

Queer Newark Oral History Project

Interviewee: Alicia Heath-Toby

Interviewer: Naomi Extra

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Location: Rutgers-Newark

NAOMI EXTRA: All right we are on, today is May 13th 2016. My name is Naomi Extra here -- Naomi Extra and I'm here interviewing Alicia Heath-Toby at Rutgers-Newark for the Queer Newark Oral History Project. Okay thank you first for this interview again, so I'm just going to start with the question: When and where were you born and can you tell me a little bit about your early life?

ALICIA HEATH-TOBY: I was born in New York, I was born in the Bronx and I grew up in Spanish Harlem and my mom and my elder sister and I came to New York -- I mean New York, Harlem and I was... I think I was five. So I was raised in New York and I --

NAOMI EXTRA: **[Unintelligible - 00:01:06].**

ALICIA HEATH-TOBY: My mom was a single mom. My sister is 13 years older than me so the dynamic was that my mother worked a lot and my sister stepped in and posed like mom when I was little. I went to elementary school, public school until junior high school. I went to private schools **[Unintelligible - 00:01:37]**. I was a quiet kid and for the most part -- I mean I like being with people, but I was quiet. I enjoyed the play, I like playing and stuff...

[00:02:00]

NAOMI EXTRA: **[Laughter].**

ALICIA HEATH-TOBY: Okay, when I got into Junior High School they discovered that there were some challenges that I had and they -- of course back then they called it... I forgot what they called it, but it turns out that I'm **ADHD**. But it was more than there was a time when, black folks were like? **[unintelligible - 00:02:34]** sit down **[unintelligible - 00:02:38]** so it wasn't acknowledged until I got like later into -- and it wasn't even **called that then it was** hyper active or whatever. But you know I grew up again like I mean any normal kid except for, you know, in Spanish Harlem, in the ghetto, not so many kids that

look like me went to private school and so it was very difficult and seventh -- between seventh and ninth grade. One, because I went to school with -- it was 98 percent white and there was a culture shock and it was something that I struggled with because I was the only black kid in my class. Until maybe the eighth grade and then we have two other black kids, well maybe it was the three of us. So it was hard and it was also hard coming home after school to a community of kids that look like me who -- it wasn't bully, but tease me, you know, you think you're white. [Unintelligible - 00:03:55].

[00:04:00]

So at that age I became aware that I had to defend myself more than I would have liked to and so that was a little challenging and then I went to high school and I went to another private school where I was maybe one of six black kids, but at that point I had a -- I had become used to it and I was older and my friends in the neighborhood were, you know, at that point I was in school and it wasn't new.

NAOMI EXTRA: Right.

ALICIA HEATH-TOBY: At sixteen, no actually fourteen there was this girl in my class who -- she was so pretty and you know the experience of private schools for those of us who know the experience, is that you have the opportunity to be exposed to things that you never would be otherwise perhaps, particularly from low income families, you know, it was, so I -- we took trips and until it happened to be a sleep over. And she dared me to kiss her and I was a kind of kid that -- I was always a leader, so I was always the one who initiated who, you know, and so when she dared me I was like ooh you should have never did that and I kissed her. And it was -- I knew then that one, I like girls and two that I couldn't like them outwardly.

[00:06:00]

I grew up in a house with a mom who was very religious, but she wasn't a fanatic, we grew up Pentecostal. So my mother was -- she

allowed me to be a young person, she -- I could play my music and all that but they would clear -- things were clear about what you could and couldn't do. And sexuality and the expression of that was one and homosexuality was always talked about as an abomination and having sex before you got married was also an abomination. So I was -- I never had the experience of being able to explore my sexuality in the safety of my life as I knew it. So I knew that I liked girls and I knew that I couldn't like girls outwardly, but every opportunity that I had to be with girls I took them. At sixteen I decided I couldn't be closeted and it was very difficult and my nature was just one like I'm bold, that's just who I am. And so my coming out was cutting all my hair and you know claiming that I'm queer.

NAOMI EXTRA: Was that the term that you used?

