

Queer Newark Oral History Project

Interviewee: Laquetta Nelson

Interviewer: Esperanza Santos and Kristyn Scorsone

Date: March 7th, 2020

Location: Phone Interview. Queer Newark Office, Newark, NJ and Maryland.

*Esperanza Santos:* Today's date is March 7th, 2020. My name is Esperanza Santos, and I'm interviewing with Kristyn Scorsone. We are interviewing Laquetta Nelson over the phone in the Queer Newark office while she is in Maryland for the Queer Newark Oral History Project. Hi, Laquetta.

*Laquetta Nelson:* Hello, Esperanza and Kristyn.

*Kristyn Scorsone:* Hello.

*Esperanza Santos:* Thank you again for being willing to do this interview. I know you have a pretty big story, and I'm excited to hear all about it.

*Laquetta Nelson:* I'm excited, too.

*Esperanza Santos:* All right, so let's get going. Now, can you tell me when and where were you born?

*Laquetta Nelson:* I was born March 16, 1955 in Washington, D.C.

*Esperanza Santos:* Growing up in D.C., who raised you?

*Laquetta Nelson:* I was raised by my mother, and I was her first born of nine children.

*Esperanza Santos:* Oh my goodness. Was it just your siblings and your mom, and that's who made up the household?

*Laquetta Nelson:* Pretty much.

*Esperanza Santos:* In D.C., did you all mostly stay in one neighborhood or in one house, or did you all move around a lot?

*Laquetta Nelson:* We moved around a lot. We moved around a lot.

*Esperanza Santos:* Was that like your mom had trouble with housing, or was it y'all were just trying to get something better?

*Laquetta Nelson:* My mother was trying to survive with all those children.

*Kristyn Scorsone:* What did she do for a living?

*Laquetta Nelson:* My mother never worked, so I grew up on welfare. I received free lunch and free breakfast. I used to run to school to get that little thing of cereal.

*Esperanza Santos:* That's right, in the morning with the little cereal and the little milk. You know?

*Laquetta Nelson:* Yes. Yes. Yes.

*Esperanza Santos:* Yeah, and also for lunchtime.

*Laquetta Nelson:* Yes. All the stuff they ended up cutting out. When they first started it, I was one of the kids that received it and participated in it.

*Esperanza Santos:* Oh, so did that start when you were in elementary school?

*Laquetta Nelson:* Yes.

*Esperanza Santos:* Do you remember what grade or what year that was?

*Laquetta Nelson:* When? What are you talking about specifically here?

*Esperanza Santos:* When you got the breakfast or the lunch.

*Laquetta Nelson:* The free breakfast? I don't recall. Let me see. I think the fifth grade. I think that is when it started, in the fifth grade. I don't remember getting it in the fourth grade or any of the grades before then, but I know I got it in the fifth grade and the sixth grade.

*Kristyn Scorsone:* Was there a stigma around it at that time for you?

*Laquetta Nelson:* Hm. No. I don't remember anybody making fun of me because it was a lot of us.

*Kristyn Scorsone:* Right. Totally.

*Laquetta Nelson:* I remember running and playing in the classroom after lunch. We got our little bags of free lunch, and they were good too. After we had our lunch, we would be running around playing in the classroom, and then we'd go outside a little while before we had to be back in class.

*Kristyn Scorsone:* Did your mom ever talk about how she felt about it?

*Laquetta Nelson:* She never talked about it with me. Like I said, my mother, she was trying to survive. I think that people like myself that grew up during that time in similar situations to mine—we're the people who are pushing for the kids to have their wholesome, healthy meals in school. We're the ones pushing

behind that. See, when I was coming up, there were no child abuse laws, either. There was nothing pertaining to pedophilia. None of that, but like I said, the people who were subjected to that stuff and survived it and were able to go on and get education and stuff—they were usually the activists that brought about the change.

Kristyn Scorsone: Mm. Interesting.

Esperanza Santos: While you were growing up, do you recall, besides your siblings and your mom, was that the steady between your nine siblings and your mom?

*Laquetta Nelson:* I'm not understanding.

Esperanza Santos: Sorry. That's because I'm not saying it clearly [*laughter*]. There was no one else who went inside or outside your home, like no uncles, no grandparents, no other cousins?

*Laquetta Nelson:* Oh, surely people came in and out of the home. All those kids had fathers [*laughter*]. Some of them stayed for a while. Some of them never stayed, never came. It was tough for my mother.

Esperanza Santos: Mm. Yeah. Something I'm hearing you say was your mom was surviving.

*Laquetta Nelson:* That's it. That's it.

Esperanza Santos: When you think about surviving, is there a moment or a memory that comes to mind? What does surviving look like to your mom?

*Laquetta Nelson:* Hm. I don't know what it looked like to her.

Esperanza Santos: Or to you.

*Laquetta Nelson:* Looking back, it was poverty, for sure. I made a promise to myself that I was not going to live in poverty. I know what poverty smells like, what it tastes like, what it looks like, and I knew that was not where I wanted to be in my life. Did not want to be poor.

Esperanza Santos: Was there an age where you were conscious of it? For some folks, they don't really know they're in it until they get out of it, but some folks are like, no. I know where I am, and I know I'm not happy here.

*Laquetta Nelson:* Yeah. I knew where I was, too. You see, my mother had me when she was 18. Okay? I was my mother's right hand. I was her gopher. I was in places that most children didn't get to go, and I heard things that most children didn't get to hear. See, because my mother told me children ought to be

seen and not heard *[laughter]*. It was good, though, because long as I was quiet, I could sit there and listen to the grown folks' conversation.

Kristyn Scorsone: As the first born, were you responsible for a lot? Did you feel like you had to almost be like a parent to your other siblings?

*Laquetta Nelson:* Later, when I went to grad school, I found out there was a name for children like me. I was a parentified child. That means when my mother wasn't home, I was in charge, and I was a kid myself. Right now, I got siblings that won't speak to me because of things that happened when I was 8 and 9 and 10 years old. Don't ask me why. I'm not angry at nobody at this stage.

Kristyn Scorsone: Right. Do you feel like you got to have a childhood?

*Laquetta Nelson:* Nope. And I was very angry about that for a long time, but I didn't realize that that was part of my anger until I went into therapy. I spent seven years in therapy. I was angry at my mother for how she treated me. I was angry at my siblings, because I felt like I should have been an only child *[laughter]*.

Kristyn Scorsone: *[Laughter]*

*Laquetta Nelson:* They just kept coming. They kept coming.

Kristyn Scorsone: Yeah. That's tough.

*Laquetta Nelson:* They kept coming. I was like, wait a minute. I didn't realize all of that at the time. All that stuff came out later. I got my child play in when I could. There were times when I was outside all day long and just had to be in before the streetlights came on, and I was all over Washington, D.C.

*Interviewer:* How would you describe the neighborhoods where your family lived?

*Laquetta Nelson:* I would say that from what I remember and what I saw, I would say we lived in poor neighborhoods. Whatever rent that my mother paid—that had to come from the welfare. That was a whole other trip bag in itself because you could not have a man staying with you because if you had a man staying with you, he had to work. Whatever income he brought in the home, they would deduct it from your welfare money, which was really way less than what it is now. It's still not enough for people to live off of. There's people living off of it, so I can't judge any of that. I'm only speaking to my own experience with respect to that. We lived in the projects once in northeast D.C. Ridge Road. For some reason, I thought we had lived in the projects for a long time, but then when I looked back over my life and put things—I had to go through the timeline to help me

remember where I lived. Like I said, we moved around a lot. It turned out we only lived in the projects for a year. In a way, I said yay for us [laughter]. There were a lot of things. I was a young teenage girl, and my godmother told me that she told my mother that wasn't a good place for me to be in. That's why we only stayed there for a year.

Kristyn Scorsone: When you mentioned that on welfare you can't have a man in the home, did you ever experience case workers coming to the home to see if there was a man residing there?

Laquetta Nelson: Are you kidding? No. Look. They had to do regular visits. Okay?

Kristyn Scorsone: Uh-huh. Okay.

Laquetta Nelson: Like a social worker, and you got people that you have to check in, make sure they are okay, see if they doing alright. Same thing. They did it then, but I remember when the welfare person was coming, mama hiding stuff, because you couldn't even get a gift. They would deduct the cost of the gift from you, and if mama somehow was able to get stuff—and my mother—she liked nice things. I remember her hiding stuff from the welfare people.

Esperanza Santos: Yeah. Who doesn't like nice things?

Laquetta Nelson: Okay. Yeah. When you're on welfare, you're just bare bones. You're not supposed to be having things like that. If you can't get it out of that little bit of money that they give you, what I learned from it was that you're not supposed to have. I remember mama's boyfriend leaving the house when they knew the welfare—because people in the neighborhood talked, and they knew when the welfare people were in the neighborhood. They would send the kid. So and so's in the neighborhood. My mama was not the only one [laughter] still hiding stuff.

Esperanza Santos: How would you describe how your mom, or the neighborhood felt about the welfare people?

Laquetta Nelson: Well, from what I saw, what I heard, and what I learned, they had to feed those children. They had to have a roof over their head. Okay? They did and endured what they had to to make that happen. If they could have done it another way, I'm sure they would have done it another way. You see, I was born in 1955, so we are talking about the late 1950's and all throughout the 1960's. Okay? That was not a good time for Black folks in America, even though we were living in Washington, D.C.

Kristyn Scorsone: What sort of discrimination would you all experience at that time—your family—aside from the welfare workers?

*Laquetta Nelson:* I didn't have any understanding of discrimination. Okay? I do know every time a Black person came on TV, the whole neighborhood was excited. The word would go around, like when the Supremes or any of those groups that would be on the Ed Sullivan show—because that was what was happening back then—we would all get together and watch it. I know I loved Muhammad Ali. All of us loved and looked up to—well, he was Cassius Clay, and then he became Muhammad Ali. We all loved him and still do.

Esperanza Santos: Aw.

*Laquetta Nelson:* Yep.

Esperanza Santos: I think when I asked the question—the welfare people—I'm sorry. I should have specified the people who were the professionals who would visit you.

*Laquetta Nelson:* They were probably social workers. I think they were social workers. I just imagine because I studied social work in grad school. I have a master's in social work degree. From my present perspective looking back, that's how they come across to me.

Esperanza Santos: Yeah. How did your family or your neighborhood see these social workers?

*Laquetta Nelson:* They were trying to survive, okay? These are mostly women with all these children, okay? For instance, I just found out three years ago who my dad was through DNA testing. He was never in my life. I never even heard his name. There's another man on my birth certificate.

Kristyn Scorsone: Wow.

*Laquetta Nelson:* Turned out he is not my father, and he didn't raise me either. At a young age, him and my mom broke up, but I always saw him as my father until people started telling me stuff. They would get angry at my mother. She was young, and she would fight. When they were afraid of my mother and they couldn't get to my mother, they would come—and I was just a little kid, they would come to me, and they would say things to hurt me and basically to hurt my mother. I don't know what to call it. I don't know what to call it. It was a lot of whatever that is.

*[Laughter]*

Esperanza Santos: Yeah.

*Laquetta Nelson:* They were all young. They were all young.

Esperanza Santos: 18 years old is when your mom had you. She was young.

*Laquetta Nelson:* Yes. She was very young, and when I turned 40, I did my family history research. I wanted to understand what happened to my mother, why my mother was the way she was, and why she treated me the way she treated me. I came to an understanding from doing the research. Her mother died when she was about 16, but she hadn't been around her mother a lot. The story is when my grandmother's mother and father got divorced, my grandmother went to New York to visit her aunt. While she was in New York, she met a man who turned out to be my grandfather. She went back to North Carolina where my mother was born.

Esperanza Santos: Do you know about roughly when your grandma was in New York?

*Laquetta Nelson:* Well, let me see. It had to be around 1935, because my mother was born in 1936. My grandmother went back down to North Carolina, gave birth to my mother, and left my mother with one of her cousins. When my mother was 13, my grandmother came and got my mother and took her to Patterson, New Jersey because that's where my grandmother was living, and my grandmother was a domestic.

Esperanza Santos: What does that mean?

*Laquetta Nelson:* She cleaned people's houses.

Esperanza Santos: Oh, okay.

*Laquetta Nelson:* My grandmother died there in Patterson. After my grandmother died, my mother was about 16. Her stepfather sent her to D.C. to stay with one of her older brothers. It's somewhere after her arrival when she was 18 she met my father. He was 20 years old. I found all this out by research. He was 20 years old, and two months after I was born, he joined the military. This is during the Vietnam War. Three years after he joined the military, he was stationed in Japan. He met a Japanese woman. He married her, and I had another brother three years younger than me. A year after that brother was another sister. She was a year younger than my brother, and it turns out she was born in D.C. just like me.

Kristyn Scorsone: Wow.

*Laquetta Nelson:* Yeah. I'm sure there's more to the story. It ends up I'm the oldest of 11—the 9 from my mother and 2 others from my father.

Kristyn Scorsone: Do you know what your grandfather did for a living?

*Laquetta Nelson:* My mother's father?

Kristyn Scorsone: Yeah.

*Laquetta Nelson:* My mother's father—this is very interesting [*laughter*]. I'm really excited. I have no shame about anything that happened in my life. I just wanna make that clear.

Kristyn Scorsone: Awesome.

*Laquetta Nelson:* My grandfather—it took me some years to find him, because my mother didn't know her father. When I started doing the research, I didn't know where to look. I found one of my mother's older brothers that she went to live with in D.C., no, not that one, that's Uncle Lorenzo. Her oldest brother with her mother—that's Uncle George. I found Uncle George living in Patterson. The reason why I couldn't find him earlier—because I looked for him for many years while I was living in New Jersey, but I couldn't find him because I was spelling his last name wrong. So when I found him, he told me that my grandfather worked on the wharf in New York. I didn't know what that meant to work on the wharf, so of course, I had to go look all that stuff up. Then, I went to the archives over in New York, and they told me that working on the wharf meant the shipping, where they load and unload stuff at the Pier.

Kristyn Scorsone: Right.

