

Queer Newark Oral History Project

Interviewee: Aaron Frazier

Interviewer: Naomi Extra

Date: March 23, 2016

Location: Rutgers University, Newark, NJ

NAOMI EXTRA: It's March 23, 2016. Naomi Extra here interviewing Aaron Frazier at Rutgers, Newark as part of the Queer Newark Oral History Project and Aaron is just going to open... begin with a poem.

AARON FRAZIER: Okay, thank you.

A time not so long ago, where the beats were fast, so fast, loud and rhythmic too. You did not want the night to end.

"Hey ho, hey ho!" Remember when that chant or phrase was "we don't need no water, let the motherfucker burn, burn bitch burn!" a party, you know.

Remember when T. Scott would spin those old songs, which kept you young, "Oh, black daddy bam a lam," better yet, "Love sensation" or "Ain't no mountain high enough to keep me from you."

Not one of those red lights special, a party that lasted to the early afternoon.

Remember when breakfast became brunch and dinner was a late afternoon snack followed by a nap or some other party starting in the afternoon.

A good time, good people, long gone so it seems. A time not so long ago. Larry Levan, Larry Pattison before the last song was played. Carl Bean's song became a national anthem, "I am happy, carefree and gay."

The straight kids, gay kids, both young and old could identify. Color barriers broken down, walls broken down and let's not forget Sylvester, "You Are My Friend," Two Tons of Fun, "It's Raining Men."

A time which hit the club culture hard through travesty an epidemic came and became the enemy. HIV and AIDS are nicer words now, but then AIDS related complex was it or ARC was named then. Stigma already attached just in the name alone. Neither knowing nor caring. At the time it took a many promising artists, entertainers and prospective

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people away.

The faces have changed, but the ignorance has not. Once again, the cycle is repeating itself because people of color may be living longer, yet a lot of our long-term survivors are dying quietly, kidney failure, liver failure. All kinds of formalities causing infinite casualties.

Alone, they are not.

The voiceless has re-risen. This is not a time to be silent. This isn't a time to be invisible. Just because we are of color, look around would you please, because if you remember those fallen heroes and sheroes gone too soon, listen to your heart, remember the pain and if you can't remember anything, remember a party never ends, it goes on.

Each and everyone here is here for a reason whether a friend, a lover or a family member. Transition due to illness or disease, that is no one's fault, but ignorance allow our government to cut, shred the little hope of dignity that any of us have left just because our lifestyle is different, our color is different, our religious belief different, we do not deserve a death sentence.

Remember the beat goes on.

Written for the day of learning, June 24, 2005 by Aaron Frazier held at SS County College.

NAOMI EXTRA: Thank you. That was really good. So, there's a lot in that poem that I want to ask you about later on, but let's just start with some -- just a basic question about your early life and when and where were you born?

AARON FRAZIER: I was born in Newark, New Jersey at Marlton Hospital on Bergen Street, July 24 of 1960. I don't remember too much more of that, but I know that was the City Hospital, a lot of people who were poor went there, but it was really one of the better hospitals from what I can remember.

NAOMI EXTRA: What do you remember about your early life in Newark?

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AARON FRAZIER: Early, for then my childhood, I can remember a lot of good times. I come up on a Winner's Avenue. We were a block away from Row Street Cemetery. We were actually one, two, three, four, five, maybe 10 blocks from Westside Park.

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I just remember I could say a happy childhood. We lived in a neighborhood where even though I have seven siblings at that particularly time, but most of my neighbors and families within the community, there were at least -- one, two, three -- at least five other families that was their family size started at 16 to 20. [00:06:00] And a lot of the people did not know their fathers. The fathers didn't live in the same household. My father -- we were one of say actually maybe five families on our block where our father lived in the same household with us.

But overall, it was a good -- I can actually say it was a very family oriented community because if you step off of the block, and you did something bad on 18th Avenue, somebody was calling your mother or father to tell them that your son is around here causing havoc and they had the right to give me a whooping, chastise me, not kill me, but you know, hold me accountable for my actions and then I had to deal with, once I got home, another beating or chastisement, you know, for my disrespect or whatever the behavior was at that particular time. But it was a family oriented community.

A lot of that which is no longer, I would say, here in Newark. You know, it's ours, but it isn't the same because where we lived at, a lot of the teachers, police officers, workers who worked at a school or within the community, they lived in Newark community, so whatever happened, everybody knew about it. Whereas right now, it's a whole big difference and they curtail a lot of stuff, a lot of stuff back then looking over, you know looking back to from now to back then.

NAOMI EXTRA: [00:08:00] What brought your family to Newark? So how many generations back are we -- like your parents or your grandparents, were they also in Newark?

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AARON FRAZIER: I vaguely know my grandparents. My father's mother, I don't remember her at all. I only know of my father's father because he had a candy store/barber shop on Charleston Street back in the day. So a lot of times, when we would go down to visit, most times me and my brothers and my sisters, we would go to the big field, the empty fields and we would collect aluminum cans so that we could have money to get us Italian hotdogs. So that was our, you know, reason for going where my father to, you know, when he would go down there to visit his brothers and everything and his father. I don't remember at all ever seeing my grandfather. I know he was there; I just don't remember him.

And then as far as my mother's people, my mother is from Tuscaloosa, Alabama. All I remember -- I don't remember my grandfather. I remember when I look back at my -- like trying to remember my grandmother, all I remember is a shadow, like a real, you know just a shadow of a strong person, a strong woman. So with that, I don't remember her facial features, none of that. It was like, you know, you just respected the woman.

[00:10:00] When we had a family reunion, we went there. It was different, but what I liked about down in Tuscaloosa, the store person would -- we being kids we were like seven or eight, he would give these cookies, what we called penny cookies back then. You know, he never sold the broken ones, so the broken ones we had at least, it was almost like a case of broken cookies that he just gave to us because we were visiting our grandmother. He was cool with my grandmother. And so, me and my brothers and my sisters, we would be out there, you know, just gorging on the cookies.

And I remember, there was a lot of raspberry trees and all over the place and eating them down there were different than trying to do it up here.

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Down there, it just seemed like the thing to do. It was like part of what happens, it was just fresh and we just eat them, just rambling, but then when I got up here, I didn't like them.

NAOMI EXTRA: When was that? When did you go and have that experience?

AARON FRAZIER: That was during -- between seven and eight years of age, so that's 1968 because shortly after that, I remember coming in the room and seeing my mother crying because one of the Kennedy's if not both of them, I don't remember exactly, had died. And then shortly after that, then it was Martin Luther King and we were told that we couldn't sleep in our bunk beds, we had to sleep on the floor because they were shooting up at the windows.

NAOMI EXTRA: [00:12:00] And this was where?

AARON FRAZIER: In Newark, in Newark and they tore up Springfield Avenue. Springfield Avenue back then was I cannot say, what Market Street strives to be, we had -- our Five and Dime up there, it wasn't a wool worker, it wasn't a Macquarie's, but it was in the community where you could go get quality toys, quality merchandise, even several furniture stores. There was a T&J Italian hotdog place there.

So, it was interesting. It just was interesting, but when the riots hit, people looted and for whatever reason and I was supposed to be going to school and I went up there, just to be nosy. I mean, I'm a little kid. I'm like eight, nine years old and I went and I was being nosy. And I actually went into the Five and Dime. I had opportunity to get any and everything that I wanted. You know what I went in there and got? A little red ball, that's it and walked out like nothing to it and all these adults, nobody let anything happen to me because it was all adults and that's all I wanted. I came out of here and went home. I got reprimanded because I should have been in school, but I went there for like you know.

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And that's when I think things for me kind of changed because I don't know, I just felt different, but I also became closer to my mother.

[00:14:00] My father got injured. He was a longshoreman, but then it's like several things had happened to injure him. He got a fire that occurred in a hallway where we lived. He went up there to put the fire out as somehow the wires somehow pierced his skin and hit his bone. So he had to go for multiple surgeries to correct that, but he put the fire out, so that we would still have some place to live.

