

## **Queer Newark Oral History Project**

**Interviewee:** Julio Roman

**Interviewer:** Kathielee Cruz and Shantell Rondon

**Date:** May 4, 2017

**Location:** Project WOW

*Shantell Rondon:* --Kathie. We're interviewing Julio Roman the Third at Project WOW for the Queer Newark Oral History Project. Just tell us a little bit about you, where you were born, where you grew up.

*Julio Roman:* I was born here in the city of Newark. I was actually born not too far from here at University Hospital. I grew up actually in the south part of Newark for most of my life until I was about 14. I grew up right here in the projects at Spruce Street and Prince Street, pretty hardcore place to live. Then I moved on to north Newark at about the age of 13. From there, I did most of my junior high school and high school over on Barringer High School. That's where I spent a lot of my teenage years, actually.

*Kathielee Cruz:* When's your birthday?

*Julio Roman:* My birthday is February 19, 1983, so I'm a Pisces.

*Shantell Rondon:* Can you describe to me the difference between north Newark and south Newark?

*Julio Roman:* Yes. It's not that far apart from one another. What really divides us is the central ward, which is the ward that we're sitting in now. We're in the central ward, and so to the left of us is south Newark, and literally two blocks over to the north is north Newark. North Newark is predominantly Latino, Puerto Rican, Dominican type of community that's there. The differences are that, and the same—it's one of the—probably the safer place to live in Newark. Way more suburban. A lot of doctors and teachers and lawyers and politicians

from the city choose to live in north Newark and the Forest Hill section.

I grew up and did my early years in the south side where I went to grammar school. It was just the opposite of that. It was, I grew up in the projects, which are 15-story-high buildings, and there were about ten of them, five and five facing each other. I was probably the only Latino kid in the whole neighborhood, so that was a very unique experience for about a good six or seven years. So yeah. I think culturally, there's a big difference, and then just the way that the setting is portrayed from suburban to really kind of gritty and hard bricks. The bricks.

*Shantell Rondon:* Would you mind sharing any experiences from living in the projects?

*Julio Roman:* Sure. Experiences. I think one of my biggest experiences was probably feeling separate from everyone. I moved into the projects maybe at about, like I mentioned, maybe like six or seven, whereas a lot of the kids that I was going to school grew up in the projects, so they had a little bit more of an edge on me. They were a little bit more tougher. It was more of a, I think difficult time. Just trying to fit in where you really stick out in any type of environment, I think you're more prone to be picked on.

That's a lot of stuff that I went through as a young kid, so I learned to fight really early on. It became just a part of my makeup. You really don't have to do much after you fight a few times, and that was my interesting experience. Surprisingly enough though, I did really well in school in that environment, which was actually kind of funny. Then I moved to north Newark and got distracted with the fun and that safety feeling, kind of relaxed from school a little bit.

*Shantell Rondon:* It seemed like school was an outlet for you when you lived in that type of environment.

*Julio Roman:* Yes. It was a big outlet for me. The teachers almost always watched out for me, and I felt that when I went to school. Even though I didn't realize it at the time that they were looking out for me and paying extra attention and making sure that I got home safe, I realize now that I did better because I felt probably safer at school.

*Shantell Rondon:* Now, did you grow up with both parents? Did you have siblings?

*Kathielee Cruz:* What was your family dynamic like?

*Julio Roman:* My family dynamic was cool. My mom had us at a really young age. I'm a twin, by the way. Yeah. I have a twin brother. His name is Angel. Yup.

*Shantell Rondon:* Where is he? *[Laughter]*

*Julio Roman:* He actually lives here in Newark too. He lives in north Newark as well. He has a family and everything here. Our dynamic was great, I would say. My mom was almost like my best friend. My mom had us at 15, so we kind of grew up together. I kind of had to be more of the backbone of the family. I really didn't have a dad around for the earlier part of my life. Instead, it was my brother and me, and then it was my mom. So we all pretty much grew up together. She met my stepdad, and they've been married now for about—I would say about 15 years. It was great, having young parents. They understood some of the struggles that we were going

through at the time. Looking back, I realize that they were learning with us too. I realize, like, 28 with twins—I'm 34 now, so to just think of having twin boys at this age by myself, I couldn't imagine how tough it was. There's a lot of things put in perspective for me, looking back.

*Shantell Rondon:* Now, were there any specific events while growing up that kind of related to how you saw your sexuality?

*Julio Roman:* Can you repeat it again, that question?

*Shantell Rondon:* Is there any transitions or turning points in your life that relate to your sexuality or formed it?

*Julio Roman:* I would say maybe—so I actually also grew up in church. I think I was really invested in church as a really young boy. I was 13, and I saw this gospel church that was really rocking one summer night, and so I decided, let me go in. I started having fun with them, and it just stayed with me. I spent a good part of my teenage years in church, and I got all of my family in, and they all got saved and went through that whole process that you would find in a gospel church and baptized and all of that.

I think the turning point with me being young and finding a place of safety like that as well was, when it came to beginning to face my sexuality, and the church didn't explicitly come against it, but very passively did. As I became more and more true to myself, I realized that it wasn't maybe the most healthiest place for me to be even though it was instrumental in building me up to be the person that I am today, if that makes any sense at all.

*Kathielee Cruz:* No, it makes perfect sense.

*Julio Roman:* I'm really grateful for that experience because it taught me a lot. I understood with the church, it was more probably of a cultural thing and a lack of understanding, so I never really held it against them. I just parted ways, in a way, and did my own thing and got into social service work.

*Kathielee Cruz:* That's great. At what age did you—?

*Julio Roman:* I would say I was about 18. Yup. I would say I was about 18. The pastor just made a comment. It was nothing harsh at all, but it was again, a very passive-aggressive comment. Something just clicked, and I realized, as much as I love this place, it may not be the place for me now. About 17, 18, I believe.

*Shantell Rondon:* Was it something that you just—how do you call it? It's like, nothing that was significant of you growing up. It was just that, okay, I want to explore this.

