

Queer Newark Oral History Project

Interviewee: Leslie Oliver

Interviewer: Kristyn Scorsone

Date: January 10, 2024

Location: Zoom

Kristyn Scorsone: Okay. Today is January 10, 2024, and my name is Kristyn Scorsone and I'm interviewing Reverend Leslie Oliver over Zoom, sorry, for the Queer New York Oral History Project. Thank you Reverend, and I know you were about to tell me about "Happy in the Rain," the song that changed your life.

Leslie Oliver: Indeed. The cool thing about it was, you know I was a fresh-sophomore at Rutgers University in New Brunswick, and I played drums for the choir. And one of the members said, "you know, I wanna do a record with you, I have a studio." I'm like, "You're right." So, he took me to a studio in Newark and back in those days, I mean still even to this day, a lot of people record in their basements, attics, so I didn't see it in a studio. I was a little cautious. But I did record my demo later on. They brought me back to Newark to record.

I joined the group Intense who had already released that song one time. They added me to the song a year, like a couple of months later, and the song took off. They remixed it. It took off. And then everyone's like who's this girl in the group? Who's this girl in the group? And so, I had a great time with the group. I actually came out while in the group. I was in school still. So, I, it was around 1990 we remixed the song but in '92 when I graduated *[laughter]* I decided to come out of the closet and I was *[distorted audio 00:01:49]*

Kristyn Scorsone: Oh, you're breaking up a little.

Leslie Oliver: I came out. Oh, can you hear me?

Kristyn Scorsone: Yeah, now I can.

Leslie Oliver: Let me get some *[unintelligible 00:02:06]* Okay. I actually came out of the closet while I was a member of this group, and it was tough because I cut all my hair off. I had a Caesar haircut and people were looking at me funny and the lady tried to make me look a certain way. Like this is the image for the group and you're not to *[unintelligible 00:02:31]* I'm like but that's not who I am. It was a struggle when I first came out 'cause I was a part of this group that was trying to put me in a mold and then that just wasn't me. It's interesting that the music group was a part of my beginning.

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They had me wearing a wig. I had to wear all these different, and I was still a very butch in those days. They had me wear a *[unintelligible 00:02:56]* trying on clothes. I was like, "Oh my God I hate this."

Eventually the group broke up and I was on my own so from there I was able to chart my own course, but it was very much oh my God can you believe Jazmina's gay? Oh God, oh God, everybody kept worrying about me hitting on them and all this and that. You know how some people are.

Kristyn Scorsone: Yeah.

Leslie Oliver: I was like, "I'm just here for the music so." I eventually went solo and then the rest is my journey, but the singing group was a part of my coming out process from there—

Kristyn Scorsone: Who else was in the group?

Leslie Oliver: We had two other gentlemen in the group. Khison Vuane was the lead singer, Tyrone [Payton] was the producer. And I'm on the, I come on the scene as the new voice, so you had that whole entire struggle with, "I need to be in charge;" "I need to be in front." And so, I really got tired of that. I left 'cause it wasn't serving my life anymore. That's the group, I didn't stop singing, I left the group. And then things just kind of picked up from there.

It helped me make my mark as the singer Jazmina. It really, that song, really changed my life. It opened up opportunities. I got to record with a lot of cool people in New Jersey. In Newark you can't say house music without saying my name. Can't say Jersey house music without mentioning my name or my group. That song just opened doors for me. It just gave me confidence and I went on to do a lot of great things with other producers. Other notable house music producers. That was like early '90s and I worked throughout the '90s making records here and there.

But then I felt a pull to the ministry. I felt a pull to the ministry. I wasn't exactly sure what that looked like. I heard this church called Unity Fellowship Church movement. I was in Murphy's. Murphy's was a legendary bar in Newark. That was one of the few places people, queer people, would go to hang out. Murphy's and First Choice were two of those places. And so, I was in Murphy's and I

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heard about this church. I was like, "What? there's no gay church come on now." 'Cause that's what I was taught. Now they said really, in New York on 13th Street at the center. But other than the gays and they have church there. I said, "Really, gay people?" So, I trekked over there one Sunday, sure enough you had to, they had to count the number of people because the fire code wouldn't let them hold a certain amount of people. I went to the service. I got in the line for the class because if you got in the class, you had an automatic cheat. That was another way to cheat the line. I get into class and my best friend from high school is in there. I'm like, "Whoa." So, I'm like, "Oh my God, perfect." That was the beginning of my journey with Unity Fellowship. And I was a member of the church in Brooklyn. They went from the LGBT sisters, pardon.

Kristyn Scorsone: What was the class?

Leslie Oliver: The class was a membership class. The church would hold a membership class to discuss homosexuality and the bible. What Unity believes. So Unity was founded by Carl Bean. He's now deceased. He left Broadway to start a prayer group for his friends who had AIDS in California. He's in Baltimore while he was pursuing his career he got a call, look we need your help, help us. No one would touch the patients. No one would pray with them and their families.

He left New Jersey, he left the stage to go to California to pray with these families and it became so big he had to buy a building to accommodate the prayer services. Somebody in New York asked if he could come there so he sent a pastor there. The pastor in New York had an assistant who was sent to Newark to start a church in Newark. People started hearing about it, so we started opening up different churches. That's how I found out about the one in Newark. *[Distorted audio 07:29]* one in New York, I heard they were starting one in Newark and so I went to the service. That's when I first saw Jae Quinlan.

I started working with the choir there at the one in Newark. And built, I was working, I was doing the music, playing the music for them, and you know, I learned for the first time that I was something special. I never heard that in church before. I heard about homosexuality in the bible. They helped to unpack the scriptures and *[unintelligible 08:03]* to say what they really meant.

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And I was so excited to know that. I grew up in church my entire life. I grew up in the church and to hear these scriptures unpacked for the true meaning was very intriguing to me.

See, my mother who was a Pentecostal mother evangelist, she couldn't even answer my questions. So the stuff I was learning, I would try out on her. She couldn't answer me, so I knew I was on to something, so I stuck with it. So there's a trek from Brooklyn to Newark. I start with the choir, build the music up, and so that's why I spent most of the '90s working with this church in Newark. Still doing music, but now openly gay. Affirmed on something good. Unity teaches, you are very special. God loves you just the way that you are.

Everything I did has that lens on it, and we did a lot of good work actually and the *Star-Ledger*, and you may find this article, I can send you clips of it, there was an article on Unity Fellowship in the *Star-Ledger*. '95, 1995, I think, or '90. Between '95 and '97, I don't know the date. [June 13, 1997 per NewsBank.com search] But the *Star-Ledger* there was an article written on the church and that's when everyone else was like, "What? You're a gay? Oh my God!" My nieces, my cousins like, "Oh you do go to that gay church downtown. How dare you." I'm like, "Listen sister, listen. You don't want to have a debate with me."

Kristyn Scorsone: [Laughter]

Leslie Oliver: That was one of the only times where I had to, well I felt like I had to defend who I was. But was very out in prayer 'cause my picture was on the front page of the *Star-Ledger*. Boom clear as day—

Kristyn Scorsone: Wow.

Leslie Oliver: So all my friends, my coworkers, I worked at FedEx at the time. All my coworkers saw it. Oh, we saw you in the paper. Yada, yada, yada. So you know, I'm out of the closet, I'm not really caring about that. But Unity gave me a place to really educate myself on theology and to really affirm myself and I just carried it everywhere. I continued to do music, nobody seemed to care really about any of that with my music.

I was a teacher, what was it '92, in the '90s I started, no I wasn't teaching yet. Not yet. I was working with FedEx. Living life pretty

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open and affirming, me performing around Newark. Doing community service with the church in Newark in the social scene in Newark, the gay social scene I was pretty much a regular. People knew about the ministry. They knew about the music.

I found a home at Murphy's. I spent a lot of time there. Sharing my music, hanging out with friends, really trying to encourage people to affirm themselves. Newark not only is it my hometown, it was the place, the birthplace of a ministry that really affirmed me. So my thought to give back to the church was to work with the music. You know, I held out with the national movement, with the national music. It really saved my life. If I, the reason why I found the church is because I think 1993, I was at a party and someone spiked the punch.

Kristyn Scorsone: [Laughter]

Leslie Oliver: Not with alcohol but what I think was with acid or something.

Kristyn Scorsone: Okay [laughter].

Leslie Oliver: Some kind of drugs were in the punch

Kristyn Scorsone: [Laughter]

Leslie Oliver: and I was—

Kristyn Scorsone: Wait, where was this party? Was it in Newark or was it in New York?

Leslie Oliver: It was in New York.

Kristyn Scorsone: Okay.

Leslie Oliver: So at the time my mom wasn't totally sold on the gay thing so I would wander the streets at night 'cause she would lock the doors. She would lock the doors. You're not here when I'm here, I'm locking the door. Now don't bring any of that gay stuff to my house. Don't come to my house. She was very religious. I would be in the street at night, nowhere to go. I would hang in the New York clubs. I had a reputation as the singer Jazmina so that allowed me to get in a lot of the clubs for free.

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No one knew that I was hanging on E. I had just enough money to buy a drink and maybe grab something to eat so I was essentially homeless. My mom wouldn't let me in the house. So I'm wandering through these clubs dancing, singing, I would sing and make money but the entertainment thing, you don't make money every weekend. It's whenever there's an event. I'm just kinda, me and my duffle bag just, my backpack, just dancing my way through these clubs.

This particular night in December of '93 someone's laced the punch, I drank some of it and I was just incoherent. That night someone tried to stab me with a knife.

Kristyn Scorsone: Jesus.

Leslie Oliver: And when I got home and came down from the drugs, the one thing I could remember was Unity Fellowship Church from the conversation in the bar. That's what made me go search for it. Because I felt like okay this is not a way to live. You're just kinda wandering, you're going to get hurt. Get settled. Unity settled me. It really grounded me. It gave me a sense of purpose 'cause think about it, '93 I'm like, I'm 24 years old. I'm 24 years old wandering the streets of New York, not safe at all. When I found Unity, it really saved my life. Gave me something to focus on.

Shortly after joining Unity and working with the music, I became a deacon in '97. I was a part of the leadership and began to learn a lot more about liberation theology. This freedom to explore God for yourself. And I really fell in love with that idea and began to just educate myself on ways that I can stay liberated. The pastor at the time, Jacquelyn Holland, who is now in Charlotte [North Carolina] with me, she was really big about learning God for yourself. Ask questions. Ask the hard questions. Research, research.

And so I spent a lot of my time researching the scriptures and like what does this mean, what does that mean? Why did they tell us this? Why did they tell us that? Tried to pass on as much as I could. And that's what I did before the time that I was in Newark, the remaining time 'cause I stayed in Unity. Well, the name of the church is Liberation in Truth Unity Fellowship Church, LIC. I work with the music, and I worked with the bible study classes and really try to encourage and affirm people to know God for

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themselves. I did that from '95 to 2004 when I left. When I left Newark, yeah that's what I did until I left Newark.

We're still doing music [*unintelligible 00:1:30*] by 2000 I was teaching. And determined to be an out teacher. I remember I was, the year 2000, I was a substitute teacher coming to work with my cut off leather vest and my Caesar haircut [*laughter*] and my cowboy boots. Oh, I was such a rebel.

Kristyn Scorsone: [*Laughter*]

Leslie Oliver: And just learning my life out and proud. I really don't remember being in the closet, only that period that I was in my group where they made me wear a wig and stuff like that.

Kristyn Scorsone: What did the wig look like?

Leslie Oliver: Like the Cleopatra style wigs. Oh my God. I'll send you pictures. Oh my God.

Kristyn Scorsone: Yeah.

Leslie Oliver: So miserable. I will send you a picture of my group with me with the wig on.

Kristyn Scorsone: Please.

Leslie Oliver: And I'll send you a picture of one of the outfits I had to wear. The church that my mother was in, they insisted on no pants. They insisted on this wig. I was like, "Oh my God. Oh my God." What did appreciate is that when I graduated from college—

Kristyn Scorsone: Wait, it's interesting, can I just say it's interesting that you love the Caesar haircut, and they made you wear a Cleopatra wig. It's so many like—

Leslie Oliver: Oh, isn't that funny?

Kristyn Scorsone: Yeah.

Leslie Oliver: Like [*unintelligible 00:16:42*], right? Yeah so, my hair was natural underneath. Like this my hair what do you mean I can't wear it?

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Kristyn Scorsone: Right.

Leslie Oliver: But it goes back to religion is the suppressive vibe and where people don't even love who they are. They don't love what they look like. I was in college in the '90s and I just found myself and I was loving it. And then I had to go home for the weekends and pretend. I got tired of doing that. What I did appreciate was that in '92, as I was shifting in the music industry [*audio cuts out 00:17:14*] I was shifting from the group to going solo. One Sunday I did not come to church that weekend, I stayed on campus, and I was wearing that wig, and the pastor decided that would be the day to do an entire sermon about me and my bulldagger ways. What happened was actually the truth was I brought my then girlfriend to the church and they tried to hit on her, and she rebuffed them. She's like, "I'm with her, what do you mean? Are you kidding?"

Kristyn Scorsone: Wow.

