

Queer Newark Oral History Project

Interviewee: Lynette Lashawn

Interviewer: Kristyn Scorsone

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Location: Rutgers-Newark

Kristyn Scorsone: Okay, today is January 19th, 2017. My name is Kristyn Scorsone, and I am interviewing Lynette Lashawn at Rutgers, Newark for the Queer Newark Oral History Project. Thank you for doing this.

Lynette Lashawn: You're welcome.

Kristyn Scorsone: Can you give me your date of birth and where you were born?

Lynette Lashawn: My date of birth is 2/7/77. I was born in Newark at United Hospital.

Kristyn Scorsone: Who raised you in your house?

Lynette Lashawn: My mom raised me as a single parent.

Kristyn Scorsone: What did your mom do?

Lynette Lashawn: She was a postal worker. Before then, she was basically a stay-at-home mom. She cared for my brother and I, yeah.

Kristyn Scorsone: It's just you and your brother?

Lynette Lashawn: Yes.

Kristyn Scorsone: Did you grow up in one home, or did you move around?

Lynette Lashawn: We grew up, for the most part, in one apartment building.

Kristyn Scorsone: Where in Newark?

Lynette Lashawn: Oh High and Spruce. It's now Martin Luther King, but it was called Hight Street at one point.

Kristyn Scorsone: Is that Central Ward?

Lynette Lashawn: Yes.

Kristyn Scorsone: What kind of kid were you like?

Lynette Lashawn: Well, I was the first child and first grandchild on both sides. I would say I was spoiled rotten by my mom and my grandparents. I was a child of curiosity. Everything piqued my interest. I needed to know why that socket was there and why I couldn't put anything in it. I was one of those kids. Yeah, I would say I was a child of curiosity.

Kristyn Scorsone: You were close to your grandparents?

Lynette Lashawn: Very.

Kristyn Scorsone: What did they do?

Lynette Lashawn: My grandmother was a nurse and my grandfather was a truck driver. They both were on their jobs for 30 plus years.

Kristyn Scorsone: Did they live close to you?

Lynette Lashawn: Yes.

Kristyn Scorsone: Do you recall any events or transitions or turning points in your early life that impacted you?

Lynette Lashawn: I would say, as I said, my mom was a single parent. She didn't create me by myself, but I would say my father, being absent, probably impacted me more than anything else. As a girl, a young girl, a little girl, you grew up with idolizing your dad. You idolize your mom, too, but you idolize your dad. That's the first man you love. I think that impacted my life in a greater way than I imagined then. I now realize it, now as an adult, that it had a lot of impact, just him coming in and out, not being consistent, that sort of thing. Watching my mom not want to paint him in the most negative light, but allow me to see him for who she needed me to see, not who he was to her, in her eyes, and from her experience. I would say that was more impactful than anything.

Kristyn Scorsone: Can you tell me one of your early memories? Something nice or something that just stood out to you?

Lynette Lashawn: With my dad or just in general?

Kristyn Scorsone: In general, yeah. It doesn't have to be about your father.

Lynette Lashawn: I would say the strength of my mom. To be a single parent—and I'm not a parent, so I don't know what that's like to be a single parent, but to be a single parent and to raise two children to the best of your ability, and work, and be that disciplinarian, all of those different things, wearing those many hats, just seeing that showed me how strong my mom was. It made me admire her even more, because she had gone through those things.

I would say that's one of my—seeing my mom in that light.

Kristyn Scorsone: Can you describe what your neighborhood was like?

Lynette Lashawn: Woo. Newark. I would definitely say it wasn't any different than any typical adolescent life, other than the location. [00:05:00] I played the cello. I played the violin, flute, cheerleader, basketball, Double Dutch team. Anything that you can think about that a parent will thrust their child into, my mom made sure we weren't bored. Let me just say that. I would say it definitely was tough times. At the end of the day, we made the best of what we had. I also saw that with my friends who we were all growing up together, so we got to see the struggle. You see the triumph, and you see the trials and you see the triumph. From where I come from, you make the best of it. You try not to harp over it, otherwise you'll lay down and just give up and say to heck with it. You just gotta keep going, because it's a better life out there for you, if you just do what you gotta do.

Kristyn Scorsone: What schools did you attend?

Lynette Lashawn: I went to Louise A Spencer. I went to Cleveland. I went to Central High School.

Kristyn Scorsone: Did you go to college as well?

Lynette Lashawn: I went to Essex County College where I got my paralegal degree. Then, I later pursued my bachelor's and master's degree at Thomas Edison State College. Well, Thomas Edison University now, at this point.

Kristyn Scorsone: Where is that?

Lynette Lashawn: It's in Trenton.

Kristyn Scorsone: You said your BA and your MA there?

Lynette Lashawn: Mm-hmm

Kristyn Scorsone: What degrees?

Lynette Lashawn: Liberal Arts. Both Liberal Arts.

Kristyn Scorsone: How come you changed from paralegal?

Lynette Lashawn: I guess because I'm always one to stay abreast of current trends and careers and different things like that. When I started seeing the shift in the economy, and I started seeing that employers were hiring less specialized degree applicants, I started to say you know what, I'd rather have a degree like a liberal studies degree, which is well-rounded, deals with the humanity, everything, basically. Everything. I just decided to go that route. That way it's not a matter of me having a criminal justice degree and I'm trying to get a position doing something completely different. Because, as you know, you'll probably change your jobs or careers very often. That was one of the main reason why I decided I needed to not specialize in anything in particular and just keep it broad.