*Julio Roman:* When it came to my sexuality?

*Both:* Mm-hmm.

*Julio Roman:* I think with me, it was that I was always friends with girls in school. I was always friends with the popular girl and never wanted to hang out with the guys. Even though I wasn't overly feminine, it opened up a lot of accusations of me dating girls and dating other guys' girlfriends and stuff like that, but I never dated anyone. When they would open those doors, the girls I used to hang out would be like, why wouldn't—why aren't we dating, or why aren't we talking? I had to really come to terms with the fact

that even though I like hanging out with girls and chilling with them, I was always attracted to guys, and I was always attracted to the more masculine type of guy.

I wouldn't say anything significantly made me say, wow, I'm gay. I think I just put it on the back burner, and I kept pushing it back as a young kid. I was already kind of vulnerable in the projects. I stuck out, so the thought of even me thinking about doing anything different or standing out anymore was petrifying for me. When I moved to the north Newark part of—side of town, I got a little bit more comfortable, and I had people that accepted me I think before I even accepted myself. I was lucky and fortunate to have some of that growing up.

*Kathielee Cruz:*

With a Latin American background with your family, how did that work? Culturally, was there any backlash?

*Julio Roman:*

Culturally, no, actually. My family is predominantly Puerto Rican. My family loves me. I just had a family that just loved me, and I was a twin to my brother, so they loved me. They saw that I went to school, that I was a good person, that I never messed with anyone. I think now, looking back, they knew something was up because I never dated a girl. I never brought her over. I never faked it. I never had a girlfriend just to have one. I think they knew, and they accepted me, again, before I really accepted myself. I actually told my mom—I was working in Project WOW, and I actually had—I was in the field, and I decided to tell my mom.

I was reaching online, and it just came to me. My mom is a minister at the church, and the church is within eyesight of Project WOW, right up the block. I literally came out to my mom in the center of our church. Yeah. Yeah. It was an interesting meeting, I would say, to go from a place of not feeling safe to actually

gaining the confidence to go back to that place and come out to my mom.

*Shantell Rondon:* Now, were there any significant figures in your life besides your family and the teachers you said that helped you when you were in school?

*Julio Roman:* Significant figures? Yes.

*Shantell Rondon:* It could be anybody.

*Julio Roman:* It could be anyone?

*Shantell Rondon:* Celebrities or real people in your life. Anybody.

*Julio Roman:* Relating to my LGBT life or my growing up?

*Shantell Rondon:* Yes. Any people that helped you in your sexuality or helped you just as an individual.

*Julio Roman:* I would say there's been quite a few people that I've been fortunate enough to really come across and really be put under the wing of them. When I started doing LGBT work, I was 17. We had no drop-in centers. We had no LGBT centers. We had no LGBT programming. We really didn't have anything in Newark. I was lucky enough to meet folks like Alex Williams and Adolph St. Arromand and Tasha Jackson and Shelton Jackson. These were young men at the time that experienced the virus in the early 80s. When they met me, this only Latino kid who wanted to be in this field, they really took me under their wing and really began to mentor me and really teach me the history of what it meant to be

gay and also to couple that with being an advocate for the community by doing HIV service work and awareness work and education work. So yeah. Alex Williams, Adolph St. Arromand, they're two great actually leaders to a lot of people in the field and in the LGBT community.

*Shantell Rondon:* Now, my question, what do you mean, they taught you what it means to be gay? What do you mean by that?

*Julio Roman:* I think I would say when I first started coming out, it was, I just tied my—I tied purely my sexuality just to the act, just I'm gay because I like to be with other men. I didn't understand that being gay meant more than just who you slept with, but it also meant about having a social responsibility to your community and making sure that we understood that even though you identified as gay, there's others out there that may not identify as gay. They really encouraged me to live in my truth, and so I guess that's where I was going with it. They really talked to me about self-worth and about self-esteem and what it really meant to have confidence in yourself and not what you look like or what you can do for others or what others can do for you. Maybe not just being gay, but just overall being more focused and more whole to the perspective of what it meant to be gay.

*Shantell Rondon::* Are these individuals still active in your life now?

*Julio Roman:* Yes. Yes. Adolph St. Arromand is the CEO of an organization in Atlanta, and he was also the former manager of Project WOW. Yeah. He also mentored me in that way professionally. I was able to see how he worked for five years and took a lot of his drive and passion and really internalized it for, actually, what I do now.



Yeah. He's an amazing person. Then Alex Williams, he's like a genius. He is someone that you would go to interview, but by the end of the interview, he has literally interviewed you with a few questions. He just has that way about himself. Many men in the field, especially that do this work, call upon him for any and everything relating to HIV prevention and being LGBT.

*Kathielee Cruz:*

At 17, how did you get started and get in the field?

*Julio Roman:*

At 17, I actually—I had graduated out of high school, so I was pretty much ready to hit the job market. My aunt is, Wanda, she was the administrative assistant for the founder of NJCRI. Even though I was looking for work, she told me about a group that was showing up at NJCRI once a week. This was even before I came out to my mom. She was like, "There's this group that's meeting once a week, and they're looking for young men to talk about giving back to their community." I was one of those men to show up to those meetings, and I was the only one to show up for maybe three or four weeks.

The manager just had this one person showing up for this community meeting, and he decided to offer me a part-time job doing outreach, which was interesting because I wasn't even that out to my family or community, but I was still willing to put myself out there to outreach to other folks. Then I soon learned that this was YMSM, which meant young men who have sex with men. I'm like, oh, my God. My aunt, she knows. I think that was my first experience really coming in into the field. Also realizing that the main purpose of us getting together was to create a safe space because at the time, there really wasn't no drop-in centers or anything like that for young gay Latino, African-American men. At that time, it wasn't gay. It was just DL or MSM, men who have

sex with men. The project was created for people that not necessarily identified as gay, but that was engaging in sexual activity with men.