Leslie Oliver: "Eww. Yuck." [*Laughter*] She's like, "You dirty old man. You're the preacher, I'm with her, what do you? Get out of here." She reached, she [*crosstalk 00:18:01*]

Kristyn Scorsone: The gall.

Leslie Oliver: And the next week he talks about, oh she's bald headed and she's a dyke and blah. He went on a whole tyrant, a whole thing about me because my girlfriend told him no thanks. Well, my mom left the church. Right? She left that day. It made me very proud that she left.

Kristyn Scorsone: Wow.

Leslie Oliver: My sister was in the church and they both left. They resigned. They just left because they were like not anymore.

Kristyn Scorsone: Was this the same—

Leslie Oliver: Not to mention he was one of the people that was, he was one of my abusers [*crosstalk 00:18:34*]

Kristyn Scorsone: Right, yeah.

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Leslie Oliver: They left after that. They were like that's enough I'm gone. I really appreciated them standing by me. And from there, my sister was also gay. She was very butch. Like the vest and the baseball caps and the basketball jerseys. She was in that, it was very clear who she was. She wasn't really hiding anything. She was gonna be who she was. But since I had the natural hair, had to wear the Caesar, the wig, whatever. But they both left that day and life just opened up for the both of them as well. And I really appreciated them standing up for me.

And this time that I was at Unity, my mom became like, I don't know if you know about *Queer as Folk*, my mom became like Michael's mom on *Queer as Folk*. She became the poster child for gay parents. Parents of gay kids. She was like gay this and gay that. I was like, "Okay mom you don't have to be over the top with it. [Laughter] Just support and love me. It's okay you don't have to have rainbow everything." So of course, for a lot of time she was trying really hard—

Kristyn Scorsone: That's so sweet.

Leslie Oliver: —to support me. But I was like, "Mom you can relax." [Laughter] It wasn't all bad. It was okay. So, she realized that [crosstalk 00:19:59]

Kristyn Scorsone: Well, I had the same experience with my father who was unaccepting for a while and then now he's the same thing. He is the advocate of the year.

Leslie Oliver: Yeah, I was like mom chill out [laughter]. She was just over the top with it. Still believes, not necessarily understanding it, not totally agreeing, but being supportive because she had two lesbian daughters.

Kristyn Scorsone: Yeah.

Leslie Oliver: If you can't beat 'em you got to join 'em, I guess. [Laughter] And she was just trying to her best to support us and understand us.

Kristyn Scorsone: I have some—

Leslie Oliver: So, while—

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Kristyn Scorsone: Sorry, go ahead.

Leslie Oliver: Oh, sorry I was just talking. You can stop me at any time.

Kristyn Scorsone: Well, no, I just I have some specific questions about your singing career, just because I'm interested in labor too and your working life. You said you would make money performing sometimes at the clubs, but it was tough, you didn't have a place to live. How much would they pay you at that time?

Leslie Oliver: The way the shows go is, you know you have your clubs that are open every weekend, a couple of days on the weekend, and as a singer it's seasonal work. It's once or twice every quarter you might have a show with them, so it wasn't like I had a thing every weekend.

Kristyn Scorsone: Oh.

Leslie Oliver: Usually I would get paid, let me see, anywhere from \$200 to \$600 a show because of who I was at the time. And that \$200, \$600 that would, that's only for one show. Shows happen maybe like I said twice a quarter. Like holidays, around holidays. And once you've done all the clubs, I mean there's not a million clubs, so once you've performed at 'em all, I mean there's nothing to do. I did, I wasn't working in my 20's. When I graduated from Rutgers I couldn't find a job, I found one stacking cardboard pieces for \$5.50 an hour. That was the minimum wage back then, which is horrible. I found some of those, the little jobs. I had the little jobs, but then I lost them and all I had to live on was my show money.

And I would try to do a show, and I would try to do one or two a quarter. I relied on help from my mom, you know I didn't have much. And I was just going on the strength of who I was. They would let me in the clubs for free. I would use the money, I would earn money as a musician on the weekends and that would kinda be the money I had. I didn't have to pay, I wasn't in an apartment or anything. I didn't have a living space so I didn't have to pay the utilities so I would be under the grace of some of my friend's couches.

And I just popped from here to here and then I had women take care of me and stuff like that. But nothing to call my own until I got, I landed a job at FedEx in '94. Great job. I enjoyed working

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with FedEx. I was doing music when the FedEx job came along. I was able to support myself a little better. You know hanging at grandma's house and just you know, I'm 24, I'm not thinking about being responsible because I grew up in trauma. And growing up in trauma you miss a lot of those lessons that you need. And if the lessons aren't there you didn't, I couldn't concentrate on following through with what I was taught because my mind was scrambled. Like I was literally, college literally was a vacation for me. It wasn't for learning. I went to college to escape the abuse I was dealing with. And so my mind was scrambled most of the time I was there. I was functioning, but I wasn't truly living because I was dealing with lots of anxiety. And so I was just kinda bouncing around campus. I knew I was smart, so I took my classes, but I was at Rutgers for five and half years. It could have been done in three because I was that smart, but I enjoyed being safe. I was safe there.

Kristyn Scorsone: Yeah.

Leslie Oliver: The campus was a haven for me. I didn't want to leave so I would keep taking classes, dropping classes, take classes so I couldn't of lasted for too much longer so I eventually left it. So was the [unintelligible 00:24:37] of the clubs were the same thing. You know I had friends I would stay with that would take care of me [crosstalk 00:24:44] but it wasn't until I started at FedEx that life began to take a shape if you will.

Kristyn Scorsone: So, you—

Leslie Oliver: But the singing was very seasonal, yeah.

Kristyn Scorsone: You graduated in '92 and then in 1993 you're, how long were you homeless for? Like a year or two?

Leslie Oliver: I'd say about a year because let's see '92 I was with somebody, but I didn't know the signs of drug addiction. I didn't know she was addicted to crack. I had no idea 'cause she seemed very well to do. She took very good care of me but when I discovered that she was a drug addict I left her alone. And then I was just on friends couches for about a year or so. Then I met someone at Murphy's. I met one of my exes there and then I moved in with her. And so we began to just establish a life together 'cause I was working and then I was working at FedEx, so I was able to hold my own in a household.

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By '94, '94 I was no longer homeless. I would say about a year I was bouncing around at the *[unintelligible 00:25:50]* shows when I can get them. But in 94 things started to shape up. I met someone that I really liked, moved in with her. We shared the space and by then we both, both of us went to Unity. I don't know if you ever met Reverend Shonda Nicholas, but we came to Unity in Newark together. We were ordained in 1997 together. I'll send you these pictures when I get them.

Kristyn Scorsone: Yeah, did you—

Leslie Oliver: We were ordained together, yeah.

Kristyn Scorsone: Did you make any money from the records?

Leslie Oliver: Well no. This is okay and this is one other thing. Horrible contracts and horrible managers. *[Laughter]* At the time that the, around '90 is when “Let the Rain Come Down” came out. We did a lot of work in shows. You have your show money so that's who right there quick money. I got some sort of floozy advance from signing my contract with the label, but I didn't get any royalties from the song.

By the time I joined the song, it was a remix, so I wasn't going to get anymore because I did not write it, I wasn't on the original tune, I just got some money for singing on the record. They paid me to sing on the record. I got paid to perform the shows but royalties I wasn't going to get those. I didn't write it, and this is the second time the song had been out. I wasn't going to get any royalties. But future royalties *[crosstalk 00:27:29]*

Kristyn Scorsone: What about for your solo?

Leslie Oliver: I got paid to sing the solo, yeah. But it was like a one-time thing. After that, if I did a record I just did it. I wasn't thinking smart. I didn't know anything about the business, I'm just having fun. I wasn't even taking music seriously 'cause I was in school, just something to do on the weekend. But in the future, future records I would get paid in advance. Advance royalties I would get, I would get some money upfront and then they would recoup whatever they had to recoup.

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Most of my money came from the shows. That's why you see a lot of artists on the road all the time because they don't make any money with the royalties. The label has to, the label will give you money as an advance, but they get to take it back. If they have to put you in a limo. If they had to buy you a train ticket. If they had to get your hair done or your clothes. They get to recoup all that money.

Kristyn Scorsone: Oh my God. *[Laughter]*

Leslie Oliver: Yeah, you make nothing on royalties, not really. *[Crosstalk 00:28:33]*

Kristyn Scorsone: What about—

Leslie Oliver: You make it on the road.

Kristyn Scorsone: You mentioned in the other oral history that Abigail was part of Movin' records. Was Abigail gay at all or was that a straight woman?

Leslie Oliver: No, Abigail Adams was not gay, no.

Kristyn Scorsone: Okay, just curious.

Leslie Oliver: She's the owner of the sounds of Movin' Records. The store is gone now but it used to be way up on Central Avenue between South Harrison, and I can't remember the street, but up in East Orange right up Central Avenue Movin' Records. Now she owned the label that the song got remixed on. That's the one I was on. Tony Humphries was the legendary DJ in Newark at Club Zanzibar, which was the most, the hottest club at the time. He remixes it. She puts it on her label, song blows up. Um, none of those people were gay. I, now I was gay, but I was around tons of straight folks. You know and I can understand you got a lot of gay people, but none of the singers that I encountered were gay.

Kristyn Scorsone: Interesting, okay, *[crosstalk 00:29:45]*

Leslie Oliver: I was one of the few.

Leslie Oliver: —there's more of a straight—

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Leslie Oliver: Hmm?

Kristyn Scorsone: There's mostly straight, a straight scene. Like the house music artists and stuff?

Leslie Oliver: Well, there's no straight scene if people were not out.

Kristyn Scorsone: Ahh, okay. Gotcha.

Leslie Oliver: Yeah. Probably predominantly gay but a lot of my colleagues and people—'cause what I would do, I would perform and then come right off of the stage, and I would join the party. I loved to dance. Most of the people I was around were gay, but they weren't out. They wouldn't out, they would say they're gay, they wouldn't—you could clearly see that they were gay, but they were very closeted. When I was on the club scene or the house music scene, many people were closeted. It was just, I don't, you know, but you could just tell who your kinfolk are.

Kristyn Scorsone: Right.

Leslie Oliver: And I dated some of them and so people were very closeted. Now this is the '90s and people were just getting over being nervous about AIDS and realizing that you're not gonna die if you touch somebody with AIDS. People were acting very ignorant, and so you know, it was not the thing to do. But you had those who were out, and I just celebrated them and just always counted it joyful when I saw them. So yeah, I was pretty much on my own, especially in New Jersey nobody was talking about it. They weren't talking about it out loud.

[Laughter] We were just living our lives and meeting on the weekends and having fun and so yeah. I made the money I could. I did what I could. I finished school, run around for a year, even when I was at Unity, I would do music here and there. But all the folks that were gay, they would come into Unity, and they were going to Murphy's.

Kristyn Scorsone: Did you perform at Murphy's at all? Or First Choice?

Leslie Oliver: No, but the DJ's had my music.

Kristyn Scorsone: That's cool.

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Leslie Oliver: DJ David Helper was the DJ at Murphy's, and I would, as soon as I recorded music, I would bring the cassette to him to let him play it so I could see what people's feedback was. And I would do that all the time. He had my new music all the time. First Choice, the DJ, I knew the DJ, DJ Tracy, she would play my music. A drag queen performed one of my songs once there. I thought that was so cool.

Kristyn Scorsone: Oh yeah, I was curious about that 'cause I saw you said that in an interview. So, a drag queen at First Choice did your song?

Leslie Oliver: At Murphy's.

Kristyn Scorsone: At Murphy's. Oh cool. Do you know who the drag queen was?

Leslie Oliver: I don't remember his name. I think he's now deceased. I wish I had taken a picture. Well cell phones weren't really a thing back then otherwise I would have taken a picture of that moment. Or video.

Kristyn Scorsone: Oh yeah.

Leslie Oliver: But yeah, I had that honor of having the drag queen perform one of my songs at Murphy's so that was—'cause they look—the David, the DJ at Murphy's was always playing my music. People knew my music because they knew I did “Let the Rain Come Down” 'cause I'm a hometown favorite. Like she sings the rain song. You know everybody knew that. But all the demo songs and the studio work I was doing, I would bring it to him, he would play it.

One time I took him with me to record a session. But yeah, I would bring my music there when I didn't have a show 'cause again, the show was done of like, that's why I said I had to do shows then because people would—I mean like I said, it was seasonal by then because I was solo. And people would bring me in here and then do shows. I was like wait I got to get a job. So, I [*crosstalk 00:33:35*] was at FedEx.

Kristyn Scorsone: Is it cash you get paid?

Leslie Oliver: Hmm?

Kristyn Scorsone: Was it cash that they would pay you in? Or check?

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Leslie Oliver: Some checks, some cash, yeah. And the—I mean I would mostly use it to party with or to help my mom or whatever. Wasn't a lot of money. I had seasonal shows. I'd have at least four to six shows a year. This is around when the '90s came around like '92, '93. Around the time I started at the church. Then I became less concerned with singing and more concerned with ministry. I'd spend most of my time at church working on the music, working with the—that became my life and—

Kristyn Scorsone: You also headlined and Zanzibar on its opening night?

