

Queer Newark Oral History Project
Interviewee: Donald Ransom
Interviewer: Whitney Strub and Isabella Sangaline
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Vetted by: Emily Posyton
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Whitney Strub: Record on this computer. Okay. It should be recording. That pop up for you?

Donald Ransom: Yeah, it did. It popped up.

Whitney Strub: Okay. Great. Oh, sorry. Let me just start the transcript off by saying it's April 6, 2021, here, and so we're recording over Zoom because of the pandemic. Yeah. All that being said, sorry, Don, go ahead. Just pick right up wherever you want because we're doing a second-round interview here, so the floor is yours.

Donald Ransom: I came to Newark in '84. At first, I was working in Brooklyn, a group called People of Color in Crisis, but they were in crisis because they didn't keep the books right, and the money was misspent. Then I decided to go to Paterson, where I worked in an HIV prevention project for IV drug users. Then I went into Straight and Narrow, which is a drug and alcohol program, so I could get clean and sober.

After a year and a half in treatment, I completed the program, and then they hired me to be their HIV educator, counselor. I took the position so that I could not only talk with and educate clients, but also staff. I tell people that, even today, if I were to go back into the field, I never had breakfast or lunch if I was gonna give someone their results because—

Whitney Strub: Uh-oh. Did Don disappear for you?

Isabella Sangaline: Yeah.

Whitney Strub: Oh, wait. Okay.

Donald Ransom: Okay. That was my sister calling. I'll call her back. Because one of the things is that we had staff when we established that program that didn't want HIV-positive clients. I said, "You can't have a client that's positive and you don't want to deal with it because, if

you're gonna deal with the addiction, then you have to deal with everything that goes with it." I was grateful for the priest that was executive director that told everyone, "Look. We're gonna do this program, and we're gonna educate the staff."

My way of educating the staff was, I want you to take a test, and I want you to tell me how you felt because your clients go through—then you had to wait two weeks for your results because we were sending the blood work to Trenton. Because of the confidentiality, I couldn't tell a staff person or a counselor that their client was positive, and a lot of the staff couldn't understand that. I said, "Because if my client wants to tell you that he's positive, he or she has to do that." I got a lot of grief from that.

I also got a lot of grief from one of the priests because I used to keep a bowl of condoms on my desk, and they would say, "Why do you have those? No one's having sex here." I said, "Whether they are or not, I must give them some kind of protection, or do *you* want them?" A couple of the priests said that they were offended that I would think that. I said, "Well, all I know is, someone is touching the clients, and it's not me."

Whitney Strub: This was a Catholic—

Donald Ransom: Yes.

Whitney Strub: A Catholic group, an organization?

[Pause 00:04:06 - 00:04:12]

Donald Ransom: I don't know why my phone is starting to ring.

Whitney Strub: You're in demand.

Donald Ransom: It didn't ring all morning. Then also being openly gay, some of the priests had a problem with that, but Father O'Connor, the director, told them that he didn't hire me for being gay. He hired me because I knew about HIV, that I was living with HIV, and when you sit and talk to someone—I can remember someone telling me, "I know how you feel." My thing was, are you positive? Are you taking twenty pills a day?

Do you wake up every morning knowing that at least eight or nine people you know today are going to not be here this evening? Then we started working on a project called Project Fire with James

Credle, with Newark Community Health Center, and that's where we did outreach to the Black, gay, and Latino—

[Pause 00:05:28 - 00:05:45]

Donald Ransom: Then after three years, then that project—I moved on. I went back to Straight and Narrow because I wanted to continue working in the field of substance abuse, HIV, and recovery. Then there, we had—I think my caseload at that time was forty clients. Then one of the most successful parts of that program was, one of my clients was pregnant, and I got her into the prevention project at University Hospital where she delivered a full-term baby that was negative. I remember her—people telling her, "You need to get rid of the baby. The baby's gonna come being positive," and all that.

Then I continued to go to a lot of, like NMAC [National Minority AIDS Council], amfAR, a lot of meetings, the International AIDS Conference. For me, the best one was when we went to the one in South Africa where Nelson Mandela spoke. Let me tell you, that moved me to tears, just the fact that he walked into the room, and the way the hush went was unreal.

Whitney Strub: When was that?

Donald Ransom: The International AIDS Conference that was held in South Africa.

Whitney Strub: Yeah. What year was that, or just even roughly?

Donald Ransom: Was that '88? Also, I was able to meet a lot of wonderful people at the Department of Health—Dee Sanders, Claire Gregory, Greg Morgan—people that were wonderful for the state of New Jersey that actually did a lot of work in the community. I've had clients that have left New Jersey that go to Atlanta or Alabama or somewhere, thinking that they can get the same services that they got in New Jersey, and they can't. Now, I figure, after 35 years of being positive, I'm not so much worried about being positive as I am about having four cancer surgeries.

I continue to do work. Then I got involved in Unity Fellowship Church NewArk where I started as a deacon, went to minister. Now I'm senior reverend. This past year, I've seen—because we can't meet at the church, we're doing Zoom meetings, and our membership has doubled. I'm just hoping that, finally, when we can open the doors of the church and I'll be back—because I believe that faith plays a big substance in people during recovery.

Like I was telling my neighbor, and she's a Republican, and her and I have had some battles in the laundry room where she thinks that Mr. Trump—'cause I always call him Forty-five—he's the best thing since popcorn. I said, "Oh, okay. That's nice." But, when you see someone that comes in that's incompetent in how he does things—and I believe that all these people now that are acting out and that are being racist or whatever, it was always there, but we had someone to tell 'em it was okay to do that.

