

Queer Newark Oral History Project

Interviewee: Andromeda Russell

Interviewer: Phoenix Sherling

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Location: Newark, NJ

Marissa Myers: Thank you, guys, for coming. Today is July 27th at three-ish p.m. I am with Phoenix Sherling, and we are interviewing Andromeda Russell, Ann, Andi, all those apply.

Andromeda Russell: Those are all good.

Marissa Myers: I am going to get right into this. I'm going to ask the first question, but after that, I'm going to revert back to Phoenix. But our first question is just when and where were you born?

Andromeda Russell: I was born in 2001, just kind of in the middle of nowhere, Indiana.

Phoenix Sherling: Do you want me to take over?

Marissa Myers: Yes.

Phoenix Sherling: Okay. So you were born in [city name redacted]. You're 25 now. What was your —how did you grow up? Were you raised by parents? Grandparents? Did you have siblings?

Andromeda Russell: Yeah, I was raised— I did have both of my parents. I was raised by both of them until I was about eight. Then from then on, I was basically raised by my mom. My dad was not around from eight to 17. I spent a lot, the majority of my childhood, early young adulthood, in a single parent household with my mom and my brother.

Marissa Myers: Sorry. I'm going to cut in. You also have adopted siblings, right?

Andromeda Russell: Yes, I have two— So, my- I have two sisters who are biological sisters who my mom adopted when, they were about the same age as me. I was about—I was 14 and they were 13 and 14 when they were adopted. I was in the same grade as the older of the two. Then suddenly, they were my siblings, which was interesting.

Phoenix Sherling: Yeah. No, that is a—I would say that's a unique experience to have had. So they moved into your house when you were a teenager. Did you stay in the same house as a kid? You stayed in the same place in [hometown]?

Andromeda Russell: Yeah, we never moved. Until college, I lived in the same house my entire life. I think we had an idea of moving at one point and then we just, after a certain point, just didn't have the money or the prospect of moving. I mean, there was a little bit where we were worried we weren't going to be able to keep the house we were in, but that's not really moving. That's just becoming homeless. *[Laughter]* Different thing, kind of.

Phoenix Sherling: Different circumstance. You were with your family, you said you had an older brother. Did you do a lot of stuff at school as a kid? Were you in sports? Were you super involved? Did you have a close friend group?

Andromeda Russell: I did have a pretty close group of friends. I did a lot when I was in grade school age and stuff like that. I did a lot of sports and things like that. I think I had a very down, depressed arc in like my—I mean, in middle school, I was fairly certain— they were fairly certain I was going to fail out when I got into high school because I was doing this thing where I—so, we had a policy about late assignments and stuff like—or not turned in assignments and stuff like that, where you would, if you didn't turn something in, you would get a detention. I was turning in things exactly half done and getting F's on every assignment. Then passing the test to keep myself with like a B or a C. I had to be pulled aside by a bunch of teachers and were like “you need to do better.”

I was not very motivated for a lot of years. I mean, I didn't start sports or anything until after I had gotten into high school. Again, I had done baseball and all those things when I was younger and then just was not interested for years, and just kind of stopped. I was in choir when I was later in middle school. I was a percussionist in band for a while. That was fun. I went to the Indiana all-state honor choir, which was a big one. I really, really love singing. And that was a pretty crazy thing.

My brother did that when he was in elementary school, fifth grade, which we weren't supposed to be able to do, but they were like “we're going to put him through anyways.” It was just really good. So I thought it was cool that he went and he was a little younger than my age at the time. Then I went into choir and got to also do it. We both kind of had that experience shared, which was pretty fun.

Phoenix Sherling: Nice. We'll get a little bit more in depth into the nitty gritty of queer stuff later. Just because we're talking about siblings, you said you had two sisters and a brother. Can we get a little brief rundown of how do you identify now? Obviously, not the same as when you were growing up, but where are you at now in terms of your identity?

Andromeda Russell: I mean, I guess the easy term that I typically use is, which is a good enough assemblage of what I think is gender fluid. I had a long journey of

being tossed back and forth with gender and stuff like that. I grew up with just my mom. I feel like kind of was a much more feminine child growing up, even though I was born male. And so it was that thing of I only had my mom as a role model. I didn't really have many other people in my life like that. But then what— got into high school and started wrestling, because I was a wrestler when I was freshman year through senior. I was in that and I got very hyper-masculine and did all that. I was bodybuilding at the time. Super unhealthy for someone that age, by the way. No one should ever do that. That's a terrible idea.