Leslie Oliver: Did I say that I don't...

Kristyn Scorsone: Is that when you, Toni Braxton and her sisters opened?

Leslie Oliver: Oh! It wasn't the opening night at Zanzibar, it was my first major show was at the Zanzibar. [*Crosstalk 00:34:44*] my shows, yeah, it wasn't opening night. I don't know why I said that.

Kristyn Scorsone: Oh, maybe I misremembering [*crosstalk 00:34:49*], yeah.

Leslie Oliver: Yeah, it was a very special show that night. I didn't even know who the Braxton's were! Like who are they? They weren't from New Jersey. Nobody ever heard of them but apparently in those days what happened was R&B groups would record their song, the R&B version 'cause this is when vinyl was out. CDs weren't out yet. You would have an R&B version of a song or a gospel song or a jazz song, rock song, whatever and a DJ would remix the song as a house remix on the other side of the record.

Apparently, the Braxton's had an R&B song they put out and, in those days, labels would ask a house DJ to remix it because house was starting to blow up. They had a house remix of their song that they were singing at the Zanzibar, they were, I guess they were making their rounds to the different cities. New York. New Jersey, all the different cities. Major clubs near Baltimore. And there were all six of them, all the sisters were there and their mother. And what happened was they left, they didn't bring their reel, the reel-to-reel machine is where many people played their music on.

They didn't have that music for the show, so they had to sing acapella. And they sounded really good. But it was a song, it was a Take 6 song. Take 6 is an acapella gospel group, they sang some

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gospel song. We were like, okay is that it? Everybody was brushing them off like, next. *[Laughter]* But I remember the name because I got, I received one of their records. It was called *The Good Life* or something.

I was distinctively remembering Miss Evelyn the mother, I remember Tawanda stayed, Toni stayed briefly, and Tamar. Toni, Tawanda, and Tamar I remember like remembering their face when I—yeah, 'cause when Toni Braxton came out later, I was like, "Wait I saw her, she came to Zanzibar at my show." *[Laughter]* Yeah, they opened up for us that particular night, but they sang acapella 'cause they didn't have their song.

Kristyn Scorsone: Do you remember what *[crosstalk 37:06]*

Leslie Oliver: And they sounded really good.

Kristyn Scorsone: Do you remember what that night was like for you performing?

Leslie Oliver: I would be amped anytime I did perform I would be amped 'cause think about it, I'm the only woman in the group. And then our church girl, this is all new to me, Zanzibar was, it was like the Garden of Eden to me. I'm walking around when I first went in there, when I first went, I went to a recording. A video, it was a recording of a video. Vicky Martin, her song "Nowhere to Run." They were doing a video for her song. And that's where I met some other Newark legends. Kenny Bobien, Eddie Stockley, they did background vocals for all of the house singers. They did background vocals for everybody. That's how good they were.

Kenny Bobien is now, he's considered, he's a king of house music. He's amazing. If you, I don't know if he identifies as queer or not, but if you talk about house music history, he's the king of house music in Newark.

Kristyn Scorsone: Wow.

Leslie Oliver: He's still singing to this day. He's still in Newark.

Kristyn Scorsone: Did you ever *[crosstalk 00:38:11]*. Did you ever meet Al Murphy?

Leslie Oliver: I never got to meet him. By the time I got to the Zanzibar, I don't think he was getting out and about too much.

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Kristyn Scorsone: Oh.

Leslie Oliver: I, Shelton Hayes. Shelton Hayes was the manager of Club Zanzibar when my group was there, and he was very kind. Very, very, very, kind sweet man. He ran the Zanzibar when I was there. And he had us come in and perform at the Zanzibar a lot. Almost all the way up to his passing. He was very nice, very accommodating. A figurehead of house music in Newark. He managed the club, Tony Humphries was the DJ so when Shelton was there, I was there. He was very nice. So Al Murphy, I never got to meet him.

Kristyn Scorsone: Have you ever met Bobby White or Dorian Smith? *[I misspoke here. The name is Dorian Paris.]*

Leslie Oliver: Are they the owners of—Dorian that name sounds familiar. I think I wanna say, hey wait that, mmm.

Kristyn Scorsone: They used to own the Doll House. *[crosstalk 00:39:27]*

Leslie Oliver: No that's the other old Jersey Newark club. *[Unintelligible 00:39:33]*, Docks, Zanzibar. There were a few, I think I've been to a few of them. I never came, I never went to Docks. I never went to Docks. But I never met them. I only met Tony [Humphries] and Shelton [Hayes] at the Zanzibar. I've been to, I've partied at Murphy's. First Choice was the very first club I went to. As a matter of fact, I was walking with my boyfriend, my very last boyfriend *[laughter]* my very last boyfriend, who was too cheap to get me a taxi to the movies! *[laughter]*.

We walked from the movies down in the neck there was a movie theater down there by First Choice. We walked to the movies and back from Penn Station to the movies. From the movies to Penn Station. I was like, "You couldn't get us a cab?" *[Laughter]* He was cheap. He was so cheap. Anyway, walking back from the movies, we walked past First Choice and that's what made me go in there. I said, "Ooh they cute in there." He said, "Oh no that's that gay club." Now remember, I'm questioning by now. I'm discovering that I think I'm attracted to women. I gave myself a mental note that I was gonna go back in that club the following week and that's exactly what I did. When I went to First Choice for the first time, they were having a ball, you know what the ball scene is right?

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Kristyn Scorsone: Yeah.

Leslie Oliver: So I didn't know that it was a ball. I thought I was coming on a regular day. They were having a ball, the House of Junon which is a legendary Newark house. It's a legendary house in the bar scene. Junon. They were having a ball that night, I had no idea what I walked into, but I was so excited. And then after that I got to know the DJ. She was like, "Are you gay?" *[Laughter]* I was like, "Um yeah." She said, "No you're not." I said, "Yes I am." She said, "Be careful please." So the very next—yeah then a week later I met one of my girlfriends, the one I said was a drug addict. I met her in First Choice, my very first girlfriend. And then that was '92. I went home with her, had a great time. I mean I didn't know nothing I was just doing stuff. *[Laughter]*

Kristyn Scorsone: Did you meet, did you ever, did Miss Teresa throw parties there? Did you ever go to Miss Teresa's parties?

Leslie Oliver: I met her at First Choice. She was there for an event. We're hanging out one night 'cause Saturday was the night that all the women came. I met her there. And just she was very friendly, and I would see her at Murphy's. She was very friendly. She would MC some of the balls that they had. She was in the House of Junon. I met her. And then she would host her own little events and I would go to over the years. I met her at First Choice, and the I would see her at Murphy's. She came to church once or twice. And everybody knew because of my song. Then I got to know some of the people personally. Really nice. I still communicate once in a thing. Yeah. I met her in First Choice and also at Murphy's. You throw names out there I might know different people.

Kristyn Scorsone: Yeah.

Leslie Oliver: Yeah. You throw names out I might know 'em.

Kristyn Scorsone: Did you ever meet Patty Pendarvis?

Leslie Oliver: I think I saw her one time.

Kristyn Scorsone: Yeah.

Leslie Oliver: Didn't meet her like hi my name is so and so. I think I saw her perform once. Miss Patty. I think I saw her perform at I wanna say

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it was at First Choice too. I spent my Saturdays at First Choice until I found out about Murphy's. When I found out about Murphy's I stopped going to First Choice and I would go to Murphy's 'cause it was closer. It was right downtown. I think I saw Miss Patty at First Choice once or twice.

Kristyn Scorsone: Did you ever, at Murphy's, did you ever meet the owners? Or the owner?

Leslie Oliver: I never knew who the owner was. I knew the bartenders and the DJ's and if the owner was there, I never met who that was.

Kristyn Scorsone: Okay. Was it—

Leslie Oliver: I don't. If I did, I didn't know they were the owner.

Kristyn Scorsone: Okay. Was the bartenders and DJ's, were they part of the LGBT community or were they straight?

Leslie Oliver: The bartenders were. Chucky and then we got. Chucky definitely. David, I don't believe he's gay. David Help I don't think he was gay. I think one, I think one other DJ was gay, but it wasn't David. Yeah. But people were straight and gay, everybody. But the drinks were super strong. *[Laughter]* And you got a free drink with your admission so people would go in there and would be tore up with one drink 'cause Chucky made 'em strong. So people went there for the drinks and the fellowship. But yeah, people loved to go there. So yeah straight, straight folks, gay folks, yeah everybody was in there, yeah.

Kristyn Scorsone: Did you ever see any trans women have problems there? Like getting kicked out or anything?

Leslie Oliver: Not getting kicked out. I would see instances where they would get beat up *[crosstalk 00:44:41]*

Kristyn Scorsone: Oh wow.

Leslie Oliver: - outside the club. They would fight. I saw one or two fights in the club. I saw one get beat up by her boyfriend outside the club. He came down there and just, just started beating her up and I was just like, "Wow, that's what we're doing?" I saw that once or twice. Not often because the bouncer, they had a bouncer at the door. Bouncer

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would remove you immediately if there's any kind type of fighting or anything out you go.

I even got tossed out one time and I didn't even do anything. I don't know what happened. But I got put out the club. I was like, "Why am I [*unintelligible 00:45:18*]?" He said, "Let's go." I said, "What did I do?" Yeah so, the bouncer was no nonsense [*Laughter*] You didn't see a lot of fighting. If you saw fighting it was down the street around the corner from the club. But everyone pretty much had a good time. I saw that once or twice. Not often.

Kristyn Scorsone: At Liberation in Truth, I think either, I think it was Reverend Janyce [Jackson Jones] that told me there was trans women too that were a part of Liberation in Truth. Like the [*audio cuts out 00:45:46*]

Leslie Oliver: Uh-huh.

Kristyn Scorsone: And I think in your [*distorted audio 00:45:48*] you mentioned trans men as well. Could you tell me more about the trans folks that would attend?

Leslie Oliver: Keep in mind that this church started in '95, and this message of God loves you just as you are is kinda new to everybody. They're like are you kidding me what? And this is a place where they really could be themselves. And so we had, this is before people were really affirming the trans community. They would come, be in the choir, in the congregation. I knew the trans brothers and sisters from Murphy's and First Choice and all the ball house, the ball events and they would come to church sometimes on Sunday's. We had a few of them in the choir. It was a very, [*unintelligible 00:46:38*] to affirming space so they were welcome.

They would come out whenever they came. They would come if they wanted to sleep, they came if they were tired. If they were suicidal, they came. I remember one person came that was evidently about to transition and we allowed him to sing. He just wanted to sing in church, and we let him sing. Pastor Holland was very affirming and supportive. Of course, we always we had food, we fed 'em. We had clothes, we gave 'em clothes. But we definitely made 'em feel at home so yeah. Our church included the trans community for sure. They were in leadership. They were in the choir. Yeah.

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Kristyn Scorsone: Wow, that's cool.

Leslie Oliver: Yep yep.

Kristyn Scorsone: Leadership as in reverends and pastors?

Leslie Oliver: Deacons because we only had one pastor. We had a few of us were ministers and we, there was a process. I mean for two years you trained, and then you became ordained. So it would take two years to get through the process. Throughout the process the first step is to diaconate, you become a deacon first. Then a minister. Then a reverend. They had, you had to do your training, so we trained a lot of deacons that were trans. We had ushers who were trans. People in the choir were trans. Working the sound system that was trans. Security, people that were trans. A lot of congregants that were trans, so yes. Some are trans now and still in leadership. I left Newark. This church didn't close when I left so it's still there. It just changed the name. And they're still there. Some of those trans male and trans female individuals are still there. Some passed away. Some moved away. There's always a space for them to enter leadership for sure.

Kristyn Scorsone: That's really cool. Did you, when people work at the church doing different like usher and all that, it's all volunteer right?

Leslie Oliver: Mm-hmm.

Kristyn Scorsone: Okay.

Leslie Oliver: Yeah, everything's voluntary.

Kristyn Scorsone: How do you, do people just say okay I wanna be, I wanna do usher work? Or do you, did the church pick people to do things? Or how do you divvy up the labor that takes to have a service?

Leslie Oliver: What would happen is that we would have seasonal, remember in the membership class when you decide you would like to be a member, in the membership classes you are asked to express interest in the area you would like to serve in. And that's when you would make it known I wanna do this, I wanna do that. But you had to become a member first. You go through the membership and then you decide what you would like to do to serve the church

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or to spread the message. It would be after membership. You would have to become a member of the ministry first.

Kristyn Scorsone: Okay.

Leslie Oliver: Yeah.

Kristyn Scorsone: Cool.

Leslie Oliver: That's how that went, yeah.

Kristyn Scorsone: Did anybody have to do things like clean up the space or did the church do that? Like was it Trinity that it was at?

Leslie Oliver: Trinity of [unintelligible 00:50:09] yeah. And so, we built the model of service of Act 6:1-6. In the bible in the book of Acts there's apostles had to go out and do what they do. So, you needed someone to take care of the church while they were gone. And that's where the role of deacon was created. And so in our training, we were taught you're the deacons, it's your responsibility to keep up the space, take care of it, make sure it's clean and orderly. And it wasn't our building, so we had to make sure that we did that anyway. We're gonna do that anyway.