I also get sometimes flack from friends of mine because they say, "You seem to be concerned about women, men, straight men, veterans," whatever. I said, "I'm concerned about humans." I'm the baby of eleven, so I always had brothers and sisters and family. My sisters were no problem. Two of my brothers were like—they would start quoting scripture. Then I would look at 'em and say, "Did you read the whole chapter?" Since I've been sick, my nieces and nephews have been just, "You're our Uncle D. We love you. Keep doing what you're doing."

I do what I can. Today, if I want to get involved in something, I will get involved, but if I don't like it, I can say no and not feel guilty about it. I was working with some kids that got put out of some LGBTQ housing because they didn't want to follow the rules. I said, "If they say be in by midnight, you got to take a urine weekly, then you do that." I'm just so amazed now that we now have a generation of young kids that are involved. I'm not the biggest fan of Facebook because I've been finding out so much stuff from people on Facebook that—I think that's wrong.

Like when I got a call about my friend Kyle on Saturday morning, an hour later, it was on Facebook because someone put it on there, and his sister was upset because she wanted to call people herself to tell them. At least we know how to communicate. Facebook, TikTok, messaging, or whatever else is going on. I'm glad now to see a young generation that's doing a lot with PrEP, with being involved and working so that—like I tell them, if you want to know what's going on, you have to get involved.

You just can't say you want to be positive to get housing, to get incentives and things. I said, because every morning when I wake up at 7:00, I have to take two pills to start. I would like to wake up one morning and just be able to have a cup of coffee and not worry about, you've got to take your meds otherwise, you're going to get sick. I've always been very, very grateful because of the women in my life.

I started in Philadelphia with a Muslim sister, Rashidah Lorraine Hassan, who started Bebashi, which was Blacks educating Blacks about sexual health issues. There, I learned how to go into the community and do work. For that, I'm grateful for her because the imam where she was at asked her to leave the mosque, masjid, because of her work, but she was a public health nurse.

She was the first one I remember being at a bar called Smart Place where she came in on a Sunday afternoon at tea dance to tell us about this thing called GRID. Then she broke it down. She said, "Listen. I'm not gonna do that CDC state talk. I'm gonna talk to you like I'm at Fifth and Olney. I'm gonna talk like I'm from the hood." It was really wonderful. I worked with her before I moved up to Newark to work in Paterson.

Whitney Strub: Can I jump in there? Because I did want to ask, why did you wind up in Newark specifically?

Donald Ransom: I wanted to get out of Newark—get to Newark because I was good friends with James Credle. I knew that Newark had had a problem with a lot of Black gay men that were positive, but not only that, but at that particular time, everybody was doing the rec-cremation [00:14:43]. I said, no. We need to change that. Once a person dies, I'm sure the virus, if it's in their body, dies, but we got to be able, at least for people of color, we need to celebrate you. We need to give you a home-going service.

The first funeral home that I worked with was Whigham, and people were surprised that Carol Whigham was doing services. She said, "All you have to do is use universal precautions." When we were telling people that, your son dies, your daughter dies, that there will be a viewing, there will be a service, they were like, "Really?" Then when I said we're gonna go to Whigham, they said, "That's the most expensive funeral home in the city." I said, "It may be the most expensive, but trust me."

I think we had a grant where we could—I think we paid for 100 funerals just to—I remember the first grandmother, when I told her, I said, "I'll pick you up in the morning. How do you want your grandson dressed?" She said, "I always wanted him in a blue suit, a white shirt, and a blue tie." I said, "Okay. No problem. We'll get that for you." You do this for her, and you—I'll tell anyone, I'm grateful. I'm blessed.

I can't understand, and I always say to God, what are you preparing me for that I've been through cancer, I had three brain surgeries,

prostate cancer, I had part of my colon taken out, and I'm still here, still involved, still going to work, was involved—I was on the first HIV planning council with the city of Newark.

Whitney Strub: When was that?

Donald Ransom: I think it was '86. Who was the mayor then?

Whitney Strub: Sharpe James?

Donald Ransom: Sharpe James. We also were able to get an additional grant from the U.S. Conference of Mayors to work with gay and bisexual men, but even—what's-his-name didn't sign off on it, the mayor. At that time, we got the state health commissioner to sign off on it, but of course, when the grant was awarded, you know who was standing on City Hall steps smiling. I just said, "I'm not gonna argue with him. At least he didn't stop the grant." At that time, he was president of the U.S. Conference of Mayors.

Also, one of the things that we did, getting Black and gay men of color, we also included women in there. A few people don't understand, and I tell them that women have been very important in the HIV/AIDS movement. If it had not been for them, I don't think we would be this far along in the stuff that we have done.

One of the first women that I loved and adored was Elizabeth Taylor, when she was there for her friend Rock Hudson when those two idiots in the White House weren't. Women have played a very, very important part in HIV/AIDS, just as they've done in the coronavirus thing. I think it's wonderful now that we can have people of all genders involved because it's—for me, it's human, a health problem for the entire community, not just gay or lesbian or whatever.

Like I was telling my neighbor, I said, "Back then, you were saying that only gay folks were catching HIV. What do you say about COVID? COVID is taking everybody out." I told her that I took the—I said, "I got the vaccination," and she said, "Why?" I said, "'Cause I want to live, and on the advice of my doctor." She said to me, "Your immune system is compromised. You've been taking antiretrovirals for thirty years," because I took AZT when it first came out, and I took it believing that it was going to help me.

Everybody else was saying, "It was only made for white folks." I said, "I guess I'm gonna be white to keep myself alive." As I worked and continued to work, I can remember telling my mother,

and I said, "When do we tell the rest of the family?" She said, "They may be your brothers and sisters, but they're my children, and they won't like you." She was absolutely right on that. As far as my nieces and nephews are concerned, I'm just their favorite uncle.

I continue to do the work. I continue to be grateful. I continue to be blessed. My brother in Colorado calls me all the time and says, "When is Newark gonna go up? When is there gonna be some shooting like Ferguson or somewhere?" I said, "Right now, our mayor has a tight lid on stuff, and I think he's doing a wonderful job."

