Queer Newark Oral History Project
Interviewee: Aaron Frazier
Interviewer: Whitney Strub
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Whitney Strub: All right. We are on. This is Whitney Strub with the Queer Newark Oral History Project. I'm here with Aaron Frazier at the Newark LGBTQ Community Center. This is our fourth round. I want to thank you for your patience and time in going through all of this.

Aaron Frazier: No problem.

Whitney Strub: This round, we've talked about and we've decided, I mean, we're going to have a very specific theme here. We're going to talk about the history of HIV/AIDS in Newark and your experiences of it. Now, I just want to acknowledge going into this that, I mean, I'm approaching it really as a historian. I know your narrative is one who lived through this and is still living through this. I have a bunch of questions I want to ask. I also want to offer you the opportunity to set the stage with anything you want to say before I launch into my questions.

Aaron Frazier: Okay. For me, when HIV became prevalent, timewise, I'll say 1980, maybe '84, 1984. No, '80. We're gonna go with 1980. We was doing the clubs. We was partying. Also, during this particular time, HIV, far as those of us who were club heads—and I was a club head. Acid was my thing and mescaline. Give me a mescaline. I could sit and party with the best of 'em all night long.

We went during that time—we would do Zanzibar. We did Murphy's. You did First Choice. You had New York Better Days. You had The Garage. On the pier, you had Peter Rabbit's, Sneaker's, Keller's, the Nickel Bar, Club 77, which was in Jersey City off of—I want to say it's around Grove Street. That's what I remember, because it was actually in a apartment building, a residential. It was on the first floor, the club. Well, it was more of a bar. We called it a club.

I'm gonna give you another one. They used the term "tea dance." Now, I never knew what a damn tea dance was. I'm gonna be real honest, because my friend, Cornell, who was the bartender at Murphy, AKA Carlotta Ross, was the party animal. That's who I was always with. That bitch, we would be—would literally party. After she done worked at Murphy's, we hit all the clubs in New York. Then we'd end up at her house. Then she'd do a

little breakfast, brunch, whatever, whatever. Then we'd start doing the going to clubs again that afternoon. It was—

Whitney Strub: Wait. That's what the tea dance was, the whole cycle?

Aaron Frazier: The tea dance is basically for those who were clubbin', it was just a smaller version. It could've been a social setting of this nature but at somebody's house. You had music and a social—a real good time. These kids today will never know what a good time really meant. They will never know, because we didn't go through two-thirds of what they go through over nothin'. If we had a altercation with one another, it was something really fierce for you to even get into an altercation or one of your friends to come and join in.

Whitney Strub: Yeah. Wait. Did tea stand for anything? Was it just the letter T?

Aaron Frazier: Oh, I don't know.

Whitney Strub: Okay. It was just the letter, you think, or T-E-A, like—

Aaron Frazier: No. You would have to ask James about that. Well, James is talking about doing one. That's why when they explained it to me, I'm like, "Oh, okay." I said, "Cornell did that all the time," cause Bernie was here when we was talking. I said, "Well, I never knew what a tea dance was. Cornell did it all the time."

Whether or not we would—I remember one, it was some gospel show. We all the way Cornell's house. He done cooked brunch and everybody cocktails and sitting around watching this show come on the TV. We did it collectively. It was no incidents. Everybody just having a good time, enjoying one another's company. If it's like that, fine. That other crap, I can't get with.

During that particular time when people actually started dying, I was just—I don't know. I was coming to terms with things myself, different friends. It just was a trying time. A lot of times during that particular period, I hung by myself. Even though I knew a lot of people, I preferred to be by myself because a lot of times when I went cruising, I was by myself. Whatever I did, I was by myself. If I was in trouble or something, I knew I could call for people for help or whatever. Most times, stick to the—my thing. I stayed basically to myself. If I got in trouble, whatever the case may be.

I think the first person to pass for me was a guy that lived in my neighborhood when I came home from school from Virginia Union. He lived up the street from my mother. My mother talked about him. Then

one of my friends was talking about him. Then I finally met the person. I was like, “Oh, cool.”

He reminded me of my older brother who was murdered in Oakland, California. I took to him. He would give me odd jobs to help him out around the house or whatever. Then next thing you know, we hanging at the club. It was cute. Then he was goin’ with a reverend, same person who owned the house. I’m lookin’. I’m going like, “Okay. This is a bit too much information.”

Then the organist lived on the first floor. I’m going, “Okay. This is a lot of information.” I paid it. Then I don’t know. It’s like, just as things started looking good, James all of a sudden got sick. The organist got sick. The reverend got sick. Two of the people that the reverend was dealing with got sick. Never at that particular time putting any one thing together about why or what’s going on. People started dying.

I just looked at things. Oh, my god. All these people are dying. Okay, then I started backtracking on who I laid with, who I did, what I did and all of that. I’m going like this, “Well, so and so.” Then it’s like, the stroll here. All the kids from the stroll. All the kids from the stroll, certain ones that I was friends with started passing.

Ahmad, Mark. Oh, god. What is Mark’s last name? Well, Mark Page. He was from Orange Street. Miss Tiffany Tracy. Oh, my god. A lot of them I even forgot their names.

I was like, wow. Then I started going in more. I know I slept with the person that slept with Mark. I know I slept with the person that slept with Ahmad. I was like, “Oh, god.” I think it was one day we was at Murphy’s. Somebody else passed. I’m just saying, “Oh, my god.” I—

Whitney Strub: Wait. Somebody yelled what?

Aaron Frazier: Had died. Somebody else had died. It was like, at this time, it was maybe 5 to 10 people that died in the course of a week. I’m talkin’ about from Murphy’s. We’re not—

Whitney Strub: Wow.

Aaron Frazier: - even gonna talk about the stroll. By this time, I then looked. I said, “Bitch, take your ass to go get tested.” You could get the anonymous test at St. Michael’s. I went up to St. Michael’s to get tested. I saw the two other kids there that I knew from Murphy’s. We didn’t say nothin’ to each other. When that idiot gave me a number, ‘bout the way how we are right now, this was a waiting area.

Whitney Strub: Okay. It's an open area with people—

Aaron Frazier: Right.