Deacons were responsible for managing the space. And for us, since we only really used it a few times a week that was nothing. So we would take out the bibles or hymnals or whatever we used and just put everything back in place. Trinity did a great job of maintenance itself. So we didn't have to do much anyway. Deacons would be responsible for taking care of the church, yeah.

Kristyn Scorsone: Did you ever meet Dean Sabune? Was that his name? Or pastor Sabune?

Leslie Oliver: Spell the name for me.

Kristyn Scorsone: S-A-B-U-N-E. He was the one that Bishop Holland rented the space from, I guess. He was...

Leslie Oliver: Yeah, I met him once or twice at a service. I did get to, the choir got to sing for him. I met him once or twice. Like in those days we just, I would be moving so, and my life has slowed down, but I would be moving and be so busy. I would say, "Hello how are

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you? How are you?" And I would be going on to the next thing. [Laughter] I believe I did meet him. I did meet him once or twice. I did.

Kristyn Scorsone: That's good. Did, what was I gonna say? What did it feel like to play the keyboard there for you?

Leslie Oliver: Well, here's the thing, I grew up in church and I didn't play keyboards growing up. It was just something that I taught myself to do because I was fighting, I was arguing with my sister over instruments. My mom did not work. She did not work a traditional job so were at the church often and we would be arguing over the instruments and one day she said, "Okay so when it's time for you to play for real, I want the same kind of focus when I ask you to play for me on a Sunday." We thought she was kidding. Well, our keyboard player got fired and there you are. She said, "Remember that day I told you to be ready, well now's the day." So, I taught myself to play by ear and when I got to the church, they needed a musician. I said, "Well I'll help I can play a little piano." And I could, I could play it just to get by so that's what I did now. I probably sounded absolutely so I sounded like a nine-year-old probably. [Laughter]

But I decided to use what I learned and I, what I didn't know was that I was this, I had all the skills in me from growing up watching my mother do it. I know I put voices together. I was in a choir in college. I knew how to direct. I could play a little bit and I knew how to play drums. I had a sense of music so could use what I had, and it was really cool to be singing without any shadows over your head. I was able to pull voices and music together to sing affirming music. It was really cool. I had to learn it though. I had to get the theology in my head before I started the music.

Pastor Holland had to stop me one day or pastor, Reverend Green. Reverend Kimberly Green. She was assistant pastor at the time. I wanted to teach, "Oh Happy Day."

Kristyn Scorsone: Oh, I love that song.

Leslie Oliver: You figure, right, you figure oh why not. What's wrong with the song? She said, "You can't sing that song." I said, "What do you mean? It's a great song?" She said, "We don't talk about sin here." That was my first lesson in liberation theology. I said, "You're

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gonna take that word out." She said, "No, that's not how it works." Then Pastor Holland was like, "Why don't you join the deacon class? I wanna show you some things." And then before I knew it, I was sitting in the deacon class becoming a deacon. She saw that I needed to learn the theology.

It was really refreshing to learn while I was playing 'cause I love to learn new stuff. So having to look at the lyrics, understand what these songs meant, the context for the song, when they were written. I learned how damaging language can be. Not just *[unintelligible 55:03]* bull dagger, but *[unintelligible 55:06]* and sin. And dirty, clean. I learned that you have to be very careful when you communicate because these words send signals to people about their lives and who they are.

Kristyn Scorsone: Right.

Leslie Oliver: I learned that playing the keyboard at L.I.T.

Kristyn Scorsone: Wow.

Leslie Oliver: I could understand the lyrics but that doesn't mean that the person listening will understand. That's perpetuating a narrative that is not affirming.

Kristyn Scorsone: Right.

Leslie Oliver: Amazing grace how sweet the sound to save the wretch like me. Now the man who wrote the song was talking about himself because he was a former slave owner.

Kristyn Scorsone: Okay.

Leslie Oliver: But that average person doesn't know that. He wrote that song because he was ashamed of his role as a slave master.

Kristyn Scorsone: Wow.

Leslie Oliver: Everybody doesn't know that.

Kristyn Scorsone: No.

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Leslie Oliver: And we learned in these leadership classes how to look at language in the bible and see how it can really hurt people's lives. Like washing myself white as snow. Well, he's saying I'm dirty?

Kristyn Scorsone: Right.

Leslie Oliver: Make me clean. Am I dirty? So we unpacked a lot of the language and when we—and then using he for God who does not have a gender. We stopped using he, we had to use God. Or we would say she because she was not affirmed, you know. I learned so much about language and language in the bible, the Kings James version. I started the NIZ. I started finding all these different versions comparing and stuff. I started becoming very careful with what I would say and the songs I would choose for the choir to do. If the language was not universal or affirming, then we didn't sing it. *[Crosstalk 56:56]* Yeah liberation theology is what Unity's Fellowship, that's the theology it rests on.

Free yourself from all of that oppressive language, the oppressive dress, yeah. And that's why they did affirmations in the services right after the prayer. Right after the prayer we did affirmations. They would affirm people from head to toe. Your hair, your extra weight, your funny looking toes, what you did last night, it's okay. You're struggling with alcohol, it's alright. You're okay just the way you are. They had to do that to take some of that off of people.

Kristyn Scorsone: Can you say more about what you mean by the dress?

Leslie Oliver: It was a come as you are, which what a safe space should be. You're welcome to come in as you are, but we made a point to encourage people to come as they are and when we did the affirmations, we affirmed anything, everything they had on. Tight skirts, short skirt, dirty skirt, we affirm it. It's good 'cause people have been hearing that their whole life they're dirty because you're trans, you're dirty. You're a gay lesbian, you're dirty.

Church is, if people at church found out that you were gay or a part of our queer community, they make you sit in the back. Or they wouldn't let you be out front. They wouldn't affirm your name. If you're trans they wouldn't call you by your new name, they would call you by your biological name. And there are a lot of things that churches, and religion would do to dismiss who people were. We made sure people know that they were fully seen. Their hair. The

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texture of their hair. The type of skin you had. The kind of lips and nose you have. Your fingernails. Your Doc Martin boots. Your corset. Whatever you have on. Your wig.

The affirmation affirmed all of this. It affirms your choices when you knew better. It affirmed the choices when you didn't know better. We had to do all that and that's what made people so comfortable. It made people feel safe. Like I would see many soup kitchen lines, right? And many churches giving out food and clothes but you got a bible in front and you're screaming at people. I don't wanna hear that. I'm hungry.

Kristyn Scorsone: Right.

Leslie Oliver: I'm cold, can I get something to eat? Can I have a coat? Don't preach to me now. If you give me something to eat. Give me some clothes. If I'm warm and I feel safe, I might open up to you. But if you condemn me before I even get into the door, I'm not coming. So we made sure that affirmation was a key part of the service. And you have to also affirm music is very sacred to people. People would listen to music before they'd listen to a sermon, so I had to make sure that every song I chose had affirming language and that it didn't harm more than help people. So being the keyboard player there was very good for me, yeah.

Kristyn Scorsone: Do you remember some of the names of the songs that you would play?

Leslie Oliver: Some of the names of the songs, our very first concert was in 96. And I have a lot of these musical numbers, I have this stuff on VHS. I have a ton of VHS tapes. *[Distorted audio 01:00:11]* "Courage." "I Feel Like Going On." That was one. "The Battle is Not Yours." "God is Good." I tried to find "I'm a Lord I'm Available to You." I tried to pick songs that really spoke to us being open and available to God and "God Loves me As I Am." "The Jesus in Me Loves the Jesus in You." "So Easy to Love." Songs like that.

Kristyn Scorsone: Did you ever try to write your own songs for L.I.T.?

Leslie Oliver: Not while I was at L.I.T. When I moved to Charlotte, I wrote a few for the youth. I left Newark to move to Charlotte and the pastor here hired me to do the same thing I was doing in Newark. I wrote

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“Beautiful Creation”. A couple other songs. I wrote for the church here but not in Newark. I wasn't that confident in my songwriting skills yet. And I had written songs, I just wasn't confident enough to bring them to the choir. I would do some other stuff. But I tried to be creative. I always tried to be creative with how I sang other people's songs. But I never wrote, I never sang any of my own.

Kristyn Scorsone: That's so cool.

Leslie Oliver: One song “I Am.” If you ask anyone from Unity about that song, they're gonna be like oh that's my song. So Mickey Brayden who used to play keyboard for us, she taught us that song. That's another of the good ones. But yeah, I never did any of my own.

Kristyn Scorsone: How many folks were in your choir?

Leslie Oliver: Hmm. That first year we had about 14.

Kristyn Scorsone: Wow.

Leslie Oliver: It went up to as much as 24 and then it tapered off. People were transient. They would come to church, be there for a couple of months, they would leave. At the most I had 24, 14, and then the leadership transitioned. People started transitioning out and it got smaller and smaller. But it's always been at least seven to eight people. Yeah. And they were really good.

Kristyn Scorsone: Yeah. *[Laughter]* You also worked at Loving and Truth Drop in Center, right?

Leslie Oliver: Mm-hmm, so.

Kristyn Scorsone: Were you assisting Reverend Janice?

Leslie Oliver: Pastor Holland. I was her executive assistant.

Kristyn Scorsone: Okay.

Leslie Oliver: That was one of those periods where I left FedEx, oh let me see, let me get the timeline right. Before I left FedEx, I started to assist at the center as Pastor Holland's executive assistant. And that was right, that was in 2000. I want to say 2000. Right around the time I left FedEx. So when the center first opened up, I was her executive

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assistant. All of those leaders, there were four of us that were leaders, three of us volunteered at the center. So I worked as her assistant.

My partner at the time, Shanda, she ended up working there full time. Shanda Nicholas. If you talk to elder Janice, she'll tell you about Shanda. Shanda ended up managing the center. She stayed. She was there longer than me. I started teaching. I started substitute teaching so I couldn't volunteer there anymore. I would come after work on the weekends and volunteer. But I did start, when it first opened up, I was the executive assistant to the pastor. So I was there quite often. Yeah.

Kristyn Scorsone: When you were executive assistant, did you get paid? Or was that volunteer as well.

Leslie Oliver: That was voluntary.

Kristyn Scorsone: What kind of work did you do when you were volunteering there?

Leslie Oliver: Just kept pastors in our offices, kept her records tidy, kept it with appointments, do notes for her. I would accompany her if she needed me to. Real simple clerical stuff. Nothing really heavy. I would help with the program, since I had a program, I would volunteer with the setup as a [unintelligible 01:04:40] of things. But I—it was very short because I started teaching and I wasn't available in the daytime like I used to be. And Shanda and other folks were eventually hired to come on board and work there. I didn't, I was there before people started getting paid to work there. [Laughter]

Kristyn Scorsone: Did you ever hear of or remember a newsletter that was around in '95, '96 that was called New Jersey's Gay Black Women?

Leslie Oliver: No. Oh wow. No.

Kristyn Scorsone: I'll have to send you a copy of it. It's really cool. Can I—there's some names of contributors, can I see if you recognize any of these names?

Leslie Oliver: Oh yeah sure.

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Interviewer: Kristyn Scorsone

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Kristyn Scorsone: One second, let me just pull it up here. Let me do, here I go. Karen Kinsey?

Leslie Oliver: Karen Kinsey. Karen Kinsey. Hmm. The name Karen sounds familiar.

Kristyn Scorsone: Myra Campbell.

Leslie Oliver: I bet you if I saw their names, I would know every single one of them 'cause there was very few people I did not know in community then. Because you know, in the community the lesbian circle is small. Everybody knows everybody.

Kristyn Scorsone: Yeah.

Leslie Oliver: The names are kinda seeming familiar but I'm so bad with names. I would be better with faces.

Kristyn Scorsone: Oh, that's okay. Yeah. I'm gonna send you, I'll send you one of the—I have a bunch of copies, but I'll send you one of the copies so you can see. It's like Karen Kinsey definitely was the person who was putting it all together and then Margie Shaheed is one of the contributors and I know she was a poet. But yeah, some of these women are just, it's just so interesting and they had Ms Theresa on the cover of one of the newsletters and—

Leslie Oliver: Yeah, so if I didn't know them, I saw them. If they hung out in the clubs at that time, then I know them. [*Distorted audio 01:07:04*] I was always [*unintelligible 01:07:08*] in the clubs, they would, I was quite the dancer back then [*laughter*] and I had to be just grooving all the time. And so people would sit there and watch me dance so they knew me from dancing at Murphy's. [*Laughter*] So I'm pretty sure I know 'em.

Kristyn Scorsone: Do you know Angela Raine?

Leslie Oliver: Raine. I would have to see her face.

Kristyn Scorsone: She's a trans woman. She has, she publishes *La'Raine Magazine* and she used to perform at Murphy's sometimes I think but not super often.

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Leslie Oliver: I'm sure I saw her. If people saw me, they'd be like oh yeah, I've seen her around. But I was at Murphy's almost every week. I tried not to miss a week there because it was just a *[distorted audio 01:08:02]* I'm sure I saw them. I don't know if I spoke to them. And I wasn't buddy buddy with a lot of people, but they definitely saw me 'cause I would be on that dance floor all the time. Yeah.