Whitney Strub: I voted for him too. Can I ask you a couple of follow-up questions though? Do you mind if I jump on?

Donald Ransom: Go ahead.

Whitney Strub: I wanted to know first—and then, Izzy, same to you. If you want to jump on, just do so. I wanted to know specifically, when you first got to Newark in the mid-80s, how did it stack up against Philly? What was your impression of the local community, particularly the LGBT community, but also the state of the AIDS epidemic and local responses to it?

Donald Ransom: They were very, very visible. At that time, thanks to Doug Morgan, who was the assistant commissioner for health, Claire Gregory, Steve Sanders—may Steve rest in peace, and Doug also—they were very, very involved because they wanted—they had money to give out because, back then, everyone was doing women and children with HIV.

I'm glad that those services were available, but Black gay men, people—organizations did not want to be involved with us, even though they were taking—I can remember I was told that there were 18 organizations in Newark working with Black gay men, and I said, "Where are they?"

Whitney Strub: What were they? In the 80s? What organizations were supposed to be doing that work?

Donald Ransom: They were all getting money, some of them. I know Newark Community Health Center, 'cause we had Project Fire, and then along came AAOGC, and then came Positive Health, and then came St. Bridget's was the first one to do housing for homeless people. Then, of course, Broadway House because, at one time,

they were sending people all the way up to—there's a place—oh, God. It was a nursing home in—up off Twenty-three. I can't remember the name of it. Then people couldn't get up there to see their family or their relatives or whatever. Oh, God. What was the name of that place? It'll come to me later. We got the housing down.

Then one of the things I've always loved about the Ryan White Council is, they've had their good share of consumers, people that were affected by HIV and AIDS. I was also on the HIV council for Bergen Paterson Passaic. Then people said to me, "You don't have a relationship." I said, "Because I'm so busy doing all these different meetings and being on the governor's council." I've always been very actively involved because I've been concerned about making sure that we exist. If people are gonna be making decisions about our care, then we need to be sitting at the table.

Whitney Strub:

Yeah. No. That makes a ton of sense. One thing you didn't talk about much in the first interview was getting your first diagnosis and what that was like around HIV. When was that? What did that look like, and what did that feel like for you? Can you just walk through that process?

Donald Ransom:

I went into Philadelphia AIDS Task Force because I had lost—a couple friends had passed. When I went back two weeks later to get my results, when the counselor walked me to the room, her body language said to me, "You're positive." She just said, "How do you want to hear it?" I said, "Just give it to me straight. Don't be sitting there saying, 'We can do this. We can do that. We can do this. We can do that,' or whatever." She said, "I'm sorry to report—" I said, "You don't have to be sorry. If I have HIV, I have HIV."

I immediately left there, and I went up to see a good friend of mine, Dr. Anastasia Gray at Temple Medical Clinic. She did a lot of blood work, and then she said, "Okay. I'm starting you on AZT." I said, "Fine. No problem." Then I went over to the Smart Place bar, and I said to—the bartender said, "Are you okay?" I said, "No." I said, "I just found out that I'm positive." I said, "You need to give me some Jack Daniels so I can feel better." I had about five or six shots of Jack Daniels, and it didn't affect me. That's when I said, okay. You can't drink yourself away, and you can't drink this hurt or pain. You're positive, deal with it, and so I did.

Generally, when I meet someone, I let them know. I'm not gonna sit there and talk to you all night and chitchat and not let you know what's going on. Do I tell you that I have cancer, or do I tell you

I'm HIV-positive and that I'm in recovery? Then when you tell someone that's you're in recovery, sometimes, they say, "One drink won't hurt." I'm going, I know the one drink won't hurt, but it's the 500 that are gonna come behind it.

Then another thing is like, when my nieces and nephews say to me, "You never wanted to get married?" I said, "When it's legal for me to marry a man, I will, but as far as marrying a woman and having children and all that, I said no. I can adopt." I did raise two of my nephews 'cause their father's in jail for life. They call me Dad, which makes me feel wonderful and great that they're—one is now at Morgan State, and the other is in Valdosta, Georgia, in the Air Force.

Whitney Strub:

That's great. Oh, I'm sorry. Go ahead.

Donald Ransom:

I've never felt sorry for myself. I never felt that I'm being punished because—I was at a revival one time, and this pastor—we were in Weequahic Park, and he was saying, "God is punishing people for their lifestyle." I got up and left because they were getting ready to pass the collection plate. I'm not gonna give you money if you're gonna sit there and talk about me and say that God is punishing me. I said, maybe God should start at the pulpit and come down. How can I say it? It's been good, bad, ugly. I've witnessed all of it.

I've been there when people—I've told people they were positive. I've done funerals. I've been there when people were making transition. I've conditioned myself to, wow, life is okay. Life is great. Every morning I wake up, I say thank you because—at the end of the month, I'll be seventy-seven, and I'm grateful, blessed beyond measure. As long as I am alive, I'm gonna continue doing the work, join the interviews, and letting someone know.

A couple of months ago, I met a kid, a teenager, seventeen, that was just told he was positive. He told me, he says, "I go to these barebacking parties, and I want to be involved." I said, "Why would you go to a barebacking party knowing you're positive, and they're not using protection?" He said, "If I'm gonna die, I'm gonna die happy." I said, "You're seventeen." I said, "I've been positive thirty-two years." I said, "I'm living because I'm taking care of myself."

Then I just wish we'd get out of this, to get people to come to support groups to take care of themselves, that we have to get them incentives. I think the incentive is you're living. You got insurance. You can get your Section eight. You can get medical. You can get

so much. That's one of the reasons why I joined the board of NJCRI because they were taking care of the entire community, 'cause I joined their board in 2010.