It was crazy times, I would say. I just remember a lot of the good times. I remember, you know, we had several drill teams in the neighborhood. I'm trying to think, the Pink Flamingos. We were in a drill team, I don't even remember our names, but we just wore blue and white, but the Pink Flamingos, they were the hottest drill teams around, but we all were in the same neighborhood, Debbie Sewell, Lucinda Sewell and Freddie Sewell, who always played the timbales.

But it was just good times and even though we were in separate drill teams, a lot of times when we didn't have the timbales, but sometimes when we were getting to real parades and stuff, they, Freddie and Debbie would help. They'll be -- have Freddie play a little beat for us and we'd do our little drill team steps to it and it was really fun.

And back then, the parades went up Clinton Avenue and Springfield.

[00:16:00] And that was my first time where the one we were in was on Clinton Avenue, but the one that really caught my eye was on Springfield Avenue, that's like two or three blocks from the house. So we went up there and we saw them, you know, marching, but the one school that stood out for me was Central High School.

Tommy, I can't think of his last name, anyway. I believe it was Jackson, but don't quote me on that, but he was the bomb. All I remember is him,

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the way that he just studded and the whole Central. I was like, "That's the school I'm going to go to, that's the school I'm going to go to", but I'm now realizing that I would eventually be there. And then the other marching band that was really cool, it was Shabazz and Tommy and Slim. Slim was the band person -- what do you call them?

NAOMI EXTRA: The director?

AARON FRAZIER: The drum major for Shabazz and at the end of the games, because I started going to a couple of the games, Central and Shabazz would go at it, but Tommy and Slim would go at it during the half times for who could dance the best and it was always entertaining, always.

NAOMI EXTRA: Was this during high school?

AARON FRAZIER: No, this is before I even got to high school.

NAOMI EXTRA: Right, right because you hadn't gotten to Central High yet.

AARON FRAZIER: Right.

NAOMI EXTRA: Okay.

AARON FRAZIER: So I then will go a little further. After Martin Luther King had died, so then it was like, okay, I finally get into West Kennedy Junior High.

[00:18:00] I was terrified because we had to go down the hill and walk through the projects to get to West Kennedy. And for whatever reason many had issues with people having lived in a home, we didn't live in the projects, we lived in our home, so they had issues. And I didn't understand it, I really didn't.

We are all the same people, but for the first three weeks of school at West Kennedy Junior High, I fought everyday in the big field and after they realized I wasn't a punk and that they couldn't just run over me, there was somebody that didn't say I was in every fight, but they knew they was in a fight once it was over. I got the respect and I could walk through there with no problem and it was good.

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And then I just get focused on school and just got into school and back then like if you were in the seventh grade, they had it up until like the top 10, 701, 702, 703; if you were in any of the top 10, you were considered part of the brightest, so I was in the top 10. And maybe to the eighth grade and just as I was trying to decide what school I was going to go to for high school, I was chosen to go to the opening in the start of Science High, which was being held within Central High School.

So I was like, okay I made it here, so I got into Science High. The only thing that messed me up in Science High was I wasn't -- I didn't really feel comfortable with letting people take advantage of bullying me and stuff of that nature because before leaving West Kennedy, people tried to bully me.

[00:20:00] And one of the principals, the vice principal saw what was going on and when he kind of, he took me and the person, I forgot the person's name who was bullying me and I was really terrified of this person, but as long as we were in that room, it was like I didn't have to worry about nobody jumping me. So when he said, okay are you all in the room, and I just went in, I just started fighting this guy and when the guy realized that I wasn't afraid of him as long as I could get him one on one, I didn't have to worry about being jumped after that.

But prior to that, it was like they would jump you and it was like I didn't know, like my brother who is a year older than me, he went to Montgomery Street, but I told him about it and then he was going to tell the rest of the cousins and I was, we're just going to leave it alone, I'm going to handle it. So that was when it was like when I got accepted into Science High, it just went on me and just let that go away.

Science High was interesting. I could get with the school work, but they penalized you on what they call attitude, because I refused to allow people

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to bully me or take stuff from me and I was fighting back, they told me I had an attitude problem. And I'm expressing to them how I have an attitude problem when students are getting beaten up in this school and we are in Science High, but you're not doing nothing about it. And I just looked at them and I said no, I'm not like that. I can't accept that. So, I had a comic book that I had, they took it from me inside the school, I left it alone. [00:22:00] To this day, that comic book is worth almost like \$1,500.00. I never followed up on anything. They kicked me out because of my attitude. They said I had a bad attitude because I fought, so I was like okay.

And by this time, we moved to North Newark and my mother would ask me, well what do you want to do? I said I'm staying at Central, what the heck, why should I leave? I said, I made friends here, they're all my friends. And I wasn't the only one that left Science High because a lot of us did not agree with some of their policy during that time. So I just stayed in Central, ended up being part of the band and being part of the tennis team, being part of the drama club, being part of the school newspaper.

I still had to fight a little bit in there and it wasn't until towards the end of graduation when I was getting ready to graduate that I found out that I had a whole bunch of cousins that was on Highway Street, Shrew Street and French Street. I said, where in the world was you all when I needed you when these people were trying to jump me and it was just a mess. But by my senior year, I had no problems because by this time, they found out, he has a lot of family. And I was just like I just wish I would have known them earlier.

Because it was like you don't really want to go to school for fighting, you go there to learn and to try to you know just do what kids are supposed to

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do. And reflecting on that, I also need to say, at graduation night when it was like the highlight, I cried like a baby. [00:24:00] I said, what am I supposed to do because I wasn't prepared for college. I didn't know what to do. I really had no goals, no aspirations, because I can actually say I was a sheltered kid, but I was also content with just being a kid.

So then I started -- I got my first job at Macy's AKA Bamberger's. No, the first job was at Woolworths. When I got there and we moved to North Newark, my mother then was having some physical problems, so you know for the rest of the siblings, I said okay. So then I worked for Woolworths, I could get stuff on there where I could get a discount and stuff like that and it was my first time getting a paycheck and they actually have -- they used to give us envelopes with the cash in it.

And it would have the breakdown of what they took out for taxes and different things of that nature, but you actually got cash. I was like this is -- so it was like, all right. So to help my mom I got my siblings, I put bikes on layaway, I put coats on layaway, different things that I could get and help out with the family get what they needed for Christmas. And it felt good, it really felt good.

Unfortunately, some of my siblings was unappreciative of what -- you know, you got a bike -- I bought you a coat, there was no thank you, none of that, but I moved past that because kids will be kids. And I just always would try to be an older brother to them even though later on we found out we had two older siblings that was raised with my grandmother.

[00:26:00] And the reason that they were raised with her because with my mother, there was no work in Tuscaloosa when she migrated up here and got my father, but even after she started a new family, she tried -- she was sending for them to come up here with us, but they didn't want to leave

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my grandmother down here by herself, so they stayed until they became adults.

Both of them went to Vietnam. One came back all right. The other one was coo-coo for coco puffs, but the oldest one eventually from the [whisper] and different stories that I heard, he was gay, you know outwardly gay, but he also had a speech impediment, he stuttered. But overall what I remember of him, he was very supportive of me when he would come visit and it would just be like me and him time and you know I really appreciated that.

And then I found out, we get a call that he had died, but then -- and so my mother ended up going to Oakland, California to bury her son. My father was willing to send me to go with my mother, but my mother said, no, you're not to go. And kind of looking back at it, she didn't want me to go because one of the things that came out that even though he supposedly died, he was murdered for being gay. [00:28:00] They tried to make it seem like a suicide, but the way that they tried to set it up, it was too obvious that it wasn't a suicide.