Kristyn Scorsone: Oh, that reminds me, what was I gonna ask you? Something about your fashion. When you, I guess when you performed you had to wear this, the Cleopatra wig and did they make you wear a dress?

Leslie Oliver: No, no, no. I wore little short sleeved pant suits or tops and pants or something like that. Back in those days again, remember I was not working so I don't even know how I made it. It's interesting how you make it in your life. You don't even know how you get there.

Kristyn Scorsone: Yeah.

Leslie Oliver: But in those days, I had, I thrift all the time. My mother used to take us thrift shopping and I just developed a knack for it. I would go to the thrift stores and grab this piece or that piece and go to the little shops downtown and see what I could piece together 'cause back then I had the shape to do that. You know, wear a pair of slacks with some cool shoes and a cute little top. I was really faking it while I was making it. I don't even know what I looked like, but I was probably Afrocentric or anything that looks weird, I would wear it. *[Laughter]* I seemed to make it work.

My figure at the time, I was pretty small, so I was able to get when little, small stuff and wacky stuff. I didn't spend a lot of money on clothes, I know that. I had, you know, I'd buy little long earrings and then I'd, I had a natural haircut so I just tried to look as comfortable as I could. I really don't know how to wear makeup. I faked that too. I did the best I could with the—I really, I don't have a lot of pictures from that time of my life, but I have a few. And I look at the pictures and I faked it pretty okay, I guess. I guess somebody paid attention 'cause I could sing or whatever.

But in those days, I was not feminine, I wasn't a fem, but I looked feminine. When it came to my shows, I just kinda put the little eclectic look together and I just made it work, I guess. I got rid of that wig after, let's see, when I took that wig off? I think '93, right

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out of school so when I went solo that wig just went with it. That was, I wore that wig maybe three months. When I graduated from college in '92 that was the end of that wig. I was not doing that.

Kristyn Scorsone: When you could—if you could get rid of that wig did you change the way you dressed too? Were you able to control?

Leslie Oliver: Well by then I was solo. Well, here's what prompted me leaving the group, I was dating the other singer in the group Khison. And he was being a whole jerk in the group like being a womanizer whatever. And I said, "You know what? This sucks." I stayed in the group maybe a year after we broke up. He was kicked out of the group because he just would not do the right thing. Show up late for shows. Wear his own outfits. And you know, the label owner was like, "We don't have time for this. So if you're not gonna do the right thing then go." Well, I'll leave you ain't gonna have a group without me. He left and so me and the other, no one was listening to him anyway, they were really listening to me.

Me and the other group member did a couple of songs and shows with just the two of us but then it got really dry. And I was like, "I gotta graduate from school, I don't have time for this." I said, "If something comes up let me know. If not, I'm gonna be in school 'cause I gotta graduate." When I graduated, I became less concerned with being in the group. And I was out out by then. I was a lesbian. I'm not wearing a wig. I'm not doing that, so I left it behind. I mean I just, from there it was just me being me. And then I marched right into Unity and then from there I definitely, I'm not gonna hide who I am. This is what you get.

And like I said, the music tapered off after that. I was doing music. I was recording stuff. Wasn't doing a lot of performing but when people would ask for me, I would come up and do something. It was more about ministry then. Yeah.

Kristyn Scorsone: I have two questions, wait, one of 'em flew out of my head, crap.

Leslie Oliver: Let's see, was it about music or the choir or?

Kristyn Scorsone: It was oh gosh it's gone, but what about, I remember I think it was Bishop Holland or maybe it was Reverend Janice, were talking about the HIV AIDS epidemic and how Liberation in Truth it was surprising that there was a large number of women with AIDS that

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were coming to them for help. Do you *[unintelligible 01:13:41]* remember anything about that?

Leslie Oliver:

I don't quite remember the conversations 'cause, let's see. I don't remember too many of them, but I do remember being concerned. I think she spoke about it in church one day. I remember being concerned because as I was learning things about HIV from the center, she kept saying, "Listen you guys have to be careful. You can't be out here just doing stuff. Women get HIV too. Protect yourselves. Be wise. Watch and be careful." Because you know, I was what, in those days I was single, no I wasn't, let me just stop lying *[laughter]* no I wasn't, I was in a relationship, but I wasn't practicing safer sex because I assumed oh this is my girlfriend, I mean I don't have anything to worry about.

When they started talking like that, I was like well wait a minute. *[Laughter]* What if, maybe we should get tested more whatever. And so my girlfriend at the time was like, "I'm not about to do that la la la la." But it did, it gave me anxiety a little bit, but I thought how many people, how many women are walking around here infecting other women and don't even know it or don't even care.

Kristyn Scorsone:

Right.

Leslie Oliver:

So I remember having, hearing a conversation about it and thinking what if somebody gave me HIV? Then I had been very paranoid like do I have it? Oh, wait a minute what does that show, oh why did I show that? Now it's just life, there's nothing wrong with me. I'm HIV negative. I initially took a test while I was at, I began taking tests when I was there just to *[distorted audio 01:15:33]* Who, how many women, did I ask her. I started going back over my life like oh my God I have to start being more careful.

She did talk to us about spreading the word that you have to take care of yourself. You have to get tested. You have to know your status. She got on us about it. Especially because I was just, I was being really naughty in those days. *[Laughter]* She said, "You got to be careful. What are you doing?" She addressed the congregation and she *[unintelligible 01:16:05]*. I remember that. I remember having anxiety over what you mean women get HIV from women. No, they don't. She was like, "Uh yes they do." She was like, "That's why you need to know your status. Get tested."

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We'd get free tests, and we did lots of new free testing and I'll never forget 2002, now by now I have a new partner that I'm on the outs with. I'm on the outs with her. But we'd agreed to have, I wanted to have *[distorted audio 01:16:42]* think it through. I had to go and get an HIV test and her *[unintelligible 01:16:48]* started it as well. I do remember me developing anxiety around the HIV test. And I was like oh my God 'cause I know this woman I was, we did some wild stuff. I said, "Oh my God." *[Laughter]* What if I can't have a child because I have HIV. I was just so nervous. But it was fine, I was HIV negative. But I do remember her saying, "Well if you ain't got it then I ain't got it." I said, "Uh-huh, you need to go take your own test."

Kristyn Scorsone: Yeah.

Leslie Oliver: She refused to take a test.

Kristyn Scorsone: Wow.

Leslie Oliver: She just wouldn't do it. I was like, "You're not gonna get tested." "I'm not the one trying to get pregnant, you are." If you ain't got it I'm good. I said, "No, that's not how it works." I remember that. I was relieved because I was HIV negative. And you know you have to *[distorted audio 01:17:36]* take another one maybe three months later or so. She still wouldn't do it.

Kristyn Scorsone: Wow.

Leslie Oliver: Kept saying I wanna *[unintelligible 01:17:47]* knowing of some of her past I was like you might wanna go take that test. She refused to do it. She might have taken one by now, but this is back in 2002. She would not go get tested. And I wanna say she was probably just as nervous as I was thinking of her history and like oh my God what if. But I'm so glad I did. I mean I was gonna do it 'cause I was trying to have a child and my daughter's father was quite promiscuous. And I didn't want him giving me anything but I'd rather I find my own status 'cause I didn't wanna give him anything.

I finally got over that anxiety and I started to really pay attention to it. And then I think nowadays, the doctors give you one anyway when you, I mean I figure they'd give you one anyway or they'd

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ask you when you do your yearly exams. I think I consented to get one every year anyways. Some of the *[unintelligible 01:18:50]* I came down south the first couple of years and I'll get my yearly exams. I'm like okay I didn't get no call. I guess I'm alright.

Kristyn Scorsone: Right.

Leslie Oliver: So, I was still a little nervous. The whole conversation, everything 'cause God forbid they have to have that conversation with me. *[Distorted audio 01:19:10]* Loving in Truth, could not dare having to be the one having to tell somebody you know your tests results were positive so yeah. I didn't like confrontation back then and I didn't know if I would be able to handle that. But yeah that's *[unintelligible 01:19:34]* work.

Kristyn Scorsone: Wait, so all because they were a testing center, right?

Leslie Oliver: Yeah, you can go there and get tested. I mean Shonda, my ex, she had to do it all the time. My other Janice had to do it to, but I can't imagine having to tell someone 'cause back then it wasn't like it is now where I mean God there's so many more resources now. Back then there wasn't oh just take this and oh it'll become undetectable. None of that was around. It seemed like a death sentence back then. And so people were like losing it if, you know so I did not, yeah. It had us in a frenzy. Even with the information we had. Yeah.

Kristyn Scorsone: I would think that at least hearing from the women at Loving in Truth Drop In Center must have been so much better to get that devastating news from them because I've heard horror stories of people back at the time getting the news from doctor's who would just be very callous or oh well—

Leslie Oliver: Yeah.

Kristyn Scorsone: - I guess you should just run up on some credit cards and party 'cause you're gonna die.

Leslie Oliver: Yeah, saying really ignorant things.

Kristyn Scorsone: Yeah.

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Leslie Oliver: [Distorted audio 01:20:48] we handle people with compassion and love because you're talking about their lives and the quality of life. And we had to teach people that you can live and care for yourself no matter what your diagnosis is. It's not licensing you to go bag packing or go out here or destroy yourself because of some news that you did not like. Don't do that. We tried very much just to pour into people. Give them a safe place to land. A place where they're still loved.

Theres many families who did do exactly what you said because people were ignorant. They didn't know any better. Some people were just mean. Churches were mean. They would say, they still are. They're on some really ignorant stuff. Yeah, that's why it's important for those of us who are out and who are queer to know that people are watching us and if you don't do anything but live authentically. That can help so many people. And I was just determined to do that. And you know, I never really cared, call me, I never really had any issues with homophobia. Not really. I would hear stuff when I was in college, when I was in high school. But I just had so many other things going on I didn't pay and mind and when I became an adult, I don't think I really cared. I don't think I cared. I was trying to survive and live. I'm out of survival mode now. I was so busy and in survival mode that I didn't have the time in my mind to even hear what [unintelligible 01:22:27] or act a certain way. It went right over my head 'cause I was trying to live. [Crosstalk 01:22:35]

Kristyn Scorsone: Yeah, like the whole music—

Leslie Oliver: - not to go under so.

Kristyn Scorsone: When you were in the music scene did you experience—

Leslie Oliver: Huh?

Kristyn Scorsone: When you were in the music scene did you experience, it sounds like you experienced a little bit of homophobia, but how about sexism, racism, or was it just sort of not as bad?

Leslie Oliver: Not so much racism. I didn't experience racism. Sexism the brothers were very, some of them were very disrespectful. And just saying just jerky stuff. But again, I had such a thick coat of defense on me. I was so, in my college years I was very defensive. I was

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very abrasive and defensive because I had been a victim of trauma—

Kristyn Scorsone: Right.

Leslie Oliver: —at the hands of men. And when I came to college, the thought was no man is gonna ever take advantage of me again. Ever. Never. He said something, I thought if you said or looked at me some way I was like, "What did you say? Who are you talking to?" It was very much I had my chips on my shoulder. So I didn't encounter too much, but there would be people who would say to us—I've been sexually harassed a lot. I got propositioned a lot. But not disrespectful directly. The gentlemen around me that were at the studio and stuff, just about every one of them just made a play for me and I'm like ahhh you know. I experienced that and in the house music scene, I just was very, I did a very good job of just kinda keeping people off me. It must have been the way I carried myself or whatever.

I refused to be violated again. And it made me walk a certain way and I guess I put off some aura like don't mess with her. [Laughter] That was my 20's. In my 30's, by my 30's I'm at L.I.T. I'm in the lesbian community. I'm not really encountering men as much and the gay men I encountered I mean there wasn't too much sexism, not much. But again, I was very, I had a very sharp tongue, and I would cut you real quick if I thought you said something disrespectful. And I must of, I had my resting bitch face [laughter 01:25:03].

I had a don't mess with me attitude and don't mess with my face. And people didn't. I've softened up over the years and I guess I'm just so grateful 'cause I never had a Karen moment, racist moment, people—if it happens, it didn't happen to me. There have been those moments where I've been in a space where I've felt uncomfortable or violated, not really. Not even as a teacher down here in the south. I'm in the south now, never had those moments.

Kristyn Scorsone: Wow, nice.

Leslie Oliver: Not really. I've seen those moments. I read about 'em, but me directly, because I mind my business. I get in my car, I go where I need to go, I do what I need to do. But no, I've been very blessed not to have to, I mean I've been pulled over by police, but it was

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not for racism. Ma'am you are going too fast [*unintelligible* 01:25:58] and they pulled me over and they said I was speeding. I knew it I was just here, here you go. Sorry about that. And I've never had an unpleasant experience with the police.

Never had any issues with men down here, people down here are usually very kind. And they don't say much. People won't say much. It's not like up north where people say exactly what's on their mind. [*Laughter*] Down here people [*distorted audio* 01:26:27] people are very quiet. They're like 20 years behind us. [*Laughter* 01:26:33] Everybody is extremely friendly for the most part, so you don't have to deal with that down here. But I didn't have a hard time, not—since I witnessed sexism at the church because of how my pastor was treated.