Kristyn Scorsone: Has religion played a role in your life at all?

Lynette Lashawn: I would definitely say yes. I grew up in the Baptist Church. I was on the usher board in church every Sunday with my grandmother. I have to say that it definitely played a crucial role in my life. It helped me form my own belief, but it also allowed me to put myself into the equation, in that, not that I'm gonna follow the bible to the letter, more than I'm going to—I don't know. I'm just gonna say this. It has played a strong role in my upbringing and everything that I do. I believe in God. That's it. Yeah.

Kristyn Scorsone: How would you describe your sexual orientation or gender identity, if you do describe yourself in a way?

Lynette Lashawn: I try not to box myself into any particular category. I understand LGBT; I understand we have to identify with something, right? I don't know necessarily that I wanna be identified or boxed. I'm a woman who happens to love women, and who's married to a woman. That's just how I look at it. I'm not defined by anything.

Kristyn Scorsone: Growing up, were you aware of [00:10:00] LGBTQ people? Like in your area or on TV or anything like that?

Lynette Lashawn: I had an uncle/aunt, transgender. I was very close with her. I don't know. I idolized her, because she was able to be herself in a world where you're being forced to adopt some of societal norms. She was just free. Just to be free, and to not care about what people think about you. At the point I'm at in my life, I'm free. I understand, in hindsight, how she might've felt when she was alive, let me say that.

Kristyn Scorsone: Do you associate different places in Newark with the LGBT community? Or have you ever gone to different queer spaces or bars or clubs?

Lynette Lashawn: Yeah. I mean I'm from Newark. I came out here, being out and about, on the club scene. Just going to different parties. There used to be a bar on Academy Street in Halsey, which used to be called Euphoria. That was a hangout spot. We had the Globe Trotters, which is by Lincoln Park. That was another place that I would hang out with friends. Just wherever the new local bars were. Me and my girlfriends would go and hang out and have a good time.

Kristyn Scorsone: Can you describe what it was like in Euphoria and the Globe Trotters?

Lynette Lashawn: I don't know. I would say just like your typical bar, girls hanging out, having drinks, checking other women out. You know how it go.

Kristyn Scorsone: Yeah, so it's all women. It's not a mixed crowd?

Lynette Lashawn: Some parties were mixed. Oh, there's another one, Murphy's. Murphy's was that place. It was a safe haven for us. You go. You can have lunch during business hours. Then you can go for fierce cocktail after work or whatever. It was a place to be. Eight dollars, you get a free drink when you come in, and the drink is so strong, you don't need another one. Like literally.

Kristyn Scorsone: Eight dollars cover charge, or eight dollars for the drink?

Lynette Lashawn: I think it was just eight dollars for the cover charge, and then you just got a drink.

Kristyn Scorsone: There was dancing, too?

Lynette Lashawn: Dancing, yeah. Yeah.

Kristyn Scorsone: Do you have any favorite memories of these places?

Lynette Lashawn: Oh, I have favorite memories at all of them. One that I can remember, Globe Trotters, we used to have what we called lip sync. Basically, you put on your favorite song and you just perform in front of everybody. One of my best friends and I, we actually lip-synced to Brandy and Monica, The Boy is Mine. We really thought—I mean we dove into character, and we really thought we were Brandy and Monica that day. It was really fun. When you add alcohol, you can do anything, right?

Kristyn Scorsone: This is true.

Lynette Lashawn: Exactly.

Kristyn Scorsone: When did you decide to start Off the Hanger?

Lynette Lashawn: Well, Off the Hanger started seven years ago. Actually, February makes seven years. I decided to start it because fashion was always something that was a part of my life. My mom was very fashionable. Big hair, red lipstick, thick suits or tight jeans and pumps. Then my grandmother, she was this nurse, always clean and neat and everything. Then when she went to church she had her big hats and her suits.

Then my grandfather, being the truck driver, he had that rugged, flannel shirt, leather jacket, biker, aviator glasses. He also drove a motorcycle. I've always been inspired, and always had a love for fashion because of the people around me, my immediate people around me, my grandparents, my mom, like I said. I don't know. It was [00:15:00] destined for me to eventually fall in love with fashion in a way that I wanted to be able to give it to other people.

One day I just was talking to a couple friends. I said I'm gonna start a boutique. One of my girlfriend's was like well, you dress really nice, I can really see you doing styling, blah, blah, blah, blah. Then Off the Hanger was born. I had a hundred names on a list, because I couldn't decide. I sent it to one of my girlfriends and I said all right, I have 100 names, I need to narrow it down. Help me.

She was like, Off the Hanger. I was like I don't know. I was coming up with Off the Rack. Off the Hanger. A bunch of different names, and I had to sleep on it. Once I slept on it, and I woke up, I was like hmm, I like Off the Hanger and there you go.

Kristyn Scorsone: Why did you choose to open your business in Newark?

Lynette Lashawn: Well, Off the Hanger started online. Then it ventured into a showroom. It became this sensation where not only was it an online store, but I was offering services. I was offering styling services. I was offering personal shopping services. Those different things that you don't necessarily get with an online store. I would do private appointments in my home. I would host shopping events in my home, but it would be by referral. I wouldn't just let anyone in. That was one of the reason—well, that was—I lost my train of thought.

Kristyn Scorsone: Oh, it's okay.

Lynette Lashawn: Is it gonna keep go—you can edit that part. What was the question, I'm sorry?

Kristyn Scorsone: No, that's okay. Why did you choose to open your business in Newark?

Lynette Lashawn: I go off.