I think I started to play with being non-binary when I was in college. I had a good long while where I was he/they. Once I started transitioning, came out as a fully binary trans woman. I was like, "I want she/her. I want it this way." Eventually I was like, "I don't actually think that's true either." It's, I think, gender is a very developing thing. I think the reason why gender fluid fits me at this point is because I think it is just something that is changing and is going to change again. I think I've been presenting a lot more masculine at least on the majority of days of the week at this point but still wanting to be referred to as feminine. So it's like, there's a whole thing with that.

Phoenix Sherling: Very in flux.

Andromeda Russell: I think I've always kind of seen my gender as something that's, like, allowed to change. I think that's why gender fluid fits best. Did you ask gender and sexual orientation or is that—

Phoenix Sherling: Sure. Let's do both.

Andromeda Russell: -oh, was that the next question?

Phoenix Sherling: I just wanted to know anything that you had a label for or had an idea on.

Andromeda Russell: Yeah. I think gender fluid is the simplest. The simple shorter answer and then all the other stuff I said was the long answer. At this point, sexual identification or sexual orientation wise, I mostly just use queer. It's kind of... I don't know, it's like spotty, because I feel like I used to not want to date cis men, but I was fine. It was mostly T4T as well. That was a big thing for me. I would only date other trans people, mostly just for personal comfort, but also because I, admittedly, I didn't know what to do with someone with, I guess, I don't know how to say it. I don't know how to say it in a way that's not, like, not PC.

Phoenix Sherling: I would say you're allowed to swear and be a little vulgar if need be.

Andromeda Russell: I didn't know what to do with a dick, is the answer. Because I had only been with people who had vaginas. I was a little bit T4T because I was like well, I like people of all gender presentations, but I just don't know what to do with them over there. That's since changed. That's why I use queer now because for a while I was referring to myself as a lesbian. I think that's maybe not the truest understanding of it because now I'm like, I don't know. I've been with people who are non-binary and AMAB and I've been with people who are cis men at this point. I think, or at the very least, non-binary, but still male presenting and AMAB at the same time. I think I've gotten to the point where it's just queer because it's just, if I look at them and I say, "yep, that's the one." That's how it goes for me. My sexual orientation is that one.

Phoenix Sherling: That takes me a little bit into, you have said that you were more of a "feminine" kid growing up with mostly just your mom, but that also you had these hyper-masculine swings. Would you say that you knew any gay people as a young person? Were there queer people around you before college?

Andromeda Russell: Not many. There was a couple people who were out. There was— I mean, I have one friend who I had in college, or not in college, but high school, who was an out gay teen as a teenager in school. Which was really bold at the time, because it was—that was not a thing you did. He was really cool. He was really popular too at school, which was pretty fun. I was in a super small town that just did not do that kind of stuff. That was not the vibe. You did not want to be the queer one in the room or whatever. He was a cis gay man.

Then I had another friend who at the time identified as a lesbian but eventually transitioned to masculine. I don't remember... I think he's just trans masc, but stopped calling himself lesbian and was— just did that kind of thing. And so I had a few people, and there were definitely people—a lot of my friend group came out after high school was over. I had a lot of friends who were—I was like mostly friends with guys— like "I'm a straight guy." Then we got into—I left for college and then came back, and everyone was bisexual. It was like okay, sure. Sure. "Straight guy" over there. That was a whole thing.

I think it was—the thing of it was, it was like, we were in a place that was not super friendly to that. I think once people got out of the school and people got away from their parents a little bit too, I think was the big thing, is that a lot of them decided, okay, it's okay for me to test the waters with this. A lot of them came out as bisexual and stuff like that, like right after we got out of high school. I didn't have a lot of gay representation. My mom's friend... My mom also had a friend who we— had another

friend—it was a friend of a friend of my mom's friend who was a really effeminate gay man. He was so fun. He was a really fun guy.

We didn't interact that much, but I remember being over at my neighbor's house and helping her change her pool cover and he was there the whole time, and we were cracking jokes back and forth. Because I was a little Christian kid, so I—he said a lot of swears. I think I gave him a swear jar at some point. *[Laughter]* And he did it and I got the money from him at the end because that was our deal. I was like, I'm a kid, you can't say that in front of me.