*Shantell Rondon:* What do you mean by DL?

*Julio Roman:* DL is a term that was coined in the early 2000s.

*Shantell Rondon:* Down low?

*Julio Roman:* Down low. Yeah. There is a big infection rate among those that don't identify their sexual behavior with risk. The program, Project WOW, was created to engage those who may not normally come out to you in the street. We did a lot of the phone chat line outreach, and we were able to talk to folks on the phone about some of their struggles. We were able to chat with them online about some of their experiences creating a safe space for people to reach out to us, to talk to us about their sexuality, about struggles that they're having with maybe an STD or a scare or anything of that nature. It really provided a way for them to reach out to us in that sense.

*Shantell Rondon:* Why do you think there is so much spread of HIV? What proactive measures can be taken? Because we learned so much about it, and the knowledge is there, but what can we do more?

*Kathielee Cruz:* I saw that you guys have the—that program, PrEP. That's awesome because a lot of people—we actually just learned about that.

*Shantell Rondon:* We knew nothing about it—

*Julio Roman:* No?

*Shantell Rondon:* - until this course.

*Julio Roman:* Yeah. Yeah. I'm sorry. I'm trying to formulate your question, and then I just thought about that one. Your question was, what can we do or what are we doing?

*Shantell Rondon::* Yes.

*Julio Roman:* What is the—

*Shantell Rondon:* I was reading the sign that was outside the door that one out of four, I believe, Latino men contract, and one out of three African-American men contract.

*Julio Roman:* One in two.

*Shantell Rondon:* One in two?

*Julio Roman:* Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm.

*Shantell Rondon:* Why is there so much of the spread of HIV?

*Julio Roman:* There are many factors that contribute to high infection rates or the disproportional rates of HIV infection among African-American and Latino young men. That could be contributed to a few things. One of the primary things are the socioeconomics of this population. If you are below the poverty line, your access to education, your access to health literacy information at a young age, is really nonexistent. One of the biggest, I believe, things that

is fueling the virus is the lack of health literacy. A lot of our young members and young LGBT folks were never taught the importance of a primary checkup, of going to the dentist, of eating right, of exercising, of taking your medication when you need to.

When we try to talk about HIV, it's a foreign concept to them partly because it was never taught to them, and also because of the self-esteem and self-worth issues that the clients or the members are dealing with at the—at that time, which is a big—again, I believe, another big factor in why HIV continues to spread the way that it does. Besides the unsafe sexual activity, the poor social networks that we have. We have a lot of young members in our project who are not connected to healthy networks. We have groups of folks that are engaged in all type of risky behavior. What we do here at WOW is try to influence those networks and make them positive.

*Kathielee Cruz:* Have you tried to work with the education system?

*Julio Roman:* In what sense?

*Kathielee Cruz:* To implement a better sex ed course. There you go. That's what I was thinking. I went to high school in Belleville, and they had nothing.

*Julio Roman:* No sex ed, right? There have been a few initiatives around education and trying to get this type of information into the schools. When we talk about that, we really have to look at it in different parameters. We can bring in health, general health education, to give a general population info on sexual healthy activity, but then we're not giving the specific information we need to give this population that they need to keep safe because the risks

that young gay men endure are significantly different than their heterosexual partners. We have tried it, but what we do more as far as reaching out to our population is, we go to the highest-risk areas.

We go to strolls, which are streets and areas where there's high levels of prostitution. We do night outreach because—and we provide them with condoms, and we give them HIV testing and STD testing. We give them care packets, drinks, food to stay warm. Then we go to house bars, and then we do house parties and community events. We go anywhere where we're likely to find a high-risk population. A lot of times, we get the question, why don't you go to all these universities and do a lot of work there? A lot of the time, it's because we cannot find the highest-risk population in that setting. Yeah. It's an untraditional landscape when it comes to doing this work and outreach.

*Shantell Rondon:* Now, do you see a large population of male prostitutes when you go on these strolls, or is it more female-oriented?

*Julio Roman:* There's a mixture. We definitely see more of our transgender population engaging in prostitution and sex work and survival sex. You may find a smaller percentage that are actually males, but in that type of work, transgenders are more prized and make more money. What we have even found is young men who transition into females because it's easier to make money, and they make more money that way. Maybe where somebody was never thinking of them being a transgender now are doing it out of necessity versus wanting to just do it. You go to the store with your girlfriend, and your girlfriend makes \$200.00, \$300.00, but you make \$20.00. What happens after a while is you want to make that two and \$300.00 too, and you need your money for the hotel, and

you need your money for food, and so it becomes a thing of, I need to do this out of necessity.

*Shantell Rondon:* Is that what you mean by survival sex?

*Julio Roman:* Yup. That is a form of survival sex. Another form of survival sex is, I have to date this older person, or I have to date this person because he has an apartment. If I stay with him and I sleep with him, I can sleep here. At some places, members have been told that if you don't have unprotected sex, you have to leave. They're told that at 2:00 and 3:00 in the morning in the dead of winter, and it's a no-brainer for them at that choice. That's another form of survival sex. It's literally negotiating sex services in a very non-transactional way. It's a control thing. I meet you. We hang out. It's not outwardly spoken that it's happening, but it's a part of the culture. It's what happens.

*Kathielee Cruz:* Your outreach is central and south Newark?

*Julio Roman:* We outreach all over the northern part of New Jersey. We do Essex County, Hudson County. We do Elizabeth. We do Bloomfield. We do Irvington, East Orange. We do anywhere where we can identify high-risk pockets of the population.

*Shantell Rondon:* How many people usually go out to these?

*Julio Roman:* We will have teams of—two teams of about six to eight folks that go out, and we normally would do a club, and they will all pick a theme. Maybe they'll go out as Olympic medalists for the night. They'll go out, and they'll do an event. They give out condoms, promote. They go in, and what we do is what they call a flash

outreach move where they will run for 15 to 20 minutes, flash the club for information, they get a shout-out from the stage, and everyone leaves, and then they move on to the next club.