Kristyn Scorsone: Right.

Leslie Oliver: The male leadership in the denomination at the time, they were not always kind to her. We would see her [*crossstalk* 01:27:00] mistreated. Pastor Holland. Because she was very outspoken about what she like, what she did not like. What she felt was okay and was not okay. And it was predominantly male leadership at that time, and they just insisted on not trying to hear what she had to say. But she was just sharing wisdom and she would try to help, and people would try to stop her from doing certain things. And she would come back and share I need prayer for this, I need prayer for that. I saw how the men in the movement treated her.

I experienced it when I became a higher leader myself. I became the national minister of music and some of the gentlemen were upset because they felt they were entitled to the position. But I was selected for the position because of my work ethic with the music and the different choirs and stuff. So I experienced that. That I was treated a certain way because people did not get the positions they wanted. But that one time but overall, not really, because and it might have been because I just kept myself focused on the work at hand. Serving in my local church, doing music, doing community service. I just had tunnel vision, it might be why I didn't see a lot of things happen.

Kristyn Scorsone: When did you get [*crossstalk* 01:28:24] to be the national minister of music? What year was that?

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- Leslie Oliver:* That was 19, no, 2007. It was the year I became a Reverend in 2009. It was in 2007.
- Kristyn Scorsone:* Cool.
- Leslie Oliver:* And the national minister of music manages the music for national events. It's like a liaison for other local ministers of music. So I had been doing the work, I had been the consistent one. So I earned it and some people were not happy about it. But they were okay, they got over themselves.
- Kristyn Scorsone:* Is that a volunteer position too? Or do they pay you?
- Leslie Oliver:* Yeah, in the church everything's voluntary unless you're a pastor or a musician, paid musician. I didn't get paid to play the keys, I volunteered. Until I stopped doing it and they hired someone else to do it, then they paid them a stipend.
- Kristyn Scorsone:* Okay.
- Leslie Oliver:* I began to get a stipend, I started to get a stipend for playing the keys, yeah. Most things were voluntary. Yeah.
- Kristyn Scorsone:* I forget how old you are, but did Stonewall, was that an influence on you at all?
- Leslie Oliver:* Stonewall was the year I was born. I'm 54. I'll be 55 in April. Stonewall, I was born that year.
- Kristyn Scorsone:* Wow.
- Leslie Oliver:* I'm aware of the history of it and I've gone by the bar a few times when I was, when I was young, when I was in Jersey. Now since I'm—I've never gone inside. I'll have to do that. I gotta write that up on my list. I gotta go inside and have a drink in the bar so I can say I sat at the bar when everything changed for the poor, the community. I gotta go there and have a drink or something. But I was just born in '69 so I'm not, I wasn't around when the riots were happening. I marched one time with Unity Brooklyn. I marched in the parade in New York one time. It was amazing. I'm glad I had that experience.

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I remember the pier. I remember when the pier was there when everyone who was gay or questioning were hanging the pier. I remember that. That's when Christopher Street was a little less commercialized. Now it is probably very commercialized. The piers were there back then. We would dance on the pier. Everybody would have hookups on the pier. We would hang out after school on the pier. Yeah, I remember those days. Hanging in Washington Square Park. Yeah. So those were the days. I remember *[distorted audio 01:31:17]*

Kristyn Scorsone: Did you help at all when, or I guess, I forget what they, I remember they were, Alicia Heath-Toby and Sandra Toby-Heath were fighting for same sex unions, were you there during that time at all?

Leslie Oliver: I was *[distorted audio 01:31:38]* to my daughter's father. Toby-Heath is my daughter's grandmother.

Kristyn Scorsone: Oh, wait say that again.

Leslie Oliver: Yeah.

Kristyn Scorsone: You're cutting out.

Leslie Oliver: The son is the man I *[audio cuts out 01:31:51]* I was saying that Saundra Heath-Toby...

Kristyn Scorsone: Mm-hmm.

Leslie Oliver: Her son is the one I had a child with.

Kristyn Scorsone: Oh wow.

Leslie Oliver: Mm-hmm.

Kristyn Scorsone: That's so cool.

Leslie Oliver: I got ordained as a minister with Reverend Alicia. She and I were ordained together.

Kristyn Scorsone: Oh wow.

Leslie Oliver: So yeah, they are family.

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Kristyn Scorsone: Yeah. [Laughter]

Leslie Oliver: They're good people. But I wasn't around. I was already down here I wanna say. I was here already.

Kristyn Scorsone: Oh, that's so cool. I love them. They're so nice.

Leslie Oliver: Yeah, Honei is what we call Sandra. We call her Honei.

Kristyn Scorsone: Yeah.

Leslie Oliver: Yeah, she's my daughter's grandmother.

Kristyn Scorsone: I did their oral histories, both of them separately so they invited me to their house when this was a few years ago. I guess prior to the pandemic actually and yeah, they're just so warm and awesome and I remember green tea and meeting their dog.

Leslie Oliver: Yeah.

Kristyn Scorsone: Sandra let me look through all her clippings from when she, when they fought for gay marriage. Just so cool.

Leslie Oliver: Yeah, they were the first couple. They were the first, I think they, I don't know if they were the only black couple but yeah that was the first fight. They're the ones, they won the case, right?

Kristyn Scorsone: Yeah. It's amazing.

Leslie Oliver: Yeah, they're my daughters' grandparents. Yep.

Kristyn Scorsone: That's so cool. I love that. I'm trying to think, oh I remember the question I wanted to ask you. It's just sort of what are your influences? Like cultural influences like music wise or books or tv I don't know. You know?

Leslie Oliver: Okay so growing up my mom played a lot of movie soundtracks. I remember the movie, *Claudine*. It's such a good movie.

Kristyn Scorsone: Oh yeah. I've seen that.

Leslie Oliver: My mother played that record for oh my God.

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Kristyn Scorsone: Wow.

Leslie Oliver: Of course, I grew up in church, so my influence is gospel, movie sounds like the 70's. *Shaq, Claudine*. I love *Mahogany* is my absolute favorite movie and I love the soundtrack. The music I remember it as a little girl remembering, I remember the music as a little girl. I loved movie soundtracks. I love them to this day.

Kristyn Scorsone: Someone Left the Cake Out in the Rain, was that a song from that?

Leslie Oliver: I don't know the titles. I have no idea. [*Crosstalk 01:34:31*] I can look it up and I'll let you know later. But I love to hear music from movie soundtracks. And I remember *Mahogany* was one of my favorites. *To Sir with Love* was one of my favorite movies. That soundtrack. So, I loved movie soundtracks. Jazz of course. I love jazz. Blue note jazz especially. When I came up in college Bob Marley. I'm not really a fan of hip hop. Not this music. Whatever they call this that they're doing now, I'm not a fan of it. [*Laughter*] But 1980s, 1980s with L.L. and Run DMC and those guys, Michael Jackson. All the '80s, the '80s was good music. The rock music. All of it was good.

Kristyn Scorsone: Yeah.

Leslie Oliver: Cindy Lauper, Prince. Billy Joel, all of that. All the music in there. Queen. All that '80s music. If it came out in the '80s, I'm a big fan of '80s music, movie soundtracks. But nowadays I listen to just a lot of jazz and just meditation music but yeah jazz was an influence. The '80s music was an influence. Movie soundtracks. Audre Lorde is my absolute, I just, oh my God.

Kristyn Scorsone: Yeah, she's the one [*crosstalk 01:35:55*]

Leslie Oliver: I was a college student, I read her biomythography and I just fell in love with her. And she was, I think she was an older woman by then. I was like who is this lady? I wish I could meet her. Not knowing she's right there in New York. I would have tried to meet her, but she passed away before I had a chance to try and meet her. Alice Walker. I was reading *The Color Purple* in church.

Kristyn Scorsone: I love that book.

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Leslie Oliver: I was reading the book in church behind—my keyboard was behind the pastor's chair. I was in the back of the pulpit reading *The Color Purple* pages the same way Celie read the letters. I was reading the book before the movie came out. I was so excited when the movie came out. The movie was the first, the book was the first time I heard anything about with two women kissing. And it intrigued me so much because I think I became—I think I knew I was gay. Excuse me. I knew I was gay when I saw Lynette Woodard. Lynette Woodard was the first Harlem Globetrotter. The first female Harlem Globetrotter and I saw her play and I was like ooh I felt a little twing of something on my back. *[Laughter]* She played for Kansas.

Kristyn Scorsone: I was obsessed with her. *[Laughter]*

Leslie Oliver: She played for Kansas. I think she played for Kansas the college. I was like ooh that lady's pretty out and then I knew something was different. I had, Alice Walker, I was in college, I was a senior. The professor wrote Alice Walker a letter and asked if I could come shadow her so I could just learn from her. But she was on tour, she couldn't do it. And I thought that was the most amazing thing that anybody had done for me so far that believed in my writing so much. If I ever meet her, when I meet her, I'm going to remind her of that. So Alice Walker, her books, Toni Morrison, Audre Lorde absolutely.

Kristyn Scorsone: Yeah.

Leslie Oliver: Audre Lorde is a heavy influence. Audre Lorde for sure. Her story really inspired me.

Kristyn Scorsone: I love that. That's one of my favorite—

Leslie Oliver: The way she told the whole story. Yeah. Every couple of years I take out *Zami* and I read it again. But it's on my shelf. I love, yeah, her and Alice Walker. But Audre Lorde at number one influence. Big influence on how I just live my life authentically and just some of the stuff she went through I went through some of the same things. But yeah. That's what I would say would be influences. The black church, black women like Alice Walker came up with this idea of womanism, which is all things black women, all the things black women experience.

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She created the term womanist to counter the term feminist because at the time she felt like the word feminist was not as inclusive as it could be and could have just been a sign of the time. So I adopt that word womanist as a matter of fact, I teach art now. I teach art in the daytime, kindergarten to fourth and I just started my visual arts career and I consider myself a womanist expressionist because I'm taking everything that I experienced as a black girl and a black woman and I'm just pointing it into art telling those stories. And so Alice Walker has had an influence on just me owning and honoring who I am, who I was then and who I am now. So I owe her a lot. Audre Lorde, I would read her poems and her lectures and the courage that she displayed in her work really moved me. So those are two of my favorites.

Kristyn Scorsone: Do you feel like when you're performing, do you feel like performance and music and all that is your—almost like an activist expression for you? For yourself?

Leslie Oliver: Well, it's definitely revolutionary because even as a pastor, 'cause I pastor now, I have an outreach ministry here in Charlotte and I preach every other month. It's definitely revolutionary. Every time I stand up in my shoes and sing or do whatever, it's an act of resistance. I was inspired to believe that from what I read in Audre Lorde's work. And just my survival is resistance 'cause I should not be here but I am. And so yeah, and a matter of fact I give voice to it when I—now when I perform, I honor my ancestors, I bring certain names in the room, and I establish that I am a queer womanist and I'm in my own skin. And the songs I write now reflect that. The poetry I write now.

Yeah, I am resisting every negative thought, every negative thought I used to have. All the negative thoughts people had about me. This is what you're going to get, and you don't have to like it. It's okay. I'm still gonna love you but I'm gonna be myself. I mean at 54 years old what else am I supposed to be? And I have people looking at me. I have a daughter. What am I teaching her if I can't own my shoes? How is she gonna live hers? I have a legacy to uphold. So I am not about to hide or shrink for anyone 'cause for me it's not even about being queer. I mean that's it. I'm queer. That's just it. Get over it. *[Laughter]* If you can't get over it go to therapy. Go get some help. Get somebody to talk to you about why you hate me so much. I'm not gonna stop being me because you can't handle it.

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I've done enough of being somebody else to other people. I'm at the point of my life now where this is it. And so I'm grateful to work in an education community where it's inclusive. My school movement charter school is inclusive to the staff. For a long time when I was in the school system, I did not, I was not, I was out but I would not publicly say who I was at work 'cause it would cause too many problems and I never knew what they would do with that.

But in this system, I'm in now, when I came in the door, when my first day at the job I came out. I eventually came out at my job but not to the students because you know I was *[unintelligible 01:42:07]* like that and I shouldn't have listened but I did. I couldn't be my full self in the classroom. I can be my full self in the classroom now. I'm encouraged to be my full self. I was not encouraged to be my full self before.

Kristyn Scorsone: Wow.

Leslie Oliver: Audre Lorde, Alice Walker, they really helped shape some of that and I am grateful that I can do that. Some people will never do it. But what do I have to lose? Absolutely nothing.

Kristyn Scorsone: Yeah.

Leslie Oliver: Nothing at all.

Kristyn Scorsone: Were you teaching when Sakia Gunn was murdered?

Leslie Oliver: I was. I was teaching in Newark. I was teaching first grade. I actually sang at one of her memorials.

Kristyn Scorsone: Yeah.