ALICIA HEATH-TOBY: Yes.

NAOMI EXTRA: Okay.

ALICIA HEATH-TOBY: Yes. Lesbian wasn't -- I had heard the word lesbian, but it sounded -- I heard it in the context of it was something bad and my mother -- and the other word that was bad was dyke, the bull dagger and so queer was seen to be safe and because I was exposed to white kids early like that that was the language that I heard in that community, so I adopted that word initially.

[00:08:00]

NAOMI EXTRA: I just want to ask you a couple of quick follow up questions, what year were you born in?

ALICIA HEATH-TOBY: I was born in '62, so I'm 53 -- I will be 53.

NAOMI EXTRA: Okay and so at this point -- okay I'm talking like in the '70s okay?

ALICIA HEATH-TOBY: Yes.

NAOMI EXTRA: And so you are still in Spanish Harlem, so the middle school, the high school were in Spanish Harlem?

ALICIA HEATH-TOBY: No. The middle school and the high school were downtown.

NAOMI EXTRA: Okay, but you were living?

ALICIA HEATH-TOBY: I was living -- I grew up, I lived in Spanish Harlem so I commuted I got on the bus, the regular city bus. We didn't have buses that came to pick us up. So I get on a bus and I would go to school, but it was downtown in the '70s.

NAOMI EXTRA: Okay.

ALICIA HEATH-TOBY: The first school then I went to, New Lincoln, it was -- I can't remember, on 60 something street and then high school I went to Baldwin School.

NAOMI EXTRA: Okay.

ALICIA HEATH-TOBY: And which is now Calhoun and it was on 74 Street so I knew this train system and the bus system and I would go to school, travel to school that way. But it was the 70's and so, you know, I was with kids whose parents were hippies and so they were a different kind of breed of white kids. And they were very, you know, much of what I learned that was not the right thing to do was as a result of being in private school. So I got high early, you know, the Quaaludes and the Valium—

NAOMI EXTRA: Hippies.

ALICIA HEATH-TOBY: Yeah, you know and so I had it -- I was exposed to things in that way, so queer at the time was the language and again I adopted that language because it was -- it was safe.

[00:10:00]

NAOMI EXTRA: Was it -- so was it okay, was it safe in school, but then not safe at home?

ALICIA HEATH-TOBY: Well, it wasn't -- it was not -- when I was in school I wasn't an out lesbian like I knew my expression of my identity was just being around girls as much as I could. But I wasn't intimate, like I didn't sneak behind and do sexual things with girls because I was afraid. That if I got caught I knew that my mother would like -- that would not be good. But I had this secret admiration for girls and every op-

portunity I got I was with girls until 16 and I realized that I was actually getting ready to -- I was closer to 17 and I was getting ready to graduate from high school and I was getting ready to go off to college.

So this was my opportunity to come out because I knew that I didn't have to be with my mother and I knew that had I come out earlier my mother would have -- she wouldn't have put me out, that's not who my mother was, but it would have been a very difficult time had I stayed—if I were going to be home. And so I, like I said I you know, bold and I cut off my hair and then made this announcement and my mother was not happy, but at this point I was getting ready to go off to school.

So I got the lecture around you know, how I feel about it, it's an abomination, I love you but, you know, all of those things and my mother was a very interesting person because again she gave me—not free reign but she wasn't extremely strict, with me.

[00:12:00]

So I got to go to parties and all those things that -- and you know there was a group of black kids that we all went with school together and so we got to go parties together because our parents felt safe because our kids were in private school.

Little did they know the things that we were doing, right? But you know who -- they didn't know and they just felt safe and so I had an opportunity to be out in the world in ways that many kids didn't and in those opportunities I got to be—express myself in ways that I would not naturally do in the hood and certainly not under my mother's roof.

NAOMI EXTRA: In terms of ethnic background, your mother, African American?

ALICIA HEATH-TOBY: My mother is an African American southern and my dad is Trini.

NAOMI EXTRA: Okay.

ALICIA HEATH-TOBY: But my dad wasn't around.

NAOMI EXTRA: Okay.

