

Queer Newark Oral History Project

Interviewee: Perris Straughter

Interviewer: Anna Alves

Date: April 19, 2016

Location: Jersey City, NJ

ANNA ALVES: This is Anna Alves, interviewing Perris Straughter on Tuesday, April 19, 2016 at Beachwood Café in Jersey City. All right. So we'll start with something really simple. When and where were you born?

PERRIS STRAUGHTER: I was born in 1983 in Montclair, California.

ANNA ALVES: Montclair, California. How was that, growing up there?

PERRIS STRAUGHTER: Well, so I grew up—so when I was very young, I was in the Inland Empire is what they call it, in Upland and Rancho Cucamonga in San Bernardino County. Then I moved to Orange County where primarily I was raised. I lived in several cities within Orange County. And then I moved to—or I went to college—back in the Inland Empire, in Claremont, California, at Pomona College.

ANNA ALVES: And when you were a child back in Montclair, who raised you? Did you grow up in, like, one place and household? Or did you have to grow amongst several?

PERRIS STRAUGHTER: Yeah, so we moved a lot, partially because my parents separated when I was nine, although we moved a couple of times even before then, but certainly after that, we moved a fair amount. So I was raised by both of them. Thankfully, thank God, both my parents are in my life, but yeah—I think that answered your question, right?

ANNA ALVES: And did you have siblings?

PERRIS STRAUGHTER: [00:02:00] Oh yeah, yeah, I have a brother. A younger brother. He's still out there.

ANNA ALVES: And how many years apart?

PERRIS STRAUGHTER: He's three and a half years younger than me.

ANNA ALVES: Did he stay in California for the most part or did he travel a lot?

PERRIS STRAUGHTER: He came out this way for college, but we were both raised together the whole time.

ANNA ALVES: And who—beside your sibling and your parents, if any—who made up your household as you were growing up, and who joined or left it during your childhood and teenage years?

PERRIS STRAUGHTER: Sure, yeah—so my mom and dad split up, so I kind of had, like—they had joint custody.

ANNA ALVES: And how old were you then?

PERRIS STRAUGHTER: Nine. And then my mom remarried a year or so later, so I had a mom and a stepdad I spent a considerable amount of time with for about five years. They separated when I was in high school.

My dad never remarried, although he had a long-term girlfriend that he moved in with and that we lived with for a year or so when I was—I don't know, I guess I was 13.

ANNA ALVES: So you left your mother's household to live with your father?

PERRIS STRAUGHTER: They had joint custody, so—

ANNA ALVES: —That's right. You went back and— Okay.

PERRIS STRAUGHTER: Yeah, yeah, so it was kind of weird, but it worked out. I spent a little more time with my mom, which helped because it was like, that was my primary home. But I did get to see my dad and spend time at his house twice a week, so it was like -- you know, it was pretty balanced.

ANNA ALVES: Nice. And they were in the same city the whole time there was, sort of—?

PERRIS STRAUGHTER: Multiple, different. [laughter] So fortunately, I only had to change schools twice, or once—yeah, I only changed school districts once. Because you know, even changing it once is hard for kids.

ANNA ALVES: [00:04:00] Right. And you were -- in which stage of schooling were you at when you had to change?

PERRIS STRAUGHTER: I was in middle school—I just started middle school and then I changed. It was hard because middle school is awful.

ANNA ALVES: Yeah, I would say that's a rough one.

PERRIS STRAUGHTER: So, you know, I didn't know anybody, I didn't have any friends. It was really bad, but, so—

ANNA ALVES: And your brother as well?

PERRIS STRAUGHTER: So my brother was in elementary school. That was hard for him too, because they were fierce at elementary school.

ANNA ALVES: And this is all within Montclair?

PERRIS STRAUGHTER: No, this was—so we moved from Upland shortly after I was born to Rancho Cucamonga and then moved to Orange County when I was five. And then we moved again when I was in junior high.

ANNA ALVES: And this is all within Orange County, at this point?

PERRIS STRAUGHTER: Yeah, but we lived in many different homes because after my parents separated, there was a lot of bouncing around. I mean not all the time, but we moved a fair amount. But fortunately, we only had to move, change schools, once.

ANNA ALVES: That's the rough one.

PERRIS STRAUGHTER: Yeah.

ANNA ALVES: How was that transition? You want to talk a little bit about—do you have any stories that you remember?

PERRIS STRAUGHTER: I just remember wandering around at lunch, like not having any friends and just like, it's hard for kids.

ANNA ALVES: Yeah.

PERRIS STRAUGHTER: You think back—it's funny now, but it's like, oh man! And yeah, my brother had similar stories, so it's just tough.

ANNA ALVES: Right. So did you make the usual transition and then at some point, you found a sort of niche and then moved forward, or how did that...?

PERRIS STRAUGHTER: Yeah, I mean it was great. I mean, it's funny because it would be hard to think about my network of friends if I had stayed in my school district. When I left, it was like, "This is so awful, I don't want to leave," but the friends I made in high school were wonderful. Some of them I'm still friends with, so you know, it's funny how— life just turns out, you know, so.

ANNA ALVES: **[00:06:00]** Are you still friends with anybody from your first school district?

PERRIS STRAUGHTER: No, not at all. I mean, I've reconnected with them on Facebook a little bit, a few of them, but no friends.

ANNA ALVES: The middle and the high school years tend to be pretty formative until now.

PERRIS STRAUGHTER: Right.

ANNA ALVES: So do you recall any events that were transitions or turning points in your early life?

PERRIS STRAUGHTER: Well, my parents separating and, of course, I mean that was a tough time and ugly at times, and yeah, so.

ANNA ALVES: And then probably the moving, maybe with your school transitioning and stuff?

PERRIS STRAUGHTER: Yeah, the school, the moving, you know the whole different— because we had moved a little bit, but we were still kind of in the same part of Orange County. We moved to a whole different part of Orange County, so some of that transitioning at the same time as changing schools,. But that wasn't so bad. It was just different.

ANNA ALVES: Yeah. What was it like growing up in Orange County?

PERRIS STRAUGHTER: Well I think as a kid, it was great.

ANNA ALVES: What was the makeup of your neighborhoods before you moved and then when you moved?

PERRIS STRAUGHTER: Yeah. Well, I lived for— the longest places I lived in, one of them was a fairly affluent neighborhood, the first place. And

yeah, I mean, you know all the kids would like go to each other's houses. It was really fun. It was, you know, I was dealing with my parents fighting at that time and not being around very much because my mom worked a lot, my dad worked a lot, so it was tough for me in a way, but I think the environment was really great, which was the neighborhood. [00:08:00] And then, kind of fast forwarding until when I changed schools, I'm a little older, but yeah, like you know, it was middle class, kind of a mix of people with, you know, a mix of incomes. And definitely more diverse than the neighborhood I lived in before. But yeah, it was fun to be a kid, like, we could go—you know, you could walk to my middle school. We used to play around. There was kind of like hills and nature areas we used to go and do stuff. Yeah, it was fun being a kid.

ANNA ALVES: In terms of the adults in your life that might have, besides your parents, were there—I guess the question is, were there other adults in your life that shaped your adolescence? Family members, friends?

PERRIS STRAUGHTER: Yeah, sure, adults. Well, because my parents worked, we had babysitters. One of which was kind of like a long-term—we got really close with her—I'm still connected with her. I don't see her as much as I did because she's back in California, but—so yeah, she and her family had a big impact on me.

ANNA ALVES: Were they neighborhood kids or were they family friends?

PERRIS STRAUGHTER: No, I think they just—my parents found them on—I guess that was before the internet went on.

ANNA ALVES: Yeah, I know. It's like, how did they find a babysitter?