Whitney Strub: - who can overhear?

Aaron Frazier: It was no discretion. It was no confidentiality. You gonna give me this. The only thing was you gave me a card with a number with my status. You let me walk out of there. Didn't know whether or not I was gonna jump off the roof, whatever the case may be.

Whitney Strub: Sorry. He just handed you a card, and that was it? There was no conversation?

Aaron Frazier: There was no conversation.

Whitney Strub: Whoa.

Aaron Frazier: I left there. What is the word I want to say? Shock value, I'll just say. What is that word I'm lookin' for? It's what we do psychically when we've been traumatized. We accept it. We move on. We never really deal with it. Then when you real—well, that's what I did. I continued.

I then got into a relationship. Actually, it was two. The first relationship was just a plaything. The second relationship was—it was also a plaything. It turned out to be—we were together for seven years after that. He died from AIDS. He was also a intravenous drug user. He didn't disclose any of the information. I never disclosed that I had had the test.

Whitney Strub: Just to be clear, so the very first time you were tested, it came back positive?

Aaron Frazier: Yes. That was when I was 20.

Whitney Strub: When would that have been?

Aaron Frazier: 1980.

Whitney Strub: '80?

Aaron Frazier: Mm-hmm.

Whitney Strub: I didn't think the test was around until a few years later.

Aaron Frazier: That's what makes it really ugly, because St. Michael's was the only place you can go. St. Michael's at that time, you heard of the AIDS word. You heard of the horror stories. That's where I had to go to be tested. When I say I went, and I was like, I was scared. I was just perplexed, because as a young person, I wasn't sure. I just knew I needed to get tested.

During that particular time, I just stayed to myself even more. I became more just, I won't say a recluse. I was still on the social settings. I just stayed to myself. When I got into the relationship and found out that he was positive—well, he wasn't positive. He had full-blown but never disclosed that.

One of my friends from the neighborhood, she worked on the floor. I said to her, I said, "Well, girl, he won't tell me what's going on. I need to know what the fuck is going on, honey." We at White Castle's on Elizabeth Avenue. I'm ordering me some burgers. They're ordering the burgers. We had just left the club. She said to me—she said, "Aaron, just go get yourself checked out."

At that point, I just looked. I was mad. I was pissed. I didn't fall to pieces in the beginning. For a minute, I just kept on going. Me and him were still together till he started doing stupid stuff. I'll just say from his deathbed, he tried to correct all the wrongs he did, the stealing, the cheatin', tried, said he'd offer me money.

I'm looking at him going like this, "Child, I told you. I don't need shit from you. I didn't need shit from you. That's the way we're gonna leave it." I won't say that he didn't love me. That he really did. His whole family, nieces and nephews, we developed a good relationship. Me and his sisters along with his brothers, we became good friends even on the aftermath of his death.

The sad part about when he died, it was just it was at the same exact time I had got—when I say I got caught up in becoming a workaholic. I was doing three shifts at the bank just keepin' my mind focused and off of what was what. When he died, they was doing my—I was in the process where my money in the escrow. I can't really spend money. I was closing on the condo. They had just turned me down.

The mortgage company had first turned me down. Then somehow, somebody referred me to another mortgage company which accepted whatever the particulars are for the closing. Instead of closing in October, I closed in January, something like that. His death, it was like they didn't have insurance. I knew somebody in his family had insurance. I knew the trick of his wife of his had insurance.

Whitney Strub: Oh, so he was married?

Aaron Frazier: Yeah, he was married. That's my other downfall. I'm always attracting married men. I've been, I would say in the past, at least I'd say 10 years, trying to break that cycle. I'm like, "No, no, no, no, no, no. I just can't." I try. I really tried to break that cycle.

When he died, I was gonna go up to the casket. His younger brother said, "No, Aaron. You can't go up there because they didn't do a good job on him 'cause they were saying something about blood was still by his mouth and stuff like that." I said, "Okay." I just stayed in the back.

I've *[unintelligible 00:17:21]* the nieces and the nephews, because I said, "All the money that he stole from me to give to y'all." I know he did. I said, "Y'all gonna go to the graveyard and buy or steal a bunch of flowers to put up there on him." I said, "That's my thing, not y'all's." I left it alone.

Whitney Strub: Did his family acknowledge that he was gay?

Aaron Frazier: Oh, yeah. They didn't have a problem. His moms had died way before that. His whole family knew. It's just that I just took it a different level because he was a workaholic as well. I just thought that he deserved some flowers. Regardless of his bad behavior towards me, he deserved some flowers because he did a lot of good with his family. I just didn't get that.

I didn't go to the repast or whatever you want to call it with their family. I went with my best friend from Jersey City. He took me. I said, "Bitch, let's go somewhere and get a drink." I said, "I want to sit at a bar. I mean, I want to buy a beer." We sit down in a park or something and talked. That's what I did. I tried to keep a rapport with his family. I really did for the most part, because there was so much stuff going on.

By this time, I'm in the house. I'm in my condo in Society Hill. Still doing the clubs. I see a couple of the kids that I know, the Ballrooms Scene. I'm going like, "What the hell is a ballroom?" Then it's like, all right. I'll go. When I started getting involved with Miss Patti Pendovis Labelle—her original name is Maurice Alexander. She would do shows and functions at Burke's Lounge on Bradford Place. I would go and help out.

I was also friends with the bar—if it was a bar, any bar, I'm friends the bartender and the owner. I could all the time. It was cute. During this particular period, I then joined the House of Labelle. As we have a function, she has a function going on, and again the kids are dying. They're dying quicker in this particular scenario than before.

Whitney Strub: When is this, ballpark?

Aaron Frazier: I would say ’92, 1992. They’re really dying. It’s just a sad scenario. I remember, we were at the Mini Ball. Actually, it wasn’t even the Mini Ball. It was my damn birthday party. My birthday party, Patti had got different people to perform and whatnot. At this particular time, this is when James Credle and Don Ransom came to the Mini Ball, well, to the function. They was talking about—I forget the organization name that they had back then.

Whitney Strub: Was that Project Fire?

