

Queer Newark Oral History Project

Interviewee: Leslie Oliver

Interviewer: Kennedy Didier

Date: February 28, 2020

Location: Telephone

Kennedy Didier: As long as we just—

Leslie Oliver: Is it clear enough for you?

Kennedy Didier: Yeah, totally loud enough, as long as we just talk in our loud voices. *[Laughs]* It'll be totally fine. It picked your voice up super well. I'll start by introducing myself, and then we'll get started. I have a sheet of questions that we prepare, but we'll be moving off of that depending on the information you tell me. I'll respond to that. If there's any question that I ask that you don't want to answer, feel free to just say, 'Kennedy, stop' *[laughs]* and/or 'I don't wanna answer that,' and that's totally fine.

This is your interview. What we're here to do is really just collect the stories of people in whatever format or information you wanna share with us. We're so more than excited to be a part of that. So feel free to move off the questions and talk about your experience. Does that sound good?

Leslie Oliver: Yep.

Kennedy Didier: Awesome. The interview will be about an hour and a half. Do you have any questions before we get started?

Leslie Oliver: Nope.

Kennedy Didier: Awesome. I'll start the official recording. My name is Kennedy Didier. It is Friday, February 28, 2020. I am here interviewing Leslie for the Queer Newark Oral History Project. Leslie, say hi.

Leslie Oliver: Hi.

Kennedy Didier: We'll get started with when and where were you born?

Leslie Oliver: I was born in Newark, New Jersey, on April 12, 1969.

Kennedy Didier: April 12, 1969, in Newark, New Jersey. Who raised you when you were growing up? Did you grow up in Newark your whole life, or did you move away?

Leslie Oliver: I lived, I grew up, and I was born and raised in Newark. I left [inaudible 00:02:06]. I left Newark in 2004.

Kennedy Didier: You left Newark in 2004. Where did you go when you left?

Leslie Oliver: I transitioned to Charlotte, North Carolina.

Kennedy Didier: And what brought you back?

Leslie Oliver: Well my mom's there. My mom and sister still live in Newark, New Jersey. Of course, I was in ministry in Newark as well. I returned occasionally to care for my mom 'cause she was getting up in age. I really moved 'cause I wanted to raise my daughter in a different environment than I grew up. I didn't want the harshness of the city on us, the city life.

It puts an extra layer of skin on you and I didn't want that skin on her. I wanted her a bit more genteel. And I just wanted a fresh start for us, fresh energy. There is a bit of toxicity there that I didn't want her to have in her psyche growin' up through the years, so, yeah.

Kennedy Didier: When you were growing up, what was that experience in Newark like? What was your household like when you grew up here?

Leslie Oliver: Oh, boy. It was a myriad of things. I grew up in a religious household. So I'm fourth-generation Pre-k and preacher and all that. My mom was very religious and was head first—church head first. I lived on the—we grew up on the west side and the central side of the city. The west side of the city.

Very religious household, which meant my mom was at church a lot. When she was home, it was good. Mom was home, whatever, but, when she wasn't home, just a bit lonely because you have the babysitter [inaudible 00:04:08] we lived in a pretty decent neighborhood. My experience was very traumatic because of sexual trauma.

Kennedy Didier: Sorry. Say that again.

Leslie Oliver: Sexual trauma. I was molested as a child quite a few times. So for me, it wasn't very safe outside of my home, my nuclear home. Church wasn't safe because the pastor was a pedophile. And grandma's house was safe until a certain age, until six, because there were people there that abused my cousins and I. My childhood was very—I was very unsafe.

If I wasn't in my mom's view and presence, then I wasn't safe. I was such an easy target. That's why I'd withdraw from myself. So childhood was pretty lonely and melancholy. I was very introverted, emotional. Granted, I'm makin' sense—it would all make sense at the time, but people didn't understand because they didn't know the severity of sexual trauma.

I was also bullied. School wasn't always comfortable. Classes really were where the teachers were. But you know, playground wasn't safe. Church wasn't safe. Grandma's house wasn't safe. Home was. Home with my sister or with my brother and my mom was safe.

The safest place was home inside the pages of a book or listening to music. Really rough growing up. I even wrote a memoir about it. First, as a release and that—for a few reasons, but then it shed light on—for my story. So it's tough. By the time I was six, I had already been molested by an uncle. I was very defensive and protective then. Bullied in school in the middle grades, fourth through sixth grade, and molested repeatedly.

When I went to high school—so in Newark, I went to the Fifteenth Avenue School from K to two. I went to Sussex Avenue School for third grade. Martin Luther King Elementary from four to eight. By the time I got done with MLK Elementary, we had moved a few times. My space was stable and safe until I got to high school. I went to Arts High, majored in drama.

The pastor of the church had begun to molest me and rape me. School was a safe—it was one place that I felt like *[inaudible 00:07:01]*. I wasn't bullied in high school. I was bullied in the middle—in elementary school, I was bullied. Middle school grades were okay. High school was okay 'cause it gave me a place to get lost and go in. But church was very much—

Kennedy Didier: By the time you got to high school, you felt—by the time you got to high school, you felt like school was able to be a safe place, but in the lower grades, it was more chaotic.

Leslie Oliver: Yes. So first through third, a lot of sexual abuse at the hands of my uncle and my aunt's friend. I would say fifth—fourth through eighth were probably the happiest years as a child where I could really kind of breathe, which is why I'm such a lover of the '80s.

Kennedy Didier: *[Laughs]* Where did you go to—

Leslie Oliver: I love the '80s. *[inaudible 00:08:04]*.

Kennedy Didier: Did you go to one school between fourth and eighth grade, or was—or did you move schools?

Leslie Oliver: No. Moved schools. K-two Fifteenth Avenue. Third was Sussex Avenue. Fourth through eighth was MLK. By the time I got to fourth grade, my mom decided, 'Look, I can't keep moving these kids around.' She was trying to find peace, trying to really create stability because, emotionally, she was an abused woman.

This pastor was abusing her too. Of course, she had come from a life—of a street nightlife as a young woman, being like a—not like a drug dealer or anything, but she dated gangsters. Then she jumped headfirst into the church. This abusive preacher, she was just trying to—they would—every time she would try to move to a different place, she would get a sense of peace. The peace would kinda come *[inaudible 00:09:04]*. It was after fourth-grade *[inaudible 00:09:06]*, she said, 'Listen, I can't keep movin' my kids around. I've gotta give them some kind of stability.'

That's when we got to MLK, fourth through eighth. They were pretty stable, I felt a little bit as a child. My music teacher *[inaudible 00:09:21]* took us under her wing and got us really open and used to things like that and then encouraged us to apply to Arts High.

And so I'm three years older than my sister. My brother was already going to Newark Tech and then left for the Marines when I was in the seventh grade. And so I went to Arts High, majored in drama and then I could *[inaudible 00:09:49]*. I had gotten to eighth grade. I got into track in eighth grade. Going to the school of the arts was a great experience. High school *[inaudible 00:09:57]* of it. Now I'm the corny church girl, lookin' all *[inaudible 00:09:59]*, but I felt good because I could sing, I could do drama, it gave me an outlet.

Kennedy Didier: Arts High was—you had to apply into it? It was like a prestigious—you had to have—be very talented, right?

Leslie Oliver: Yeah, you had to apply. You had to apply, do an essay, an application and all that. Then you had to audition. You had to sing or dance or do a theatrical piece. The other part of the audition—I auditioned for music and drama. I didn't *[inaudible 00:10:37]* after my freshman year, they moved me all into drama. That was also

the year that the pastor—he had raped me at that time. It was not like a forcible kind of rape, but it was against my will, where like, ‘Can I show you this and I’m supposed to be the one to do that. You know, I’m a man of God, so I should be the first to take your virginity because God trusts me. I won’t tell your mother and it’ll be okay.’

Kennedy Didier: Oh goodness.

Leslie Oliver: Did that whole predatory thing. He had groomed me psychologically as a young child to trust him as a voice of reason, as a voice of authority that would not hurt me. I was so afraid of my mother finding out that I worried about what she might know and what he might say to her that I consented against my will. And it just kept happening. And then from there, he would follow me around. High school became a safe place because I hated going to church because I just—my whole relationship with God was trashed.

Then I played basketball at the high school and he would come to games. By sophomore—my junior year, he was coming to the games.

Kennedy Didier: Oh no.

Leslie Oliver: And I was just like, oh my God. I was disgusted why he’s here. High school was the only place where I could get away from the thought of anything negative or painful. It was my world. I joined the team to get away from home ’cause he was the type of man that would just come to my house any time he felt like it.

Like my mother was in Haiti one year—the first—my first year. She was on a mission trip and he invited himself to the house and assaulted me. And so it was very awkward because the babysitter walked in. I had to let her in the house and she could tell something was wrong. I had to play it off like I was okay because he was still at the house.

She responded like, ‘Okay. You’re messin’ around with this man,’ as opposed to he was messin’ around with me. My sister and I were so used to dysfunctional sexual behavior that it was more of a—like a, [*inaudible 00:12:47*] as opposed to, ‘Why is this man in my mom’s house?’ It was a very heavy thing to carry where you don’t have control of yourself and the fact that he can do whatever and keep showin’ up in our home.

I was just like, 'Mom, please come home.' She was gonna be back home in two days. I'm just like, 'Please, hurry home.' She didn't know what was happenin' at the time. I told her later on. Even through those years, he would drive us home from church. I hated being around him. I hated his smell. I hated—

One time, she went—she had to step out of the car for something to go in the church building. She came back and caught him fondling me [*inaudible 00:13:29*] my clothing. It was then that she realized that I wasn't safe around him and so she kind of kept me away from him. That's what high school was like. So school was the only place where I could relax, school, track, and basketball.

I joined these teams just to have something to do 'cause I wanna—'cause this is where I got into poetry, music, and all of that. Throughout my high school years at Arts High, it was a safe haven. Come to senior year, he's controlling, he's still in our lives, he's at our basketball games.