PERRIS STRAUGHTER: Right. [laughter] How did people live before?

ANNA ALVES: There's no Craigslist! [laughter]

PERRIS STRAUGHTER: Right. The phonebook or something. So, yeah so but we— so they didn't know them before that professional relationship, but then it evolved into— like, even after I didn't really need babysitting anymore, because I was old enough to watch over my brother, we would go and visit them.

ANNA ALVES: [00:10:00] Were they much older? Were they a family you stayed with?

PERRIS STRAUGHTER: Yeah, yeah. When she started watching us, we were really young so like, I was— I don't know maybe five or six? That was when we just moved from—we didn't live in Upland very long, after I was born, we moved to Rancho Cucamonga. And then we moved to Orange County, that's when they started watching us, so like I must have been four or five.

ANNA ALVES: And she was about?

PERRIS STRAUGHTER: And she was a teenager at that time, yeah, so.

ANNA ALVES: Very responsible teenager, it sounds like.

PERRIS STRAUGHTER: Yeah well, it's also—I'm trying to think, she—at that time actually, she wasn't really the primary babysitter, it was her mom, yeah. And it was in their house where we'd go and like-

ANNA ALVES: You'd be dropped off or you'd go after school?

PERRIS STRAUGHTER: Yeah, I'm trying to think. Yeah, I guess we were— I'm trying to think how we got — maybe they picked us up? God, why I don't I remember this?

ANNA ALVES: [laughter] It was a while ago.

PERRIS STRAUGHTER: Yeah, I guess so. Yeah, but something like that. And then -- but then you know she got older, so she would watch us as opposed to her mom? So yeah.

ANNA ALVES: And so what was that really -- because you say that you're still friends?

PERRIS STRAUGHTER: Yeah, yeah.

ANNA ALVES: So how did that relationship evolve? Because of— in terms of, like, in a sense she's an adult that impacted— but she also was still a kid—

PERRIS STRAUGHTER: Yeah, she was young. You know, I think that -- well, I think their whole family felt because we were around, and you know, me and my brother, you know, so. And they watched other kids too, now that I think of it, but I think for whatever reason, they formed a closer bond with us.

Yeah, so it was nice, And then particularly for her, because she was younger, it was like, even though she was older than us by maybe, I guess she's almost 10 years older than us—or than me—[00:12:00] there was commonality, you know, just like— so yeah.

ANNA ALVES: Cool. When you do go back, is she still in Orange County?

PERRIS STRAUGHTER: Where is she right now?

ANNA ALVES: Like how did you...?

PERRIS STRAUGHTER: The last -- it's been a couple of years since I saw her. But yeah, not too long ago, you know, we visited and just hung out.

ANNA ALVES: Is it sort of like -- is the impact somewhat because it was, sort of a stable space as well since there was so much going on? Or is it just sort of because she was an adult and her mother was or the family were adults, that were basically like a...?

PERRIS STRAUGHTER: I think it helps whenever there's like stuff going on, like—you know, sometimes those bonds become stronger because you need that. I mean, it's hard -- you know, it's hard to know, like, how it would have been if it was 100 percent stability. But yeah, I think mostly, you know also this is a thing in our family. Like, our family frequently becomes close to, you know, people we kind of— you know, it's kind of like— my grandma on my dad's side is like this, where anyone who kind

of comes into her circle, becomes family. And in a way, my mom is also like that. Even though they're not related, they're both like that, so yeah. Because there's a couple of other adults that kind of became, you know, not like family, but they were close to us in the same way.

ANNA ALVES: [00:14:00] Like an extended family?

PERRIS STRAUGHTER: Yeah, yeah.

ANNA ALVES: And so, you've talked a little bit about different schools you attended— exactly what were the schools that you attended? You can name them, if you remember.

PERRIS STRAUGHTER: Newport Heights Elementary School. Edison Middle School. Los Alisos Middle School, [00:14:27] Laguna Hills High School.

ANNA ALVES: And then where did you go to college?

PERRIS STRAUGHTER: Pomona College.

ANNA ALVES: And then grad school?

PERRIS STRAUGHTER: Princeton.

ANNA ALVES: And then what degrees did you receive?

PERRIS STRAUGHTER: My undergrad was Sociology and Public Policy. And then, my Masters is in Public Affairs and Planning.

ANNA ALVES: And what were -- I know this is a little bit of a jumping because we just listed all your schools, but I'm going back to childhood again. What were some of the challenges besides the divorce, which was big, and then the transition of schools, what are other challenges that you remember from childhood that you think might have impacted, maybe your development or, like, the way you see things and then how did you manage them?

PERRIS STRAUGHTER: Challenges...

ANNA ALVES: Do you have any stories about things that you might have remembered that might have been a hard time or even if it's

related to some of those, because those are two huge ones. But are there any others that you can think of, or are there specific stories around those times that you can remember that you would like to share?

PERRIS STRAUGHTER: I think that was the—I'm trying to think—like when, you know, in childhood— Now when you consider childhood, what is...?

ANNA ALVES: Probably up through -- what is that, the tween years? What is that up to 14 or 15 now? [00:16:00] Like there's the middle years, right? Which we call like tween now. The childhood would probably be right -- maybe right up to middle school, probably.

PERRIS STRAUGHTER: Yeah, I mean so, you know, I was blessed in that --

ANNA ALVES: Elementary school.

PERRIS STRAUGHTER: You know, I was -- you know, the major thing was just dealing with you know, the divorce and you know, my parents splitting up and the things that go around that in terms of moving and, you know, et cetera. I didn't really have any other traumatic things happen. Thank God, so.

ANNA ALVES: How did you and your brother sort of manage through both, through— because oftentimes with siblings, when that happens, then there's a certain...?

PERRIS STRAUGHTER: Yeah, no. We managed. He was younger, probably helped him, although you know, some of that stuff is some more subconscious sometimes I think. But whereas, I think I did obvious things that were outwardly in terms of bad coping, so yeah.

Yeah, I mean it was, you know. I mean, I think that it was nice having him for the two of us— or us, for the two because we could kind of get through it together. But yeah, I think it was -- you know, at least for me, it was, I remember being

angry a lot as a little kid, with all the anger. And now I look back and it's like, oh man.

ANNA ALVES: Like no wonder.

PERRIS STRAUGHTER: It's just funny, you know. It's like when we see the world through our eyes as we're of that age, and then when we look - - we have memories of it, but when we look back, wow, that was my memory, but like, I was nine years old back then. Yeah, because when you look at nine year olds— yeah, it's like totally, you know. I guess that's how you can connect with kids, if you'd try to think back on—

ANNA ALVES: [00:18:00] Remember? Yeah. And it's funny how you can actually, you can remember it actually, but then sort of stand away from it as an adult.

PERRIS STRAUGHTER: Yeah.

ANNA ALVES: But then sometimes it's hard to remember the details, too. That's why sometimes these questions are like, think back, if you can remember. So in the sense—okay not in the sense— but shifting over to, sort of, like, religion. Did you grow up with any kind of religion in your household? And then what kind of role did that play in your life?

PERRIS STRAUGHTER: Yeah, sure. So my parents were not religious. My grandma was very religious and so we used to go to church with her sometimes.

ANNA ALVES: Was there a particular faith that—?

PERRIS STRAUGHTER: She's Seventh Day Adventist. She was Seventh Day Adventist, as most of my dad's family was, but he wasn't. You know, at times he— I can only remember one time—but I feel like it was more than once, he took us to church with a girlfriend of his, but he was not religious.

My mom was very spiritual though, like, her kind of spiritual beliefs and belief in God is a big part of her life, so she did share that with us. And... yeah, so.

ANNA ALVES: And then as you grew up, did religion sort of stay with you or did you—what was your relationship to religion as you moved from childhood and then became an adult?

