

Queer Newark Oral History Project

Interviewee: Rodney Gilbert

Interviewer: Christina Strasburger

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Location: Rutgers University-Newark

Christina Strasburger: Today is April 2nd, 2016. My name is Christina Strasburger and I'm here interviewing Rodney Gilbert at Rutgers University-Newark, for the Queer Newark Oral History Project. Rodney, thank you so much for being a part of the project and taking time to share your experience with us today. To begin, I'm going to ask you to please introduce yourself and provide some biographical background including when and where you were born.

Rodney Gilbert: Good morning. My name is Rodney Gilbert. I am the Executive Director of Yendor Productions, Yendor Arts. I am a Newark resident born in the '60s. I've lived my early life and high school in the City of Newark. I went to Crescent Street School in the Central Ward and then went to Arts High School. Left, went to college and then came directly back and have worked at various places within Newark's community. You want early, you said.

Christina Strasburger: Early. So who raised you? It's a composition of your...

Rodney Gilbert: Okay, so I was raised by my grandmother until my mother was in a position to participate. So that was about... I say about seven or eight when mom came in. So we all lived together at that time, but predominantly, it was my grandmother and my grandfather's influence who raised me in my early life. [00:02:00] I say my mother had hardships, but I had a very stable home with my grandmother and my grandfather. I was telling someone... pre-school started prior to me going to kindergarten. I remember them coming to have a conversation. They interviewed my family to enroll me in pre-school. My grandfather was... he was opposed to me going to pre-school. So I didn't go to pre-school. I started in kindergarten. He felt that I needed to spend time and grow at that age within my household. Because my grandmother didn't work because he didn't allow her to

work. He didn't want her to work. Because he felt that he made enough money to take care of our home and that the children needed someone there physically on a daily basis. So he was very old-fashioned. He was the man, he would provide. So that's the kind of upbringing.

Once she had a job, and I remember him having all the family members – like my mother's brothers and sisters, they got together and he had a conversation with them about asking her to leave her job. He felt – even though my brother and I now we were in school that she should still be at home to greet us when we came back from school. I guess a kind of traditional, old-fashioned kind of upbringing. But it was always... the other exciting part was my mother, she was always in New York. So she would come and she would take me to New York. She just was an icon in fashion and very attractive and beautiful. So I always enjoyed the time with my mother and I loved New York. I guess you can say I was a spoiled kid.

[00:04:00] In addition, though, I went to a school – I say, people find it shocking – I think there are parts of me that are very reserved and shy and then being feminine on top of it. I think I withdrew more, but because of how I dressed and – I was a reader, like public reader; I love to read in reading groups – that made me popular. So the popularity in a sense kind of wrapped itself around me and kind of stopped kids from picking on me as much with calling me names. People say, you're gay. Not popular in the '70s. That and then I dressed extremely well. That was the thing. When you're in the 'hood, you got to have something. You're either the educated one. You're the one who dances the best. Or you dress the best. Just something. You have the best food. So I was the best dresser. That kind of stuff protected me.

There's a five-year age gap between my brother and I. We were raised in a home together, and we fought all the time. All of the time. I think

it was intrusive, my coming, for him. I disrupted his life. And I think there was shame there because of... because I had feminine ways. I think he was embarrassed by me a little bit. But I know he loved me, like in hindsight, looking back at it; and he was my brother. We did wait for Santa Claus together. We did do all the family functions together. We did go through all the ups and downs that a family goes through. The loss of our dog. I look at those things.

He died – I don't know, how many years has it been – maybe 10 years. There was a closeness then. [00:06:00] But I think because of what people deemed, as I was gay before I even knew I was gay, it was something shameful for him. He was overweight. I used to be like, "So, you're overweight. You're fat. You're fat. You're fat." That was our fight.

That was our fight as children, as kids. I remember first day of school, he'd say, "Listen," and I don't think it was all because I was gay. I think it also was just a five-year age gap. He was like, "Oh, why are you here? Why do I have to do all this stuff for you? You walk behind me. You don't walk next to me when we go to school." I'm like, "I don't need you to take me to school. It's only around the corner. I don't need you, it's only around the corner." But I was supported heavily by my grandfather and by my grandmother, and by my mom, to do and be anything I wanted to be.

I was raised... my grandmother, she put a lot of love into me, my brother, to our family. For where there was... places where it wasn't, where it didn't appear there was fulfillment of the love. She overcompensated. And I never needed for anything. Like I was... I didn't need for anything. My grandfather made sure. There was always the ills of what was affecting my mother. But my grandmother would bandaid all of that as much as she could.

That was the early part. It was happy. I was sad at times when my mom was not there. I wanted my mother. I've always had a great

relationship with my mother in and throughout her addiction... she was my mother. We could not talk about my mother. We're family. They think you don't know. They would spell her name like a... So when you start... just because they didn't want me to know. I was like, "That's my mom's name? You talking about my **[00:08:00]** mother, stop talking about my mother." We just had this thing. I remember her telling me, "No matter what, I'm your mother and your mother loves you. Mommy loves you." And I could feel it. It was a feeling.

And then when she came to live with us, I was, I think, very overprotective of her. My mother grew up... she's one of the first African Americans in parochial school and I feel that she was a part of what would be called the test, and it caused... the nuns referred to them as being like monkeys and how you deal with that. And being the only black... extremely light, my uncle like her, extremely light, but I think my family's intention moving here, my grandmother's mother and all of her siblings, a percentage of her siblings moved to Newark and then New York, was they were Catholic. They became Catholic. It gave them a certain amount of freedom and political power to be connected to one of the priests and to one of the Catholic churches here in Newark.