Kristyn Scorsone: That's okay. Feel free to go off. It's fine.

Lynette Lashawn: Like I said, it started online. It transitioned to a showroom, which turned out to be a really big hit. We wanted to do a commercial. We met with someone from Cablevision. She said this location is

lovely, but she said the only problem with this location is this location.

It forced Anita and I to really look at the space, look at the location. Not that we didn't do that when we initially decided to open there, but it was factoring in what type of responses that we were getting and different things like that. Once we analyzed the situation ourselves, we were like oh yeah, it's time to move. Being born and raised in Newark, and always wanting to have something in Newark—I know I wasn't sure if it was going to be fashion or if it was going to be something else, but I knew I wanted to do something in Newark and come back and bring the people of Newark something that they never even imagined could be in Newark, really.

Anita and I, we started looking at different locations. We started seeing all the new development and a lot of things that was happening in Newark. Then coupled with our love and obsession with fashion and furniture, we were like how about we open a fashion and furniture boutique, sorta like an Anthropologie, but in Newark. That's pretty much how it happened.

Kristyn Scorsone: How do you go about starting a store? What kind of bureaucracy's involved, like paperwork or licenses or capital?

Lynette Lashawn: Well, you first have to start with your name. Once you have a name, you register online. You have to register with the state. You have to apply for an EIN number, especially if you're gonna have employees. Especially if you don't wanna use your Social Security number which, if you're a business, you really wanna use an EIN number and not your social.

Once you register with the state, you get your EIN number, if you decide it's gonna be an online store, then obviously, you'll buy a domain name. You'll find a website host and go from there. Or if you want a actual store, you still go through the paperwork that

you go through, but you have to find a space. The first start is looking for a realtor that can help you with commercial property to help you look for a space. [00:20:00] Then once you actually find your space, and you sign the lease or whatever, you have to put a permit in with the city if you're having work done and all of that stuff.

That's pretty much it. Starting a business is not as hard as people think. It's so easy you can do it online, or you can do it over the phone. You can actually start a business in one day, really. It's not as hard as people may think.

Kristyn Scorsone: What was that first day like?

Lynette Lashawn: The first day in the store?

Kristyn Scorsone: The first day in the store, which happened to be our grand opening, was amazing. It was an out-of-body type of experience, because here we had the mayor here.

Lynette Lashawn: Which Mayor?

Kristyn Scorsone: Ras Baraka. We had our family and our friends. We had so many people from Newark who are actively participating in gentrification in Newark. Just to have all of those people see something that we've worked so hard for, because we've really put blood, sweat and tears into opening this business. When we were going through the construction part of it, we vowed not to take out a loan when we started the business. When we opened the doors the first day. We wanted to be the first people we paid. When you take out a loan, people have their hands out. That was one of the things that we really admired about how we were able to do what we did, and staying true to who we were. Not go in the direction that most people starting a business would go—they would take out a loan. We just felt like if that's something that we're gonna do, we'll do that later on down the road, if we need it.

For now, we're fine. We were selling coats out of the store when it was cold.

Fine. Because it's cold. You need a coat. That was something that was amazing. The grand opening, we had an overwhelming response, the love that we got was unbelievable. I can't even describe the feeling, because even till this day, and getting ready to celebrate a year next month, the love and support has been unbelievable. The number of people who have come to the store, all walks of life. All walks of life.

That's so us, because we're those all walks of life type of women, basically. We welcome everyone. Yeah.

Kristyn Scorsone: Was your mom there for the opening?

Lynette Lashawn: Yes.

Kristyn Scorsone: How about your grandparents?

Lynette Lashawn: My grandparents both are deceased, so they weren't able to—

Kristyn Scorsone: Oh, I'm sorry.

Lynette Lashawn: - but they were watching from above. I'm sure they were quite happy.

Kristyn Scorsone: Do you consider yourself an entrepreneur?

Lynette Lashawn: Yeah, absolutely.

Kristyn Scorsone: What was some of the challenges that you faced when you first started your business?

Lynette Lashawn: The first thing was deciding what hours of operation, because there's so much going on in the city of Newark right now, so many business are opening. Certainly, being not a new business, because Off the Hanger has always had a presence online, on social media. Just being a new business in the city of Newark, and in trying to find balance and presence. Trying to figure out okay, hours. What people like, demographics, who are your customers? We knew the customer was an eclectic one, but to what extent? Those were some of the things that we had to deal with. Pricing.

Are we pricing things right? Trying to have something for every price point so that everyone that come to the store can feel like they can shop here. Not [00:25:00] that they have to hold something up and they're so scared to look at the price. We don't wanna do that to people.

Kristyn Scorsone: How do you make those decisions? Do you have to do a lot of research, or is it trial and error?

Lynette Lashawn: I would say it's a combination. Trial and error and definitely research. Yeah.

Kristyn Scorsone: Are there challenges or issues as a business owner that you face because of your gender or sexuality or your race, or any aspects of your identity?

Lynette Lashawn: I can honestly say no. We haven't had to deal with anything as it relates to race or gender. I think when people come in the store, they're shocked that two African American women are the owners of such a beautiful space. It's from all people. Black, white, whoever come in the store. It's like oh, wow, okay. It's nice to see from African American community, it's nice to see another brother or sister or whatever in the community, being able to bring something like this to the community. I think that people really take to the fact that we are from Newark. We're not outsiders coming in, trying to reap the benefits. We were affected by a lot of things that happened in the city of Newark. Rightfully so, I think that we should be able to reap the benefits from the city of Newark.