PERRIS STRAUGHTER: It evolved. Yeah, I mean I think I've always had a spiritual—yeah, I think I shared the beliefs my mom does. So I kind of guess, I took on that as a kid. [00:20:00] But I think when I was you know, like a teenager and young adult, I didn't -- you just focus on other things and I don't think it was this big. And then later, in kind of reconnecting with that part of myself, I became -- I don't know if I consider myself really religious really, but I definitely joined the church and would go to church, and then eventually joined the church. So I've been part of a Baptist Church for, it feels like five years now, it might be, four or five years, although I just left that church because I moved. But I'm looking for another one. It might not be a Baptist Church this time. We'll see. It's more about, you know, I don't feel like my beliefs have changed, it's just finding a place that nourishes that and kind of holds you accountable. But definitely, my belief system has been strong throughout my life even when I was a kid, yeah.

ANNA ALVES: And then I guess shifting now to sort of your Newark experience, what is your earliest memory of Newark?

PERRIS STRAUGHTER: My earliest memory of Newark. Well, I guess when I was -- I did a project in Newark when I was in grad school. That's how it came on the map for me because coming from California to New Jersey. Actually, a funny story—a friend of mine from high school, I told her I was moving to Jersey to

go to school, grad school. And she was like, "Oh yeah, Jersey, so that's like a suburb of New York, right?" You know, she pictured the whole state as a city, you know. So and that, she wasn't the only person that... [00:22:00] So, yeah, doing that project put Newark on the map for me.

ANNA ALVES: What was the project?

PERRIS STRAUGHTER: We were working -- we did...

ANNA ALVES: And what year was this?

PERRIS STRAUGHTER: This was in 2006. We did a study. Land use and economic policy. It was like a real short recommendations document, basically one of our professors had a connection with the new deputy mayor, so that's how.

ANNA ALVES: The deputy mayor of Newark?

PERRIS STRAUGHTER: Of Newark.

ANNA ALVES: Who was the deputy mayor?

PERRIS STRAUGHTER: Stefan Pryor. He had just -- so this is at the very beginning of when [Cory] Booker had just taken office. Because he took office in the middle of 2006, this was fall of 2006. [00:22:58] Certainly when I got to Newark, some of the things I had recommended, they were working on, but I think a lot of that is just by, you know, good ideas are out there, so— This is when I was -- so I knew I was coming to Newark, apartment hunting, and that day was really interesting because in that day -- I really only had, like, one day to really walk around, looking for apartments. So I spent most of the day in Newark, ran into a friend of mine that I think lived in Newark. He was from Princeton, getting his PhD, and he was key in terms of later on plugging me into the whole gay community in Newark. So I ran into him, it was really weird. And then, towards the evening, I'm walking back, so now I'm walking to the trains. It's like

starting nighttime, let me just go to the city. [00:24:00] I don't know why I was going— because I was living still in Princeton, but anyway— I probably wanted to go out or something.

ANNA ALVES: So, you were going to the PATH train?

PERRIS STRAUGHTER: Yeah. And I remember walking, and this is actually, it's funny because I ended up getting that apartment. So I was by that apartment that I ended up living in, but— you know, I was checking out the neighborhood— and some creature -- it was warm outside because it was like June. So I was in shorts and flip-flops. I'm a total Californian. I was wearing flip-flops.

ANNA ALVES: [Laughter] It sounds like the California uniform.

PERRIS STRAUGHTER: And some creature, I had no idea what it was, it was crawling on me. So it was like -- it was just really nasty and I was like, “this is not a good first experience in what will probably be my neighborhood.” [Laughter]

ANNA ALVES: [Laughter] That’s your earliest memory? Did you ever figure out what it was?

PERRIS STRAUGHTER: No.

ANNA ALVES: Were you afraid to figure it out?

PERRIS STRAUGHTER: I mean, it was some bug, really.

ANNA ALVES: It was a bug? I was thinking like some rodent or something.

PERRIS STRAUGHTER: No, no. It was just, like, some bug that -- I don't know what kind of bug that was crawling on me. I was like, "Oh my God! It's so nasty.”

ANNA ALVES: What neighborhood did you...?

PERRIS STRAUGHTER: Because as soon as I saw it, like, I just, you know— you don't want to like, "Ooh what is that?"

ANNA ALVES: Well, if it's crawling, I know you definitely don't want to. I totally empathize with that. What neighborhood were you moving into?

PERRIS STRAUGHTER: And so, like, this is in Lower Broadway. And I moved there and it was great. I loved that neighborhood.

ANNA ALVES: What was it like? Do you have like any sort of stories about living there, what you liked about it?

PERRIS STRAUGHTER: You know it was right outside downtown, so a lot of it was because it was convenient. It was near my other friends because they were in that particular part of downtown, which was not too far. It was by a train station. The buses were amazing. [00:26:00] I mean, it was almost like living in the city because in the rush hour there's a bus like every five minutes. Yeah, so it was great.

ANNA ALVES: And the bus would take you anywhere around the city, up to and to New York?

PERRIS STRAUGHTER: Well, the buses would go to downtown Newark. But then you could transfer to the train to New York.

ANNA ALVES: Right, so good accessibility.

PERRIS STRAUGHTER: But then there's a train station right next to my apartment.

ANNA ALVES: Like a light rail, like the light rail?

PERRIS STRAUGHTER: No, like a New Jersey transit train.

ANNA ALVES: Oh, New Jersey transit.

PERRIS STRAUGHTER: This is Broad Street Station.

ANNA ALVES: Nice. Yeah, yeah. And then how, this was when you said, 2000...?

PERRIS STRAUGHTER: I first moved to Newark in 2007.

ANNA ALVES: How has Newark changed since then?

PERRIS STRAUGHTER: So much. I mean, some of it's very much the same, which is good. Too much change in a short time is not so good, although change is certainly needed. Yeah, I mean, what's cool to see is the, like, beautification stuff. So like, parks being improved, the streets being improved, new buildings. You know, all the kind of economic

development stuff, the restaurants, you know, all that kind of -
- new stores. It's interesting because you know, even though
there was a lot of that, there's like some stores that were there
that went out of business.

ANNA ALVES: Right. Were there a few that you really missed?

PERRIS STRAUGHTER: Well, the gay club that was just like an anchor – Murphys –
and others. It had -- but you know, it was the anchor of its
own right— it closed. I don't remember what year that was.
The Armory was one that was there for several years while I
was in Newark. And that has been closed for a while now.
But business like that. There was a soul food place right
downtown – Je's – that closed. [00:28:00] So you know,
that's what happens, you get great new businesses that come
in, but sometimes you get those businesses that either because
the area is changing and they can't keep up, or in most cases,
it's just that, like, things go out of business and as you know,
this is what happens, so.

ANNA ALVES: It's just like a cycle of things.

PERRIS STRAUGHTER: But definitely seeing so much improvement downtown and
seeing that change-- you know seeing different people?
Newark definitely got more diverse over time, you know. So
seeing that, and seeing new faces, and different types of
people, you know, that was sort of...

ANNA ALVES: Is there anything about Newark that's changed that you don't
think people might be aware of?

PERRIS STRAUGHTER: I don't know.

ANNA ALVES: Or is it pretty invisible?

PERRIS STRAUGHTER: That you could see? I think people that live there are aware of
the changes, although when I -- one thing about Newark and I
hope this is changing, although I think it is, but it's harder
because it's more institutionalized and for folks coming in,

they often have perspective that prevents them from experiencing this, too.

But Newark is so silo'ed that often times people like spend their whole life in one part of Newark. Like the East Ward or North Newark or the West Ward, or you know, Weequahic. And they don't really -- like they might go from Weequahic to downtown and that's it— so they don't know what's happening in North Newark or like vice versa.