So I was also raised with a thing about... there wasn't anything that I could not do based on race. I always heard the story in Orbach's **[spelling?]** where people followed my mother and my grandmother. My mother was a child and called them niggers. Get out of the store. And my grandmother tapped the lady, "You know, there's a time you couldn't do it," and when they arrested them, but because they were attached to monsignor, they had to get an unmarked car and nothing happened.

[00:10:00] So I was raised with that kind of thing like it doesn't matter. I traveled, my entire childhood, and of course, it was a place

where I was integrated in the stuff. We were always kind of the first in discovering that thing of difference and things where there wasn't equality. Of course, the lack of diversity, but it was about equality, trying to... I don't know, give us things that were subpar. We just didn't allow it. So I was raised like we don't allow that and I think that's where the fighter in me comes. Which helped me when I discovered who I was. That I am a gay man. And it being here in an urban community, that is different than New York City. Very close but very, very different. You deal with homophobia and that kind of stuff. There's something that I think that because of the way I was raised, that gives me that drive not to have... I didn't spend a lot of time in a closet, let me say that.

When I really realized and I knew, then I was like, "Okay, I got to go for what I know and change my life and be free." And come to peace with myself. Because that was the hardest, come to peace with myself. You deal with people and there are the ups and downs of the homophobia and the hate that you feel when you encounter people because of who you are or who they perceive me to be. A lot of times that they perceive me to be, I am a gay man. But their hatred for people because of the fear, the stigma, all that stuff. You can feel it. It could almost embody a space. Like walking out the sidewalk downtown and you encounter somebody and they look at you and they know and they...

[00:12:00] Do you know, I could feel the hatred and the anger. It's based on what my foundation is on that day, how I respond. Because I almost say it's like I'm not affected by it. Some days, it saddens me. Some days, I'm extremely angry. Other days, I'm like, "Fuck 'em." Literally so it goes through those things and so it doesn't have a lot to do with them. It has a lot to do with where I am. Spiritually grounded or if I'm just having one of my days where I'm not feeling so great about who I am and where I am in my life. But some of that, it helped

me through my high school years and when I really had a self-discovery.

I went to a magnet school. The performing arts school. I went to Arts High which was such a... something I would say divine. It's only 500 students. I worked on theater two periods a day to develop my craft. I started acting when I was 10. It disciplined me more. It helped to build my self-confidence. So when it really came to the point of confronting my sexuality, I had a freedom. It was a school where we had a freedom to explore who we were, artistically and academically. You say early on, it was kind of early on. I started acting at 10 so that also professionally changed my life and opened up the world. My grandmother, her brother, her sister, we did family things that exposed me into a lot. To travel, to go out, eat, explore places. That was part of the ritual of exposing me to the world and the things that they had when they were coming up in Norfolk, Virginia, and then of course, my family was in Manhattan, up in Harlem. It's a whole cultural thing and the whole thing about exploring. I had that but then theater opened up the whole box. Limited. Nothing was almost impossible. There was also something, a safety that wrapped me around that. Looking back, if I did not have those things, I say dealing with my sexuality, my life might have been totally different. Because of the lack of self-esteem and a lack of acceptance. If I didn't have those other things to kind of support me and propel me out to explore my life and be who I wanted to be.

Christina Strasburger: So how did you first become aware that you were attracted to...?

Rodney Gilbert: To men?

Christina Strasburger: Do you recall your **[crosstalk 00:15:06]**?

Rodney Gilbert: I just think... I think early on, before kindergarten... It wasn't attracted to men. I was attracted to big T-shirts, which would make it look like I had a dress on. I remember these things, like really... So no more kind of... I don't know if it was because I idolized my mom.

I mean she was beautiful. She was so beautiful to me and glamorous. But there were a lot of kids who had glamorous moms. Doesn't mean that they put long T-shirts on or try to put heels on. It just... I think it was in who I was early on. Then the fascination – which was '72 – I was very fascinated by Diana Ross. And she was the first woman who I thought was more attractive than my mother. And it was a thing about her complexion. [00:16:00] She was darker than my mother and I'm dark.

And it just was there. So it wasn't even attraction to men. It was... I had things in my spirit that said I was different. Then I say about... I guess, I don't remember a first... I know that my grandfather had a friend and he worked with him. And he would play with me and pick me up. It was something about the way he played with me. Might have been a little inappropriate. I can still smell him. And it was a manly smell. That was the thing. I have children. I was with my kid's mother for years. I had girls... I thought I was straight. I knew distinctly when I was discovering, it's about these endorphins and the smells that I'm more attracted to men than I am to women. Because I could be that bisexual thing. And I was like, "Oh, this is so unfair. That's not truly who I am."

Now, as I got older, I'd say in middle school, I started to have attractions. But I think it was there way before... there was an attraction say to the same sex. Or to the opposite sex. I just think it's in my DNA. I mean when I discovered it, I was like, "Oh my God." It's not that it was an experience – I was an artist – I was having... and I was like, "This is not an experience." So to thy own self, be true. It was painful. I was already black, a man in America. I know you got to work harder, you got to do all these stuff. [00:18:00] And then I was artsy and I was like, "Oh, God, I got enough stuff." That I always have to overcome. I was like, "Damn, please, this can't be."