*Shantell Rondon:* Now, I want to pull us back more into, how do you think Newark has changed? I know you said there wasn't barely any LGBTQ programs when you were growing up compared to now.

*Julio Roman:* I think now, we have grown tremendously. I remember being 17, not having a space. Project WOW started off of a demonstration grant from the CDC [Centers for Disease Control]. The grant was basically saying, "Give us something new that you can do, and we may continue to fund you." They liked the concept of how outreach works, they saw the effectiveness of it, so we were able to develop and grow. Project WOW NJCR has been a model program for a lot of the LGBT programming and services that came after that. We collaborate with a lot of organizations like AAOGC, the LGBT Center, Rutgers, Newark Pride, and the LGBT Commission. How has it changed? I would say that the population that's doing the work has gotten way younger. I was 19, 20, and I was still the youngest person in almost every room that I sat in, whether they were state meetings and LGBTQ meetings. Now, I'm happy to see that when you go to these meetings, half of the room is under age 25. I think having more of that youth involvement has definitely made these projects or our projects more successful.

*Shantell Rondon:* What do you like about Newark?

*Julio Roman:* Newark is amazing. I love Newark's architecture, and I love how communities here blend together really, really well. Growing up in Newark, I had always an opportunity to see the vast differences of

it, but just to see how it's building up again, the arts, how this city has really accepted the gay community. Newark has a heavy population of LGBT folks, and so to be able to see them living more freely. We're seeing more businesses downtown, and we're seeing more flags being risen and just more pride overall has really made me excited as to what Newark is gonna become. Just to remember from where it was to where it is today, I'm super excited to see what it's gonna be in three, four, five years.

*Kathielee Cruz:* We hear a lot that the LGBT community tends to travel to the Village and New York, finding clubs and bars and just being able to be out. How do you think, growing up here, did you have any of those spaces? Do you remember any bars or clubs you could attend growing up—

*Julio Roman:* No.

*Kathielee Cruz:* - or while you were coming out?

*Julio Roman:* Growing up, I also had to go to New York City. There was one place in Newark. There was one place in Newark, and it was Murphy's Tavern. It was for older men, and it was for—yeah. It was for older men, and it was just an old-school place that—an old-school joint where you can do—you can play pool, and you can also listen to music, and at that time, if you were 17, still be served alcohol. It was a very place where you would go to really start being yourself. That was really the only place in the city of Newark. What I had to do, because I was coming out of the church scene at that time, I had to feel safe. I had to get on the PATH train. I remember being terrified as it was going to Christopher Street because I knew anyone who gets off at



Christopher Street is gay. I knew once I got off of that train—that was my perception at the time. Once I got off of that train, I'm like, oh, my God. Everybody's gonna know I'm gay. Everybody's gonna know that I'm coming out here to look at boys and all of that. I would literally travel into the Village by myself most times, and I would get braver and braver until the first club that I went to. I was 17. I had to travel into Queens by myself. I remember coming home at 3:00 or 4:00 in the morning, really young, just really thinking about, wow, this world that just opened up to me. I probably wouldn't travel to Queens now on the train and come back at 3:00, but at the time, it was so new to me that it was definitely an experience that I wish I didn't have to go to New York City for.

*Kathielee Cruz:* You did it by yourself?

*Julio Roman:* I did it by myself.

*Kathielee Cruz:* Did you have a group of friends?

*Julio Roman:* No, I didn't. It was interesting for me because even though I was getting out of church, and I was still trying to find myself, I was still battling with, is this a sin? Here I went from preaching, holding hands and proselytizing, to now I'm getting on a train, trying to go to New York City to figure out what's going on with me. Why am I feeling this way about men and guys? I finally get there. I remember getting off the train and just smelling the city for the first time and that warm air in the subway, walking up. At that time, Christopher Street was nothing like it is today. It was very raw.

It was very dingy and very just—very urban. I hate to use that word because I just do, but it was really just hardcore. You would come up the stairs, and there would be 20, 30 guys just sitting around. They saw you were fresh meat. My experience, first experience, was walking up the stairs and being greeted by all of these types of men coming up and down the street on their bikes, staring at me, looking at me, which I've never experienced a guy ever looking at me like that before.

*Shantell Rondon:* Here in Newark?

*Julio Roman:* In New York.

*Shantell Rondon:* You said you didn't experience guys checking you out—you mean that by living here in Newark?

*Julio Roman:* In Newark, I was—I never really looked for it here. I associated Christopher Street with being the gay place to go. At that point, I wasn't really thinking that there's guys who don't identify as gay walking around, looking at other guys. I just figured I was the only one at that moment going through it, and I wasn't willing to tell anyone about it, so I did it a lot of times on my own.

*Kathielee Cruz:* How'd you hear about Murphy's?

*Julio Roman:* Murphy's? I heard about it actually after the fact when I started working here. I didn't even know about it then when I was going into the city. I learned about it afterwards.

*Shantell Rondon:* That's interesting that you speak about Christopher Street because even seven years ago, it was a completely different territory compared to the way it is now.

*Julio Roman:* Christopher Street and the pier was my drop-in space. You could say that. Because I could go there and be the loner that I was, and I could just sit there by myself, and you could look to the left, and there would be a pier full of people, groups of gay, LGBT, trans folks dancing, listening to music, vogue-ing, walking up and down with their friends, drinking. All you have to do is sit there for five, ten minutes, and someone will come to you and start talking to you. Before you knew it, you were a part of a family within 20, 30 minutes that you were able to laugh and joke with people that accepted you for who you were. When I experienced that, it was a leap because I'm like, okay. This is what it's really about, being in a group and really having people you can connect with and not just being on your own. It was a new experience.

*Shantell Rondon:* Do you feel that there's any gay places or LGBTQ places here in Newark now?

*Julio Roman:* To party and to socialize in or—

*Shantell Rondon:* Yeah.