[00:30:00] There was a lot of that, so yeah, like, I think it's very hard to kind of get folks out of their usual spaces, out of their comfort zones and particularly, you know, it's one thing to bring you downtown, you know, sometimes *that* is hard. It's another thing to kind of get them into a while different ward than they would normally go or a different neighborhood.

And that, you know, but I mean, even though there's been less development and less change in certain neighborhoods and in neighborhoods relative to downtown, there has been a fair amount of change. And, you know and this is just in the time I've been— you know, new housing developments, etcetera. So it's like, I hope that people venture out more that the city figures out how do you get people to cross geographic and cultural lines and talk to each other?

ANNA ALVES: Beyond their particular neighborhoods and more across?**[00:30:57]**?

PERRIS STRAUGHTER: Yeah, yeah.

ANNA ALVES: And then let's see. This next question is: where in the city have you lived and when? So with that place that you lived in, did you live there the whole time until you moved to Brooklyn?

PERRIS STRAUGHTER: So Lower Broadway— I lived in Lower Broadway in the edge of downtown for about three years and then I moved. I had a house in another part of Lower Broadway. Kind of the other end of it - more north - and lived there for, like, two or three years. Lost my house, unfortunately, to a fire and then moved downtown— and lived downtown. For a brief period of time, I was like right downtown at Broad and Market, basically. It was amazing.

But it's funny because it's really convenient, but there's like no stores really. There's clothing stores, but there's no, like, food stores. It's interesting.

ANNA ALVES: [00:32:00] Right, grocery.

PERRIS STRAUGHTER: Yeah, it was -- I mean, certainly, it was inconvenient, but...

ANNA ALVES: What did you do for that? Did you just have to drive some place or—?

PERRIS STRAUGHTER: Yeah, I just walked far or got on the bus. It was not too bad, but it was not as convenient as where I was before. Then I moved to the Lincoln Park neighborhood, which I loved. It was -- I loved that apartment, I was on the sixth floor. I had a view.

ANNA ALVES: Nice.

PERRIS STRAUGHTER: That was my favorite apartment until the one I am in now-- the Brooklyn apartment now, too. But yeah, and that neighborhood – Lincoln Park – was just great. Great mix of people, beautiful because it's all historic brownstones. And a lot of change happened in that neighborhood, and it was still changing, but it was still, it -- so yeah, it had this kind of mix of feel of, like, old and new, and yeah.

ANNA ALVES: That sounds lovely. And then you moved, where in Brooklyn again?

PERRIS STRAUGHTER: And now, I'm in Crown Heights.

ANNA ALVES: Yeah, you're in Crown Heights. And this is recent?

PERRIS STRAUGHTER: Yeah, yeah, so I just moved out of Newark in March, so it's been just over a month, like five weeks.

ANNA ALVES: Oh, well, *very* recent.

PERRIS STRAUGHTER: Yeah.

ANNA ALVES: So what, if anything, did you like or find appealing about living in Newark? You obviously found a lot of things appealing. Did it depend on the neighborhood? Is there something about Newark specifically that you find singular that you sort of like maybe miss or don't miss?

PERRIS STRAUGHTER: Yeah. It's interesting. Someone told me this before I moved to Newark when he found out that I got the job— he helped encourage me to take the job. He said, "Nowhere have I been" -- he does planning in a lot of different places all over the region, if not the country -- "where I've seen people that have so much pride in their city." And I definitely experienced that in Newark.

[00:34:00] There's this -- you know, there definitely is a lot of angst and anger and kind of oppression-related effects on people's psyche that's negative in Newark, but you know, but despite that, there's a strong sense of pride and love. So it's just cool to be in a place that had that, especially being from the suburbs. That's like total -- I mean, one reason I didn't like Orange County is it's so sanitized, like, no real world. And Newark was so opposite that.

Just like, real life, real people, I mean struggle, yes, but people having pride in what they have, even though it was in certain cases little, or they were dealing with real issues, in terms of crime or abandonment or whatever, still having this love for their neighborhood, their block, et cetera.

So I love that and I love working with them and being a part of the community there. So yeah, so I love that. And then you know, it was still convenient to come to New York City, but Newark is a city in itself, too. Like, so you can go downtown have a drink.

You know, when there was the gay club in Newark, I used to love, I used to walk to it from my house. But it was just great and, you know, it's like you can have -- it was a great place to be young.

ANNA ALVES: Is there anything that you *don't* miss about it or that you wish had improved before you left?

PERRIS STRAUGHTER: Yeah, there's definitely all the businesses that opened up.

[00:36:00] Just before I moved, they opened up this great grocery store, which is still a mile from my house, but it's like, finally, there's this place I could go that has organic stuff that I could walk to. And that just happened—you know, it would have been nice to have had that.

When I first moved to Newark—because there was nothing in my neighborhood like that—I used to do grocery shopping in New York once a month. I'd go all the way to the Trader Joe's on 14th Street or the Whole Foods. How I had the energy for that, I don't know. Being young, it's great.

But so, you know, stuff like that. You know, definitely, I don't -- being in New York now, the convenience of it is amazing. What's great about Newark that's changing is having those amenities within the city of Newark.

ANNA ALVES: And let's see-- what's your perspective on Newark's connection or relationship to other nearby places or cities or suburbs, probably within New Jersey and maybe also in relation to New York?

PERRIS STRAUGHTER: How does it compare to those places?

ANNA ALVES: I guess so— let's see, perspective, connection— like, I guess compare or it's connection or relationship. Okay, let's start with compare, then see where we can go from there.

PERRIS STRAUGHTER: Yeah, well I mean, you know, so I mean this is very -- you know, running the PRIDE organization in Newark for as long as I did, being involved with it as for as long as I did, and just the community in general, you know, I was always thinking about how does Newark line up with other places?

And what's unique about Newark in that sense is, you know, it's this kind of like cultural capitol in a fairly liberal area, you know, being in the Northeast and greater New York. It has access to New York, access to Jersey City, but it has like its own community and own assets too. [00:38:00] So, you know, it's a really great place to be and I think it has tremendous potential.

You know, because it has a lot of things that other cities of its size don't have. You know, if you're in Cincinnati or if you're in, you know, even Baltimore to some degree, you know, it just doesn't have -- you know, New York is right there and some of the issues with Newark in having its kind of its own identity outright is that it is the second city, you know?

So that's hard. And because it's poor, you know, so you know and that's— you know a lot of that is a function of racism and classism, but like, you know, it's a city that's poor and the people that have money that either live in Newark or near to it, don't want to go to Newark for shopping or entertainment because they don't, you know -- because— some of it is perception of crime and a lot of it is about race.

And even to this day there is that so, you know, so that was some of the challenge in Newark. I like doing that work of figuring out how to improve places that are poor and figuring

out how to, for those people that are in impoverished places, how to give them access to more resources and opportunities. So it was perfect for the work that I wanted to be doing to be there and be doing that work. But certainly, you know, the whole goal of that work is that hopefully, you're moving the lever, you know? [00:40:00] And I think in Newark, we're getting there. It's challenging. You know, it's that you lose good people sometimes, or you know there's capacity challenges and you have to figure out how with the existing group of people and some new folks.

Start with the kind of existing feel of the place, that you build off of that to make it a better place and have better resources, opportunity, for everyone who's in that place. Without that it's just kind of like, "Let's just bring in new people that know how to do it and the people that are bringing us down, we'll just get rid of that." So figuring out how that model works for making a city work better.

Newark is a good case study for that-- you know, we'll see if-- I don't know how successful I was and others like me were, but we'll see how successful the next generation of leaders is too.