Leslie Oliver: Yeah, I never met her personally, but I did sing at her memorial on the corner, for her mother on the corner. I was teaching first grade at a new school, I was. I actually was there at the—we met with young people after her funeral. We met at Essex County in the gym. I was there and I offered myself up as an out gay teacher if they wanted to talk and connect. I made my presence known. The mayor was there but they pretty much booted him the whole time. *[Laughter]* Yeah, we met with them after the funeral to hear some

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of their concerns. I happen, L.I.T., the church was very instrumental in being present for the young people 'cause they were torn up at that funeral.

Kristyn Scorsone: Wow, so—

Leslie Oliver: I remember being at the funeral, yeah.

Kristyn Scorsone: So, you went to the—

Leslie Oliver: And we were there, yeah.

Kristyn Scorsone: You went to the funeral and then at Essex County College, you had a meeting with the youth? And the mayor?

Leslie Oliver: Yeah, the clergy, those of us from the church, the leadership in the church was there. The young people met with the mayor of Newark, Sharpe James, at the time. And some other leaders were in the room just to give the students a chance to just express what they felt. And they were really on the mayor. They were like, "You don't care about us. You don't care. All you wanna do is lock..." they were very angry. And he was like, "That's about the gays, I'm not you." He didn't talk for long 'cause they didn't want to hear what he had to say. They were very upset, very hurt. Yeah. 'Cause stuff like that never happens on Broad and Market.

I remember in my 20's I used to go up and down that street with no violence. During the day no violence. Something like that happening in that particular place, it really shook the kids up 'cause after 3:00 that's where all teenagers hung out. When I was a teenager, that's where we went. Broad and Market. That's where everybody went to see who was who. I remember Pras. Pras is a member of The Fugees. This is the group Lauryn Hill's in. He used to imitate Michael Jackson on that corner. *[Laughter]*

Kristyn Scorsone: That's funny.

Leslie Oliver: That's how cool Broad and Market was. Everyone had—you went there to catch a bus home. You went downtown, meet your friends. I remember when *Thriller* came out and everybody was trying to be Michael Jackson, so everybody was trying to dance like Michael Jackson on the corner of Broad and Market. The same corner she died on. That was just the happening corner.

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I remember there used to be a vendor who sold house music on cassette. She would have the music playing real loud and we would be—all of us would be out there dancing, having a good time. So the space, that particular corner held a special meaning to many of us. And then to hear that this young lady was just minding her business being who she is and somebody you know. So I don't think it's been the same since then. Yeah, I don't think so.

Kristyn Scorsone: Did you—you used to—I think in your other oral history you said you danced on that corner with—you put linoleum down. Was it like breakdancing I mean?

Leslie Oliver: Almost. Someone would put linoleum. I would do that at school. I went to Arts High. We would dance on linoleum. We would break dance on linoleum in the hallways. But on Broad and Market they would play, the house music would be playing in that—back then I was *[unintelligible 01:46:09]*. I would just—you'd see me dancing with a couple of people having a good time. We'd develop a little circle, and we'd just have a good time. It was a great meeting, gathering place. Which is—it reminded me of Washington Square Park in New York where we would do the same thing.

Kristyn Scorsone: Was it *[crosstalk 01:46:27]*

Leslie Oliver: Make a circle—

Leslie Oliver: -dancing on the corner?

Leslie Oliver: Yeah. And it was really hoppin' back then in the '90s late '80s, '90s house music was it. Hip hop was around but it wasn't getting as much attention as house music was. Now it is, but in the late '80s, mid '80s to mid '90s house music was kinda the music to listen to. Now it's still around but not as prominent as hip hop is.

Kristyn Scorsone: What was it like singing for—on the corner for her memorial?

Leslie Oliver: Very powerful. It was a memorial for her and Shani Baraka. Who I knew personally.

Kristyn Scorsone: Oh wow, I'm sorry.

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Leslie Oliver: Shani's sister went to the church. Very nice. Her sister went to church, not yeah. Shani went to school with my sister. My younger sister and I just knew her from community and both of the mother's were there. Sakia Gunn's mother. Shani Baraka's mother 'cause Shani was murdered with her girlfriend by one of her sister's boyfriends, something like that. But they were having a double memorial and I got to sing for the mothers and that was very special. I used to sing for, Shani Baraka is the daughter of Amiri Baraka, I used to sing for him at Rutgers. He was holding rallies because they tried to take his tenure away.

Kristyn Scorsone: Oh wow.

Leslie Oliver: I would sing for his—yeah. I would sing for his rally when he was in the Bronx. I had a chance to sit in one of his classes. Yeah, Rutgers tried to take his tenure away.

Kristyn Scorsone: [Laughter] Why?

Leslie Oliver: I don't think it worked though. You know he was pretty radical at the time, and I guess it wasn't a good look for Rutgers and they were trying to cancel him out. I don't think it worked. I don't think they were successful 'cause he protested pretty bad, pretty heavily. Yeah, I have such interesting stories with all of these different people. Just from being, just from tapping into myself and just being who I am from Newark and then come around and I got to sing for Shani, yeah.

Kristyn Scorsone: Was that in 2003 that you sang? Or was Shani, she was killed, I forget what year.

Leslie Oliver: I wanna say '04.

Kristyn Scorsone: So was it like in '04 [crosstalk 01:48:55]

Leslie Oliver: The reason why is because my daughter. I sang at the memorial it had to be '04.

Kristyn Scorsone: Okay.

Leslie Oliver: Because yeah, my daughter was walking, she had to be, my daughter was walking, she was a baby. Because I was at her funeral, and she went and ran up to this lady and I said come here

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Judith. It was Raven, my friend Raven who is the sister of Queen Latifah. Queen Latifah was coming out of a side door to leave. My daughter had run up to her sister and that's how I got to meet the Queen. I got to meet her. Her sister Raven used to sing in the choir at the church.

Kristyn Scorsone: At Liberation in Truth?

Leslie Oliver: Mm-hmm. And my best friend used to date her, and we got a chance to go to the house. I got to sing for her one time. It was just so amazing. She's so nice. Queen Latifah is just so nice.

Kristyn Scorsone: She seems it.

Leslie Oliver: She's real nice. She would always come to the middle of the to hang out here and there. Real [*Distorted audio 01:49:59*] just relax and just sitting there just enjoying the music or whatever. And people—we would just let her be because she was at home, she doesn't want anybody like oh [*unintelligible 01:50:10*]. Her name is Dana, she doesn't want to be bothered, she'd be in the back just sitting there drinking on some water or something. She was always the first in the room of the night and we just left her alone. But this time, that's how I know it had to be 2004. It was Shani's funeral. She was coming out of the side door. My daughter was a little baby, and she was just walking and she, yeah. I think that was 2004. And the memorial was in '04 I believe.

Kristyn Scorsone: Wow.

Leslie Oliver: I think it was in '04 because I was leaving—I was growing my hair out. There's a news article about that too. I have that as well.

Kristyn Scorsone: Oh, I'd love to—

Leslie Oliver: I was growing my locks, and they were short. I remember that. I'll just have to send you a bunch of stuff. I have a clip from '95 about the church. I have the clip from the memorial. I have VHS clips of us singing at the church. Yeah.

Kristyn Scorsone: Yeah. I would love to see all of that like whatever—I have, I do have one video tape of a L.I.T. sermon that I think it must have been donated by James Credle [*crossstalk 01:51:14*] Queer Newark project and I have to find, 'cause I took some cell phone, I taped it

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on my cell phone so I can send you clips too. I just gotta find 'em. I think they're on my external hard drive. But that's—

Leslie Oliver: Oh, if you find them, I would love to have them but I *[audio cuts out 01:51:31]* She was not there. Mine are on Google on my Google photos so I will look through and send you clips of the group singing. I think I have one with Jae in it. You might recognize some of the faces in it yeah.

Kristyn Scorsone: Yeah. Was there a lot of people in the corner that day for the memorial? Was it a big crowd?

Leslie Oliver: Yeah, it was big crowd. It was pretty packed.

Kristyn Scorsone: Wow.

Leslie Oliver: The funeral was packed. People loved Sakia. I had no idea. Like I said she's young, she's only 15 so I would never interact with her, but she was very well loved, that center was packed. And that corner was packed, yeah.

Kristyn Scorsone: Such a shame. Did you ever do any fashion shows for Peggie Miller?

Leslie Oliver: That's funny that you should say that. *[Laughter]* Me and Peggie go way back. Now I was in the very first show. I have that on video VHS too.

Kristyn Scorsone: Oh my God that's amazing.

Leslie Oliver: I am an original new millennium butch.

Kristyn Scorsone: Wow that's so cool. *[Laughter]*

Leslie Oliver: Yes, and so I'm gonna pull that tape out. I'm gonna pull it out and send you clips of me in that show. So yes, I was in her very first fashion show. Yes, I was. *[Laughter]*

Kristyn Scorsone: So cool. I love that.

Leslie Oliver: She, as a matter of fact, she had a group at the time called Debonair.

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Kristyn Scorsone: Yeah, were you in the Debonairs?

Leslie Oliver: A singing group. No, I wasn't in the group, but I remember they sang at the fashion show. But yeah. Yeah, Peggy and I go way back. She came to the—she was throwing parties in that community that I was going to go, but she was also and she's still at the church. I remember when she first came. She was in the pew in the choir too but now she just became a minister in October. Yep, I have the video. Debonair's in the video and there's so much queer history in that video. I remember that.

Kristyn Scorsone: Oh my God.

Leslie Oliver: I was in her first and second show. I was in the first show and the second show, then I left town.

Kristyn Scorsone: Oh, I love that. That's so cool.

Leslie Oliver: Yep.

Kristyn Scorsone: I got to see one of her shows a few months ago. I guess it was during this year's Newark, or 2023's Newark Pride. It was so good. It was so awesome.

Leslie Oliver: Yeah, it was, it's amazing all the different things that I've had like the historical things so that—what she had done that day was—no one had thought to do a butch fashion show. And not only was it groundbreaking for Newark but there were women there that were part of the House of Moshood. Moshood is a designer in Brooklyn. If you look up the Moshood brand, but the ball scene is usually featuring butch queens and fem queens who are biologically male. But the House of Moshood was the house of lesbians. Butch lesbians. They had their own house in the ball scene. Very well respected.

They came to the fashion show that night. It was packed in there. I remember it was at Rector Street, the social club on Rector Street. Right around the corner from Trinity. Peggie's first show was packed to capacity. I mean packed. If I show you a clip, all you're gonna see is the aisle because it was so packed in there. Everybody came to that show. It was really cool. Yeah, it was a lot of fun.

Kristyn Scorsone: That's great.

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Leslie Oliver: [Crosstalk 01:55:10] I look totally different than I do now.
[Laughter]

Kristyn Scorsone: How'd you stay—

Leslie Oliver: It was very different from when you see me, yeah.

Kristyn Scorsone: How did you feel about that show?

Leslie Oliver: For me it was just, I was just, I was honored to be in the show. I thought it was cool that she asked me to do it. And again, I was just spinning, just like functioning, I wasn't really living. It was just all a blur to me, but now that I'm a little more settled it's like wow look at you. I was identifying as butch at the time because my girlfriend said, "Well, we can't have two fem's." I remember I did this as androgynous. That's how I really identified. But everybody was calling me a butch and put me in the butch show, but I looked more masculine than my girlfriend did [laughter] so she put me in the show. Now I think it's the coolest thing ever. Back then I was just oh that's nice thank you for asking me. [Laughter]

Kristyn Scorsone: That is so cool.

Leslie Oliver: And I did roll with [unintelligible 01:56:10] in the show. I came out of the show and all that and then I did one scene where I had on this red feminine coat. I thought that was cool. I'll send you a— I'll send you clips from the VHS tape because I don't even think Peggy, unless she got 'em transferred to DVD. I don't even know how to do that. If I knew how to do that, I can send you a DVD of the show. But I have to figure out how to do that. I don't know how.

Kristyn Scorsone: Yeah. It's a, I think you need equipment. I did it, I used to work in the Newark Public Library, and I bought this, God I don't even remember, it was some kind of thing that you put the tape in and then it takes it to the, it was like, it cost money. That was like \$70 bucks. The library paid for it, but yeah. But maybe now, 'cause that was years ago so maybe now it might be easier 'cause that was probably in 20 [crosstalk 01:57:05]

Leslie Oliver: I'm gonna look into it.

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Kristyn Scorsone: Yeah. But [*crosstalk 01:57:09*]

Leslie Oliver: Yeah, I have a lot of VHSs. I have—yeah.

Kristyn Scorsone: Oh, I'm sorry what year was that show?

Leslie Oliver: That was in, do I wanna say 2000, 2000 let me see. I usually try to think about it by my hair. I had a short haircut. Was it 2000? 2002? It—new millennium, it was in 2000 or 2002.

Kristyn Scorsone: Okay.

Leslie Oliver: I had to go back 'cause it's on the—when you first put in the tape it says so on the tape. I wanna say 2000 or 2002. It was in the millennium. It was at the top of the century.

Kristyn Scorsone: Oh yeah that's true. [*Laughter*] Were you in the New Millennium Butch coffee table book? [*crosstalk 01:57:50*]

Leslie Oliver: Yeah, it had to be. Coffee table book? I doubt it. Jae might be in it but I doubt it because I was already in Charlotte. I didn't know anything about a book. I don't know another book around. Started a book too, I didn't know.