Aaron Frazier: No, this is before Project Fire. I’m not even gonna try to rack my brain. They had another name that they had back then. When I say to you the information that they brought, I was like, “What the hell are they talking about?” That’s all I kept saying. Then I think I was probably one of the only ones who was questioning it and looking up what they were saying, because I say this to say if it wasn’t for James Credle and Don Ransom, I probably wouldn’t be here today. I would’ve died with the rest of them, because during that particular process and that particular time, far as the stigma that was attached, people was isolating.

People were taking one another’s medicine. At that particular time, only thing they had was the AZT. It was something that came out maybe a couple years later, the D-something something, because I got it filled. I got the prescription filled, never took it. Just said, “I’ll just put in the closet,” and would not look at it like that and keep on moving. I never took it.

Whitney Strub: Why not?

Aaron Frazier: It just didn’t sit right with me. It just didn’t sit right. I followed my sixth sense. Even though I was unaware of the particulars of it, it just—I had to let the sixth sense kick in. That’s another thing that, I guess, keeps me here. When the sixth sense is speaking, a lot of times, I have to sit in silence to listen whatever the particular messages are. I have to allow that.

During that particular process, from that point, I want to say—I guess I’m jumping up a little bit. After James and them did their spiel, next thing you know, they were doing the safe sex parties. This was through Newark Community Health Center. Project Fire was housed in Newark Community Health Center at 741, their office in the basement.

Whitney Strub: 741?

Aaron Frazier: Broadway. Unfortunately, they only was getting, say, $100,000 for the program itself. Out of $100,000, Newark Community Health Center was taking anywhere to 15 to 30 percent of 100.

Whitney Strub: As overhead or—

Aaron Frazier: That would be for their administration costs, for them being the fiduciary whatever.

Whitney Strub: Gotcha.

Aaron Frazier: A lot of times, it could have done better. It didn't. They just whatever. Some people didn't get paid for—I remember hearing Don. He didn't get paid for two to three months.

Whitney Strub: Wow.

Aaron Frazier: He still did the job. Other people got paid. I came on after them.

Whitney Strub: Is it okay if I pause you there and go back in time a bit—

Aaron Frazier: Sure.

Whitney Strub: - and ask some of these historian questions, and then use that point to return to and move forward?

Aaron Frazier: Okay.

Whitney Strub: Because one thing, I just, I wasn't completely clear. You sort of narrated this. Just to be more specific, when was the first time you were aware of AIDS?

Aaron Frazier: In actuality, the first time I was aware of AIDS—

Whitney Strub: How did you first become aware? I mean, was it through a friend, through a newspaper?

Aaron Frazier: Actually when Mr. Rock Hudson died.

Whitney Strub: Oh, really? Okay.

Aaron Frazier: When Rock Hudson died, and the spiel—the spiel that I remember that sat with me. When Rock Hudson died, it became national news. When it was affecting the way CDC and people were dealing with it, they stigmatized it because in the beginning, because it was only affecting people of color and drug users, people who had sexual practices that they—the society

didn't agree with. At that particular time, they didn't care. They allowed the epidemic to spread to the point until it got to their friend Rock Hudson.

Then they found out that it was other people. I forget who the particular person was who slept with Rock Hudson. There was supposed to be a book that was coming out behind that. The book was supposed to be telling—it was like a tell-all for those on the down low or whatever the particulars were from back then. That's when it became more prevalent. Then when it really hit society was when the little boy, Ryan White, died.

Whitney Strub: Right. Rock Hudson dies in 1985. By that point, had you already lost friends or not?

Aaron Frazier: Yeah. I've lost so many of 'em that I feel bad sometimes because I forget their names. I've forgotten their names. Sometimes I actually sit in awe trying to remember their names because they were important people to me at that particular time. They were good people. They were good people. It just baffles me, because over here at the park, the park had its—this whole—

Whitney Strub: Which? The Washington Park?

Aaron Frazier: Washington Park. This stroll area here, if you were received in here, people looked out for you, your back. Even when the people were coming to rob people, to stick up people, whatever the case may be, certain people looked out for you while you was down here. You always had to have somebody watching your back when you caught yourself out here hustlin'. Yeah, back then you needed to have alliances and friends. I didn't befriend a lot of them. I befriended the ones who I knew that if I'm in a situation we in, at least both of us gonna go down, we gonna go down fighting.

During that particular period, it—oh, god. 'Cause now you got me thinking. I miss Eno. She was a fashionista. She lived up in Prince Street. That's Miss Eno, 'cause Ahmad—I'm trying to think. Ahmad went after Eno. It was so many different deaths.

Whitney Strub: I guess one thing I'm not—I'm trying to understand, were friends of yours dying before you understood that it was AIDS? Was it the other way around?

Aaron Frazier: Combination of both, because I really didn't understand it. I didn't even start going—I'm trying. I still went to New York. When I would go to the Village, I didn't know nothing about it. I didn't hear that. I went with a couple of the younger kids from North Newark. I just enjoyed the camaraderie.

I didn't get with a lot of the New York kids. I even tried to date somebody in New York. It just didn't sit well with me 'cause I was uncertain. I've always had a fear of New York City, which was a major part of it. Even when I was—I met somebody. We met at Better Days.

Now, that was a ugly night, 'cause even when we met at Better Days, I hadn't seen him in a while. When I was with a blockhead, we in Better Days, and I see him. I'm like, "Ooh." Then my friend comes over. I said, "I gotta—" As we're leaving, we get into a altercation down the street. This hooligan pulls a knife out on me. I'm like, "Ah, boy." New York just did a lot of trauma to me personally. I just didn't get it. It wasn't meant for me.

I want to say one of the first—also one of the first people was [redacted] 00:32:06 from First Choice. He used to look out after all the other kids who had died. He was the first one that I knew of that had—was HIV positive. He was on his deathbed. He was on his deathbed. That bitch outlived all of them. He took care of Miss Corinne, took care of Portia, took care of Patti. Just looking out for those going through. He's done that since I've known him.

Whitney Strub: Yeah. What happened? I mean, he was on his deathbed, and he just miraculously came back or what?

Aaron Frazier: I'll just say somebody was praying for him.

Whitney Strub: Wow.