ANNA ALVES: Something I remember, I mean I'm just— at one point in my life, like in my former life, I worked at the Ford Foundation. And I remember there being around 2000 or so, 1999, a big grant to help build out the- I guess, the Arts District or something?

PERRIS STRAUGHTER: NJPAC.

ANNA ALVES: Yeah, back in 2000, so like...

PERRIS STRAUGHTER: No NJPAC was already built there, so it was the arts district downtown.

ANNA ALVES: I just remember the -- I think there was a cathedral there that they created, that they built out into a restaurant and then there were like, organizations around it. It was a long time ago.

PERRIS STRAUGHTER: Oh yes, yes that project is called the Priory.

ANNA ALVES: So it felt like there was this big sort of concentration of these resources. And then there might have been maybe the next generation that would have been, like sort of, your generation, and then now, there's another generation. How do you see that spectrum?

PERRIS STRAUGHTER: It's interesting, yeah.

ANNA ALVES: [00:42:00] Like when you walked in and saw that, and then when you came in and sort of pushed the lever, what is, sort of like, some of your thoughts about maybe what you might have— you know what I mean?

PERRIS STRAUGHTER: Yeah, yeah. I know what you're saying.

ANNA ALVES: Because it seems like there was— and this might be just me because I was coming from California at that time— and I'm here in New York and then this is a big project they're funding, so I'm learning about it while I'm there. And then I know one of the things when I came back was wondering what happened with that, and it seemed like there was a lot of build out, and it seems like you were right there in the middle of that.

PERRIS STRAUGHTER: Yeah.

ANNA ALVES: Do you have any sort of...?

PERRIS STRAUGHTER: Well, it's like what people say about -- I mean, so I was part of the Booker administration. I didn't know Booker when I started the job. I actually -- yeah, I knew him, you know, of course I knew of him, but I really didn't know that much about him and had never met him. What interested me was the work

in Newark. And, you know, he's a great guy. I mean, there's pros and cons in every politician leader, so.

But that work has been the same and certainly the renaissance has been an ongoing thing of many generations, and things that-- you know, that kind of arts movement that really happened in the Sharpe James era-- you know, some of that even got started under Ken Gibson before that. So I mean, there's been these -- you know, one of the places I lived in Newark was called Renaissance Towers because that was, I think in the late '70s, they were looking for a renaissance. So you know, these things go in waves. So you're right in that -- you know, at that time, there was a particular push and, you know, of course there's market dynamics. There's all these things that affect— but certainly, throughout Newark's history, there's been people -- you know, just looking at the part of its history that's after Newark started to decline. There's all these people and groups that have been really trying to focus on, "How do we stop the decline? How do we revitalize?"

[00:44:00] Even when Ken Gibson came into office, someone who's an alumni of Princeton that I know through the online network, she worked for him for a short period of time and at that time, she was telling me there was all these people that were new to Newark city government, that were really trying to work with Ken Gibson to reform and bring about revitalization and that was, I don't know, it was like in 1976 or something? 1974?

I think what's important for folks doing this work to know is that we follow a tradition of folks that have been trying to do this work, and you know, have had successes and failures. And some of that is because of things we've done wrong and

some of that is just because of market dynamics or whatever that we can't control.

But certainly knowing that history— and this extends not just in terms of development of the city, but also to the LGBT community— knowing our history, knowing what we've been doing, what we haven't been doing, what's worked, what hasn't worked. And figuring out how to build on those lessons and kind of integrate the two. You know, there's young people that, “this is what's going to happen now,” and then there's the folks that have been there, done that. And you know, figuring out a way that they can all work together is key.

What tends to, sometimes I think, stifle progress is either it's all out with the old— and you know, there was a fair amount of that at the beginning of Booker administration as well as at the beginning of the Baraka administration. [00:46:00] It was like, “all out with the old and do all new things.” So not doing all of that, but also not being wedded to, like, “this is how we have always done things and this is how we should do this.” And again this goes to the gay community too, like, you've got to continually know, respect and weave back in that history, but also bring in new ideas and figure out how to keep things fresh and keep things moving forward.

ANNA ALVES: Shifting from that, actually, since we've brought that up— what places in Newark do you associate with LGBTQ people in communities and activities?

PERRIS STRAUGHTER: Yeah, definitely Halsey Street, or “the gay street of Newark.” Yeah, I miss Halsey Street. Just hanging out there, 27 Mix. You know, Newark is great because -- and part of this is because it's a kind of fledging city, where it's developing -- you take any bar that's cute and we're going to be there. Gay (LGBTQ) people are going to be there.

So that's, you know. Other gay spaces... You know, one of my favorite things— she hasn't done it for a while, but hopefully she'll bring it back— but one of our community leaders used to put on a cookout at Weequahic Park. So for me, I always associate Weequahic Park even with a gay space even though it's only really one time a year. But you know, also Washington Park because we do the festival there. Yeah, I mean a lot of places that were, like, gay places have closed. [00:48:00] Mentors, the Armory, Murphys I had mentioned earlier. There was a place in the Ironbound that I can't even remember now —XL lounge I think it was called or something like that. But now of course, there's a new round, new places that have been opened up. They're not exclusively gay, but they have a Gay Night, you know, and it's interesting because— so those gay spaces like Halsey Street definitely, we know that that's a safe place for us to be, whereas Broad and Market, we're always there. Like, there is that gay corner at Broad and Market. So at the northwest corner, there is a vendor there and she's usually -- she's not always there, but she's got her rainbow flag, so it's a gay space. There's another spot further down on Broad Street that usually where— there's another vendor. And then Manira, who's active not just in the gay community but also in the labor community in Newark, she's usually always has a little spot on Branford. So there's like the spots like that. But as I was mentioning, what I was going to say, it's not just the spaces, but people. People are really big in Newark and you just -- because it's a small community, you see someone you know, or you see someone you can tell they're a lesbian or gay, you know, maybe they have a rainbow sign, it's like that.

You've got community at that level, so it's not just the spaces, but it's like we find each other because often times there's not like a fixed place, like, we don't have the peers per se, you know. [00:50:00] Halsey Street is Halsey Street, but it's not -- it doesn't have that critical mass, so some of it is, it's not just the place, but like those people.

ANNA ALVES: And they're connecting that way?

PERRIS STRAUGHTER: Yeah. And certainly, well I didn't -- and I didn't mention L.I.T., which used to have two locations, because they had the church space, which was not always open, and then they had an actual drop-in center. Then the Center [Newark LGBTQ Community Center] opened on Halsey Street. But I mean, yeah, that's— just to have some store front where, you know, that was a big thing because the drop-in center was not always open— and it wasn't the easiest place to kind of find.

ANNA ALVES: Yeah, that's what Janice said.

PERRIS STRAUGHTER: Yeah. And AAOGC is on the second floor at Broad Street and William. But I remember— that was actually the first place that I went to. I was looking to connect with the gay community. I knew my friend was living there, but I was wanting to get to know others— because I used to volunteer with the Orange County Gay and Lesbian Center when I was in college and that's how I met all my gay friends. And actually my best friend, still to this day, is someone I met at that center as a youth that was dropping in.

ANNA ALVES: Still in Orange County?

PERRIS STRAUGHTER: No, she got out. She's in San Francisco. Yeah, but yeah, so we're both in much better places. 13, 12 years, like, I don't even know how many years. So AAOGC, certainly NJCRI. AAOGC was like the first space that I went to where as I found other people. And then I discovered NJCRI later

because it's -- one of the problems of NJCRI is that it's not downtown, so it's -- it's good in that the people that it services, a lot of them are coming from all over the city.

So in certain ways, it's more convenient for some of the more vulnerable populations, but you know, it's harder for everyone else because it's not centrally located. [00:52:00] So that's another space. There's also NAESM in North Newark. I've only been there a few times but it's also a resource, albeit not in the same exact way.

