Queer Newark Oral History Project
Interviewee: Larry Lyons II
Interviewed by: Lorna Ebner
Date: June 15, 2017
Location: Larry Lyons' Apartment, Newark, New Jersey

Lorna Ebner: All right. Today is June 15th, 2017. My name is Lorna Ebner. I am interviewing Larry Lyons at Larry's apartment in Newark for the Queer Newark Oral History Project. Thank you so much for doing this with us. All right, my first question, pretty basic. When and where were you born?

Larry Lyons: I was born in Fort Campbell, Kentucky, in April of 1981.

Lorna Ebner: Oh my goodness. *[Laughter]* When did you end up coming to New Jersey?

Larry Lyons: My family is originally from New Jersey. My father was in the military, and he was stationed in Tennessee. It just so happened that both my sister and I were born in Kentucky, but our roots are here for a few generations in Somerset, New Jersey.

Lorna Ebner: Mm-hmm. When did you end up—did you ever actually move to New Jersey when you were young or growing up? Or were you pretty much everywhere else, and then visited New Jersey in the meantime?

Larry Lyons: Right, so, born in Kentucky. I think my family lived in—between Kentucky and Tennessee. Then Maryland, like Aberdeen, I know. I think then it was back to Jersey and maybe when I was two-ish. Then we moved to Germany, which my earliest memories are on the Army base in Germany in Frankfurt.

Lorna Ebner: Oh, wow.

Larry Lyons: It was so long ago that it was West Germany. It wasn't, you know, just Germany. Yes, that's where my father was stationed in Frankfurt, Germany.

Lorna Ebner: Okay. I just heard your timer go off. Do you wanna get that?

Larry Lyons: No, it's fine.

Lorna Ebner: Okay. Perfect. Who raised you? Did you grow up in—oh, you just went over that. One place or household or more than one. Yep. Who raised you?

Larry Lyons: My mom and dad. They were high school sweethearts. They met in grade school. They were prom king and queen. So, it's a very magical story. Yeah. Both of them raised me.

Lorna Ebner: Do you have any siblings?

Larry Lyons: I was raised with my oldest sister Tanisha, who actually lives in South Carolina now. When my father remarried, he had twin girls, Aaliyah and Shaaliyah. I have two half sisters, one whole sister. *[Laughter]* No other boys.

Lorna Ebner: You fall second in that?

Larry Lyons: Yes, I am the middle child in that way.

Lorna Ebner: *[Laughter]* How was it growing up with only sisters?

Larry Lyons: My family was—it was very strong women. Women everywhere. They weren't very many male children, so I was always outnumbered, but we were very close with our cousins. Whenever we could, we'd spend nights at one another's house, sleepovers and stuff. It kind of evened things out occasionally, because at least if it wasn't in the home, there were cousins around.

Lorna Ebner: Do you recall any early transitions or really strong memories growing up in your early life?

Larry Lyons: Oh, plenty. I remember. Again I said my earliest memories were on that Army base in Germany. I remember, kind of, the sights and the smells. After undergrad I went back and visited Germany. It's like, "Oh, it's this strange kind of energy." I knew that we were one of very few black folks on the base or just in Germany period. Folks would be like, "Oh, Michael Jackson."

Lorna Ebner: Oh my gosh.

Larry Lyons: Their point of reference for brown folks was just that one pop star. I remember the conversations in my family around that. Just because they stood out from the rest of the conversations that we had about the mundane stuff in the house. My sister was old enough to go to school. She was away. And then my father was obviously at the Army base. My days were spent with just my mother and I, and I became the quintessential mama's boy then. My earliest memories are about being home with her and enjoying the few hours we had of English television, because at a certain hour it would just stop, and there would be nothing. I feel like we were very tight knit because of that. Being a military family and being out of the country. My earliest memories were about how close we were on the base.

Lorna Ebner: Do you know German?

Larry Lyons: Hm-mmm.

Lorna Ebner: *[Laughter]*

Larry Lyons: I picked up a few words while I was there, but obviously that was a long time ago. Then by the time I went back to visit, I picked up French and Spanish, so I wasn't on the market for another language.

Lorna Ebner: What were your neighborhoods like growing up? We discussed Germany. What about the others in Kentucky and Maryland?

Larry Lyons: Where was that?

Lorna Ebner: *[Laughter]* Trying to make you jog all of these memories. I'm so sorry.

Larry Lyons: That's fine. I guess there are two cities that are central. That's New Brunswick and Somerset, or Franklin township really. When I said that my parents met in grade school, it was in the public schools in Franklin township. **[00:05:00]** They were both born in, I think, Robert Wood Johnson [Hospital in] New Brunswick.

Lorna Ebner: Oh, wow.

Larry Lyons: In the way that if you are born in Newark, you have ties in Irvington, Franklin Township and New Brunswick were that way. Major hospitals in New Brunswick would still—you might go to Franklin Public Schools, or if you got kicked out of public school, Franklin to New Brunswick. Anyway. Those were the two main neighborhoods. I would say that back in the early '80s, they were comparable to—or moving toward the '90s, they were a lot like Newark is now in terms—they did have strong working class communities. Also a reputation for drug trafficking and violence. People would talk about Newark, New Brunswick, and Camden in kind of one sweeping breath, which also represented the way that Rutgers would punctuate so many points in my life because of that triad of

cities. Yeah. I felt we—we grew up in the church, so I had a very churched youth. A lot of the elements of illegal drug trafficking and violence were like pushed the periphery of my experience, because the faith community was at the center of it. Which is not to say that there weren't kids at my church who were being convicted of crimes and engaging in criminal mischief. My parents were very determined that that wouldn't be our path. That's the long answer to what it was like in Franklin and New Brunswick.

Lorna Ebner: When you say that you grew up religious, what religion? Also did that travel with you as you moved around growing up?

Larry Lyons: Yes. We are Christian. Our church was Baptist. Sharon Baptist Church, New Brunswick, New Jersey, Reverend James R. Kirk was pastor at the time, at 25 Howard Street. They still have a really great ministry there. And yes, it was less about our faith traveling with us. I feel like our racial identity was more resonant in my experience than our faith. When I was young and on the Army base. I think Faith was something I associated more with country. That we are pledge allegiance, one nation under God. It always seemed like this super system that really shaped more of the military service part of our family than the actual domestic life of our family.

I guess what it did contribute was a real structure. When we lived in New Brunswick, that was our first apartment. I think we lived with other family members or different arrangements. Our first apartment-apartment in New Jersey was in a home, a house owned by the church, so it was on the church's property. The church owned maybe four properties. One was the pastor's house, and the other was our house over here, and it was the church, and there was another one. Very much enmeshed in the life of the church in that way. So faith. I was in church at least four days a week.

Bible study, choir rehearsal, usher board, youth fellowship, vacation Bible school.

Lorna Ebner: You didn't have time for anything else? *[Laughter]*

Larry Lyons: I definitely had no time for nonsense. My mother was determined to afford us every opportunity. The church would have ski trips in the winter. Our annual ski trip. My mother was adamant about us just being exposed to things beyond what was available in New Brunswick. That led to me joining the ski club and being on it all throughout high school when we moved to the suburbs in South Brunswick, New Jersey. I participated in a lot of things in school and then a lot of things in church. It was a full calendar. Not much time for being in the streets.

Lorna Ebner: You mentioned a couple minutes ago that you felt like your race traveled with you more so than your religion. I was wondering if you could go into that a little bit more.

Larry Lyons: I think just because we were a visual oddity in the landscape of Germany. That experience was amplified in a way that my young mind maybe imprinted in a way that our faith was not dominating. I think we had narratives around **[00:10:00]** cleanliness is near to godliness and things like that. They were really mundane axioms, not like, "If you don't do your chores, an angry god is going to remove your name from the Book of Life." Right? I just feel like in terms of things that had such an impact on our family that it determined conversations and produced sound bites that I recorded. I did experience that more in terms of race than religion.

Lorna Ebner: Okay. Were there adults in your life who shaped your adolescence other than your parents?

Larry Lyons: Adolescence.

[Laughter]

Larry Lyons: Yeah. Well, certainly there must have been a few people in my church, because I was there every day of the week.

Lorna Ebner: You mentioned your pastor I think. *[Laughter]*

Larry Lyons: Yeah, so my pastor was—I have to tell you a bit about the black church.

Lorna Ebner: *[Laughter]*

Larry Lyons: There's this real geographic interest. If you come from New York, you're expected to have a certain style of preaching. If you come from the Carolinas, it's a different style all together. I think I was baptized by a Southern Baptist, but he was older and more calmer. Then when he passed away and my church had to search for a new pastor, it was this charismatic North Carolina preacher, who was really bright, but known for his charisma and his command of the language. Certainly my formative experiences around the power of language happened right there in the pews of Sharon Baptist Church watching my preacher, because being in the church, if you're not one of these parishioners who just goes on Sunday, you are afforded the opportunity to evaluate different preaching styles. Right?