Aaron Frazier: Literally when he got it, and when he started healing, this is one of the main bitches who helped take care a lot of those not here today, because a lot of them, their families, once they found out that they were HIV positive, again, the misconception HIV positive that—during that particular time, they all categorized them as AIDS patients. They wasn't. He broke stigma and treated them kindly and lovingly, each and every one of 'em. Even some people took advantage of him. He still didn't stop caring for people in need. He still do it today.

Whitney Strub: Yeah. We need to interview Craig.

Aaron Frazier: Oh, yeah.

Whitney Strub: I met him when we were interviewing Pucci. Tell me a little more about the families of your friends and how they handled—

Aaron Frazier: Oh.

Whitney Strub: - this.

Aaron Frazier: It was weird. All I can say, it was weird, because all the time—I'm gonna just speak about Patti. Patti was the mother of the House of Labelle. Her family, we were cool. We come up together. These were her aunts and her cousins. I never knew her mother. I only knew of her mother. Church woman, yada, yada, yada, but was unaccepting to the fact that her child was what it was.

He was a transgender from male to female. He did hormones. She was unaccepting of that. She didn't recognize him as that. He is also a person who's doing all of this when upon his death—I'm gonna just say this—he, she whatever, had the same doubts and inner hate for himself on his deathbed. That really mentally messed me up.

Whitney Strub: The doubts being about their own gender, you mean, or what?

Aaron Frazier: The whole thing, because when it comes to—the church at times tend to utilize—some churches, let me rephrase that, utilize a person's death as a directive. In other words, they're reflecting upon, "Well, if I didn't do this, maybe I wouldn't be here." It was nothing like that. It was nothing like that. What happened happened. Patti probably would have still been here but for the sole purpose of the bitch didn't want to go to a damn doctor. She was taking other people's medicine.

I'm going on assumption. I still could be wrong. From looking back to what was and knowing what is, that what probably happened was the fact that you developed a certain resistance to the drug, period. When it was finally prescribed for you, your system wasn't able to deal with it. That's my particular take on that. Her family and a lot of other people who died, they just—when it came to gay or even with the virus, "Oh, we don't want to talk about that." I'm like, "Why?"

I know right now of several women that I've come up with who, I looked up to these women. I'm told, "Well, you know she died from the virus." I'm like, "Really?" The family talk. I'm like, "Why they so scared to talk about it?" That's the stigma that's still attached today, because the ignorance of not telling the truth misleads people like as if she lived the perfect life.

Not saying she didn't live a perfect life. There were some mistakes along the way. We all makes those. To put yourself above a mistake is really like saying you're a perfect person. That ain't so in this world, not in this world.

Whitney Strub: Yeah. Okay, so wait. I've got so many follow up questions. We'll never get through all of them. I mean, just as a ballpark figure, so people understand the scope of and scale of this, I mean, ballpark, how many friends would you say you lost over the years?

Aaron Frazier: Ooh, I'm a say close to 500.

Whitney Strub: Five-hundred. Wow.

Aaron Frazier: Yeah. Some of it I really don't dwell on because then I get emotional, because when it happened, again, me being a loner, I didn't believe in sharing my emotional downpour or my emotional feelings with people. Unfortunately, some people got to see the effects of—quite a few people. Actually, a third of the people who have died who were my friends, I would say a third of what I'm going through today I wouldn't be going through. That says a lot. My friend Cornell, which is Bernie's cousin, which he worked at the Murphy's, was a good—when I say we've had our ups and downs. Somehow this particular bitch just knew me like, "Bitch, don't stay over there by yourself. Bring your ass on over here. Come on. You're spending the night, bitch." Shit like that. He would say that, "Oh, so and so. Oh, don't worry about that. I'll put them out. You got the couch." He would do this on the regular.

Just so many good people. Even I even look back at some of the guys that liked me. I had no clue. I'm like, "You didn't say nothin'. What you want? How am I supposed to know?" It happened. It happened. It's just sad. Just sad.

Just a sad period for, I'll say for the 12 years that I lived in denial of my own status, becoming a workaholic at the bank. It wasn't until I got laid off that I realized that I was in a state of denial for as long as I was. I literally went into a state of depression. It just was a ugly scenario. Exhausted the little funds and then my savings and 401k, robbing Peter to pay Paul. I remember it wasn't until when the damn—the lights was turned off, my water was being shut off, and I tried to keep the phone on, 'cause I said, "I need to be able to communicate with somebody at least."

At that point, I was like, this shit gotta end. Next thing I knew, William Bell and a couple other friends come knocking at the door, said, "Bitch, you're getting out of this house. You gotta deal with it." That's when I literally started getting involved with the HIV work.

Whitney Strub: Okay. You bottomed out. That's when you pivoted.

Aaron Frazier: Yes.

Whitney Strub: Is that when they foreclosed on your house, too?

Aaron Frazier: Oh, no. I kept the house until 2003. At that point, I just said—I weighed the pros and cons. I said I'm not really workin'. If I go back to work full-time, they're not gonna pay me what I'm worth. It's not gonna really make anything better. I'll just opt out. I let it go.

Whitney Strub: Okay, gotcha. I want to come back to that topic of denial and how you're dealing with this. Let me just ask a few of these backup questions first about the context here in Newark. What was the city doing about the AIDS crisis? I mean, we've got Ken Gibson and then Sharpe James.

Aaron Frazier: Oh, I'm so glad you did go there.

Whitney Strub: Okay, yeah. Do tell.

Aaron Frazier: Now, the insult about when HIV and AIDS was impacting the city in the magnitude that it was, the City of Newark abandoned, the Department of Health abandoned, didn't want to deal with Ryan White or HIV services whatsoever. They put 'em on North 6th Street.

Whitney Strub: Explain that so that people without a context know what you mean.

Aaron Frazier: They didn't want to house it in the Department of Health.

Whitney Strub: Okay. You mean the bureaucracy that administers the funds?

Aaron Frazier: Correct. They didn't want to house it in the 110 Williams Street. They told them. They okayed them to have that space there. For years, that was the particulars. Again, greedy people, for whatever reason, Newark being the epicenter of the disease itself, and it still comes—the money has to come through the City of Newark. For whatever reason, the powers that be, Union County all of a sudden is the governorship or the housing of what was and supposed to be in the City of Newark—is really a slap in the face. Nobody's saying nothing.