So I know my mother kind of bear the brunt of that, of losing a child and you know, for being different. So sometimes, I look at her and you know, we go at it, but she's like my best friend. Sometimes I kind of forget that she's my mother and you know, it's like if I'm talking to some of my friends, I'd be like, bitch, you get on my nerve and then I have to remind myself, this is your mother. And I'm like, "Ma please forgive me. I didn't mean to say those things." She said, "I know, I know, go on", you know. But we had that rapport and we never talk about this situation that occurred with my brother. She never talked about it. I know during that particular time, when she came back she brought a lot of his clothes. He loved European specialty made clothes. Back then, I used to love to wear

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his clothes like I could wear it. I was small. I think I had it up until I had some of his clothes. I went to my junior year in high school.

And my other brother, he's a Vietnam vet, but I knew something was up with him. [00:30:00] And even though this is now, I'm 55 soon to be 56, found out the boy's birthday the day after mine, but we're 10 years apart, he still has issues with why our mother left him there, you know, but that's his thing and I explained it to him. I said I'm younger than you and I get caught what's happening and you're not catching it and you're trying to hold her accountable for your neglect, but you made a conscious decision also as an adult to stay there when you could have come here. She made arrangements for you to come here.

My father, you know, our fathers are different, but he was accepting of you all and you all didn't want to come and when you did come, you came with craziness. He was going wild when he went into the house. We were all looking and we're like this, "Who that?" And then you'd be -- and you were disrespectful. And so you know you went back and then I guess you got your feelings hurt and then you tried to commit suicide on stupidity and it didn't have to be like that. So it was like for me that's the crazy part.

But sibling rivalry, it exists and right now, I'm the only one out of -- there's eight of us left, out of eight, I'm the only one that speaks to him, you know. And I tried to convey with the rest of them, you know, he's still your brother, we had the same mother. There's no way you can get around it, whether you want to or not, and so -- but they're weird. That's all I could say. We don't have a -- we were raised in a situation where we should be closer than what we are, but for whatever reason, we're all scarce sparsely, you know like scattered.

NAOMI EXTRA: So, most of your siblings kind of left Newark or...?

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AARON FRAZIER: Three of them left Newark. It's only four of us here. The other one, he was always, you know, away anyway. [00:32:00] He still lives in -- he lives in Oakland, California now. One of my sisters lives in Atlanta, Georgia. My brother, two of my brothers, the youngest ones, one went to South Carolina somewhere, the other one went to Virginia because he worked for Elijah Bush and that's where the job was moved into, so he's doing much better for him. He's about the only one that's personally I could see that's really excelling down there.

My other sister that's here -- the other two sisters are here. It's one that's just I don't know. You know, we babied her as a child and unfortunately she still thinks she's a baby with babies. But I don't get into that no more because I was trying to kind of help her, but I also don't want to think I -- because of knowing how being raised did a lot of stuff to help her, but she never took advantage of the help.

She just -- it's like she's supposed to finished school, so because it became a problem, I would do it, like my brother is a year older than me. I felt so bad for him dealing with school scenarios, specifically going for his GED. I told him, I looked at the test paper for the GED and back then, we were almost look-alike, so I said we can get away with it.

So I went and took the eight-hour test for him to get his GED, but I charged him. I said you're not getting away with this for free, so I made him pay me for that. [00:34:00] And because he said he was going to go into service, never even went, never even left home. He's a year -- I'm 55, he's 56. I moved out of my mother's house when I turned 17 because I knew my lifestyle was different. I didn't feel comfortable there.

You know I couldn't even creatively do what I need to do, but during that time, I was doing a lot of community service. I was head president of the youth patrol in North Newark under United Community Corporation. We

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were one of the first youth group in the city of Newark to patrol our community, whereas during the winter when the snow storms hit, we would shovel the snow for the seniors, go shopping for them while they were in the house, you know after we shoveled for them.

When we wanted to do different things or go on trips, we had our fundraiser, but we also had the support of our community. So then the parents, they started a parents' group to kind of hopefully help us get to where we wanted to go. It never panned out because they would stuff like cocktail sips. It just didn't work out though. A lot of the stuff, money is there we raised as youth. From the carwash to the cake sales, we made money, but then the parents actually didn't know at that particular time how to properly facilitate managing stuff.

[00:36:00] You know, we had to get them basically out of, what you would call, in the dumps. So when we cleared all the books for everybody, we had enough to go to great adventures and we went on the day it was raining, but we went. We got a bus and everything. We had a good time even in the rain. We ate -- just had a lot of camaraderie, a good time with a bunch of people that wanted to make a difference.

Then the following year, it was 1979, I was doing the same thing at the Boys Club in the North [Ward] and I won youth of the year. While during that time, I won boy of the year because it's the Boys Club, but then when it went to the final year, they changed it for the largest scale to youth. And I said because I'm not a boy no more, you know, I just turned 18. So then they changed it to Youth of the Year.

And that year, I got youth of the year, mayor for a day. I got honored by the National Council of Negro Women for Community Service and I got awards from United Community Corporation for community service. So that's where my community service work come into place. And my aunt,

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she also was one who encouraged me -- Irene Parson, she encouraged me to you know, be involved with the community because she's been doing National Council on Negro women. She's a lifetime member, so she always encouraged me to do stuff of that nature.

[00:38:00] So that's why, I guess I'd still do it. I'll say shortly after that, my mother had looked at me and she said, "You know you're really on the road of doing real good stuff, but you got so involved, you're getting so involved with this gay stuff and issues for inhibiting you." And I just looked and I was like -- because I had to come to terms with being gay because I wasn't and it was a mess.

I went applied for a job. They called it manpower back then. I applied for a job. I had the qualifications, but during that time, they would give the job, even though I had the qualification, if a woman came up, who has children, she was in more of need of the job than I was, so she got the job. Yes, so during that time, somebody -- they've encouraged me to go to school. Okay, okay.

I looked and I applied to Virginia University. I went there for the first year and I was like, okay back then, this is before -- this is like Reagan just got in office.

NAOMI EXTRA: Interesting.

AARON FRAZIER: Reagan just got in office. He stopped us from using one of the grants that we could use during that time out of state, so that became a problem.

[00:40:00] So you know, your first year of school and the first time away from home, so you know as a young person, you're doing what all people do, you're trying to get to know yourself and you know, adhere to the rules and stuff of that nature, so I didn't do too well, but I didn't do too bad.

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So within the following semester, he cuts the grant and I was furious. I said, "Oh my God, I ain't got no money." Then I realized at this particular time, most of the people that go to this school, their mamas are doctors and lawyers, they own businesses, and different things. What in the world did I get myself into?

NAOMI EXTRA: What year was this?

AARON FRAZIER: This is 1980, so I actually was flabbergasted, but I had met some good friends. One of the girls, she and I became good friends. I don't even remember her name, but all I know is her mother was one of the biggest CEO for the National United Negro College Fund and I told her what my plight was. She got on a phone, called to her mama and within a half an hour, they said, Aaron, your tuition is paid.

NAOMI EXTRA: Wow.

AARON FRAZIER: I said, what? And I was like, oh my God. I was so happy, appreciative, you know because I wouldn't have been able to make it, but I couldn't achieve the same thing the following semester because that's when you really know that you really did it because for a first time student, who's going away from home most kids, they need their first -- they kind of look for you to mess up their first semester.

The second semester you should have already kind of mended your offenses and try to get things better. It took me through the third semester. By this time, everything was cut. I was in debt. They wouldn't even allow me to take my final exams. I was so upset.

[00:42:00] I ended up befriending these people at Virginia Commonwealth and it was a church ministry. I get involved with them and then I moved off campus. I moved in with these people. My mother didn't know who they were, then she says, "You joined..." -- she thought I joined in a cult. They were sending for me and everything. It was just a

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bunch of craziness. I did not -- they like, what you called, they lured me back saying they will pay the rest of the money.