It is tradition to travel with the pastor when he goes to different churches. You will basically audition different sacred ways of being, different sermonic styles. It's popular for folks in church to say, "Oh, he's more of a teacher than a preacher," which is to say he's more invested in conveying a message than getting a—arouse physically to incite folks to—whatever it is folks are incited to. Call it the Holy Ghost. He had that great

duality, Reverend Kirk, where he was cerebral but also really charismatic. Before I move onto the next person, it's a really interesting story I think.

Lorna Ebner: Oh, please share.

Larry Lyons: Why thank you.

Lorna Ebner: *[Laughter]*

Larry Lyons: He was this handsome guy. He had a son, Kelsey, who was around my age, within a year of me. Kelsey dated my sister, and so we were tied to the church and to the pastor in so many ways. I don't know if I mentioned, his birthday was the day before mine. The pastor's was. All kinds of connections to the Kirk family. Living on the church's property, being in the same Boy Scouts with his son. That kind of thing. It is the tradition in the Baptist church, and in most Protestant churches I'm sure, to be—to really, really support and love and celebrate and honor your pastor and the pastor's family. And we did. Oh gosh. *[Laughter]* How do I begin this story?

There were a number of women in the church that came to my pastor for counseling. "My marriage is on the fritz. I can't get a job. I'm unhappy here. I can't with this child." Whatever. What happened is that he slept with a number of them. These things happen in the church. It's not the first time. But here in New Jersey, it set a legal precedent, because the women sued him for malpractice. It was the first time in the state a clergyman had been sued for malpractice.

Lorna Ebner: Oh my goodness.

Larry Lyons: Because usually reserved for a medical situation or any other professions, it set a legal precedent here. The little picture that they had in the corner of

the newspaper when he had his 20th anniversary was now this huge front-page picture of him leaning on the pew. I'll never forget it. **[00:15:00]** It was I think shameful for the entire congregation and very messy. My community was divided. Because I was so enmeshed in this church, and there's so much of my youth there, that in addition to it being statewide headline news, it impacted me thoroughly, because he was someone who modeled eloquence and what it meant to be a powerful black man who could use a command of the language as a vocation or as a way to engage on a higher level. And so, I'm sure he was a role model to me in that way. To watch him experience this very public scandal about these sexual indiscretions, it was crazy. Particularly because I had a sense that I was not heterosexual. *[Laughter]* My attraction for men had always been greater than mine for women. Always. I had always even every year in the church struggled with this question of sexual immorality and the parameters of God's love. What will he love you through?

The amazing thing that I found in my pastor was that he practiced and preached a theology of forgiveness and that there wasn't a sin that could separate you from God. A lot of preachers who were as charismatic as him and had that way about them were violently homophobic or at the very least harder and had more condemnation for certain sins. Sexual sins stood apart from other sins in that way. For years, I, in very nascent ways, very nebulous and nascent ways, had appreciated that I was in a safe space in my faith community where I didn't have to guard my heart and my soul against the threat of condemnation, because I knew that his was a theology of all encompassing love and forgiveness. Then this is the person that is hit with a sexual scandal. It divides not just the church but the community around it.

The questions that I was left to ask myself were around if they'll treat our pastor this way, who we have held up and celebrated, how will they regard my sexual sin? Which wasn't a sin as much as it was a sexual identity, but I didn't have that language at the time. That was one of the folks

[laughter] in my early life. I think it was a really formative relationship, because it was such a father figure.

There were a constellation of folks in the church as well. The youth fellowship director. I don't know what her official title was, but she ran the youth fellowship program. Betty Clark. Gregarious little woman. I ended up dating her granddaughter at the time. Just super invested in ministry and our choir. Competing in the McDonald's gospel fest. Touring and going to other churches throughout all of high school and then even when I went to Rutgers for college in undergrad. I was in the liberated gospel choir there. Ministry centered piece in my life. Definitely the folks who led my interest in ministry were important figures.

Lorna Ebner: When did this—around what time or how old were you when this happened?

Larry Lyons: The timeline's a little fuzzy. I know that the time stamp on it is that he passed away at the age of 46. I was at the very beginning—that must have been somewhere between '97 and 2000. The accusations have probably become public five or more years prior to that. Yeah, so basically all of my adolescence was spent watching him manage sexual sin and what that does within the faith community.

Lorna Ebner: Okay. What schools have you attended?

Larry Lyons: I had seven **[00:20:00]** different grade schools and three different high schools, I think.

Lorna Ebner: Wow. *[Laughter]*

Larry Lyons: If I can name them. Pine Grove Manor School for kindergarten and first grade.

Lorna Ebner: Do you mind mentioning where these schools are?

Larry Lyons: Oh, sorry. Yeah. Mm-hmm.

Lorna Ebner: It's okay. *[Laughter]*

Larry Lyons: Pine Grove Manor School is in Franklin Township. Then we moved to New Brunswick and, I went to Paul Robeson Community School on Commercial Avenue in New Brunswick, where our principal went to my church. She was so cool. Mrs. Williams. I got in so much trouble. Then I was put into a talented and gifted program after third grade. I went to fourth grade at AC Redshaw School in New Brunswick. Fifth grade I moved in with my father who was living in Jackson, New Jersey. He bought this beautiful five-bedroom house with a Jacuzzi and a tree house and a pool, and I did not intend to be left out. I moved in *[laughter]* and went to Goetz Middle School. G-O-E-T-Z.

Lorna Ebner: Thank you for spelling that out for me. *[Laughter]*

Larry Lyons: I went there, but not for very long, because I wasn't very happy, having been a quintessential mamma's boy. Jackson was like the sticks. I was used to a more urban community. More folks that looked like me. I went back to live with my mother mid-fifth grade and went to Conerly Road School in Franklin Township, where Mr. **[Spelling: Chalupa: 00:21:53]**, who was the principal, had taught my father. I'm in and out of Franklin Township and New Brunswick schools. That's fifth grade.

Sixth grade we moved to South Brunswick. I go to Brunswick Acres. That is the quintessential Fresh Prince of Bel-Air move. When you go from the hood to some place that's really uncomfortable. That was Brunswick Acres School. I was one of three black students in the sixth grade. Then to

Crossroads Middle School, which I attended seventh and eighth grade. Then went to South Brunswick High School for freshman and sophomore year. That was the longest stretch I've been in a school system ever. Then we moved out of our apartment in South Brunswick/Monmouth Junction to Franklin Township. I didn't want go to the public school, so I went to the private school where my girlfriend at the time was a student and my cousins that I had grown up with were enrolled. I went to St. Peter's High School, where I got to be an altar boy. The study of religion. I got straight As. I had a 99—no. Matter of fact, my average in that class was over 100 level.

Then *[laughter]* the diocese had a major budget cut. They were going to have Mr. **[Spelling: Grinnelli?: 00:23:30]**, the gym teacher teaching English. I was like, "Ah, I'm out. Sorry. I might actually be trying to do something with this study of literature thing, and Mr. **[Spelling: Grinnelli: 00:23:40]**, is charming, but not my teacher. No." So, I went to Franklin High School, which is where I graduated. It's also where my parents were prom king and queen, class of '78. I'm proud to be a Warrior alongside **[Spelling: Myra Stateman: 00:21:53]**, and Larry Lyons. Thank you.

Lorna Ebner: Well, thank you so much for running me through that.

Larry Lyons: Yes. Long and sordid, I know.

[Laughter]

Lorna Ebner: What are some challenges you faced in childhood? How did you manage those?

Larry Lyons: It was certainly around gender. My father being a military man, he wasn't the quintessential alpha male, but he definitely knew that there was a way

to be a little boy and a way to be a little girl. He didn't want a sissy as a son. Definitely didn't wanna see me playing with dolls, didn't want to see me jump rope, which probably made them that much more attractive to me. Like I said, I was surrounded by women.

I think my father, he experienced both guilt about him having to be away on the Army base and not being a strong male presence and wondering what role that played in shaping my sexuality, which he didn't understand as different from my gender expression. That was— **[00:25:00]** I think that was the most difficult thing I faced during my childhood. My parents, when they were fighting all the time, they were like, "We were so poor." I was like, "We had no idea. " I was too worried about why I couldn't play jump rope. I wanted to be playing Double Dutch. I didn't care that we had to be out of the house because we didn't have air conditioning. I didn't know. Yeah. Not having much money I think was probably one of the challenges. Most of the folks around us didn't have much, so it just seemed like—

Lorna Ebner: There was nothing to compare it to?

Larry Lyons: Yeah. We knew that some people were doing well. That was so rare. It didn't feel like we deserved to do much better than the folks around us. I don't recall that being a big thing for us.

Lorna Ebner: What about switching between all these different schools? Was that ever a challenge? Were you able to adapt pretty easily?

Larry Lyons: Adapt is a cleaner way to discuss what I did. I think from being a military family and my life was all—I was always in transit. There hasn't been a time in my life prior to being here in Newark, where I was anywhere for anytime. I remember, I think when we were leaving Germany, having to

say goodbye to our friends, and realizing that I'm probably never gonna see these people again. It's unlikely that I'll ever talk to them again.