I went to a meeting and did a public statement, just what I'm telling you. They say that they got a mandate from Herser to be reacclimated with this Department of Health in 110 Williams Street. For whatever reason, the Department, they were looking for space to really house them. The bullshit was Union County just want the money and wanted to be housed here. Where they're housed at in Union County is a horror. You talkin' about Ryan White clients walking through a hood. There's not good transportation to and from. They justified it. They think it's good.

Whitney Strub: Yeah. Wait. By the time we have Ryan White money, we're talking the early '90s. What about before that, like under Gibson? I mean, did the mayors acknowledge the AIDS crisis in Newark, would you say or not?

Aaron Frazier: Hmm. I'm a say no.

Whitney Strub: Yeah. What about there was a group? They've left some papers over at Newark Public Library, the Newark People With AIDS Coalition. It looked like it was only around for a few years in the late '80s. Was that something you were aware of at all at the time or involved with?

Aaron Frazier: Say that again.

Whitney Strub: It was the Newark People With AIDS Coalition.

Aaron Frazier: No. That's before me.

Whitney Strub: Okay. It had Derek Winans. He was one of the leaders.

Aaron Frazier: I'm gonna put it—I don't know who he was. Again, what occurred in the City of Newark, NJCRI [North Jersey Community Research Initiative] comes out of ACT UP in New York, because all the—

Whitney Strub: Oh, really?

Aaron Frazier: - other people in New York went. GMAC was born, GMAD [Gay Men of African Descent], Harlem United. All these different entities evolved from ACT UP. Newark, we got NJCRI. In the beginning, all their particular target population—one of the reasons that I—wait a minute. I've got to think about this. I don't even care.

In the beginning, their primary initiative was dealing with those who were drug addicts, who were living with the virus. That was their target populace. It loses some of its luster. I can say they hired some good people. When they actually started dealing with people from the community who knows the particular plights of individuals and who want to make a difference in helping, that's when their particular dynamics changed.

Whitney Strub: Oh, okay. Let me just see if I got this clear. They're originally not doing LGBT outreach. They're just focused on IV drug users?

Aaron Frazier: Correct.

Whitney Strub: What's the ACT UP connection? Was it actually members of ACT UP who founded NJCRI? Was it—

Aaron Frazier: No.

Whitney Strub: It was—

Aaron Frazier: Bob Orr and Brian McGovern were part of ACT UP. They started NJCRI.

Whitney Strub: Okay. I didn't realize that. Were they from Newark, or were they from New York and they came here?

Aaron Frazier: They're from New York.

Whitney Strub: Oh, really?

Aaron Frazier: They weren't from here.

Whitney Strub: Oh, okay. I did not know that. That's interesting. Before that, was there AIDS activism in Newark that you were aware of?

Aaron Frazier: No.

Whitney Strub: Huh. Why not? I mean, why do you think that's the case?

Aaron Frazier: At that particular time, I would say it was the stigma around it, the talk. It was really never a conversation. During that particular time, I would say the conversation wasn't even ready for the conversation.

Whitney Strub: Okay, gotcha.

Aaron Frazier: The powers that be could—who could make a difference wasn't making a difference. It's easier in Newark, specifically when you're dealing with people of color, is something that may exist, we don't talk about it in public. We'll deal with it discreetly. I would say they may not have made public acknowledgement. There might have been services somewhere exactly. I do know that at the time UMDNJ was doing a lot of research. They was doing a lot of bloodwork.

I remember my mother telling me of a friend of ours mother who we come up with who was part of them. She was doing these—I just assume the research because they were—they covered her expenses, whatever the particulars were. Her funeral, they even covered that. Then my issue with them as in during the beginning, you did that. Now for research, you minimize the value of your—their prospective people. That is a problem for me.

Whitney Strub: What do you mean by that?

Aaron Frazier: In other words, as a person with the virus, if I go—if I needed extra change, you—there was a time you could go to UMDNJ. You could get almost a hundred dollars for a vial of blood. Not now. You lucky if you get 25 for 2. It's horrible just the treatment and the value, no, it's just not heard of. You got me.

Also, I joined the research CAB [Community Advisory Board] of Rutgers. One of my things with them, I joined it for the reason that we could make a difference. They have a specific directive. It was conflictive to me. I'm like, "Wait a minute. I thought y'all do—we supposed to be doing this and this."

I'm like, "If we're in the City of Newark, and if the number one killer of people is diabetes, why are we talking about HIV protocol? Then y'all don't want to do nothing with diabetics or in the City of Newark? Can you somebody explain that to me?" I'm still waiting. They got upset with me, because I haven't—I have not felt when I joined that there's—my presence, my participating has made a difference. It's one thing not to get paid. It's another thing when you feel less than. You don't have no self-worth.

They did a collaborative meeting with Columbia University. They have Ryan HIV positive clients. We did the meeting over there. I went. I'm looking at them. They're on the same CAB as us. They're over in New York. They're getting a MetroCard. They're getting $20 cash. I'll come back over here. They get mad at me because I'm questioning them.

I'm like, "What the hell is going on here? You mean to tell me we go all the way over to New York, and you don't—we're supposed to go to New York for a bus ticket?" I say, "Have you lost your mind?" They're looking at me.

I'm like, "I don't get it. Y'all mean to tell me y'all justified to get food when it's a research grant. They gotta have food. Y'all don't give them incentive. They're gonna tell you some bullshit. Girl, you got the wrong one. I do consulting. I know what goes on. You got the wrong one."

I said, "I just can't." It's like, but they have a clique. I don't see nothing. There's nothing of significance that they can really say that they do. It's that.

Whitney Strub: Yeah. No, that is. I don't want to—okay, so let me just finish my political questions and then come back to your trajectory from denial toward that. The only two other political questions I had, I was just wondering if during the '80s and in the early '90s what you thought of Ronald Reagan

and the first George Bush and their responses to the AIDS crisis. Was that something you were engaged with at the time?