I get back here, they didn't pay [unintelligible - 00:42:37] just because they thought I joined in a cult and I didn't. And I was involved with them for about a year that I stayed with them. And then it was weird because it was a nondenominational. It was out of LA. They called themselves trying to start a ministry to kind of turn gay people from being gay to straight. And I looked that down and they did this whole ritual of praying over you and doing that you know, removing of spirits and I just looked at them, why are you going like that, what the hell.

So, I just looked at them and then by this point, I knew I was spiritually -- what is the word I was -- I was spiritually gifted because my spirituality did not mix well with them. [00:44:00] There were certain things that became clearer, but I need to also say that I was also afraid because there were certain things that I can interpret back then that kind of made me stray away from them because when everybody -- you know some of the stuff that they were talking was very clear.

Everybody is looking for the anti-Christ to be some type of demon, enemy or whatever and it's really going to be something to the point of electronics, where you know, in certain aspect, there were things that they were trying to do. Well, they have already started that particular process where you know, right now they don't want you to really carry the cash. They want you to use your little debit card, your credit cards. You know credit cards, you know, they got into the point where you got your picture on the credit card.

Eventually, they're going to want you to take a mark or something on the hand, and different things in that nature, that is working towards what they want done. And it's just crazy, but it's in all honestly, it's already

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occurring, but that part, it's just really -- it's like wow. I can't believe I'm still here because I really was on another note, I didn't expect to be here as long as I am from that particular aspect.

NAOMI EXTRA: Did you grow up in a religious home? Were your parents religious?

AARON FRAZIER: My father really wasn't but his family is, you know. My mother has always been a church woman, go to church. You know, we would go to church with her as well. But it wasn't that strict religious situation like you didn't get brow beaten with the Bible scriptures and things of that nature, but you were supposed to -- you are taught to be respectful of God and there is a God and Jesus and all of that.

[00:46:00] It wasn't until much later in life that I got to really understand it. And that was after -- we're talking about after the associates, we're talking about I would say within the last 10 years because when I completed my Bachelors in Urban Study Public Policies at Saint Peters, I had to take two religious courses and they were talking about Catholicism. Then I was like, what in the world.

Then I got into understanding it a little bit better and I was like, wow, it was different, but I understood the particular dynamics that goes on with Catholicism, but it's unfortunate that some people take what the teachings are and they're using it more as a weapon than a tool for teaching because it's not really about fire and brimstone. It's about understanding.

And then from then, how do you say about this background upbringing when I ventured away from my family practice of their religion. I went to Lutheran practice, then I even experienced Muslim practice then I even went to an Episcopalian and really in all honesty, I liked the Episcopalian. Lutheran was just too quiet.

[00:48:00] Baptist changed because they're trying to become a new generation of Baptist and a lot of the people in all honesty, who when they

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start speaking in tongues or some vagrant, whatever they are mimicking, trying to think they're speaking in tongues, speaking in tongues are not supposed to be spoken unless there's an interpreter to tell what the spirit wants to be revealed.

And it's not no gibberish, it's something of a language, maybe Spanish, Portuguese, Creole or whatever, but somebody should be able to interpret what is being spoken and a lot of people just always doing that "ham-shalala" whatever is a bunch of crap. Because when God really wants you to know something, it's going to be a message of interpretation, so there's going to be someone to speak it and there's going to be someone there that can interpret what was being said.

And a lot of people don't like, you know, from the spiritual aspect of my development, I started realizing things differently, so I didn't want to be in the traditional Christianity Church, so I joined Unity Fellowship Church. I was still kind of questioning some things and looking at things and then I was like, wow, but what got me was when I saw doing the running around and falling out and I was like oh, what did I get myself into.

[00:50:00] But even then after I got to understand it, what more so what spirituality is, I was like okay, I can get with this and then I realized doing that particular process, it ain't got nothing to do with religion or spirituality, it was about just being a good person, doing and I really like being part of Unity, servicing the community, providing service to a mass of people that would not normally get service. So I didn't get into the hierarchy of okay, I'm an ordained deacon, minister, Reverend and all that other stuff, that didn't bother me. It's about doing the work. I could care less about the title. It's about providing a service.

The problem that I was having with ministry within Unity was they had problems with me because I questioned, you know, certain things that they

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really -- if we're part of a bigger movement, how can you tell me not to go to one of our sister church's function. And then when at that particular time, she got so upset, she called a cell, suspending me and said, okay you can't serve in church. Have you ever heard of something like that? You can't serve in church because you got a personal problem with me because I went to a national movement.

So I went like this, first I was going to fight her and then someone said, they said, you sit your butt right here. She said, you sit back here, you sit right there. And I said, okay, Lee, I'm going to sit right there and I sat there just like this and I was like looking at them, they gagged. They didn't realize how much work I did before church, setting up the altar, getting the security stuff together, setting up the audio for recording of the service, setting up the pastor's table and the whole nine.

When they realized how much I did and I did it in a timely fashion, she rescinded that suspension that day, you're back in service, like you know.

[00:52:00] But never really apologized because you did wrong and I don't really have no issues or hard feelings with the person, but I just rather not be in their presence.

NAOMI EXTRA: When did you join Unity?

AARON FRAZIER: Unity, I want to say it was between 1994 to 1997. I broke away because I had a fall out and I left. At first, the archbishop said, he was the one to sanction me and another person starting a new church under Unity in Newark. But then my fault I slipped my business cards, because we had started getting business cards and I slipped it into somebody and they showed it to the person at the time, who then got upset and cried to the archbishop, who was also part of how Unity started. So then we got kind of kicked to the curb, but then my reputation for all the work that I did

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with Unity from the men's ministry and trying to do things in the community, all that was kind of kicked to the curb.

So then I just, you know, I left and my friend, we were going to start what we started a new church was called Church of Greater Newark.

[00:54:00] It's established, but then she had to go get training under the -- what was it that you call them, the Methodist Church. And because I told her, I said, I'm not coming. I'm not moving. My calling is here in Newark. She went through the training and she got her, you know, degrees and stuff and she made it, but then they directed her from New Brunswick to North Plainfield and I just wished her well because I couldn't do it because that's a large commute. And you know, I'm here if she needs me, but me coming out there for your ministry is not where I'm supposed to be.

So I don't do much of anything, but I've been doing community service from like different -- from the groups to... it could be a group just putting together that's helping with the Fireball or Day of Learning, which is an AIDS educational thing. Different things in Newark and just continuing to do so like right now, I'm in a process of back stepping to start working on my personal projects. In the next couple of weeks, I'm going to be putting together my collection of poetry for print. Hopefully it will be ready by Pride in Newark because that's going to be where I will be starting to sell the books and my fashion show is going to be between October and November.

I'm not looking to make a lot of money, but I want to be able to say like give to the **[unintelligible - 00:55:53]** and get them \$250.00 to certain organizations that I know that is doing the work. **[00:56:00]** It ain't going to be much, but they will at least be able to get \$250.00, so I'm working it out now how that would look. I'm also in the process of in the next two

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weeks while I'm doing the poetry, finishing that, trying to deposit on the space for the fashion show.

So when I say, along with doing my projects, I'm still working with the youth, still working with other organizations in the community, still doing -- I wanted, **[unintelligible - 00:56:36]** started trans group at the center.

So I'm working with getting them started, getting them a person that at least that can help with the footwork and just doing the right thing for the community as a whole.

NAOMI EXTRA: So your community work has been over two decades?

AARON FRAZIER: Yes.

NAOMI EXTRA: I wanted to go back a little bit and ask you about that transition that you mentioned from like being 17 and moving out and getting into that community work. I want to ask like what was that transition like and was that a part of your like coming out process?

AARON FRAZIER: Not only part of my coming out process. I'll put it to you like this. When I came out also in Virginia, when I was at Virginia Union, they introduced me to the straw, which is a pickup spot for dates and whole nine, my coming out process was really weird, but it was also scary. I didn't mind the cruising.