*Laquetta Nelson:* He did that. And so, they told me how to find his personnel records because the United States government keeps the records of its employees for 75 years. With some help from a very nice lady there—it's in Missouri—with the help from that lady, I found my grandfather's papers. That's when I found out that he had served in World War I and World War II, also, I believe. I found out that he was married. My mother knew her father was married. She always said that she was always sad about that, because my mother's generation—it was not a good thing to be born out of wedlock.

Kristyn Scorsone: Right.

*Laquetta Nelson:* That was like a freaking curse. I was always an inquisitive child. I was always asking questions, and she would be like, why don't you shut up and be quiet like the rest of them? I said because I'm not like the rest of them. I want to know, because I didn't have any grandparents. I'd be at school, and I hear my friends talking about going over their grandparents' house and their grandparents buying them stuff and spoiling them and loving them. I didn't have any grandparents [*laughter*]. Okay, 'quetta.



You're going to be all right. I had to talk to my little girl inside. She's getting' revved up here.

Esperanza Santos: Yeah, but she goin' be all right.

*Laquetta Nelson:* Yes, she is. I have to let her know she's going to be all right. I got this.

Esperanza Santos: Yeah, and she's allowed to have feelings.

*Laquetta Nelson:* Yes, she is. I found out that he was married. He had five children. I found out that he worked on—well, I went to the library prior to getting that information. I went to the library, and I found a 1950 October issue of *Ebony* magazine. There was an article in there on my grandfather. My grandfather—his name was James Cunningham. He and a lot of other Black men were working for the U.S. Customs Office, but they weren't getting promoted, and a lot of Black folks weren't being hired, so the NAACP filed a class action lawsuit against the U.S. Customs Office. As a result of that lawsuit, my grandfather became the supervisor of 20 men *[laughter]* at—gosh, I can't think of what it's called. I caught the ferry from Hoboken into New York many times, and I never knew that my grandfather used to be the supervisor in that Hoboken terminal.

Kristyn Scorsone: Wow.

*Laquetta Nelson:* I was very proud of that. I'm still very proud of that.

Kristyn Scorsone: Yeah, that's really cool.

*Laquetta Nelson:* That was the first time when I saw a picture of my grandfather. It was in black and white, but I was able to get an idea of what he looked like.

Kristyn Scorsone: His picture was in *Ebony* magazine, you mean?

*Laquetta Nelson:* Yes.

Kristyn Scorsone: Wow.

*Laquetta Nelson:* With the article.

Kristyn Scorsone: That's really cool.

*Laquetta Nelson:* Yeah. Then, I found out that his wife was a teacher. What ended up happening is all of their children had college degrees. One was a psychiatrist. One was a principal in the Bronx school system. I believe Aunt Ruth was a nurse. I'm not sure about that, but I believe she was a nurse, and then the other two were doctors. When I learned all of that, I

was like, wow. My uncles, my aunts. Just imagine the impact that they would have had on my life if I would have been able to interact with them growing up. You see, the thing is, they didn't know anything about us. This was a family secret, and I blew it clean out of the water.

Kristyn Scorsone: Wow.

*Laquetta Nelson:* I was curious because I knew how my mother not having her father affected her and how it affected us. Okay? I wanted to see how this family secret—because my grandfather knew about my mother, but he couldn't care for my mother because he had five kids, and his wife made sure whatever money he made came into the house. Eventually, he did leave some insurance for my mother. A friend of my mother told me that. I found her after my mother had passed away. She told me that a lawyer had found my mother, and my mother had to go to New York to get the insurance that was left by my grandfather. My grandfather—his mother was a German immigrant. She was from Hanover, Germany. That's my great-grandmother, and my great-grandfather was from King George, Virginia. My great grandfather came from Virginia to New York, and he was a blacksmith. Then, at some point, he became a chauffeur. He was the chauffeur for my great grandmother's family. My aunt—I met her, I saw her in person, and she told me that my great grandmother's people were the Mueller Macaroni people. You know about the Mueller Macaroni?

Esperanza Santos: I have no idea what that is.

*Laquetta Nelson:* It came in a blue and white box. Macaroni. You know macaroni, right?

Esperanza Santos: Yeah.

Kristyn Scorsone: *[Laughter]*

*Laquetta Nelson:* Okay. The Mueller Macaroni—growing up, they were in there like the people that's in the store now with the macaroni. I haven't seen Mueller Macaroni, so they may have gone out of business. My great-grandmother was a part of that family. In 1892 or '95—somewhere around in there; I can't remember right now offhand—my great-grandmother and grandfather got married. That October, my grandfather was born. Her family disowned her because she married a Black man. That's what my aunt told me.

Esperanza Santos: Yeah. I can imagine. At least from what I know, there was a lot of pretty big laws passed against miscegenation. A lot of Black folks couldn't marry White folks, and there was a lot of taboo around that. I can imagine that.

*Laquetta Nelson:* Yeah, absolutely. That didn't change until the Virginia versus the Lovings. Loving family. That was the law that changed that.

Esperanza Santos: Now, Laquetta, is it okay if we transition from talking about your grandparents to talking about you again?

*Laquetta Nelson:* Absolutely.

Esperanza Santos: Okay. If I can briefly summarize what I'm hearing is it sounds like some challenges you faced growing up as a child was you didn't have a father in your picture and you didn't really have your grandparents in the picture, either.

*Laquetta Nelson:* Nope. No grandparents.

Esperanza Santos: It sounds like number one, living in poverty is pretty harsh, and then number two, not having a large family structure made things harder, and number three, having a lot of siblings to take care of is extra burdensome.

*Laquetta Nelson:* No fidelity.

Esperanza Santos: It sounds like a part of it was the family secret of where your grandpa was coming from, and you weren't able to manage that challenge until you were an adult and were able to do research about your family's history.

*Laquetta Nelson:* That's when I discovered all this. I didn't grow up knowing this. I was 40 years old when I started the research.

Esperanza Santos: Yeah, so that must've been 25 years ago?

*Laquetta Nelson:* Well, if I'm 65, something like that, yeah *[laughter]*.

Esperanza Santos: Okay, so it sounds like you just experienced it as a child, and you were able to manage it as a 40-year-old. Did religion have a role growing up in your life?

*Laquetta Nelson:* Thank God, no.

Esperanza Santos: Why do you say that?

*Laquetta Nelson:* Because. I'm 65, and I have seen what religion has done to my people. I'm one of those people, I am not for traditional religion. It is very damaging.

Esperanza Santos: Tell me more.

*Laquetta Nelson:* In my opinion.

Esperanza Santos: Tell me more.

*Laquetta Nelson:* Okay, because they don't want you to think for yourself. They don't want you to question things. You are supposed to just accept what they tell you. I was one of those kids—well, we never went to church on a regular basis. I remember my mother taking us to church a couple of times on Easter. Okay? I remember the churches in the neighborhood would come by and get us. There were a few of them that would take us to church, right? Well, the only reason why I would go is because they would get us ice cream afterwards. What kid doesn't want ice cream *[laughter]*? My mother had a picture of the White Jesus hanging up in there, and I never understood that. I'm like, why mama got that picture of that White man in there? I wondered, but I never thought to ask about it or nothing like that. She would have told me something to shut me up to keep me from asking questions.

As I grew and I learned and I saw nature, a lot of that stuff just didn't make any sense to me, like a woman having a baby just out the blue. That never went over well with me. That was the first thing, because everything I saw in nature—that was not something that was real. I was there when some of my siblings were born, and I was there when my mother—after going to the hospital and she came home, and she nursed them. I had to help her. I was her helper. So, I was not buying this immaculate conception. I just wasn't buying it. The thing about Jesus dying and rising, I was not buying that, either. When I went to the funerals, I was watching the dead people *[laughter]*. It didn't make any sense to me. None of that made any sense to me, and when I went to college, I was always getting in arguments.

Because everybody else I was around had been raised in the church, and they were highly indoctrinated in Christian thought. I wasn't, and they used to put me down and make fun of me, because I didn't believe in what they believed in. It made me stronger. It made me a strong person. So, no, I'm not indoctrinated, at least not in religion. I was indoctrinated through education. I say that because of things I've learned. When I was in grad school, I went to Delaware State University to get my master's degree, and I met a classmate of mine who introduced me to a book called—I can't even remember it now, *Stolen Legacy*, I think it was. After reading that book, I was very angry, because my bachelor's degree from Rutgers—I graduated from Rutgers in 2001.

Esperanza Santos: From Rutgers-Newark or Rutgers-New Brunswick?

*Laquetta Nelson:* Rutgers-Newark. Rutgers-Newark. My degree was in Philosophy and Religion, and I questioned my professors on a number of occasions. Why

weren't there any women philosophers? None of them ever really had an answer for that. When I read *Stolen Legacy*, that helped me to understand why there were no women philosophers being studied because of what the Catholic church did. They destroyed stuff that had anything to do with women. It's taken years to find out about these women pharaohs. Hatshepsut. I didn't grow up knowing about these things and these people, and I was not taught about these people in school. I learned about these things on my own. After I read *Stolen Legacy*, I was so angry, I wanted to go turn my degree in *[laughter]*. I was not taught the whole truth about people like Socrates and Plato and Aristotle. They didn't tell us anything about how they had all gone into Egypt and learned the things that they learned in Egypt and then went back into their own land and country and were teaching their own people. The Greeks—they got it from the Egyptians.

Kristyn Scorsone: Growing up, you went to all public schools?

*Laquetta Nelson:* Yes, I did.

Kristyn Scorsone: Okay, and then you have your BA from Rutgers-Newark, your MA in social work from—where did you say?

*Laquetta Nelson:* It's an MSW from Delaware State University.

Kristyn Scorsone: Then, did you move to Newark after that?

*Laquetta Nelson:* No, no, no. I was in Newark for my first year. During the summer, I moved down to Trenton, because I was commuting to Delaware State. For my second year, I moved down to Trenton so that I could cut my commute down—the time.

Kristyn Scorsone: Could you take us through how you get to Newark after university?

*Laquetta Nelson:* Okay. I also spent some time in the military. I spent five years in the military. I went in in 1979, and I got out in 1984. When I got out in 1984, I got out at Fort Dix, New Jersey. I had a girlfriend there. That's why I went there. Prior to that, I had been stationed at Fort Bragg, North [Carolina]—I might as well tell you this, too. My first duty station was in Europe. I was stationed in Germany. I was there for two years. I came back to the States. I was stationed at Fort Bragg, North Carolina. This is where I got my sergeant's stripes pinned on.

Kristyn Scorsone: Wow.

Esperanza Santos: Congratulations.

*Laquetta Nelson:* I took a job as a basic leadership instructor at the 35th signal battalion basic leadership course. As a requirement to teach there, I had to attend the primary leadership course, which was the 82nd Airborne Noncommissioned Officers' Academy. I graduated from the academy second in my class out of about maybe 200 people.

Kristyn Scorsone: Wow.

*Laquetta Nelson:* Which made me what we used to call Billie Jean badass.

*[Laughter]*

The guy that beat me—he beat me in all the physical tasks, but all the other stuff, I beat him. The day of graduation, I remember the commandant of the school coming to me. He shook my hand, and he said, “Job well done, Sergeant Nelson.”

Kristyn Scorsone: Wow.

*Laquetta Nelson:* I was feeling pretty good about myself back during those days. I was young, in my 20s.

Kristyn Scorsone: You said you had a girlfriend in Fort Dix. When did you become aware of your sexuality?

*Laquetta Nelson:* Okay. No, she was not at Fort Dix. She was living in Jersey City. I met her while I was stationed at Fort Bragg.

Kristyn Scorsone: Okay.

*Laquetta Nelson:* I knew from a young age that I was different, and I knew that I had an affinity for girls. I was more drawn to girls than I was to boys. I liked boys, too, but I liked girls more. I grew up hiding that and thinking that something was wrong with me. I didn't tell anybody, because I heard what they said about people who were like me in the neighborhood. And none of it was good, so I kept that to myself all growing up. I think I began coming out when I went into the service.

Esperanza Santos: What year was that?

*Laquetta Nelson:* In 1979.

Esperanza Santos: What about you going into the military made you feel comfortable to either explore what you liked or label yourself?

*Laquetta Nelson:* Ha! It had nothing to do with the military [*laughter*]. It had nothing to do with the military at all because during that time, if it was discovered that you were gay or lesbian, you were dismissed from the military. Okay, so my proclivity had nothing to do with the military. It was in me. I went into the military because I had been married. I got married in 1975.

Esperanza Santos: Four years before you went into the military.

*Laquetta Nelson:* Yes, and I had a daughter and my marriage broke up. Okay? And I was in a very low place. I didn't feel strong. I felt very weak, confused, didn't know what to do with myself. One day, I went to get some food stamps. I received food stamps for about somewhere between three and six months. I was in a hurry to get off of the food stamps, okay? I was refusing to be in a situation like my mother. When the marriage broke up, I left my daughter with her father and his family. They were good people, and I knew they would take good care of my daughter. My mother-in-law told me to go and do what I had to do, and when I got back, I could get my daughter. I sent her stuff, and I made a couple of trips from Germany home to see her. That's about all I'm gonna say about that.

That one day I was going to get the food stamps, and I had to walk past this recruiting station. My two younger brothers had joined the Marines, so I was looking at the Marines stuff. The man that I thought was my father at the time—he had also been a Marine. This guy from the Army came by, and he said, "You don't wanna go in there." He said, "Come on in here and talk to me." I went in there, and I talked to that guy, and in a very short amount of time, I had signed up to join the Army. I figured I could get strong. I could build myself up. I could get strong, and I could travel—those kind of things—but mostly, I needed to get strong. I was really weak then. I felt really weak, and so I joined the military. I joined the Army, and I was a Multi-Channel Communications Equipment Operator. That was my title.

Kristyn Scorsone: Were you aware of other gays and lesbians in the Army where you were?

*Laquetta Nelson:* I wasn't out. I had never been in the gay and lesbian community, so I didn't know anything about any of that at that time.

Kristyn Scorsone: Okay. Did you hear anything about Stonewall or anything like that?

*Laquetta Nelson:* Nope, did not know anything about it. I found out about it later, but at the time when I went in, I was living in a different world, living a different life. I didn't know anything about any of that, but I discovered it. Of course, I was a good-looking woman. I was fine [*laughter*].

