuff or whatever but it was more so a respect thing where, [00:56:00] you know, but you don't fuck with us and you're going to respect us how we want to present ourselves and stuff or whatever and it was like, "We respect you all." But it was like -- they just were like I just broke that pot for them, like I made that -- I broke -- if it wasn't for me they probably would have never spoken or interacted with them or probably would have still kind of made fun of them.

But because I was one of the popular "in" kids and when I was like transitioning and started hanging out with them, it was like, "What's going on?" And I was like -- just no one would really like question me, they would always question my boys and be like, "What's up with Scooda and stuff," and I was like, "Let them live, let them live." And just started like -- by the end of the school -- but one thing I loved about it is my boys are still my friends today.

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My same friends from high school who was my original four friends who I used to sit and eat lunch with still popular, hangout with are my still friends today. Knowing how out and flamboyant and crazy as I am I can still call them up, hangout with them as it was nothing. But during my high school year and stuff they were cool with just hanging out with me outside of the school. They were like, "It's cool, it's fine."

NAOMI EXTRA: They're like, "We'll take him."

SCOODA: Yeah.

NAOMI EXTRA: So when we first started out this interview you were telling me about some of the night life club spaces that you started to -- places where you started to hang out in Newark. So can we pick up there?

SCOODA: Yes.

NAOMI EXTRA: Because you were at senior year in high school and [00:58:00] you had seen -- was it somebody starting to vogue --?

SCOODA: Yes, it was -- so I was in the club for the first time, me and my best friend --.

NAOMI EXTRA: This was The Globe?

SCOODA: Yeah, it was The Globe, the African Globe, it was downtown next to Symphony Hall, the ballrooms and it was like this little, narrow, dark club and stuff and I just heard like that was like this hot, the gay hotspot to go to like everybody of everybody, like that was the place to go. And when I went there I was like, "Okay, they're playing regular house music, they're playing club music, they're playing hip hop, rap." So I was like nothing is out of the ordinary besides me

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seeing two guys dancing with each other, two girls, but I'm like I've seen that in the straight club, but not in a gay setting.

When I say I've seen two -- I've seen like guys like dance with each other like that and I was like, "Okay." They were doing the exact same thing but I -- and they were doing it in a more intimate way too, but I was like, "Nothing is really out of the ordinary for me and stuff." At the time that was the only spot to really go to besides the Village NYC. And that was the senior year; it was the first time going to NYC Pride.

I remember going with some other friends that I met from the neighborhood and stuff, we'd all went down to Penn Station and I told my grandmother I was going to go and she just was like, "Just stay with your friends and stuff, you're going to have fun, it's going to be extremely crowded." Actually that wasn't my first time going. The first time I went to the gay parade it was with my grandmother, my 11th grade year, she took and that was my first time going by myself my senior year. But [01:00:00] what my grandmother did was she took me the day before the parade; she took me to NYC like the village area. And she started talking to me and was telling me what the village was and that's how she started making the connections for me.

You know taking me up and down Christopher Street, letting me see the boardwalk and having pizza and stuff and actually being in an

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environment where it was okay to see two men hold hands and stuff I was like oh wow, like she said this is like a little gay neighborhood, like everything is gay friendly, around here you can be yourself -- it just felt like liberal like oh my God, like this little gay town. But the Village from when I remember it back then, it's not the way it looks now, it's not even a "gayborhood" anymore, it's like -- that's just -- they transitioned that neighborhood so much. Now Chelsea is the new gayborhood. But yeah -- so every Friday for maybe about like a good, that whole -- my whole senior year I went to The Globe.

But it was -- I was able to know -- it was good that by this time I was already probably after my birthday. My senior year I was -- my friends was knowing about The Globe so they was fine with me going and meeting them at this big party and then I would okay I'll see you later, so they would be like okay go have fun and stuff or whatever -- but it would be so funny when I would come back to school Monday and they would be like yeah, we saw one of those drag queens in the chicken shack or something, they was like somebody said something to them and they was like one of them went crazy was about to fight or something, so I was like oh wow, but it was like good that -- I don't know I've never really had any personal experience first like filling like victimized, or feeling like [01:02:00] gay bashed and stuff.