[00:58:00] I didn't mind having the dates, but what became a problem when people really likes you, they come back with other people. Even when I'm in my comfort zone, and I had two of these guys together and I'm just one person, but I turned them out. And the following day, I'm at this spa and I'm hanging out with some of my friends and one of them looking, the boy yelling at me, yelling my name and I'm looking back, I'm like, what? But I see like almost 10 other boys with him. I said hell, no, so I called -- my friend was driving by, I said, Shara wait, wait, wait and I jumped in the car and get in the car with them and go off.

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NAOMI EXTRA: Where was this?

AARON FRAZIER: This was in Richmond, Virginia and it was also my first time seeing Ms. Divine at the club that same night and I just couldn't believe it. It was crazy and it was just and I really need to say, because of my, I need to say, fear, sixth sense I think if I would not have followed that, I probably wouldn't be here today. Because in a scenario like that you don't know how or which way it goes, you know so. I had been in crazy situation. 'Cause shortly after that, I met this guy when I was living with the Christian people, but I still had the key to my old dorm room and the guy was talking all these crazy stuff, like you know. He just broke out of jail. I'm like, yeah right. The following day, I get the newspaper, he did break out of jail and it was him and I gave him money to get to wherever he was going.

NAOMI EXTRA: [01:00:00] Wow.

AARON FRAZIER: Yes, and I kept the article that can remind me how silly I've been sometimes, you know. But he didn't harm me or nothing like that. He was a very nice person, but I was just like, I can't believe it, you know.

NAOMI EXTRA: So it was in Virginia where you really started to like be able to experiment, but before that in Newark, did some of that start -- did your family kind of have a sense?

AARON FRAZIER: Before I actually went away, I used to play basketball and one of the guys that I played basketball with -- you know all the other guys is gone and then he embraced me and he said, are you gay? And I was, what the hell was that, what do you mean? And you know that kind of hurt me because in the back of my mind, I was always thinking it and I kind of started crying. Then the next thing I know, I'm in bed with this man.

NAOMI EXTRA: The same man who asked you?

AARON FRAZIER: Yes.

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NAOMI EXTRA: Wow.

AARON FRAZIER: And then we ended up being in a relationship of what I thought was a relationship, then the next thing I know, his girlfriend, his baby mama, is asking me questions. And I say, why you tell her. And then you know when they're having problems, she's calling me, but he's not doing this and this. And I'm looking at him and I'm looking at her, I said I can't do this.

I said this is odd for me, but it's like he liked me, but it's just that I was still new to the parameters. I didn't know the rules and with her being, her sister was my good friend. [01:02:00] But I answered their questions and I would mediate when they would have issues, that became a problem. She doesn't speak to me to this day. We don't know what happened to him.

NAOMI EXTRA: Were you a teenager when this was happening?

AARON FRAZIER: I was 19.

NAOMI EXTRA: Did you feel like you had to hide it or in Newark, was it, did you feel like it would be okay?

AARON FRAZIER: For me because I'll fight anybody, I don't care who you are, and I always fought for my respect. If friends of mine from across town was coming to North Newark where I lived, girl, we're coming over to North Newark. Okay girls, just let me know and I'll tell my brother and his friends, I got some girlfriends coming over this way. You all be respectful. None of you all bother them.

You know, I had to literally beat my younger brother because he flipped one of my friends and I said, all you had to say was you're not that into that and send her on her way. You didn't have to throw, you know, hurt her. And he was like -- I said because what you do to her, somebody else is going to do to me and you're not going to be there to help me.

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And he changed his attitude so he started dealing with them differently, but I know those who would also try to cross those paths, whether or not he tried to correct them or not, but for the most part they at least got respect when they came around my facility and I got respect when I go visit across town to the different areas that they live in.

Now, this new thing a bunch of young people though, they think they're just entitled to it because they are, but you haven't earned it. In most neighborhoods, you get your respect by earning it. You earn your respect, whether it's fighting them or talking back to them or putting them in their place.

[01:04:00] You don't just you know because you're gay you have the rights to passage. No, you have to earn their respect and then you can't talk about respect if you don't respect them in your community because not everybody is you know down with it. And if you see somebody's mother and you're disrespectful to her and her son finds out about it, yeah, you deserve a beating.

So you know, why are you being disrespectful? You don't want that to your mother or your family, so it's all about just being respectful in both parties, yourself and other people, you know. And a lot of these young people do not do that. They just think they should get.

You know, I really hate to say, white America tells them that they should just have to, just how white America says that it's all right to be racist in America, but I'm not bothering you, you're bothering me. It's the same thing and the craziness of it is that's why we are such in a whirlwind, in a tizzy and it shouldn't be. It's all respect. How hard is it? It's not that complicated, but they make it complicated, you know. That's where I'm at with that.

NAOMI EXTRA: So you moved out the house, you get your own place in Newark?

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AARON FRAZIER: I actually have moved in with a friend. The guy was my boyfriend, moved in with him. He stayed with his sister. At that particular time, we're doing like landscaping work. Get up early in the morning, late and it was crazy, but we did this for about I'd say maybe about a year. **[01:06:00]** And I was like, when I had a little heat stroke and I was on the side of the road like, no, this is not for me.

So at this particular time, he still did what he was doing and I started temping and I got my first temp job at... back then it was National State Bank, 500 Broad Street, and I started getting good at what I was doing. When I moved up, I moved up from like you know, just sorting mail and opening mail just stuff and I moved up to encoding. And when they realized once I got a hold to the keyboard and I was really good and I was fast, I helped them achieve their goal.

So by this time, it started becoming I got real good at it, so I would work on the third shift, but say the second shift and the first shift, it's still behind their work. I said, okay I'll look at that work and go like this, okay for me to do that work you'll have to pay me at least seven hours. They looked at me, they said okay. I will finish it in half an hour, but I got 7 hours worth overtime from the second shift, maybe 6 hours from overtime from the first shift. So to the point, I was doing roughly 80 hours a week to the point that I was like okay. I told my lover I said, we can't stay with your sister, we have to get a room at this hotel because I need to be able to you know come here and rest and then go back and we did that for about a year.

NAOMI EXTRA: A hotel in Newark?

AARON FRAZIER: Back then it was the Lincoln Motel. So you know, because I worked at 500, the Lincoln Motel right now, just walking. It was a piece of cake. **[01:08:00]** And then he started getting sick and one of the nights whereas

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you know I didn't do the 80 hours and I was hanging out and I'd seen one of my friends who worked at the hospital where worked on the floor where he was and I said, well sugar, what's going on with my friend? She said, well, Aaron, I think you need to go to the doctor and have yourself checked out and she said because he's full blown. And I said, huh? And he never disclosed.

Because when I first went into the hospital, I was wondering about why they're telling me I've got to put on this gown and the gloves and the mask and I'm looking and I'm like, okay. And I really didn't have anybody to talk to during that time, so when I spoke to my friend who worked on the floor and we were at White Castle, so she was in front and I was back, that's when she said to go get checked out.

NAOMI EXTRA: Was this like in the '80s or the early '80s?

AARON FRAZIER: Yes, early '80s.

NAOMI EXTRA: Right. And this was before Virginia?

AARON FRAZIER: No, this is after Virginia.

NAOMI EXTRA: After Virginia?

AARON FRAZIER: Yes.

NAOMI EXTRA: Wow.

AARON FRAZIER: Yeah. I was still -- I think I might have been -- I know I was actually 20 when I found out. So, I was gasping and I just was -- the people were dying left and right, and I was like, oh my God, when is it my turn? You know, it was like how do you get through this? At that particular time, you know I had a little discussion with my mother. I told her I took the test. I told her what was going on. My mother said, you all right, you all right? I said, yeah. But then I just kept being in the state of denial.