ANNA ALVES: But if you do, you can always shoot me an email.

PERRIS STRAUGHTER: Yeah.

ANNA ALVES: And now we're going to shift into the questions around identity. So, how would you describe your sexual orientation or gender identity?

PERRIS STRAUGHTER: In terms of gender identity, I identify as a cis male. Sexual orientation, I'm a gay man. Although, it's funny how that over life -- because people often ask me about this. I feel like I was just talking about this, this past weekend with somebody. Oh, I was, because I was saying I found this girl really attractive and they couldn't understand that because I identify as gay, I'm definitely gay, but you know, I definitely see sexuality as somewhat fluid and I think some people— you know, there's a whole spectrum? And that people are in different places and I feel like sometimes you can move a little bit, you know, I don't think it's fixed sort of either, so— But yeah, I definitely identify as a gay man.

ANNA ALVES: And how did you first become aware of that aspect of yourself?

PERRIS STRAUGHTER: In high school, although I definitely had fantasies and stuff like that and crushes in junior high, maybe even before. Maybe even in elementary school, now that I think about it,

yeah. But, you know, our society represses all that stuff or it doesn't make it available, so we repress it and I think I repressed it.

But I had this crush on this guy in high school and it was like tough, because I was totally not bi or gay or anything like that. [00:54:00] And then I was like, I just had to come into reality with myself— you've got to be bi, you were obsessed with this boy. So that's how I came out at bi initially because I had girlfriends, and I had girlfriends after that, but I came out as bi.

And then later, I realized after I dated a girl in college for a while, I realized this is -- I'm not -- I'm holding on to the bi thing mainly because I was afraid actually to accept myself as gay. I didn't want to be gay man. That was when I was 19, I came out as gay.

ANNA ALVES: And how did you first learn about the existence of the LGBTQ community?

PERRIS STRAUGHTER: I don't remember. I feel like definitely when I was younger, there were shows and stuff like that-- not shows, but they were out in the media. Although, you know, there was HIV and everything like that, AIDS so...

ANNA ALVES: When you say shows, do you mean like TV shows or do you mean -- what do you mean?

PERRIS STRAUGHTER: No, like media. Like there were gay actors. There were movies where there were gay people and I feel -- I don't remember a specific point, because yeah when I was a kid there were no gay shows. I don't remember.

ANNA ALVES: It's just like, oh, here we are.

PERRIS STRAUGHTER: Yeah, I mean, I remember at least from my parents, they never -- I mean I remember my mom saying something about lesbians when I was a teenager. [00:56:00] But besides that, I

don't really remember them talking about it at all. They were not intolerant, just silent. .

My own coming out was different, different story, but they were not people that were intolerant of that, but at the same time, I don't remember having them ever talking about it when I was a kid.

ANNA ALVES: Right. And then how did the people in your life become aware of the identity that you were evolving into?

PERRIS STRAUGHTER: Well, I came out to friends initially.

ANNA ALVES: In college?

PERRIS STRAUGHTER: In high school.

ANNA ALVES: In high school.

PERRIS STRAUGHTER: As bi and then I didn't come out to my family until I was 19. My mom had discovered some chats that I was doing when I was 17 or something? And that was a really horrible experience for me, so we didn't talk about that until I came out, like three years later.

ANNA ALVES: And then how have your racial and religious identities impacted your LGBTQ identity? Or affected it? Or have they?

PERRIS STRAUGHTER: I definitely felt at times when I was struggling with it initially, when I was a teenager I definitely felt suicidal at times. I felt like it was wrong, it was bad, but it never felt like it was because it was unholy or not according to God. I never felt that. It's interesting. I think it probably has to do with the way my spirituality is. I don't see God as wrathful.

[00:58:00] I don't believe in the devil, for instance.

But I definitely felt like it was not right, it's not good, but it wasn't for those reasons. So I never really had that problem that a lot of people unfortunately do, where they have this conflict between their spiritual selves or religious selves and

their identity. I had it more just kind of— I guess because it's not normal, you know-- “normal,” I know, but—

ANNA ALVES: Considering, yeah.

PERRIS STRAUGHTER: But yeah, exactly, considering and because society viewed it as bad, so I had a lot of problems with it. In terms of how it connects to race, really after I came out and after, you know, like I'm totally okay with the gay thing and everything, to see the intersection of race and to see [00:59:03] that's still a struggle because there's so much racism in the gay community.

I think the bigger problem is -- and then there's homophobia in the black church and that's a big problem that's mainly affecting black communities. I've seen that and have experienced that, but also I went to a black Baptist church in Newark and I've been around a lot of religious people in Newark – most of them Black – who were not intolerant.

Although homophobia in the Black church is a problem, I think a bigger problem is the racism that's within the LGBTQ community and it's not from the LGBTQ community either, it's just everywhere. [01:00:00] I think for some reason, it gets sometimes intensified in the LGBTQ community because we're already on the fringe, so we get -- and this is good, for the most part -- we already don't care about what people think or about being PC or whatever.

So I think stuff that I think the straight community knows, like “oh I can't say that” or “I can't,” people are able to get away within the LGBTQ community. People are -- they're able to segregate themselves or say certain things or have preferences or like just “I don't date such and such, a certain type of people.”

And certainly when I came out and I was looking to date, you know, or just meet other people— you know, so I'm half black, half white, but I don't necessarily look black. It's kind of like, “oh what are you?” I get that all the time. You know, out here I look Puerto Rican and Dominican, but you know, back home, it's like, “Perris, what are you? Are you Egyptian or whatever?” You know, they never know.

So I remember meeting guys— this is like online and that's -- this is before the apps, this is like chats. I would always get like “what are you?”. And I would be like I'm half black, half white. But but like literally, 90 percent of the time unless like a Latin or Black person—even a lot of the Latins did this too—would be like, “Oh, I don't date black guys.” Or they might say something like, “I don't date black guys, but you're mixed and you don't really look black.”

[01:02:00] I got this so much, it was just really— and it would just make me so angry, because this is like half of who I am, you know? And I really— I mean growing up in Orange County, in mostly white areas, I mean there's a mix, but there definitely wasn't a lot of Black people where I was, where I grew up. But this was a dynamic I experienced everywhere in Southern California generally. I experienced all kinds of subtle racism, but I didn't experience that kind of racism until I was really dealing with people in the Gay community. And it really affected me because I was like 18 at that time? Or 18— I guess 19? 19, yeah, because this is after I came out. But some of it was before because I was on those chat rooms, even before I came out, so you know it was like -- so it was a very formative time in my life.

It's something I still struggle within that because I knew the pain that it caused me. You know, I really, you know, trying

to work to you know eradicate that within the LGBTQ community is really important to me and it's hard because people don't want to talk about these things. People don't want to like give up their preferences or whatever, you know, it's just -- you know, so it's tough.

Turning back to my work in Newark, there's some self-segregation that happens. Yeah, certainly the spaces, the communities that I've been around had been mostly black or Latino and, you know, so— I think I have more work to do in terms of figuring out how we integrate.

ANNA ALVES: Is that something that you're taking with you as you go out to Brooklyn?

PERRIS STRAUGHTER: Yeah, so the work -- some of the work I want to do once I find some space to do it, is well... [01:04:00] but also I see what's happening in New York. There's that integration work that's necessary, but there's also this huge attack on black gay spaces in New York. It's very conscious, I believe.

At the top of the gay community definitely is more white male. But it's not from them, it's really from the white heterosexual community. Because it's related to gentrification and it's related to policing the spaces and it's definitely more of anti-black thing, than an anti-gay thing, but it has elements of both.