Kristyn Scorsone: Can you describe the store, the inside?

Lynette Lashawn: I don't know. I love the store.

Kristyn Scorsone: It's beautiful.

Lynette Lashawn: Thank you. The store is our baby. I guess it has a Parisian flare on Off the Hangar side. Then AGT, which is A Girl and Guy Thing, has a rustic, industrial type of feel. Macho man, cave man type of

situation going on. The back of the store has a hotel theme. I don't know if you realized that. It has the porta-chairs with the fitting room that's made out of a door, doors. There's a luggage cart and stuff like that. Yeah.

The furniture area of the store is very colorful, it's very bright. We wanted to be able to—I'm all about energy. Well, we're both all about energy. I think that bright colors really brighten up people's spirits when they come in, opposed to something being dull. The space is certainly a conversation piece, if you will. It has a lot of character. We really put our blood, sweat and tears into the design of the space. It was a way for us to create. It was a way for us to be able to express ourselves through design. For people to see the world from our perspective.

Kristyn Scorsone: Yeah, I love all the details. Everything seems very specifically picked out and curated. You have those giant hangers. That's really—were they hard to put up and everything?

Lynette Lashawn: Not for us, cuz we didn't, but probably for the gentlemen that we hired to actually install them. One of the things I wanna just include in this, is that when we decided to open the store, we got the keys and everything, the first thing we said that every person that we hire, they have to be from Newark. The hangers, we had them done from a welder in the Ironbound Section.

Kristyn Scorsone: That's really cool.

Lynette Lashawn: The hangers are my logo. I don't know if you saw.

Kristyn Scorsone: Yeah. That's really cool. What do you think about the changes happening in Newark, the gentrification or the revitalization?

Lynette Lashawn: I honestly think it's amazing. I think it's amazing. It's long overdue. It's high time that people see Newark in more than just this poverty-stricken area that is infested with drugs and crime and all of that stuff. Newark is so much more. [00:30:00] Born in Newark and raised, and seeing the different changes that is

happening in Newark from where it was, it's a great thing. It's definitely a great thing.

I only see it getting better. I see Newarkers being more active in having a role to play in the growth of the city. Because we are all responsible. There's a sense of community here that everybody have a responsibility to do something, to do their part. That's just how I feel about it.

Kristyn Scorsone: What is your day-to-day like at the store? How do you guys figure out—do you both work the same hours? Do you split shifts?

Lynette Lashawn: It's a combination. We both also work full-time, aside from this. I also have another business, which is LynetteLaShawn.com. I offer web design services, creative director services and style ambassador services. Incorporating that into the boutique and all of the other things that we have to do, it is very challenging. We try to split our times up. The day-to-day is basically opening the store, making sure everything is logged in, making sure everything has a price. Greeting customers, taking photographs of the items. Usually I'm the model.

Taking pictures of the items. Posting them on social media, and then posting them on a website. It's a never-ending saga when it comes to the day-to-day. Because every day is something different. We may be logging in merchandise one whole day, and then the next day we're photographing it. The next day is getting it on the website and posting it on social media and different things like that. Responding to customers. Because it's not just the in-store. It's the online.

I sell a lot of stuff online, on Instagram. I have 10,000 followers, and I am trying to keep up with every response. I don't wanna be another store that don't respond to customers when they have questions about something, when they want more pictures. You

have to give the customers what they want, and you want to keep them coming back. Yeah.

Kristyn Scorsone: Do you have downtime?

Lynette Lashawn: What's that? Downtime is usually Sundays and Mondays for us, because we're closed both days. Downtime, for us, is usually us working still. Because whatever we can't do for the week, we need to do it during our off days. We don't have downtime.

Kristyn Scorsone: What are the top skills you think a person needs to be a successful business owner?

Lynette Lashawn: The first thing is to be realistic. You really have to be as realistic as possible when you come into this business, to understand that growth doesn't happen overnight. Patience. You have to be able to have patience with customers. You have to have patience with your vendors that you work with, whose designs you may house in your store. You have to be able to remove yourself in the buying process of a store like ours.

Some things we see it's like oh, I like this. Will a customer like it? You have to definitely do that. I would say, also, people skills.

People skills are important. You have to treat your customers how you wanna be treated. Just be practical. Practical. Honestly, being an entrepreneur is a lot of hard work, and that should be understood. It's so easy. It's so easy once you learn who your customers are. [00:35:00] Once you learn what the supply and demand is, what's needed. What's needed in the community. Are you gonna be the same cookie cutter store like everyone else, or are you gonna have something that stands out from the rest.

Because I think in such a saturated industry like fashion, you have to have a niche. The niche has to not be something that has already been done. It has to be something new and innovative. Yeah.

Kristyn Scorsone: What are your favorite things to do at the store? Do you have certain aspects of the job that you prefer?

Lynette Lashawn: I think I love photographing the items. They tell a story. I definitely think that if you put something on a mannequin, okay, fine. I think that to put the items on, to show the customers how to wear them is so crucial to everything else that you do. Because if a customer can't visualize themselves in your items, then it's really pointless. You're gonna have an item that's just gonna sit there. Because a mannequin can't sell clothes. You have to. I usually try to put the items on as best as I can, to try to show women how they can wear it. If they choose to remix it in another way, that's fine, too. Being able to tell a story in what it is that I wear is most important to me. Then any other task in the store, as it relates to product placement in the windows, that sort of thing. That's very important. That's very important, yeah.

Kristyn Scorsone: Do you carry a lot of—like a large range of sizes?