[01:10:00] Then you know the temp assignment ended, so then I started working at National State in Linden. It was really, you know at night, just

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regular hours. By this time, me and my friend, we moved to Irvington and I had already went and got tested and during the time that they tested me, they just gave me a you are, but I didn't like the way that they talked to me, so I left. I went to my doctor at that time at East Orange General and he said to me, he didn't -- this is all new. He does not know how to deal with it. He said the best thing I could tell you is just take care of yourself and be well.

And so, I'm 20 years old, hearing this from this man, and I'm like -- you know, my head just like I could have went somewhere and just shot myself, but instead I go to Beth Israel. I met somebody in one of the rooms, you know, in the support group and he suggested going over to Beth Israel, so I went over there and been at Beth Israel ever since.

During this particular time, I then just getting engrossed in work and for 12 years, I just actually just become a workaholic. Whatever, it don't matter what shift you need me, I'm just working, whatever needs to be done. You know, sorting mail, whatever, whatever. And it wasn't until I got laid off, that was in 1986, I think. No, 1996, I got laid off from the bank. [01:12:00] So by this time, I then took the package, you know the exit package, you know the weeks they gave you and everything and I did that.

Then I fell into a state of depression. I wasn't working and I just was like, oh my God, I can't believe this. And then you know a couple more friends started dying and it's just like I was in the process of closing on my condo in Society Hill, so actually it's not '96, it's like 92.

So closing, I'm waiting for them, so it was supposed to be like in '91, but something happened at the Union whether they're going to be ready and I still continue to work and do what I was supposed to do, but then once I'm

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actually in the condo, I'm like I'm okay and I continue in the state of denial, but then in '96 when I got laid off, that's when all hell broke loose. I just was in the state of depression, didn't want to be bothered by nobody. You know, I paid the mortgage up for as long as I could. You know, the money that I had in the 401 K, sold the stock, sold the bonds and then I was like okay, down to the last, with a little bit of money and I was like, well, my water was turned off, my lights was turned off and I was struggling to keep the phone on.

My friends realized that I was in a state of depression, coming to the house. They started banging on the door. [01:14:00] And I was like, I ain't going to talk to you all, but they ended up getting me out of the house, getting me back involved with the community and then I started working with Project Fire. We started doing the Fireball and everything and you know, it started...

NAOMI EXTRA: This is late '90s now?

AARON FRAZIER: Yes. So it was really good, you know. And then I started dealing with my status. I started going to the doctor on a regular, by this time and just trying to keep a positive flow going. But the kids were dying, they just kept dying and this was like really horrific. You know, every time you go to the club, so and so died. You hear these five to seven names and you knew them. And you know, it started becoming personal when you start backtracking of who you slept with. And I'm like, okay, okay and so and so, it became a crazy scenario.

NAOMI EXTRA: For everyone.

AARON FRAZIER: Yes, but I kept going. I kept doing what I do, helping out where I can and it just became chaotic. Then I got involved with, you know from the Fireball, they wanted us to get involved with the community-planning group, which is the prevention group that was started from the HIV/AIDS

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epidemic. It was okay in the beginning because they were really inclusive of consumers' participation, but then as time progressed, they weren't inclusive.

It became more of service providers securing their job, making their job more secure and less concerned about the well-being of consumers.

[01:16:00] I then had problem with them, so I became more vocal, but then they looked at me, kept looking at me as being problematic and I'm like, why am I problematic. And then it just got real ugly.

I became Chair of several, you know, different groups within the community-planning group, but I just got tired of it. You know, at this time I was working for Project Fire. I was only doing 10 hours a week then it moved to where I would say I would get compensated for going to the community-planning group, but then when the community-planning group changed to the point where they wanted to merge care and treatment with prevention, but the care and treatment only did that because treatment money did not last as long as prevention money.

Prevention money had more longevity whereas treatment money was only three years. So they wanted control over the prevention money, which lasted longer and that's when it became even clearer for those who were doing care and treatment to try to take up control over those prevention dollars.

And they took away like if I'm -- me being a consumer, me getting reimbursed for my transportation getting there, whether I took a cab, bus or train, you know I would get reimbursed. They took that away. Once they took that away, it was like why am I coming. Because nobody -- well during that time, my godmother was going for me, but if she wasn't going you know, offering a ride, I couldn't get there and they didn't care.

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[01:18:00] You know, they started doing -- it was quite obvious that it was more service provider driven even to this day. They're trying to get me to come back, but I just don't want -- I really don't feel as though it's necessary for me to be back in that scenario because I don't do well with them. I'm still trying to understand how you get to rationalize your being here, but don't rationalize my purpose of being here.

And it's quite clear that, you know, certain things that they do like they had created this, what you would call it, fraction or problem on how they would justify funding different programs. It became that, say for instance if it's scientific based methodology that they used into scientific methodology is that this infection rate for this group of people is rising, this is who we should fund even if it's more than IDU, but for people of color and specifically MSMs, they have yet to do that throughout, you know, since I've left them.

You know, in MSMs is still on the rise right now, but programming is not being done properly for them. And I've said to them for over 10 years, we are three of the largest institutions in the United States, why can't there be some type of collaboration between the three institutions to create intervention that works from here. [01:20:00] They already said the President is for what works in provision around the nation, why you can't create that intervention right here and nobody would answer. And they looked at me like I didn't know what I was talking about. That's when I -- early on, I didn't have the degree when I would go to the meeting. So it was like because I didn't have the alphabet soup, but I had the know-how they didn't respect my word, so I went and got the alphabet soup.

Now, will you respect me what I have the say now? It didn't matter, you know and it was like they're not trying to do anything different. They look at -- you know, interventions need to be transitional. Early on, they

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were, but they're not right now and with the current stats of the infection rate for MSM, it needs to be transitional because they transition from one week to the next, so you need to have intervention that meets them where they're at and that's why I have such a big issue with them and they haven't done it yet.

But then as always when different projects come up because I also do consulting with the State and CDC, they'll call me and they just haven't called me in a few years, but they will call me eventually because they know who knows what because I still interact within the community from doing the different things that I do and I do observe what transitions are going on and what is trending.

I volunteer in Newark to go, you might as well say, Paterson as well, **[unintelligible - 01:21:42]** with them and I made a commitment to only go once a month because I've gotten myself too involved with everybody else and I tend to go lacking. **[01:22:00]** Because those young people need to know that there's somebody that still cares about them, so that's why I made the commitment to them for once a month.

I said I'll give you that and then when they go on the weekend retreats, I go and help and observe and with things that I've observed something or it says that a client needs a little bit of one-on-one, I get them to who they need to be with. And kind of try to talk to them if I can, if they're open to me in a conversation because the whole thing about status, you've got to kind of let them know you're there for them. You don't force them to disclose. You make them feel comfortable with disclosing and that's why you just be there. You meet them where they're at when they're ready you talk and you'll be available and that's where I'm at.

NAOMI EXTRA: And that's what you mean when you talk about like the services being transitioned? Transitional.

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AARON FRAZIER: Transitional, yes, because it has to be because this is a population of young people specifically who were caught up in instant gratification. All they're caught up in right now is smoking weed, getting a blunt, and getting their back dug out or digging out somebody else's back. They're not thinking about the consequences of the aftermath.

They just want what they want when they want it. And that's sad. They don't even know, you know because even my own nephew, I try to tell him, you have enough time to wait to give your body up, you should be loving yourself and knowing what love is in order to receive it when it comes your way.

But most of these kids, when love truly comes their way, they're pushing it away because they don't know how to accept it. They never had unconditional love. [01:24:00] They never had somebody to accept them with flaws and all and still want to care about them, so they want the person that treats them badly and dog them out as opposed to the person who is genuinely giving you unconditional love. And it's across the board, from the straight kids to the gay kids, all the same thing because they don't know nothing about it and some of their parents don't know nothing about it.