Esperanza Santos: Hey, work it, you know?

*Laquetta Nelson:* Yeah, so they came. They came at me. Through talking and stuff, I learned things. I had my first experience when I was in basic training when we got our leave.

*Esperanza Santos:* Was that also in '79?

*Laquetta Nelson:* Probably, yeah. Probably in '79, '80. Somewhere around there. I would say '79.

*Kristyn Scorsone:* How did you meet your girlfriend?

*Laquetta Nelson:* Oh, goodness gracious. She and I were in the same unit. We used to compete with each other doing pushups and on the rifle range. We were some strong young women back then. She was a Puerto Rican woman from New York. She was from New York. I won't say anything else about that.

*Kristyn Scorsone:* Cool.

*Esperanza Santos:* There's this space between you joining in the military and not feeling as strong as you want to, and then coming into Newark after the military. Does that sound about right?

*Laquetta Nelson:* Oh, yeah. I was not feeling weak then. I'll tell you that much *[laughter]*. Like I said, that was 1984, and in 84, I was 29. Okay, I was 29 years old when I got into New Jersey. I started in Jersey City for a while. Yeah, Jersey City, then Irvington, and then Newark. I spent nine years in Newark. Then, I left Newark and went to Montclair. I lived in Montclair for nine years. Then I moved back to Newark in—let me see—2004. The summer between 2004 and 2005, I moved to Trenton.

*Esperanza Santos:* What drew your attention over to this area of Jersey and to Newark?

*Laquetta Nelson:* Well, it was the girlfriend, of course, to start from Jersey City to Irvington. At that point, she and I broke up. It was at that time—I had no family there. I had no friends. The people that I knew—they were her friends, and when you break up, they are going where their loyalties are. They went with her, so I was there by myself at that time. I was homeless. I had a car. I was sleeping out of my car. I tried to get help from welfare. I tried to get help from a lot of different places that people I met on the street in places told me to go. It ended up... I went to the Red Cross. There was a man there that I spoke to in East Orange Red Cross. He told me that he wasn't going to send me to the shelter. What he did was he gave me something. I forget what you call it, but it made it possible for me to stay in a hotel—the Lincoln Motel as it is up there in East Orange. I stayed there—I forget.



Was it six months? It might have been. I can't remember the exact amount of time that I stayed in that hotel, but I stayed in that hotel.

Then, he gave me vouchers to go to this little restaurant where I could get three meals a day. During that time, I met somebody that introduced me to the noncommissioned officers—it was an organization that lobbied for the military benefits. Also, we sold life insurance. I was a life insurance selling somebody, because I knew that the time was coming when I would have to leave that hotel. When that time came, I would need to take care of myself. When that time came, I had the money to get an apartment. I didn't have enough money to get the apartment, so a friend of mine that I had been in the military with—she had introduced me to her sister.

Her sister was a Buddhist. Her sister allowed me to stay in her apartment sleeping on the floor. She didn't know me. She was doing this for her sister. She didn't know me, but she did this. I learned about Buddhism, and I practiced. I met a lot of people, and they kept my spirits up so that I wouldn't get down. When you get down, you can't receive... there's things that you can't connect with—opportunities and people who can help you and stuff like that when you are down. They kept me up, had me doing Buddhist activities and everything, and it was amazing to me that the situation I was in that I was happy *[laughter]*. I felt good.

Esperanza Santos: It sounds like from what I'm hearing is you were connected to people who kept your spirits up, and so instead of falling into a funk or a depression, or getting stuck, you were able to move with it.

*Laquetta Nelson:* I was able to move with it. I was able to earn enough money where I was able to get my first apartment on my own. It was a studio apartment in downtown Newark.

Esperanza Santos: Do you know the cross streets that you were at, and do you remember the year that was?

*Laquetta Nelson:* It was the Pavilion Apartments. I could look out my window at the train station, the train tracks there.

Esperanza Santos: Oh, the Newark Penn Station?

*Laquetta Nelson:* No, not Penn Station. You know where the Clay Street Bridge is?

Kristyn Scorsone: Oh, you're talking about the Broad Street train station?

*Laquetta Nelson:* Yes.

Esperanza Santos: At this point when you moved into your first apartment, how would you describe that Newark that you got to know? And what year was it again?

*Laquetta Nelson:* Let me see. I'm not sure. Wait a minute. Let me think now. I got there in '84. She and I broke up in '85, so I would say maybe '86. Somewhere between '85 and '86.

Kristyn Scorsone: Were you living close to Club Zanzibar?

*Laquetta Nelson:* Yes.

Kristyn Scorsone: Did you ever go there?

*Laquetta Nelson:* No. At the time when I moved in there, there was a lot of prostitution going on down there in that area, but they eventually moved those people somewhere else.

Kristyn Scorsone: Right. Was the prostitution in that area gay, straight, trans women?

*Laquetta Nelson:* Don't know. I was not connected to the community at that time.

Kristyn Scorsone: Okay. Did you ever go to any gay or lesbian bars in the city, like Murphy's I think was still around, maybe?

*Laquetta Nelson:* At that time, I did not go to Murphy's, but I did go to First Choice.

Kristyn Scorsone: Oh, yeah. How was that?

*Laquetta Nelson:* Well, it was a hangout. It's where I hung out at.

Kristyn Scorsone: That was mostly women, right?

*Laquetta Nelson:* Yeah, that's who I was hanging around. There were some guys, too. Gay guys.

Kristyn Scorsone: What was it like inside?

*Laquetta Nelson:* Fun. It was a lot of fun, but I'll tell you, I saw a lot of suffering. Remember now, I wasn't born there. I was born somewhere else. I was raised somewhere else, so I was not of the mindset of the people who were born there and raised there. When I looked at things, I saw things from a different perspective. I saw a lot of unhappiness. I was one of them. I'm not going to not include myself. I was not all that happy at that time. I had my pain and my suffering, too. Drugs, alcohol, all that stuff was involved. There was no place for us. There was no community center. The only places we had were First Choice and Murphy's and probably a few other

little local bars that didn't have a problem with gay and lesbian folks coming up in there.

Kristyn Scorsone: What did it look like inside First Choice? Where was it located exactly?

*Laquetta Nelson:* It was on Ferry Street. I can't remember that intersecting street there. It was on the corner. You go inside. The bar was to the right. You'd pay your little cover charge or whatever, if they had a cover charge, and sometimes they would have dancers. Sometimes, there would be shows there. There was always a DJ playing the hottest music, and we would dance and drink and have a good time.

Kristyn Scorsone: What kind of shows would you see there?

*Laquetta Nelson:* There were drag shows.

Kristyn Scorsone: Oh, very cool.

*Laquetta Nelson:* Drag shows. We had the best drag shows. Just the best. The AIDS epidemic took a lot of our drag performers. We lost a lot of really cool people due to AIDS.

Kristyn Scorsone: All drag queens, or drag kings as well?

*Laquetta Nelson:* I would say during that time, there were just the drag queens.

Kristyn Scorsone: Was it large in there, or it's a small place?

*Laquetta Nelson:* It was small. I mean, depends on what you're comparing it with. It was small.

Kristyn Scorsone: Okay. What was that like to experience the AIDS crisis?

*Laquetta Nelson:* It was devastating. It was devastating. When it really kicked in full gear when the folks in New York started being in the streets and raising hell about how the people were being treated in the hospitals and how families were treating their family members who were infected, we were outraged. We were outraged, and that I think was when things started boiling within me. I lost some of my friends, some of my very dear friends. Their families disowned them and didn't care for them. The people in the community—we cared for as many as we could in Newark. It was hard. It was really, really hard.

When I first got started, I dedicated everything that I did to my friends Barry and John. John went first. They lived in the building across from me. I remember when they first told me that they had HIV. At that point, I

had never had a friend at that point who disclosed to me that they were HIV positive. I didn't know what that was like. Barry told me first. I met Barry out one night. I was coming in. Me and another friend were coming in from partying, and Barry was out walking. He looked lost, and we stopped and talked to him. I didn't even know him, but we stopped and talked to him. He was considering suicide. We sat outside with him all night into the morning talking to him, letting him know how valuable his life was.

That's how I became friends with Barry, and his partner John I met through him. When they told me they had HIV and AIDS, I did not know what to do. I didn't know what to do. I wasn't sure even how to feel about that, but I know that I cared about them. I did not want to treat them the way other people were treating them. I think they thought that when they told me that, I was not going to be their friend anymore. That is not what happened. I stayed their friend, and I hugged them, you know?

Kristyn Scorsone: Yeah.

*Laquetta Nelson:* I hugged them. I had read enough and seen enough where I knew that I could not catch HIV from hugging them, and they needed hugs.

Kristyn Scorsone: Were you scared in general?

*Laquetta Nelson:* Yes. Yes, I was.

Kristyn Scorsone: Were you aware of any AIDS activism happening in Newark at that time?

*Laquetta Nelson:* Outside of the ones that came in the clubs with the little packages for the guys so that they could use condoms and stuff like that—outside of that, I had no connection. I had no knowledge of anything like that at that particular time.

Kristyn Scorsone: Can you describe any of the drag queens that were lost to the AIDS epidemic that maybe a performance of theirs that stood out to you or something like that? I don't know.

*Laquetta Nelson:* Go ahead.

Kristyn Scorsone: Sorry. No, I just wanted to know if you could describe any of the drag queens that were lost. If not, it's okay. I'm just curious.

*Laquetta Nelson:* I can't. It's been a long time.

Kristyn Scorsone: Oh, yeah. Totally.

*Laquetta Nelson:* Okay, but I remember always enjoying the shows. They put a lot of work into making their costumes and their outfits that they performed in. It was entertainment. They were really good at what they did. We enjoyed what they did, and when they began to die, so did the drag shows. There were not that many drag shows anymore in Newark. After a while, the whole community was devastated. Okay. It was devastated. There were some organizations that got started. There were a couple of the—I can't remember the names of them right now. The White LGBT who—I think they hired some folks from Newark to educate the people in the community in Newark about using safe sex practices and so forth and making funds available to help out with that.

*Kristyn Scorsone:* Do you mean GMHC?

*Laquetta Nelson:* I think that is who it was.

*Kristyn Scorsone:* [*Crosstalk 1:10:55*]

*Laquetta Nelson:* What does GMHC stand for?

*Kristyn Scorsone:* Gay Men's Health Crisis.

*Laquetta Nelson:* Yeah, I think that's it. Yeah.

*Kristyn Scorsone:* Do you happen to remember a performer named Reese LaRue?

*Laquetta Nelson:* Reese LaRue. I probably knew Reese LaRue but did not know her by that name.

*Kristyn Scorsone:* Okay. I was just curious. Their heyday was a bit before you, but they were pretty famous in Newark for a little while, and then they passed from AIDS. Around that time, they worked for the Bessie Smith Center. I think it was a childcare center.

*Laquetta Nelson:* That may have been before my time.

*Kristyn Scorsone:* Yeah. Yeah, I think so. I was just curious.

*Laquetta Nelson:* Mm-hm. Yep. Now, the one thing, because I was political. When John died, John's family went into the apartment and took everything. They had not cared for John while he was sick. Barry was there for him.

*Esperanza Santos:* Do you remember what year this was?

*Laquetta Nelson:* Let me see. I don't know.

Esperanza Santos: If you're not sure about the year, it could be the time period.

*Laquetta Nelson:* I think that had to be in the early '90s.

Esperanza Santos: Okay.

*Laquetta Nelson:* Okay, because I began to get active in the community. I got politically active in the early '90s, and I became a district leader. I was in Murphy's one day, and this guy who was my neighbor approached me and asked me if I wanted to be a district leader. I was like, well, what's a district leader? He explained to me what the district leader was, and I said, well, I have never done anything like that before. He said that that's okay, so I became a district leader. I served as a district leader for three to four years, and a district leader is the bottom of the political line. That's the first step. It's a community leader. You interacted with the people in the community. I used to hold voter drives to register people to vote. I used to do all that stuff right there where I lived that right.

That's what that was, and I learned a lot about Newark politics during that time from the man Mr. James Wallace who was the chairman of the Central Ward Democratic Committee in Newark. He taught me a lot. He was like a father to me. He was like a father figure to me. He was also the founder of the International Youth Organization in Newark, and I think his wife is still running it or associated with it now. I don't know. It's been many years. He taught me a lot of stuff about Newark politics. A friend of mine at some point in that early '90s period called me up and she said, "I met this woman down here who is involved with the New Jersey Gay and Lesbian Coalition, and they're going to Washington to talk to the state legislators about what's going on with the gay and lesbian community in the state of New Jersey," she said, "Is it okay if I give her your number?" I said, "Yeah, sure."

It was Wendy Berger. It's been so long, I can't remember her partner's name, but the two of them were at the helm of the New Jersey Lesbian and Gay Coalition. We took a bus. It was a whole bunch of us that took a bus down to D.C. and met with the state legislators and let them know what was going on and what was needed. That was my first venture into LGBT politics. Once I came back, I served on their executive board for a while. I was mentored by Wendy Berger. I spent 15 years with them. Not with the coalition. I spent just a few years with the coalition, and I even started a committee called Sisters United. We did that for about a year under the coalition, and then in the late '90s, I received an invitation to attend a conference in Atlanta with the National Stonewall Federation is what it was called at the time.

It turned out I was the only person there from New Jersey. As a result, I ended up on the executive board of the National Stonewall Federation, which later became the National Stonewall Democrats or something to that nature. After that meeting in Atlanta, everybody that was representing the state like Minnesota Stonewall Democrats, New York Stonewall Democrats, Georgia Stonewall Democrats, okay? When I came back from that trip was when I started working on creating the New Jersey Stonewall Democrats. I met with the chair of the New Jersey Democratic Committee—

Esperanza Santos: Wait, do you know what year this was?

*Laquetta Nelson:* One second.

Esperanza Santos: Yeah. No, take your time.

*Laquetta Nelson:* I'll be right back. I have the paper because I knew I wasn't going to be able to remember this. (1:19)

[Pause 1:19:00 – 1:19:14]

Oh, yeah. Here we go.