*Julio Roman:* I would definitely say there is. You have Show in Elizabeth that does a lot of great work with the Latino community. You also have Rio down in the Ironbound section. Then you also have the Playhouse. Those are the three primary places here. They have club nights. They're not specifically LGBT, but as far as having even up to this day an LGBT venue, there's still really isn't a

gay-owned social place like, let's say, Murphy's, who was at that time.

*Shantell Rondon:* Can you elaborate more on those nights?

*Julio Roman:* On those nights? Yeah. The Latino nights on Show is on Fridays. They play a lot of music around salsa, merengue, and it's a lot of that Latino flair culture there. Then on Saturdays, you can go to Rio downtown, and you'll be able to really layback and listen to more R&B. You have an older LGBT crowd that goes there and a crowd that's more metropolitan, so they're coming from Jersey City, and they're coming from New York City. You do have a lot of folks that come into Newark from New York City. They just tend to be the older LGBT folks.

*Kathielee Cruz:* That's interesting. I haven't heard that.

*Shantell Rondon:* Why do you think that is, that there are not more events, places, clubs, catered for LGBTQ?

*Julio Roman:* Hmm. I really can't speak for the history of why there isn't, but just from my observation, we are seeing more and more businesses come up. I think at the time really, everyone associated success with going into the city. Even being a young gay guy, I said I wanted to work in New York City. I want to be in this office. I had this picture of what it was to be successful, and Newark at the time really didn't represent that. It was underdeveloped. It was—had a lot of violence. There was a lot of crime. I think at that time, we just felt unsafe, so we by nature migrated to where it was safe to go to, which was the Village in New York City. When I think of how Newark is coming up and developing, I

see how it's attracting the LGBT community. I see them buying property. I just bought property here and plan on buying more property here. I definitely see that type of return back into the city, that Renaissance, like they're calling it.

*Shantell Rondon:* Do you go to gay pride?

*Julio Roman:* I do. I do, I do, I do. I've been to all the—pretty much all the gay prides. I've done New York gay pride, Philly gay pride, Newark, Brooklyn, and Queens. I've done them. I've been doing this work for 17 years, so I've done them quite a few times. I skip out on them sometimes, but I make sure that my project and my program is always involved to let them know that, you know what? We are here. We do the work here in Newark. I'm surprised by how many people outside of the city knows about us versus the people that are inside the city, which is—I always thought was a strange monopoly around things.

*Kathielee Cruz:* It is, because I didn't know until recently that Newark had a pride.

*Julio Roman:* Yup.

*Kathielee Cruz:* A whole pride week.

*Julio Roman:* Yup. The Newark Pride actually started here. Newark Pride started as a part of under NJCRI with folks who really wanted to bring Pride back into the city and their own organization, and they do incredible work. We're actually gonna be working with them this summer to put on some more events and to do more promotions across the city.

*Kathielee Cruz:* How has Project WOW evolved since you started?

*Julio Roman:* I think Project WOW has become very—more prominent in the community. When we first started, again, our aim was to reach out to young gay men who were really trying to find themselves. When we first started our program, we wouldn't publish our phone number. You wouldn't find our address on any material. Everything was word of mouth. As HIV is changing, and as our community is changing, we learned here at Project WOW that also our programming has to change. It's not just about HIV anymore. It's about taking care of your whole self. It's about primary checkups. It's about self-esteem and education and being a more productive person in society whereas at the beginning, it was all HIV. If you came into Project WOW, that main focus was HIV, HIV, HIV. Now, what we're doing is we're addressing some of those issues that may act as barriers to them keeping themselves safe or for them getting into care treatment services. That's what we're aiming more to do now is really build around addressing the whole person when it comes to being healthy.

*Kathielee Cruz:* That's great.

*Shantell Rondon:* Now, just for those who listen to know, what is your sexual orientation? I know you repeated it before. What's your gender identity?

*Julio Roman:* I'm gay, and my gender identity is he, his, him. Yeah. I've always been gay. I've never dated girls or anything like that. I always thought they were extremely beautiful, and I love to be associated with them, but I've always been attracted to guys and always just really have had that experience.

*Shantell Rondon:* You know? You've always known?

*Julio Roman:* I've always known. Yeah. I've always known. I questioned it once, and then I kissed a girl, and then I realized, I'm like, it just didn't feel right. She was just too pretty for me to be kissing like that. I'm like, yeah, this doesn't feel right. It's funny because now she's LGBT too. We took each other to the prom, and we both were straight at the time, which was interesting because we hadn't—

*Kathielee Cruz:* To your high school prom?

*Julio Roman:* To her high school prom. We had a great night. We had fun, and it was a blast. Then on the ride home, it was so awkward because she was on one side, and then I'm on the other side. We talked about it years later, and we talked about what was going through our minds and about how we were both wondering, should I be over there sitting next to him? Is this what we're supposed to do as a straight couple? We should be making out in the back of the limo. It definitely was an experience, but it was a good one. We're still good friends to this day.

*Shantell Rondon:* You said you identified as straight. Is that—?

*Julio Roman:* No. I identify as gay. Why? Did I say straight?

*Shantell Rondon:* Yeah.

*Julio Roman:* I did?

*Kathielee Cruz:* You were 17, 16 maybe. Cuz you said that you had both identified as straight, taking each other to the prom.

*Julio Roman:* Oh, yeah. Yeah, yeah, yeah.

*Kathielee Cruz:* That's what you said.

*Julio Roman:* Yes. That's a good catch. Yeah. I could work the timeline out for you. I was about 17, a little bit about 17 when I first left church. I was dating the pastor's daughter, so that's who I took to church—that's who I took to prom. Here, I left the church because I felt a certain type of way about it, but the daughter of the pastor was somebody that was also going through the same experience that I was. At the time, we both identified as straight. At that time, even though we identified as straight, it didn't mean that the behavior we were engaging in were anything heterosexual.

*Shantell Rondon:* You didn't have sex. It was just dating?