ALICIA HEATH-TOBY: And he wasn't around at all. I mean I met him a couple of times but he wasn't around and so it was just my mom and my sister and I, but my sister had gone off to school by the time I was -- she is 13 years older than me so I had to be about nine, oh eight or nine when she went off to college. Actually it was before. About seven or eight when she went off to college. With so, you know, she would come home when -- on every other weekend or once a month and I'd get a chance to be with her, but I was a baby and so it was just kind of really me and my mom. And it was -- that's what it was, it was what it was.

[00:14:00]

So when I came out, you know, I got the conversation and I was, you know, and my mom whatever, because this is who I am, you know. And I went away to school and I got my first relationship.

NAOMI EXTRA: Where did you go to school?

ALICIA HEATH-TOBY: Holy Cross.

NAOMI EXTRA: Okay.

ALICIA HEATH-TOBY: And that was another -- I didn't want to go there. I got accepted, but I didn't want to go and—but my mother and my sister did not want me to go to a historical black college. I think that they felt that I would not be able to focus in a way that would support me completing school successfully.

NAOMI EXTRA: I got that speech.

ALICIA HEATH-TOBY: Yes. So I rebelled and I mean I went but I didn't like it because this was a different breed of white folks. This was the Irish and wealthy and it was evident that they did not want us there. And so it was a lot of racial tension and because I grew up in with a mother that I was -- my mother was a domestic and so she worked for white folks and it was hard to have those conversations with her about what it felt like to be mistreated because of my race.

So I struggled through college, made it, graduated, but it was not a place that I liked at all. And it was -- me and my mother never really had the kind of relationship again that afforded opportunity to talk about our lives. My mother is no longer with me and my sister, she has been dead for almost three years.

[00:16:00]

But our relationship was never that and so, you know, it was difficult. However, when I was with my first lover I brought her home and first initially my mother was very upset, and she was like, you cannot bring her here and you certainly can't be, you know, with her in this house. And that was like alright, whatever cause I'm going back to school. But yet there was a time that I can remember so vividly walking down the street, going to a store, a department store that no longer exists, and I see my lover and my mother notices my response and she leans over and she said you can go and say hello if you like.

So my mother was very -- she was a very interesting person 'cause she also honored that it meant something to me to love her and if I was happy, although she didn't agree, she appreciated it and she felt like how can I deny her this thing called love whatever that is for her? And so it was—but yet I -- and I never was closeted with my mother, every woman that I was with my mother knew. Fast forward and I -- and at this time still in the church and at about -- by the time I went to college I was no longer in the church, but when I would come home I would go to church with my mother sometimes and sometimes I wouldn't and she never -- at some point in my life I can't remember how old I was. She never forced me to go, but I enjoyed church, I enjoyed the worship and I enjoyed worshipping with people who knew the power of worship and black folks.

[00:18:00]

And so it was a joy for me, but then it came a point in my life where it became like I started to hear the homophobic messages from the

pulpit in ways that I did not hear as a kid. I don't even remember them as a kid, but now I have a heightened awareness because I'm identifying as -- at this point I'm 18, 19 and I'm identifying lesbian, I'm clear about that.

And I started to hear these messages and it became very difficult for me to be in the church but I knew -- but I always had a real connection with the experience and I was always clear that God was available to me. Get through school, I enter the military.

NAOMI EXTRA: So where are we like chronologically right now? Military how old are you [Unintelligible - 00:19:02]?

ALICIA HEATH-TOBY: I graduate college, I'm 21 and I do some gigs, I work for about maybe a year and a half.

NAOMI EXTRA: Okay.

ALICIA HEATH-TOBY: And in that time I started using drugs, like bad, so I was sniffing and smoking crack like it was that time.

NAOMI EXTRA: And where are you in?

ALICIA HEATH-TOBY: I'm still in New York. I don't get to Newark for a while. I'm and so -- I'm like I got to do something, I'm going to die, I'm going to die. No one knew that I was -- my mother didn't know and my sister didn't know. I'm very private and very secretive, you know, and so I lived on my own, so no one knew but I knew.