Lorna Ebner: That's a young age to have that realization.

Larry Lyons: Yeah. I feel like most folks have a little more time. I think what it made me—what it welcomed me to believe was that you really just—that nuclear family is your foundation. Everything else is just everything else. Your foundation is the family. I start to wrap my mind around that at the age of three or four when we were coming back to the States. Then my father had to continue his military service. He's still not in the home. It's just like, "Okay. It's not the nuclear family, because the patriarch's gone. Now we got grandma's." It's this more expansive notion of family, but it's still family. Right? Then my father comes back. We get our first apartment. We have that for maybe two years before they separate and then divorce. It's just like—so it's not family then. Right? *[Laughter]* Even if the nuclear family can eject or lose, forfeit, whatever, it's patriarch, then there's this eroding sense of connection to other folks, so when I was young—at the Army base, it was like, "Oh, I'm surrounded. This is my community." It's like, eh, not so much. It was like, "Well, family is." Hm, not so much. By the time I was in fourth grade, I normalized the end of the school year meaning the end of all those relationships. The challenging thing is that it wasn't until college that I formed authentic friendships. I was cool with enough folks to get through the day without being bullied violently and to run for student council and the student office and things like that. Enough folks knew me, but I don't feel like I had authentic friendships until college, which was the first time that I was somewhere for four years at a time. I don't even remember what question I was answering.

Lorna Ebner: *[Laughter]* How did you adapt to transitioning between schools?

Larry Lyons: Yeah, so that's the way that I adapted was normalizing saying goodbye at the end of the school year, and fully expecting for that to be the end, which is not totally true to my experience, because as I pointed out, I jumped back and forth into the school systems. There was no guarantee at any point that that would happen. Where some folks had the experience of on graduation day having spent 12 years with these folks and formed a bond, it was like, "This is my first year in the school. I'm really just worried about my college." I just normalized having looser social bonds and not even expecting the foundation, the root of my relationships to be intact.

Lorna Ebner: Are you still close with your family? Do they live around here?

Larry Lyons: Yeah. I'm closer now with my family than I've ever been. I think what happened is when I got to college and had that opportunity to form friendships, it was just like, **[00:30:00]** "Oh, well, forget the family. They never understood me anyway!" I think I had my whole—

Lorna Ebner: You had your rebellious stage really late. *[Laughter]*

Larry Lyons: Yeah, and I think it's predictable that when you get to college you start to distance yourself. I still brought with me the ministry. I was still prioritizing ministry as a central part of my life. What that really meant was waking up. Having a rehearsal with the Liberated Gospel Choir that led into 1:00 a.m., and then getting up for an 8:00 a.m. class the next day and making sure I maintain my GPA. It continued to be an investment. I say that to say my—I did get the reputation from my family at that time as being a black sheep. I did not think time with family was important, because I was—my experience has shown me. Y'all might not stick around. Or I might be so gay that I forfeit your support at a crucial time. It

was a weird time. I was as distant as I needed to be. But I've come out on the other side now. *[Laughter]*

My family and I, we are closer than ever. My mom, she still lives in Franklin Township. Maybe we'll talk about her later. She's amazing. My father, he was living in Jackson. Then when he and his wife finally separated, he moved to Trenton. He passed away a few years ago. My sister, she went to Morgan State University in Maryland. She met her husband there. Then- so they had a son. Then a daughter. Then he got a position in South Carolina. She's there now. I'm there almost once a month, because I'm a really—

Lorna Ebner: Involved uncle. *[Laughter]*

Larry Lyons: Yes. Uncling is my favorite thing. Yeah. I have not gone 24 hours without talking to my sister in years. My mother, my sister, and I have three-way calls almost daily. We are very close. That's been amplified since losing my father. We were close then, but I think we are even closer now.

Lorna Ebner: We're gonna move onto the Newark section. What is your earliest memory of Newark?

Larry Lyons: Living in New Brunswick, Newark was the place that we would come to do our school shopping, because its reputation as a manufacturing hub definitely extended through the '80s and '90s in certain ways. Even now, if you see Broad and Market, you can kind of glimpse that Newark that I was first introduced to. Newark felt like our bigger, cooler, older cousin that hung out with New York. Was just a little more metropolitan than us. Also more hood than us. If a kid transferred into our school system from Brooklyn or from Newark, it was like, "Oh, okay. Don't mess with him, 'cause if he's coming from Newark, he probably can fight." That's the—

[laughter] I'm not proud of it, but I feel like my earliest memories of Newark were around shopping and violence.

[Laughter]

Lorna Ebner: That's a great combination.

Larry Lyons: It's my life in a nutshell. It really is.

[Laughter]

Lorna Ebner: How has Newark changed since then? What do you think about those changes?

Larry Lyons: Yeah. I feel like Newark is being—how do I say this? Growing up in New Brunswick, it just felt super black. It was a black city, right? The further we got into the '90s, the larger the Latino population grew. I feel like we were so backwater in the '80s that every Latino person was Puerto Rican. "Oh, you're black, you're white, or you're Puerto Rican."
Then I think with the growth of the "Hispanic", Latin community, we got into the **[00:35:00]** differentiation more and more. It changed the profile of the city, so that there's just more signage. It was bilingual. There were all these markers that the city was changing, that it wasn't quite the New Brunswick that we grew up in. Not in a xenophobic way. Just in a visual culture way. I saw a lot of development happen in New Brunswick. I say that to say the New Brunswick that I experienced from like 1985 through 1995 is a lot like the Newark that I'm experiencing from 2010 to now. That means amazing things like new developments. I remember when the projects where my father's ex-girlfriend used to—*[laughter]* one of the women my father dated before he married his mistress, she lived in the projects. We spent a couple summers there, just being in the projects. Life

was a little different. Then those were torn down. Seeing the new developments come up.

Just what gentrification looks like on the ground when you are experiencing it through the lens of—the random, or the average Christian working class family. The city feels less and less yours. The small mom and pop shops that have let you slide when you didn't have all that you needed are replaced with a Wal-Mart that is not trying to hear that. One of my best friends worked at a record shop on—I wanna say Nassau Street. One of the main corridors in New Brunswick, called Sound Express. You would go there, and that's where you got your music.

Then a Sam Goody moved in around the corner. Within two or three years, it was out of business. Then within four or five years, that Sam Goody was gone. We have nothing, because Sam Goody could—it ruled as a chain and it not impact their bottom line, or maybe it does impact their bottom line. The way that gentrification and the introduction of big box retail displaces local merchants, like I saw in micro. I've been witnessing that again in my time here in Newark. Really exciting development plans, but also really crippling consequences for communities that have built their support structures around things that are deprioritized in those development plans.

Lorna Ebner: Where have lived in Newark and when?

Larry Lyons: Actually this is the only apartment I've ever had. It's a love story. I was living—I lived on the Livingston campus at Rutgers, which is on one and nine basically, on Route One. Then I went to Princeton for graduate school, which is also on Route One. Then I went just—I got exhausted with the lack of culture down there, because there's really no life outside of the university. The graduate student experience is so immersive that it would be really great to have something that isn't wine and cheese and gothic architecture. I moved to Newark. It was vibrant with bodegas and

barbershops and basketball courts and the urban life that characterized my early days in New Brunswick.

Actually, I had started dating out here, so I knew some boys. It just felt like Newark was the place to be. I was apartment shopping probably on some early version of Craigslist at the time. Some kind of classifieds. Just zigzagging a city I knew very little about. I rode down Martin Luther King Boulevard and was like tree lined. There was colorful frat houses. I was just like, "This is Newark. This is beautiful. I would love to live on this street." Then my partner at the time, we came to this light here, and he looked up out the window. He was like, "Oh, there's a for rent sign there." I was like, "I gotta get back to Princeton, but can you check this place out for me?" He did. He's like, "I think you'll like it, 'cause there's a walk-in closet." That closet sealed the deal. *[Laughter]* I've been here for ten years.

[Laughter]

Larry Lyons: It was March 15th, 2007, that I moved in.

Lorna Ebner: You remember the day. Wow.

Larry Lyons: Just because I had it on my lease, and I used it to get my parking permits.

Lorna Ebner: *[Laughter]*

Larry Lyons: Yeah. I was in the middle of taking my general exams at Princeton, and so it was the worst possible time to attempt to move, but I was so desperate to get out of there **[00:40:00]** and feel loved in my brownness. Yeah, and so yeah. This is the only place in Newark that I've lived.

Lorna Ebner: Do you remember where the projects that you said you spent some of the summers are were?

Larry Lyons: Yeah, so they were at the intersection of Commercial Avenue and whatever that major highway is. It turns into—you can hit One and Nine off of it. It's not French Street. Commercial Avenue and—I have to take it to get to my mom's house.

Lorna Ebner: I wish I could help you out. *[Laughter]* I'm sorry.

Larry Lyons: Should I look it up?