And yeah, these spaces that were historically havens, and to some degree still are for all gay people, particularly gays of color. They're being like hyper-policed and they're oftentimes not safe spaces. Thank God [New York City Mayor] DeBlasio [01:05:14] is in office and Stop and Frisk is not happening anymore, but aggressive policies like that and actions like that, to some degree, still continue today. That's

the work I think that needs to be done because that's the population that's vulnerable.

They don't have the resources to -- because this is not happening to someone like me, who is of color, but I can afford to have a cute little drink, in a cute little bar where the other bar might have got displaced, went out of business, but I can be in a mixed space and pay \$12.00 for a cocktail.

[01:06:00] But for kids that are under 21, where do they go? And if they're told they can't be in this place or this place closes at X time or there's so much policing that's happening around the Piers, for instance now, it's just not a safe space for LGBTQ youth anymore.

ANNA ALVES:

And let's see. I'm trying to figure out if these questions actually -- if you've already answered some of these questions. Okay, how has being gay made your life different from the way it would be if you did not have this identity? [Pause and some laughter] Quite the question.

PERRIS STRAUGHTER:

My best friend, I have to call her tonight or text her. She would always say, "Perris if you weren't gay -- I forget if she said gay and black, or if she just said gay. I feel like she just said gay, but maybe it was gay and black — she said, "if you weren't gay and black or gay -- if you weren't gay, you'd be a Republican." She would always tell me that, and I used to get so mad at her. I was like -- I used to get so mad at her. And then she -- because I would say a lot of things, this is when I was younger. Being from Orange County, like, there's just a lot of internalized prejudice. Like, so yeah, I mean, I think that being gay— I mean, I love it now and it comes with disadvantages, certainly, but it also comes with so much perspective on life and joy.

I've had very limited negative experiences, thank God. I wasn't really bullied in school or at least not because I was gay. [01:08:00] I haven't been bashed. I haven't had things happen to -- so thank God. But of course, there's the fear of those things happening. I've certainly been called names and threatened and that kind of stuff, so there's always that fear of violence.

But those kind of experiences gave you perspective, and being in the minority like that particularly, I mean there's one thing being black, there's another being gay or LGBT. Well, I think, just being gay or lesbian or bisexual, then transgender is a whole another layer, but -- it's like it gives me access to a life experience that I couldn't really imagine life not being this way because it would just be so— like I wouldn't have this other experience.

And I think -- I mean my friend's point, I think not having privilege gives you access to these perspectives that can make you -- not to say this could make you a better person, -- something that someone said — being on the fringe, you have a different view of life in the world and you're able more to love everyone and experience everything that life has to offer without judgements and without holding back. I don't know who said that. I have to find out where I heard that from but yeah, some of that is true.

ANNA ALVES:

And if you do find that, you can give me the -- although it is on record. And then how has -- well, you kind of answered that. [01:10:00] Next question was how has your perception of that identity changed overtime? You kind of talked about that, unless there's something sort of -- because I think we've been talking about that in general.

PERRIS STRAUGHTER: I think what I would add to that is that there's my identity, but there's also just LGBT, in general. Definitely, when I was in college, it was very academic, like, pansexual and I don't want to have a label. But that's what I was wondering, right?

But I definitely have -- my perspectives have evolved in that I feel like things are much— what I'm saying earlier about being fluid and having a spectrum and not being fixed in your perceptions or beliefs. And I think it's important for people to, even in the community, make sure you have friends that are trans, that are lesbians, that are -- I know too many gay men that only hang out with gay men. Or also I know gay men that only hang out with like straight girls.

It's just, like, diversify your people. Because I've had my opinions change over time, and it's not like I was not accepting of people before— it was more that I had prejudices that I didn't think I had or wouldn't acknowledge. And doing this work for so many years now, I've seen them and been able to kind of unravel them and dismantle them.

Whereas I think there's a lot of people that are doing this kind of work that, they got prejudices and they're not challenging them. They're not -- or they may not be doing the work, but they're out in the community and they have all these prejudices.

ANNA ALVES: **[01:12:00]** And then, have you found -- okay, moving I guess beyond the individual, have you found community or support from other people in Newark or elsewhere? You had mentioned LIT a little bit earlier and then other sort of spaces, but I guess like expand upon spaces and, like, communities that you feel have been supportive or that you feel folks can find as support— sort of maybe spaces in community, for instance?

PERRIS STRAUGHTER: Yeah, I mean what was great about working with Newark Pride and I'm still on the board — but what was so great about that work is that I made friends in a place that I didn't know anybody, besides my one friend from Princeton. I made friends.

I made professional connections, networks, and there's all these groups and organizations, Newark Pride is one of them, that it kind of gives you access to this community, that it's about getting the work done. Well, a lot of what we do is parties too, so it's also about having a good time. So you're creating fun for not just yourself, but the community. But it's also about meeting people and, like, you form this family.

What I was able to do in Newark, was I definitely felt like I have this extended family of friends, a lot of it was through the work I was doing. [01:14:00] So yeah, I think that -- yeah, I just hope that people explore those organizations and Newark PRIDE. That's what I wish for the next generation of leaders. You know, there's the Newark LGBTQ Community Center, AOGC, NGCRI, with Project Wow. In terms of professional orgs, there's a LGBTQ Chamber of Commerce now in Newark.

But all those types of groups— then there's informally because there's all these promoter communities that put on the parties— but through working with these folks and getting to know them, you can kind of create friendships and beyond that, that just help to -- it helps you, but it helps to again build the community.

ANNA ALVES: It sound like a mix of -- sounds like a mix of social and political and sort of civic organizations.

PERRIS STRAUGHTER: Yeah.

ANNA ALVES: And then, and so the spiritual, kind of more embracing type of spiritual...

PERRIS STRAUGHTER: Yeah.

ANNA ALVES: If so. And then so...

PERRIS STRAUGHTER: Well, the church—because UFC is a church and so was LIT before it became part of UFC and that's big for people. You mentioned political, that's really important because even though things are getting better for LGBT people, we're not there yet, particularly in places like Newark, where there's certain violence, and sometimes we're victims of that violence. **[01:15:20]**. We've got to have political power and efficacy and some of the ways you create that is through community.

You can't have community if you don't have people coming together, working on stuff together, praying together, having fun together. It's big. The community -- I mean this translates up and this is something that as I've been learning it.

[01:16:00] Poor people and LGBT people, people that are kind of on periphery of society or are disenfranchised, don't necessarily have access to power and social capital, but the fact is that people that have power, they know these things. That's why you see all these like networking mixers— stuff like we don't even hear about because it's, like, we're not invited. We're just not invited. But the Hilary Clintons of the world? They're invited and they go. They're having cocktails with the billionaires that own this company.

So it's like this social thing, where they're social, but it's also political. And they're in the ears of those with power— so we need to do that same type of stuff, at our level, in our communities, in order to have political power.

ANNA ALVES: Have you had any experiences that maybe approximated that or come close to that? I mean. I know you also were on the Commission. What was that experience like? In terms of some of the stuff that we're talking about, was it helpful, was it...?

PERRIS STRAUGHTER: Yeah.

ANNA ALVES: Did you see some of these things playing out? In what ways?

PERRIS STRAUGHTER: Yeah, well being in city government, and I see a lot of stuff, but what was great about the Commission is that finally, LGBT, our community, we weren't outsiders. We're like insiders now. We're part of the Mayor's administration. We're appointed by the Mayor. The city has to respond to us because technically, we're part of the city.

Now, I mean, that structure does not work in and of itself.

Darnell Moore and I— Darnell was the first chair, and then I was the second chair— did what we could to try to kind of build that body and make it work. Unfortunately, sometimes, structures that exist, kind of push people out, remain.