And I was crying. That's how I know the support that I had coming up. Had me ready, I'd say, when I had the full self-discovery, that I could stand on my own two feet and live with it. Because I prayed for it to go away. Not a long time. I'd say that wasn't long. I realized I am, then I had a – I guess you could call him... we were in high school so we didn't want to define it... He didn't want to define that he was dating me.

But I had like a boyfriend. I had a girlfriend, too. But I had this kind of secret boyfriend and I was like, "I'm not gonna see him anymore. It's over." But I continued to see him. I was feeling bad about it. I considered myself to be a forthright, honest person. I had started to have to lie to my girlfriend and it hurt my girlfriend. She was my kid's mother. And even in high school, we lived together. My first child was born when I was 16. And we had a great relationship. We were best friends. We were great lovers.

When I started to have my secret boyfriend, it caused me a lot of pain. And I was like, "I'm not gonna do this anymore." But I continued to see him and I just said, "You know, God, I don't wanna be miserable and crying every time I see him. I need to make a peace with this. Please help me make a peace with it." And I tell you, in no time, something came over me. There was a process. I still went through things. I was a junior. I never even tracked this. [00:20:00] I was a junior and me and my kid's mother broke up my freshman year in college. So I tried to maintain it. I tried to. But I made a peace kind of internally like I had accepted a little bit about... this is a part of who I am. I cannot be devastated because of my attraction. Yeah, I couldn't.

I had to make a peace with it. Like I really didn't see him. I would say my relationship with him was not the same as the relationship I had with her. We had a family. Of course, I took care of my family. I had become my grandfather. And I still was in high school. And I

was in professional theater in the city. I was doing some side bar hustling. And I had created a life and I loved her and I didn't even see myself leaving her. It was once it got to the point where I had to create the lies after lies. It dimmed my light and I think I was drinking more. Now, I always had been a partier. I'm an artist and I don't say that attaches you to being alcoholic and a drug addict, but I did things in excess. I was excessive in that stuff at an early age.

By 16, 17, I saw it got bigger and broader. And I think that was because I couldn't be truthful. I didn't know how to say I was more attracted to a man than I was to her. And I loved her. I still love her. She's still my friend. We've raised two wonderful children. And we work in concert in regard to our family. We're still a family.

[00:22:00] My partner, when we were together, for those years that we were all together, we spent Thanksgiving with my kids, kid's mom, her husband, my mother. So we have a nice reality show family. I just want to exploit myself like that.

Christina Strasburger: One of the questions that I know that I'm interested in is how did your grandfather and your grandmother respond to the revelation that you were gay?

Rodney Gilbert: Well, my grandfather died when I was in middle school, seven or eight. The impact of that was really that my life had changed because he... there was nothing I could not have. He helped create this thing in me where he'd take me shopping and I think it was because he grew up poor and I could go pick things that I want. I would go in the store, go to my section and just have access to what I want and then he would come, look at the items and then pay for them. That was kind of like, "I could do that." I had every Fisher Price toy. So he didn't really get to experience that. I don't know if he knew when I was small, because you could see the things, the characteristics, but he was highly supportive. He was highly supportive.

My grandmother? I don't know if she was in... I don't think she was in denial. We just kind of didn't talk about it. She was a champion for me. Once she said something derogatory to me and I was so upset and she had never... and she could be brutal. She was brutal. I get my tongue because I'm gay. I get it from my grandmother. She was brutal.

But she never put me down. One time she did and she... I could see it hurt her. [00:24:00] But like everything, she'd have a conversation with me about it, gave me what she felt was wrong or right. Like when I was going to be a father at 16. She was like, "You need to be clear. You're really young. You have a future ahead of you. What are you gonna do? You should wipe that stupid smirk/grin off of your face and think." So she would talk to me and do those kind of things. So when it came to sexuality, I kind of didn't talk about it. I had a boyfriend in college. He came up with me. She said my mother told her when we first had the conversation. Because when I moved back to Jersey, I had a friend and I was living at my grandmother's and he was coming over and we were going to my cousin's wedding and I wanted to take him. She was like, "Oh, I don't want the family to be talking. You're throwing up this homosexuality." I was like, "Wait a minute. If you have a problem with that, like if it's a problem with me being me, then I think I should move. I mean, I love you, but I need to be comfortable. And who I am is just who I am." My brother had a girlfriend who was a drug addict. Like she's high all the time so we would rather have her just cause she's a female like falling in the soup. Just cause I'm with a man? I said, "That doesn't match up to me." And my grandmother was strong. She came to me the next day and she said, "You know what, you're right. You're absolutely right." So it was always support. We had other family problems. It wasn't about me, I think, being gay. I don't know. We didn't have a lot of conversation. She wanted me to be responsible with whatever I did.

She wanted me to have some integrity and respect for myself and my family. Those were my grandmother's biggest issues. [00:26:00] Like you don't do certain things in public. It wasn't about sexuality. It was about drinking or partying or dancing or... She's like, "Oh, ripped jeans." I come from an era wearing ripped jeans. She was like, "That looks... you look homeless."

So she had that kind of... that was more of an issue, I think, than the sexuality. I don't know if she had some burdens that she worried. She also wanted me to be a responsible dad. When I came back... how I got into education and I came back so I could be closer to New York. Her thing was, "You need a job. You have a child and you need to raise your children and you need a job and it needs to be honest money. And here's an application. You have more than enough credits to be a substitute teacher." I didn't plan... my grandmother gave me the package and said, "This is a direction that will help you in being an honorable parent because you need to take care."