*Julio Roman:* It was just dating like, we're gonna be the future leaders of the church. They was setting us up for that. Let's get them into the ministry. Let's get him ordained and do all of that, but we just—it just didn't feel right. Identifying. We see a lot of guys that don't identify as gay. They identify as straight, but their behavior is, they sleep with men. What somebody may identify as may not be the behavior they're engaging in. That sometimes gets a little confused on that.

*Shantell Rondon:* That's interesting because I had a transgender friend who said that, because they were a top, that that wasn't gay.



*Julio Roman:* Yeah.

*Shantell Rondon:* Is that what you get often?

*Julio Roman:* You know what I get often? I get that I have a girlfriend or whatever, but when I get drunk, I let my friend go down on me. I'm like, hey. Yeah. You're not gay, but you have sex with men. It's the behavior that we're looking at. I have had a lot of heterosexual guys say, "I'm not gay," yet their behavior is having sex with another guy. They just don't identify as that, which is—yeah, it's again one of those things where as a transgender, a lot of folks may identify a transgender and assume her sexuality, and her identity and her sexuality have no—they can exist mutually exclusive from one another. It's just learning. It's a process to learn. I'm learning a lot about gender from being genderfluid. Being gay, you're either gay, straight, bi, or transgender, but now we have folks that don't identify as either gender and that are very genderfluid. Pansexual. Exactly. It's always this learning experience, I think, when it comes to how we evolve when it comes to how we identify and our sexuality. I think we're always evolving with that. There you go. There you go. *[Laughter]*

*Shantell Rondon:* Do you still identify as Christian?

*Julio Roman:* I still identify as Christian. I go to church. My view of church is different now than it was before. I've done a lot of my own studying, and I've been fortunate enough to have friends who are religious leaders in their field and are very well learned, and they traveled the world. They've enlightened me to religion here in America and how young it is and just what it is to love and what it is to really worship God, without all of the rules and

interpretations, I guess, that man makes or whatever the case may be.

*Kathielee Cruz:* Do you still go to the same church?

*Julio Roman:* I don't go to the same church anymore. That church actually moved to three or four other locations. They broke up and became stationed in different cities. I still have great relationships with the leaders of the church. My godmother is one of the head pastors still there, but no, I don't attend. I attend for special functions. If I'm picking up my best friend's mom, I'll stick my head in and say hi to everyone and stuff like that, but no, not really.

*Shantell Rondon:* Now, you said that prior, you didn't feel 100 percent comfortable with your sexual identity. Now at 34 years of age, how do you feel about being gay?

*Julio Roman:* It feels normal. It feels normal now.

*Shantell Rondon:* It's just a part of you?

*Julio Roman:* It's just a part of me now. I have to remind myself that—not that I'm not different. I think sometimes I have to remind myself that you are gay. Sometimes, I have to become aware that everywhere around me in the world isn't necessarily a safe place all of the time. To come from a place where I was—felt never safe to a place where I feel totally confident in myself, yeah, it's been a total change. I think that's really because I've had to develop that self-esteem and that self-worth really for myself through those different experiences.

*Shantell Rondon:* Now, I was curious. You said that after you graduated high school, you began to work in this type of outreach work. Did you do anything between that, or you went straight to outreach work?

*Julio Roman:* I went straight into outreach work. No, so you know what, let me take that back a little bit. I did an internship as an associate developer for the founder when I was 17, and so I got a little bit of my feet wet when it came to doing nonprofit work. When I really got into LGBT work, it was after my internship when I returned for the focus groups that they were having.

*Shantell Rondon:* Now, were there any—I don't want to say traumatic experiences growing up that you experienced?

*Julio Roman:* Traumatic experiences?

*Kathielee Cruz:* I wanted to ask more towards your gay identity. You know how we talk about the bullying and the hazing and all that kind of stuff, did you ever experience anything like that?

*Julio Roman:* Yes. *[Laughter]* I laugh about it now because I see some of the people that used to bully me, and they're not in the best—you bullied me, and I'm getting out of my car. Anyway, *[laughter]* so I did get bullied as a kid. I got bullied, I think, because—not so much because of my sexuality alone, but because I've always surrounded myself with girls, growing up, and so guys, I feel, maybe have thought I was gay. Because of it, I was called gay. Every name associated with gay, I've probably been called. I've had to fight, and I've been jumped and all of that stuff as a kid growing up. I learned how to fight and defend myself and stand up for myself really early on. Even if it was a scary experience, I was

always taught to set the standard of what people would treat you like, and then you're good. My uncles made sure—cuz I had a lot of uncles—they always made sure that I was always okay and always good, yeah, growing up and experiencing that.

*Shantell Rondon:* No one in your family, did they ever treat you differently because you were gay?

*Julio Roman:* No. No. No, not at all. Not at all. I've had people pick on me, and my family would get upset because like I mentioned before, they would say, you don't pick on anyone. You don't fight anyone, so nobody's gonna pick on you. I would leave school, and I'd have all my family on the playground waiting for me to take me home to just let them know that he may be the one that sticks out, but he's not alone. I always had their backing. I think that helped when I came out. It was like, we always knew you were different. I always had a different sense of style, how I'd always go to New York to buy my clothes. I just didn't look like any of my family members. They always knew that something was up with me in that sense.

*Shantell Rondon:* How would your life be if you weren't gay? What would you be doing?

*Kathielee Cruz:* What do you think it would be like? *[Laughter]*

*Julio Roman:* What do I think? *[Laughter]* I think it would be traditional, and that scares me a little bit.

*Kathielee Cruz:* Do you think you would be head of that church?

*Julio Roman:*

I think I would. I think I definitely would. I think I would be doing probably some great things, really, really big in the church. Yeah. I think I would be doing some great things in church. I believe that it was important for me to step out of ministry to do this work because as a young kid, I would always try to tell people about God and living a good life, but I never experienced what it was to struggle. I never experienced what it was to live the life outside of church. I feel like doing this work in a way is my ministry, and so even though I'm not in the church doing the work, I feel like worship and praise is about serving other people. That's how I serve God. I serve God through helping folks and trying to be there for anyone that needs me. That's how I keep my relationship with God going in that sense.