[Pause 1:19:17 – 1:19:25]

Okay. The chair of the New Jersey Democratic State Committee was Mr. Thomas P. Giblin. This was in the year 2000. That is the year that the New Jersey Stonewall Democrats was created. I served as the president for three—wait a minute. Yeah, for three years, because I resigned in 2003, February. Okay. Now, being the president of the New Jersey Stonewall Democrats—because there was no other democratic LGBT entity in the state of New Jersey. There were LGBT organizations, but they were all 501(c)(3), so they could not do what I did, what I was doing.

Esperanza Santos: Oh.

*Laquetta Nelson:* The 501(c)(3) prevented them from doing stuff.

Esperanza Santos: Yeah, so 501(c)(3) is the nonprofit status.

*Laquetta Nelson:* Yes.

Esperanza Santos: A lot of them are more social services oriented, and a part of this governmental entity label tax number is that you can't be too politically involved or advocate for certain politicians. What it allows people is to

receive funding, but it also limits their ability to be overtly political or involved in governmental politics.

*Laquetta Nelson:* Exactly. What they could do is they could educate. They could educate about the political system. They could educate about voting and things like that, but they could not—what’s the word? It’s not coming to me. They could not support one particular candidate. It’s a word for when you—because I did it.

Esperanza Santos: When you endorse a—

*Laquetta Nelson:* Endorse. Yes.

Esperanza Santos: Okay.

*Laquetta Nelson:* They could not endorse. They could not endorse, but I could, and I did.

Kristyn Scorsone: Before you go on, could I ask you two really brief side questions?

*Laquetta Nelson:* Sure.

Kristyn Scorsone: You had said initially—I think—that you were in Murphy’s Tavern when somebody handed you something or started talking to you about politics or something to that effect.

*Laquetta Nelson:* Yes.

Kristyn Scorsone: Do you happen to know when Murphy’s closed down, by any chance, like around the year?

*Laquetta Nelson:* Murphy’s closed down—was it before I left or after I left? I left in 2009. Okay. I’m trying to think. Murphy’s closed before that ice hockey center came.

Kristyn Scorsone: Right.

*Laquetta Nelson:* I’m not sure when that was, because during that time, I was not there. I was in Trenton dealing with grad school when they closed. It had to be—let me see. I was in grad school from 2005 to 2007. I don’t know for sure, but somewhere in there, Murphy’s closed.

Kristyn Scorsone: Okay. That makes sense, ‘cause I think that they broke ground for the Prudential in 2007. I could be wrong, but I think that’s the year. Then, my other question was just was James Credle and Bill Courson involved in the Stonewall Democrats with you?



*Laquetta Nelson:* Heck, yeah. Those were my sidekicks.

*[Laughter]*

Kristyn Scorsone: Awesome.

*Laquetta Nelson:* It was the three of us, and James especially, because James made it possible for me to have all of my meetings. I had them in the Paul Robeson Center. We did a prom for the gay and lesbian folks who couldn't go to their own prom. James made it possible for me to do a lot of things.

Kristyn Scorsone: That's awesome.

*Laquetta Nelson:* Of course, you know, he gave me advice. If I was steering off somewhere, we would have a conversation. Same thing with Bill. I relied on those two a lot.

Kristyn Scorsone: Is that how you all met, through that organization?

*Laquetta Nelson:* Well, where did I meet James? I met James when I was with the New Jersey Lesbian and Gay Coalition. What I wanted to do was try to bridge the gap between the Black LGBT in Newark and the White LGBT that I was working with in the coalition, because they were separate. It was separate because of historical stuff. Somebody—I can't remember exactly how it happened, but those first meetings took place at Rutgers-Newark through James. James made that happen. We had a few meetings, but we were not able to bring that to fruition. We haven't even got that thing right in the nation. The nation still hasn't gotten that thing right, so I don't feel bad about that at all.

Kristyn Scorsone: What do you think hampered it?

*Laquetta Nelson:* The same thing that keeps Black people and White people separate today. It's the same thing. When I left serving as the president of the New Jersey Stonewall Democrats, one of the reasons why was because the same things that I was fighting and dealing with in the regular community I was having to fight and deal with the same thing in the LGBT community. It was very difficult. It was very difficult. When James McGreevey got voted to run for governor for the second time—now I lost track of what I was trying to say.

Kristyn Scorsone: *[Laughter]*

*Laquetta Nelson:* Okay. It'll come back. It'll come back. Let me go somewhere else with that that will lead up to that. Maybe that will help. In 2000, we started the

New Jersey Stonewall Democrats. Mr. Giblin made it possible for myself, my vice president, and my secretary to go to the Democratic National Conference, which was held in Los Angeles, California in 2004. The Gore Lieberman campaign. They were all excited about it, because we were the first out LGBT democrats to ever represent New Jersey at the national democratic committee conference.

Kristyn Scorsone: Wow.

*Laquetta Nelson:* Okay, and prior to that taking place, the National Stonewall Democrats held a conference in—what’s that hot place in California in the desert? Yes, Palm Springs.

Kristyn Scorsone: Palm Springs.

*Laquetta Nelson:* They had a gathering in Palm Springs, and what we did was we came up with a plan for those of us who were going to be attending the national conference—what we were going to do. What happened was of the three of us, only one of us was allowed to sit on the floor with the New Jersey delegation, and that was me.

Kristyn Scorsone: Wow.

*Laquetta Nelson:* The other two—they were in there. I don’t know where they were, but I was in that delegation by myself.

Kristyn Scorsone: Wow.

*Laquetta Nelson:* What we did—we had signs that said, “Gays and Lesbians for Gore and Lieberman.” The plan was anytime anybody that was up on the stage said anything about anything that had to do with the gay and lesbian community, we would stand up and hold our sign up. Well, I was scared to death.

Kristyn Scorsone: Yeah.

*Laquetta Nelson:* I was. I was scared to death, but guess what? I was standing up for Barry and John and all of my friends and everybody else that I knew in the community. I stood up for all of them. I was the only one in that delegation standing [*laughter*] up with that sign saying Gays and Lesbians for Gore and Lieberman.

Kristyn Scorsone: Wow.

*Laquetta Nelson:* Yep, and I also had to beg and fight, because every morning, the delegation would get together and have breakfast, and somebody would

speaking. Well, I don't think they really wanted me to speak, because I had to fight to speak. I won in the end. They let me speak, but when they let me speak, it was at the end of breakfast, and a lot of people had left. There were still a lot of people in there, but a lot of people had left. That was a first that that New Jersey delegation was spoken to by an out lesbian.

Kristyn Scorsone: What did you say?

*Laquetta Nelson:* I don't remember.

Kristyn Scorsone: Yeah.

*Laquetta Nelson:* [Laughter] I do not remember what the heck I said, but I said what I needed to say.

Kristyn Scorsone: Do you remember what the important issues were for your group at the time?

*Laquetta Nelson:* Oh, yeah. I was the president of the New Jersey Stonewall Democrats. I had to know.

Kristyn Scorsone: Yeah.

*Laquetta Nelson:* Okay? I would go talk to people at cookouts and people gathering at people's houses. I was all over the state.

Kristyn Scorsone: Wow.

*Laquetta Nelson:* I wasn't [unintelligible 1:32:01]. At this time, I was all over the state. I didn't focus all my energy on Newark until I left the Stonewall Democrats in February of 2003. Okay, now, also, I was instrumental in getting—let me see—the year that—what's that guy's name? He was running for the governorship. Corzine.

Kristyn Scorsone: Oh. Mm-hm.

*Laquetta Nelson:* Corzine. What I did—and this was something that had not been done before. The Asbury Park gay pride celebration—when the year that Corzine was running for governor—because they were all wanting to know how they could reach our community, because we didn't have any set place for where we all were. You could go on the Christopher Street in New York or some specific neighborhood where—hello?

Kristyn Scorsone: Yeah.

*Laquetta Nelson:* Oh, okay. Some specific neighborhood where all the gay and lesbian folks lived. It wasn't like that. We were dispersed all over the state of New Jersey, and New Jersey is a long state. Okay, so they wanted to figure out a way to be able to communicate with our community. What I did was I had every democrat that was running for office that wanted to communicate with the community—I brought them to Asbury Park. I think they're still doing that to this day. But, the first time that it happened, it was the Stonewall Democrats that brought the democrats to Asbury Park. Somebody complained to me. Why aren't the republicans here? I said, "Well, you're going to have to go talk to those log cabin republicans about that. I'm the president of the New Jersey Stonewall Democrats, so that's why the democrats are here." Every time they want to talk to the community about getting votes, they know to attend gay pride down there. Now, there was no gay pride in Newark like there is now. That was something that got created along the way, too, because—I'm all over the place right now. I'm trying to stay on the timeline.

Kristyn Scorsone: That was 2006?

*Laquetta Nelson:* No. Huh-uh. What was I talking about right there?

Kristyn Scorsone: You said when Corzine first became governor or was running, so I looked up. He was governor from 2006 to 2010.

*Laquetta Nelson:* Okay. No, he got elected. He served from that time, but he ran the two years before.

Kristyn Scorsone: Okay. Mm-hm.

*Laquetta Nelson:* Okay, so we'll say 2004, 2005, I helped to get him elected.

Kristyn Scorsone: Okay.

*Laquetta Nelson:* He put money into the community, because he bought a full-page ad in the magazine. What is it? *The Gay Times* or something like that? I forget the name of it, but it's a New Jersey gay and lesbian magazine. They would buy ads in that magazine, and they put money in there. Okay, which was what they were supposed to do. Also, there was James McGreevey. Now, this is really interesting here. James McGreevey—he left office in not so good relationship, but when he ran the first time, he didn't have such a good relationship with the gay and lesbian community. Now, he's running for governor again, but this time, there's the New Jersey Stonewall Democrats. He was running against another governor. I can't remember his name. Starts with a F.

Kristyn Scorsone: Yeah, I don't know.

*Laquetta Nelson:* Okay, whatever. He was instrumental in getting the protection clause in the state constitution, an amendment to protect the gay and lesbian community. He did that. Flenoy, is it? [Note: it was Florio.] Okay, it'll come to me at some point. Anyway, he did that as governor, and he was running for governor again against James McGreevey. We interviewed both of them, and when it was all said and done, we all chose James McGreevey. The reason why is because we created a questionnaire. James McGreevey answered everything on the questionnaire and returned it to us, and I got a copy of that [*laughter*]. Also, I made a deal with him that if he signed the domestic partnership bill that I would do everything I could to get him elected. That was a deal that he and I made. James was present at that time and so was Bill. Okay, now what happened prior to that—there was—let me see. He had to come to Asbury Park, and he had to make amends. He did that, and people were still skeptical about him. I had people calling me from GLAAD and from all of the magazines and stuff, because they all had heard that he was gay.

Kristyn Scorsone: Right.

*Laquetta Nelson:* I knew he was gay. Okay? People told me if he don't act right, we got pictures.

[*Laughter*]

Okay, but I said no. I said we're not doing that. We're not going to do that. We're going to do this above board. I said as long as he keeps his word to us. One day, out of the blue, he called me at home. He asked me—and this is after he got elected. He's the governor now, and he calls me at home, and he asks me to organize the community for a meeting with him at Drumthwacket. I put the word out to everybody, and I'm going to tell you, that was a very difficult thing. I got called a second-class citizen, because I'm Black and a woman. Okay? I had people say all kinds of bad things about me. They were pissed off that the governor called me instead of calling them, and they had years of experience working in the LGBT politics.

Well, he did the right thing. He called the president of the New Jersey Stonewall Democrats, and he was a democratic governor. He was supposed to call me. Okay, and he called me, and it was hard work getting them all together. We had to meet a couple times before we met with him so that we could set things up for how we wanted that meeting to go. There were legislators in the state that were trying to divide us between domestic partnership and same sex marriage. Okay, but we decided we're not having that. We want all of it. If we can get domestic partnership first,

we'll take it, but know that we are always going to be fighting for same sex marriage.

Kristyn Scorsone: Right.

*Laquetta Nelson:* Okay, so we had the meeting. The meeting went well, and of course, following that, myself, Wendy Berger, and this guy—he was in New York. He had worked on Corzine's campaign. Steve. He was his co-campaign manager for Corzine. That was later, but he was advising us. Eventually, we held the first statewide LGBT democratic—I don't know. The meetings they have at the conference. Whatever you call those meetings, we held the first one, and I can't remember the year that that was. I cannot remember that, but we held that meeting there, and I remember prior to it happening that same day—this is during James McGreevey's time. James McGreevey got on just before we were going to have our meeting at this statewide conference. He makes a statement to the press that was—I can't remember what it was, but I know it ticked me off. I was very upset about what he had done, because all he had to do was call me. He didn't have to take it in front of the press like he did.

Out of my upset with him doing that, I said I wasn't going to do the meeting. They wanted that meeting to happen, because it had never happened before. I left and went and sat down at a bar and was having a cocktail, and the next thing I know, a couple people came and got me and said that the governor wanted to speak with me. I went with them, and I went to where McGreevey was. The only person on my side that was in there was my vice president. What's his name? I can't even remember his name right now. I can't remember his name, but he was with me. Me and McGreevey had it out.

Kristyn Scorsone: Was his statement that he made with the press—was it about domestic partnerships?

*Laquetta Nelson:* It had to do something with that, because that's what I was working on.

Kristyn Scorsone: Right.

*Laquetta Nelson:* Okay, but I can't say for sure, because I can't remember it right now. I got all the papers and everything in boxes and stuff. It's packed away because that was, what, about 15 years of political activity there. It's all packed away, but he and I had it out in that room. When we finished, I went and did the meeting. Me and the vice president—we went and had that meeting, and we came up with some things that we were going to do to move the community forward. As a matter of fact, something that we decided to do in that meeting, Steven Goldstein—he took it and ran with it, because he had access to a lot of resources.