And I was taking care of my daughters. She was like, "It needs to be legal money." So certain things I could not argue with her about. It made sense. I wasn't angry. I don't want to be a teacher but it made sense. So that's what I did. Now before she died, I stopped drinking, partying at 25.

Christina Strasburger: When did she die?

Rodney Gilbert: So my grandmother must have died... I was in my 30s. I might have been 32, 33. Something like that. I'm 49 now. I've always lived well, but I was living well, I was grounded. My mother had been clean for a very long time. Somewhere around seven years clean, about 23 and she... [00:28:00] I hosted a dinner for something, one of the holidays. And she was there and she was saying, "You know, I'm fine." I was with my partner then. So she knew. We were all a family. Partner, kids' mother, mom, grandmother. All of us. And she said, "If I was a daddy, damn fine, because I know that Camilla and Rodney are fine."

They're stable." Because she was a matriarch and she was really the foundation. She was right.

There were times... because my grandmother raised me and my mother was not stable... I can remember being fearful as a child, that I didn't want anything. What would I do if something happened to my grandmother? Like where would I go? Who would take care of me? I don't know why I was worried but that's some fear that I had. I can remember praying instead, "Oh God please. Don't let my grandmother die. If something happened, I don't know where I would go. Who would take care of me?" Because there was the thing about when I was born, at one point, she already had my brother, someone else in my family was going to adopt me. They didn't want me to know who my parents were. Those are one of those arguments that you learn over the stuff some adults were screaming about it.

And because my relative didn't want me to know who my mother was, my grandmother took me. She said, "Cause that would never work." That would never work, it would come out. It would traumatize me and she did want me to know who we were. Especially my family. It would always come out. Somewhere in a big family gathering.

Christina Strasburger: Who were the other adults that made up your household and your experience growing up?

Rodney Gilbert: Grandfather, grandmother, my brother, my mom, and my uncle would come and go. Then there was my mom and my stepfather. I have a stepfather, who after he died – I don't know, I was [fond of him] in hindsight. I hated him. I thought I hated him. [00:30:00] I think I was jealous of his relationship with my mom. But my father died when I was three and I don't remember him. I remember his car, certain incidents, but I can't... I don't remember. I have a picture but I can't remember visualizing his face.

My grandmother's brother was very huge in my life. He worked at my school. Yeah, he was the Head Custodian and he also... after my

grandfather died... my grandfather was very lenient on me. My grandmother's brother, uncle, he... about appropriate or inappropriate. Part of the thing about, I think, I'm disciplined in ways, is it comes from him. He worked in my school. I used a lot to wear my hats in school. No hats. How to eat at the table. He taught me to order even off the kids' menu. I wasn't allowed to eat hamburgers and hotdogs out at restaurants. That's all I've ever wanted. That influence was heavy on me.

So no, I want a hamburger and a hotdog. He goes, "No, you don't." It was like... he'd step away from the table and he said, "You need to learn to eat off a menu. A hotdog and a hamburger is a cook-out. It's a barbecue. We're at a restaurant." So he did all those things. He would have all sorts of discussions. He took me in and bought me my first pair of eight shoes which was when you could wear men shoes. All when in New York. And picked them out. He paid for them. He would take me, give me my haircut. He was a big influence.

Then I had some best friends growing up in the neighborhood. They were a group of guys. We were really a close knit group of friends who surrounded me and supported me. So I started acting when I was in fifth grade. [00:32:00] I was in Star-Ledger. It made me very popular and I will say my community wrapped itself around me. I keep using that word, but they really did. Because they were proud. I was supported and maybe given passes throughout life because I was doing theater and in the newspaper and performing and traveling. Even -- I'm a kid and I did everything that was in my community and they go, "Rodney you can't do this. We're gonna do it. But you gotta wait. We're gonna steal this car battery." I want to do it, too, because you want to... "No, you can't get in trouble."

So it was that kind of stuff. My community, I will say that. That's what I mean. That's what I love... I live a block away from where I grew up. Being in my community, they helped between what my

family put into me and my teachers. I had great teachers coming up, Equipment Street. I am who I am because of their support, their love and their support. And able to be African American, openly gay man, who lives in the city, works in the city, wheels and deals, and very supportive, and I think, loved. I feel the love. I think I designed my programming like this that everyone could get, that black men in Newark could get what I've received.

There's a fear amongst people of color. Only a few of us are going to make it so we got to push the one who can make it. That's what I am. I'm the one who is going to make it. I have friends who were just as gifted in various areas. [00:34:00] But only like two of us, we get selected to be things. Now, I tell you, there were times I knew people talked about me. They were ashamed because it was like, "Damn, if he wasn't gay, it would be better." Without them even saying it. It just didn't work for me trying to be... I was who I was. Like my physicality was what it was. I felt uncomfortable. I remember one time trying to change my walk. And I was like, this is not...

Christina Strasburger:

How old were you?

Rodney Gilbert:

I had to be in middle school. Because I was walking once and a guy... I walked around the corner and a grown man looked at me and say, "You are fucking gay." It wasn't like he was trying to attack me. He saw it. And I was a kid. He spotted it. It came out of his gut. Like he was so shocked. And I am... that hurt. I remember what you should work on. I was like, I'm not changing. And I wanted to fit in. I think as a kid, I'm like... it's too much work. I felt uncomfortable. I'm like, "I'm not gonna be anybody else." I like being me. I'm glad I did. But again, being in the arts supported that and that I had the support of my family, just about me succeeding.