*Shantell Rondon:*

What do you like the most about being yourself?

*Julio Roman:*

About being myself? I think my confidence now that I've gotten older. I've gotten way more at peace with just being me, just walking in my own truth, not thinking about what everyone else is thinking of me, not being a yes person, and just being able to stand up for myself. There was a time where it was really hard for me to stand up for myself or to advocate for myself. I was great at doing it for everyone else, but it was just a little bit more harder for me to do it on my own.

*Shantell Rondon:*

Now, I definitely want to dive into Project WOW since you spoke about that prior to the interview. I wanted to know some about the information, like you have summer and winter retreats. What does this consist of? What goes on?

*Julio Roman:* Yeah. Project WOW has been doing summer and winter retreats for about ten years now. We've been able to do that through a grant that was funded to us by the Department of Addiction Services. It's the only grant that the department gives to an LGBT-specific group, so we're really honored to be able to continuously get that grant and get that funding in. What we do is we take 15 LGBT folks from our community who come into our center away for a weekend retreat to talk to them about living a positive, healthy life. It's centered around substance use. What we do is, we take them out to do community building, and we do workshops around negotiating safer sex and being able to negotiate your way out of risky behaviors or risky situations. We build a boat together as a team as a trust type of exercise. At the end, we all get on that boat, and we go into the middle of the lake.

*Kathielee Cruz:* Sink or swim.

*Julio Roman:* It's a sink or swim type of situation. It's really a great experience for our young members who maybe have never had the opportunity to go camping or to go to the woods for the weekend or to go fishing or just to have that overall experience of getting out of Newark and out of this kind of city sometimes helps greatly with street smarts.

*Shantell Rondon:* I read that the ages are 14 to 24?

*Julio Roman:* Mm-hmm.

*Shantell Rondon:* You have individuals that have been with the program for a set number of years. What happens when they turn 25? Is there still resources for them?

*Julio Roman:*

Yes. That's probably one of the hardest parts of this job is everybody has to age out eventually. We've had members that have been with us when they were 14 or 15 years old, and they've built their whole social life around what we do here. What we do is very—about a year, a year and a half prior to them aging out, we start working with them and getting them adapted to what happens outside of Project WOW. What we do here is really try to let them know Project WOW is a safe space, but the world isn't a safe place all the time.

We work with them in the last year to really get them oriented to the fact that you can't come to Project WOW on a normal basis as a member, but you can return back as a volunteer. That's a little open door that we have so that they're not totally disconnected from the project. Once they age out, they're always able to come back in, volunteer, do groups, really become a leader and really take charge of the things that they learned about their time here.

*Shantell Rondon:*

Now, if someone were to have a criminal background, do you guys not allow certain individuals to participate, or you just—?

*Julio Roman:*

We do an intake and assessment process here. So once somebody comes into the project for the very first time, they'll meet with one of the intake staff members. What they'll do is they'll do a comprehensive intake and also an assessment. That assessment would involve questions that would ask about substance use history, that would ask about mental health issues, that would ask about criminal issues. What we do is, we the assessment, and then if a client does state that there is a criminal matter, we'll go ahead and dive a little bit further into what that criminal matter is and figure out if it's appropriate that he's a member here. If we find that

that person may not be appropriate to be a drop-in center member, he's allowed to access services within the organization. That person just may not be permitted access to the drop-in space. We always assure that they have access to services and that they're never turned away from services.

*Shantell Rondon:* Now, say they don't include that on their intake. They just don't put it. Do you still investigate every single person that comes through intake?

*Julio Roman:* No, we don't. No. What we do, so one of the—I guess the dynamics of having a space like Project WOW is that it's a safe space. You come in, and we do that intake, and we do that assessment. We also take a picture of your ID, and then we copy it. We try to do a full assessment of the client, and so we try to do a probational period when they first come in to look at their behavior, to look at how they interact with clients, to look at if there's any troublesome signs that we should be looking for. If anything arises where there's an outburst, somebody's personality has changed to where they're not the same person, there's an outburst of violence, then we may do further investigation work and find out if that person does have a criminal history.

*Shantell Rondon:* I wanted to know, what are the Kiss and Tell Mpowerment groups, and what does the M stand for instead of EM?

*Julio Roman:* Kiss and Tell is a group that is delivered by us once a month here at Project WOW, and it's a part of the Mpowerment curriculum. The Mpowerment curriculum is the basis and the core of the project. It is the structure of how we do things here. Mpowerment is a high-impact HIV prevention program that is funded by the



Centers for Disease Control. This intervention is proven to work with this population when it comes to being effective as delivering services and setting up a safe space. Mpowerment is really made up of informal outreach events which are smaller things we do inside the center, formal outreach, which are big community events, and also the core group element, which is the group of folks that really decide what type of programming we do within the center.

Mpowerment is all about being peer-led and peer-driven. It's really about empowering them to take charge of the process and make this their space by communicating to us what it is that they need. They advise us on where to go for outreach to what type of social nights to have here. They approve all of our big community events to just make sure that it all stays focused back on the population. Kiss and Tell is a health education group. The responsibility is to bring in somebody who's never been to Project WOW, and you put them in Kiss and Tell where you're able to talk about different sexual experiences in a fun, relaxed way. It all leads back to how to make it safer.

We named it Kiss and Tell to make it interesting. We learned a long time ago that young folks don't want to go to anything that sounds clinical. That group was our healthy living group, but we know that if you put healthy living on a flyer, it's not really gonna appease a lot of young LGBT folks to come in, so we named it Kiss and Tell. Serves the same purpose, and so we package it and brand it differently to engage a broader audience.

*Shantell Rondon:* What's Impact?