Lorna Ebner: Oh, no. You don't have to. *[Laughter]*

Larry Lyons: Yeah, but at the base of Commercial Avenue when you enter New Brunswick is where those projects where.

Lorna Ebner: All right. Are there things about living in Newark that you find difficult or challenging?

Larry Lyons: More so the reputation and the stereotypes about Newark are more difficult than the actual lived reality of Newark, for me.

Lorna Ebner: What people think about when you're out somewhere. Like, "Oh, I'm from Newark." Their immediate reaction rather than what it's actually like living here.

Larry Lyons: Yeah. I have encountered more ignorance at cocktail parties than crime or violence in the streets. Do you know what I'm saying?

Lorna Ebner: Wow.

Larry Lyons: My car has been broken into a couple times, but it really is because I can be a bit reckless. Like, "Oh, I'm gonna fly to Spain for Thanksgiving. I'll just leave my car in front of the house." Well, that's not the best idea, right? Or I'll leave my wallet on the seat of the car. I'm just—and Newark has made me more savvy about that. Like, "Hey, sweetie. Don't do that." In terms of challenges, it hasn't mapped onto what the reputation and the stereotypes are. It's been—or maybe, because I did work as a senior manager of stakeholder engagement for the Newark public schools for a year. The legacy of political corruption has certainly made the state of the public school system here abysmal. We've been fighting to get from under state control. Just the politics around that are crippling here. My work with stakeholders has really introduced me to the ways that the school system and its dereliction have impoverished the citizens here. I'm not talking about financially. I just—

Lorna Ebner: In their education as well?

Larry Lyons: Yeah, yeah.

Lorna Ebner: On a wider note, can you tell me a little bit about Brick City Varsity?

Larry Lyons: Woo!

Lorna Ebner: *[Laughter]*

Larry Lyons: Yes. In 2010, 11-ish, I was teaching at Rutgers. I was adjuncting and teaching the required literary theory course for graduate students in the master's program. In my time at Princeton, I'd been on stipend the whole time. I'm accustomed to living the life of the mind and having a stipend to cover things so I don't have to worry about much else. I remember when I

interviewed for my position here, they were like, “Yeah. Some adjuncts choose to work in the computer lab.” I was just like, *[laughter]* “What now? What? No. We won’t be working in the computer lab, sweetie. That’s precious. No. That’s not what I do.”

I think midway through the semester, the reality set in. This is not sustainable. They are not paying you enough to be—because at Princeton, the class size, you might have ten students in your precept. In that class, and this was at the graduate level, there were just more students than I had been responsible for. Then they were turning in papers that were twice as long. I was preparing lectures weekly and doing Blackboard posts and reviewing those. Then the writing assignments, and doing the reading along with them, because I had never taught this course before, and I had designed the syllabus a month before the course. It was just a number of texts that I’m reading for the first time. It was just a lot of intellectual labor for not very much money. I’m like, “I need to make some money.”

[00:45:00] Because of some of the work that I had been doing outside of the academy, I had an opportunity to use my creative pursuits. Back in 2004-ish, I’d become a blogger. This is before anyone was ever paid to do a blog. This is when blogging was done for the love, in the good days of blogging. My partner at the time, who was over ten or twelve years older than me, like older. He was a blogger. I ended up going to this meeting of black bloggers in New York City I would say in 2003 or 2004. This is very much before blogs were a thing. The notion of a corporate blogger, like CNN or NBC having a blogger was unheard of. This is just when brown folks were writing about recipes and diary entries, and random people in the world were responding. I say that to say, as a blogger, I was using my blog to write about issues of identity that I was working through academically. I just needed another space to work through those issues, because you don’t want to have the fullness of your identity experienced exclusively as an academic debate. Right?

I was a student of post-modernism and thinking about nihilism and post-racial identity and structuralism. There was just so much I was thinking through. I wanted to articulate from a more personal space than was allowed in my academic writing. That's what the blog was for. In order to—I think I've always been marketing-minded. I want people to engage my content. If it's just words, that doesn't happen. A lot of blogs at the time were not doing images at all and I wanted to create custom images, because I'm talking about ontological insecurity as activated by blackness. Just existential angst. If I Google men experiencing existential angst, I get a lot of white guys. That's not a realm of expression where there's a lot of stock photography of black folks. I kept running into this wall where the complexity of the conversation I was having could not be met by the content generated in the photographers online. I had to jump into that void and generate that work for myself.

My earliest work as a photographer was on my blog doing self-portraiture to show black men experiencing existential angst and ontological insecurity, right? I was really using my camera as a supplement to the creative thinking and academic thinking that I was doing. What it gave me the opportunity to do on campus was take my black body and foreground my subject, like, "I'm a person. I own this space. I deserve to be here." What I felt. Anything, but—and then share that journey with the world, which was much safer than—fewer people took an interest. The stakes were lower.

But because of the blog offering me that space, people near and far *[laughter]* began to take note of my photography. When it came time for me to figure out how can I augment my pay as an adjunct, photography presented itself, cuz you can shoot a wedding in one day and get paid more than you make in a month or two of being an adjunct. I'm just like, "Yeah. I'm going to be a photographer." I'm really long-winded.

[Laughter]

Larry Lyons: I just love my life. No apologies.

Lorna Ebner: We love it. We want you to be long-winded. *[Laughter]*

Larry Lyons: Good. I'm at home. I'm chillin'. I get into photography, because what I'm thinking is I don't wanna pick up more classes to make more money. I need something that's not gonna be so cerebral, so that I can finish my dissertation and be Dr. Lyons. Then when I can come into some real coin as Larry Lyons, PhD. That is my last semester teaching, cuz I'm like, "I'm gonna see where these creative skillsets will take me." **[00:50:00]**

In the course of doing photography for folks, it was headshots for aspiring models. Whoever was in my cipher. A lot of entrepreneurs who were launching a first website and needed my help with the content for that. Just a slew of creatives who were just like, "Oh, I wanna be a spoken word poet," or, "I'm gonna be a singer. I need headshots." Whatever. "I need a conceptual editorial." I got you. Hey.

In the course of doing that, my sense of style became another tool, because folks wanted me. They would show up for the shoot and look a mess, and be like, "Oh, fix it. Fix my life." I'm like, "I can do that. Pay me." I started bundling the services of styling with the photography and doing their fashion work and helping models build their portfolio, doing test shoots with agency models to build my portfolio. Yeah. Initially folks would borrow a—like, "Oh, can I get that jacket of yours? That cute Burberry piece that you got from the thrift store?" "Yeah. You can borrow that for your shoot." They were just borrowing my pieces. Then a client of mine broke a one-of-a-kind piece of mine. An '80s-style dookie gold chain. I was so heartbroken. I was like, "That's it." When these shoots come up, 'cause I frequented thrift stores. I'll keep an eye out for the items that correspond to the theme of your shoot. If you're interested, you can buy

them. If not, my taste is so dope. I'll keep it. It'll be fine. I'll make use of it. *[Laughter]*

I shifted from allowing folks to borrow things from my personal collection, like my closet to basically acting as a personal shopper, because as a vintage shopper, you don't wanna divulge to everybody where you're shopping, 'cause then they're gonna get all the good stuff. No. I will not take you with me. I will style you. Pay me.

That's how Brick City Varsity was born in a very practical sense. Needing, as an adjunct, another revenue stream so that I could get back to my dissertation. Using skills that had accrued some value outside of the academy. The reason I named that Brick City Varsity, because it was gonna be Style U, like Style University. Something really cheesy and corny. In the short time I'd been in Newark at that time, I think I was helping my partner run for city council here. He was running for the Central Ward council seat that was vacated in the midst of some scandal, I'm sure. I learned a lot about Newark through that campaign. I'm doing the photography. I'm doing the website. I'm drafting the talking points. Really getting into the minds of Newarkers in the way that electoral politics require a municipal candidate to do. There was that.

Then I started teaching at Rutgers-Newark. I learned about Conklin Hall and that history of resistance or that moment of resistance there. Then just the city's history around the riots in '67. Became really enamored of those two moments of resistance and what they meant about Newark, because after the riots, we had such white flight and the evacuation of the middle class. It has been strong working class communities, like the ones that I knew in New Brunswick that sustained the city. Yeah. It was privy to tales about like, well, when this ethnic enclave left the city, they didn't just move out. They demanded that the city return to them their monuments and the statues and shit. They wanted to divest. They wanted nothing to do with the city. It was no longer theirs. I really wanted—if I was going to

build a brand— to have it be a tribute to those folks. The folks who had the least and used their creativity and their savvy to make it look amazing. That's what my family had always been. That's what my community had always been. Making something out of nothing, and making it look fabulous. I felt like that mapped directly onto the model of me going to thrift stores and producing a high-end editorial shoot out of it. With the mission of the thrift store, **[00:55:00]** I was going to the Goodwill I believe it was right here, or is this Salvation Army? The Goodwill store right here on—

Lorna Ebner: University?

Larry Lyons: - University.