The thing that we came up with in that meeting was to have meetings in various places around the state to talk to the community at large about the lives of gay and lesbian people that they live around and work with and so forth. I felt like if we interacted with them, if we did things with them, community activities with them, that they would come to see that we didn't mean them any harm. They hopefully would change the way that they saw us as human beings rather than the stuff they had cooked up in their brains. See, because that was the problem. The stuff they had in their brains was making them treat us like we didn't deserve to be alive. We didn't deserve to be treated in a humane way. I had a lot of friends who were beaten damn near to death. Okay? One of my friends almost lost his eye completely because some guys didn't like the way he was walking.

Kristyn Scorsone: Wow. Was that in Newark?

*Laquetta Nelson:* That was in Newark. That was in Newark. A lot of that took place, and I'm sure that there were some who were even killed, but we had no structure or anything set up to handle those kind of things. That's why I felt we needed the community center.

Kristyn Scorsone: Right.

*Laquetta Nelson:* We went on and we got the legislation passed through the state house, and it ended up on James McGreevey's desk. He signed domestic partnership into law in the state of New Jersey. That's how that happened.

Kristyn Scorsone: Wow.

*Laquetta Nelson:* That's how that happened, so we got that. There were other folks who—their main mission was same sex marriage. That's all they worked on, but as a group, we took the domestic partnership, but we kept fighting for that. The people who focused on that, that's what they did. I was not focused on that, because my people were in different situations. Okay, and I tried to bring—oh, gosh—it's an organization in New Jersey that works with the schools. I wrote letters to the superintendent of schools in Newark to try to get that organization into the Newark school system so that they could get help with the bullying. This organization started the anti-bullying program. I can't remember the name of it offhand right now. See, that's what happens as you get older, your memory is not as sharp. I tried to get them involved in Newark.

Kristyn Scorsone: This is for LGBT youth?

*Laquetta Nelson:* Yes. Yes. They met and everything, but nothing came out of them. It didn't work. I think the timing wasn't right, because LGBT kids were not

able to go to school because of bullying. A lot of them had dropped out. Their families had kicked them out. They were living in the streets. That's what I was fighting for. Okay?

Kristyn Scorsone: What did you do for work at this time? Were you working as well as doing this?

*Laquetta Nelson:* Yes, I was. Yes, I was. I was working as a bus driver.

Kristyn Scorsone: What was that like?

*Laquetta Nelson:* I loved the work that I did. It was very stressful, because I was going in and out of New York every day. The last 18 years of my life that I worked there—I don't feel comfortable naming the companies and stuff that I worked at.

Kristyn Scorsone: No problem.

*Laquetta Nelson:* Can I not mention them?

Kristyn Scorsone: That's fine.

*Laquetta Nelson:* Okay, yeah. I worked as a bus driver for 20 years in New Jersey. It allowed me to live the lifestyle that I was living.

Kristyn Scorsone: Right.

*Laquetta Nelson:* Okay, so I was good with it. I did it for 20 years. I left in 2005. That was the year after my mother died. I had had it. One of my best friends died the same month a year later, and I couldn't handle all the stress from my grieving, the stress of my job, and plus, at the same time, I was doing all this political stuff, and I was going to school. I graduated from Rutgers in 2001.

Kristyn Scorsone: Mm. When you say it allowed you to live your lifestyle, do you mean flexibility in terms of being able to be politically active, or do you mean in terms of your sexuality?

*Laquetta Nelson:* No, when I say that, I'm speaking in terms of my economics.

Kristyn Scorsone: Okay.

*Laquetta Nelson:* Okay? It had nothing to do with my—eventually, I came out on the job. I mean, I was all on TV at that point.

Kristyn Scorsone: Really?



*Laquetta Nelson:* Oh, yeah. Especially during 2003. I'm working my way there. Let me see. What's the last thing? McGreevey and then same sex marriage.

*Kristyn Scorsone:* Yeah.

*Laquetta Nelson:* All of that, and in February of 2003, I left the Stonewall Democrats. Okay, but what happened was in May of 2003, Sakia Gunn was murdered.

*Kristyn Scorsone:* Right.

*Laquetta Nelson:* Okay, and I remember I was getting ready to go to church down at LIT—Liberation and Truth—at the time. I was ironing my clothes getting ready for that, but I was watching the Sunday news. It came on there about a 15-year-old girl who had been murdered. They showed her picture, and I was like, oh, that's so sad. That poor young girl got killed like that.

*Kristyn Scorsone:* Right.

*Laquetta Nelson:* About an hour later, I got a phone call from Bill Courson. Bill says to me, "Did you hear about the 15-year-old lesbian who was murdered in Newark?" When he said that, something came over me. I don't know. Something just came over me, and I was like, no. They did not say she was gay. He says, "She was gay." Then, people started calling me because everybody knew I was the political person in town. They didn't know what to do. Well, guess what? I didn't know what to do, either. Something hit me, and I said, "They're not going to sweep this one under the rug."

*Kristyn Scorsone:* Right.

*Laquetta Nelson:* They're not going to do that, because I identified with Sakia.

*Kristyn Scorsone:* How so?

*Laquetta Nelson:* Well, she was a 15-year-old lesbian. She was out. I wasn't out at 15. I knew that I liked girls, but I didn't know all of that. To me, she was brave. She was brave. She was courageous. She was living her little 15-year-old life in the fullness of who she was. I was not going to let them do that to her. I went to church, and I announced it to the church. I asked them to send up prayers for her family and everything. Now, I'm not a Christian, never was a Christian, but all my friends was going to church there. I'm hanging out with my friends at church. They sang in the choir. I sang in the choir. After that, I get another phone call about all these kids down on the corner of Broad and Market.

*Kristyn Scorsone:* Ah, the G corner, they called it?

*Laquetta Nelson:* They weren't calling it that back then.

*Kristyn Scorsone:* Okay.

*Laquetta Nelson:* It was just Broad and Market. It became the G corner after Sakia's murder.

*Kristyn Scorsone:* Okay.

*Laquetta Nelson:* Sometime after that, I would suspect. All these young people—they had nowhere to go. They couldn't go to church. A lot of them couldn't go to their parents. They had nowhere to go, so they all gathered there and made a makeshift memorial for her. Okay?

*Kristyn Scorsone:* Wait, something just hit me. I guess I always assumed they called it the G corner like gay corner, but is it named the G corner after Gunn? Sakia Gunn?

*Laquetta Nelson:* I don't know about that.

*Kristyn Scorsone:* Okay.

*Laquetta Nelson:* That did not happen when I was there doing all of that.

*Kristyn Scorsone:* Right. Yeah. Yeah.

*Laquetta Nelson:* This was the first time I've ever heard of it being called the G corner.

*Kristyn Scorsone:* Okay. All right.

*Laquetta Nelson:* In the aftermath of her murder, a lot of gay kids—that's what they did. That was how they could be close to her. They identified with her. They were friends with her. They were people who knew her.

*Kristyn Scorsone:* Can you describe the memorial that they put up?

*Laquetta Nelson:* Teddy bears, candles, cards. They took pictures that they had that they took with her. They put them there. All of that was there. Okay, and so I went down there, because I know about the police and Black people. It was a lot of young people down there on that corner, all around the corner on both sides, right? I noticed there were other adults down there, too. Wasn't nobody bothering the young people. We were just making sure that the young people were safe. I made a couple calls, and some people from the churches that were gay-affirming and so forth—they showed up down there, and we made sure that those kids were able to grieve safely,

because myself and another lady—we saw this officer pick up the radio after a while.

We were watching everything, and we felt like he was calling for backup. We walked amongst the children and told them to go away. Go somewhere else. You can't stay here. If you stay here, they are going bring more police, and somebody is going to get hurt. We were able to disperse the young people, because all we wanted was to keep them safe. That's all we did that whole time. It was a bunch of us just wanting to let them kids grieve and be safe. A couple of those people—the other adults—had connections to the police department and to the mayor and so forth. They contacted them and asked them not to be so aggressive with those children.

The next day, when they gathered in front of the City Hall, the police were much nicer. They weren't so aggressive. I know I went up to some of them and I thanked them for not being aggressive. Then, there was her funeral. There were so many young people out there. That little place where they had her funeral could not hold all those people. Those children were all outside, and they were mourning. They were crying. Some were passing out. The mayor was not there. None of the city officials were there. Somebody called them and made them come. They came, and they brought water, and they brought the emergency people.

See, the thing that ticked me off is there were adults who were standing around watching these children, but they didn't want to have anything to do with these children, because they were gay. They sat and watched these children suffer. It was heartbreaking to all of us that were there. I got the opportunity to speak to Sharpe James, who was the mayor at the time. I told him. I said, "We need a community center." I said, "Are you going to help us get a community center?" He said that he would. He lied. He lied to us. There was a lot of people who said they were going to help us build the community center, and they lied to us. I could tell you that they lied to us, because I asked them for help myself. I didn't know how to do those kind of things.

Kristyn Scorsone: Right.

*Laquetta Nelson:* It never happened, but I was glad to see that the community did not give up, and they now have a center.

Kristyn Scorsone: Totally.

*Laquetta Nelson:* They have a center now. A couple of years before Sakia Gunn's murder, New Jersey Stonewall Democrats—we marched with the African American Heritage Day parade down the center of Broad Street. I'm going

to tell you. The first time that we did it, we had the African American flag, we had the American flag, and we had the rainbow flag. We had gay men and—let me see—were there lesbians? I know I was there. I was always there holding it down for the lesbians.

Kristyn Scorsone: *[Laughter]*

*Laquetta Nelson:* I can't remember right now, but I know we were all scared. We were scared, because we did not know how those people were going to respond to us, but we had to do it. We had to do it, and as we began marching down the street, people began to wave. They were waving at us. Some people were clapping for us, and we just kept on going. When we got down to the parade where the Grand Marshal and all those people are—when we got there, the Grand Marshal said, "It's about time. We've been wondering when you all were going to come join us." They said that publicly over the microphone. Everybody heard it, and we kept on marching right on down the street. Nobody did anything to us. Nobody said anything to us. People came to us crying. Some people approached me, and they were crying. They were like, thank you. Thank you all for doing this for us. It was—woo. That was a very moving experience. We went on, and I know I participated in it for about three years. Then, after that, we started having gatherings in the park down there. What was that park? Lincoln Park.

Kristyn Scorsone: What year was that first march that you just described?

*Laquetta Nelson:* Girl, I can't remember.

Kristyn Scorsone: Is it the early aughts?

*Laquetta Nelson:* It was before 2001.

Kristyn Scorsone: Okay.

*Laquetta Nelson:* Because I resigned in 2001 in February, so all this had to happen in the late '90s. Was it the late '90s? I don't know. I don't know. I would have to go look through my papers and stuff and see. I can't remember right now.

Kristyn Scorsone: Totally.

*Laquetta Nelson:* I'm sorry about that, but that's just how it is when you get older.

Kristyn Scorsone: That's okay. I have trouble remembering stuff like that, too *[laughter]*. No worries.

*Laquetta Nelson:* It was right around that time. This was before Sakia Gunn’s murder. Hell, that had to happen between 2000—yeah. I think the first time happened in 2000.

*Kristyn Scorsone:* Okay.

*Laquetta Nelson:* It happened 2000, 2001, and probably 2002. I might not have did it in 2002. I’m not sure, but I know that’s the timeframe.

*Kristyn Scorsone:* Would you say this was a precursor to Newark Pride?

*Laquetta Nelson:* Absolutely, because Newark Pride was created in the aftermath of Sakia Gunn’s murder. With my political experience, I knew we had to pull everybody together. James [Credle] made the space available, and I can’t remember exactly when it was, but it was in 2003. We held a meeting at Rutgers University, and we invited all the people in the community to come together so we could decide how we were going to respond as a community. As a result, that was the beginning of the Newark Pride Alliance. We took a lot of time deciding on that name, too. We chose alliance because that’s what it was. Most of the organizations in Newark that were a part of it—well, you had the church—Liberation and Truth church was involved. I can’t remember the names of the other organizations, but there were HIV/AIDS organizations. They were involved.

*Kristyn Scorsone:* Was it AAOGC?

*Laquetta Nelson:* Yes.

*Kristyn Scorsone:* Okay.

*Laquetta Nelson:* That was in their beginning days, too.

*Kristyn Scorsone:* Right.

*Laquetta Nelson:* They were there, and there were a lot of individuals who were there. See, this was something new. This was something new, and we created committees. We developed our by-laws. It was through the Newark Pride Alliance. We sent information out to the mayor and to city council members to let them know who we were and what we were and what we represented. Anything that had to do with gay and lesbian people, we spoke on. Okay?

*Esperanza Santos:* What year was that again?

*Laquetta Nelson:* This is 2003.

Esperanza Santos: Okay. Was it right after Sakia Gunn was murdered?

*Laquetta Nelson:* Sakia Gunn was murdered in May of 2003 on Mother's Day. Okay, and I would say off the top of my head that the Newark Pride Alliance was formed in June or July of 2003.

Esperanza Santos: What were some of the early meetings like, and what would you say was the vision or the feeling attending those meetings?

*Laquetta Nelson:* For me, because I was out front and outspoken, I caught a lot of flack. I was attacked on a lot of different fronts. See, at the time, I felt—and this is my military background—I felt that I had to always present a position of strength and power. I could never, ever be seen as weak. Okay, so that intimidated a lot of people. These people did not know me. They did not know about my military background. All these things that I've told you—they didn't know about any of that stuff. I mean, they knew about what I had done with the—those who wanted to know knew about my work with the New Jersey Stonewall Democrats, but as far as what I did specifically in Newark, there were days I went and sat outside the mayor's office. He said we were going to have a community center, but I found out he was sneaking out another door. I did things like that that people didn't know about.

There were closeted gay people that were working in city hall, and those people were very helpful to me. I was grateful for the help that those people gave me. If they ever hear this or see this, I want them to know that I was very grateful for everything that they did to help. I was very grateful to the people at LIT and Gary Paul's organization and all the other organizations that came and helped out. I was very grateful to all of them, but there were people who could have helped that did not help. There were people who were comfortable living two lives and got upset with me for shaking stuff up. I was looking at it from the standpoint—I had lived two lives. Living two lives is hell.