Lynette Lashawn: Mm-hmm. We carry from small to about two or three X.

Kristyn Scorsone: I meant to ask you before; besides your other entrepreneurial pursuits, do you have any other 9:00 to 5:00, standard go to a company, work there, jobs like that?

Lynette Lashawn: Yes. I've worked for the city of Newark as a paralegal in the labor and litigation section. I worked for the city for about ten years. I got laid off. Then I was unemployed for about ten months, and thank God for Off the Hangar, because Off the Hangar really kept me afloat during that time. After I did that—I was unemployed for about ten months. I landed a job with the Board of Public Utilities through the American Reinvestment Recovery Act, ARRA. I landed a job doing paralegal work for the Board of Public Utilities, and I've been there seven years now.

Kristyn Scorsone: Does your prior work experience inform your work at the store? Did you gain skills or experience or knowledge that you take with you?

Lynette Lashawn: To the store?

Kristyn Scorsone: Yeah.

Lynette Lashawn: I would say no. I will honestly say no, because I've been doing investigative work, paralegal work for a long time. I would honestly say that the skills that I acquired through that experience was something separate from fashion. Two different arenas. However, it has taught me to—any type of business transaction that I do is via contract. That's something I can bridge the gap with.

Yeah, I would definitely say that aspect of it, the legal aspect of it, using images. Because social media is all about reusing images that other people might have used. Telling a story from someone else's perspective, but you may not have permission to do so. Just being able to go back into my archive, [00:40:00] paralegal archive, so to speak, and just be able to apply those things in terms of the business, the legal aspect of it, I would say, yeah. In that regard.

Kristyn Scorsone: How did you meet Anita?

Lynette Lashawn: Anita and I got hired around the same time at Continental Airlines. Funny story. I was waiting to be interviewed—waiting for my second interview. I had just taken the test. There was a test that you had to take. You had to learn 250 airport codes within I wanna say like a week's time.

I went in for my second interview and she so happened to be there. Remembering her from the club scene, seeing her out or whatever, I don't know. We started talking. We remembered each other's face from the club scene.

She was talking to me about her getting ready to do the test, blah, blah, blah. I was like, well you need these cards. I had just literally took the test. She was like okay. She was studying. She ended up passing.

We would see each other. We would go to lunch and different things like that, but we both were in a relationship at the time. I didn't look at her like that. She didn't look at me like that, I'm sure, cuz she was in a relationship. Yeah, that's basically how we met, at Continental.

Kristyn Scorsone: When you guys got out of relationships, then did you start dating shortly after?

Lynette Lashawn: Not right away. We were dating other people. It's one of those situations like Anita and I had dated off and on—like the first time. How we got together was she was out of a relationship, and at that time my long-term lover, who I was with for seven years, had broken up. I was single. She was single. The opportunity permitted itself. Here we are.

Kristyn Scorsone: When did you get married?

Lynette Lashawn: We got married almost five years ago in Dominican Republic.

Kristyn Scorsone: What was that like?

Lynette Lashawn: It was beautiful. It was an intimate wedding. We had about 30 guests. They all wore white. I had a pink wedding dress on, because I wanted to stand out. Bride.

It was beautiful. My mom was there. My brother was there. My closest girlfriends and family. Her niece was there. It really was an amazing, amazing time. It really was. Marrying your best friend, your confidant. My slumber buddy is what I call her sometimes. Can we have a slumber party? Yeah. It's amazing.

Kristyn Scorsone: Is being an entrepreneur, do you find that empowering, or do you feel like it gives you control over your life?

Lynette Lashawn: I would say it gives me meaning. It puts a lot of things into perspective. It is something—especially because I love fashion so much. It doesn't seem like work. Being an entrepreneur is me chasing my passion. Me being myself. It's rewarding. It's beneficial. I love being able to give to other people. I love making

other people feel beautiful. Helping people boost their confidence, because you just never know what people are going through. Being an entrepreneur, for me, teaches me how to be compassionate. Compassionate to others. Because again, you don't know what anyone's dealing with. Yeah.

Kristyn Scorsone: Have you made friendships with the business, like either with customers or vendors?

Lynette Lashawn: Tons. Tons, yeah. Like I said, I've been doing it seven years. I've met a lot of people that have helped me along the way that I've helped along the way. Met some interesting women who are also doing the same thing that I'm doing. Just to be able to piggyback off of each other, and share stories and what do you think about this? Friends in business. It's good to have that sort of relationship with women and men. Yeah.

Kristyn Scorsone: Has anyone given you any piece of advice that's stuck with you or helped you?

Lynette Lashawn: There was one friend that said to me never discount your services or your worth. [00:45:00] Never discount those things. Know your worth. It's valuable. Sometimes you'll get people who feel like they want something for nothing. You couldn't live off of something for nothing. Just keeping that in mind. Just knowing your worth, basically. Yeah.

Kristyn Scorsone: Do you have any favorite quote or mantra or motto that you go by to get yourself through the day? If it's a stressful day and you're like—?

Lynette Lashawn: That's interesting.

Kristyn Scorsone: Or how do you keep yourself from becoming overwhelmed?

Lynette Lashawn: My favorite quote of mine is by Muhamad Ali.

Kristyn Scorsone: It's okay if you don't remember the exact wording.

Lynette Lashawn: Yeah. Oh my goodness, and I just looked at it. I should know it because I look at it every day. It's something along the lines of—I can't even think about it. Yeah, I can't think about it right now.

Kristyn Scorsone: Yeah, that's okay. You look at it every day, though?