*Julio Roman:* Impact? *[Laughter]* You know a lot about our program. Impact is the core group. Impact is just the name of the core group. That's

the name that they chose themselves, chose for themselves. Last year's group was FOL, which was Future Leaders of Tomorrow, but this year's name is just Impact.

*Kathielee Cruz:* It changes yearly?

*Julio Roman:* It changes yearly. Yup. Each core group are voted on. We have a vice president, a president, and a secretary. Then we have members that are voted onto the board. Then the community are allowed to sit around them to offer their opinions, but anything that's offered up as opinion has to be voted on by the core group for it to pass. That core group is the VIP members of the project. They get special privileges. They get access to many things first. We do that to incentivize folks wanting to get into the process.

*Shantell Rondon:* How many members do you have monthly, or is this yearly? How does the membership exist?

*Julio Roman:* Currently at the moment, we have 133 members that have done full intakes, have membership cards, and been to the center at any one time. As of this month, we've got—as of last month, we had 277 visitors with 65 folks, so 65 LGBT folks came into the center 277 times for services or for some type of group, service, or community event that we've done.

*Shantell Rondon:* Can you describe the demographics? Are they trans? Are they lesbian? Are they gay?

*Julio Roman:* Yeah. Definitely. I would say about 90 percent of the population that comes to Project WOW are young men, and the other ten percent are transgender. 85 percent are African-American to 15

percent about Latino. I would say 50/50—I would say about 45 to 50 percent of our folks are 18 and under, and then the other 50 are 21 and above. We do separate programming, depending upon what population we're serving at the time.

*Shantell Rondon:* Now, say for emergency crises where they are underage, and they can't stay at home because they're faced with so much adversity, so you have shelters and transitional housing. How would that work for a minor?

*Julio Roman:* If a minor was to come in, and they needed to get into some type of shelter, which has been the case for us, we're obligated here to do just an assessment of what's happening with the client. If the client or if the member expresses to us that they have no safe place to go, then we can refer them to one of the only shelters that is LGBT-friendly, which is the RAIN Foundation. At that point, however, we are still obligated to reach out to a guardian, and so we make every attempt to reach out to a guardian before taking next steps and placing them where they may need to go.

*Shantell Rondon:* Do you work hand in hand with child services?

*Julio Roman:* Yup. We work hand in hand with child services. We work hand in hand with the Newark Police Department. We have a liaison for both places. Then we also have a partnership with Malcolm X High School, which a lot of our young folks come from.

*Shantell Rondon:* Is there anything else you'd like to share with us? Anything about you? Anything about the program?

*Julio Roman:* Let's see. About the program. You guys asked some really great questions, very in-depth. I think it's just really important to just stress the importance of collaborations with LGBT organizations. It's one of the main reasons why I wanted to do the interview because you guys were able to interview a vast number of LGBT leaders, and so I want to thank you for just being one of those bodies in the community.

*Shantell Rondon:* Thank you for your time.

*Kathielee Cruz:* Thank you.

*Julio Roman:* No, it's a privilege for me, so thank you. I do appreciate that, to have you guys as one of those bodies where we can go back in history, and to be able to be a part of that is a tremendous resource for this city. Just thank you for the tremendous work. We really appreciate it here.

*Shantell Rondon:* One thing we did miss is for you to address your position within the company.

*Julio Roman:* Sure. Sure. Currently, I serve as the manager for LGBT programming and services. That basically entails making sure that our federally-funded and state-funded programs are delivering their objectives and their deliverables while building the program and making sure that we're providing quality care and services to the LGBT community. I find myself busy but very fortunate and blessed to have that responsibility.

*Shantell Rondon:* Are you here five days a week, six days a week?

*Julio Roman:* Yeah. I can be here six days a week, easy. *[Laughter]* I was a traditional here, so Tuesday through Saturday from 12:00 to 8:00. I do administration work mostly throughout the week, but I'm normally here from about 9:00 to 6:00 Monday through Friday and about every other Saturday.

*Shantell Rondon:* If there is a need for emergency services, is there a number that youth or any—

*Julio Roman:* If you need emergency services and you're LGBT and it's after the hours of our drop-in center, I encourage everybody to call the United Way information and referral line, 211. They have a great resource with current beds availability and also emergency services. We're also a part of their directory. Even though you may not be able to reach us at that moment, they'll be able to tell you, "They're opening tomorrow at 12:00," or, "They're not open tomorrow because they're not open on Monday." They're a great resource because if they get placed and they wish to leave their information, the United Way 201 line will then send us their information to be able to reach out to them. It's a really great partnership and collaboration we have going on.

*Shantell Rondon:* One last question.

*Julio Roman:* Yeah. Absolutely.

*Shantell Rondon:* I notice on the NJCRI website there's also a program to give clean syringes. Do you also do that here?

*Julio Roman:* Yes. I think one of the things that make Project WOW unique of all the LGBT services in the city is that we're connected to a

building that has a multiple of services. Our clients here are able to connect to get to—they're able to be connected into care and treatment services, but also our transgender clients are able to access their syringes here. We also have a doctor that our transgender clients can go to who does primary care and checkups also administers the hormones and also is able to prescribe the hormones. Not only do we provide just behavioral interventions here, we also have a primary care doctor that the LGBT population can see.

We have a legal clinic, a pro bono legal clinic for the state of New Jersey, which is specifically for LGBT issues. Then we have a substance use program, a discharge program. We have a pharmacy in the building. We have LabCorp next door that is able to express all of our specimens. I can test one of my clients and get their results back in three days and get them treated when they first come in versus waiting a week and then trying to call them back. We're really fortunate with the services we're able to connect our clients to.

*Shantell Rondon:* Thank you.

*Julio Roman:* That was a lot.

*Kathielee Cruz:* Thank you.

*Julio Roman:* Thank you for dealing with my little odd rambles.

*Shantell Rondon:* No, no. Appreciate it.

*[End of Audio, 01:05:37]*