Marissa Myers: That actually brings up the—I meant to ask this earlier or to have Phoenix ask this earlier, but I think that something that's really prominent? prominent, that's what I meant, prominent, in the queer community is people growing up religious and having a sort of realization, culmination, where they're like, wait, I don't know if my identity follows this religion that I was raised with. I'm wondering, were you religious? You said you were Christian growing up. How did that affect your life as a kid, but also coming in and realizing your queer identity?

Andromeda Russell: Yeah. So I mean, early, early life. My parents were—my dad was Catholic growing up, and my mom, not Methodist, what was it? We ended up, it was like kind of the middle ground. My mom was in a very different kind of church. We ended up being Methodist because that's the diet Catholic—

Phoenix Sherling: Compromise.

Andromeda Russell: That was their compromise they came up with. Once it was just me, my mom and my brother, we ended up—we got introduced, or she got introduced, to like, it wasn't called an evangelical church, but it was an evangelical church. I've later gone back and figured that out because being there for so long, it kind of like tricks you or whatever into not thinking that's what it is.

I was very deep in evangelical doctrine and stuff like that. I've told people this before and they seem kind of shocked. I had read the Bible multiple times of my own volition when I—since I was a child. It was a speaking in tongues kind of church. It was all that kind of stuff. They would have preachers come in and people were falling down on their back. It was that type of thing. It was very intense. I think the biggest thing was just that it was, I think I knew pretty early on that I didn't like the idea— I've said this before, I didn't like the idea of growing into—becoming a man. I think I was, as a young boy, I think I was fine. I didn't mind those terms. I didn't mind the way that worked.

There was just something very deep that I was like, I don't like the idea of becoming a man. I think that was what a lot of the doctrine was centered around, was being a good man of God. All this sort of like when you're growing up in those things, the doctrine is really gendered. It's very strongly "This is what men do and this is what women do." It was hard, hard lines. I mean, I was put in groups that were to help— I don't know. It was this thing of—and obviously these are not the associations I make now, because I don't— Gender and sex are different, but not as in sex as in biology, but like sex the action. The idea of like thinking about your gender and thinking about your sexual orientation and also sex itself, are separate concepts. But being queer was seen as sexual deviance and stuff like that.

I think there was a connection that was made where I was in groups that were like "you can never masturbate or it's taking away your soul" or whatever. There was a lot of that type of stuff. I was in groups coaching other people my age the dangers of like sexual deviance and masturbation. And part of those doctrines were always like they would slip a little bit of "And you also can't be gay. And it's also bad for you to be gay or to be thinking about gender in any way that's not 'how can I be the best man possible.'" I think that was a big part of my repression, I think.

I don't even think I really realized it. Because I didn't know. I mean, obviously I didn't know what I was missing. Not being able to explore my gender expression, because I kind of never got the chance. I was eight years old when I started getting fed this type of stuff. I think growing up in that kind of environment, it just becomes a thing where you internalize this thing of, "I need to be the best man of God that I can be." That became a separate thing from being a man or, you know, as a gender. It almost became like a task, a goal, that I was trying to do. It's a very sneaky way of convincing you not to do that because it tacks on all these things that like, you know, of how a man should be. How a man should act.

They're all good stuff, but it just convinces you that you're only going to be good if you're that man. It's very, very strong, like you have to be that. That part of it was super important in everything I was taught. I mean, it's the basic, yeah, of course, they tell you that you go to hell if you're gay or whatever. They didn't say that exactly, because that was—they have to be a little stealthier about it. They were low-key saying it the whole time. But yeah, it's like, I think that was a big part of— I didn't realize I was repressing anything. I was trying to be the most masculine, whatever person I could be, because I was like, that's what I was told I was supposed to.

Phoenix Sherling:

"That's what God wants."

Andromeda Russell: “That's what God wants.” I think it was a thing where I was substituting anything that I was repressing for just this caricature that I was told to be. I was like, that's what was rewarded. That's what I was told. You got all the good boy points for doing that. Everybody told you, patted you on the back, and told you how good of a man you were if you did this and you did that. And so, yeah, I was very deep in it. Like I said, I read the Bible so many times as a child on my own. I had read it front to back before I was 13. And like, had done it multiple times without anyone telling me to or without any help. That just became a thing where I think I wanted to master being the best man of God I could be. I had to do everything possible to make sure that was what I was. It just became a way to identify that was safe, I think.