NAOMI EXTRA: But did that start at Holy Cross?

ALICIA HEATH-TOBY: No, that started when I got out of school. I smoked weed in college the entire time. Best academic years were when I started smoking weed. [laughs] I was like yeah, I can do this so -- but real hard -- and I drank, but cocaine and freebasing is what they called it then. I started using a lot and I said I got to get away from this and said the military and so I joined the navy.

NAOMI EXTRA: Interesting.

ALICIA HEATH-TOBY: I joined the navy and I loved it. I loved the idea -- what drew me was, besides the fact that I had to get away from the scene, that I got

the opportunity to travel and I was like, I don't have any money, but here's an opportunity for me to travel and so I took it.

NAOMI EXTRA: What year do you remember joining the navy?

ALICIA HEATH-TOBY: I was 20, it was '85.

NAOMI EXTRA: Okay.

ALICIA HEATH-TOBY: So I was 22.

NAOMI EXTRA: Okay.

ALICIA HEATH-TOBY: Yeah I was 22. And so I'm in the military and I'm doing -- I'm having a great time and I go into the military with a pre-existing condition, but they don't detect it. It was a physical -- I had something wrong with my hip. And I'm like yes, I made it, they didn't detect it and then somebody does detect it and they say that I have to go to medical and as a result I'm discharged and a quick discharge and now I'm fucked up, because I'm like oh man, I loved this. So, I come back home and I was trying to figure out what I'm I going to do with my life and I'm not getting any jobs.

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I went to this private school, that cost me all this money, that was -- it's the Ivy League blah, blah, blah -- I should have gotten a job and it didn't happen for me and I went -- I spiraled out and I started drinking and worked—I never not worked because I one, I had to support myself, I could not go home to my mother. That was not an option and there was nobody so, it was me.

I had to make it happen. So, I worked and then I started using again and I remember that again, I grew up in a time where many of us at my age, people didn't talk about depression. It was like get yourself together.

You ain't got time, you know that's a luxury, white women get depressed. You ain't got time for that, get it together and that was my conversation with myself and so -- but it wasn't -- in retrospect I needed help and I didn't go into NA or AA or none of that because I

was ashamed and I thought there's going to be somebody -- where I went there was going to be somebody in the room who knows my family and I'm gonna be outed as an addict.

And so, I kicked on my own, but it wasn't easy, but I knew that I couldn't keep using. I was just going to die. So, I go get this gig -- no I get married.

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So now I'm, Jesus, 23 because I was only in the military for over maybe... exactly 181 days and so, I come home and first thing I do is go to a club or something and I meet this woman and she's beautiful and I'm not shy, but I'm—like I said, I'm very reserved and I'm -- and she approached me and I'm like oh my God --.

NAOMI EXTRA: Do you remember what club it was?

ALICIA HEATH-TOBY: Yes, I do. It was The Grove.

NAOMI EXTRA: Okay.

ALICIA HEATH-TOBY: It used to be called The Duchess.

NAOMI EXTRA: Okay.

ALICIA HEATH-TOBY: And she approached me and I thought wow, okay and because I was in the space I was in, I didn't recognize that it was not a healthy relationship, but now I'm in it and I'm needy and somebody loves me, somebody wants me.

And so I make this commitment to marry this woman and we struggled and she had a daughter and I've always been clear about a number of things. One is, I'm not going to be with you if I can't be out, if we can't be out and if you have children, your children need to know about me and her child was with her mother.

And I just couldn't understand why that was and so, I insisted that she come and live with us and that was a shift for me. That's when I decided you cannot be high, because here is this little girl who is looking at you and her mother and what you do will be a lasting impression on this little girl and I stopped using.

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And we were together five years and her and my daughter, we still have a relationship and then it started getting violent. Her mother was just angry, she was an alcoholic and she hit me and I was like okay, because I'm not going to do that because, the other thing is I'm a fighter, backed up in the corner, I will fight. And I knew I don't want to be -- crimes of passion is real -- and I don't want to be hurt and I don't want to hurt her and I don't want this little girl to be with-out her mother again.