So those things, I think, kind of protected me from some of the stuff that I know other gay men go through and other people who live in poor environments and men of color, they go through... I think I had a

nice support. My family had issues that all families have. All the drama and trauma that could happen. I'm wouldn't say we were not Ozzie and Harriet but no, not in a long stretch.

[00:36:00] So I think those things. I said I had great teachers. I had great teachers at Equipment Street. Newark Public Schools at that time, there were deficits, but I still had nurturing teachers. Especially in my later years. Again, then I also was one of the chosen ones. So I was supported out the door. At that point, the schools had tiers. So you'd be in the top group, second top, third top, going out to the bottom. I was always in the top class. Except one year, they mixed us. They came up with some idea that didn't work. They put us all back together. I was with the same kids from kindergarten. So like we were in the same class.

I remember some of them from kindergarten especially by first grade, second, you just... you stayed in the same class. So we kind of... there are people still who I Facebook who still live in Newark. We're a strong unit. I had one kid -- then we went to high school together and we just had our high school reunion. Allen and I have always gone to school together our entire lives. That thing about community and support, love.

I just say all the blessings for that. Things could have turned out totally different and I understand the pain of being gay. I understand the pain of being black and gay. I just had a strong support. I could see how it would bring depression, addiction, suicide. I've had my moments. Like I said, when I'm really scared I was like, "God, please no." I'm just crying. That's what I tell people, it's not a choice.

[00:38:00] If I could have prayed it away, it would have been gone. If I could have made a choice to be something else, I would have been something else. Who would want to be black, poor, and gay? Just like as a natural choice. I don't buy in to that at all. Not saying that some people are making it up. I don't believe it. I know it not to

be true because of who I am. I'm not like this made up thing that's false. It's who I am. I just don't see it. That's why I knew in my heart. That's just who you are. To thyself be true. Then I've got God to work it out for me. And it happened. I'm just saying... I feel lucky for that. That there wasn't a lot of years of pain and struggle. More self-harm.

Christina Strasburger: You've spoken a lot about God, growing up with a Catholic household.

Rodney Gilbert: They were Catholic. When it got to my generation, my mom didn't follow and my grandmother didn't. My cousins in New York did. So I went to a Pentecostal Church. And then I stopped going to church. I'm spiritual. I just know... it's in hindsight that I could say these things. But I know in fear of pain that I went to God and not. I had an issue with organized religion when I had my kid. Some of the sermons just didn't make sense to me. Because I was judging the people who I found to be hypocritical. Like you talk all this other stuff up in this higher thing and we lied about what was really going on in our lives. Didn't want to baptize my daughter because I wasn't married as some... [unintelligible - 00:39:55] like, "That's not true." "Yes, it's true." That was something... [00:40:00] What does she have to do with a decision that I made not to get married? I'm not getting married at 16.

But I always knew that there was something that protected me. Even when I didn't work it out with the church, I always felt very centered in my God. As I've grown older, it's become clearer. What the spirituality is and who my God is. I think which grounds me. It's totally not traditional. I cuss like a sailor. It's in my DNA. I don't believe I'm going to hell... I just believe that's something created by men to control the masses and especially African Americans through slavery and masters controlling you through this doctrine and taking away your religion to give you a religion to tell you it's sinful for you

to run, it's sinful not to be obedient. I don't buy into that. I don't buy into that at all.

It's probably because I also knew that my family partly was Catholic for political reasons. You always understand like there is religion and then there's spirit. I believe in the spirit that protects me.

Christina Strasburger: So now you said you're a block away from where you grew up. What street did you grow up?

Rodney Gilbert: I grew up on Spruce and High. It's Martin Luther King now. I'm from the boule. When they named it Martin Luther King, it became a boulevard, boule. You're on the boule. That's serious where people used to live there. We still Facebook about the boule. But I'm at the bottom on the hill side. I grew up at 90 and I live at 30. [00:42:00] I was like, "Gee, that's a full circle." For me to come back home.

Christina Strasburger: So you've seen a lot of change. How has it changed? I know it's a long [chuckles]...

Rodney Gilbert: No, I've seen a lot of change. I've seen and I see redevelopment of the area. Where there were years of blight. Central Ward was rough. That's where all the projects... percentage of the projects, not all of them. You have Prince Street, Howard Street, Mercer Street, Lincoln Street. So those are all projects. Those are all the kids I went to school with. Because there was only Equipment and Morton. Spencer wasn't there yet. As we knew a change of Renaissance is like coming forever was happening. So things start to change in the city. All the movie theaters closed down downtown, which used to be a place where everyone would come and get to meet. Arcade closed which isolated you more to your neighborhoods. There's nothing for you to do downtown. You don't come downtown. I just have the Lincoln Park which is a part of downtown where I grew up. I'd say there was a lot of devastation during the '80s and the crack epidemic. We're already suffering from the aftermath of the riots.