Lorna Ebner: Mm-hmm.

Larry Lyons: Off James Street. With their mission of supporting veterans and ex-offenders and disaster victims, it felt like a different way of approaching fashion, because so often we think about fashion as the site of indulgence. If you look at runway culture, it's these ridiculous high prices. If you're gonna look great, it means that you have to spend top dollar at the expense of something else in your life. In my community, it's always like, are you gonna get that big hat for church or that new Easter suit, even if it means that your lights are gonna get cut off, right? In working class communities, it's felt like we have to decide between looking great or staying afloat. I wanted to build a fashion brand that looked at it the other way. If we— here are clothes that have been donated. We're not depleting more of the earth's natural resources. It's really a more sustainable model of how to cycle clothes through a community. They've been donated but they're being sold and that money is going to help these disaster victims. It's gonna help these veterans. The most vulnerable in the community can be

supported as we indulge in fashion. That indulgence doesn't have to mean that our kids don't get to eat or our lights don't stay on.
That was really the position that I took with Brick City Varsity. The Brick City is that homage to the City of Newark and its resilience. The Varsity it about that graduating class of 1969, the Black Student Union that took over Conklin Hall and forever transformed not just Rutgers but student activism in the State of New Jersey and beyond. I was really inspired by those two. I wanted that represented in the name and in the brand. That's where Brick City Varsity was born.

Lorna Ebner: That's really amazing. What kind of clientele do you get?

Larry Lyons: A lot of creatives. I love my creatives.

Lorna Ebner: *[Laughter]*

Larry Lyons: Artists, starving or otherwise. I've really done the gamut. But also entrepreneurs, folks who are just looking to establish a new brand. I've gone from just doing photography to photography and personal styling. I mean, personal shopping and styling to doing some—offering graphic design services, interior design services, and branding, like letterhead, business cards. Whatever it is that help a client elevate from, "This is an idea that I have," to, "I have brand identity, and I'm presenting it to the world." That could be as simple as an author photo for a book, or as involved as an entire multimedia campaign that gets them more visibility. I will say there's probably more church folks than your average because of my history and my family. My mother, she's the—both of my parents were corrections officers. When my mother—when my sister and I graduated from school, my mother pursued the ministry. She practices the ministry, and then she retired from corrections about a year ago, just over a year ago. Years prior to that, she had opened a salon and boutique.

Actually inspired by the model of Brick City Varsity, she's paired a carefully curated women's fashion boutique with a state-of-the-art salon. She is the founder of Truly Spoiled Salon and Boutique in Franklin Township where she was born.

Lorna Ebner: Did you inspire her or did she inspire you?

Larry Lyons: Yeah. She was not into vintage. It was a tough sell. *[Laughter]* I would take her on my shopping trips. She saw my business model. Like what the markup needs to look like. How to present previously owned garments and welcome folks to engage fashion differently in that way. Yes, I think she did borrow that part from me. She's been a caretaker for folks in our family for a long time. [**01:00:00]** The whole investing in women's beautification and creating a space where they could be pampered and truly spoiled, that's her own vision. I can't take credit for that. It's very authentic to her. Very organic. The business model around garment sales was my earliest contribution. Then once she came up with the idea, my sister and I totally poo-pooed it. "What do you know about owning a salon? You don't even do no hair."

I've done all the branding. Her website, her bio, all of her promotional materials, signage, window displays, salon furniture, all of that I've either produced myself or collaborated to do.

Lorna Ebner: You're basically her marketing manager?

Larry Lyons: I am.

[Laughter]

Lorna Ebner: Ah.

Larry Lyons: For a couple of brands, I get in at the inception and contribute to their growth. I think that's probably the best example.

Lorna Ebner: Okay. What places in Newark do you associate with the LGBTQ community?

Larry Lyons: Definitely Halsey Street, 'cause there's one aspect of my earliest memories of Newark that I did not share, so I'm glad to circle back, because my best friend—I'm not gonna mention his name, 'cause he would gag. He knew Halsey Street to be where the male sex workers were in Newark. Whenever he would drop Halsey in a conversation, he'd be like, "Oh." That is definitely my earliest queer memory of Newark. Was that the male sex workers are down on Halsey if you wanna find 'em. Not completely verified during my time here, but yes. That's one place that was queered in my memory early.

Liberation In Truth. I don't even know where they were based before, but I know that in terms of me saying queer safe spaces, even before—in my earliest time in Newark. Murphy's. Again, which is another space that I did not enter. I wasn't a part of that story. I know if you walk near the arena with the right gay man, he's gonna *[laughter]* tear up a little in the eyes for ole Murphy's being gone. There. I know that a lot of illicit sex acts happen in the Penn Station bathrooms. I celebrate *[laughter]* all of my folks who are engaging in public sex. Rock on. *[Laughter]*

Lorna Ebner: Have you ever been involved in the ballroom scene here?

Larry Lyons: I haven't. Well, that's not completely true. I one year sponsored a category in a ball. Something that James Credle was doing, and I wanted to support. I did not attend the ball, and have not to this day attended a ball in my life, which is embarrassing, considering how much work I've done in the black

queer community. I guess I'm more of the church queen variety *[laughter]* than the ballroom variety. But there's plenty of intermediary.

Lorna Ebner: That should be a category. The church queen. *[Laughter]*

Larry Lyons: I'd be surprised if somebody didn't walk church queen realness.

Lorna Ebner: How would you describe your sexual orientation or gender identity?

Larry Lyons: Loud. No. *[Laughter]* I identify as queer, because my sexuality has its own politics, and it's not the politics of the mainstream gay community. I'm a pretty gender conforming male. *[Laughter]* I celebrate my maleness, the anatomy therein.

Lorna Ebner: *[Laughter]*

Larry Lyons: Yeah. I only sleep with men.

Lorna Ebner: How did you first become aware of that aspect of yourself? Was there a specific moment that you remember? Did it develop? Around what age were you when that happened?

Larry Lyons: I remember being attracted other male preschoolers.

Lorna Ebner: So way back.

Larry Lyons: Way back. *[Laughter]* I don't remember—there wasn't a time where females were as interesting to me.

Lorna Ebner: How did you first learn about LGBTQ people?

Larry Lyons: Well, they were the social pariahs that existed on the periphery of the religious community. Right? I feel like gender was policed **[01:05:00]** in very particular ways in the church. If someone had a little too much sway in their step, *[laughter]* or filed their nails during church. Just any kind of markers of femininity. There would be a murmur and a finger point. Someone would be careful to tell me not to be that guy, because I think that it was always clear that there was some danger. That's how it happened in my church. Finger pointing. That guy's different. Don't be like that guy. Stay away from that guy.

Lorna Ebner: What was your first positive interaction with that community or identifying that community?

Larry Lyons: I wish that was easier to answer.

Lorna Ebner: I'm so sorry.

[Laughter]

Larry Lyons: Me too. Positive? Ugh. Okay. Oh, gosh. This is so messy. So messy. *[Laughter]* Give me a second. I'm just trying- 'cause I'm thinking about two friendships that are formed with other queer men. Both of them were in my church, so both of them were just inherently messy. I wanna find another example.

[Laughter]

Larry Lyons: When was it okay to be gay? Who was an okay gay? Oh gosh.

Lorna Ebner: If you want, we can come back to that question.

Larry Lyons: Wait. I know Ellen DeGeneres was one of the earliest ones, which is crazy, because I'm so critical of needing a white savior to model viable queer identity, but the black ones were just so beat down by my religious community. She was the first that emerged as beyond the reproach of the church. Yeah, so I will continue to think about that.

Lorna Ebner: Mm-hmm. How did you other people in your life become aware of that aspect of your identity?

Larry Lyons: I think I was feminine enough *[laughter]* that it was ever-present. I think the people closest to me always—"Oh, I mean, it's okay. He likes to play with dolls. Dolls are fun. People like dolls."

Lorna Ebner: *[Laughter]*

Larry Lyons: Yeah. I think I was just that feminine that it was always a thing.

Lorna Ebner: Did you ever have to tell your parents or your family about it? Did you just brush it off and they just knew?

Larry Lyons: Both.

[Laughter]

Larry Lyons: I had to, and I didn't. Wait. Before I tell my entire coming out story, okay. What is the question?

Lorna Ebner: How did other people in your life become aware?

Larry Lyons: Become aware.

Lorna Ebner: Yeah.

Larry Lyons: Yeah. Just they inferred and assumed, and that didn't change until I was dating a grown-ass man. I was 17 dating a 21 year old that turned 22. Thanks, Internet. *[Laughter]* Yeah, and even at that time, I was auditioning a possibility. There was a time when in my senior year of high school, my parents sat me down, *[laughter]* 'cause I had been dating this grown man who would—I'd run up to the curb and jump in his car and speed off. One day he had to go to the bathroom. Like, "Well, just come in and use the bathroom." My mom intercepted him on his way out of the bathroom. Was like, "Oh, so you're the one who's coming and picking up my son and speeding off into the night. Just know that you don't have to peel off into the darkness. You can use the bathroom and come and say hi to his mother." "Hi, Mother."