So, I left and I was devastated and before I left, you know that whole transition when you're about to break up and this whole thing about -- you start to think, should I leave, should I go, should this little girl, my daughter, where am I going to live and I'm in that space.

And we're like faking the funk and a friend of mine called me and said, I'm going to cop some weed and where do I go and my wife spoke to me and I was like I will ask Angela and she said, oh yeah tell her to come up. And she comes to visit us to get this -- to cop this weed and she brings who now is my wife. And when I saw her I was like oh my gosh, she's just so beautiful.

And I'm just being me and time lapse and my friend who called me -- one day I was --

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Me and Angela were going to and she says, I said I need to get out of here, because I just can't do this anymore. And she said well I'm getting ready to move to Delaware, I'm going to sublet my apartment. Take it, sublet it. You can rent it and I said absolutely and that's in Irvington, New Jersey. Now --

NAOMI EXTRA: What year are we in now?

ALICIA HEATH-TOBY: We're in -- okay so I barely --

NAOMI EXTRA: Maybe early 90's.

ALICIA HEATH-TOBY: Yes, it's '91, '90, like '91 I think it is. And she says, you can sublet my apartment and then go, oh cool. So I come and I look at her apartment and my wife Angela and at the time was like, you are going to New Jersey and I'm like yeah because I can't stay here so, that was -- then we ended that and that was that.

But it comes to find out that Honey, my wife now Sandra, lived downstairs. And my friend told me Sandra lives downstairs and she said that I have to talk to her to see if she's okay with you living upstairs above her.

And it wasn't about anything except for they were really close and she just wanted to shoot it by her and so, I was like okay, whatever and I'm thinking, how can she say no **given** she doesn't know me but, **what she's knows is [unintelligible]**, I'm like okay.

So I go and I look at the apartment and Sandra comes upstairs and she interviews me. She grills me, like where you live and why come to New Jersey, like it's someone's talking and everything and I'm just thinking oh, she's just so adorable. I'll roll with it.

[00:30:00]

ALICIA HEATH-TOBY: So, I move in and we become fast friends. Now, she was living a heterosexual existence and I was really clear at that time, Naomi, that I didn't want to be in a serious relationship. I really just wanted to have sex with as many women as I could, that's what I wanted as fate would have it and the universe wherever it didn't turn out that way, right? And so, she and I started becoming friends and she -- we would go, she had Mondays off, Sundays and Mondays and we would go, Monday would be our trip—she would take me to different places in New Jersey like to shop, shopping and stuff like that and we would have lunch and we would chat and one day she said to me, what is it like being lesbian?

And I said -- I don't remember what I said, I was like something silly, it's like being straight, it's just with women or something like that

and she said, when did you know and all that and then I'd tell her the story. And we come back and I love telling this because, yes, she is so funny, she seduced me. She got me, she plied me with drinks, and she seduced me. And we were you know, just being intimate, when we were in just -- and then one day, we went to dinner like it's a really nice place.

She took me to dinner and well, she is sitting across the table from me and I'm looking at her and I say, I think that I'm falling in love with you. And she looked at me with this blank look and I was like, ooh shit, I shouldn't have said that.

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She had no expression and she said nothing and I'm just sitting there like, okay what now? And we continue to eat, but in my mind I'm like, oh man. And so at this time something is -- she was dealing with men and something happened and we were just kind of just flowing and then she has sons -- we have sons and her youngest -- when I came into her life and her youngest was nine and her oldest was 16. And both of her sons were raised Muslims and so there was this whole -- and they didn't know about us, they just thought we were just good girlfriends. And back then I didn't appear as I appear now. I always identify -- at that point I started to identify as butch, I own that and, but I had -- I wore makeup and I had long nails and so looking at me one wouldn't think that I was butch, but I was, I was clear.

So they thought we were just good friends and I said to her as I said to the woman that I was with before. We cannot be together and be closeted, I can't do that and I can't be with you if your children don't know that. And she said, "Okay." We told her youngest son and he didn't really -- actually we didn't tell him because he was nine and I don't know what it was, but we told her oldest son and he was not happy. He had a really difficult time, but he had a girlfriend who got

it and she really talked to him and she said if you love your mom then you need to get over this.