Then I went off and lived in Philadelphia. Went to college. The crack epidemic destroyed the community. It was one thing to have people be endorphins, heroin addicts. But people still with that took care of their children. [00:44:00] The crack, it's hard to maintain a family on crack. Even with heroin, but hard, really hard on crack. In the school system, when I got back, it was worse. All that stuff had come in to play. Retention of children twice. All these different tests that would be involved and all these different tests I feel were being done with the children, which helped, I think, to kill what was community in that area. Then you add the onslaught of guns and the poverty. So now it's where a lot of the buildings are bricked in. They didn't do the redevelopment that was supposed to happen. They did it in one portion of Brick Towers. They never developed the other. As they started to close buildings, knock down the projects, and I remember once being in the neighborhood and running into someone and he was so excited to see me. He was at my age and he just said, "Everybody is gone. Where is everybody?" What I realized was like, "Oh, wow. What he has known as his life or his entire life has been wiped away." Because all of the people that he... If I went from kindergarten to high school with certain people, so did he. We always lived in the same neighborhood. You had kids with the girl who lived around the corner. If you lived in the projects, you had a baby with someone who lived in the complex. You guys got your apartment, your mother lived here. So all of that was gone. So family was gone in this new change. Because people are so always excited about change for his money. [00:46:00] Change brings new people to your community. Where that has its pluses, I think there is something longing for community and family. So I know my neighbors in my immediate houses next to me. And I'm thinking, but you don't know everybody in the townhouses above you. So I think that's a loss. Even as we build new buildings and build condos around

the corner. And a lot of people moving in to condos. Those are my colleagues and my friends. That's a major change.

Then of course, there's still beautification of Newark. I'd say Lincoln Park area of south Broad... We need what the other side of Broad Street is getting. We need the redevelopment in that area. But I would hope and it's hard. Luckily they are saving some affordable housing in places to keep people who've been here, who want to continue to call it home. Allow them to still call it home and not be the new Brooklyn. I always want to say Newark has the opportunity to do it and do it right and be better. Just like with the third space. If anybody can do it, Rutgers can do it. There's always limited money, but there's money for things that you want. And there's the investment and there's the assessment, real assessment and the commitment to stick and stay, anything is possible to really have community.

Christina Strasburger: What particularly do you find appealing about living in Newark?

You've stayed here and returned.

Rodney Gilbert: **[00:48:00]** It's home. It's in my DNA. It really is. I think it's where - - it's so odd. It could be dangerous. It's where I'm most comfortable. I have fantasies. I was in a theater company in New York during my high school years and I always wanted a 15-room apartment on Central Park West with pillars and two levels. That's my dream home. But actors and people who are artists, they don't live in Manhattan. You live in Brooklyn, far out now because Brooklyn is gentrified. Or you live in Harlem, but Harlem is gentrified. So you got to go to Queens. Newark, I'm closer to mid-town than most of my friends who live in New York City. Nobody lives in Manhattan except my rich friends.

You know what I'm saying? They either have their families' money or they're working Wall Street or something to that effect. Nobody lives there. So I always knew the access that Newark had to provide just to get right there. Then there's something, it just feels homely to

me. I would say, yeah, most comfortable. Something even about the air. I've been thinking about it. Because I could live anywhere. They always want me to move to Madison and I'm like, "And do what?" Be their black friend? Be their black neighbor.

I love people of color. I love the culture. And I love the internal, I say, tenacity. Even when people are like the living dead. Because the options seemed short and the despair has worn. I've seen people with nothing still give. [00:50:00] Cigarettes are almost ten dollars a pack and I still see people give a person a cigarette or give them a chicken wing. I was spending almost \$2 on chicken wings and you still extend and allow people to sleep on their couches and to support each other even with all the despair. That's something I've been discuss— maybe because it reminds how my grandmother was.

I think my relationship with her is what lets me know what God is and that there is a God. Because she loved her family and loved me. Because she was my God. Like my fear... like nothing happen to her. God introduced her so I would understand the spirit. How someone can love me that much. This has probably come out like... I'm not a religious fanatic. I'm totally about spirit. Something has guided me and protected me through all of this.

Christina Strasburger: So are there particular places in Newark that you would associate with LGBTQ people?

Rodney Gilbert: They're gone. There used to be Murphy's which is so funny I wouldn't even go to Murphy's when I was here. It's like, "Oh no, just not my scene." I went to college and I came back and my best friend took me. It was really cool. It's a place for us to congregate. It would be the sanctuary at the bar scene that I could go into in the club scene. Because I was a dancer, like I party. I told you I was a partier. It was those places which are now all gone. So no, there is not. It would be Murphy's, first choice. Places that I went. We would go to New York to hang out. It would be going to Christopher Street, going

to the pier. [00:52:00] I would say as I got older, when Reverend Janice and them started the church, I was at the first service. Because I used to go to the service in Brooklyn. Not in Brooklyn, in – that’s where the other church was – but the pastor from Brooklyn started having service at the center in New York. So I would go to the center for service.

Then Newark started a church. I was like, okay. So I was going to church for a little bit. But that’s where people congregated. But other than that, no. Well, there was those of us who were kind of out in Arts High School. Working with all artists. But no, there wasn’t any supportive places. When I got older, as an adult that engages in political stuff. Start looking at that and then you discover Rutgers has a place. But that’s not always accessible to everyone unless you have colleagues or friends and that’s your circle. But not the gay people down from Newark. You know if you visibly can see certain people who you’ve seen at the clubs, that kind of stuff. But it would be stuff at people’s homes. There’s nothing that I will say as identifiable. People may disagree with me. I’m the co-chair of the LGBTQ Commission here in Newark. But I would say Newark is different. It can be a very small town and there haven’t been places created for the LGBTQ community. Then once the center got there or rather Reverend Janice when they had the other place that dealt with HIV and other stuff, because she had the church create stuff, Dean Creadle with The Fireball. [00:54:00] But that was me as an adult. By then being a professional because I can always buy a table from our organization by bringing people together to support a ball in that way, where we could all come together. I see people who know each other, walking down the street, “Hey, you know, I’ve seen you at the bar.” That comes up, but not a place that’s identifiable where we have a space of our own, like what the center is now.