My whole purpose, as a leader, was to be a change agent. I did not know that term back then. I learned that one later in grad school, but that's what I was. I was a change agent, and I wanted to shift the paradigm for the way that people looked at gay and lesbian people. I wanted to be the cause for that. Now, I took a lot for being in the position that I was in. I was like a sacrificial lamb. Okay, because I went amongst people who shunned me because of who I was and the people I represented. Now, Black people—when they hear shunned, they know what it means. That's when you walk in, people stop talking, or people turn their backs on you as you walk by. I endured a lot of that. I had my tires on my car slashed. I had my car scratched up. I received threatening phone calls.

Kristyn Scorsone: Wow.

*Laquetta Nelson:* Okay, and I saw that you all interviewed Amina Baraka.

Kristyn Scorsone: Yes.

*Laquetta Nelson:* In the aftermath of her daughter's murder—Shani Baraka and her partner were murdered by Shani's sister's husband.

Kristyn Scorsone: Right.

*Laquetta Nelson:* Okay. In the aftermath of that, I thought it was my responsibility because I was a leader in the community to go and pay my respects to her on behalf of the community, and I did that. I spent a lot of time with Amina learning about her life and what it was like for her during the civil rights movement. I wanted to learn about that. I sat at her knee, and she taught me. I taught her about her daughter's life. I took her places that she wanted to go, and some people got upset at me for taking her there. I felt that as a mother, that's what she wanted, she had every right to see. Because of her relationship with me, I remember her crying over her daughter having to live two lives. Shani Baraka was a good person. I didn't know her as well as I would have liked to have known her, but I met her on various occasions, and we talked. She was a really good person, and it turned out that she was Sakia Gunn's basketball coach.

Kristyn Scorsone: Oh, wow.

*Laquetta Nelson:* Okay.

Kristyn Scorsone: I did not know that.

*Laquetta Nelson:* Yeah. She was Sakia Gunn's basketball coach. The lesbian community in Newark—we were grieving big time. Big, big, big, big, big time. A lot of people could care less.

Esperanza Santos: May I ask you a question?

*Laquetta Nelson:* Sure.

Esperanza Santos: You were saying that you were a part of the founding committee in organizing the Newark Pride Alliance.

*Laquetta Nelson:* Yes.

Esperanza Santos: You were connected, and you were saying that you received threatening phone calls and that your tires were slashed.

*Laquetta Nelson:* Yeah.

Esperanza Santos: What do you think motivated people to attack you?

*Laquetta Nelson:* Hatred. It was out of hatred and ignorance. I marched down the middle of Broad Street. After Sakia Gunn was murdered, I sent out a call for action. That thing went all over the place. I had people calling me from England, from France, from South Africa, and all over the country. The news, the press, they didn't say anything. What's Kim's last name? She deals with the press.

Commented [1]: didn't say anything.

Esperanza Santos: Kimberlee Williams?

*Laquetta Nelson:* No. Huh-uh. I can't think of Kim's last name, but she did an examination of the press response to Sakia Gunn versus the press response to the murder of Matthew Shepard.

Esperanza Santos: Oh, wow. Check that out.

Kristyn Scorsone: Oh, right, because there was way more coverage.

*Laquetta Nelson:* Hm?

Kristyn Scorsone: There was way more coverage of Shepard.

*Laquetta Nelson:* Yes. Absolutely. And PFLAG—I introduced—well, first, I took Sakia Gunn's mother and introduced her to PFLAG in New York. I went with her. Then, I introduced Amina Baraka to PFLAG, because I felt that if we could get PFLAG in Newark, it might help a whole lot of families. That did not work out. I couldn't do that. I couldn't spearhead that. That's why I introduced people so that they could make stuff happen, but people wanted me to do it. I couldn't do it. I was working, going to school, plus my political activity. I just could not do it. I did not have the time nor the energy, so that didn't work out. The thing with the school—GLSEN—that is the group. They are the one that came up with that day of no bullying.

Esperanza Santos: Oh, yeah. They have a week in January for no bullying, and then they have a day of silence in April.

*Laquetta Nelson:* Yes. Yes.

Esperanza Santos: In October, they have spirit day.



*Laquetta Nelson:* Yes. That's the group that I tried to connect with the Newark school system. Here again, I could not spearhead that, either. I wrote letters to the superintendent of school, and the guy who was—and I can't remember his name, forgive me—who was the head of GLSEN at that time—I was communicating with him trying to make that happen. For a lot of reasons that I surmise and other reasons that I don't know, it didn't go over. But, what eventually did happen is that they had a course set up to help the LGBT kids get their high school diploma. That was important. If we could get them their high school diploma or even a GED, then they could go to college if they wanted to.

Esperanza Santos: Do you remember who led that program or if it had a special name?

*Laquetta Nelson:* James might know. James might know. Like I said, this is all stuff that happened in the aftermath and making connections trying to hook people up so that they can make stuff happen. That's why I know that the organization was created, and I don't know if it's still in operation or not. But I know it was created. I don't remember the name of it or anything like that. At one time, they were building a new high school in Newark, and they were going to name it after Sakia Gunn. At that time, I think I was living in Trenton and going to school down in Delaware at the time. There were some people who fought against that. Now, whether they were successful or not, I never followed up to find out.

Kristyn Scorsone: A couple quick backtracking questions. When you said you took Amina Baraka to places, what places did you mean besides PFLAG, or was that what you were referring to?

*Laquetta Nelson:* PFLAG meetings. Let me see. She came to all of our rallies. We had rallies and stuff on the corner of Broad and Market. She supported that. She would always come. The PFLAG was the main thing that I felt was going to be helpful to her and other mothers in the city that were having to deal with their children being gay. She was in mourning over the loss of her daughter. I was just trying to help her get through that. One of the places we used to go to socialize, I took her to one of those places—one of the nicer places. She went with me down to Murphy's. At that time, I think First Choice had closed. She went with me to Murphy's. She went with me to another social event. That was a world she had never seen before. She had never been a part of, but this was her daughter's community.

Kristyn Scorsone: Right. I know we established that you identify as a lesbian. How would you describe your gender presentation or identity?

*Laquetta Nelson:* Well, let me see. That was complicated. I embrace my womanhood. I always embraced my womanhood, but early on, I think people looked at

me and saw me as a femme. I didn't feel like I was a femme because I was aggressive. The butch chicks stole our phrase. They stole it, because aggressive was for women that were like me. We presented as femme, because we wore our lipstick, and we were fly but not butch. Okay? Down the years, the butch girls confiscated the aggressive term, and they began calling themselves aggressives. I was like, okay *[laughter]*. You can be whatever you want to be. Now, while I was doing my political stuff, I was a bit butchy. I was butchy.

Esperanza Santos: What do you mean by butchy?

*Laquetta Nelson:* A lot of my friends were *[laughter]* butch women. They are the more aggressive type. Some of them wore men's clothes. Sometimes, I wore men's clothes. At this stage of the game, I no longer wear men's clothes. I have no desire to wear men's clothes.

Esperanza Santos: What changed for you?

*Laquetta Nelson:* Well, long before I left up there—because it didn't resonate with me.

Esperanza Santos: When you say up there, do you mean when you left Newark?

*Laquetta Nelson:* Jersey. In Jersey. In Newark. Yeah. You see, I left 11 years ago to come south. See, I've been gone for a long time.

Kristyn Scorsone: Around when do you think that the butch girls confiscated the AG term?

*Laquetta Nelson:* I noticed it in 2003. I started hearing it. I started seeing it. I'm like, wait a minute, I thought you all were butch. Okay, so hey. It just went like that. I think some of them now—they call themselves aggressives.

Kristyn Scorsone: Yeah.

Esperanza Santos: Wait a minute. Off topic. I said you were in Maryland, but you're actually in Delaware right now, right?

*Laquetta Nelson:* No, no, no, no. I was living in Trenton, New Jersey. Actually, when I entered grad school at Delaware State, I was living in Newark for my first year, which was 2005. The summer of 2006, I moved to Trenton to finish out my last year of grad school in Delaware. I commuted. I commuted all through grad school. I was still living in New Jersey.

Esperanza Santos: That must've been a long commute.

*Laquetta Nelson:* It was, but you see, the thing was there was no historically Black university in the state of New Jersey. I wanted to get my master's degree

in social work at a historically Black university, because I wanted the Black perspective versus the European perspective which I would have gotten at Rutgers. That would've been the European perspective. I wanted to be taught by Black instructors. Most of my instructors were Black, except—one was an Indian from India—that type of Indian—Dr. Suri. I think everybody else was Black. Yeah, but that's what I wanted, and that was my thinking and my reason for going there. It was worth it to me to do the commute because I wasn't going to move there.

Esperanza Santos: Just to come back, something we were talking about was it was when you moved to Delaware when you stopped wearing men's clothing.

*Laquetta Nelson:* I never, never, lived in Delaware.

Esperanza Santos: Oh, okay. I'm sorry. I'm a mixed-up interviewer, then.

*Laquetta Nelson:* No, it's okay.

Esperanza Santos: You were saying that once you left Newark, that's when you stopped wearing men's clothing. Did you associate it more like that's the community you found here, so you did what other people did?

*Laquetta Nelson:* Look, when I was wearing the men's clothes, I was trying to identify with my friends, with a lot of the people that I was representing, that I was around. Okay? At some point, I felt like that was not working for me. It was not resonating for me. Since I have been down here—in May of this year, it will be three years since I found out who my dad was. I have been healing. This whole time I have been down here, I've been healing from the things that I endured by being a leader in the state of New Jersey and in Newark as a Black woman. Okay? I was hurt in a lot of ways. Not physically, but in a lot of other ways. My spirit was hurt. It was broken. My self-esteem was damaged, and I needed to heal. That was one of the many reasons why I came back down here was to heal.

In my healing, I woke up one morning, and I looked at this picture that I had hanging on my wall of these two women kissing. That picture was a favorite picture of mine, and this one morning when I looked at that picture, that picture did not resonate with me anymore. I felt the desire to take the picture down, which I did. Then, I realized something was changing. Something had changed, and this is the first time that I'm saying this to anybody outside of my close, intimate friends. I no longer have the desire to be with women. I no longer have the desire to be with anyone. I had to find myself. I had to find out who I was, and that was part of what the family history research was all about—trying to find out who I was and who the people were that I came from. Everything that I came down here to do, I accomplished. It was basically about finding the truth about

who I am. I know who I am now. I know what I am, and I am all right with me.

Esperanza Santos: Oh, that's beautiful.

Kristyn Scorsone: That's amazing.

Esperanza Santos: Thank you for being willing to be so intimate with your journey.

*Laquetta Nelson:* I am hoping somebody will learn something. See, because me being 65—I could [*laughter*]—every day, every moment is something special to me. You know? It's special to me, because I could drop dead at any time. That's why I'm being open like this. I don't know when my time is going to come, and I have reconciled myself with my life. There's nothing in my life that I feel ashamed of. I think I lived a pretty extraordinary life, really.

Kristyn Scorsone: When you were doing all this political work—I have someone in my life that tries to organize things for the LGBTQ community in her place of employment, and sometimes it's difficult for her as a woman, but she is a White woman. How do you feel like race impacts your gender as someone who has this leadership role?

*Laquetta Nelson:* I can tell you this. They see me being Black before they see me being gay.

Kristyn Scorsone: Right.

*Laquetta Nelson:* Okay, and about being a woman, look at what just happened to Elizabeth Warren. That's it right there. She was at the top of her game, and she wasn't gay, and look at what they did to her. Look at all the women who were there in the thing to be running for president. Look at what they did to all of them. First, there were five, then there was one, now there is none. They're getting it on a much higher level. These men, especially the angry White men—they something else. They something else. They are the ones that got this country in the situation that it's in now. I had hopes before, but I'm not feeling really hopeful for the end of this year. I'm expecting something terrible to happen from what I see.

Kristyn Scorsone: Do you feel like you got it from both the straight and the LGBTQ community as a Black woman—discrimination?

*Laquetta Nelson:* Yes, yes, and yes. Absolutely. That's why I was saying I have been being attacked by the very people who you are fighting for is one of the most painful things I think that a leader can experience. I expected the churches and the straight community to come at me. I expected that, but what I didn't expect was how the people in my own community came at me. That I did not expect, and that was the most hurtful of all. I was accused of

things that I never even thought about. Some people were saying I was an opportunist. I'm like, what kind of opportunity am I getting out of this? Yes, I was interviewed by a lot of magazines, okay, but from my perspective, I was getting the word out that Black gays and lesbians in Newark were suffering. Okay? I wanted people to know that. I wanted them to know that it was not acceptable how they were treating our people, and they needed to stop.

We had the protections under the state—oh, God. I can't remember this stuff. The protections. We became a protected group of people, but there was no enforcement. Nobody came up with a way to enforce that. Eventually, it got to the point where you couldn't be fired from your job. That was a good thing, because if they found out you were gay, you could get kicked out of the church. You could lose your job. You could lose your family. That's why a lot of people were living double lives. There are still people living double lives, because they don't feel safe.

Esperanza Santos: Laquetta, can I ask you a question about before you left Newark?

*Laquetta Nelson:* Sure.

Esperanza Santos: One of the things that stands out to me was there's this moment in 2003 where Sakia Gunn has passed away. There is the Newark Pride Alliance, and I feel like it's tragic and it's sad, and there's also movement.

*Laquetta Nelson:* Yes.

Esperanza Santos: Then, there's this moment of you leaving Newark and feeling low and needing to find out who you are and what it meant to live this life as yourself. What happened between the Newark Pride where there was some movement to the moment where you left feeling less than?

*Laquetta Nelson:* In 2004, I had my job, and I had the activities that I was doing in Newark, but from 2003 to 2004, I realized—it was a meeting I went to, I can't remember who it was—it was with a state legislator. I had invited people to come with me. I reached a point when I turned around and I looked to see who was supporting me. Who was looking after me? Who was protecting me? There was nobody there. There was no one there. At that point, I started looking at things differently. Especially during that 2003-2004 and a lot of work that I did with the New Jersey Stonewall Democrats—I couldn't keep a lover. I couldn't have a partner, because if I attempted to have a partner, I was faced with things like jealousy and envy. Okay? Then, on my part, I didn't have the time to put into a relationship. I thought that the work that I was doing was worth the sacrifice that I made. I still don't have a partner, but that's by choice. It has been a long time

since I've had a partner or since I've even attempted to have a partner. But that's okay, because I've reconciled with that.