And it's an unfortunate situation because somebody got upset with me because we were talking about a young lady who we have met and she said, "He doesn't love me if he don't beat me." And I said to the other person, "You can't get mad at her because that's what she learned." The mother didn't know that the father didn't love her or told you know, he doesn't love me unless he beats me, so the daughter -- it's going to transition from the mother to the daughter, so that's what happens. And then you have scenarios when young people, where they're in a situation about loving themselves, they don't even want to deal with

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themselves at most times and that's where we've gotten lost that. All this hatred and stuff that's going on and people killing each other for nothing. And I'm like, you know, that's one of the reason with the ballroom scene, I fell away from the ballroom scene because there was fighting. And last ball I really -- I won't say the last ball, but before I went to this ball, I got my house ready to walk and I had my little drinks and I was feeling fab and getting them ready and I couldn't get drunk, what in the world was going on.

[01:26:00] So, my spiritual side was telling me to be observant, which I wasn't. So then I stood back and I started observing and I said, oh my God, I see this or that house, big house, putting on guns on the judges' panel, they're telling them who to vote for.

I said, you know what, and then the big part was the house that we was at the ball for, the house that we came with, which was Jersey, they were trying to set them up to jump them. I said, no, we all came together on this bus and I said, oh no. I told my kids, I said once we get them to see what's going on, we're out of here and we caught that bus back to Jersey. But it was just that crazy, you know, you coming there to enjoy and have camaraderie good time and these people up there setting fights, I ain't got time for that.

NAOMI EXTRA: Well, while you're talking about the ballroom and also thinking about the poem that you read in the very beginning, which was like about night life a little bit and music, you talk about how you got involved with the ballroom scene in Newark and what were some of the places that you went?

AARON FRAZIER: Well, the Robert Treat will be where we planned the Fireball, but then okay, those balls would only occur -- the original balls only occurred once a year in Newark originally and it was a girlfriend thing, but when

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houses became houses then you can look for a ball like maybe once a month, but then you know, new kids wanted to have practice before the real ball.

[01:28:00] So then people started doing mini balls and we would do mini balls at places like Birds Lounge, the Blue Swan back during the day, Black Box, Zanzibar, The Honey Hole, which used to be on Broad Street; Laurel's Garden that used to be on Clinton Avenue; Irvington Manor. It was a lot of outlets to have a mini ball. You don't have that today.

You know, even for a ball, if we want to have a ball in Jersey in Newark, you're going to spend close to anywhere from \$5,000.00 to \$10,000.00 to have a ball and if you're going to do that, that's just for the rental of the space for the venue. You're talking about security, that's another say \$1,500.00. You might as well round it to an even \$2,000.00.

You're doing trophies, another thousand. You doing like cash prizes, that's another five. So then you've got people that you got to pay, the MC, the DJ, a couple of performers, you might as well say that's an additional five. So the price is really, it went up, so it's like it's not that prevalent. If you're not in with an organization or get a sponsorship, it's costly, it's costly.

NAOMI EXTRA: Do you remember the first ball that you went to?

AARON FRAZIER: It was at the Terrace Ballroom; it was a girlfriend ball. That was the first ball that I got to see. I'm trying to...

NAOMI EXTRA: What year?

AARON FRAZIER: Oh, God. This was in, I'm going to say, 1980, 1980. **[01:30:00]** I forgot about Bobbie White used to have the Doll House, which was on William Street over top of Jay's Restaurant; before it became Jay's Restaurant, it was over top of it. And it just was a fab time. Then I guess once Jay's

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bought that building then he tried to do something on Branford and it wasn't the same. Then they did something over top of the Adams Theater. You know, they used to have mini balls there then they had the mini balls there at Burke's. Then there was this other little place, it was like a chess club that used to be on Washington Street, they would have mini balls there. So a lot of the places that we used to have, we don't have at all now.

NAOMI EXTRA: What's a girlfriend ball?

AARON FRAZIER: Back then like a girlfriend ball was like, the only way I could say it, you've seen *Paris Is Burning*?

NAOMI EXTRA: Uh-hmm.

AARON FRAZIER: Okay, Dorian Corey and Avis Pendavis, and Pepper LaBeija would get together, no I'm not going to say Pepper. We're going to say Bobbie White of Jersey. We're going to say and use Bobby White and say Bobbie White because Bobbie White is and was one the prevalent people back then who wasn't even mentioned in *Paris Is Burning*. But for the Jersey perspective, he set the tone for what you should be looking for walking certain categories and even though he was more of a Las Vegas showgirl, he was very entertaining and he would do these like cabaret scenarios. [01:32:00] They will be, you know, just entertainment, you know whether or not it was female impersonation or you know, have a group of transgenders dancing around, whatever the case maybe, and then they would have this child, who did a snake charming dance, Ms. Taboo and it was two others, I forgot their names, but these were the people who what the girlfriends giving these balls back then.

Before the House of LaBeija, before the house of Corey, before back then redline and all of them, you know, but for Jersey -- and some of the Jersey, it goes a little bit further than the ones that I mentioned because

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I really didn't interact with. You know it was like if you wasn't working or doing something positive, I really didn't bother with a lot of them kids back then.

NAOMI EXTRA: So, you became -- you kind of started on the ballroom scene around 1980 and then...

AARON FRAZIER: No, I didn't start on the ballroom scene until actually, I started in I will say '92.

NAOMI EXTRA: Okay. Your first ball that you went to was in 1980?

AARON FRAZIER: Right.

NAOMI EXTRA: Okay.

AARON FRAZIER: Because I didn't believe in them. I just didn't thought it was entertaining and then all of a sudden when one of my friends or one of the kids that I knew from the neighborhood, Pattie Pendavis, she started the House of La Belle. She was also doing female impersonation, but she was part of the House of Pendavis, but she started her own house in Jersey and when she did that, I got involved. [01:34:00] And when I got involved in my first ball, which was the Valentino Ball on Fuller Street, that's when was my first ball to walk.

NAOMI EXTRA: So what category did you?

AARON FRAZIER: Back then I was supposed to be walking Wench Queen up in Drags for the first time, but I ended up walking Wench Queen up in Drag Runway to Foley.

NAOMI EXTRA: All right, we're back on.

AARON FRAZIER: Okay.

NAOMI EXTRA: So can you tell me a little bit about -- so around '92, I get this picture of you getting involved, with becoming active in the ballroom scene and you had a house?

AARON FRAZIER: Right.

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NAOMI EXTRA: How did that...

AARON FRAZIER: Okay, after Pattie, the mother of the House of La Belle, she died where she was on her death bed, but she left a message even though I was the last of the royal house member, I was the duchess and she said, when I go, the house goes to you. **[Unintelligible - 01:35:11]** you keep it going. I want you to succeed me as mother because I had gotten more notoriety than she did and she was not a happy camper.

At our first house ball, she is a mother they didn't go up for, but when I came out, the whole ballroom went up and she was really upset about it, but it wasn't that I did anything spectacular, I just befriended a lot of people, you know, in the ballroom scene. You know, talked to the kids even if they weren't in our house, if there was a child that was getting prepared and I looked at him or her, and I say that ain't going to look right, child, help this child get ready even if he or she was a competition. I didn't care. **[01:36:00]** I just wanted us to have a good competition.

And so that's what helped me get notoriety in the ballroom scene, you know, because I helped those who you know -- they were already part of a house and their parents wasn't helping them. So then you know, I took over the mother role, you know even as the duchess [isn't] part of the executive board for the House of La Belle, but she was -- she just -- that was her stuff, but I didn't let it dwell.

And even before she died when I was supposed to start my house and was getting to ready to walk out first Fireball, the people said, the members said, Pattie don't have nobody walking with her, I don't know what we're going to do. And I said, okay we will not walk as Devines tonight, we will walk as La Belle's one last time to support her, so that she doesn't feel like she's alone as she was sick at that time and that's what we did.

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And I just wasn't hurt when she died, I was hurt in everything, but I continued doing what we do.