Lorna Ebner: Oh, I love your mom already.

[Laughter]

Larry Lyons: She's awesome. What I should say to that point, my mother had been reading—my mother was a fairly voracious reader, which really impressed and inspired me. She was reading, I remember Terry McMillan who wrote *Waiting to Exhale*, which was made into that huge movie. She read enough of her books and then around the same time, a number of books by E. Lynn Harris, who's a black gay author who really was ground-breaking, because he would write gay sex into the plot of his novels in ways that his writing style was endearing and interesting to a lot of straight black women. As a result, **[01:10:00]** I feel like a lot of black queer boys of my generation were sneaking their E. Lynn Harris books from their mother's pile. Like, "Oh my gosh! How is she reading this? How is she not sharing it with me?"

Lorna Ebner: Like their version of *Fifty Shades of Gray*? *[Laughter]*

Larry Lyons: Yeah. It's not racy. In fact, my critique of it as a literary critic was that the sex is really disappointing if that's what you're coming for. There's this whole gauzy, smoky, "And then they fell into one another"—it's more like Danielle Steele than Fifty Shades of Gray. It's very—"Oh, I will not lift the veil of gay sex. I will not offend you, sweet reader, because only men know what men do." Anyway, but I do feel like that was the earliest moment of an—I want to say an exchange. Not just my mother using her maturity and insight about her child and gender to say, "That boy gay," but me actually picking up something and embracing it and that being a point of exchange.

That happened when I was in middle—the early stages of high school. Now remember, because in middle school I had taken one of her Terry McMillan books, I think, and written a book report about it, that was totally inappropriate. There was all kinds of ish going on. I'm the kind of the student. I'm a voracious reader. You assign us 10 books for summer reading, and I'm going to read 30 books. It's who I am. It's what I do. I just chose to write about *Disappearing Acts* is the name of the book. I blush now, because if I were my teacher, I'd be like, "Oh! Woo. Yes, Mrs. Caldwell, what are you giving your son?"

That's how I timestamp it, because that had to be seventh or eighth grade that I was reading the straight girl that my mother was reading alongside the gay guy. I know that by eighth grade, I'd graduated to queer fiction, and I didn't even know it. That was the first thing that my mother could point to and be like, "I knew, 'cause you was slipping through them pages so excited."

Fast forward to me being 17 and still being very [closeted]—dating the granddaughter of the youth fellowship director. Watching how my community had been divided by my pastor's malpractice and his sexual

immorality and how my community understands that to separate you from God. Then the Internet hit. I got access to chatrooms. It was just a crazy time to be gay. Questioning, I guess I would've been at the time. I'm seeing this man and auditioning this reality, and he's just at the time Calvin Klein model gorgeous to me. He just represents everything. My parents see that I'm spending a lot of time with cousin Eric.

I come home one day, and it's an ambush. This is before the show *Intervention*. I didn't know what it looked like when you walk into an ambush. I was ambushed. They're like, "We need to talk to you about cousin Eric." As a matter of fact, they didn't even go straight to cousin Eric. They're like, "So we've been noticing you're going out more," 'cause I was totally antisocial. I was this bookish, awkward kid. Suddenly I'm out, getting manicures in the village. It's like, what? They're like, "You know, you've been getting manicures. You're coming home with these silver rings and these leather bracelets *[laughter]* and necklaces." They're just trying to piece together any element of non-urban heteronormative gender presentation. They're like, "Oh, we haven't seen this. Is this part of your new sexual identity?" I'm just like, "I don't know. I don't think so. I had no idea that these things could even be connected. That is oddly accurate, and I'm uncomfortable." *[Laughter]*

They, in that night, are basically trying to force me to come out. I wasn't out to myself. I was like, I like sleeping with this man, but *[laughter]* who's to say? **[01:15:00]** My answer—and my father pressed harder than my mother I recall. I was like, "Dad, when I figure it out, I'll let you know. When I know, I'll let you know." My father would not accept that. He was like, "When you let—no. We are here." My parents had been divorced since I was in the third grade. This is senior year of high school. They had not been in the same room. They were not a team in that way. For both of them to be under a roof saying—and here's what they said ultimately. "We love you. We want you to know all this sneaking around and ducking into cars, as officers we know that it's not safe. We want you

to know that we love you, and whatever you are is okay with us." Having come on the heels of, "Do these silver rings and leather bracelets mean that you're gay?" and, "Tell us about cousin Eric." I'm like, "We're cool. We met on a college tour." I had got my lies ready. "We met when I visited the TCNJ campus. He's mentoring me." Mentoring.
Oh, Jesus. So yes. They really wanted me to come out to them but unwittingly had created a climate and an environment where that wasn't going to be possible. It was not a satisfying night for them, but in retrospect, it was one of the most beautiful things that I'd ever seen a parent do. There was no precedent for that in our community. Not one. There wasn't a cousin down South who had came out to his auntie. There wasn't a single person that I knew of who had faced the struggle that I faced and then heard those words that, "Whatever you are is okay." There were a few examples of folks being kicked out of the house or disowned. That wouldn't happen to me for much later. Much, much later.
Yeah. That was the moment at which they articulated their awareness of where I was, even if I wasn't ready to articulate that to them.

Lorna Ebner: What about with your sister?

Larry Lyons: It was a little more challenging for her, because she was there. My sister is a year older than me. A year and a few months. We were in the same school at times. If I was being ridiculed, the source of the ridicule was always being gay. She had to protect me from that so often it just became default for her to defend. "He's not. He's not. He's not, and I will fuck you up."

Lorna Ebner: To deny it.

Larry Lyons: Mm-hmm. As I explored more, particularly in my senior year, it was just like, "Please let me know something, because I'm out in these streets

having to defend you. The family's asking me questions." I'm like, "I don't give a damn about none of y'all. I'm figuring out what this means for me, and y'all will wait it the fuck out. I'm sorry that it's an inconvenience for you, but honey, I am questioning whether God made a mistake with me and whether I will inherit the kingdom of God or be cast into a fiery pit. I don't give a fuck that it is difficult for you when you're having locker room conversations with the JV basketball team. I don't care. There's a lake of fire with my name on it. I do not care." She had to wait it out, just like everybody else had to wait it out. *[Laughter]* She wasn't always patient, and it wasn't always easy, I will acknowledge.

Lorna Ebner: We talked about this a little bit. How have your racial and religious identities affected your LGBTQ identity?

Larry Lyons: Come on, intersectional question!

Lorna Ebner: *[Laughter]*

Larry Lyons: Okay. Let me hear it again. How has my racial and religious identities impacted—right. Jesus, this is a difficult question. I'll take it one by one. As a queer person of color, you know how DuBois talks about double consciousness? How you have to operate in two ways. The way the world sees me, the way I see myself. I feel like that is the experience for black queer folks. We are part of—okay. I'm not going to draw any more parallels. We are second-class citizens within the larger gay movement, or at least that's how I experienced it most of my life. If you look at the fight, for example, for gay marriage, **[01:20:00]** it's so much more about class. Black folks from urban communities are like, "We're not safe. Our bodies- You're worrying about estate tax and motherfucking visitation rights." That's where we have some common interests, because we end up in hospitals. That is the fight that's more resonant for us. To be—

Lorna Ebner: That intersection is really difficult because people either want to see you as one of the other, but they have trouble seeing you as both.

Larry Lyons: And the organizations and systems and structures that are designed to serve you have a blind spot around half of your identity.

Lorna Ebner: They either serve you as an African-American male or a gay man?

Larry Lyons: As a gay man, but not as both. They can be really irresponsible and reckless around those intersections. Like, "Oh, well, we get it." No, you don't. You clearly don't. Yeah, and so I just feel like the more vectors of—what is this word?—marginality that you own, the more complicated it gets. Yeah. I guess that's the answer. It's gonna get complicated.

Lorna Ebner: All right. Now the religious aspect and how that's affected—we talked about the pit of fire a little bit. *[Laughter]*

Larry Lyons: There's that. My experience is a unique one because so much of my religious experience was shaped by a moment, a situation, around sexual immorality. I'm querying my own notions about is the black church—churches generally are not sex-positive. Christianity is not a sex-positive religion. Where blackness intersects with that is like we have not—we have the religion, we have a faith that tells us be at war with your body. The desires of your body is what separates you from God. If you can wrestle and tame that thing into submission, that will bring you closer to God.