Phoenix Sherling: Yeah. No, totally.

Andromeda Russell: Especially in the environment. It felt safe at the time.

Phoenix Sherling: That makes a lot of sense, especially, small town Indiana. It's easier to be the expected way to be.

Andromeda Russell: I mean, the thing that's interesting about it is that I was still for like, not—and I'm not saying, oh, and Christian people are—I'm not saying Christian people are persecuted or whatever. I'm not saying that. That's not the case. That's nonsense. Sorry other— Sorry people who are Christian and cool. That doesn't happen. We're in America. No. I was Christian and white and male. No, that wasn't—I was not being discriminated against. But I was, like, a weird kid for being that into it. I think I didn't mind being that weird kid because I was like, it felt less like I was off the beaten path and more like I was ahead of the curve.

Phoenix Sherling: Right.

Andromeda Russell: Like, “I'm doing this. I'm doing this God stuff better than those grown adults in my class that are teaching me. I know how to do it. I'm winning religion.”

Marissa Myers: A plus in religion.

Andromeda Russell: I mean, I was getting the highest of marks in religion when I was a kid.

Phoenix Sherling: I feel like we've touched on a few potential ones, but I know that they exist. Can you think of any major turning points in your childhood into young adulthood? Any that you want to talk about?

Andromeda Russell: Turning points as in for my gender expression and stuff like that?

Phoenix Sherling: I would say just in general.

Andromeda Russell: In general?

Phoenix Sherling: Things that made major impacts on your life and the way you exist in the world.

Marissa Myers: Yeah. I would just say the things that made you who you are today, whether that be you as Ann, Andi, Andromeda Russell/you just as somebody who was a film major and somebody who is living the life that you are now, you know?

Andromeda Russell: Yeah. I think the thing that a little bit shaped me emotionally was my growing up in that smaller three-person family. I've become— There's a lot of bad emotional things that came from it, but I do think that my mom raised me to be very empathetic, very respectful of other people. There's some other stuff in there. But I think it did, as a person, make me very loyal and very bonded to certain people and stuff like that. My little family was everything and including my sisters when they were—when they came in as well. But our little— Especially when it was just the three of us, we just had each other.

So I feel like I do kind of do that where I can talk to other people and I can do other things, but I bond to smaller groups. Like, “These are my people and I would do literally anything for them.” I feel like that really shaped me as a person in the way that I interact. I think this wasn't necessarily a good turning point, but I think going into high school and stuff like that, I was, I think I mentioned earlier, I was a wrestler. I think getting into that environment, not saying that every wrestling program is like this, but there was a very toxically masculine, very kind of mean-spirited culture and logic to how that worked. And I love the sport. Don't get me wrong. I still really love the sport. I would love if there was a, I don't know, maybe if there was a queer wrestling something or other. I would love to do that. That would be awesome.

But I think growing up that way, I think did give me a really warped sense of masculinity. I mean, as well as the church stuff as well. I think when it came to the church stuff, I think I thought less about gender and more about this idealized version of what I wanted to become. I think I thought a lot about being a man when I was in wrestling and not good thoughts, for sure. It did make me like a person I wasn't super—I'm not a—I wasn't a big fan of even then. Where I was very angry. I think that was the time when I did feel the way that people describe being repressed as. I was very angry and hyper-masculine. I wanted to like be able to shape how people thought about me. And sometimes— Obviously, I wasn't a super scary

person. No one was— not many people were actually afraid of me, but I was—I wanted to be strong enough to make people scared of me.

Because that was a way that I could shape how people thought about me as a person. I think, I mean, I did, I think, the big thing that brought me out of that was just getting out of my little town in Indiana. Because going to college, I think it took a month before, like, I was talking to my friend who I hung out with all the time. We ended up being roommates for a while as well. I was talking to my friend that was down the hall. I was like, “I think I might be bisexual.” It was a month after I moved. I think it really was just like—and I've done this before too. We'll get to another spot where it was similar. But I was like, “I think I want to be bisexual. Like, I think—” Not want to be, but you know what I mean. *[Laughter]* That's not the phrasing I said it in. I was like, I think I might be, I might— “There might be something else going on.” I think is what I was typically saying. Because I wasn't even sure about what I was saying at the time. Because I didn't know what all that meant.