Lynette Lashawn: Yeah. It's one of those situations where it's like I really wanna say what it is, because I think it's important. Not just for me, but just anyone in general. Maybe we can come back to that.

Kristyn Scorsone: Yeah, if you think of it, definitely. Do you feel successful?

Lynette Lashawn: I guess it depends on what you define as success. I have been successful in many things. Coming from, like I said, a home where there was a single parent. My mom highest education was an associate's. It was something that was instilled in me was to go to school, finish. Don't do things that you see other people doing. There were a lot of people that I was growing up with at the time that were having children, my age.

My mom was like you're not gonna be like a lot of people that you might be friends with. That's okay. You're not better than them; I want something more out of your life. I want you to have what I didn't have. I think that was one of the reasons why I traveled.

Why I decided to explore so many different things that I've explored in my life, from just obtaining three college degrees, and opening my business, and connecting with the people that I've connected with.

Just breaking down barriers and being the first in my immediate family to do a lot of the things I was able to do. Not because I was the oldest, but just because I was reared that way, to do those things. Be active, keep your mind going. Don't hang around the wrong crowd, don't be a follower. Be a leader. Those sort of things. I was not a follower, in my upbringing. I just wasn't that type of person. I wanted to do my own thing. I'm an Aquarius by nature. We tend to be loners. Just doing things our own way.

Marching to our own beat. You say tomay-to, I say tomah-to. That sort of thing. That's an Aquarius.

Kristyn Scorsone: I'm also Aquarius.

Lynette Lashawn: Oh wow. When's your birthday?

Kristyn Scorsone: The 22nd.

Lynette Lashawn: Oh wow, mine's the 7th of February. Yeah.

Kristyn Scorsone: Awesome.

Lynette Lashawn: We like to talk, don't we?

Kristyn Scorsone: Yes.

[Laughing]

Kristyn Scorsone: Do you feel pressure to also live up to the so-called norms of adulthood, I guess, like buying a house or having a child or things like that?

Lynette Lashawn: Absolutely. Yeah. I think naturally everyone had this idea of the white picket fence, so to speak. You want the house. [00:50:00] You want the kids. You want the car. You want the family. You want all of those things. I don't see a problem with that. Because it depends on what you consider to be your, let's say, piece of American pie. It's whatever you choose to make it. You understand what I'm saying? I feel like it's what you make it. You define what that piece of the pie tastes like, you know?

Kristyn Scorsone: Do you ever think you'll expand the business? Do you have different goals for the future?

Lynette Lashawn: Right now I'm working on a style series that will allow me to connect to other creators who are also entrepreneurs chasing their dreams, highlighting lifestyle and the arts in the city of Newark. Highlighting Newark in a different perspective, a positive perspective different than Newark has really ever been. When people think of fashion and Newark, they don't necessarily put the two together. I think that it's a duty of mine to be able to show

people otherwise. To show people that fashion and Newark can exist together.

Kristyn Scorsone: Is that an online thing?

Lynette Lashawn: Well, the web series is gonna be online.

Kristyn Scorsone: Will that be on YouTube?

Lynette Lashawn: It's gonna be on YouTube and Vimeo.

Kristyn Scorsone: Oh cool.

Lynette Lashawn: Yeah, it's going to be on both. YouTube has its own set of—it has its own platform, and so does the other. I wanna be able to reach a variety of people.

Kristyn Scorsone: That's really cool. Do you have ideas, I guess, for episodes?

Lynette Lashawn: One episode I've already started filming. Just to share with you, I am dealing with fibroids issues. One episode I am basically talking about my journey, my journey dealing with fibroids, and how I am able to continue to climb, in spite of my health condition.

Another issue is aerial yoga and introducing fitness, because it's important. A lot of people look at me, and come into the store, and they expect fitness, beauty, all of these different things. I wanna be as transparent as I possibly can with people, trying something new that I haven't tried, in terms of food, exercise, all things lifestyle. You'll see an episode with Anita and I deciding on a project in the store, and giving you a before and after situation. I have a friend who is an artist, and he is also an actor. I'm gonna go to some art galleries with him.

It's gonna be all things lifestyle. It's gonna be an episode of myself and a friend of mine's where we're going thrift shopping. Just all around giving people a glimpse into my life. It's not just Off the Hanger. It's so much more, just like Newark is this big city, but it's so much more than people give it credit for.

Kristyn Scorsone: I love that. When you mentioned your health, how do you deal with that? Do you have health insurance?

Lynette Lashawn: I do. I am having surgery. I was supposed to have surgery Friday, meaning tomorrow. My blood was too low when I went for my pre-admission testing. I have to go through some blood management situation, and then I'll have the surgery. Probably another two weeks I'll have the surgery or whatever. I'm looking forward to it. Because one of the things that happens when you are dealing with fibroids, obviously you're usually affected when your period is on. It's debilitating in a sense that it doesn't allow you to go about your day-to-day.

When you have a business, you have no days off. Even though we're closed Sunday and Monday, we still have no days off. There's always something to be done for the business. In this episode where I'm talking about fibroids, giving the facts and all of that good stuff, I'm just being real. I'm just being [00:55:00] as transparent as possible, because I'm not embarrassed about it. It's nothing that I can control. Seventh-five percent of women will deal with some aspects of fibroids, and 50 percent of those women are African American women. Why? No one knows.

If I can be a voice for Newark, too. Because I'm sure there's so many other women who have dealt with this in silence. Because I've dealt with it in silence for so many years. Now I'm just breaking out like I'm not embarrassed. I can't control this no more than anyone can control finding out they have breast cancer or whatever. It's just part of life. Biological aspects of aging. All that good stuff. I'm just dealing with it.