Then as black folks, as descendants of slaves, we have this weird relationship with our body where they haven't always been ours. We haven't been invited to experience the fullness of our humanity for very long as citizens in this country. We're so frequently objectified. Even in

2017, it's so difficult to assert agency within a black body. As a Christian, your desires are what separate you from God. As a black person, your desires are—your sexuality is a tool for capitalism. Your community is not a community. It's a mode of production. It's just a completely different relationality to the body, I think.
Then as a queer person *[laughter]*, you're just this abnormality and exile amongst exiles. I feel like that's the language that my religious community gave me to think about my sexual identity. If Adam and Eve were cast out of Eden for actualizing their sexual difference, then the gays are exiles beyond exiles. We are at least two movements removed from God's good graces. Feeling like a social pariah who does not enjoy the promise of reconciliation. That was something that maybe I believe can work toward and through their heterosexual populating the earth, but because we couldn't contribute to that colonizing *[laughter]* family structure- exiles beyond exiles without the hope of being reconciled.

Lorna Ebner: Do you still count yourself religious?

Larry Lyons: No, no. **[01:25:00]** *[Laughter]* Deeply spiritual, surely. I speak fluent Christian. I continue to be inspired by Christianity. I help my mom with her sermons. There are several elements of the sacred practice that are attractive to me and I integrate into my life. Ritual and fellowship. Even the magical realism of the Holy Ghost animating your body and moving it to dance. I like those elements, but I don't portend to be religious. No.

Lorna Ebner: How has your perception of your identity changed over time?

Larry Lyons: The older I get, the less of a war it is relating to myself. I feel like I was so embattled as a kid because of the scripting I was getting, primarily in religious spaces. Urban life is like that, too. It has its strictures for the performance of masculinity. Yeah. I think if there's a trajectory, it's that

with each passing year, I'm less persuaded by a dogma that says that erection is why God doesn't love you.

[Laughter]

Lorna Ebner: What do you like best about being LGBTQ or being part of that community? What do you find most challenging?

Larry Lyons: I guess it's the romance of the underdog. I'm part of several communities that are characterized by making something out of nothing. That emerges as something you almost have to be proud of. It's proud with an asterisk. It's like proud because I'm absolutely forced to be. Otherwise my worldview is really nihilist. Yeah. I'm proud of that and it makes me happy. I do feel like being queer, rather than just being gay, that's the more exciting part. That queerness positions you to use marginality to be incisive of the status quo in ways that advance all of us and not just people whose sexuality looks like mine. My fight as a queer person advances all of the black women and the black feminism that has strengthened and fortified my family for generations. Just sleeping with men doesn't do that. You gotta be queer to commit to that kind of critical apparatus.

Lorna Ebner: Mm-hmm. Have you found community or support from other people or organizations in Newark?

Larry Lyons: Yes! Oh, this is what I love about Newark. Being so close to New York, it's hard to not compare the two constantly. One thing that I've experienced as a creative and as a queer is that the cutthroat nature of interactions in New York, that scarcity mentality that says, "There's this tiny island that matters to everyone else in the world. If you're too similar to me, I have to snuff you out." I feel the opposite is true here in Newark. I feel like we know that we live in the shadow of the Big Apple. If we just

pull together, we can manifest our dreams as powerfully on this side of the Hudson as we could anywhere else in the world. I do feel like both the queer community here and the creative community here is warmer and more supportive, authentically and organically than anywhere else. Not just more so than in New York. My other frame of reference is Princeton. Child.

[Laughter]

Larry Lyons: It's like, a bunch of folks who—they acknowledge queer theory. They teach LGBT history. That is a different thing altogether than knowing that there's someone- I can wander into this street. I can walk down Halsey Street almost any time of the day and there's a hug waiting for me somewhere. There's such support here in the queer community. I really, I wear that as a badge when I travel to other Prides or just to other cities, and they ask me about Newark. I have nothing—well, that's not true. I have mostly good things to say.

[Laughter]

Larry Lyons: The majority of the things I have to say about the queer community here are really positive.

Lorna Ebner: Are there specific spaces that you go to **[01:30:00]** to hang out with that community or get support from that community?

Larry Lyons: Yes. I don't go to the LGBT center, but again, I know if I walk by there, I can probably get a hug. Like, "Reverend Janyce is in there? Good. I got some physical love affirmation. Starting from Washington Park and walking down Halsey, the LGBT center and then the Artisan Collective, Jay Quinlan and the others there have done an amazing job to make that a

safe space. It's literally underground. It's just like you're tucked away and enveloped in, not just queer excellence, because they are excellent queers. Just creative excellence. I love that. Those two things come together in that space. That's huge for me. The Artisan Collective. Just two doors down, Marco Hall has his boutique, which, talk about queer excellence. Just world renowned, award-winning talent. Not just from him, but his band of creatives. It's the most impressive faggotry I've seen concentrated anywhere.

Being so transient all my life, having those kind of anchors, it's been transformative. There's a sense of home and belonging that I've never felt in any other city. That's just three places. Really, those are the long and short of it for me. It's just a two-block span. When I moved onto this block, Brian Epps was a homeowner here. There was another gay couple here that I won't name. Their presence here definitely made it feel like a gayborhood. I think since then, folks have regarded this as a more progressive strip of Newark. I think that is to be expected within the university community. We're forward thinkers. We're a little more liberal. Even though there's very clear frat boy energy, which can be really violently homophobic in other spaces, I've not experienced that once. I have not had—I've not been called a name by a frat boy. I've gotten more insults from master's students enrolled in my class *[laughter]* than homophobic frat boys on the strip here. Frat row. I do feel like I exist in a relatively queer, tolerant strip of Newark. So, this is a queer space for me. We were debating putting out a rainbow flag and really testing the waters. Frat boys are vandals. Just across the board. Whether you put a gay flag or anything, they're vandals. They're vomiting and urinating on everything. I just don't want to put out my gayness for that experience. Yes. Are there other spaces in Newark?

Lorna Ebner: Do you ever go out dancing or any clubs here?

Larry Lyons: Well, right, so I can talk about where—that.

Larry Lyons: I couldn't possibly—there used to be a place, I wanna say off Sussex, called the Armory. It was a hole-in-the-wall. We definitely called it hole-in-the-wall. Their drink was the Red Devil, and it was strong, and it was awful, but we got it. Everything was syrupy and dark. Ugh. So many nights. So many nights. There. That was a gay bar. Generally we just had gay nights at a regular bar, 'cause that's when the shift in New York, New Jersey black gay nightlife, it feels like we don't own our spaces. We have spaces within—or we have nights within straight establishments, which to your average Joe, he's like, "Well, how different could that be?" Well, when you have the regular security from their club patting you down and having to have these very intimate relations with bodies that they're not totally in favor of, it creates a different dynamic. That's one thing that I do see.

Yeah, there was a party at a space called Mentor's. It's right outside of Teachers' Village. It's still there. That was the rockin' Sunday night party. I remember, ah! I went there so many times. For years. Probably ending around 2012 or '13. Yeah. A Sunday night party. **[01:35:00]** DJed by DJ Ironbound. What's better than a gay Newark party with a DJ named after the Ironbound? It was just so quintessentially Newark. I weep that it's gone. I still follow the DJ on social media. He has his own night now at a club in Brooklyn. But he's still DJ Ironbound. Whenever I have the opportunity to bring him back for a Pride celebration, yank him back, or whenever I have the chance to tell him I want to be on the guest list for his thing in Brooklyn, I'm coming. Yeah. Mentor's was a fixture for the young, when I was young, black, gay urban music hip-hop crowd. But that's been gone for years, not to be replicated.

Lorna Ebner: All right. That's about all I have. Is there anything that I didn't ask you that you wanna add or cover? Do you wanna talk about your mom a little bit?

Larry Lyons: Ah, I'd love to talk about my mom.

[Laughter]

Larry Lyons: What can I say? Oh, yes. How I got involved with the queer community here in Newark. June Dowell-Burton. I think one of the things that I love about Newark is that all the celebrities are accessible. James Credle, I could just roll up. Like, "Hey, what up, James?"

Lorna Ebner: I saw the mayor at Whole Foods the other day. I was just like, "What are you doing here at Whole Foods?"

Larry Lyons: When I was signing up for the gym, I ran into him. Literally ran into him—

Lorna Ebner: It's just a normal thing.

Larry Lyons: - in the locker room at Planet Fitness. It was just, "There's Ras Baraka again." Love that. *[Laughter]* That's so what I needed, because I've had these experiences where I was in Princeton for three years, and it had no notion that Larry Lyons was there at all. Then I was here within two years, I've launched a brand dedicated to the city. I've taught at an institution that really valued my service. I was doing something for the parent student association. Corey Booker retweeted it. It just felt like that city was into me and understood that I loved it, and it wanted to love me back, and I hadn't gotten that anywhere else.

I connected with June Dowell-Burton, and then started volunteering for Newark Pride early in my time here. I want to say probably 2011, 2012. It was just inspired by her as an individual and as a leader and the vision that it took. How folks were just drawing upon their own resources to make something happen in a city that absolutely needed it to happen. For the last five years, I've run a game show that was designed for youth who didn't have a lot of programming in the Pride lineup in the years prior. Even prior to that, I moderated a panel discussion about probably civil unions and gay marriage.