I got to college and said—and talked about it with my roommate. Then I think the only person I came back home and told was my brother. For years, I think that was the only person who knew. I went home on an Easter or something and told him and he was just like, “Cool, sounds nice.” My brother's always been very—I think the biggest thing that he's always done has been a normalizing presence. Because I'll bring something to him that feels terrifying to say, and then once I've said it, he's just like, “All right.” He just didn't really have too much big things to say about it. I think after that, so while I was in early college and stuff like that, I started having a lot of weird symptoms and pains and things like that.

And after months of going to the hospital or going back and forth from the hospital, we found out that I had leukemia. I had ALL, which is acute lymphoblastic leukemia. It's a childhood version of it. Well, there's a lot of details, but it's higher risk factor if you're an adult when you get it. If you do get it, you're supposed to get it as a kid and then they give you a few medications and then, because your body can bounce back easier, it goes away pretty quick. Usually. Not saying I was like, man, I wish I had cancer as a child, but like I—

Phoenix Sherling: You're pranked by having it at 20.

Andromeda Russell: I did get it. I was diagnosed at 19, and it was a three-year process. And near the end of my treatments and stuff like that, I had, I think— I had gotten COVID and was in the hospital for a while. They gave me antibodies and stuff. It did not stop it. I ended up with it and was in the hospital for, like, two weeks. A week and a half of that was spent on and

off of a ventilator. And I had to learn how to walk again after that for the next five weeks in a rehab facility. I think that was my big thing of kind of set me in the mindset where I'm like, "I need to figure out what I want in my life and what matters." Because I was like, I nearly died. And I was like, okay, I don't know if this is going to happen again. It could. I was always like it could come back. I want to have my shit sorted. I do not want to die still trying to follow somebody else's ideal. And so I think that was a big point for me. It was where I was like, I didn't come out as anything at that point, but I think, I mean, actually no, that was when I started—

Phoenix Sherling: Yeah, for sure.

Andromeda Russell: That was when I started using non-binary as a label. I was he/they for the longest time. I think I switched to they. The other, it's a funnier one because it's the same kind of thing that happened when I went to college. I went on a trip to—it was—this was a while after that. I had gotten back to being able to walk normally and everything. I went on a trip to Prague for a class. It was a study abroad program. While I was there, I realized that I wanted to transition. And that was when I first came out as trans feminine. I came home and was hanging out with one of my friends for, over and over again and told them, I was like, "I think I need to get on hormones." They're like, "That sounds cool. You can go to the health center. You can just go to the health center and get those." I said, what? I thought that would be—I did think it would be harder than it was. Yeah, so that was when I started transitioning pretty—I think it was maybe about half a year after I was—after that hospital visit. I had been using non-binary as a label for about that entire time.

And then, I think that was the big thing that's gotten me where I am now. I mean, I don't know that there was ever a hard line as to when I stopped calling myself a trans woman and started using transfemme and kept things more non-binary and flowy with it. But I think that just came with time. I think I was more accepting of the change. There didn't have to be these big moments. I think those were the big stages, I think, in life that made me me.

Phoenix Sherling: Yeah, lots of, lots of big... one after the other. Of, you know, going from a two-parent household to one and then adding two more siblings and then getting a second parent back and then going to college where you're starting to figure out your identity. Then getting cancer.

Andromeda Russell: Yeah, and having cancer.

Phoenix Sherling: Having to figure that out and then figuring your identity out more because of the cancer.

Andromeda Russell: Yeah.

Phoenix Sherling: Yeah. There's a lot of really interesting stuff there that I think is a really, not always necessarily fun, perhaps, but very interesting and unique series of life experiences in that way. Which I think kind of—so you—we've talked a little bit about college. Can we get into—I think we mentioned that you were a film major. Where did you go to college? What did you—When did you graduate?

Andromeda Russell: I went to Indiana University. I was a direct admit into their media school. I specialized in film and cinematic arts. They called it like three different things while I was there. They were still figuring it out. I don't remember what... I believe my degree says cinematic arts as the specialization. But yeah, I think probably you can understand from my circumstances that I had a lot of things I felt like I needed to like, get escapism and stuff like that from. That was like where I really discovered that I loved film, and I loved like what film could do as a medium. Like that's the thing is like I was talking, I was, I was talking to you, Nix, the other day, and I was like, "I don't re-watch shows. I don't reread books. But I do re-watch movies." My favorite movies I have seen 10s if not 20s of times. That's how I've processed the world, I think. There's a lot to that. I think I put a lot of myself in—or I get a lot of who I am from the things—the films that I enjoy and look into. I think the ones that I like the most are the ones that I see myself in, because it's, I think, getting into it as a form of escapism, I think I was most intrigued when it brought me back and mirrored and showed me myself a little bit. And so, yeah, I went to school for film. I started in 2020 which was an interesting year to start college.