I have had like my little shares where I probably been like called gay, here and there and I've probably gotten in like a scuffle, but

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nothing to make me feel like I've been like victimized or I've never felt like unsafe in my environment and stuff. Even -- I don't feel like -- I feel like it's like two fold with me because I look like a boy, to see me walking down the street you probably wouldn't perceive or think of me as being gay, but when you do know me, and you know that I'm gay it's like I still don't get fucked with, or I still don't get bothered.

And it's like I don't know if it's because people know me and have a sense of respect for me, but I would be like I never feel uncomfortable where I go, I'm comfortable in myself in any environment. But that did happen overnight, that took going through, having different mentors, and having different people, exposing me to different things, to know that it's okay for me to be comfortable in my skin.

NAOMI EXTRA: So I want to ask you so many questions. Can you tell me a little bit about how you got involved with the ballroom scene? Did that happen around that same time senior year of high school?

SCOODA: Yes so senior high school the more I started going to The Globe and stuff, what happened was I had found my vogue CDs, the DJ was selling them, so I was when I tell you I was fascinated, I got my first vogue CD girl I went hell I took that loud, I was there trying to do all this crazy stuff, I was like what am I doing, and this wasn't a time of YouTube so the only thing that they really had at the time was VHS and there was [01:04:00] integrating from the -- and this was when they were starting to do a lot of things on DVD, and stuff.

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So I would have to -- it was this guy, who I knew that they said sold DVDs and he would go to -- he would meet the people in the Village, on Fridays and Mondays like all Fridays through Mondays, and he would sell like the ball DVDs in the village and stuff and whatever. And I remember I was like okay, I got my vogue CD, I've got my vogue music, okay I'm [going to] practice, but I couldn't emulate nobody because I didn't have nothing visual and stuff or whatever. So I was like the next time I go to the -- I was like the next time I go to the Village with my friends and on the Saturday I'm going to buy a DVD and stuff or whatever. And I remember I had saved my money, I saved my lunch money from then or whatever, and I was like I was going to buy that ball DVD, and I went to that Village that Friday night, it was Saturday, and because that Friday I went to The Globe I remember that. So I went out there so I remember I had enough for the path, I had enough for two slices of pizza, a soda and my DVD. I was so happy with that.

Because then at that time everyone was into smoking weed, I wasn't really I was this is like who does this smoking -- that comes later when I get involved in the ballroom scene. So I got my DVD and I went home and I would practice it like I would watch one scene like a million and one time and try to emulate the moves and stuff for over -- by this time my mother was comfortable with the vogue sounds or whatever because it was -- it [01:06:00] sounded like house music, it sounded like an integration of techno music, and club

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house music, Jersey, Baltimore, that's what ballroom music sounded like.

So when I played it in my house you know my cousins would hear a few words that were similar to what you would hear in club music, so maybe they just bobbed their head to it at times as well, but did they little you know -- and that's when I would be in my room with the door closed practicing my stuff, they would hear club music, they think it's club music and stuff.

NAOMI EXTRA: Had you seen -- had you actually seen the dancing, or had you actually been to a ball at this point, or were you just watching DVDs?

SCOODA: So what happened was other than seeing people vogue at The Globe, I had never been to a ball, so it was one a particular time in a spring or whatever and no I didn't go to my first ball, so I graduated high school and I was attending Montclair State University. My freshman year of Montclair State University I was living on campus, and when I was living on campus I was like I started knowing a few people within the scene and stuff. And I remember going to, he was my best friend and stuff and he got his car he was yo like I'm going to -- you are going to catch the bus from school and I'm going to come pick you up from the bus station, and we are going to see a ball at The Globe. And I remember -- I remember exactly because the ball was not on a [01:08:00] Friday night the ball was on a Sunday night, right, because we went to the party that Friday and that Sunday night

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was the ball and I was like I don't want to -- I want to go to the ball, but I want to make sure I don't miss class.