It was at that moment when I turned, and I looked, and I saw nobody had my back. I was standing there raising hell by myself, representing a community that wasn't there for me, that didn't support me. It was time for me to go, and that is when I left. I cut my activities out, and a friend of mine who was an associate dean at Delaware State University—she told me. She said come on down here and get in this master's degree program. Within a couple of days, I went down. This was past the application period, but I went down, and I met with the director of the MSW program and interviewed with her.

Right on the spot, she said get your application in here to me as soon as possible. I came back home, and I went to work, and I got my application and everything together. In 2005, I started my Master's in Social Work degree program in Delaware. I was still living in New Jersey, but that's how that went. I was disappointed because I had hoped for things to be different for me, but I understood my people. I understood that my people were, are a hurt people. My people have been living under a very oppressive system, a system that is very oppressive to us. That is just as Black people. Add the gay in, and—a matter of fact, I wrote a research paper on that when I was in grad school educating my fellow social work students. I knew they were going to be faced with dealing with gay and lesbian people, and I wanted to be the one that schooled them on it in the class.

Kristyn Scorsone: That's awesome.

*Laquetta Nelson:* I did it.

Kristyn Scorsone: That's awesome.

*Laquetta Nelson:* You see, that military training I had—that training, plus I've had some other training—in search of me, in search of what my purpose is in this life, I spent a lot of time trying to learn about those aspects of myself. It made me a very different person. A lot of those people had never met anybody like me before. I don't know what that is, but I could just tell. I was different. I was even different amongst my gay and lesbian friends, because I was from somewhere else. You see, where I was from, being born in Washington, D.C.—when I grew up and became an adult, I learned what a treasure that was for me because I got to see things that people living in other places around the country never got to see.

My mother and a lot of other women in the neighborhood—when the march on Washington came, they cooked chicken and cooked food and

took it to the people that were living in the tent city down there. I remember playing with the kids that were down there. There were people everywhere. I was just a little girl when the march on Washington came. I was there playing in the mud with the other kids. As a kid wandering around the city, I spent time in the museum by myself or with my friends. It was wonderful because soon as we went in there, they saw we didn't have any adults with us. They told us that it was okay for us to be there. We just couldn't touch anything, and we couldn't run. No running. I grew up in those museums down there.

I remember going in the Supreme Court. Okay, me and two and of my other friends. I just wandering around, looking, seeing, being kids in the United States Supreme Court. We were walking around in there *[laughter]*. Here again, they let us do it. We couldn't run, and we couldn't touch anything. We could walk around, and we could look. We walked around and we looked, okay? I remember walking the monument mall during the Vietnam War. People protesting, all that. I grew up seeing people sitting outside the White House all day, every day, some people for years protesting. So, that is part of me.

When I'm in New Jersey, I'm like, why are these people not protesting? Why are these people not in the street? Why are they not saying anything about how they being treated? You see, that made me different. That made me different, because I had a different perspective. That perspective is what ushered me into saying, okay, I'll try that. Okay, let me see if I can make a difference. That's part of who I am or who I was. Since I've been down here, I've been quiet, except for online. I raise hell online.

Kristyn Scorsone: *[Laughter]*

Laquetta Nelson: Oh, yeah. I let them have it online. I sent a Tweet. Look, I sent a lot of messages to Nancy Pelosi, because I think she took too damn long to institute the thing against Trump.

Esperanza Santos: Oh, the impeachment. That's right.

Laquetta Nelson: Yes. I think she took too long. They didn't want to do it, because they knew that it was not going to go through the Senate, but for the people, I was like, when y'all going to fight back? It looked like they weren't fighting back. Did it look like that to you for a while?

Esperanza Santos: It looks like she was just hangin' out *[laughter]*.

Laquetta Nelson: Yeah. I'm like, y'all, these people are trying to take over the country, and you aren't doing anything.

Esperanza Santos: You know?

Kristyn Scorsone: It seemed like they were hoping for some sort of other shoe to drop with him evidence-wise, and I guess they—

Esperanza Santos: Yeah. No. Laquetta, I know we're talking a lot about D.C. We have a couple of questions, because it sounds like you have an outsider/insider perspective when it comes to Newark. You lived in Newark, but you don't have the perspective of people from Newark, so you see it a little differently. Can I ask you a couple of questions about Newark?

*Laquetta Nelson:* Sure. Sure. Before you go there, I just told you that about the D.C. thing because that is the root of why I was able to stand up and protest when other people were afraid.

Esperanza Santos: Yeah. You were politicized just by living in D.C. and seeing how people navigated politics, how people used their voice, how people protested, how people marched.

*Laquetta Nelson:* Yes.

Esperanza Santos: You were exposed to a set of tools that maybe were more common in D.C. than they were in Newark.

*Laquetta Nelson:* Yes. That's why I said that, okay?

Esperanza Santos: Yeah, yeah, yeah. No, and this is a good segue. What is your earliest memory of Newark?

*Laquetta Nelson:* Aw, man. I'll tell you. It was not good.

Esperanza Santos: Beautiful. Tell me. Yeah. Tell me.

*Laquetta Nelson:* Okay. The first time that I went to Newark, I was living in Jersey City. I went with my friend to Newark for something. I can't remember what it was.

Esperanza Santos: What year was this?

*Laquetta Nelson:* Oh, shoot. This had to be in the late '80s, right around the time when I first got to New Jersey after I got out of the service. When I went to Newark, it did not resonate with me at all. It was not a place that I thought I would ever live, because to me, it was a depressed city. It was depressed, and even when I ended up living there and I would walk down the street, it was depressing what drugs did, the homeless people—it was just depressing to me. And I was depressed. When my daughter would come to



visit, my daughter hated coming there. She did not like New Jersey. She will tell me now, “Mama, I didn’t like New Jersey. I don’t know why you lived there.” She didn’t like it. It was very depressing, and when I left, it was still depressing.

Esperanza Santos: When you say depressing, you’re referencing people’s drug use, the homelessness, the perspective of the people—

*Laquetta Nelson:* People’s attitudes, the way they treated each other. One time, I had a townhouse that I bought in Newark down there in the University Heights. I swear, I got an image of all these people just being zombies. I know they were struggling. They were well-meaning people, but the life there just was—they looked like zombies to me. The walking dead. I’m telling you honestly. That’s what I saw, okay? That’s how I felt.

Esperanza Santos: Yeah. Just to give some perspective, I spoke with someone who—I think she’s a bishop now, but she was a pastor at a church. Number one, late 80s is when the crack epidemic took over. Then, number two, you have folks who have HIV who have nowhere to go.

*Laquetta Nelson:* Yep. There was a lot going on.

Esperanza Santos: Number three, Newark is a neglected city that people don’t care much for and was pretty low economically.

*Laquetta Nelson:* Exactly. In that apartment building I lived in—when I first moved in there, I was on the ninth floor. When things got better for me, I moved up onto the 20th floor. I remember around 4:00 every day looking out over the city of Newark, and what did you see? You saw cops come from out of the place out of nowhere making the streets so that the people who were working in Newark that lived in other places were able to get out of Newark before dark. Okay, and after all of those people were out the city, then it went back to *[distorted audio 2:57:36]*. It went back to usual.

Esperanza Santos: Since that moment in the late ‘80s when you were in Newark, how do you think Newark has changed since then?

*Laquetta Nelson:* Well, a friend of mine who lives in Trenton now and she’s been trying to get me to come back to Jersey, and she had been sending me all these advertisements for all these new condominiums that’s been built up in Newark. Now, when they put the ice-skating rink in, I thought that was kinda crazy. I’m like, an ice-skating rink in a predominantly Black city? Black folks don’t ice skate. It’s too cold. Most of us don’t like the cold, but they put an ice-skating rink in downtown Newark. I guess it’s been good. I don’t know. She was telling me that downtown had changed and that I could get me a condo downtown very near the arts center and all

these really nice restaurants they got all downtown now. Shaq had built some nice condos and apartments there. The gay and lesbian community there now—they have a community center now. They have gay pride in Newark now. They have gay gatherings and stuff down at the parks where we first started doing that stuff. There's a lot of stuff going on now. I don't know. I haven't been there in quite a few years, but I still have friends who live there that I talk to.

Kristyn Scorsone: So, you never got to march with the Newark Pride Alliance?

*Laquetta Nelson:* Not in the gay parade in Newark, no.

Kristyn Scorsone: Okay.

*Laquetta Nelson:* It wasn't happening.

Esperanza Santos: What year did you leave Newark again?

*Laquetta Nelson:* I left Newark quite a few times, but even though I wasn't living in Newark, all my activities were in Newark, because that's where all my friends were.

Kristyn Scorsone: I have another follow-up question about the time with Sakia Gunn. I saw *Dreams Deferred* a while ago. You were involved in the trial, as well, or no?

*Laquetta Nelson:* Yes, I was.

Kristyn Scorsone: What was that like?

*Laquetta Nelson:* I spoke at the trial. I think that was in the film. Let me tell you. The guy who made the film—he and I had a conversation beforehand, and he was thinking about making the film. He didn't know how it was going to go over about a Black gay man making this film about this young Black lesbian. He spoke with me about it, and I told him, make the film. I told him. I said make the film. I said is anybody else out here making the film about it? He said no. I said make the film, and he made the film. I saw the film. There was a place in Boston who showed the film, and Sakia Gunn's mother and I went to that filming. Afterwards, they had question and answer. We also did that in Washington, D.C., too. Yep.

Kristyn Scorsone: How'd you feel about the film?

*Laquetta Nelson:* I thought it was good.

Kristyn Scorsone: What was it like to speak at her trial?

*Laquetta Nelson:* It was sad. It was really sad. Everybody in there was sad. It was a sad situation. The guy was drunk and on drugs, and it seemed like he otherwise was a nice guy. He had a family. He had kids. In that moment, he made a choice that ruined his life and took Sakia's life and affected the lives of all of her friends who were there that witnessed the event. It also affected all of us. I don't know too much about how it affected the gay guys, but I know it really affected the lesbians, the Black lesbians. Those were my people. Those were my friends. It was sad. It was really sad, and it was such a waste of life.

*Kristyn Scorsone:* I think if it were me, I would've felt very vulnerable.

*Laquetta Nelson:* Well, I was vulnerable anyway. I mean, from the early '90s when I decided to do that—whenever you step out as a leader, you are vulnerable. Look at Elizabeth Warren. Not just Elizabeth Warren. Every last one of those women who ran for president. Look at what they went through. Then, all of those women who were elected to office in 2016, especially the group. What do they call them? AOC. They call them the squad.

*Kristyn Scorsone:* Oh, mm-hm.

*Laquetta Nelson:* I saw a lot of that stuff that people wrote about them. Any time you step out there, somebody going come for you, because somebody is not going to like what you are saying. Somebody is not going to like what you represent, and they want to silence you. They tried to silence me. They tried to silence me, and I refused to be silenced, because people that I loved and cared about needed for me not to be silent.

*Kristyn Scorsone:* Totally. I'm at the very, very, very beginning stages of writing a dissertation. I'm very interested in labor and queer people. You had said as a bus driver, one that was advantageous to you economically and also that you came out on the job. I was just wondering what you meant. Did you make a really good salary? Also, what was it like to come out on the job?

*Laquetta Nelson:* Well, I'm going to tell you. The reason why I drove the bus is because it was a union job.

*Kristyn Scorsone:* Okay.

*Laquetta Nelson:* In a union job, we all made the same salary. I made the same salary that the men who were driving the bus made. They were supporting their families with the salaries that they made, and I was able to take care of myself with the salary that I made. I was alright with that, especially when I found out that women were not paid the same as men.

*Kristyn Scorsone:* Right.

*Laquetta Nelson:* I was okay with that. The reason why I came out is because one of my coworkers told me he had seen me on TV [*laughter*]. Okay, I didn't [*audio cuts out 3:06:24*].

*Laquetta Nelson:* - staying in the driver's room and say, "Okay, y'all. I'm gay, okay?" No. I didn't do that. There were two people that were important to me, and I cared about them. I came out to them. Every time I came out to somebody, they would always tell me, just like Mr. Wallace, my mentor and my father figure. When I first got started with the gay and lesbian stuff, I went to him, and I told him I was gay. He was an old country dude, and he's like, "Baby, I knew you were. I was just waiting for you to say something to me." All the other people that were important to me that I came out to gave me the same response.

You know what I think? I think that if you are in a family or if you know somebody that you really care about and you love, and you can tell that they are gay, why do you have to wait for them to come tell you? Why can't you out of love sit down and tell them that you see them, and you love them no matter what? That would take so much pressure off of some folks. Why they have to wait for us to do it? What are they afraid of? There's nothing to be afraid of. What I'm seeing right now, especially online—a lot of Black folks talking about gay folk. A couple of times, I have responded to them. Where the hell were y'all when the whole country was talking about this? The conversations that took place around the country ended up with laws being passed. Where were y'all? Why y'all waiting to come out talking about this thing now? Don't know, but that's just how I feel about it.

*Kristyn Scorsone:* Right.

*Laquetta Nelson:* Anything else?

*Esperanza Santos:* I have a couple more questions as they relate to Newark, and then I think I'll be good. How does that sound?

*Laquetta Nelson:* Okay.

*Esperanza Santos:* Yeah?

*Laquetta Nelson:* That sounds good.

*Esperanza Santos:* Okay, cool. We talked about your earliest memory of Newark, and then we talked about how it's changed since then. Are there ways you think Newark's changed that most people aren't aware of?

*Laquetta Nelson:* I've been away too long to be able to answer that question.

Esperanza Santos: Okay. You said there's been a lot of moments when you come into Newark and come out of Newark. Where in the city have you lived?

*Laquetta Nelson:* Like I told you, I lived down there at the north end of Broad Street down there near Clay Street. I lived down there in the 28th district of the Central Ward. I also lived on Howard Court in the University Heights. I lived there. I don't know. I can't even remember what the name of that street is.

Esperanza Santos: You can just tell me the area.