By now, my sister is at Arts High. She's a women's basketball star. I was just on the team 'cause I didn't really like basketball, it was just one of those things. He'd come to the games. I'm like, oh my God, why is he here? He would show up at the school. [*Inaudible 00:14:18*] I would have to go through the back of the school to avoid running into him.

'Cause when he would come to the games, he would ride us home together. My sister was in the car. I would at least be like, oh you're not gonna try anything with her sitting there. But I just—[*inaudible 00:14:33*] so what happened was he wouldn't allow me to go to my prom. My mother wouldn't let me go to the prom because he said I couldn't go. I *hated* her for that. That's how much control this man had on our family. It wasn't just our family. It was other families in the church, my cousins. Like he—

Kennedy Didier: What was your mom's role in the church again?

Leslie Oliver: She was the church administrator. She was a lead administrator. She was also the devotional leader, so she led the worship—led the music and the worship.

Kennedy Didier: So they worked very closely together, her and this pastor?

Leslie Oliver: Right. They were in a relationship, not about—not willingly, not initially. She was an abused woman. He would demean her and say

things to her. He took control of the relationship. Like, 'You're gonna be with me, and that's it.'

Whenever it got twisted, it got really ugly. Once you're in a thing and it twists, it's kind of hard to find your way out, just find—get away out of this thing, but was being abused by this man. And so I'm watching her [*inaudible 00:15:45*] being ridiculed, harassed. What can I do? 'Cause already it's hard to be me.

So I got to the point in my junior or senior year, like, 'If you don't leave me alone, I'll kill myself, and I'm gonna tell the cops what you did. I'm gonna go to the station and do it there. I'm gonna fault you for everything. Leave my mom alone. Leave my friends alone. Don't you come near my sister. Leave us alone.'

And so he backed off when I threatened to go to the police. He left me alone. And so I [*inaudible 00:16:20*]. I hated my mom for letting him control her like that. I said, 'I gotta get out of here. I've gotta get out of here.' School was great. I made friends. I applied to college.

I said, 'I'm going to accept the first letter that comes through to me,' and Rutgers University-New Brunswick was the first letter that got through to me, and I accepted it. It was my way out. It was my ticket out. I was a decent student. I had been on the honor roll all three grades of high school.

I was just trying to breathe. I was a decent student, but I was so distracted by the trauma. But I was a decent student. I graduated number twenty—number nineteen out of a hundred. I was pretty smart, but I didn't really care. I just wanted to breathe. Graduation was on a Thursday, I believe, and I was at Rutgers campus for the [*inaudible 00:17:13*] program, the summer program, I was there Sunday at 8:30 a.m., my brother drove me there.

Kennedy Didier: Wow. Graduation was on Thursday, and you got to Rutgers on Sunday?

Leslie Oliver: Yeah. The summer program started that Sunday. I was the first one on campus. Yeah. That's how much I want to get out of there.

Kennedy Didier: Mm-hmm. You were ready to bolt.

Leslie Oliver: I felt bad for my—I left my—I was gonna go, but I felt bad 'cause my sister was—she was in the ninth grade. She was left at home in

this environment. My mom was there, but I had to save myself. My brother was already out. He was gone.

High school was great. Loved Arts High. I came up in *[inaudible 00:17:57 - 00:18:03]* on the campus. I had been traumatized, number one. And number two, I'm this church kid who has been sheltered and in this shell, this religious shell, so, of course, I just kind of kicked off the shell. I was still worried about my mother finding out the stuff I was doin' so that bit of control she had was still kind of present.

But I had *[inaudible 00:18:29]*, so I had to work. In the summer of '88—

Kennedy Didier: Summer of '88?

Leslie Oliver: I had a good ole time for the summer of '88. I'm at another—at some math program, and I decide I want *[inaudible 00:18:48]*. I joined the choir, the Rutgers' gospel choir. I played trumpet *[inaudible 00:18:55]* and I sang a little bit. What happened in the sophomore year is that one of the other drummers tells me, 'Okay. You sounded good. I'm gonna take you to the studio.'

I'm like, 'You're lyin'. Just stop it. You're lyin'.' He was like, 'No, no, no. My cousin has a studio in Newark. I'm gonna bring you to the studio. I'm gonna bring you to meet him and his best friend *[inaudible 00:19:19]* what he has to say.' That was my sophomore year *[inaudible 00:19:24]*. 'Cause I live in Newark, I'm like, okay, it's gotta be near my house.

He was like, 'It's on the west—it's *[inaudible 00:19:31 - 00:19:35]*.' So he takes me to this house and everything. I'm lookin' like, 'This is not a studio.' But I didn't know anything yet. So Ace Mungin is the owner of Ace Beat Records in Newark. It is a house music label. House music was pretty popular then.

[Inaudible 00:19:55 - 00:20:05]. I met Vincent Smith [Khison Vuane] *[00:20:06]*. When *[inaudible 00:20:07]* He was the producer. *[inaudible 00:20:14]* invited me to come back and record that song. So I'm goin' to school at Rutgers-New Brunswick, and I'm coming home on the weekends to work on this song at this record label in Newark. [Song title: "Can't Treat Me This Way"]

Kennedy Didier: Wow.

Leslie Oliver: And I—yeah. I did a demo.

People really like it. They're kind of shop it around. People liked it. We decided to record the song. I'm excited 'cause there's a record label right in the heart of town. I'm gonna be on a record. I'm not thinkin' super big, but I'm excited.

The summer of my sophomore year, July, the radio station at the time, Kiss FM, New York based, but they play Tri-State area. WBLS, [*inaudible 00:21:01*] station played my song. I hear it on Saturday evening [*inaudible. Maybe 'while I'm in my truck' 00:21:05*]. I'm freaking out like, oh my God. That's me.

Kennedy Didier: Wow!

Leslie Oliver: Ah! That's me! I'm like, oh my, so cool. What I do is, I begin a tradition where I said, okay, every time I make a record, I'm gonna go buy a copy of it myself. There's a record store in East Orange, which is just like five minutes up the [*inaudible 00:21:30*] from Newark. It's literally the next town over, straight up Central Avenue in Newark. Movin' Records, which was run by Abigail Adams. That's where everyone went to get their records.

All the DJs in Newark, everybody went to get their hip hop or whatever records on the record store. I go in, I buy my record, I say hi to Abby, she says, 'Oh, hey Jazmina.' My stage name is Jazmina. So I'm like, people know me, I'm excited. They take me to Zanzibar. Zanzibar is the hottest dance music club in the city and in the state of New Jersey. [*inaudible 00:22:06*].

Kennedy Didier: Sorry. What was it called?

Leslie Oliver: The Zanzibar.

Kennedy Didier: The Vanderbilt?

Leslie Oliver: The Zanzibar, Z-A-N-Z-I-B-A-R. Zanzibar.

Kennedy Didier: Oh, Zanzibar!

Leslie Oliver: It's called Zanzibar.

Kennedy Didier: Got it.

Leslie Oliver: A little dance club in Newark, New Jersey. DJ Tony Humphries, DJ Larry Patterson. These are legendary DJs who DJed there. They were [*inaudible 00:22:33*]. Shelton Hayes—I'm giving you all

kinds of rich history. Shelton Hayes was the manager of the club [inaudible 00:22:42]. Ace [Mungin] took me there one night. I'd never been in a club before.

Ace took me to the Zanzibar, which was like *the* place to dance, the place to sing. I go in there, and I'm like, 'Oh my God.' I was in awe. A few months later, I would perform in that club.

Kennedy Didier: Wow.

Leslie Oliver: I would open up for CeCe Rogers, who was the biggest name in dance music at the time and he's from New Jersey. I would open up for him. My group would open up for him. The name of my group at that time was Intense. That's the group that I was in.

Kennedy Didier: I'm sorry. What was it called?

Leslie Oliver: Intense.

Kennedy Didier: Intense?

Leslie Oliver: Right, like if something is intense.

Kennedy Didier: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Leslie Oliver: Yea so that's the name of our Newark group on Ace's label, Ace Beat. They had already had some success with a song called 'Let the Rain Come Down.' Right? I do 'Can't Treat Me This Way' as another song. And so it got a good buzz and it got some noise. Ace decides to re-record 'Let the Rain Come Down' with my voice on it along with Khison Vuane.

I had my little record that comes out, but I'm added to this other record. Movin' Records, the record company, Tony Humphries mixes it 'cause he's the hot DJ at the time. Tony Humphries does the production mixes for 'Let the Rain Come Down.' This is the remix of it. Abby's label, Movin' Records, puts it out on their label, instant hit. Instant hit.

Kennedy Didier: Instant hit?

Leslie Oliver: Now, it's an instant hit. It's an instant local hit. Everyone's like, 'Who is that at the end of the record? Who's that?'

Kennedy Didier: [Laughter]

Leslie Oliver: 'Cause Khison is singin' by his self and so here I come [*inaudible 00:24:41*] and takes off. Everybody wants to hear the song. It's [*inaudible 00:24:47*]. Now, I'm officially in the house music community. I'm the singer in this house music group. This song is still being played thirty or so years later. This was 1990, that this record comes out. 1990, yes.

Kennedy Didier: So 1990, you were twenty?

Leslie Oliver: Yeah, in 1990, I was twenty-one. I was twenty-one.

Kennedy Didier: Twenty-one. You had this big record that was being played everywhere.

Leslie Oliver: Right, right. I was still in college. I'm going home on with the weekend. I'm goin' to Newark on the weekend to tour with the group and go—we did the Tri-State area. We did all kinds of—we did bars and parties and stuff, and so the record was good. I'm making a name for myself. People in my college are like, [*inaudible 00:25:42*]on the radio, whatever, whatever.

I'm enjoying all of that, finding my voice at Rutgers. I'm still in the choir and singing and playing in the choir. I'm starting a career as a poet with the Black newspaper 'Black Voice' at Rutgers. I'm writing poetry for the paper. I'm also singing at fashion shows 'cause now I have this record that everybody knows about. We do a few other records as a group. People are like, 'Oh wow.' My nickname at school was Moochie [*laughs*].

Kennedy Didier: Moochie?

Leslie Oliver: Crazy. Moochie. Everybody knows me as Moochie at Rutgers. They know me as Jazmina back home in Newark. If we were back in Newark—

Kennedy Didier: They know you as—what was your name back in Newark?