You know I had like a nine or ten o'clock class that morning, but he was like after the ball I'll drive you back up to school. I was like okay, so we went to the ball and stuff or whatever, and that was like my first time going to a ball. And it was at The Globe, but it was like a different setting. And it was like decorated nicely and different, it was like, it was people there, but people was dressed a little more differently than the club and stuff, it was just like the scenery was just like different, it gave you like a club feel, but you knew that something was going to happen, and stuff or whatever. So we were sitting there and stuff and whatever and they started and they did the whole LSS thing and we -- that was our first experience for a ball. So that is how I first started getting into -- that was like my first ball experience and stuff or whatever. I didn't walk anything I just went, we was amazed we was like oh my God, I was like I was there -- I was like I wish I had my video camera, I've remembered that oh my God they didn't have camera phones that day.

Technology has changed in 10 years -- in 10 years I'm thinking -- so as I started going to The Globe more I started knowing about this website called Walk For Me Wednesdays, which was an online ballroom platform where it promoted [01:10:00] balls it was like a shade form where you could talk about different forums you could --

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it was a forum where you could talk about different things in the ballroom scenes like upcoming balls, what happened at past events, shady things, judges, it was just like a platform, where you could just like talk about anything.

And I've never had like a profile or anything I would just always go up there and read all what was going on within the ballroom community and that is how I was able to learn who these different people was, from that ballroom website platform called Walk For Me Wednesdays online I don't think it's in existence anymore, I think they tried to bring it back several times. And from just actually started going to the balls at the time, see Jersey at that time it had a lively LGBTQ night scene because they had not only night scene, they had a ballroom scene as well and they supplemented each other.

NAOMI EXTRA: Around what year are we talking now?

SCOODA: 2006, 2007, 2008, 2009. After 2009 it really hasn't been -- that they are trying to bring back that nightly hood. I would say 2008 was the best of the good and 2009 was when you started seeing it like linger and I could see that because that was when I just kind of liked graduated college. So that is when I started like seeing like it being like completely dissolving like the Jersey, and that is because it's lost venues, people become inconsistent for as you know, doing events stuff, people get over it. But during that first year is -- I had actually [01:12:00] met someone who started showing me how to vogue and stuff or whatever. It was like I was like -- even though I was in college, I was still -- sometimes on the weekends go to Project

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WOW and to like vogue and stuff and whatever, now as I was attending Montclair State University I was going to Project WOW.

Now I was going there, not for its educational purposes, they offered those skills, I was going for because that was like my way of letting go for the week, from some school I would go there on Saturday, to go vogue, to go lash out, you know to get my -- be free, I had been worked up the whole week through school so I would go there and vogue. And it was my 10th -- my sophomore year of college was when I met my first love and stuff, that is when I brought him to the family and alright that was during all that time and stuff.

And that's when I made it known that he was my lover, that's when we started getting tested and stuff, frequently and that is when we were going to Project WOW together and it was giving us like these hands on tools, for us to kind of like how to have safe sex and that's when I started really like applying the other pieces of the program, I started making a connection I was like [01:14:00] this is more than just a hang out spot, to just come vogue and to be free. There is another educational background pieces to why they come here and to get HIV education and safe sex and condoms and safer sex education.

But during that time I was like... to them, to the staff, I was perceived as an ideal role model for the youth at the time, and I did not look at myself like that, I did not. I never looked at myself as a

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role model, I just was like I'm just doing what I should be doing, I'm in school, I had my one lover my boyfriend, we were like traveling like they was living because we was like young going to, we would go to DC, we would go to like random trips and stuff or whatever. And I'm like that's the things that -- like that's what kind of kept our relationship --.

[01:15:18]

[RECORDING STOPPED]