So there's work to be done in that area. A lot of healing needs to happen. So I guess that's why I'm on the commission and hopefully, I can help with that. We look at what the center is going to be or what the one that the mayor is creating. How those two things co-exist and how do they support each other, how do we really look at the needs of the constituents and not the politics of the organizations. I'm an advocate for that. I want to keep everybody together or let's have conversations. Then you say, "Hi, African American office of gay concerns." How do we continue to talk, share our resources and not be afraid because we're going for the same funding? How do we get to the community?

And then I think as we continue to strengthen and build that, I will say that Newark's Pride has done a lot of work in that power strata, the new chair. They've worked their butts off. But we still have a long way to go. We still have a long way to go. I think support across the board of each other is very, very important. Very, very important and it doesn't always become that. Just like anything, we have to watch egos. [00:56:00] Our personalities will dominate often.

Christina Strasburger: What's your perspective about Newark's connection or relationship to other nearby places, in the Greater Essex County area, in New Jersey or in general?

Rodney Gilbert: Well, there's a chamber, the Gay Alliance Chamber of Commerce for Gay People that they started with Kimberly Williams and them and I think they're bringing people together. I think people are going to Montclair, going to West Orange. Of course, we always have our connection to New York City. I think that's where the young people, they flock to the city. They feel they're more comfortable. I think the Center is helping with them having some place to go. But hopefully, we start to look at how to have an alliance, a Greater Essex County Alliance is great. I think we have to get more united on the political front as well. And be a part of the scene. A big part of what is

happening is that Rutgers does a lot of work in this area. So we are connected. The people who are in the know. Just even when we had the thing... where we had the slides – what was that day – there was a panel discussion.

Christina Strasburger: Out in Newark!

Rodney Gilbert: Out in Newark! It was great. Because that had not happened. It gave every man, as I've called it, community could come in and remember, reflect, and look towards the present. We might have to say we got to look to Rutgers a lot more to create that. [00:58:00] So there's some equity. Because if it's not formalized by one of the agencies, the community doesn't have access. I say those who have access are those who are the doers and the players at the table who all share something in common. Either politics, academia, or businesses. That is one set of community, but that doesn't speak to the five wards of community. I'm very interested in that as well as in politics and academics and the business structure things for people self-identified as gay. But I'm really interested in constituents. They're a big priority.

Christina Strasburger: So how do you think your life would have been different if you did not identify as gay?

Rodney Gilbert: I would have been complacent and really in the first place, I would be dead. I might be living, but I would be dead. Because I would be living a complete lie and I think a constant struggle with secrets. A constant struggle of a lack of self-acceptance. And I don't want to sound like I'm a guru and I accept myself and I wake up every day and I love myself. It's so beautiful. It's work. I'm a human. But I think I would be dead because I wouldn't be being true. Almost like that time I tried to practice a walk. Like this is not working. I was uncomfortable. More uncomfortable than I was with just being... Yeah, that wouldn't have worked. If it was supposed to be that way, it wouldn't have been that way.

Christina Strasburger: [01:00:00] What is the most challenging aspect of being gay?

Rodney Gilbert:

I think I come from here and I'm gonna put it on record. I don't know because I think... I don't want to say that it was like gay men are lonely. I don't know if it's because I'm gay or because of who I am, which surrounds more stuff than just my sexuality. Being a man who loves black men and all the stigmas that surround it, I have met a lot of men in pain because of who they are, that I've loved. Been in love with men in pain. So I think it has been hard in that arena. Having some of the happiest... or wanting to have the happiest relationship. But then I know other people who struggle with that, too. So I've been thinking about that like... I have to deal from the space. I met black men who don't want to accept it or who want to be in the closet who love me and then I'm just open, I'm who I am. The pain of that, seeing them hurt has hurt me, trying to sustain some of those relationships have been extremely painful they saddened me. It has saddened me with that.

Then I say, was that because of my choices? I'm always assessing it. Because choices may be... choose someone else. I want someone...

[Unintelligible - 01:01:54] work for me. People said you need to get someone who is a professor because you're a professor. **[01:02:00]**

Sometimes I can find – how do I say this – like an opportunity, you get an educated man who doesn't understand community. If you don't understand -- I don't care who you are -- if you don't understand community and the plight of poor people, we don't have anything in common. I can't. I don't want to forget the '67 riots. I have no interest if you don't understand the people.

Sometimes, it has been that thing about class, that structure. And it just doesn't work for me. Maybe because a blue-collar guy and he's struggling and some of the ills that he faces and I'm here to support it. I'm not very interested in how much money you make. I'm interested, but it doesn't – I won't say that on the record. But that's not the determining factor or your highest grade that you've completed of

education. Those things should be... again, that's been one of the hardest pieces.

I've loved and love who I love and... but also then I can say the poster child, urban gay black men... my partner and my family and the children... well, my last partner, I helped him raise his daughter. My kids being raised with me and a man. Before it was popular and just being us. Because I've been single about 10 months. [01:04:00] I also have a place where I've been in long-term relationships as well. So there's people like, "Shut up and stop complaining. How painful is it. You're going through what regular people go through" and I am regular whatever that is, defined. I've struggled with that because I'm sure I can sit around a diverse population of people. We talk about relationships and a lot of it's the same. I'm looking at it from my perspective.