Around Pride season, I really have the opportunity to bring my investments in community organizing activism together with my scholarly research or queer identity and urban space. What excited me about Newark Pride was that whereas other cities focus almost exclusively on the nightlife aspect, Newark was so cool and hip and cerebral. For years and years, I've just been proud that bit's—raising that flag at City Hall means a lot. I know, it's just a—with there being so many stereotypes about the City of Newark, it cannot be said that it is a predictably homophobic urban space. It's not, and it's not a wonderland either, but it's just more complicated than any of the stereotypes that one would project. I've been excited to contribute to wine tastings and film screenings and book signings, but also rethinking nightlife as a space for raising awareness around issues that folks should be paying attention to. Just the organize—like the old dusty organizing models can really be revisited in a space like this, because you have a strong university community that's doing dynamic programming and wants to connect with folks in the city. That wasn't happening in Princeton. It was like, "We are the university. Y'all are the township. We might have a relationship with the public library." The way that **[01:40:00]** the queer community draws together the different threads of Newark is really exciting and empowering for me. And I don't know what I should say about my mom, but I do wanna talk about her.

[Laughter]

Larry Lyons: My mother. I feel like when we were on base at the Army, men in the military were—they had wives, and they were on the DL. I think this narrative started to unfold for her around the relationship between queer identity and deception, dishonesty. I do feel like it was an uphill battle for my mother to embrace queerness independent of those things. Particularly being betrayed. My father cheated on her, and so having to make sense of the occasionally selfish and hurtful ways that men inhabit their sexuality. Already kind of scorched earth, right? *[Laughter]*

It's not surprising that it wasn't a simple journey for my mother. It wasn't just like, "I accept him a little more and a little more and a little more until I'm on the Pride float," because it was like, "We accept you for who you are, and you can come out." Then cousin Eric is at my graduation party. He's spending weekends at our house. Then I go away to—I finish college, and I'm engaged to this guy and my mother disowns me. For a year after a life of being a momma's boy, that relationship was severed for a bunch of reasons that it took plenty of therapy to walk through. It wasn't just this upward trajectory of acceptance building and building. It's been a rollercoaster ride for us. I'm really proud that she committed to taking that journey. I think it's been rewarding for her. Who doesn't want a son like me?

I've been in the church long enough to know and to see how many women or how many parents will not take that journey. She has. What life looks like now is that some of the first ladies in her cipher, some of the church women who have gay sons look to her as a model for how to engage and how great it can be to be present in the life of your gay son, because so often folks have to rely on popular culture for those images, or a 2000 year old text that says you should not be present for your child in that way. My mother is modeling ways to be an ally for a community that needs it

desperately of folks who are not relinquishing their ties to the church but still want to love their children.
When she comes to Newark, all of Newark lights up. Take my mother to Marco Hall's boutique and you will see the light shine a little brighter all up and down Halsey. She's not the mother of all of gay Newark, but she's one of them. I love how the queer community has embraced my mom. It's even more than they've embraced me, and for good reason.

Lorna Ebner: Are they all friends with her on social media and everything?

Larry Lyons: You know, it's getting there. It's growing. I'm monitoring that.

[Laughter]

Larry Lyons: We're gonna take that slow, but they definitely consistently like our pictures together when I post them. That's what's comfortable for me right now. *[Laughter]*

Lorna Ebner: She sounds like an amazing woman.

Larry Lyons: She is. She really is. I continue to be inspired by her. I think it's safe to say at this point that we're inspired by each other. We challenge each other. The people around us see it. I think so often actualizing queer identity means separation from family. We are modeling something different. I'm excited about that.

Lorna Ebner: Well, is there anything else you wanna add?

Larry Lyons: Geez. I didn't think I'd have anything to say. Now I'm just like, oh-

Lorna Ebner: *[Laughter]*

Larry Lyons: I can talk forever!

Lorna Ebner: *[Laughter]*

Larry Lyons: It feels great to be in a space where two successive mayors have been really supportive of the queer community. When I first came to Newark, it was in the Sharpe James administration. I haven't experienced any homophobia from there. **[01:45:00]** Sakia Gunn was murdered under that administration. That administration made some promises around, "We're gonna build an LGBT center." For a number of reasons, including the political scandal, that didn't happen. Not only because of that scandal, because that's just—City Hall wasn't really serious about making good on that promise.

When I first started getting involved and agitating and playing a role in the organizing around queer identity here in Newark, Cory Booker was appearing on WBGO, that radio station that broadcasts from Park Place. It's the jazz station, but he would make a weekly appearance on that and take calls from the public. I call in. "Listen. City Hall under the last administration made this promise to us that we're gonna get this community center. You're here now. I know you're okay with the queers. What's good?" His response disappointed me in that moment, because he was just like, "Whatever the community does, I'll support."

It was one of the most—it was a lesson that I knew academically, because I'm a student of social movements. I had seen that model before, but I hadn't met that model before. It was more disappointing than I could have ever—'cause it was like, "Well, how many of us have to die before you can make good on a promise?" As a public safety issue, we shouldn't feel like we have to travel across the Hudson in order to have safe spaces. It would be great for City Hall to say that they share that with us. In the face

of such a senseless murder, for your attitude to be, "When y'all get y'all's shit together, I'll sign off on it," disappointed me.

There's a limit to what can be accomplished through electoral politics. Particularly in a space with as extensive a history of political corruption as Newark. It really challenged me to look back at my favorite queers. At the June Dowell-Burtons. At Darnell Moore's, and at my friends and compatriots and fellow academics to say, "Well, it's not gonna come from City Hall. They'll sign off on what we do." I was able to get involved in a series of meetings with Ron Rice I think it was. The then Councilman, that led to the creation of that municipal—what is it? The LGBT commission. I say all that to say what I experienced as this dismissal on Cory Booker's behalf, I think strengthened my vision for how to approach social justice for queer folks and spaces like this. It's like, we have to do the agitating and then get them onboard, because even if they do take over the mantle, if they are not queer-identified, there's plenty that can get lost in translation. That's what that approach safeguards against.

I'm honored to have played a role in that moment in the history of queer Newark. I think that amazing things are happening and continue to happen for queer folks here in Newark. I hope to continue to be a part.

Lorna Ebner: Do you have a specific vision of how you think Newark should be, in terms of queer community? How do you think that gentrification is playing a part in that process?

Larry Lyons: Ugh!

Lorna Ebner: Sorry. Complicated question.

Larry Lyons: Great question. For the last four years prior to this year, I've been hired as a photographer to shoot Philly Pride, Philly Gay Pride. More appropriately, I think it's Philly Black Gay Pride, because several big

cities have a regular Pride and a Black Pride that whole Du Boisian double consciousness thing. “I’m gay, but differently.” Anyway, separate Pride. I do feel like their city does more. More signage, more banners, more support from City Hall. I’d like to see more support, yeah, from City Hall. I’d love to see the day where folks stop saying, “Oh, Newark has a Pride?” People seem shocked by that. I think elevating us from where we are **[01:50:00]** could just be a matter of a few good press releases and some street lamps with flags on them. I think that we should really advance that under this administration, ‘cause Lord knows what the next one will be.
My vision for queer Newark and the role that gentrification plays. What’s interesting is that historically I think gentrification has favored the queers, because everyone knows that it’s like, when you get artists and queers in, we raise property value. I think investing in Maker’s Village is—there’re gonna be emerging pockets of queerness in spaces that we weren’t represented before. I feel like we have cluster around Halsey Street maybe. Maybe clusters in other wards. The well-to-do gay homeowners in Forest Hill, to which I aspire to ascend very soon. Yeah.
I’d like to see a more expansive queer presence. I feel like, as with a lot of the development, that the gentrification means that it’s centered in the Central Ward. If you’re in the South Ward, your reality has nothing to do with the hoisting of a rainbow flag over City Hall. I’ll pass that everyday, and it’s symbolically resonant, but there are other parts of the city. There was some years back, a gay man was maybe soliciting sex in the park and was shot to death by a police officer. That shouldn’t happen, right? A gay couple was assaulted leaving a Britney Spears concert. Something at Prudential. Even workers at the NJCRI. Around the time that I was getting involved, they were facing violence so regularly, it wasn’t a thing. “Oh, well, yeah. Miguel got knocked out this week. It’s just what happened.”

Lorna Ebner: Yeah. They weren’t even releasing where their headquarters were, because they didn’t want people to know.

Larry Lyons: Yeah, and so that really impedes the delivery of services, right? In the sense that there's safe space. If that's in the Central Ward where the development is happening, where the dollars are being pumped, then you've got to imagine that the wards that enjoy less visibility and support need our attention and our organizing. I think if there's a vision for queer Newark that I'd like to see is that we are more connected in that the support and the safe spaces extend beyond the Central Ward.

Lorna Ebner: Well, thank you so much for doing this!

Larry Lyons: Thank you! I'm so glad to have done it. I didn't think I'd have anything to say. Now I have plenty to reflect upon.

Lorna Ebner: This is Lorna Ebner and Larry Lyons on June 15th, 2017, with the Queer Newark Oral History Project.

[End of Audio, 01:53:22]