Kristyn Scorsone: Is it painful?

Lynette Lashawn: Only during my menstrual. I have five fibroids. One the size of an orange, and then the others the size of tangerines. I have five. I guess if I wasn't— if Anita and I weren't seriously considering having a baby, it would be like okay, maybe I can stick it out. I

can't. I want to get it taken out so that I can go about my life, and then when we decide we want to start a family, then we're okay.

Kristyn Scorsone: Is she helpful in the sense of you're in pain and you can't come to work?

Lynette Lashawn: Absolutely. Yes. Absolutely. If I'm in pain, she's in pain. Because that's how it is when your significant other is in pain. They can't do anything. Nothing. When I'm on my menstrual, I'm in the bed. I can't keep food down. It's just a lot that you have to deal with. She has been my rock. My biggest supporter. My biggest doctor. You can't eat that. Mother and father. All of those things that partners are usually taking the roles on. As your partner. You wear many hats. She's been very, very supportive. She doesn't necessarily want me to have the surgery, but she understands why I need to have it.

Kristyn Scorsone: Is she just worried about you going under? That kind of thing?

Lynette Lashawn: Yeah, she's not a fan of surgeries at all. She is so anti-surgery; it's not even funny. I get it. To me, I'm not scared of those sort of thing, because it's like its gonna help me feel better. I'll do whatever I need to do.

Kristyn Scorsone: You said you guys were thinking about having a child.

Lynette Lashawn: Mm-hmm.

Kristyn Scorsone: Do you have plans already? Do you know that you'll use a cryobank or do you know if you'll probably try to ask friends?

Lynette Lashawn: We definitely won't ask friends. We definitely discussed in vitro. We discussed artificial insemination. Yeah, those two options are two options that we are really exploring. A lot of people don't really understand the whole when you find a donor, if it's a family or friend, they have to be tested for a good year before you can even use their sperm. I wouldn't even—I'd rather go through a

bank or artificial insemination, or in vitro before that other process.
Because everything is already tested you even get there.

Kristyn Scorsone: Who would carry?

Lynette Lashawn: I would.

Kristyn Scorsone: Why?

Lynette Lashawn: Because she's 45. She's like I'm not carrying no baby. Some people look at it like oh, you're the woman of the relationship. She's the more dominant one of the relationship. While that may be true, some women who are dominant or tomboyish still carry babies. She just feels like she's 45. I'm okay. Listen, I'm all right. I'll carry the baby. It's not a big deal.

Kristyn Scorsone: Where do you find inspiration?

Lynette Lashawn: Everywhere. People walking down the street. I love New York. That's my home away from home. I don't know if I told you this, but I usually work fashion week in New York. I've been doing that for a couple years, well more than a couple years. [01:00:00] I've been doing that for some years. I love it. I love to just walk around the city and just get inspired. Just see what people are wearing, how people interact with each other. Those are the things that inspire me.

I love Magazines. I'm always on blogs and social media.

Inspiration comes from everywhere. It's not one set location that I go to for my source of inspiration, honestly.

Kristyn Scorsone: Do you have favorite bloggers?

Lynette Lashawn: I like Style is My Thing. She's from the UK. There's another one. All About Monica is another one. Song of Style is another one. She's from California. Asian woman, very, very stylish. She has a book out. I forget the name of it. I have it. It's on my couch in my living room. I read it at nighttime. It talks about blogging and photos. Different things like that to perfect your craft. Because I'm

always trying to perfect my craft. Then also trying to evolve with technology and staying in the know. Because having a business, you have to know what trends are out. You have to be in the know in terms of what apps to use to post your pictures on Instagram or Facebook.

How to edit your photos, because your photos are everything. Especially like Instagram. That's your resume now. People don't wanna see your paper resume anymore, they wanna see your last nine photos on your Instagram account to see where you are, and see if they wanna do business with you. Whatever it is.

Kristyn Scorsone: Do you worry about things like what your personal brand is?

Lynette Lashawn: I don't. Now what we're trying to do, Anita and I, with our brand, even though we have two separate brands, we're merging them together to be all things lifestyle. I don't know necessarily have a worry as to how we're going to be able to achieve it. I know we're going to be able to do it, but I know it's going to be a challenge. I think that, in terms of branding, is basically to—the challenge is going to be translation. Are people going to be able to get the message that we are going to put out there as far as the business as a whole? As a business who view—we view ourselves as a brand, being able to tap on everything that involves lifestyle. From home décor, to just everyday life, fitness, all of those different things. Because they play a part. People don't necessarily talk about them, because it's not related to their business. If you're doing a lifestyle brand, it probably should be something that you talk about. You have to get up and exercise. You gotta walk. That's exercise. You have to go about your day-to-day. You might need coffee to get you through the day. You might need an inspirational quote to motivate you to do that task that you've been dreading or putting off or whatever.

Kristyn Scorsone: How would you describe your style?

Lynette Lashawn: Oh my god. Honestly, I don't have one set style. I get asked this question all the time. I always stumble. I don't really have a particular style. My looks are motivated by how I feel on a day-to-day. If I'm feeling hey, I wanna just be casual, I just wanna be chic, I might throw on some boyfriend jeans, a blazer and some pumps and a t-shirt and keep it moving. Or if I wanna dress up, sometimes I dress up in the store a lot. Well, I dress up in the store a lot, because I think the persona in the store, and what's being displayed on social media should meet. They should match the same person I present myself as, should be who they greet when they walk in the store. That's just my whole thing.