I was getting ready to retire from Straight and Narrow, and I needed to do something, so I wanted to get involved in an organization that—where I go to get my healthcare. Then I also have great respect for Dr. Robert Johnson, dean of the medical school at Rutgers Health Science Center. I still call it UMDNJ every now and then. Newark has been blessed to have some wonderful, great people. I count my good friends Gary Paul and Peter Oates 'cause I married them.

Whitney Strub: Oh, yeah. I've seen the video.

Donald Ransom: Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. I married them. I've been able to be there for people to comfort them, to marry them, also to be there and let them know that life goes on.

Whitney Strub: No, that's great. Yeah. Yeah. It's an amazing career. We could keep you on the line for hours here, obviously, asking follow-up questions, but I've got one specific—just the historian in me here pinpointing dates. You said thirty-two years, so this is 1989 that you got the diagnosis, and then that led you into recovery pretty much immediately afterward?

Donald Ransom: For a couple years, I wasn't in recovery because my thing is, I'm gonna die. Back then, I think the life expectancy for Black gay men was—they said six months to twelve—six to twelve months. I said, "If I'm gonna go, I'm gonna go my way. I'm gonna party. I'm gonna have a good time." At that time, I took my—I think it was Mastercard—what was it? The Visa I had. I think, at one time, it was \$25,000 I owed on it. I said, "Because they can't come to the grave and get it." I've been grateful. I've been wonderful.

Then to be able to go and know that Rutgers—like I tell people, I think we have the best state-run college. I said, the joke is, we were always—people called Newark Rutgers the Negro campus 'cause, for a long time, there weren't too many other folks at Rutgers Newark. I'm just so glad now in these past couple years that they have decided that Rutgers is not the stepchild, the one in Newark, where they're doing all this building, and the campus is right in the heart of the city. Of course, I'm sure you've heard of Dr.—the institute is named after him.

Whitney Strub: Oh, Clem Price?

Donald Ransom: Oh, my God. Clem Price. Oh, let me tell you. When I first met that man, I instantly fell in love 'cause I did a walking tour of Newark with him. Then I was at the campus one day. We were doing some training there. This one woman said, "That's Professor Price." I said, "Yeah." She said, "You'd never know it," 'cause he wasn't walking around like, I'm this distinguished professor. I'm the first, whatever, boom, boom, boom. He was just like, "Welcome, you all," and blah-blah-blah.

I went like, oh, God. There was another time in my life when he passed, I said, wow. I said, they're taking my foundation, I said, because he is such a wonderful, kind person, very devoted to the city of Newark, especially Rutgers Newark.

Whitney Strub: Oh, yeah. When I interviewed him for my job, he's the one who picked me up at Newark Penn Station and gave me a driving tour of the city. Yeah. No. I loved Clem. It's a real loss, not having him. Can I go back to one thing? You were talking about the racial dynamics and change at Rutgers Newark, but one striking thing you said earlier about the racial dynamics of vaccines was, when you went on AZT, other Black friends said you were becoming white. Could you unpack that a little? Was it the memory of Tuskegee and medical racism that led Black gay men to be afraid of AZT, or what was it? Can you just explain that?

Donald Ransom: It was the distrust of the government, but also, what you have to realize is, we were not part of those clinical trials. The same thing as when we started fighting for women in '84. We were telling CDC, "You can't define HIV in women and men the same way because women's bodies are different." They finally realized that it does present itself different in women, so we have to treat women different. As far as the Tuskegee study, my grandmother had told me about that, and I went, regardless of whether—whatever, I'm taking this medication to save my life.

Whitney Strub: But, other Black gay men were more wary of it though?

Donald Ransom: Yeah, they were.

Whitney Strub: What were the conversations like? I assume you were advocating for it.

Donald Ransom: I was advocating, but one of the things they were saying was, a lot of them didn't have health insurance. A lot of them were not in care. That's one thing I can say about continuum of care. I've been

in therapy since '85. I've been in recovery since '90. January 18, 1990. Then I say to people, "What you have to do is start taking care of yourself, thinking about yourself, getting involved in your care." I said, "I don't want someone sitting there, making decisions, and I'm not at the table."

It's just like, for me, going to the planning council was no problem because I had a car, but then there were a lot of consumers that couldn't come because they would have to take the bus. Then we need to take some of these dollars and buy tickets so that they can come, and allow them to have a public portion of the meeting where they can speak. Also, I tell agencies, employees of agencies, "Would you come and get your treatment here? If you wouldn't, then why are you taking care of your clients?"

When I tell people that I get my medical care at NJCRI, they go like, "You could go to a private doctor." I don't want to go to a private doctor because you're not up on everything that's going on, where we're doing clinical trials at NJCRI. We're housing the homeless. We got Project WOW, which took me a little while to get used to because—I love 'em dearly, but all that—I'm past that ballroom stuff. Thump, thump, thump, thump, thump, drop it, they get up. The health balls.

I'm just grateful that we now have so many things. Then I'm grateful for Gary Paul and his agency where they're doing the transgender stuff because, for a long time, we kicked them to the curb too. We don't want to be bothered. You don't know whether—during the day, you're male. Then at night, you're female. That's confusing. For me, it was. Then there were those that were saying, "We want to go and get the change," but then they were getting—they were going to pumping parties where they were either getting the silicone implanted or getting the hormones off the street.

Now they can come to NJCRI, or I don't know if AAOGC has it where they can get their hormones legally and get good healthcare, and they can also get their birth certificate changed to reflect the gender that they're living in. I know of a couple now that are waiting for gender reassignment, and they say to me, "Do you want to change?" I said, "no. I'm happy the way I am, very happy, but for those that want to go through that, you can."

Whitney Strub: Yeah. No. That's definitely an important evolution in the Twenty-first Century, right?

Donald Ransom: Yeah.