Leslie Oliver: Jazmina, with a J.

Kennedy Didier: Jazmina.

Leslie Oliver: Yeah, that's my house music name. So we'd go around to all the parties. I'm hanging out with all the DJs. I meet some of the best producers in the game, Kerri Chandler, DJ Camacho, Jihad Muhammad, Ralph [*inaudible 00:26:50*] a DJ from New York. Cassio Ware, Backroom Productions. So all the Jersey pe—Kenny

Bobien and Eddie Stockley were our background singers at the time, they were really popular. Our first show, actually, at the Zanzibar—that first show—one of those first shows, the Braxtons opened up for—we had our first headline show. We were the headliners. The Braxtons opened for us, Toni Braxton, Tamar [Braxton].

Kennedy Didier: Sorry. Who opened for you? Sorry.

Leslie Oliver: Are you familiar with who the Braxtons are?

Kennedy Didier: Yeah, Toni Braxton.

Leslie Oliver: Yeah, her and her sisters had a song out.

Kennedy Didier: Wow! Sorry. You just cut out for a second, so I was just checking.

Leslie Oliver: Yeah, it was called 'The Good Life.'

Kennedy Didier: Wow, that's *so* cool.

Leslie Oliver: Right. They were little. They were teenagers, but they had this song out and so they were supposed to sing their song at our show. They were just coming out, but they didn't have their music. They left their music, so they sang acapella. Even their mom was there, Miss Evelyn [inaudible 00:27:48]. Also, Vincent Herbert, Tamar's ex-husband, he was—

Kennedy Didier: Who's ex-husband? Sorry.

Leslie Oliver: Vincent Herbert. He was Tamar—He just got divorced from Tamar recently.

Kennedy Didier: Oh, wow.

Leslie Oliver: He was in a group at the time as well. They did a little song. It's called 'Reaching.' He's in the community. His brother sang house as well. His brother was part of one of the big groups in the house community. My little group was just getting started. Vincent Herbert had a little group as well. We crossed paths at the same place, Zanzibar. It was like a meeting place for all the Jersey house artists.

I'm this college girl in the house community makin' a little name for myself in this group. And so throughout college, I'd make a name for myself as a singer. In college, I'm making myself as a

name as a poet and with the choir and as a drummer. So I graduated from college. I leave Rutgers and I continued to do the music. When I was at Rutgers, my senior year, I came out of the closet. I was twenty—I was at Rutgers for five years, five and a half—I was twenty-two when I came out.

Kennedy Didier: Twenty-two. What was that experience like?

Leslie Oliver: Well here's the thing, so my junior year—I did five and a half years at Rutgers. What happened was, my fourth year, which should have technically been my senior year, but not for me. My fourth year, I was like, 'Hmm. I think I like the ladies.' I liked girls in high school but I thought that was just something that everybody did.

It wasn't until I saw a basketball player named Lynette Woodard [*inaudible 00:29:49*], she was on the Globetrotters. She was the first woman on the Globetrotters. When I saw her, I got some kind of quiver in my stomach.

Kennedy Didier: [*Laughter*]

Leslie Oliver: I couldn't stop looking at her. Right?

Kennedy Didier: Yeah.

Leslie Oliver: Then, at Rutgers, here and here and there, honestly I would just be like, 'Oh my God, she's so beautiful.' You know?

But I was just tryin' it out, I couldn't step out of the gate. I get to my junior year in college, and I had a crush on one of my professors and I'm like, 'Why am I lookin' at her like this?'

Kennedy Didier: [*Laughter*]

Leslie Oliver: I'm like, 'What is that?' My senior year, I happened to be *dating some guy from Newark*, and he was a cornball because he couldn't afford to get me a taxi home.

We had to walk from a movie theater in the Neck, that's the Ironbound part of Newark, there's a movie theater out there. It had just gotten that. We went to the movies. We walked all the way back to Penn Station Newark. He was such a cornball for not giving me a ride home.

Kennedy Didier: [*Laughter*]

Leslie Oliver: Anyway, the problem was we walked by a gay club. It was called First Choice. It was *the* place—one of the places for the gay people to go to in *[inaudible 00:31:12]*.

Kennedy Didier: It was called First Choice? It was a gay club in Newark?

Leslie Oliver: First Choice Nightclub. I don't know if it was the first one, but it was the first one I heard of. I'll get to the other one in a minute. It was First Choice, and it was like past Penn Station *[inaudible 00:31:26]* near the industrial part of the Ironbound, way back in there.

So I heard the music coming out of the club and I said, 'I'm gonna go in there one day. I'm gonna go in there as soon as I get away from *[inaudible 00:31:41]*. He's a cornball. I'm gonna go in that gay club. I'm gonna go in there.' I just told myself that. And so we walked to the station, and I got home and whatever.

But the very next Sunday, I went back to that club.

Kennedy Didier: Wow.

Leslie Oliver: I did. They were having—I was intrigued by, 'That's a gay club. I'm goin' in there.' They were having what's called a dome. Have you seen the movie—have you seen the show 'Pose'?

Kennedy Didier: I have not seen the show 'Pose.'

Leslie Oliver: 'Pose' is a series on FX about the ballrooms.

Kennedy Didier: Yeah, it's about the ballroom scene, right?

Leslie Oliver: Right. So when I went back to First Choice that next Sunday, there was a ball. They were having a ball.

Kennedy Didier: They were having a ball.

Leslie Oliver: They were having a ball, like the competition. They were having one of those at the club. So I didn't know that. I came in, people were kind of sittin' around. Some people were prancin' around *[inaudible 00:32:41]* or whatever. I'm like, 'What's the deal? I want some music.'

So that ended shortly and then the music came on. So I'm in there looking like a whole alien. The DJ comes over to me. Her name's

Tracey, DJ Tracey. She's like, 'How are you?' 'I'm fine.' She said, 'Do you know where you are?' I said, 'Um, yeah.' 'Are you even gay?' I said, 'Yeah.'

She said, 'No, you're not.' I said, 'Yes, I am.'

Kennedy Didier: [Laughter]

Leslie Oliver: She said, 'No, you're not. You're curious.' I said, 'Yes, I am.' She said, 'Okay. If you say so.' She said, 'Well I'm gonna look out for [inaudible 00:33:23] tonight.' I said, 'I'll be fine.' She said, 'Okay.' Anyway, I only had enough money to get in the club.

I had maybe a dollar left. I was going to walk back up to Penn Station to take the bus home, 'cause you know I'm in college, I'm a senior, I'm finishing up college [inaudible 00:33:43]. She said, 'Let me take you home.' I was like, 'Uh, alright.' So I'm watchin' her out of the corner of my eye.

[Inaudible 00:33:52] young and free. I'm not a punk. I'll fight for my protection. She just started talkin' about like, 'You just wandered in a gay club. You have to be really careful [inaudible 00:34:01].' I was like, 'Whatever. Whatever,' 'cause I knew I was comin' back on a Saturday this time. That was a Sunday that [inaudible 00:34:07].

She dropped me off home. I was fine. I came back the next Saturday. [Laughs] So here's how desperate I was to [inaudible 00:34:17]. My grandma actually gave me a little money, helping my grandma out with her [inaudible 00:34:23], she would give me a little money. I said, 'I'm gonna take the money and go back to the club.' I saved my money and walked—I walked [inaudible 00:34:30] the club, made my way in, and just kind of sat close to the [inaudible 00:34:37] "but you're not gay."

I said, 'Yes, I am.' As far as I was just concerned, I was. I went on a Saturday. The music was bumpin', it was pretty packed in there, 'cause it was like [inaudible 00:34:50] in there. And so I'm dancing because [inaudible 00:34:54] I'm gonna dance, right? And so the music was goin', and then this woman comes up to me and she started dancin' with me.

Everybody knows that I kill the floor. I'm like, okay, let's dance with this lady. [Inaudible 00:35:17]. Afterward, she said, 'Can I buy you a drink?' Now, I'm feelin' real big now. 'Oh, sure.' She asked me my name. I told her.

By the end of the night, she said, 'Do you have a ride home?' I said, 'No.' She brings me to my house. She says, 'Where do you go to school at?' I tell her, 'I'm at Rutgers.' She said, 'Newark or New Brunswick or Camden?' I said, 'New Brunswick.' She said, 'I live ten minutes away from there. Are you going back to campus? Do you need to go back to campus?'

I looked at her and said, 'I can.' So I'm all excited, my heart's pumpin'. I get my little weekend bag. She has a little *[inaudible 00:36:03]*, and we go up to the *[inaudible 00:36:04]*. And so here's the moment of truth. I'm like, 'Okay. I'm gonna have to go in there with her and do something.' I'm like, 'Okay.' I'm tryin' to be cool. We go to bed.

That's the first time I was intimate with a woman. I'm like, I have no idea what I just did. Whatever it was, she was smiling at the end. I'm like, does this mean I *am* officially gay? Oh my God. She sat me down and had a really important conversation with me. I thought, 'Okay. She *[inaudible 00:36:39]*, she'll have to send me back home on the train.'

She said, 'I like you, and I'd like to get to know you, but I want you to be very careful about how you pass yourself around. Be very careful about who you spend your time with. Are you sure about where you are and who you are in your life?' I said, 'I think so.' I said, 'I would never have touched you if I wasn't sure about what I wanted to do.' She said, 'But still be careful. You have to be really careful out here.'

She was just bein' wise. I'm thinking she's just trying to get rid of me. I'm like, 'Well, okay. I'll go then.' So I go back to school 'cause that's the year that I'm graduating. This is like January. I'm like, okay, that was an amazing experience. What am I gonna do with it next?

I was thinking about what she said. We ended up *[inaudible 00:37:24 - maybe 'dating like a quickly']* or what have you, graduated from school. My sister came to stay with me after graduation. We hung out with this woman at her house. My sister was like, 'What's goin' on here?' I said, 'I'm a lesbian. I'm a lesbian.'