Christina Strasburger: How long were you together with your children's mother?

Rodney Gilbert: Five years.

Christina Strasburger: So 15... what age?

Rodney Gilbert: I was 12 or 13.

Christina Strasburger: Okay.

Rodney Gilbert: 12 or 13. Because I was... I'm a summer baby. So I graduated early. I graduated high school at 17. And then I turned 18. Graduated from elementary at 12. It was eighth grade. She's older than me.

Christina Strasburger: How much older?

Rodney Gilbert: Three years.

Christina Strasburger: Okay.

Rodney Gilbert: Three years older than me.

Christina Strasburger: Okay.

Rodney Gilbert: Cradle rob. So sometimes, is it just me trying to be different when I had a woman? [Crosstalk 01:05:30] theater going off to tour. I didn't have a traditional life. I spent a lot of time... even in my child... so another thing was... one influence is I have friends who have money

because I was in theater so I spent a lot of time in the ‘burbs, on mountainside and Mount Vernon. My friends who have money and in their homes on the Upper Eastside. **[01:06:00]** Their dads and stuff were all big executives and stuff are all big major companies. They had a lot of money, a lot of access. So also kind of shaped me. I forgot that part. Like I had a lot... when you’re from Newark, all your supports... I was that kind of poster child though my family put a lot, invested a lot in me as well.

Christina Strasburger: Now, what you didn’t talk about is your college years. Can we talk a little bit about that experience?

Rodney Gilbert: College was great. I went to Philadelphia College of Performing Arts, University of the Arts. It was great. I lived in Center City, Philadelphia and was no longer with my kids’ mom. I was free. She’s been one of the greatest relationships I’ve ever had, intimate relationships. Stable, supportive. With our breakup, I said I felt the freedom. I wasn’t lying. And I thought I would meet a man and have what she and I had. I had my first real lover and it was hard. I don’t know if it was because of the comparison or because of what he had gone through in his life. Or that we were just too damn young to be trying to have the intense, serious relationship in the way that I was raised with. I created that kind of environment, but we had a lot of problems. Because of his lack of acceptance of who he really was. **[01:08:00]** And the abuses that he had experienced.

But that was part of the struggle. But it was great. I was in college. I was majoring in theater. I went to a conservatory. I worked hard. I played hard. I lived hard. And I loved it. Yeah, it was great. I love Philadelphia. I was just thinking. I’ve got to go back to Philly. I go to Philly to rest.

My dream was to own a brownstone in Center City, Philadelphia. I live in a brownstone now in Lincoln Park. But that was my dream. And I still want one. I’m just waiting for that big fellowship money to

come in that's gonna sustain me for 10 years. Yeah. I love Philly. Philly is like my other little home. That has community to it. I like that feel. It dates arts earlier than where you would even say New York is. So it's heavy. And there's that prestigious thing, with the symphonies and the orchestras and then the museum. I like art. Yeah, it was something about learning and because I'm a New Yorker as well. Because I grew up right next to New York. New York is the end all, be all. Philadelphia was different. Because they were like, "Oh yeah, we're old money and we created this and the foundation was here." So I learned a little more about the structure of art in America and being an American. I saw how, to me, how culturally as a country we're shaped. And more the roles that African Americans played in that. It was very, very interesting.

[01:10:00] The university was headed by one of my mentors at that time and he had created a school that was a mixture of Yale, Juilliard, and all... at that time, he was the head of it. So I got an exposure and access to how to really... to develop but also have a cohesive understanding of my craft. I think which helps me in being an educator. And it helps me in my performance and in my directing. It helps me to create and I think that's a big piece of who I am. So it helped with laying another layer of my foundation. I love having Walter Dallas teach me and open the world up to me. Meeting Joe Papp. Working with John Allen in the first African American theater in this country is in Philadelphia and I worked with its founder. That kind of stuff. I loved being in the midst of it. As I've grown, it helped to shape who I am as a human politically, how I think and my advocacy. All of that. I didn't know it then, but I know it now. So I've been fortunate to be exposed to some people who helped shape... I see movements in the arts for not just diversity, but equity. Which is something I learned in ages about... **[01:12:00]** It is about equity. It's

about social justice. So it's helped me to refine and define what my mission and my purpose is.

Christina Strasburger: That's wonderful.

Rodney Gilbert: I was like, "I better get it right." [Crosstalk 01:12:21].

Christina Strasburger: Thank you. Thanks so much. I know you're pressed for time. I have a million questions that I wanted to ask.

Rodney Gilbert: We [crosstalk 01:12:29] another one.

Christina Strasburger: We should have...

Rodney Gilbert: [Crosstalk 01:12:30] I haven't told what you need. I don't know what you need.

Christina Strasburger: I heard your phone buzzing. I know you have a lot of things to attend to today, but if you would be willing to talk to me again, I would love it, especially when there's not so much activity outside of the door.

Rodney Gilbert: Right. We can do it really soon. The play opens on Tuesday so through next weekend, I'm finished. I got a show on the 15th and then I'm freed up. I got a million stuff to do, but I'm freed up.

Christina Strasburger: Thank you.

Rodney Gilbert: Thank you.

Christina Strasburger: Thank you so much. This way, we can have you before the launch.

Rodney Gilbert: Lunch.

Christina Strasburger: Yes, that's April 23rd.