Whitney Strub: I think I just have one more question about specifically Newark and HIV/AIDS before maybe shifting gears into just a couple other questions that we had. I wonder if you could say another quick word about specifically reaching communities of color in Newark, Black and Latino or Latinx, anything that you felt was a specific tool of reaching those communities [unintelligible 00:41:01]

Donald Ransom: In running Project Fire, we hired people from those communities to come in. We trained 'em. Then when we were doing our safer sex parties—for the men, it was called hot, horny, and healthy—for the women, it was wet, wild, and well—where we would come into the house. They would have a minimum of ten people, and they would get paid \$150, and we would do AIDS 101 and introductions. We would do safer sex practices. We would talk about condom usage and various things.

Then one of the parties—one of the women said she wanted her twelve-year-old son to listen. Then he said, "Mom, I'm not gonna get anybody pregnant because I'm hitting it from the back." I'm going, "You and your girlfriend are having anal sex?" He said, "Yeah." He said, "Babies don't come that way." Then I knew that we had to start working with a younger population because they were thinking hitting it from the back is no problem. Then we also talked to them about STDs. "You're twelve years old, and you're a father? You know what that means? You're a kid yourself."

Then we also had to let them know, when they use the F-word—the F-word and the N-word really bothered me, and I would tell them, "You can say those words, but I'm not gonna respond to you because that's not who I am." Then you turn around, and most of us and our families are the ones that may be talked about, but when something happens, who do they call? Then I said to a friend of mine one time, "Maybe if you heterosexuals would stop having children, we gay men and lesbian women wouldn't have to adopt them and raise them," because people were saying that gay men and lesbians should—

[Pause 00:43:26 - 00:43:33]

Donald Ransom: They're gonna turn out—I have lots of young men and women that I know that have gay parents, and they're straight. I don't know. Even now in 2021, I was on the bus last week, and I heard someone say, "My uncle has the package." I went, are they still using that crap? We've come a long way, but I still think we have a longer way to go. New Jersey has always been on top. I'm just so

glad. When I went to Essex College, I was so glad on how they were doing the vaccine and how they had it set up. I was in and out in forty-five minutes.

Whitney Strub: Yeah. That's good to know. Yeah. I'm heading to NJIT is where it is today, so pretty nearby. Oh, sorry.

Donald Ransom: That's in the new health facility that's off of—is that Lock Street? Yeah.

Whitney Strub: It's on Lock Street.

Donald Ransom: [Unintelligible 00:44:48].

Whitney Strub: Right. I know, at some point, you're gonna run out of time here, and so before that happens, I do want to talk about religion, but I also want to see, Izzy, if you had any follow-up questions before I shift gears here.

Isabella Sangaline: I was just curious about how, 'cause you talked about taking control of your own recovery, and talking about that process of you taking that control and the steps you took for yourself.

Donald Ransom: One of the things is, my grandmother used to say, "You're either part of the problem, or you're part of the solution." I just didn't want people telling me all the time, "You've got to do this. You've got to do that." I decided to read up on it as much as I could, went to seminars, workshops, 'cause I needed to know what was going on. Dr. Anita Vaughn was very good because she would explain all my lab work. Because some doctors just say, "Your count is this. Your count is that."

She would break everything down. "Your T cells are good. The percentage is good." Blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah. A lot of people see someone with a white coat on, an MD, and they're scared to ask 'em and I was saying to her, "I take three or four different medications." I went to my pharmacist, and I said, "How do I take these medications? Do I take 'em all together? Do I take them with or without food?" I'd learned that because I needed to know the right thing to do. Taking them all at once, then they fight one another. They're all trying to dissolve, and then they all break each other down.

I would say that being—I'm not saying I wanted to be in control, but I just needed to know what was going on. Then I also have a very good friend of mine of twenty years, Dr. Ishmael Griffin,

who's an emergency room physician who I'm very close to, and he explains everything to me about this, that, whatever. Right now, I'm starting to have some kidney problems, so my primary had to redo some medication because it was starting to be toxic. If that's the only thing after thirty-five years, I'm happy. I'm grateful. I'm just so blessed to still be in Newark. Even I live in East Orange, the services that are now available in Essex County, period, are unbelievable.

Whitney Strub: That's great. What about religion? Can we shift to that? Because I think it's an important story that needs to also factor in here, right? Could you talk a little bit about religion in your--oh, sorry. Go ahead.

Donald Ransom: I got tired of hearing people saying, "What is the Black church doing?" Then when I joined Unity Fellowship Church, I knew I wasn't gonna be hearing about Leviticus. I also was gonna hear that God is love. Love is for everyone. I was telling some people, because there's a church in Newark in the south ward where the pastor—a lot of gay folk go there, but some of his sermons—I said, "You all are sitting there yelling, preach, preach, preach, preach. You're giving him money, and he's talking about you all and calling you all worthless, that you're sinful, that God is gonna punish you, and yet you all are tithing. You're singing in the choir." No.

I went with a friend one time, and when the pastor, may he rest in peace, was saying that it should be Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve, and I was okay with the first collection, but then they did two more, so I got up and left. I said, you're not gonna insult me, saying I'm worthless, but yet you don't give my money back, or you don't want to marry people in your church. You always get somebody else to do it.

A lot of the things—until we ourselves can say, "Listen, this is what we want. This is how you're gonna treat us, I'm sorry. I can't be sitting up in Metropolitan Baptist or New Hope, knowing that from, the pulpit, that they're saying stuff that's not right." You can't minister to me and then cut me down.

Whitney Strub: How did the fellowship come to be in Newark? It's a somewhat unique organization, especially in Newark. What was your sense of just how it came together and became such a longstanding institution and the role it played in the community?

Donald Ransom: I was going to the Unity Fellowship Church New York, when it was at the Gay and Lesbian Center on—is that Fourteenth Street or Thirteenth Street? Then they said that they were gonna be opening one in Newark. I said, "Oh, wonderful. Then if it comes to Newark, I'm gonna join it." I was just so grateful to be able to come into a space and hear the Word and not be ostracized for being who I am. I am who I am.