[01:18:00] And some of it is, and this is with anything, some of those— there's structures that can kind of enable more political power, but it always goes back to relationships.

So— and that's something that— doing that relationship building is so important. And it's not just within our

community, part of it is that, how do we build and leverage each other's relationships with people outside of the

community in order to help our community get power and influence? And the Commission kind of taught me some of, you know, how to do that, and how we weren't doing that.

Yeah, that's why history is important too, because people had to do— you know, Audrey Lorde, Harvey Milk, all those fantastic people had to do that relationship and coalition

building, even more so, back in the day than we have to now. We have to remember that if they were able to be successful and do what they had to do, to make those advancements, then the work that we're doing, which is just as important, is different. It's a different scale. There's going to be -- we're definitely in a much better place now, but we still have a lot of work to do, but we've got to use those same tactics. We've got to learn from their successes and their failures to get it done.

ANNA ALVES: When you were on the commission, did you find that there were particular alliances that you were able to move being in that space?

PERRIS STRAUGHTER: Yeah.

ANNA ALVES: And what was some of those, if you can talk about that, and were some of them surprising or some of them not surprising?

PERRIS STRAUGHTER: Yeah, sure. Well, one thing that really helped me out was having connections already beyond just the LGBT community. So I had worked with, like, the CDCs throughout the city and the neighborhood groups and churches. [01:20:00] So I had a network of folks outside the LGBT community. I know some people have been doing that work of coalition building in Newark, and that's really important because in Newark there's a lot of the silo-ing thing going on, and then it's like, "Well, we need *our* stuff." I was trying to do some of this, but I just didn't have the bandwidth, but like, the Puerto Rican Festival and the Portuguese Festival and the Gay Pride Festival— we should kind of all work together. We're all doing the same thing. It kills us, so much work, but if we worked together a little more we could leverage our collective efforts. And there was interest in that. That surprised me sometimes. So there wasn't that homophobia on the other end.

There was, like, “Oh yeah, that's a great idea, we should work together.”

It was just that none of us had the capacity to really pull it off. [wry chuckle] So that kind of coalition building, from what I could tell, there were more doors open than closed. Rarely -- when I used to tell people what I did, which is the PRIDE work or the Commission — and the Commission, because it's an official thing, I had no problem telling whoever.

So rarely did I get a negative reaction from that. It was usually like, “Oh, that's really great!” And folks usually wanted to know more. So there's more doors opened than were closed and it's really about figuring out how to leverage those open doors. And I can't say that I was very good at figuring that out, but I know that that's the way forward and that's the way to get change.

[01:22:00] And certainly, the successes that we had were because of that kind of work, in terms of like, getting people that were faith leaders to help promote stuff for us or getting people that were leading community organizations to help. That's -- it's true in that we had successes by doing that kind of work.

ANNA ALVES: So now we're in the part where it's just sort of general overview, so we're going to be winding down, which might be good because it is starting to get very loud in here.

PERRIS STRAUGHTER: Yeah.

ANNA ALVES: So are there any sort of -- are there major historical events that you can think of that have impacted your life in some of the work that you were doing— I guess, that's the big picture stuff?

PERRIS STRAUGHTER: Yeah. I mean the obvious one I guess would be gay marriage, but I don't know, I'm still -- I mean it's a huge victory. It's

very important. I'm still in the camp that I wish there was more focus on employment discrimination, and other types of discrimination. But certainly someone made the political calculus, or maybe they didn't. Maybe they just -- it was -- it's kind of the cause of the people that have the means to get it. But it's, of course, an important cause because we're talking about all the issues that for two people can't -- that love each other and live together can't get married. So, it's the fact that it was the easier cause to get through. Because that became such a prominent thing, that did help everything that we did, and that everyone was thinking about that.

[01:24:00] They didn't really know or understand gay issues necessarily or LGBT issues or what we're dealing with, but they understood gay marriage because they were hearing everything about it, so it was like a pathway in. And certainly if that dialogue was not happening and not as projected on the loud speaker, it would have been harder to do some of the work that we were doing. Probably would've been even harder to raise some of the money that we were able to raise. So that's important and that's maybe something for the next -- I don't know what the big issue is now.

I hope it's employment discrimination, but certainly having those big pushes, are not just important for the particular policies, but they're important to, like, always -- to all of our workers, just to make sure that like we need to continue to be in forefront because we have issues. We still have issues. And that probably goes for the civil rights movement as well, but I'm just thinking of the gay movement.

ANNA ALVES:

And I guess in closing, like, are there any sort of specific goals or plans for the near future that you're sort of hoping to

like, I don't know in terms of— because you just moved, so it looks like a lot of... Like what's on the horizon?

PERRIS STRAUGHTER: What's on the horizon?

ANNA ALVES: Yeah.

PERRIS STRAUGHTER: Well, I'm still involved with Newark PRIDE and my goal there -- we've got a great new president. She's great for the organization, she's got all the right elements. The key though with that, and to some degree Newark, although stepping away, I can't do this as much as I was, but figuring out that succession plan in terms of -- well, not just succession plan. It's not really about me or even other leaders that I came behind.

[01:26:00] It's about really building the capacity and moving the lever in terms of where we are. It's almost like the barometer, like really moving Newark to the next level up. And instead of us being a community that's fractured, us being a community that speaks one voice that is strong, that is powerful, that can raise money, that can have impacts, etcetera. I think despite setbacks, we've come a long way. And a lot of those people— I'm sure you've talked to a fair amount of them— have been doing that work, so my goal is that I don't just step -- even if I completely step away one day, like I might move back to California eventually — that I know there's people doing that work and that work has buildup and that Newark is -- there's that kind of level, it continues to rise up.

So that's my hope, and of course for PRIDE, because everyone wants that to get... not just be sustainable, because that's first thing, and that's been hard, but really get to the level that it can and should be. It's never going to be like a big city. It's never going to be a DC or Philly or New York, but it can be

something that is both unique and powerful and something that rallies people and attracts out-of-towners and all that. In terms of my -- I do want to, talking about earlier — figure out how now that I'm in New York, -- I want to figure out how do we. [01:28:00] deal with -- how do we preserve safe spaces for gays of color or LGBT of color, particularly youth? And it can't just be in the Project WOWs -- they can't just be in these inside spaces. It's got to be something that we use throughout mainstream society and, you know something that are physical spaces — you know, streets, public spaces, business establishments, etc. Because that's -- I mean even as - - what's affected the community a lot even in the time that I've been out, or at least out to myself, with the prevalence of apps and the fact we're just more and more accepted, so we can go certain places, yeah that's all helped.

But the fact is, we're still always going to be minorities. And we're still in certain ways, not normal. We're different. So we need those spaces and those ways to connect with ourselves. So that's kind of my next project, is like working on that kind of stuff in New York. Thinking about the Piers and Christopher Street, and there's probably other spaces on that list.

ANNA ALVES:

Do you think you'll always somewhat be connected with Newark still, even though you've moved over to New York?

PERRIS STRAUGHTER:

Certainly while I'm here, yeah, because it's so close and I'm still on the -- I'll be on the board as long as I'm still contributing something. If I get too busy with other stuff, at least I'll donate money and I'll go to the events, because I love it. [01:30:00] Part of, definitely for me, one of the best things about doing Newark PRIDE— as much of a headache and work as it was as like a side job— like going to all the events

was so much fun. I always had so much fun during the week. So if anything, I'll just support it and go. And even if I leave New York to go to DC or California or who knows, I'll always donate.

ANNA ALVES: Anything else you'd like to add as we finish up?

PERRIS STRAUGHTER: No.

ANNA ALVES: Well, thank you very much.

PERRIS STRAUGHTER: Yeah, sure.