Kristyn Scorsone: Yeah.

Leslie Oliver: I never heard of a book. I might be in there.

Kristyn Scorsone: Yeah, I think Jae's in it for sure. Yeah.

Leslie Oliver: Jae must have to be [*distorted audio 01:58:14*] Charlotte, I doubt it. But yeah, I'm gonna try to turn that video to DVD. I have a ton of videos. Every time the church had a concert, I would get a tape. And so, I have quite a few of them. If I can find a way to convert to DVD, I'll send you the entire show. It was really nice.

Kristyn Scorsone: Or if you could even just a few parts just hold your cell phone and record just the screen.

Leslie Oliver: Well, I'm gonna do that for you for sure. Just keep reminding me. I have to know, where did I put the tape? I gotta find it tonight. But now I can do that for you. I have other VHS clips in my phone

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already. I will do that one tonight if you just text me around 9:30 p.m. don't forget to send me clips of the fashion show.

Kristyn Scorsone: Okay.

Leslie Oliver: I will find it tonight and do it 'cause I know I have some cassette tapes somewhere, but I have a bunch of VHS. I sure do. Yep.

Kristyn Scorsone: Okay awesome. Yeah, and I'll send you the newsletter and I'll try to find the clips that I have on my cell phone too and I'll send them to you.

Leslie Oliver: Okay.

Kristyn Scorsone: Awesome. I don't think I have any other questions but is there any, you've been a part of so many pivotal moments in Newark's LGBTQ history, is there anything that I didn't ask you about that you want to talk about or touch on?

Leslie Oliver: I can't think of anything. I'm gonna go back and wait what did I do when I was gay at home? *[Laughter]* I'm trying to think and because I was just spinning at the time. That's how I know I was not mentally well. My mental health, I wasn't taking time to take care of me and relax. I was just so alive and because I did so much that I'm tired now. I've done a lot of things, so I'll try and think. We talked about music. We talked about the church. I can't think of anything else. Yeah 'cause I didn't do much of anything else. *[Distorted audio 02:00:39]* music or I was working at the church. I think we covered everything we did at the church. I can't think of anything else.

Kristyn Scorsone: Were you a part of the Newark Pride Alliance with Laquetta Nelson?

Leslie Oliver: No but Laquetta was in our first choir.

Kristyn Scorsone: Oh, that's cool.

Leslie Oliver: She was in one of my first choir members. Back in '97, yeah. I haven't seen her in a while. I remember when she started to run for office. I think she was running for counsel woman. She ran for something. I knew her before all of that. Really nice lady.

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Kristyn Scorsone: Yeah.

Leslie Oliver: But a lot the people in your *[unintelligible 02:01:24]* is Queer, is the website up yet?

Kristyn Scorsone: Yeah, I can send you the website.

Leslie Oliver: Yeah, if you send me a link, I probably know all the people.

Kristyn Scorsone: Yeah.

Leslie Oliver: Laquetta was in my choir at the church. Yes, she sure was. Yeah, everybody's gone on to do so many different things now. But yeah, I think you covered everything. I think you hear all the best but I'm open to questions if you have them. More questions if you have them. I'm trying to think of what else was going on in the city at that time. I was so busy just trying to just live my life.

Kristyn Scorsone: Yeah, I hear ya.

Leslie Oliver: Probably if I look at the website, I'll probably say oh I remember that I remember that.

Kristyn Scorsone: Yeah.

Leslie Oliver: Do you *[crosstalk 02:02:09]* cover the ball scene on there? That was a big part of—everyone was going to balls and stuff at that time. The ball scene was pretty strong in Newark. The social scene was pretty strong.

Kristyn Scorsone: The what scene?

Leslie Oliver: I'm trying to think. The social scene like Murphy's, First Choice, Zanzibar. You would find people at the different clubs. Outside of Murphy's and First Choice, there would be parties in other clubs for the gays.

Kristyn Scorsone: Okay.

Leslie Oliver: They would be on certain times, certain nights of the week. If you went into *[unintelligible 02:02:53]* you just wanted to go get a drink and they had—different bars had nights where they invited women to come, men to come. They did drag shows you know.

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The drag queens around that time would tell you where they hung out at. I was working so much I didn't get a chance to hang out much, I just really liked going to Murphy's. And for sure First Choice. But those weren't the only two places that people went.

But everybody would seem to meet up at the ball when there was a ball. People would show up or some people would come through the church. Everybody didn't come through the church, but some people were courageous to pop on through. If we had a concert they would come. Sometimes some of them would come to service on Sunday. Because the attendance was not huge all the time. Something about religion and just people like going to their home churches or whatever. But yeah.

Kristyn Scorsone: The ball room scene, was that—did you go to James Credle's Fireballs? At the Robert Treat *[unintelligible 02:03:57]* or was it like—

Leslie Oliver: Actually, yes one of the very first Fireball, the church had a house. It was called the House of Liberation.

Kristyn Scorsone: Oh wow.

Leslie Oliver: Yeah. Elder Tiller, Kevin Tiller who's the pastor now, he was the mother of the house, I was the father of the house. Yeah, go figure. We were in one ball, and we won. There was a category that honored those we lost to HIV AIDS. We even won a trophy for that category. I don't know where the trophy is or what the—where the prize is but we were in a Fireball, and we won that category. We marched up the house. Alicia, she was a part of us. I remember that. That was the Fireball where my breast fell out of my clothes. I had a piece of material wrapped around my chest and I was so busy prancing and gallivanting I didn't know that my breast fell out. *[Laughter]* And any if my girlfriend at the time she turned red, she was like oh my God. I had no idea til *[laughter 02:05:07]* later on. She said, "Oh no *[unintelligible 02:056:09]* your breast was out." I said, "What do you mean?" She said, "Your breast was out." I said, "No!" I said, "For real?"

Kristyn Scorsone: That's a Janet Jackson moment.

Leslie Oliver: Yeah. Right. My breast fell out of my clothes. Yeah, we had a house and one of the Fireball's. I cannot remember, it was of the

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years that Elder Kevin had just gotten here. I wanna say '99, 2000, '98, '99, 2000. We were in a Fireball. We were in one. The church was there. We had a Fireball. I used to go to them all the time. Yeah. But we were in the ball. We were actually in the ball one year. That was fun. Yeah.

Kristyn Scorsone: I love that.

Leslie Oliver: We had a house at that one ball and then we left it alone. Yeah.

Kristyn Scorsone: That's great. I love that.

Leslie Oliver: Yeah. *[Laughter]* I just remembered that. That was funny.

Kristyn Scorsone: That's so cool.

Leslie Oliver: Now someone *[distorted audio 02:06:01]* somewhere of that event. Somebody had it. Somebody has the video of that because they sent it to me later.

Kristyn Scorsone: Yeah, I should look at the, in the Queer Newark office because like I said, James Credle gave us so many VHS tapes and I feel like there was definitely some on the Fireball's. When I got down to Rutgers 'cause I'm gonna teach this semester, I'll try to look and see if I see that year and watch it. And if I can find you, I'll send you clips.

Leslie Oliver: Yeah, this was in the 2000—it had to be '99, 2000, 2001, somewhere around there because who was still alive. What's his name? The—what was his name? Oh my God. Tall Latin young man. Very handsome.

Kristyn Scorsone: Was that Claudio?

Leslie Oliver: I don't know, was this, Claudio? Might—he had dark hair. Oh my God what's his name? He was running the ball that year. Oh my God. I wish I knew—I remembered his name. Might—I don't know his first name, if you said it, I would remember.

Kristyn Scorsone: Angel?

Leslie Oliver: He was over the ball that year. Angel. Angel was over the ball that year because he was preparing for setup, and he asked. "What

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house are you with?" I said, "Liberation." With an attitude. He said, "Oh excuse me. Okay." I said, "I'm just telling you because you acted like you didn't who we were." [Laughter] He said, "That's okay. I'm sorry." I chopped him so bad. Yeah, it was, Angel was still here. I think he wanna say he transitioned. I think. I could be wrong. I hope I'm not wrong. [Crosstalk 02:07:40] Yeah, he was there. He was there that year. Elder Kevin had just come to us to help as an assistant pastor. He had just come to Newark.

Kristyn Scorsone: Okay.

Leslie Oliver: So, it was when he first arrived. I'll have to ask him. It was around the first year he arrived. I want to say 2000, '99, 2000, 2001 something like that.

Kristyn Scorsone: Okay. We have an oral history with Elder Kevin so maybe he talks about it. I'll have to look.

Leslie Oliver: Yeah, you say do you remember being [distorted audio 02:08:24] Liberation. [Laughter] And he'll be like, "Oh my God." Yeah, but he could probably tell you better what year it was. He may even have video I don't know.

Kristyn Scorsone: That's so cool. Yeah. I guess I'll try to think, if I think of anything else I'll definitely ask you questions 'cause I'm writing my dissertation on the 1970s forward of Newark's LGBTQ history and so it's and I'm just also very interested 'cause I'm from Kearny. I grew up like [crosstalk 02:08:58]

Leslie Oliver: Oh okay.

Kristyn Scorsone: I was born in 1980 and I—

Leslie Oliver: So, you remember Caruso's, right? You remember Caruso's?

Kristyn Scorsone: Caruso's.

Leslie Oliver: The Italian restaurant. When you came down the bridge into Newark you had to pass Caruso's on your right. It's an Italian restaurant. My mother loved that place.

Kristyn Scorsone: Oh yeah? [Laughter]

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- Leslie Oliver:* But it was, me and my church used to pass Kearny to drive to the highway to get to Jersey City and go to New York.
- Kristyn Scorsone:* Okay.
- Leslie Oliver:* We would pass Caruso's all the time. I wanna say it's on the bridge between Kearny and Newark. Or ask someone, maybe your parents or somebody in your family might remember Caruso's.
- Kristyn Scorsone:* Probably.
- Leslie Oliver:* Italian restaurant as you came into Newark from Kearny. To Newark. We used to park—my pastor used to park his care in Kearny and then we would drive on to Jersey City. That's how I remember it. My mom went there all the time.
- Kristyn Scorsone:* My dad's Sicilian so he would probably know *[laughter]*. His family grew up in north Newark and then mom grew up in Ironbound.
- Leslie Oliver:* Oh wow, my grandparents had a house in north Newark. On Bloomfield on uh, Berkley Avenue.
- Kristyn Scorsone:* I know he said he was around Seventh Ave maybe if im remember correctly.
- Leslie Oliver:* Seventh Ave *[distorted audio 02:10:23]* Barringer High school I wanna say. That's the north Newark area over there. Especially with the Banagher High School area. That's north Newark over there. Lake Street, Seventh Avenue, yeah. Yep.
- Kristyn Scorsone:* That's cool. I grew up in the '80s, but I was a kid. But I knew I was queer but I'm like didn't know any of this stuff so when I went to Rutgers Newark and learned all this history, I was like oh my God. This was in my backyard, and I had no idea. You know what I mean? I wanna *[crosstalk 02:11:03]* for other people to have. Other queer kids, trans.
- Leslie Oliver:* Yeah, I wish, oh my God. The Newark that I saw growing up if it was there when I was younger. I mean it would have been so much easier, but you know.
- Kristyn Scorsone:* Yeah, for sure. I love your glasses by the way in the photo.
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Leslie Oliver: Oh, I have like 70 pairs of frames. I take the plastic out and I wear the frame.

Kristyn Scorsone: Oh cool. *[Laughter]*

Leslie Oliver: Yeah, I always do that.

Kristyn Scorsone: I love that.

Leslie Oliver: I have prescription ones on now, but yeah.

Kristyn Scorsone: That's so cool. Alright, well I don't want to take up too much more of your time. Definitely, but yeah, I'll reach out and I'll text you later too. And I appreciate all—everything that you told me. This is so cool. You're such a cool person and I appreciate it. You sharing your story and telling all this stuff and sharing your memories.

Leslie Oliver: Thank you for asking. *[Unintelligible 02:12:06]* it's an honor. I loved my hometown. I just left to get my daughter a bit of a softer side. I didn't want her to grow with thickness on her skin 'cause that's what I grew up with. I just wanted to give her something different. My mom is still there. I plan to head up there in April for spring break. My mom is still there, and it'll always be a special place, always. Yeah. It made me who I am you know?

Kristyn Scorsone: Yeah, for sure.

Leslie Oliver: If you just text me or email me if you need anything else I will definitely within the hour, send you some of those clips of the choir singing at the church and stuff. Yeah.

Kristyn Scorsone: Awesome. Thank you so much.

Leslie Oliver: You're welcome, anytime.

Kristyn Scorsone: Alright I'll text you—

Leslie Oliver: And you send me a clip, can you send me a clip to the website so I can pursue it and check it out?

Kristyn Scorsone: Yeah. I'll text you the website as soon as we get off the phone.

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Leslie Oliver: Okay. Well, you be well, and I will talk to you soon.

Kristyn Scorsone: You too, be well. Thank you so much.

Leslie Oliver: You're welcome, take care.

Kristyn Scorsone: Goodnight.

Leslie Oliver: Alright, buh-bye.

[End of Audio:]