Phoenix Sherling: Extremely.

Andromeda Russell: Yeah. Then I was diagnosed later that year, right? I think it was in my freshman year?

Phoenix Sherling: Yes.

Andromeda Russell: Yeah. 'Cause I would've been 19. Yeah. I was diagnosed later that year. Throughout the whole time I only missed one semester. I was told, "Oh, you should take a whole year off. You should take a couple years off of school and not go back." And no, like I... once I was diagnosed, once I had started my treatments, I was just like, "Nope, I'm gonna keep goin'. I will work around it where I have to, but I am gonna keep trying to go." I would go to—I was going to school. By the way, just to be clear, I was not risking anyone else's health. I was never on radiation. I was only on chemotherapy. I was never risking anybody else's safety with my own going to school like that. I went to school half sick

from methotrexate and having to wear huge N95 masks, which everyone else was also too.

Phoenix Sherling: Yeah, true.

Andromeda Russell: I was having to wear a mask even when everyone else had stopped and stuff like that. Having to push through that. I went to school when I had a walker. I went to school when I could barely walk and was falling over because my legs couldn't keep up. I was, really persevered through it. I missed one semester, and so instead of graduating that—was it spring?

Phoenix Sherling: Spring.

Andromeda Russell: That spring—I graduated in December of 2024. It was still only four years. It was just, I had to have an extra semester to finish off my classes and stuff. But yeah.

Phoenix Sherling: Hey, all things considered, pretty impressive timeline.

Marissa Myers: Sorry, before we go on, I did have a quick question. You said that you didn't really know a lot of queer people when you were living back at home. You knew a couple here or there. It was your first semester going into college where you were like, "I think I'm bisexual. Uh, he/they actually." All this stuff. I'm wondering, was it a chicken or the egg situation, where it was like you were—you went to college, you came out as something, and you then developed a queer community? Or was it you met queer people and then realized, "Oh, I'm a little bit more similar to them than I thought"? Just because I think that it's really interesting the way that people develop a community around people that are similar to them even though they're not super familiar with these terms and stuff.

Andromeda Russell: Yeah, I mean, I think I was definitely welcomed in by Bloomington. There was a lot—that was the thing is Bloomington is the place where if there's a type of person you haven't met, you will meet them there. 'Cause it was a school that a lot of people from other states, from other countries even, and from very different walks of life and stuff like that would all go— all kind of went to. Bloomington itself is one of the places where I felt comfortable being—where I finally started feeling comfortable being more—well, I guess less careful about how people saw me. I didn't feel the need to put up a facade and stuff like that.

But I made a lot more queer friends pretty immediately going there. It was just, by virtue of being there, I met a lot more people who were... presented gender differently and were—honestly, I know more—weirdly

enough, I know more trans people from Bloomington than I do from Newark, to be entirely real with you. Which is a little crazy I think, considering Indiana is Indiana. But I mean, it was just kind of a place—Before I even really knew what it meant to be queer and to be LGBT or whatever, I was going to Pride Fest just because they were there, and it was huge. Bloomington Pride was giant. It was a whole—they—it just enveloped a whole street of town.

It was the most popul—it was at Kirkwood; it was the most popular place you could go. It was just being inducted into there just from the environment. I think Bloomington was a place that as much as getting out of Clinton gave me the opport—it gave me the ability to change things about that, I think Bloomington was the place that showed me what my options were, I guess. What I could or what I could become, 'cause it was one of the only places I had really found queer community. Like I said, I had gay friends and stuff like that when I was in high school.

But like, I think community was a little bit more complicated because there wasn't enough of us, so the people that were there, a lot of people were closeted and didn't wanna associate with other people who were gay or queer or whatever. That was the scary thing that could damage your reputation in a small town. I think I was able to do that partially because I was sequestered off from all of my—or not. I was away from all of the scary people who would be mad at me for being gay, and I was in a place where everyone was telling me, "Yeah, you can do whatever you want. Look at all these other people who are doing whatever they want. You can also do that."