Aaron Frazier: Okay. Repeat that.

Whitney Strub: Well, just your thoughts on Ronald Reagan and George Bush, because this crisis is happening.

Aaron Frazier: I'm a say this. During that particular time, that was when I was coming back. I went to Virginia Union University. At the particular time when Ronald Reagan got in, I think I'm 19 now. When he got in, I'm at Virginia Union.

You know the first year being away from home, kids gonna be kids. I'm gonna let that go. Then when I really get into the studying habits and following up, Ronald Reagan cuts our state grants that we can take to Virginia and put me in such—I put my best foot forward doing the schoolwork. I wasn't even allowed to take my finals as a result of what—

Whitney Strub: Wow.

Aaron Frazier: - he did. For me with him, it's just I saw problems. I really was never one to get into the political aspect 'cause I really—I could actually say that for whatever reason, my parents protected us from that. The way I come up, comic books were my politics. Comic books, anything that didn't have to deal with reality was my reality, because when you deal with reality itself on the magnitude that it is, a lot of times I was hurt. A lot of times I didn't do well. That was a problem.

Politically far as in Newark, well, when during that time, Ken Gibson was mayor. I had just won Youth of the Year. Well, I won Boy of the Year for the North Ward Boys Club. Because I had just turned 18, they changed it from Boy to Youth at that particular time. I had became Youth of the Year, mayor for a day, and sat at the—in Gibson's office—

Whitney Strub: Oh, really?

Aaron Frazier: - and all of that. Oh, yeah.

Whitney Strub: Do you have pictures of that?

Aaron Frazier: I do at my mother's house.

Whitney Strub: That would be fun to include in the archive. That's cool. Well, so okay. Just one more national question. One thing I think you're suggesting is that Newark as a city was not adequately dealing with the AIDS crisis because

of a lot of denial. What about when Magic Johnson came out as being HIV positive? Did that make a difference here at all? Did that make a difference to you personally or to the City of Newark? I mean, either.

Aaron Frazier: Personally, it didn't make a difference to me at all 'cause it wasn't like I was getting any of his money. It wasn't like he did anything specific for the City of Newark. He may have done messages like, ugh. That's just like when Oprah came to the City of Newark. She gave money to various organizations. Sadly, she didn't give to the proper organizations.

You gave to Integrity. Integrity has a history of they're at the four corners of where once they sold drugs. They're still making money where they sold drugs. That in itself, but you gave money to them like they're doing such a big magnitude. How many of their participants are from the City of Newark? When a Newark resident who is ready for treatment, he or she got to go the hell away from here, and 9 times out of 10, which means they're not gonna get the treatment.

Yeah, I have a problem with them just randomly doing for specific people. Magic Johnson and whatever her name is, she came. She went to the Metropolitan. She did a presentation over at Metropolitan. Metropolitan, which is a bunch of snooty Judies, they give money. They're politically connected. In all honesty, they don't do shit for nobody who don't go to their damn church.

Whitney Strub: Yeah, so okay. That's a resounding no for Magic Johnson meaning much to you. Do you think it meant much to Newarkers more broadly because he was straight and a hero? I mean, kind of like Rock Hudson, it was a little bit of a wakeup call nationally.

Aaron Frazier: Well, it may have been a wakeup call. It's not like his money is making a difference. He hasn't put no programs here in the City of Newark, none that I know of. If they exist, it's on a hush hush significance.

Whitney Strub: Oh, okay. Well then let's go back to your story of reacting to your test, the first HIV test you take. You said you go into denial.

Aaron Frazier: Yeah, because at the time, even though I was a hustler, and I was out there being promiscuous, I used condoms.

Whitney Strub: Oh, even before?

Aaron Frazier: During that before the testing, I was doing condoms, because I knew I was putting myself at risk. It was like, if I had a john, "Oh, yeah, child. You use condoms." My problem happened when I caught myself in a committed relationship, or it's like a regular jumpoff. That's when the shit

hit. It was like I could actually pinpoint to two people that I dealt with on a regular basis who possibly could've infected me.

Then I got away from that, because I said—I started evaluating it more whereas I knew I did more. Specifically, if I was—went to the bar, and I came—I didn't always have condoms in my pocket. I don't get into the blame game. I take ownership for my wrongdoings because I put others and myself at risk. Would I do it again? I probably would have second thoughts. I'd probably be a little bit more cautious. Now I'll leave that there.

Whitney Strub: Yeah. You didn't tell people you were positive yet at that point?

Aaron Frazier: Hm-mmm. No.

Whitney Strub: Nobody?

Aaron Frazier: No.

Whitney Strub: How long did that last?

Aaron Frazier: Actually, no. In actuality, only person that I told at that particular time—no, I didn't, because for a while I kept telling my mother, "Oh, girl. Nothing happened, girl." My mother knew because she knew me. She knew my emotional state.

At that particular time, I was going. Even though I did the test at St. Michael's, I then went to my doctor, school doctor at East Lawrence General. The doctor said, "You're positive. Whatever you're doing, it's working for you. I don't know how to treat it. You need to take care of yourself," and left it at that.

Whitney Strub: Yeah, so I guess one question I have is at that point for a lot of people, an HIV positive result did mean you were likely to die, right, I mean, to advance to AIDS and die?

Aaron Frazier: Correct.

Whitney Strub: I mean, did you think that's what was going to happen to you?

Aaron Frazier: In all honesty, in my 12 years of denial, yes, I did. I even went as far as, in my 12 years of denial, I literally was putting myself in high risk situations. I literally walked up to guys, didn't know 'em from a can of paint. If he was taking a pee, I walked over and touched. I was doing crazy shit.

It's like, well, I'm gonna die any damn way. Might as well just go out with a bang. Nothing happened. Nothing happened. When I finally, after the 12 years of denial, I come to terms with I'm here for a reason. What that particular reason is, I don't know. I'm gonna do what needs to be done.

Whitney Strub: Yeah. During those 12 years, were you receiving medical treatment or—

Aaron Frazier: Oh, no, no, no.

Whitney Strub: No. You were—

Aaron Frazier: I was still carrying on. I think if I—looking back and from the information of what I do know, I do have the particular gene that doesn't progress to AIDS.