Then to have Elder Holland, who's now Bishop Holland, come and say, "I'm Black. I'm a lesbian." She had dreadlocks. At that time, her sons, when they first came, were five and, I think, eight, and so I became their uncle. It was just wonderful, being able to come in and tell people, "You're fine. You're okay. You're wonderful. You're gonna hear loving words from the pulpit."

Whitney Strub: Was there ever a backlash to Unity Fellowship in Newark? Was there any protest or people condemning it from the more traditional—

Donald Ransom: We had gone to several churches—I won't name them, but the only one that said, "Yes, you can meet here," was Trinity and St. Philips Cathedral. Can't remember the dean. Oh, God. The dean that was there was welcoming to everybody. He's now in New York because he came in second to be bishop of the diocese of Newark. What's his name? Dean Sabune. He welcomed us with open arms and even came to services sometimes because he said, "We are all God's children."

Whitney Strub: That's great. Did City officials...I'm just wondering, the city government, was it ever warmly responsive and supportive? Do they keep a hands-off policy? What was your sense of the relations between the church and the city?

Donald Ransom: What's-his-name never came to the church, Sharpe James, but Booker did. We also had Ras, the present mayor, come several times. Of course, when his mother was grand marshal of the pride parade a couple years, she rode on the float with us, and she's an absolutely marvelous woman. I remember one time, we were somewhere, and someone was saying—they were marching, and the mayor said, "My mother will be there tonight." I said, "Mr. Mayor, don't worry." I said, "If anything happens to your mother, you think the city burned in '67?" I said, "trust and believe," I said, "they are not gonna hurt our mother."

One of his bodyguards got upset. He said, "Why would you say that?" I said, this woman who lost her daughter—because a friend

came looking for her, his wife, who they were—her and her partner had taken in and shot both and killed both of them, and this woman is still in the community doing work telling, "I love all of you. You're all my sons and daughters," and had no problem being down at the gay pride parade, walking around, talking to people. Whenever I see the mayor, I said, "Tell Mama I said hello," because I will.

Whitney Strub: Yeah. No. That's great. I remember Amina Baraka up on the big truck that year. I want to ask a few questions, just follow-ups from the first interview, about First Choice and other places you mentioned. Izzy, I didn't know, did you have follow-up questions on religion and church stuff at all?

Isabella Sangaline: I was just curious about how you handled the negative messages you were hearing from other church communities 'cause you mentioned how you just rejected—you walked away from those places, but is there any other ways you had to process these messages you were hearing?

Donald Ransom: Being a member of the Black clergy of Essex County, we were at a meeting one time, and we were talking about condom use and whatever. Dr. Johnson, I remember him 'cause he's a deacon in his church, said, "We need to save their lives so then you can save their souls." He said, "I'm not speaking as the dean of the medical school." He said, "I'm speaking—" he said, "I'm not speaking—I'm a deacon, but I'm also the dean of the medical school. You have to hear, if you want people to be in your congregation, then we need to save their lives."

I've always admired him, even though it took him five years to make him the dean 'cause he was acting dean. I feel that when you can have—I don't know if you've watch the series, "This Is My Story. This Is My Song". When Bishop Yvette Flunder said she started the church in Oakland and called it the City of Refuge because she said, "People needed refuge." She said, "I am surprised that the Black church, which was not, at one time, allowed to be in certain churches, or you had to be in the balcony, would tell us that we're not welcome." She said, "I called my church the City of Refuge because people needed refuge."

When I first heard her speak, we were Oakland, and we were doing—I was on a panel with her on HIV and spirituality, and she blew me out the water. Her and I went out to dinner that night, and we talked, and she was telling me all the stuff that she wants to do. She said, "It's like, we're in Oakland, like we're forgotten, but the

San Francisco AIDS Task Force, which has all this money, all these wealthy donors. No one gives two craps about Oakland." Now Oakland is getting gentrified.

Whitney Strub: Right. Yeah. Certainly analogous to Newark in that regard, right?

Donald Ransom: Yeah.

Whitney Strub: This is shifting gears, but I just want to make sure I fit this in. In the first interview you did, you did a nice little portrait of what Murphy's was like, but you mentioned First Choice and never came back to elaborate. I wonder if you can just talk a little about that because I feel like it's a little less well-documented than Murphy's.

Donald Ransom: Murphy's during the day, was like, businessmen went there for lunch and I guess a beer or a Manhattan or something, but then at 5:00, it turned gay, where First Choice was, it was always the children's hour, if you know what I meant. It was gay, gay, gay, gay, gay. If you were up in there, people knew what you were there for where, at Murphy's, we had to wait 'til 5:00 to come in.

Whitney Strub: I've never seen a picture of First Choice. Could you just narrate—what did it look like walking in on the street and then on the inside?

Donald Ransom: You walk in, and it looked—was it a converted bank? Was it a converted bank?

Whitney Strub: I don't know.

Donald Ransom: It looks like a bank from the outside, and then you went in, and there was a round bar, and then they had a side bar off the dance floor, and you could just dance and just be yourself, and no one bothered you.

Whitney Strub: This was the Ironbound, right? It's one of the whiter places in Newark. Who was going there?

Donald Ransom: No one bothered us down there.

Whitney Strub: Is it a mixed crowd, like Black and white at that point mostly, or what?

Donald Ransom: I would say it would be seventy-five percent Black, twenty-five percent other.

Whitney Strub: Men and women or mostly men?

Donald Ransom: I would say ninety percent men, ten percent women.

Whitney Strub: Who owned it? Do you know the story of how the Ironbound had a gay bar in the 80s?