She was like, 'I thought so.' 'Cause you know, right now, my sister and her best friend in college had come out to my mom very boldly and arrogantly and my mom was wrecked over it *[inaudible*

00:37:52] but she got it together. I was not out to my parents. My mom and my dad [inaudible 00:37:57] to my mom.

The way my father reacted to my sister, I resolved to never tell him. But my sister figured it out. And when my sister—my sister came out to me, and I said, ‘Okay. Um, I knew that, and that’s fine.’ She was like, ‘For real? [inaudible 00:38:14] you’re my sister.’ So when my sister came out to me, I accepted her and so that made it very comfortable. So when she asked me, I told her the truth. I told her that I had kept it this long because, after I saw what happened to her, I wasn’t ready to deal with that battle yet, I was gonna wait.

By the end of college, I had come out to my sister. She had come out to me and my mom, but I didn’t come out to my mom. So I’m out of college. I went to [inaudible 00:38:40] and my mom, [inaudible 00:38:43] she wanted me to ‘come home [inaudible 00:38:45] move in with me, start your life.’ I was like, ‘No. I am going to stay up here in New Brunswick with my girlfriend.’

So my mom, of course, freaked out ’cause she had already gotten one—she already had one daughter who had come out. Now my first daughter [inaudible 00:39:04], and so she was freaking out. She was freaking out. It was a rough experience. She did the whole, ‘I don’t want any lesbians in my house’ thing. [Inaudible 00:39:13]. ‘Don’t bring that mess in my house.’ [Inaudible 00:39:16].

I was like, ‘Mom, let’s not [inaudible 00:39:18] bring the mess to your house. If you didn’t bring a mess in your house, then why would I bring mess to your house?’ There was a period where, ‘If you’re not home at this time, I’m lockin’ my house. I don’t want any foolishness goin’ on in my house.’ There was a period in my life where I had nowhere to go. The music in the clubs were the only familiar places right now. I eventually parted ways with this woman and just kind of figurin’ it out on my own and spent a piece of time homeless—

Kennedy Didier: I’m sorry. Then what happened?

Leslie Oliver: —’cause I couldn’t be myself. I spent a period of time being homeless because, from college graduation to this person I was with, I had come out to my mom, who had to process and she didn’t take it too well initially. So I didn’t have a home to go back to in Newark. I didn’t have a person to go back to—

Kennedy Didier: In New Brunswick.

Leslie Oliver: In New Brunswick where I was, so I was homeless and just bouncing around here and there, sleepin' on the trains, the PATH trains from Newark to New York, going to the clubs where people knew me by now would let me in for free, dancing and singing. Through that, I was making some money singing here and there and I had a small radio job. I had a little [*inaudible 00:40:42*]. I had just wanted to give myself some small meals to eat, but I would have—was living in a barracks, essentially, hanging out at the Newark Penn Station or from this party to that party 'cause I had a sense of belonging in the house community, pretty much kept me alive.

I was just kind of stuck in all the emotions of things. I knew I could sing. I knew that people liked me 'cause I was a nice person. I knew I was cute, and so I could get a date here or there, but I didn't have a home. I was homeless for a bit. Then people in the house community found out I was gay.

Kennedy Didier: What was that experience like?

Leslie Oliver: People talk. I felt a little betrayed. That wasn't about my voice. That was about my orientation. People who I thought were my friends turned on me. It was a very lonely place to be to not know who you could really trust or who was on your side 'cause I was intentional about being in my truth.

There was a short period where I was like, okay. I can't trust who I used to trust in the house community. Who *can* I trust? By now, I was a solo artist. Intense started as a group. I was the female in the group. There were two other gentlemen in the group. We disbanded. Everybody went their separate ways.

I just prepared to do production with some different people. I met a gentleman named Johnny Dangerous. He was also a house music history. He did that song 'I Beat That Bitch with a Bat.' 'I Beat That Bitch with a Bat.'

Kennedy Didier: [*Laughter*]

Leslie Oliver: He did a lot of other work, but that song, people will remember that is his. He did a lot more work than that. He was brilliant.

So I met him. He also went to Arts High. I found that out when we reconnected. Yeah. We reconnected. He said, 'Let's do some music

together.’ So I would go to DML Studios in East Orange, New Jersey. All of the new producers and all of the Jersey new producers would go *[inaudible 00:43:04]* their work. *[Inaudible 00:43:06]* another studio. They all used to be the DML Studios and Ace Beat, they call it the campsite.

Ace Beat and then there were two other studios where a lot of us were *[inaudible 00:43:18]*. That's where I found my energy in my work. I'm out of the group at this point. I'm a solo artist. I'm performing my music, but I could get shows. I'm still looking for work.

I land a job at FedEx on the night shift. What I would do is, when I got off work, I would go to the studio to work with Johnny Dangerous just making music. I'm the house *[inaudible 00:43:48]* Jazmina, but I'm now—I'm solo. I'm my own. We make this song called ‘Good Time.’ Smash.

Kennedy Didier: Smash hit?

Leslie Oliver: Smash hit. It was on KULT Records. It was a label out of New York, these two Italian guys. Song was on the radio in a week gettin’ all kinds of play time.

Kennedy Didier: In a week? Wow!

Leslie Oliver: In a week. *[Inaudible 00:44:12 maybe ‘started a bidding war’]* ‘cause Johnny's amazing. There were some sampling clearance issues, and they had to take it off the radio. It's an underground standard now. It went from above ground in the radio rotation to now, it can't be played on the radio. It can't be because I might get sued. It was an amazing record, it pushed me even further into, ‘Oh, Jaz? That girl can sing,’ you know, ‘She’s dope.’ We did some shows from that record. I continued to record with Johnny. I'm out of the closet and doing music. Then I start performing at New York clubs, one in particular, the Sound Factory Bar.

Kennedy Didier: Sorry. What was it called?

Leslie Oliver: Sound Factory Bar.

Kennedy Didier: The Found Factory Fault?

Leslie Oliver: Bar. Like a bar.

Kennedy Didier: Bar. The Found Factory Bar. [Sound Factory Bar]

Leslie Oliver:

It was in the—I wanna say, the Chelsea part—the Chelsea section of New York, 21st and Sixth Avenue. So I meet this lady for the party. Her name is Barbara Tucker. She and Don Oliver. He's the other guy who runs it with her. They have this Wednesday night party. Little Louie Vega for his legendary, iconic house music producer. He's on the DJ booth. He's a DJ.

Barbara Tucker is the hostess. She is now house music royalty, but she was a hostess. And so I would go over there and party because that's what I did. People in the house community know me as an amazing dancer as well as a singer. So I was doing dance 'cause I loved—'cause the music was like a lifeline to me. 'Cause remember, at this point, I've reconciled with my mom, but it's not like my house. It's her house.

I'm still living out of my bag. The music and the house music community is where my lifeline was. I'm at the club. I'm performing. I'm dancing. Barbara Tucker has been told that I meet so many people in the house music community that are *[inaudible 00:46:32]* legendary. I start recording and doing backgrounds and demos with all the producers of the day. Little Louie Vega *[inaudible 00:46:44]* mixed it. I'll send you all the songs that I talk about it.

Kennedy Didier:

Yeah, I would love that.

Leslie Oliver:

Little Louie Vega has a *[inaudible 00:46:54]* after that one. He's like one of the hottest New York DJs. I do a few mixes with them. He puts his version of 'Good Time' out. I'm getting buzz here and there. This is not a goodbye house music career.

All the newer DJs and singers are my friends. Kenny Bobien is an incredible singer, Eddie Stockley, *[inaudible 00:47:18]*, Blaze, Paul *[inaudible 00:47:22]*. All the Newark singers and producers know me by now. The New York producers and singers all—I'm meeting them as well and working with some of them. Johnny and I make some really cool records. We do a couple of things together. As this is happening, this is mid-90s, I enter the ministry.

Kennedy Didier:

Yeah. I was gonna ask about that. During all these different times in your life, what was your relationship like to the church? Whether you were in childhood to all the way up to this?

Leslie Oliver: Well between '87, when I graduated from high school—from '87 to '92, while I was in college, the gospel choir was church for me. That was it. I didn't go to church.

Kennedy Didier: The gospel choir was church?

Leslie Oliver: The gospel choir was my spiritual base. My home church, I wasn't goin' back there because you have a pedophile as the pastor.

Kennedy Didier: Yeah, absolutely. When you moved out, did that—did the pastor—the home pastor stay connected to your family? When you went home to see your family, did you see him?

Leslie Oliver: He did. He did because, while he was still pulling on my mother, who by this time was like, 'Listen. Leave me alone.' But she was still at the church because she's pretty much holding the church up. Many people had left. The church was dwindling. She was called to God, not [*inaudible 00:48:50*].

She dealt with him so she could find her way and just being obedient to God. My sister is a musician by now at the church, is doin' what she's gotta do to take care of herself and make her life. In the middle of college—right near the end of college, my mom was on her way out of the church. When I came out of the closet, this pastor sent this letter around. [*Inaudible 00:49:24*] this, that, and the other. He sent this letter to my mom, but he's [*inaudible 00:49:27*] me. I don't have an opinion.

Kennedy Didier: Wow. What did the letter say?

Leslie Oliver: Well, we were always [*inaudible 00:49:35*] and wanted attention. She wanted to do this. She wanted to do that, which was as a cover for—all that you're doin' is gonna bring a negative light on me. Now I'm not gay because of being [*inaudible 00:49:47*] the problems that [*inaudible 00:49:51*].

Now, if they do decide I have to leave, [*inaudible 00:49:58*], then I'm gay because of being molested and raped me, but that's not why. I'm tellin' them my truth. That's a part of my narrative, and if people were to ask me [*inaudible 00:50:09*] other girl. [*Inaudible 00:50:14*]. That's what I [*inaudible 00:50:17*] coming out, it started scarin' him. Then he flipped it to make it seem like I was the one [*inaudible 00:50:22*].

I didn't care. I came out of the closet with my mom, got through my process, and then we were okay. We're makin' our way through

life. My sister was accepted 'cause she's not gay now. She's not gay. When she was accepted [inaudible 00:50:45] God's callin' hanging in the air [inaudible 00:50:52].