[00:34:00]

Eventually he got over it and so here we are and we're still living in the same building and my mother gets sick, very sick, and so, I'm back and forth to New York and stuff and we're still kind of hanging out and it has been 27 years this January, so whatever 27 years is from this past January is when we declared that we would be in a relationship. Now was the time for her to meet my family. And we did not -- we met the family and all of that and we started to—then we moved in together after being together for three or four years we moved in together. And it was a good relationship and great just we just are so compatible and I started getting this yearning for church again and so, I'm clear that I'm lesbian, I'm clear that I can't go to just any church because I'm not trying to hear the sermon about abomination.

NAOMI EXTRA: And you're still in Irvington?

ALICIA HEATH-TOBY: I was still in Irvington, we're in Irvington now, we moved into a place together. And so, but I'm also -- I lost a son when I was in college. I was in my junior year and I lost a son and I hadn't dealt with it, it dealt with me.

[00:36:00]

And so it was still this thing and then I started to -- and what I realized again in hindsight is that even as a child like I've made attempts on my life as a kid and I'm -- and so, I know now, as I got older I knew that was depression. Now I'm real clear that I'm depressed, I'm clear what is going on and although I'm with this great woman I'm not at peace and I make another attempt on my life again, I get in my car and just storming, it was a snow storm. And this is '85 -- no, not '85 -- '95 and I get in my car and my intention is to kill myself,

that's my intention, and it was a sports car so it's fast and as I'm driving, a spirit says, go to -- and I have a godmother who told me about this church, in Newark.

And the spirit says, go to this church, and I go to this church and they're standing outside because they rented space. It turns out that it was Liberation in Truth and Unity Fellowship church and the pastor now is Bishop **Holland, Jacqueline Holland**, is standing outside and I'm looking at him and I'm like oh my God. I'm looking at these people and I'm like oh my goodness, they look like me in some way, and some of them are butch, some of them are [unintelligible - 00:37:40]. This is it, I found it and I continued to go, that was my church and my home. And went home and I told my wife how excited I was and a couple of Sundays later she came with me and then one Sunday the pastor says, I'm, she put out a call for folks who wanted to be joined at the [unintelligible - 00:38:15] to become deacons and I knew that was God calling me forth. And I submitted my letter of intent and I was chosen among twelve other candidates and that started the journey of my clergy journey.

NAOMI EXTRA: In '95? '96?

ALICIA HEATH-TOBY: '95 -- '96 and then in '98, because it was a two-year process, in '98 I was ordained as a deacon. And then I went into the ministerial training -- the ministers training and then two years after that I was ordained or three years after that I was ordained Minister and then 2004 I was ordained Reverend. And this was at Liberation In Truth and it was in that time and early in my journey, that I became clear that God created me just as I am because that was also the message that the movement Unity Fellowship Church Movement, is God loves you just as you are and that was real for me.

It resonated for me, I didn't have to struggle with it, I didn't have to convince myself that that was the truth. It was clear to me and I was also clear that God created me as lesbian and my identity was very

intentional. That my being dyke was intentional and it was a purpose for me to be dyke because my work was to talk to other lesbians who identified in their masculinity and to talk to them and to support them in their liberation and I was real clear about that and still am to this day and in Newark -- and I never wanted to live in New Jersey ever and so coming in, and so we moved to Newark and at some point we moved in '90—so we got married, 10 years later we got married. So we got married in '90—oh god during this time was like '98 right before I got ordained, '98 we got married. And so we were together in '89, yeah '89 and so when we moved to Newark -- I didn't want to move to Newark.

NAOMI EXTRA:

Why?

I didn't want to live in New Jersey, but I loved my wife and my wife was born in Newark and she loves Newark and if we were going to be together, if I was going to be with her I knew that it wasn't going to be any place but Newark. My experience of Newark -- so we moved to Newark and so I'm in the ministry and doing that thing and really loving the process and loving the work and just newly married and in 2003 Sakia gets killed and that rocked me.