I love all things feminine. I love dresses. [01:05:00] I love form-fitting garments. I think there's nothing more sexy than a woman in a nice dress and some pumps and pocketbook.

Kristyn Scorsone: You mentioned fashion week. What do you do there?

Lynette Lashawn: I work as a stylist during fashion week. Yeah.

Kristyn Scorsone: What does that involve?

Lynette Lashawn: It involves working with designers, getting everything on the racks before the shows, steaming garments, putting shoes in the proper place, deciding which model is gonna wear what. Yeah.

Kristyn Scorsone: Is it stressful?

Lynette Lashawn: It is.

Kristyn Scorsone: Is it like you have to be real quick?

Lynette Lashawn: Yes. It is a constant revolving door in the middle of Times Square.

Kristyn Scorsone: Wow.

Lynette Lashawn: Just to describe the intensity of the busy-ness of it. I've worked for Mercedes Benz Fashion Week, Nolcha Fashion Week, Uptown Fashion Week. I've done quite a bit of productions. I've also worked at the Summerset House in London with the designer that I met in New York, working New York Fashion Week Show. Yeah, it's an amazing experience for someone who didn't have the

styling experience, I'm gonna say that, but working backstage is completely different beast. Fast-paced. Usually the women and men that work Fashion Week backstage are people that have gone to the fashion schools Parson, FIT, I haven't gone to either one. I have my master's degree in arts, and fashion is art.

Kristyn Scorsone: That's really cool.

Lynette Lashawn: Thank you.

Kristyn Scorsone: Are you guys connected at all with other businesses in Newark?

Lynette Lashawn: We definitely are. We try to support as many as we possibly can. We have collaborated with some businesses as well. As well as collaborating with some local creative designers and different things like that. As a way to create a platform for them if they don't have a store, or a platform to showcase their stuff. Yeah.

Kristyn Scorsone: Do you ever have events at the store?

Lynette Lashawn: Every month we have an event, yes.

Kristyn Scorsone: What's that?

Lynette Lashawn: It's basically a shopping event. We come up with a theme. We did a collaboration with Chef Roblé.

Kristyn Scorsone: Who's that?

Lynette Lashawn: Chef Roblé, he was on Top Chef. He was a contestant on Top Chef. He has a perfume line called Click. We collaborated with him in May of last year. We also collaborated with a designer called Daria. She has a clothing line. Another local creative. We collaborated with a Parson School design student who had a line. We've had quite a bit of collaborations with different people. They basically reached out to us to see if we were interested in a collaboration. We pretty much collaborate with anyone. We have no preference, as long as it makes sense to our brand.

Kristyn Scorsone: Is it just you and Anita working at the store, or do you have employees?

Lynette Lashawn: We have one employee, which is my mom. Thank god for her. Oh, and we have an intern from Berkeley College. She's in visual merchandising college student.

Kristyn Scorsone: That's cool. Knowing what you know now, is there anything you would've done differently?

Lynette Lashawn: I would've started sooner. I definitely would've started sooner. When you include work, school and a lot of those different things, it takes you away from the things that you wanna do. You have to finish those things first, and then go into something else. It's hard. It's hard in that sense, when you're in school and you wanna start a business, or you have so many other things you wanna do. When you're in school and you work, you're in limbo until you finalize on those different things. That has been my experience, yeah. Yeah.

Kristyn Scorsone: Is there anything that I didn't ask or you wish I had asked? Anything you wanna add? [01:10:00]

Lynette Lashawn: I think you pretty much hit everything on the nose, yeah. I don't think that you missed anything.

Kristyn Scorsone: What is your favorite day like at the store?

Lynette Lashawn: My favorite day is on Thursday. On Thursdays and Fridays, we offer cocktails to our customers. You know long day at work, need a cocktail. I love to be able to give that to our customers as they come in, because they're not expecting it, first of all. It's like would you like a glass of wine? Oh sure, you had a long day. Women are naturally those creatures that we want someone to ask us how our day was. We wanna be able to unwind and be ourselves, and be as authentic as we possibly can be, knowing there's gonna be compassion behind the questions, compassion behind the smile, all of those different things. I think Thursdays and Fridays are my favorites in the boutique, being able to do that for a customer. Help them get all dolled up. Yeah.

Kristyn Scorsone: Do you have a favorite memory of the store?

Lynette Lashawn: I have a favorite memory when the store was done. Anita and I stayed the night. We never went home the day before the event open. We basically was in the store 24 hours trying to get everything, make sure the floors are mopped and everything. I think my favorite memory was us just being in the store like oh my god, it's daylight. Now it's time to get ready for this event. What are you wearing? We literally stayed in the store for 24 hours. We were tired. We were irritable and everything, but we knew that we had a packed house that was coming. We knew the house was gonna be packed, and we weren't wrong. We were not wrong. Just to have so many people who believe in us, who support us, who have cheered us on, who have been the voice of reasoning and just gave us words of encouragement to keep going. Knowing that it's tough.

Going through the construction part of it is the worst. You're hiring people and they're taking their time. They don't realize the severity of your deadline. We worked up to the minute. Up to the minute. I lie to you not. It was so rewarding, and I wouldn't change it for the world. How else are you going to be able to appreciate your journey if you aren't able to look at those obstacles and say wow, we came a long way, but we did it. You know?

Kristyn Scorsone: That's really great. Thank you so much.

Lynette Lashawn: Thank you.

[End of Audio- 01:13:12]