In college, it was the church. I mean, not church, the gospel choir. Outside of college, I started callin' my own connections to my faith was through the music. House music was very spiritual and inspirational. That was my connection through music and I held on to it. By the time I was eighteen, mid-90s, I am recording inspirational music and all this stuff with other music. I'm still doing house, but I'm writing inspirational house music.

Kennedy Didier: Inspirational house music that has—when you say that, you mean like house music that has important themes to you that are somehow spiritual?

Leslie Oliver: You can make it, you can do it, believe in yourself, hang on, that kind of thing.

Kennedy Didier: Yeah, of course.

Leslie Oliver: I've never been like the overtly sexual kind of music. When I did have [inaudible 00:51:49] you broke my heart kind of things 'cause heartbreak always sells. That was the kind of house music that—. Heartbreak sells.

Kennedy Didier: [Laughs] Heartbreak does always sell.

Leslie Oliver: Right. But our hit song was 'Let the Rain Come Down' [Inaudible 00:51:59] in your life [inaudible 00:52:03]. When it rains, just jump into it and enjoy the rain and be happy in it. Don't be down. Don't be sad. Moving forward, that became my brand of music, inspirational house music. By the mid-90s, I had to think of myself as a vocalist.

Sometimes [inaudible 00:52:22]. I didn't have any bad experiences with the group or anything. I'm [inaudible 00:52:29] in the industry. However, my faith was cutting at me. What happened one day, in the mid-90s, I was coming from a performance, or a big party, or somethin', and I was high off of somethin' and I almost got stabbed to death that day.

Kennedy Didier: [Gasps] Wow.

Leslie Oliver: When I was told under the influence—I mean, I was stabbed like [inaudible 00:52:58] it happened in a parking lot [inaudible

00:53:06] taken and [inaudible 00:53:09]. I wasn't feelin' bad about [inaudible 00:53:12] I had, but it distorted my [inaudible 00:53:16] got me home. When I got home and became sober, I said [inaudible 00:53:22], and I said to God, 'You know the stuff that I was doing, I hate doing.' [Inaudible 00:53:28] all of the stuff I was doing because I was hurting, suffering from high school through college and probably post-college. I had to come to [inaudible 00:53:43] and achieved a solo success and come out of the closet, but I was tortured by the pain of my trauma.

Kennedy Didier: Sorry. Can you repeat that again? It just cut out.

Leslie Oliver: I said that from high school through college to the mid-90s, I achieved some success as a singer, I had come out of the closet, but I was still tortured by the trauma of it all, of my childhood and of all the [inaudible 00:54:13]. God spoke to me in that moment and was like, 'It wasn't me. It was people. I haven't abandoned you.' I'm crying and weeping. I'm like, I've got to get back to church. I've gotta get back to my faith. So what I had heard about in a club—there's this other club called Murphy's. So there's First Choice—

Kennedy Didier: And then there's Murphy's.

Leslie Oliver: Yes, First Choice nightclub, I found at the end of college. Murphy's I found in the middle of the '90s when I'm trying to find my gay self. Murphy's is downtown where the hockey arena is. There's a hockey arena there, right?

Kennedy Didier: Yeah, I think so. It took its place.

Leslie Oliver: Right near the hockey arena or the GRAMMY Museum or whatever that is. It's on Edison Place. Edison Place is right by that museum. On the corner of Edison and Mulberry, there was a club called Murphy's. Murphy's. Murphy's with an 'M.' That was the bar that everyone went to. They had the best drinks in town—

Kennedy Didier: Best drinks in town.

Leslie Oliver: And [inaudible 00:55:27].

Kennedy Didier: [Laughter]

Leslie Oliver: I heard about it—I'm sorry?

Kennedy Didier: Oh, no. I was just laughing at the best drinks in town. It sounds amazing.

Leslie Oliver: Best drinks ever. You get a ticket when you pay your money, you get a token. The drink'll probably take you down, that first one. Another one would probably put you to sleep. That's how strong they were. If you ask people about Murphy's, people that have bought—were bought—many of them probably went there. So I'm this young lesbian, house music singer, out—'cause I've been in the closet—out lesbian singer, and I hear about this club.

I'm going there, and then I made—I became friends with the DJ. The DJ wasn't gay, but he was a nice guy. His name is David Hilton, nice guy. He played my record. I would bring him music on cassette, and he'd play it for the people just to get a feel of how they liked it, and they loved it, and so I found another home.

I would go there. I could only afford to pay for one drink, so I would drink my little drink until it tasted like soda 'cause I wasn't working that regularly. I hadn't gotten to FedEx yet. Over the years, that became the place I would go. Then people began to recognize me as a house music singer. I'm the lesbian house music singer. That's where I heard about this church called Unity.

Kennedy Didier: This church called? I'm sorry. What was the name of the Church?

Leslie Oliver: Unity Fellowship Church.

Kennedy Didier: Unity Fellowship?

Leslie Oliver: Yeah. What people told me was that's where the pretty girls are. So I said, 'Oh, really?,' but I had brushed it off 'cause I was like, 'There's no way a church can be gay. No way.' When I had *[inaudible 00:57:20]* serious, the name popped back up in my *[audio cuts out 00:57:24]*. I said, 'I know where I can go. I'll find Unity.' So I looked it up and I said, 'Oh, it's at the Lesbian and Gay Center in New York. I'm gonna go there, and I'm gonna go to the service.'

I went one Sunday and you had to stand in a long line because of the fire code, they had to count the people that came in. When it got too crowded, you had to come back next time. I found a way in because someone said, 'Well, just go to the membership class. You have an automatic seat.' I went to the membership class and I met some old friends in there. I thought, 'Wait a minute. What are you doin' here?' I'm like, 'Oh, my God. Some of my good friends are gay.'

Kennedy Didier: Wow.

Leslie Oliver: I'm like, 'Oh my, God. Jackpot!' What happened in that service was I heard them tell me, 'You are very special.' I'd never heard that in a church before. I'm just crying and crying and crying. I'm like, 'What is this?' I'm looking for some place to be special, and I'm trying to be nice, so I can be special.

My entire life, I tried to be good, so I can be special. When I hear the church, when I have written God off, it was like an answered prayer. I'm like, 'Okay. I think I got my God back.' What happens is I joined that church. Then I found out that they go from New York to Brooklyn. By now, it's '93 or '94.

I'm taking the train to Brooklyn to go to this church. I only have enough time to hear a little bit of the sermon. I could either hear the choir or the sermon. I had to get back on the train and go back to Newark to FedEx to work at night. That's a trip I would take. Then at night, when I got off work, I would go to the clubs, the house clubs, and I would party because house music was my lifeline and I was still [*inaudible 59:24*] or whatever.

So I feel I belong to this church but then I find out they're making—they're creating one in Newark. I was really elated. I was like, oh my God. I get all the things I love right in my hometown. Unity Fellowship opens a church in Newark. It's called Liberation in Truth Unity Fellowship Church.

By now, I'm in another relationship, and I go, with my FedEx uniform on, to the first service. One of my exes is a part of the committee and she asked me to come and sing a song. I go up, and I sing the song. They're like, 'Oh, that was really good. That was good. That's good.' I end up joining the music department. They did not have a musician, so I say, 'I can play a little bit.'

Kennedy Didier: So you were the one-person music department at the new church?
[Laughs]

Leslie Oliver: No. They had a couple of singers in the music department. They had a director, and they had some singers.

Kennedy Didier: Oh, got it. Got it.

Leslie Oliver: I end up being the keyboard—the piano player. While I'm at Unity starting a career as a music director or the keyboard player, I'm still

doing house music in the city. Ace is still there. Right now, Ace is still there. I'm still doing music with Ace.

I'm doing music with different people in Newark. I'm pretty well known in the city. I'm pretty well known in the gay community. I'm attending Unity Fellowship Church. I'm their piano player. That's where I became a deacon and a minister. I'm connected by the house music community, the gay community 'cause they hadn't put all the other letters in it just yet. LGBTQIA was not here yet. It was LGBT.

Kennedy Didier: What year was this?

Leslie Oliver: Gay and lesbian. It was gay and lesbian.

Kennedy Didier: What year did you join Unity, and then what year did you become a deacon?

Leslie Oliver: I joined Unity in New York in '94. Unity new church came to Newark in I think '94. I joined them in '95. I had just started at FedEx in '94—April of '94. That's when my record, 'Good Time,' was kickin' off, and I was—

Kennedy Didier: Sorry. What year did you join—did you get hired at FedEx? What year was that? Sorry.

Leslie Oliver: '94.

Kennedy Didier: '94. Got it.

Leslie Oliver: '94 was when I got hired at FedEx. Later that year, I started going to the Unity in New York and Brooklyn. I joined the Newark Church in '95. I'm their keyboard player. I became a deacon in '97.

Kennedy Didier: Got it.

Leslie Oliver: I became a deacon with my partner at the time. We became deacons together. So that's '97. I'm at the church playin' the piano, working with the choir by then. I'm still doing house music. By now, I'm working with someone different, Willy Washington, and we're doing some music together. I have a couple of other songs that got some buzz.

Kennedy Didier: So you separated—you stopped working with Johnny, and you started working with a new co-musician?

Leslie Oliver: Right. Johnny and I were working off and on. At one point, it was just Johnny. I [*inaudible 01:03:14*]. I was working with the both of them kinda. Johnny and I, we did not ever stop working together on purpose. [*Inaudible 01:03:25*] and we do stuff, and I stayed in contact, but I was working [*inaudible 01:03:29*], I was in the industry now, so I couldn't work—

And Johnny was doing other things. We didn't see each other as much, but we still kept in contact. Working with Willy on some new music. We had a couple of songs that got some buzz overseas, 'Rescue Me,' [*inaudible 01:03:52*] international producers got a hold of the music. Willy and I would do some work, so—

Kennedy Didier: What countries was house music popular in internationally?

Leslie Oliver: London. Europe has a strong affinity for house music. Germany, Amsterdam, the UK, big presence. House music is huge overseas. It's bigger than it is here.

Kennedy Didier: Oh, I didn't know that. That's crazy.