[00:42:00]

I didn't know her, but what I knew was a masculine identified young woman who's very clear about who she is, speaks her truth and is murdered and it devastated me. And this is right before -- this is right at my wife and I were invited to join the Harris versus Lewis case which was right to same sex marriage in the state of New Jersey. So we were one of the seven couples, so we are the black, holistic lesbians of this movement and then Sakia gets murdered. And I'm messed up and I realized that Newark, the administration, you know, the mayoral administration and the city was homophobic. It became

evident and I was not happy here and wasn't—and still at some time quite frankly I still don't like Newark. I still think that there is a lot of work that has to be done around the LGBT community, particularly of color, because we are of color it's easier for us to be marginalized, mistreated and it's just different with white LGBT folk in the city because they come with the white privilege so it's just a different dynamic.

[00:44:00]

I was enraged and I felt very—I felt like a fish out of water here. But what kept me again was my work in the church that satisfied me, it gave me purpose, it allowed me to work in the city in ways that made a difference.

I became part of the HIV movement, really here, like I started in New York, but I became part of that work—the church got funded to do preventions and so I was in it and so I could I could be in this city because I was doing I was giving back and I was a worker.

NAOMI EXTRA: And this was through the church HIV activism?

ALICIA HEATH-TOBY: This was through the church yeah this was through the church it was very powerful and, but all along I'm like if we can just lift us up and take us someplace else. And again like I said I still struggle, but I have had the opportunity to again do great life changing work in the city.

NAOMI EXTRA: Have you moved around Newark or did you kind of move to one place and stay there?

ALICIA HEATH-TOBY: We moved to one place.

NAOMI EXTRA: Okay.

ALICIA HEATH-TOBY: So we started in Irvington and then again we moved to another place in Irvington and then the last place that we've been living for, I think it's now 18 years has been in Newark. So I live in the South ward, we live on Gerard place which is one of the most beautiful blocks in the city near up in the Clinton Hill section, whatever that means, but

around the corner is the hood. But it's a beautiful block and then everybody on the block is of African descent and that's nice.

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I think we might be the youngest couple and the only lesbian- there used to be another lesbian couple who lived there, but they moved, but we are the only lesbian couple on the block and you know our neighbors being neighbors you know we all look out for each other. And then I—so I'm still in the church, my mother is really sick again and then and she all this time she is living with my sister in Pennsylvania and then in 2005 our pastor resigned—she retired, she didn't resign, she retired and there had to be a choice, a decision made around who was going to take up leadership and it was at that time that I accepted the charge to be assistant pastor to Reverend Janyce Jackson, she was my pastor. And me and another sister who was also a reverend were assistants to her and I was an assistant pastor for five or six, maybe five years and there was an opportunity for me to pastor in Rochester at another church in our movement.

NAOMI EXTRA: Rochester in New York.

ALICIA HEATH-TOBY: New York. And me and my wife talked about it and we agreed that I would go. She wasn't able to go because she works for FedEx.

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She was, you know, she was nearing retirement, she still works for them, but she wasn't going to uproot it was harder to find work, you know you got to bid and all that sort of stuff that goes with it, so we decided that I would go and I would stay there for close to three years and it just wasn't a fit. One, the biggest thing was that my wife wasn't with me. I know that had my wife been with me I probably would have stuck it out, but it was too difficult.

NAOMI EXTRA: What was different?

ALICIA HEATH-TOBY: The climate—the how do I say this fairly as possible. Rochester is a very conservative city and the congregation that I was leading 99 percent of them were LGBT, but they were closeted. Most of them, not all, but most of them and so for them they couldn't reckon with one, my being out saying that from the pulpit. They felt like why you just can't be a pastor without all that. But for me there is no separation, it's all or nothing. And they struggled with the language of gay and God in the same context.

NAOMI EXTRA: What years were you in Rochester?