*Laquetta Nelson:* It's down there near what they calling it the Arts district down that way now. It's down near Lincoln Park.

Esperanza Santos: By Halsey?

*Laquetta Nelson:* Nope, not Halsey. Wait a minute. Which one is Lincoln Park and which one is Washington Park? There's two parks.

Esperanza Santos: Yeah.

*Laquetta Nelson:* One park is at the end of Halsey Street, and the other park is down past City Hall on the other end past city hall. It's down that way.

Esperanza Santos: Frederick Douglass Field?

*Laquetta Nelson:* I don't know what that is.

Esperanza Santos: Or Veteran's Memorial Park? Or Military Park?

*Laquetta Nelson:* Military Park—that's right across from PSE&G and Prudential, right?

Esperanza Santos: Yeah, that's pretty close to there.

*Laquetta Nelson:* Yeah. Nope, it's not that park. It's the one down the street past there.

Esperanza Santos: Okay.

*Laquetta Nelson:* Going towards the southern end of Broad Street, there's a park down there. I thought it was Lincoln Park.

Esperanza Santos: Okay. I'm not super sure. Considering all the places that you've lived in Newark and that you had a pretty stark memory of Newark when you

came, what did you find appealing about Newark since you were here for quite a bit of time?

*Laquetta Nelson:* Appealing about Newark? I liked the parks. I liked Rutgers University. I liked some of the people that I met. I always felt out of place there. I felt like I didn't belong [*laughter*], so I guess maybe I didn't.

Esperanza Santos: What made you feel like you didn't belong?

*Laquetta Nelson:* People didn't think like I thought.

Esperanza Santos: Yeah, because you had the D.C. perspective, not the Newark perspective.

*Laquetta Nelson:* Not necessarily D.C., but I met people who had never been outside the city of Newark. I lived in Germany for two and a half years. I was stationed in Germany for two and a half years. I've lived other places. I had traveled. I was a reader. I've always been a reader. I'm a smart, intelligent, intellectual person, but not everybody that I dealt with and encountered could—ugh, let me see. They were not there.

Esperanza Santos: Yeah. You were different.

*Laquetta Nelson:* I was different.

Esperanza Santos: Living in Newark, what did you find difficult or frustrating? It sounds like just not having people who thought like you was frustrating.

*Laquetta Nelson:* That was very frustrating. Not being understood. Not being understood was very frustrating for me. That was a big thing. I was always trying to fit in, and I never fit in. I was trying to live the best life that I could live for myself. I had no family, you understand. I was by myself.

Kristyn Scorsone: When you talked about the hockey rink and all that, how do you see the changes in Newark? Do you see it positively or negatively? The quote unquote revitalization of Newark?

*Laquetta Nelson:* I see that as a good thing. Progress is always good. I did hear when the ice rink was going up—the hockey rink—there was talk about they had to hire so many people from the city of Newark. A lot of people came from other places and worked in Newark, and then when the day was done, they went on back to their own places. Guess what? They took their tax money. They took a whole bunch of stuff out of Newark into the areas where they live. Okay? Is that all? Did I answer that?

Kristyn Scorsone: Yeah.

Esperanza Santos: Yeah. I just have two more questions, and then I think we'll be good.

*Laquetta Nelson:* Okay.

Esperanza Santos: What's your perspective on Newark's connection or relationship to other nearby cities or suburbs?

*Laquetta Nelson:* I always looked at Newark as—it's the largest city—let me put it this way. I lived in the largest ward—which is the Central Ward—in the largest city in the state of New Jersey, and I always felt that the people there should've had more power. I felt like the people should've had more power than what they had. I'm going to tell you, I felt powerful *[laughter]*. I realized where I was, and I realized who I was representing. That's why I could go and meet with state legislators, city legislators, county legislators, and I felt empowered. Even though I might not have had but maybe 25 members in the New Jersey Stonewall Democrats—maybe, I'm not sure—when I went to talk to those legislators, I was representing 10 percent of the electorate. 10 percent. That's a lot of people. Whether they are members of the Stonewall Democrats or not. I felt powerful in that respect.

Esperanza Santos: What places in Newark do you associate with LGBTQ people?

*[Pause 12:14 – 12:28]*

*Laquetta Nelson:* There was no LGBTQ community, no area, no designated area where the LGBT people lived. They were dispersed all over the city, all over the county, which is Essex County. They were everywhere. There was no one common place. When I think of the LGBT community in Newark, I think of places like LIT, the church. I think of Murphy's. I think of First Choice. I think of a couple of other little places where we used to go party and Rutgers University.

Esperanza Santos: Now, in our personal conversations preparing for this interview, something that you told me was that you got—it makes a lot more sense after hearing your interview, but you told me that you received an award and people outside of Newark acknowledged you, but people inside of Newark didn't really acknowledge you. Do you remember what that award was again?

*Laquetta Nelson:* That was from the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force gave me a Creating Change Community Service Award for the work that I did in the aftermath of the murder of Sakia Gunn and the creation of the Newark Pride Alliance. Their symbol is the triangle. They gave me a really nice trophy, and they gave me 10,000 dollars.

Kristyn Scorsone: Wow.

Esperanza Santos: That's pretty cool.

Kristyn Scorsone: What year was this?

*Laquetta Nelson:* Hey, because everything that I did out in the community, I paid for all that myself. Okay? There were no contributions made to me to help me do what I was doing. When I got that, I was happy. I went down to Florida to their event, and I guess you're going to want to know when that was, right?

Esperanza Santos: Absolutely *[laughter]*.

*Laquetta Nelson:* Okay.

Kristyn Scorsone: Is that the same year you got the award, then?

*Laquetta Nelson:* I got that award in 2003. I think it was 2003. I'm going to tell you in a minute. I'm going to look at this thing. I got it right here. This what is says. It says, "The National Gay and Lesbian Task Force 2003 Creating Change Community Service Award, Laquetta Nelson, for the change you create and inspire."

Kristyn Scorsone: That's awesome.

*Laquetta Nelson:* Wasn't that awesome?

Kristyn Scorsone: Yeah. That's very cool.

*Laquetta Nelson:* I was like, yeehaw *[laughter]*. I was so happy, because I wasn't doing what I was doing to get any awards or anything. I got that award, and I got an Unsung Hero award from the Newark City Council.

Kristyn Scorsone: That's cool.

*Laquetta Nelson:* They gave me a nice little award and a write up in there. What do you call that thing? Program. They did a write up of me. Now, there was a lady. One of the city council women—she told me she had to fight for me to get that Unsung Hero award. They didn't want to give it to me, but she fought.

Esperanza Santos: Why didn't they want to give it to you?

*Laquetta Nelson:* Because of what I was doing. These are Christian people, okay? This is from what I believe. This is what I know about my people that are Christian. They felt because of what I was doing, to give me an award



would be like promoting being gay and lesbian. Okay? It was not because of anything that I didn't do or anything that I did. I was a good citizen. I was a good citizen, and I was doing good things.

Kristyn Scorsone: Did you ever get to go to the Newark LGBTQ Center?

*Laquetta Nelson:* No. One of the guys that I saw you interviewed him, too—he and I are in touch on Facebook. He sent me pictures of it.

Kristyn Scorsone: Oh, cool.

*Laquetta Nelson:* He sent me pictures of it when they opened. I wrote him a message, and I told him I was glad to see that they didn't let the dream die.

Kristyn Scorsone: Yeah.

Esperanza Santos: Yeah. Oh, do you wanna ask a follow-up question?

Kristyn Scorsone: No, go ahead. Go ahead.

Esperanza Santos: Something that surprised me in our conversation was you got this national award by a huge organization and a pretty sizable amount of money, but even though you got this recognition nationally, locally, people either didn't really know or didn't really recognize that you got that award.

*Laquetta Nelson:* I don't know what the situation was. I didn't think that it was appropriate for me to make that announcement. I didn't think it was appropriate. Nobody made any announcement. One woman who—her name was Laura—she worked with the New Jersey Lesbian and Gay Coalition in some capacity which I cannot remember right now, but she was the only one that congratulated me on receiving that award. There was nothing written in any of the magazines. Nobody else said anything, so I didn't say anything, either. I took my award and went my way.

Kristyn Scorsone: I have a question.

*Laquetta Nelson:* Hang on, and I did get another award from—what was it? What's that organization down there in—I think it's in New Brunswick or it's in Morrisonville. Wait a minute. They gave me a plaque. I'm going tell you about that in one second, okay? They gave me an award. I got a lot of awards now. This one is from the "Gay Activists Alliance in Morris County is proud to present its community service award to Laquetta Nelson in recognition of her contribution to the political awareness of New Jersey's lesbian and gay community, presented October 21, 2001." Okay?

Kristyn Scorsone: Awesome.

*Laquetta Nelson:* When I graduated from Rutgers, Dean Credle—he said, “Make sure you come to awards night.” Now, I was not expecting to get any awards, because I hadn’t done anything at Rutgers for them to give me an award. I was just going to support James. When all was said and done, I came out of there with an award called the Vivian L. Brown award. It says, “Vivian L. Brown award presented to Laquetta Nelson for establishing organizations such as the Stonewall Democrats and to honor other efforts supportive of community building in a diverse environment, OBFS Rutgers Newark, May 9, 2001.”

Kristyn Scorsone: That’s awesome.

*Laquetta Nelson:* Yep. I even got a little award from the Philosophy Department, too.

Kristyn Scorsone: Were you aware of any LGBTQ organizations at Rutgers-Newark?

*Laquetta Nelson:* Whatever was there, they were working with us.

Kristyn Scorsone: Okay. Was it RAGE?

*Laquetta Nelson:* Huh?

Kristyn Scorsone: Was it RAGE?

*Laquetta Nelson:* Hm.

Kristyn Scorsone: I don’t know if that’s the right—

*Laquetta Nelson:* I can’t remember the name of it, but whatever it was, they worked with us. They were part of the coalition.

Kristyn Scorsone: Okay.

*Laquetta Nelson:* I mean, the alliance. Yeah.

Kristyn Scorsone: All the stuff that you have—do you think you’d be willing or able to maybe take some cellphone pics of some of your archives to send to us?

*Laquetta Nelson:* Well, the thing of the matter is I’m one of those stubborn old people, and my camera don’t work, and I refuse to buy a new camera. I refuse to buy a new phone.

Kristyn Scorsone: Ah, no worries. Yeah.

*Laquetta Nelson:* Now, if I could figure out how to take a picture with my laptop, I might be able to. Can you take a picture with a laptop?

*Kristyn Scorsone:* I guess it depends on what laptop you have. I'm not sure.

*Laquetta Nelson:* I got a Mac Air.

*Kristyn Scorsone:* Oh, probably, then, using maybe Photo Booth. I don't know if you could take pictures with Face Time. Maybe photo booth. I'm sure you could. There must be a way. I'll look it up and let you know.

*Laquetta Nelson:* Okay. Yeah, that'd be good.

*Kristyn Scorsone:* I have your email.

*Laquetta Nelson:* You know, these phones are so expensive.

*Kristyn Scorsone:* Yes. Yeah.

*Laquetta Nelson:* I was like, I'm going to use my phone until I can't use it anymore.

*Kristyn Scorsone:* Yeah, that's how I am, too.

*Laquetta Nelson:* [Laughter]

*Kristyn Scorsone:* I guess I only have one wrap-up question. Is there anything that we didn't ask you that you wish we had?

*Laquetta Nelson:* I got to say everything that I wanted to say.

*Kristyn Scorsone:* Great.

*Laquetta Nelson:* Yeah. I'm going to tell you. I was feeling like all of this history was just going to disappear.

*Kristyn Scorsone:* Yeah.

*Laquetta Nelson:* I'm grateful to you all for giving me this opportunity to put work that I did in the—you understand what I'm saying? It's not going to disappear.

*Kristyn Scorsone:* Yeah. Yeah, that's why we're doing this. Thank you for sitting down and doing this with us. I know it's a long time that we sat here and talked with you. I'm glad that we got your story, too, because you've been so influential and so critical to Newark's LGBTQ world and politics and creating safe spaces, especially for youth, so thank you.

*Laquetta Nelson:* Yes. You're very welcome. Y'all made my day. I feel like something has been lifted off of me, because I got boxes. I told my daughter. I said, look, if I should pass on or whatever, I got some pretty important stuff in there about what I did. Get it to a library or something. I'm not a writer. I don't want to write. That's why I told what's his name to go ahead and make the movie. Have you talked to Gayle Baldwin?

Kristyn Scorsone: No. Who's that.

*Laquetta Nelson:* Gayle Baldwin was a professor of religion at the University of North Dakota, and I met her in the aftermath of the murder of Sakia Gunn. She came to Newark, and I introduced her to everybody. She said she was going to write a book, and last time I talked to her, she had completed the book. I don't know whether she's gotten it published yet or not. She retired and is now living in South Carolina, so I don't know. I see you have talked to a lot of other people. I'm going to have to send you guys a picture. Do I need to write a resume?

Kristyn Scorsone: No. No, you can just provide us with a brief bio. It doesn't have to be super long. It could be as short or as long as you'd like. If you want to send any photos, that would be really cool. We can put those up on your page. Other than that, I think that's it, right? Just a brief bio, and then what happens after this is that we send this audio file to a transcription service. Then, they send it back to us. We proofread it and make sure, because sometimes, they make weird errors. We make sure it's accurate, and then we'll send it to you, as well, and you can look it over. Once you look it over, if you're fine with it, if you approve of it going on the website, then we post it. You have the final say.

*Laquetta Nelson:* Okay. Great.

Esperanza Santos: Now, yeah, I'm gonna close the interview, and then we can answer any questions afterwards. Does that sound pretty good?

*Laquetta Nelson:* Sounds great.

Esperanza Santos: Okay, cool. Again, today's date is March 7th, 2020. My name is Esperanza Santos, and I'm here with Kristyn Scorsone. Today, we've been interviewing Laquetta Nelson at the Queer Newark office while she is in Maryland for the Queer Newark Oral History Project. Laquetta, thank you so much.

*Laquetta Nelson:* You're very welcome. You're very welcome. You are very, very welcome. You are very welcome.