Leslie Oliver: Oh, absolutely. Now, it's everywhere. But at the time, this was the late '90s, it was getting more attention than it was when it started. The '80s, when it started—'70s when it started, people weren't really into it. But by the '90s, they were loving it, and they love it now.

We were making history with Newark. Newark was making history in house music. The Jersey Sound, as we call it, was unlike other types of house music 'cause it was very inspirational. A lot of the focus was on the lyrics. [*Inaudible 01:05:01*]. Great artists came, Adeva, Kenny Bobien, Kaywise, KC Lights, Blaze. All these people, DJ ArRoD [01:05:15], the Burrell Brothers, Cassio Ware.

House music was kickin'. It was banging in Jersey. They had their own—we had our own spiritual, soulful sound and I was a part of that and all my friends. It was a great time. The mid-90s, I was shakin' my way with New York producers and connected with a lot of different people, but also beginning a career in the ministry as a worship leader in an affirming community, a gay—a lesbian and gay community.

Unity, at this point, was about ten or twelve years old. This was the first African-American denomination for people who consider themselves lesbian, gay, bi, trans, intersex, questioning, asexual. Carl Bean, who wrote the first 'I'm gay' record—he wrote the first

record that said, 'I'm happy. I'm carefree. I'm gay. I was born this way.' He's the founder of this movement.

Kennedy Didier: Wow.

Leslie Oliver: Right. I found this out around the same time I joined the new church. Lost my mind. You mean this record that I've been hearin' for the last ten years was sung by the man who runs this denomination of this faith movement? It's amazing how I'm in the—I'm this college girl singing this positive spiritual music. I come out of the closet as a gay girl, as a gay woman who reconnects with God in the place where the man who makes the first 'I'm gay, and God's okay with it' record.

I'm in one of his churches as one of his leaders, so I'm like, wow. *[Inaudible 01:07:03]* I'm like, what? I'm all-around gay. I'm all-around gay. I'm church gay. I'm music gay. Then I became a teacher by now. I am a very funky lesbian teacher. Now I wasn't out to the kids, but the teachers knew. Some of the kids knew because I taught in my neighborhood that I lived at.

Kennedy Didier: What year was this? What year did you get your teaching credential?

Leslie Oliver: I started teaching—this was like '99 when I started teaching.

Kennedy Didier: You taught in Newark Public Schools?

Leslie Oliver: Ma'am, I'm sorry?

Kennedy Didier: Oh, I said, was it in—did you teach in—what years did you teach or what grades did you teach? Was it in Newark Public Schools?

Leslie Oliver: It was. I started subbing. I started subbing in Newark Public School in 2000 because I left FedEx. They laid me off, and I subbed going into the year 2000. By now, I'm at Unity for about five—just got ordained as a deacon. After I got ordained as a deacon, I said, 'well, I've always wanted to be a teacher.'

I don't want to work at FedEx anymore. I ended up getting hurt, and then I got laid off. I worked with the church—I worked with the church's nonprofit. They had a nonprofit in Newark called Loving in Truth. This was the first HIV/AIDS center in Newark. It was *[inaudible 01:08:40]* on Halsey Street.

The pastor at the time, *[inaudible 01:08:44]*, opened up this nonprofit for people with HIV and AIDS because—so they can get counseling and meet. I was her assistant. Then I started subbing. Then I got a permanent—a long-term assignment at MLK Elementary where I went to school.

Meanwhile, I'm at the church downtown. I'm playing piano there downtown. I'm singing with a different house music artist in Newark. Then I go back to teach where I went to school in Newark. I have a *[inaudible 01:09:20]* haircut, cut-out leggings, jacket—sleeveless leather jacket, cowboy boots, and jeans *[inaudible 01:09:30]* gay. And I knew that I had arrived in the epitome of gaydom when the teacher slips a religious tract in my mailbox. *[Inaudible 01:09:46]*.

Kennedy Didier: Wow. Wow. Hello? Leslie? I think it cut out. Hello?

[End of 2020-02-28 Leslie Oliver interview by Kennedy Didier PART ONE]

[Beginning of 2020-02-28 Leslie Oliver interview by Kennedy Didier PART TWO]

Leslie Oliver: —what happened, I was tryin' to manage this dog. There might be a chance of barking.

Kennedy Didier: *[Laughter]*

Leslie Oliver: I'm trying to get him to be quiet.

Kennedy Didier: No problem.

Leslie Oliver: He's makin' it hard, but anyway. I'm so sorry. I was tryin' to get him to be quiet, but it didn't work.

Kennedy Didier: No, no. You're fine. You're fine. I'm just gonna restart the recording, so I'm just gonna have to say the thing again. Is that okay?

Leslie Oliver: Okay. Where do you want me to pick up from?

Kennedy Didier: The last thing you said that I think the recorder picked up was that someone slipped religious stuff in your mailbox.

Leslie Oliver: Oh, yeah. Yeah. I knew I had arrived, arrived-arrived in the gay *[inaudible 00:46]* community because, as a teacher, that's it. I had a Ceasar, boots with the jeans. I'm looking very out lesbian.

Someone put a religious tract about homosexuality in my teacher mailbox.

Kennedy Didier: Wow.

Leslie Oliver: You know, I'm from the mindset, just hand it to me. We can have a conversation. You may not like what I say. I'm feeling very *[inaudible 01:13]*. In Unity, we learned that God loves you just the way that you are, and you're very special. So I had my lifeline *[inaudible 01:22]* now for about six-seven years. Back in '93, '94 was when I had that double side.

I became very comfortable with who I was. And I'm sharing my gifts in a church that I'm surrounded by gays and lesbians and bisexual and trans brothers and sisters. I sing it in my church. People know that I'm a lesbian. I have fellowship with the people on the weekend. *[Inaudible 01:50 - 01:59]* teach. *[Inaudible 01:56]* change. *[Inaudible 01:59]* not to change, and I get this *[inaudible 02:03]*, to the coward who put a tract in my box, say it to my face.

Kennedy Didier: Wow.

Leslie Oliver: And I said that very loudly. Plus now I'm in my twenties, I had a lot of nerve at that time. I say, 'Say it to my face. Don't say *[inaudible 02:18]* school.' I told the principal because I wanted to know if he was gonna save their face. He tried to give me the old, 'Don't worry about it' thing, but I'm sure he must have the tract himself 'cause he seemed a little homophobic with himself. So I resolved to just being my very, very, very gay self.

At this point, I consider myself androgynous. I like men's clothes, so I wear them to school. I wear men's shirts, men's pants, and shoes, very dapper. Not the Timberland's and a baseball hat or anything

Kennedy Didier: *[Laughter]*.

Leslie Oliver: Very like dapper, professional-looking, but I'm a woman, and I dress like an older *[inaudible 03:00]*.

So how about that? How 'bout them apples? I was *[inaudible 03:05]*. I'm a gay teacher. Everybody knows I'm gay. You can see that I'm gay. Some people can talk and ask me about it, but I have to do that. While I'm doing this, I become pregnant.

Kennedy Didier: Wow.

Leslie Oliver: Yeah, so I decided I wanted to have a daughter. Yea so. In 2000, I'm officially hired at the school as a first-grade teacher. And the first year I'm goin', okay, like, 'Oh my God, these kids are little.' So the second year of teaching second grade, I decided I wanted to be a mom. And the one thing that I remember from *[inaudible 03:52 - 03:58]* and so I decide *[inaudible 04:00 - 04:05]*.

Kennedy Didier: Hey, Leslie. It's cutting in and out. It didn't pick up the last like thirty seconds.

Leslie Oliver: Okay. Can you hear me well now?

Kennedy Didier: Yeah, I can hear you now.

Leslie Oliver: So what I said was, I'm becoming comfortable in my skin. I'm at the church. I can sing in my church, and I'm a teacher so. *[Inaudible 04:32]*, 'To the coward who put the tract in my box, say it to my face.' *[Inaudible 04:43]* and decided I wanted to have a child. Didn't ask for no one's permission. Didn't consult anyone. I just got the mommy bug.

I'm nearing my thirties, and I'm like, 'Aw, look at the baby'

Kennedy Didier: *[Laughter]*.

Leslie Oliver: Because of the trauma—the sexual trauma in my life, I had resolved earlier, look, no, I'm not havin' any kids. I don't wanna bring kids into this cruel world. I didn't want any child to go through what I went through, but I could not help the maternal pull. I said to myself, 'I think I wanna do this.'

I'm in another relationship at this time. I said, 'I think I wanna do it.' A friend of mine at church, she said, 'Are you really gonna do this?' I said, 'Yeah.' She said, 'I'll talk to my friend. I'll talk to him.' And I knew him. We had a good relationship. *[Inaudible 05:37]* together.

Kennedy Didier: Wow.

Leslie Oliver: And so you know, *[Inaudible 05:44]* where am I going to be with all this experience with a non-gay? I don't think so, but will it change who I am?

I really want to be a mother. And so throughout my pregnancy, I'm still singing, still ministering at church. I'm grappling with this identity that's come. I'm gonna be a mommy gay. I'm gonna be a mommy gay. I'm already a teacher gay and a preacher gay 'cause, by now, I am a deacon. I'm already like a preacher gay. I'm a singer gay. I'm gonna be a mommy gay. What is that?

And so, and I'm also—I'm not dressed very feminine. I have an androgynous look. I wear men's clothes, and have on make-up or lipstick. But clearly, I was not like ultra-feminine. So I go through my pregnancy and all of that kind of falls off of me.

At that point, I wanna have a healthy child. I'm excited about being a mom. When I give birth, I have a beautiful baby girl. And all that caution goes to the wind. I don't think about any of that. I wanna be good mommy for Judah and I fall in love with the little girl.

Kennedy Didier: What's her name?

Leslie Oliver: Her name is Judah.

Kennedy Didier: Judah, and what year was she born?

Leslie Oliver: She was born in August of 2002.

Kennedy Didier: August of 2002. So she's seventeen now? My little sister was born in 2001.

Leslie Oliver: She is. She is.

Kennedy Didier: That's so exciting!