ALICIA HEATH-TOBY: I was in Rochester from 2011 until—no 2010. I didn't move to Rochester until 2011, but I became pastor so I used to go every other week 2010 and then I moved February of 2011 and I came back home 2013.

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NAOMI EXTRA: That's really interesting because I went to the University of Rochester and all of the queer kids of color were super closeted, it was -- they were just --

ALICIA HEATH-TOBY: Right.

NAOMI EXTRA: And this was like in 2005.

ALICIA HEATH-TOBY: Right so it didn't change. And that was really hard. That was really hard because there was contention. It was hard for them to move and they wanted me to do what they wanted me to do and I had to what God said to do and so I left, I resigned and left and that was hard. It was a hard time in my life. And then I decided that I needed to take a step back from Ministry and still in that space having many conversations with God around what's next.

I'm no longer part of that movement anymore of the Unity Fellowship Church Movement. I still believe in the work that they do, it's still necessary because there will always be LGBTQ folks who struggle with reconciling that God was intentional in the creation of them. So, there is always room for liberation and their mission is still very powerful even today.

But I no longer felt like it was something that supported the direction I was going in and I no longer felt like I needed that kind of -- I didn't need it anymore. It served me in the journey well, the movement served me well, but I had grown in ways that the movement hasn't.

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And it's not bad that they haven't, their mission is their mission, I just have a different mission, different vision. So, I have been not in Ministry and so I come back home and I decide I got to do something because I can't just not do. So, in addition to looking for work, 'cause I had to look for work, I currently work for FedEx, but I knew that I wanted to do the work of supporting people to actualize their greatest potential.

So I decided to take a course in Life Coaching and in 2015, I became certified as a Life Coach. So, I got an opportunity to work with people in that way and all of my clients to date -- no that's not true, of the five people that I work with I get to do that and it's rewarding. It's rewarding and I deal mostly with couples and it's good. Do I miss Ministry? Absolutely.

NAOMI EXTRA: Do you feel like you are doing your ministering thought this work?

ALICIA HEATH-TOBY: I do feel like -- quite frankly Naomi I feel like I'm being ministered to in this work.

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I feel like there is this place where God is speaking to me in new ways and what will come out of it will be revealed in due season. In my work with folks you know we -- I don't just talk about spirituality, that's not just the work, it's life stuff, you know what I mean and so there are times when folks want to go there because really the work is where they want to go.

My work is to support them in going there and having some transformation happen for them. So, I don't lead it, they lead it. So, if we go there we go there. But this, the work is really about -- I feel like God

is speaking to me in new ways and preparing me for something, I don't have a clue. There are times when I say to my wife on occasion, I miss preaching because that's my love, preaching and teaching, that's what I love to do.

But right now that's not what I'm supposed to be doing I guess. So I'm just waiting, you know. And as I wait here in Newark I'm not -- I don't know it's not struggle, it's not the word but I find that I'm, as I once was, very restless. I think that the community is doing great work, but I think it's just still no support. I'm disappointed in the administration just as I was disappointed when Sakia was killed.

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I think that there is, there's a lot of platitudes that are made. I think that there's not a real commitment to the community in ways that it can be. There's certainly no funding that is provided to people doing work, LGBT organizations like the Newark LGBTQ Community Center which I am the President of the board. We've been doing this work forever without I would say **[unintelligible - 00:56:45]** very little to none. There is no support and I think that's egregious because we spend lots of money in the city, taxes, we pay huge taxes like everybody else who lives in the city and I feel like we're just not supported. And so I'm restless, but I also am clear that it's not time for me to move. It's time for me to be where I'm at. And I'm learning to be still, but that's just not my nature. And I get to be in these relationships, these conversations with my clients in ways that I may not have been able to be years ago and for that I'm grateful.

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NAOMI EXTRA:

Thank you so much, it's exactly an hour. So, we'll wrap up here. So, today is May 13th 2016, my name in Naomi Extra and I'm interviewing Alicia Heath-Toby at Rutgers Newark for the Queer Newark Oral History Project.

ALICIA HEATH-TOBY: Thank you.

NAOMI EXTRA: Thank you.