Whitney Strub: Can you explain that for the record?

Aaron Frazier: I have the actual gene. I'm in a long-term study at National Institute for Health, which I'm a long-term survivor nonprogressor. I don't progress. I will never progress to an AIDS diagnosis. Unfortunately, I, from me reflecting on what I did, I may have put myself in more—when I was doing and in the state of denial—I put myself in more risk than need be and might've damaged myself, because whatever the damage was or whatever the damage is, you're talking about I'm 38 years now being positive, 3 years on medication. Whatever it was, it's just starting to catch up with me, so whatever.

Whitney Strub: Yeah. When did doctors recognize that, the genetic aspect?

Aaron Frazier: Actually, I saw some information. I've been a part of this study since 2009.

Whitney Strub: Oh, so it wasn't until then that—

Aaron Frazier: Yes.

Whitney Strub: For quite some time, it just seemed like a miracle that you weren't getting sicker? Is that—

Aaron Frazier: I wasn't getting sick. Nothing was going on. Only thing that happened that really was bad for me for when I got herpes, I—it was, again, one of them little heydays, a little hot and bothered. I didn't look at the dick. I just let them do what they do. Then when it's over, and I'm looking at the dick, and I was like, "Oh, shit. I'm in trouble."

From that point on, I knew. The thing about early on stages of herpes, you—there are no real tests to conclusively give you that diagnosis. I had to wait, I want to say five years before. It wasn't in Jersey. I went to New York to participate in one of their studies. That's when they found out from their studies, the way that their makeup is over there, that I had herpes. Jersey still doesn't have the test.

Whitney Strub: Oh, when was that?

Aaron Frazier: Oh, god. I'll say, well, I'm gonna just generalize. Early 2000, because when I started—when I went over to New York, it was at the chest place or Chest Clinic over there. I went over there for the money. It was like they was giving $25 for the test, another $25 for the interview, then another. I was like, "Ooh, that's change." That's why I went. It was just typically about the money.

When I switched from East Orange, when the doctor said that he couldn't do nothing, I started going to Beth Israel. Somebody said to go to Beth Israel. I went over there. Fortunately, I knew Dominic Varsilone who was the nurse practitioner for the clinic. He helped me through some of it because I had met one of his friends at one of the groups that I went to. He suggested it. I went over there. I was like, "Okay." They made me feel comfortable. Dominic was keeping me abreast of what to ask and different things of that nature, which made it even better. Beth Israel is where I've been getting my treatment since.

Whitney Strub: Okay. How rare is your genetic composition that prevents the onset?

Aaron Frazier: In the beginning, in 2009, I was 1 of 64 in the nation.

Whitney Strub: Wow.

Aaron Frazier: It has grown since then. The study is still going on. I go actually June 1st for the treatment. It's a thing they—it's called AFreezes, which is—

Whitney Strub: Wait. What?

Aaron Frazier: AFreezes, which is the procedure that they do, is similar to that of dialysis. I have a shunt going. It's on. It's like one going in one arm, another one going in another arm and just pulling blood out. It's taking out all the white cells and putting it back in.

It's a mental thing because I have to really prepare. In the beginning, I initially—they only did one. Then they wanted to speed up the process. Then they did the two. Mentally, it just does something to you because you can't—for I'd say about an hour and a half, you can't move. If you

gotta go to the bathroom, you can't get up. You have to really condition yourself mentally to deal with that.

Whitney Strub: Yeah. Is it physically draining, too? Is it more just psychological?

Aaron Frazier: More psychological. The only thing they suggest you do to make sure you're hydrated.

Whitney Strub: Oh, sure.

Aaron Frazier: Very hydrated. What has made it good for me for the past four years, I met a friend that comes from Baton Rouge. Him and I try to—what has helped, we do the treatment, the thing, the procedure together at the same time. Now, what I found out—'cause we normally would have been going. I would have been going—I would have been probably in May. With 45 [Donald Trump] in office, he done halted staff hiring. They're understaffed,—

Whitney Strub: Wow.

Aaron Frazier: - the people that does the procedure. They said, "Well, you can't—we can't do y'all on a Monday," 'cause we would try to get there on a Monday. I'm literally going out on a Friday to have the procedure—I mean, on a Thursday to have the procedure done on a Friday. I just don't like the whole traffic, 'cause I go down on the train. I went down on a plane one time, a couple of times. It's just too much trouble.

The kids in Newark know me. I don't look at my bag. I throw everything in the bag. I'm just going like, "Okay." Go through. "Oh, that's Miss Oona Chow. Let her through."

I gets down to DC. Coming back, they didn't want to accept my ID. They didn't want to—I had lotion and cream. They said, "Oh, no. This gotta go." I'm like, "You look more like a damn terrorist than I do. What kinda shit is this?"

Oh, it was just horrible. Then the girl who was the TSA agent, she said she wanted to let me have it. "Oh, we gonna make him delayed." I'm like, "You think you hurting me? You gotta do the damn job, stupid."

Whitney Strub: Wow, yeah. That's obnoxious. It's at Johns Hopkins?

Aaron Frazier: National Institute for Health in Bethesda, Maryland.

Whitney Strub: Okay. Right on. Okay. Do you have the group at 5:30 today? [Aaron led a gay Black men's group that met at the LGBTQ Community Center where the interview transpired]

Aaron Frazier: Yes.

Whitney Strub: Oh, okay. I'm just watching the clock. I really want to hear, before we run out of time, if that's all right with you—

Aaron Frazier: Oh, sure.

Whitney Strub: - I mean, I want to hear what the process of coming out of denial then. I mean, you've suggested that bottoming out a little was part of it and maybe that James, and Don, and Project Fire played a role. Can you explain how you managed to come out of denial about your status?

Aaron Frazier: Coming out of denial for me, I knew I was here for a purpose. Particularly what that purpose was I didn't know. When Patti died, I knew she—I should've succeeded her as mother of the House of Labelle. She for the longest, until I had gave up the Verizon [?] and the house, for the longest, I had a message on my voicemail where she said, "Bitch, you will never be mother. I don't want you to be mother. I don't want nobody else to succeed me as mother, and da-da-da-da. I want the house closed."