Leslie Oliver: She changes my entire perspective on life because I care no more about—I never really cared much before, and I wasn't really in the closet before, but I really don't care what anyone thinks now. I have a responsibility to be my best and most authentic self, not just because that's just what it is, but I have a child who will watch my every move and how dare they—

Leslie Oliver: Yeah, and who is gonna learn from you.

Kennedy Didier: Right. How dare I walk in fear of myself or let anybody tell me who I'm going to be. [*Inaudible 08:08*]. Now, in 2002, I've come through all of these things, and I'm embracing who I am, but I have to be her mommy first. And if I wanna be a mommy, I'm gonna be a healthy, authentic, real mommy. I'm not gonna pretend to be

confused with an apron and heels and lipstick on. That does not [inaudible 08:34] cries and laughs, the tears, the struggles, she's going to see a real person. My mom [inaudible 08:43] most of the time.

Kennedy Didier:

Sorry. Can you repeat that? It cut out again. I'm so sorry.

Leslie Oliver:

I'm sorry. I said my mother hid a bunch of her authenticity behind the *Bible*. A great deal of it was, she was a spiritual or religious woman, but there was so much more to her, which I'm grateful she's finding now. And she's healed and rested and left the routine of church life. She's finding herself enjoying herself more. Based on what I went through watching her, I was determined to be someone else.

There are parts of her that I appreciate now as a woman and a mom, but I will not be bound, I will not be stuck, or held back. And so, I said, 'Okay. I'm gonna be the mommy gay. I'm gonna be such an authentic mommy gay that people are gonna be sick of it.' In 2002, I have this baby girl and then I start thinking, oh my God, [inaudible 09:53]. I can see what's out there.

'Cause in ministry at that time, things were progressin' but I wanted to see more of life with my baby girl and I was beginning to get restless with Newark. I felt that, in the city that I loved and I grew up in, I contributed much to the city, but I wanted another breath of fresh air. I saw myself wanting to go somewhere else and I heard about this place named Charlotte.

I threw it off at first, but as Judah got a little older, it kept tugging at me. I had visited it a few times. I said, 'I like this place.' I'd always entertained the thought of moving south. And so becoming a mom opened me up to the idea of leaving everything that I'd ever known and trying something different, somewhere different.

I was very comfortable in Newark. I had a music career that I could have pushed into something, but I've come to put the musical career down for the ministry. I had a very comfortable music ministry at the church at Unity and I was [inaudible 00:11:04] to put that to the side [inaudible 00:11:05]. I had a teaching job. Some of my former teachers were still there. I could have made it work, could have been grandfathered in, and had a nice, comfortable existence, but I wanted something more.

That's what led to the decision to leave Newark and come to Charlotte. Newark has—it gave me—it made me who I was to

have the courage to be gay. I found my peace, my freedom, my authenticity there. I became a mother there. I made my music career there. I freed myself there 'cause I went away to college very broken and confused.

I came back with a full understanding of let's make—I can do this life thing. I think I can [*inaudible 12:01*]. Being in this music group there, it changed my entire life. Being at Rutgers in the choir got me to being a singer in Newark, and it's changed my entire life in music. The house music in Newark saved my life. The church in Newark lit up my life. Growing up in Newark gave me the dexterity and the tenacity and the tough skin I would need to live life for Judah authentically.

Newark made me in every way, every sense of the word, and I owe so much to the city. The roots are dug deep in the ground. My grandmother moved to the Italian side of town, the north side of Newark with my grandfather, who grew up on the Italian side of town. My dad lives on the west side of Newark, the central side. My survivor story is rooted in the city and gave me the strength and the endurance to create another story with my daughter.

Because of all of the scratches on me or bruises on me from living there, I wanted something different for her. Ultimately that's the decision to move. But I love the city, and I miss it much because of the joyous times I did have there. Like I said, the '80s were a big, positive part of my life. There's nothing like going to the city of Newark and just—in the city in—. Sometimes when I do that, I go to where I grew up, the places I grew up, just to kind of remember.

When I need to remember and get grounded and settled in who I am, I will take a visit. 'Cause my mom's still there. My sister's still there. My daughter's father is still nearby, and her grandmother, that's her paternal grandmother, is still there. Both of grandmothers are there and her godfather and all that. She still has connections to the city. My mom and siblings. My sister's there. So there's always reasons to come back.

The church that I started in is still there. So the Zanzibar closed down a little bit after—right before I left and First Choice was tore down as well. Murphy's was closed. Now they have all that stuff down there. But I go to remember the journey. I also go and walk the streets at night or early in the daytime. I go to Penn Station and just sit on the benches to remember the journey.

I'll never, ever be able to forget the city. It had a special place in my story. I talk a lot about the streets there, even the church [inaudible 15:07]. It's in my memoir. I have a memoir called 'Daughter: A Pre-K Memoir.' Pre-K is a name for [audio cuts out 15:14].

Kennedy Didier: Sorry. What's the title of the memoir?

Leslie Oliver: It's called 'Daughter: A Pre-K Memoir.' I'll send you a PDF of the book so you can—if you wanted to see it.

Kennedy Didier: I would love that.

Leslie Oliver: It's on Amazon. I'll send you a PDF of the book, but I use street names to tell some of the stories of my growing up in Newark as a child of the church. My mom [inaudible 15:42]. I tell certain pieces of the story, even when I was assaulted by the pastor. That's in there and I don't use names just to protect the families of people. I'm not necessarily—I don't know that I'm protecting him. He's been exposed [inaudible 16:03].

Just the story of the Newark story. I did the memoir with [inaudible 16:11] Newark streets. Just the narrative that is my life. Newark gave me the courage to be authentic. There's a beauty in the city that gets covered by so much other stuff for me. I'm trying to answer—I think [inaudible 16:31] question. People are [inaudible 16:32].

Kennedy Didier: [Laughs] No, but I think that—

Leslie Oliver: That's pretty much my journey from Newark to leaving Newark in '04. I left in June '04.

Kennedy Didier: So you still live in Charlotte?

Leslie Oliver: I've been in Charlotte since '04. Yeah, I'm still here. I would not move back to Newark unless something happened. Because unless my mother needs me to move back there with her, I will not move back. [Inaudible 17:00] family.

Kennedy Didier: It's okay, I—normally, when I ask the questions, it—I feel like this was much more authentic, getting to hear your story as it came to you, which was really exciting. I'm so grateful that you shared with me. I think that—your story is so remarkable, and so—you're so resilient and I think that—

Leslie Oliver: Oh, thank you.

Kennedy Didier: —your story is just so remarkable. In a lot of the interviews I do, the music scene comes up so much and I'm so interested in how music can really function as a way to bring—to both bring people together, help people grapple with their own identities, their own struggles. I just think that your story is such a perfect example of that.

Leslie Oliver: Yeah, it saved my life. Yeah.

Kennedy Didier: Some follow-up questions, I guess. One, in terms of the city itself, what do you see as—how has it changed before you left? Over the time that you lived there, would you say the city itself underwent many changes?

Leslie Oliver: I'd say that it became a bit more safe. Now I grew up in the area of Central Avenue. Central Avenue, as it goes all the way down to Market Street.

Kennedy Didier: Central and Market.

Leslie Oliver: Central and Market. There's a gas station—or at least I'm imagining that there's some gas station right at Central and Market. There's a bank across from the gas station. The change is there's more violence.

By the time I was—'cause Judah was almost two years old when I left. There's more violence, and the drugs, and the crime in that area. 'Cause I've been in this area—we lived in that area since I was in the fourth grade. I stayed in that area from fourth grade all the way through high school and college and then moved back—I moved back to that same area—

Kennedy Didier: When you got out of college?

Leslie Oliver: When I became a teacher. I moved away for a bit. As I came back [*inaudible 00:19:21*], so pretty much in the same area 'cause I stayed with my mom. Then I ended up getting an apartment on my own. Over that time, it got a bit more violent. That's another reason why I left. Okay, I cannot raise my daughter here. No. No. I'm used to the goings and comings of the neighborhood, but the gang violence was starting to peak a little. Around the time that I left, I'm sure you're familiar with Sakia Gunn.

Kennedy Didier: Yeah, absolutely.

Leslie Oliver: Not too long before that, being gunned down emotionlessly. I spent—that corner she was killed on, I used to dance on that corner to house music. We would put a piece of linoleum on the ground, and we would just dance to the music. A good friend of mine, Jamie Henry, he would sell tapes of house music on that corner. We would go up to that corner and just [inaudible 00:20:19] house music and dance.

We were just kids. As a matter of fact, I saw Pras. He's a member of the Fugees. The Fugees are the group that Lauryn Hill was in.

Kennedy Didier: Oh, really?

Leslie Oliver: He used to impersonate Michael Jackson on that corner. I mean, Broad and Market. It's the corner of Broad and Market. I think there's a GameStop on that corner now.

Kennedy Didier: Yeah, where the GameStop is. Yeah, absolutely

Leslie Oliver: Right. Jamie used to have this peddler's cart with cassette tapes of house music, and we were just dancin' and dancin'. It was that kind of place. And as I was leaving Newark, it became a bit more violent. The gangs was just more and more or whatever you call it. The children were just becoming a bit more disrespectful. The tone, the new generation had arrived. It just seemed a little different. I was like, I can't raise my daughter here. I could, but I won't and I was looking for a change anyway. The safety of the city was becoming questionable for me, especially in the Central African market [confirm 00:21:21] area. I grew up in Georgia King, which is across from UMDNJ.

Kennedy Didier: Sorry, it's across from what?

Leslie Oliver: The University of Medicine and Dentistry, UMDNJ Hospital.

Kennedy Didier: Yeah. Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Leslie Oliver: I grew up in that area, [inaudible 00:21:41]. The hospital building across from UMDNJ, that used to be Martland Hospital, I was born there, in that old hospital building. My mom used to work there. I remember when UMDNJ was being built. I remember when the supermarket across from it was built.

I was a kid around those times. So that area, you could walk all over that area, but then it became less and less safe. When kids get

shot right on Broad and Market, I used to walk those streets. When I used to go to Murphy's, I used to walk those streets in the middle of the night, not have to worry about a thing with my gay self.