Donald Ransom: I think it was a straight couple. I think it was a couple, and then they had a son that was gay. You know who knows all about First Choice? Aaron.

Whitney Strub: Yeah. I think I've asked him about it, but I can follow up more. When did it close roughly?

Donald Ransom: First Choice, I would say '91, '92. Then, of course, Murphy's went out when they built the Rock next door to it.

Whitney Strub: Yeah. In between, in the 90s, were there other gay bars and clubs that came and went, or was it—was that it for that period?

Donald Ransom: That was it for that period 'cause you have to remember, a lot of us were going to New York to Two Potato, The Monster. What else? Paradise Garage. Better Days. Then there were some bars down in Harlem that we went to. Then there was, then Feathers came along. That's up in Bergen County. Then, of course, I can think of another bar. There was a bar in Passaic that was gay. Yeah.

For a lot of us gay men, Black gay men, we would not go to the gay clubs, 'cause me, whatever club was open, that's the club I went to because the bartender didn't ask who or what you were. You walk in, you order a drink, and I would always—bartender, a beer was \$1.50, whatever. I would always put \$3 on the bar and tell him, "Keep the change," and so they were happy to be getting good tips.

Whitney Strub: I've got to ask this because my own research is about porn theaters and what-not. What about the Cameo and the Little Theatre in Newark? Did you ever go there, or did you see that as part of the LGBT community at all or something apart?

Donald Ransom: I know a lot of folks went there, but my thing is, I couldn't be up in there because of the fact that I was out there telling everyone to have safer sex, be this, be that. Besides, I really didn't like them because they were not like the Club Baths that were in New York,

Philadelphia, and all these big cities. To me, I just thought they were just dirty little dingy spots.

Then my thing is, okay, you would see me in the Cameo and the Little Theatre and speak to me, but you wouldn't speak to me on the street because so many people were closeted. Of course, they say, "I'm only gay at certain times," which I never understood. That's one thing I've never had to deal with, just telling people that, "Hey, I'm gay, okay? Deal with it."

Whitney Strub: Right. A geographical question. I'm just curious too about Newark in that era, say the 80s and 90s, if you take out the clubs and bars and the church, are there other spaces in Newark that you think of as particularly LGBT or queer or bending in that direction, or is that the major geography that we just talked about?

Donald Ransom: That was the major geography, but you also know that we could hop on PATH and go to New York, or we could hop on NJ transit and go to Philadelphia.

Whitney Strub: Right. Yeah. No, that makes sense. I think the only other big topic—we talked about this a little before we started hitting record, so I know this is asking you to rehash a little of what we began talking about, but I did want to close out by asking you about the Trump years and COVID just to put that on the record for the archive, but before that—

Donald Ransom: I was going to move to Amsterdam if 45 had won again.

Whitney Strub: *(Laughter)* Yeah. It was a big existential question for a lot of us, I think. Before shifting into that closing topic though, Izzy, did you have other questions you wanted to throw out?

Isabella Sangaline: I do not currently have follow-up questions.

Whitney Strub: Okay. Cool. Cool. Yeah. When you recorded your first interview, I think it was 2018, so Trump was already in office. You talked about that a little in that interview, but just wondering if you have other thoughts about those years, what it was like to be gay and Black and in North Jersey during the Trump years or just any general thoughts, and then maybe the pandemic as well and how that's been.

Donald Ransom: My thing is, he reminded me of Reagan, who said nothing about HIV or AIDS, and then you find out that he and that wife of his secretly were vaccinated in the White House, saying nothing. Then

when he said the thing about drink bleach or drink Lysol or something, I would go, no wonder this man is—I never had a good feeling for him because, when he was first building stuff in Atlantic City, a lot—he put a lot of people out of business from not paying them. I just got tired of his—and then some of his Cabinet appointments were absolutely disgraceful in how they were gonna come and dismantle all these programs.

Like I've told my—I have a niece that lives in Stone Mountain, Georgia. I told her, I said, "I'm so glad that the Major League Baseball will not be in Atlanta." That's gonna cost them about \$100 million just because these Republicans passed—because they said the election was not secure. I'm going, these fools are crazy. Because they did that—'cause my neighbor upstairs said to me, "They should have just had the game there." I said, "You don't reward a child for being bad." 'Cause I've watched her grandson spit at her or just yell at her, and I'm going, if that were my child, he'd have false teeth. Yeah. I was just so disappointed. I thought Trump—we knew he was an incompetent businessman, but some of the people he appointed were even worse.

Whitney Strub: Yeah. It was a grim four years. Did you have a favorite in the Democratic primary, or were you just, anybody but Trump?

Donald Ransom: Anybody but Forty-five.

Whitney Strub: Gotcha. Oh, sorry. Go ahead.

Donald Ransom: I also wish we could have a strong woman like from England. Thatcher. She didn't play. Let me tell you. She was a part of the old boys' club, and they knew it. She ran it with an iron fist, and they did not like her because she was one of them.

Whitney Strub: Right. I guess, as long as we're talking politics, I'll ask you, what's your sense so far of Biden and Harris? What are your feelings about them?

Donald Ransom: I think they're on the right track. I have a little wait-and-see attitude. I'm glad he's letting transgendered people serve because, if we're gonna defend our country, we have to have available bodies. The sad part is, a lot of the people that will be enlisting will be people of color. It's just like, when I saw the Capitol on January 6th, I cried because I said to myself, a couple weeks before when they had the Black Lives Matter march, they couldn't get within two blocks of the Capitol.

Here, these people are in there, looking for Nancy, looking for people to say, "Hang 'em, do this, do that," and they're running through offices and everything. I was just totally disappointed that this idiot tells them, "I'll meet you there," and then he goes to the safety and security of the White House.