I kept playing it for people. I said, "Y'all need to hear this crazy bitch." I said it just like that. I said, "You know what, I'm going to respect her wishes," because when I initially was starting my own house, and we were ready to walk the ball, and it was the Fire Ball. When Patti came out, and she looked like—she just looked horrible. Just to keep face, this is supposed to be my debut of my house, I told them, I said, "I know what we're supposed to do. For today, we're gonna be Labelles and support Patti." The Ballroom went up and everything.

At that particular point, I knew I needed to be involved with whatever particular strategy when it comes to Ballroom. Information, education needed to be there. That's what I try to continue to do. Even though I'm partial to Ballroom, I try to be the voice of reason for the disenfranchised, the ones who won't step up, the ones who won't say nothin', the ones who won't get involved, because somebody has to speak up for them. It has to be a continuance. That's what got me out of denial. That's what gave me the courage to keep going strong. The more I became involved, the more I became empowered to tell my story and more comfortable with little to no problem.

In the beginning, I was cautious because I dealt with a lot of married men. I dealt with a lot of DL people, I mean, people that were—I could literally,

if I had said names, could've been taken out. Yeah, that was part of, I think, my whole denial piece of being what it was, because I had to process it. I was concerned with family. Not my immediate family, not my brothers and sisters but my subfamily. My cousins, because for whatever reason, they look at me from a different perspective. Some of 'em don't know or don't accept. At that particular time, that was the caution.

Whitney Strub: Yeah. I mean, so at some point, you made a decision to live as out and positive.

Aaron Frazier: Correct.

Whitney Strub: That happened way back at this point in the early to mid-'90s?

Aaron Frazier: Yes.

Whitney Strub: Okay. Did that affect your friendships, your romantic relationships?

Aaron Frazier: No. It's just currently, I still have issues. One of the things about being positive and having multiple issues, the main issue that bothers me the most is being—having herpes. Herpes is not just sexually exchanged. It's skin to skin. It bothers me because there's times when I'm—like if I'm unaware when I went to—they wanted to give me medicine for depression. What they gave me, it numbed my senses.

I only took the pill one time. My taste buds was gone. My sensory, like perception of my body. Then when I actually let the shit, whatever it's supposed to do, get out of my system, I done noticed that I done had three outbreaks and was unaware of it. That pissed me off. That meant I could've harmed somebody. That meant I could've put somebody else at risk.

That's a mental thing. It fucks with me even to the point where relationship-wise, one of the reasons that I stayed with the idiot as long as I did, even though he did me wrong, he was caring when I was going through that. It's a ugliness. A lot of times with it, if it's in my face, I don't want nobody to see it. Not that it is—again, it don't even have to be that noticeable. If I know it's there, it's noticeable to me. That's what's important. I don't care what nobody else say. Yeah.

Whitney Strub: That often weighs more heavily on you than being HIV positive?

Aaron Frazier: Yes, because I remember hugging a kid. I was like, "Oh, my god. I hope I don't give him not'n." It's like, and then people look at me like I'm being shady when I'm like, "No. I'm not really into all of that." It just is a sad thing, because if you're dealing with somebody physically, you really

need to be communicative and let them specifically know. Two-thirds of these people are not really mindful of other people or even sexual practices to be honest.

Whitney Strub: Yeah. I know we're running out of time. There's a lot more we could talk about. Actually, since we're running out of time because of the meeting you've got coming up, I mean, maybe the last thing I'll ask you here for this interview is just to say a few words about your role as a mentor and the role that this group, black gay men's group that's about to meet, plays for you. You smile and laugh. I don't even know why.

Aaron Frazier: I'm a say this. Well, I guess it means we have another part to do.

Whitney Strub: Yeah, no. Apparently so.

Aaron Frazier: Being part of the group itself is a good thing. Unfortunately, my particular premise is to have it ongoing. Sadly, Kevin is there for the ongoing. Kevin is there for the right reason. Unfortunately, what other people—that grant runs out in two more years. Are you still gonna be committed towards the group? Are you still gonna be committed towards the brotherhood? No, they're not. That's—

Whitney Strub: This is a grant through Hyacinth?

Aaron Frazier: Hyacinth through CDC. Some of the things that is going on, 'cause that's part of the rift that I'm going through right now, the previous coordinator has us doin' things that was data collecting. From previous grant renewals, it is definitely—the information is gonna be needed upon renewing of the grant. They're gonna tell me, "Well, there's no particular justification for it right now. We da-da-da." I'm just looking. I'm going, "Okay." I said, "You're the one that's the boss. I'm just a volunteer."

Whitney Strub: What kind of data are you supposed to be collecting?

Aaron Frazier: This is data. It talks about the age, the who the particular—whether or not it's Spanish, Latino, white, whatever. Those specific data is also inclusion. Is there substance use, alcohol use? How many times? Do you practice safe sex? Do you engage in high risk behavior? Those things are very crucial. What's your income? Did you graduate from high school?

Then it's a knowledge base of short survey questions to see where they're at educational-wise far as with, say, post—a pre and post test for HIV and their knowledge base. It's just weird. They don't want to continue the data. You're gonna need it later on. I said, "You know what, I need to mind my business, take myself up out of here, because at the end of the

day, it ain't about me." I know what should be done. The more that I talk about it, I'm looked at as bein' the troublemaker.

I'm like, self-sufficiency for the group itself, self-sufficiency for an ongoing process. They don't get it. When you're not from the community in which you serve, you don't care. You're just there to do a job. That's what's going on around here. You got people that's concerned more about job stability as opposed to accountability with the service you provide to a community.

Whitney Strub: Yeah. Well, I mean, that's a hell of a note to end on. I mean, clearly, we have more things to discuss. I want to give you a chance to catch your breath before the meeting since you've only got—

Aaron Frazier: Oh, I ain't worried about it.

Whitney Strub: - 15 minutes.

Aaron Frazier: Give me one second, because they left a message.

Whitney Strub: Well, okay. I'm gonna stop recording for this round with the understanding that we'll record more another time. Thank you again for doing this.

[End of Audio]