When they shot her down on the way from New York—coming from the Village. Then I was like, you know what? No. That was then. The city had got a little unsafe. I love Newark, still do, but I'm not gonna raise my daughter here. I wanna try a better place. Yeah, that's what it was. Yeah. [Note: Sakia Gunn was stabbed, not shot.]

Kennedy Didier: Thank you so much for sharing. Another question that I have, I think you touched on it a little bit. You mentioned that you first became aware of your own identity as a gay woman when you were in college and you saw the woman on the Globetrotters. When you were growing up, did you have any sense of, like your identity as a gay woman, or was that the first moment that you came into that identity?

Leslie Oliver: You know, I had the occasional 'I kissed a girl, and I liked it.' You know? [Laughs] [Inaudible 23:15]. But no, because I grew up in the church and this pedophile pastor, [inaudible 23:23] at all. I won't say his name, but I don't mind sayin' it, but I won't say it here. He was like, 'All the gays are going to Hell,' and 'Faggot this,' and 'Bulldagger that,' a very old, inappropriate term for us. And 'That's wrong. Two men or two women.'

Not [inaudible 23:46] the kids that he had been dippin' and dabblin' at the gay clubs 'cause they know him by name. But when I was a kid, it was like, 'You're going to Hell. [Inaudible 23:54]. God made Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve.' [Inaudible 23:58]. I wasn't thinking about it anyway, but I don't have [inaudible 24:05]. I thought girls were pretty, but I shoved it off. That's just something that kids do. [Inaudible 24:13]. It wasn't until I'd seen that basketball player, 'cause back then, Wide World of Sports type of thing.

ABC had this program, Wide World of Sports. Cable had really gotten [inaudible 24:28]. Every Saturday, ABC played sports. When I saw her, my—like I said, I had a quiver in my stomach and my heart started beating fast. Then I couldn't stop looking at her. I kept trying to find anything I could that mentioned her. I found out she played at Kansas. [Inaudible 24:50] ask about her. 'Cause nobody was having those conversations when I was in high school. Now there were guys who were out, and some were gay or whatever, but nobody was having a conversation about it.

I didn't know any lesbians in my high school class. I thought everybody was straight. *[Inaudible 25:05]*, but I clearly *[inaudible 25:09]* gay. I wanted to ask about *[inaudible 25:12]*. I was *[inaudible 25:16]* coming out. I just didn't know it was *[inaudible 25:18]*. Everyone in high school thought I was gay anyway.

I didn't know it *[inaudible 25:23]* I guess. 'That's how we knew you were gay in school.' My boyfriend, he was gay. I didn't know that in school.

Kennedy Didier: Wow!

Leslie Oliver: He tried to make a go at me, but he was so sweet. I was *[inaudible 25:36 - 25:46]*. I guess I was pretending and didn't know I was pretending, but when I saw her face, and I felt something, I was like, 'Oh.' *[Inaudible 25:53 - 25:59]* to not knowing, but I still do think about her a lot.

[Inaudible 26:01]. I couldn't stop thinking about her. Then when I got to college, *[inaudible 26:07]* I couldn't keep my eyes off 'em. I thought everybody watched girls. I had to train myself not to look so hard at women. Yeah, I was just gonna *[inaudible 26:20]* physically until that moment where I went home with this woman in my senior year and actually had to touch her or risk being embarrassed.

Then when I saw *[inaudible 26:44 - 26:50]* I was still at the church. But I knew something was going on 'cause we had to wear—in the Pentecostal church, some of them are very strict. You have to cover your hair with a cloth. You have to wear a skirt. But I couldn't wear pants to school, I had to sneak them to school. I had to wear holy lookin' skirts or dresses.

[Inaudible 27:08] shoulder pads in 'em 'cause that was the thing in the '80s, shoulder pads on your clothes. And I had a wig on when I was—when I first went away to college, I cut my hair and the pastor was upset about that. He didn't like seeing it, so I had to wear a wig to cover up my natural hair. I had cut my hair into like a short buzz cut and he didn't like it, said I looked like a man. Mind you, it's my natural hair. So I had to wear a wig to church.

Kennedy Didier: Wow. Sorry, when was that, that you started having to wear the wig?

Leslie Oliver: What year was that?

Kennedy Didier: Yeah. How old were you when you cut your hair?

Leslie Oliver: I was—seventh and eighth, so I was—I cut my hair freshman year. So it might have been ‘89, ‘90.

Kennedy Didier: Got it. Freshman year of high school or college?

Leslie Oliver: Freshman—I cut my hair in the middle of—no, not freshman year, I’m sorry. The middle or the end of sophomore year, I cut my hair. I was still playing music. I would come home on the weekends to play the keyboard for my church. My sister and I were the musicians. So I needed money, so that's how I [*inaudible 28:31*].

I just came home for the weekends 'cause my mother was [*inaudible 28:37 - 28:44*]. I was wearing a wig 'cause I also had to wear it for my group 'cause they didn't like my natural hair either. Back then, nobody was really wearin' hair like that. Not a lot. They wanted a more feminine look. There was this whole discrimination, yeah, discrimination of how I looked.

Some people really were discriminated against me. I just wasn't aware of it in the house community, but in the church, it is probably more because of who he was. [*Inaudible 29:08*] hair, college was the only place I felt okay to wear my natural hair. Eventually, [*inaudible 29:16 - 29:25*]. I took the wig off after a while. [*Inaudible 29:27*], yeah. I took the wig off.

I was like, okay, this feels way uncomfortable. I'm wearing the motorcycle jackets and the cut-offs and the cut-up tee-shirts. [*Inaudible 29:43*] were out then, and I was just [*inaudible 29:45*] my combat boots. I was just coming into it slowly until I could get more comfortable. Even when I walked into that club, I was like, oh yeah. I had a [*inaudible 29:58*] It was just awesome there.

Kennedy Didier: Thank you so much for sharing with me.

Leslie Oliver: Yeah. I'm a [*inaudible - maybe 'homo'? 30:07*] engaged lesbian pastor now. [*Didier laughs*]. [*Inaudible 30:12*].

Kennedy Didier: Sorry. Could you repeat that? It's sounding a little bit muffled.

Leslie Oliver: I'm sorry. I said I'm a [*inaudible - maybe 'homo'? 30:22*] engaged lesbian pastor now all over social media. So I'll have to show you some of my work. I have an outreach ministry in Charlotte, outreach church, but I also do a live Facebook thing every Sunday

at nine. I'm a whole lesbian pastor, social media butterfly now. All the way out there.

Kennedy Didier: That's amazing

Leslie Oliver: I do work with the Poor People's Campaign. I'm all the way out now.

Kennedy Didier: Oh, you work with the Poor People's Campaign, too? That's such an amazing—

Leslie Oliver: I do.

Kennedy Didier: I'm so interested in the work they do and I'm so supportive. I think it's so, so, so important.

Leslie Oliver: Yeah, I do, yeah.

Kennedy Didier: Wow, that's so cool. If I communicate with you over email or text, will you send me references to your work and stuff that I could read? I would *love* to read it. Your story is so interesting.

Leslie Oliver: I'll send you whatever you need. All of the records I made in Newark and all of that, things.

Kennedy Didier: Oh, that would be so—thank you so much.

Leslie Oliver: The church and *[inaudible 31:21]*.

Kennedy Didier: Thank you so much for sharing with me. Then the last thing is just—so, because this is a phone interview, so the recording might be less clear. We have a transcription service that'll transcribe it. But then I'll send the audio file and the transcription to you just so you can look over it and see that everything made it. And if it didn't, then you can just tell me where I should make edits just to make sure that it's as clear as possible.

I just don't want—we do that for everyone, but just especially so 'cause it's a phone interview. I just wanna make sure that it all gets in there 'cause I can hear everything you're saying, but I'm just nervous about it transferring over. And I really—your words are so, so, so important, and I just really want to make sure that they all get through. I just wanted to give you a heads up that I'll be emailing you with that once we get it back from the transcription service.

Leslie Oliver: Okay. 'Cause I know I probably said more *[inaudible 32:24]*.

Kennedy Didier: No, no, no, no, no. This was so fantastic. This was so, so, so fantastic. Thank you so much. I really, really, really enjoyed talking to you. Thank you so much for spending your time with talking to me. It's really meant so much to me.

Leslie Oliver: Do you not work with Jae Quinlan *[32:44]*? Do you know Jae?

Kennedy Didier: I do not know Jae.

Leslie Oliver: She first—. When I was visiting Newark, I believe, at a *[inaudible 32:54]* apartment. I think she probably mentioned this project to me, but Reverend Jae Quinlan, she used to be with Unity. She's not anymore, but she had a little boutique on Market Street. She told me about the project years ago. I think I was into it about two years ago.

[Dog barking] Sorry for my—Shut up Drake!

Kennedy Didier: *[Laughter]*.

Leslie Oliver: She told me about your project, and I thought you guys would know each other. She was involved in a project.

Kennedy Didier: I'm the newest person, so it's—.

Leslie Oliver: Oh, okay.

Kennedy Didier: It's probably just because I haven't met them yet.

Leslie Oliver: Oh, okay. Okay, okay, okay. She contacted me for the project a couple years ago, and I forgot about it. So I'm glad you got reconnected with me. I'll send you what you need—whatever you need.

Kennedy Didier: Thank you so so much. Thank you so much for—

Leslie Oliver: You are the most welcome.

Kennedy Didier: Thank you. I wish you and Judah all the luck in the world. Tell her that I said good luck. I know seventeen's a hard year. My little sister, like I said, is eighteen, so she's also that young age. But thank you so, so much for talking to me. I hope you have a wonderful night.

Leslie Oliver: You're welcome. You do the same.

Kennedy Didier: Thank you so much.

Leslie Oliver: You're welcome.

Kennedy Didier: Take care. Thank you.

Leslie Oliver: Bye-bye.

Kennedy Didier: Bye.

Leslie Oliver: Bye-bye.

Kennedy Didier: This has been Kennedy Didier interviewing Leslie for the Queer Newark Oral History Project. It is February 28, 2020. Thank you very much.

[End of Audio]