The other spot that I was thinking about that I missed was the Special Police Men's Club. They used to be on William Street. We used to have mini balls there as well.

NAOMI EXTRA: Okay.

AARON FRAZIER: They were very supportive as well for the ballroom community. And then once I started my house, we started doing different things. I believe in Community Service, feeding the homeless, clothing, those without clothes, doing stuff of that nature. So we started doing more community service stuff within the community or helping another organization that was doing something of that nature.

[01:38:00] So you know, we were doing stuff of that nature, more so than other houses. Then the houses started seeing what I was doing and I said because that's where I come from, doing community service so that's what we're supposed to do. So we started doing things to give more positive look at what kids do and can do. Our objective was not just to be walking balls, we encouraged kids to get jobs, go to school, do something productive with their lives.

In my house, a lot of the kids -- one of my kids graduated from Rutgers, with a journalism degree, worked for some paper down in DC. Another -- two more became nurse's assistants professional became RNs as transgenders and they lived their lives accordingly and they still do that to this day. Others, you know, became workers, you know supervisors in different capacities, but overall we weren't just part of just anybody, we were making a difference.

And then when people saw what we were doing, it started gravitating towards other houses. They started doing things, going to school, doing

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things more productive, being more of a positive look as opposed to the negative things that that was during that time being reflected from the houses. And even though when Project Fire was conceptionally started, it was supposed to become its own agency, but at that particular time, I was young and unaware of the particular dynamics on how to make that happen.

[01:40:00] It wasn't until very later after the fact that I learned what to do, but by this time, I just didn't have that in me to do that anymore, you know, because it's like I was the senior outreach worker, but I was also assistant to the coordinator of the program. And when he resigned, I became the program coordinator and I was trying to do things quickly, but it wasn't quick enough and administrative found out about what I was doing and that's why I got terminated. Because I was trying to create a board to support them and the person who was administrative was basically near to tear it apart and she ended up tearing it apart. And it was nothing that I could do at that point, but she got fired too, you know and she wasn't a nice person. I'll just leave that at that.

NAOMI EXTRA: So there's lots here, I want to also tie back into the thread of your getting like more into religion and did you say you became a deacon?

AARON FRAZIER: Yes.

NAOMI EXTRA: So is that around -- that we're talking like the '90s, the mid-'90s as well?

AARON FRAZIER: More -- yeah, I would say mid-'90. I got involved with Unity Fellowship, Liberation and Truth. I helped them start their -- well, I'm the second male deacon ordained under Liberation. Well, you might as well say Unity Fellowship Church Movement in Newark. I'm the second male deacon. [01:42:00] Don Ransom is the first. He's also a reverend now within the movement. I'm within, like I said I wasn't caught up in the titles. I'm just about doing the work.

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And during the beginning, me and Don bumped heads and we bumped heads unnecessarily because Don is -- you know, he's a spoiled baby, he's also the baby of his family out of 14 kids, he's the baby, but I wasn't there to compete with him. I was there just to help make stuff happen because that's what I do. And in the midst of me doing that because Unity back then was just a female based church, when I came in into the set, I brought the houses in even though they treated the houses very badly and I had to live with the aftermath of how they treated them. I stayed to help build a men's ministry within Unity in Newark.

So when it comes down to men's day, I had planned out the first year. I assisted Don. I didn't take credit from that. I assisted Don in making this happen. Let him take all the credit. The second year, it kind of came out, who was doing the work so he got upset so then they started saying, well, Aaron, you take the lead and you do what you've got to do to make it happen. I said, okay, do I get -- will you accept all what I want to do? So then they said, yeah, so I did the first men's month. For men's day, I had something going on every Sunday, a male speaker. [01:44:00] I had a workshop to work for building bridges between the men and women in the movement to have, which created that ongoing dialogue. It will be ongoing; it never wasn't supposed to stop.

Then when they realized how much cool I started bringing when it came to men's day, when it was men's day, they had over 100 men in their church. And I mean, I've got the brothers from Brooklyn, from New York, from DC, from Maryland. They all came to support this one day and you know, they were just at a loss for words. For those two years that I did, was in charge of the men's ministry for that time, I received archbishop award for service for two years. I got a big old plaque about what I've done for the church.

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And then when the coup occurred, I just quietly left. They tried to talk me back in coming, I just -- one thing, I had nothing bad to say about the church, it's just, I just don't think I could go back. It's just something, a part of me, that is just not there because that means I would have to like I like to go out and have drinks and hang out with friends of mine, that means I would have to be mindful of my activities again and I'm all right where I'm at right now, you know. I still do community service whether I'm part of the church or not. I still, you know, deal with my spirituality whether I'm part of the church or not. Do I miss them? Yes, because even with family, we fight.

[01:46:00] But with this church family with Unity one thing I could say, it was still family, it's just unfortunately that that particular pastor, she and I just never gel. We got along in the beginning, but when I went against her and I really didn't go against her, I questioned her authority at that particular time, but what child doesn't you know, but she still has issues, but that's on her. She got to live with that.

I'm okay, you know, but that portion, I mean because there's times where with me being at the center, helping out at the center and a lot of people, they're calling me deacon. I'm like looking at them, I'm like, child, please stop doing that. Don't call me a deacon, you know. I'm okay. I don't have to be recognized as that. Just call me Aaron. Just can call me Oona. You know, I'm cool where I'm at because at the end of the day, I got to feel good with myself with what I do and I do feel good with myself. I don't have to prove nothing to nobody. And that's where I'm at.

NAOMI EXTRA: I'm wondering about you said you got the houses involved with the church? How, what was that like and was there like some resistance? So how did you do that?

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AARON FRAZIER: There was definitely -- well, with the houses, I had a good rapport, but the resistance came with the church. The church was not ready to deal with men even though at that particular time, the affirmation said God is love and love is for everyone, they really didn't understand it. They didn't conceptualize it.

[01:48:00] They did not even themselves -- how you -- what is the word -- the only thing I can say, they didn't understand it themselves, that's it. Because if they understood it, it's just like forgiveness. We all make mistakes, but if you don't start forgiving yourself for the mistakes you've done, you're still kind of holding yourself hostage for something, a mistake that you carelessly was thinking, it wasn't like you did it on purpose, that becomes a problem and it hinders individual's growth. And they don't understand that, that's why some of them are still walking around like with high chips on their shoulders.

One individual, she and I were the best of friends for over 30 years and because she wanted to be more in with them, she threw our friendship away. I helped you come out the closet. I was there when you had to come out to your family. I was there when your son was questioning you and I put him in a headlock to not disrespect you. I got your family to respect you and you just kicked me to the curb and that was the most hurtful and painful thing that I incurred from this church.

But I'm okay with it, because at the end of the day, I still walk around with my head held high. Regardless of what or how bad I may feel, I still carry a smile on my face and I know at the end of the day, I've then helped quite a few people in the community, whereas this individual, who was once my friend, did not. I do not know nothing about being a lesbian or what not, but I was friends with lesbians who I got my friends to befriend her, to teach her how to be a lesbian.

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[01:50:00] So it was like, when I say pain and the most part that hurts the most with that whole scenario, I saw her son who is a police officer and he was real distant, whereas before it was real cool. So I learned, I'm good, I'm good, I'm real good. You know, so those are the only things that you know kind of bothers me.

And then you know, I know they floored when they see me in certain scenarios and situations because I'm there and a lot of the church family speaks to me, but she's still sitting there, going like this. I'm moving on. Honey please, you stay stagnant. So you know, that's where I'm at, you know.

NAOMI EXTRA: Thank you. So I think we will end here.

AARON FRAZIER: Okay.

NAOMI EXTRA: And I'll just close my thumb. The date, it's March 23, 2016. I'm Naomi Extra at Rutgers, Newark interviewing Aaron Frazier for the Queer Newark Oral History Project. Thank you so much.

AARON FRAZIER: No problem.