Whitney Strub:

Right. Yeah. It was a pretty ignoble note to end on. I know you already spoke about this before we hit record, so I apologize for putting you through this a second time, but I do think it's worth it for the record and the transcript of this interview if you could go back and just talk about your experiences in the pandemic because Newark has been hit hard, but you personally have had a lot of loss. I think that's useful for the historical record just to—so later generations reading this will have a sense of what people went through. If you don't mind repeating yourself a little, how this past year—

Donald Ransom:

One of the things that we have to establish is community health centers in all neighborhoods. We have to have everyone at the table. You can't be in a community and not have that community represented. I'm so glad now that they're doing a special outreach for clinical trials to not only people of color, but seniors. That's another thing where we have seniors who are in nursing homes where they're being disrespected and not treated right.

Whitney Strub:

I think you had said that, I believe, you've lost eight family members to the pandemic? Is that—

Donald Ransom:

Yes. When I was talking to a couple of them, they said, "We don't believe in hospitals. We don't believe in doctors. We remember Tuskegee." I said, "Yeah. It's in Alabama." I know that the families got compensated, I said, but once again—'cause I can remember, I was at a doctor's appointment one time with my mother, and she wasn't asking her doctor questions. I said, "Why is my mother taking this? Why is my mother taking that? What do you expect? What is she gonna do?" Boom, boom, boom, boom.

Then just before she passed, they wanted to operate on her because she had a strangulated bowel. I said, "My mother is 90 years old." She said, "I'm not going through that." They kept her comfortable, and then the next day, she was gone. We have to get involved. We have to be—it's like I was telling my mother. I need to know what's going on with you.

You're just not gonna go to this doctor and have him give you these pills and tell him everything is okay 'cause I can remember

when we were first starting to work with seniors in the nursing homes 'cause we found out that the young girls, especially the ones that were on drugs, were going to the nursing homes to service the senior men. Then we were finding women were coming in in their 60s and 70s with STDs because their husbands or boyfriends or whatever was double-dipping.

I'm just so grateful that we now have a competent Health and Human Services person, confident that we have someone that's not gonna push the nuclear button, confident—he said we were gonna get 100 million shots in 100 days, and they've done that. I'm grateful for the vaccines. I'm so glad that New Jersey was involved, Johnson and Johnson, for people getting the one shot.

I think, right now, in D.C., we're on the right track and—but the other party, I don't know why they're being—it's just like when they said Obama came in, "Whatever he does, we'll oppose it." I see them doing that now to Biden. I see Biden as someone who is humble, humane. Losing his son to brain cancer was not easy. Right now, I really, really feel good about the country. I think we're on the right track. I'm glad that he got the stimulus package passed because people need it.

Whitney Strub: Yeah. No. It's a good note to end on, a sort of up note. I think those are all of the questions I had. Izzy, did you have other questions?

Isabella Sangaline: No. I don't think so.

Whitney Strub: Yeah. Don, anything else you wanted to say that we didn't think to ask about in either of these two interviews?

Donald Ransom: No. I'm just grateful that all this is being recorded because my grandmother used to say, "If you don't know your history, you're doomed to repeat it." Sometimes, what people say to me is like, "Wow. I want to be like you when I grow up." I tell them, "You sure you want to go through my struggles?" I said, "Are you sure you—" I say, "I got some demons and nightmares, okay, that I can only tell my therapist about."

I'm grateful that I have friendships that go back forty, fifty years. Most of these people are now gone. I went home last June, and out of my graduating class of—I think there were 330 people, I think there may be 100 of us left. Several were killed in Vietnam. Several were killed in car accidents. Several had heart attacks. People are leaving here every day.

Like I tell people, I said, I can remember sitting and talking with my grandmother about how she grew up 'cause she was on the plantation and all. Nowadays, you see these young kids get on the bus. They don't want to give you a seat. They're standing on the corner, and their pants are hanging to their knee. Then when you look at them, they want to get smart. If you didn't have your pants hanging down, I wouldn't be looking.

Whitney Strub: (Laughter) That's fair enough. Yeah. No. I really appreciate you taking the time to do this. It is such a valuable record. I feel very grateful to be part of this process in documenting this, so thank you. Yeah. I look forward to—I'm sure I'll see you over the summer. It'll be nice to cross paths in-person again after quite some time living on the Internet.

Donald Ransom: I definitely wish you well, and if you need me again, I'm available.

Whitney Strub: Oh, you know what? Actually, very last thing. We do need a biography and a photo from you to put on the online oral history archive. I don't know if you have something already online that we can just crib from or if you want to just e-mail me, but if you don't mind, a paragraph biography and whatever picture you want.

Donald Ransom: All right. Yeah, I do. Let me look in my—I have a bag with my bio and a picture that I can send it to you. Just text me your address.

Whitney Strub: Okay. Yeah. You got it. I'll do that. You know what? Actually, very final thing, and then I promise, I'll let both of you go. If you've got old photos or any kind of documents from your life, from organizations you've been involved in around Newark issues that you'd be willing to either let us scan for a digital archive, we'd be totally interested in that if you just happen to have stuff that you think would be available. It can wait too until everybody's vaccinated.

Donald Ransom: I do have some stuff I'd like you to photograph, especially my friend Reggie Williams, who was with the National Task Force on AIDS Prevention. I got some photos and stuff from the National Association of Black and White Men Together.

Whitney Strub: Oh, yeah. That's exactly the kind of stuff. That would be great. Maybe I'll wait until I get my second vaccine, and then maybe I'll hit you up 'cause maybe it's something I can pick up and photograph and return or something like that.

Donald Ransom: Okay. No problem.

Whitney Strub: All right. Cool. Thank you.

Donald Ransom: Be safe. Thank you, Isabella.

Whitney Strub: Yeah. Good to see you, Izzy. Thanks for joining. I guess I'll hit end for this, but I'll see both of you soon.

Donald Ransom: Okay. Take care.

Whitney Strub: You too.

[End of Audio]