Phoenix Sherling: Yeah, very... I mean, for anyone who doesn't know, Bloomington has one of the last 30 lesbian bars in the country.

Andromeda Russell: The Back Door, baby!

Phoenix Sherling: And that's the gay bar in Bloomington. So there is a community there that you might not expect.

Andromeda Russell: Visit The Back Door! If you're ever in Indiana for whatever fucking reason, visit The Back Door! It's so cool.

Phoenix Sherling: Which, getting into place and finding community and all of that good stuff—well, you graduated college in 2024. When and why did you end up living in Newark?

Andromeda Russell: So, I can name-drop that you were the one that I—

Phoenix Sherling: You can name-drop me.

Andromeda Russell: Yeah. After college, I didn't know what I was gonna—I didn't really have much of a plan. I could've tried more—harder to get into film and stuff like that. But I feel like because I did just want some distance from Indiana, I mean especially because of some other things that were happening. Also Phoenix, who is interviewing me right now, was moving to Newark to go to Rutgers here and—to get to your—or get their master's—to get your master's. I was invited to go with Phoenix and their partner and come here to live with them. They kinda gave me the option to get out of Indiana, and I said, "Yes!"

We were the friend group at the time when that happened. We were hanging out all the time. We were doing all this stuff. It was the perfect idea. It was like this is—these are my closest friends at the moment. I feel comfortable.

And so I was like, "We can all get out of Indiana. We can all try something new." Yeah, so that's how I got here. I've been here for about a year now. A little over now—yeah—right?

Phoenix Sherling: Yeah, just over—

Andromeda Russell: 'Cause we moved in on the 22nd.

Phoenix Sherling: -in June.

Andromeda Russell: Or I moved in on the 22nd; you were here before me. I moved over here on the 22nd. They had already gotten here and gotten their stuff set up. Then I came in a little bit later 'cause I had to do two weeks for my job and stuff like that. Yeah. I worked two jobs for about six months to be able to move here. Built up, I think, it was \$3,000 or something, and I was like, "That's enough."

It wasn't, by the way. Super was not. *[Laughter]* Just in case you wanna know, \$3,000, not enough to move cross country. But I figured it out. Yeah.

Phoenix Sherling: You've been living here, working here. Obviously, you moved here with people that you know, and so you know queer people in that capacity. Where are other places in Newark that you've found queer community?

Andromeda Russell: I mean— We did a little mini interview about this before. Originally, we were going to—obviously this isn't Newark—but we were going to New York a lot, which became taxing after a while. I met a good few people, I went to—was going to a queer open draw that's

in New York. That's really fun if you get a chance. It's called Trans Figures. It's really cool. You'll meet a lot of fun people.

It was a figure drawing thing where they—where it was like the models are always trans, and it's very fun. Yeah, I think I had struggled to find any queer nightlife and stuff in the area. That was a difficult thing for me. But I had started dating somebody I met off of Hinge. We are no longer together. That story, we don't need to get into.

But our main thing was every Wednesday we were going to QXT's, the alternative club over on Mulberry in Newark. And they have karaoke nights on Wednesdays. After being there for a while—'cause I—originally, I was like, "Oh, well, I've spent a lot of time in alt spaces." I usually feel safe in those as a queer person. I spent about two—a little over two years going to Indianapolis to go to the Melody Inn, especially on their punk rock nights. 'Cause that was punk spaces, which is another form of alternative subculture and stuff like that—was also a place where I felt very safe.

It's a thing where everyone there is doing something that's weird and against the norm and offbeat from what society tells you. That was just a place where people really—even if they didn't understand transness, queerness as a concept in and of itself, they understood, "Oh, you're doing something different and not what everyone's telling you to do. That's cool as fuck. We will be your friend now." And so I got very into going there and stuff like that and eventually learned that they do drag events. They have a really rich thing for Pride, which we had a whole lot of stuff going on this year, so I didn't get to go to some of it.

Next year, I will be at the QXT's Pride events and stuff like that. June will be full of QXTs for me next time. I swear it. I had to miss out a little bit on the last set of 'em. But yeah, it just became a place where it was—there is a lot of queer people, but it's also just this very understanding and accepting place where it's like, well, who's gonna judge anybody there? We're all dressed up in crazy makeup. We all look like vampires. Who gives a shit if you're queer or trans?

Phoenix Sherling: Yeah, no, that makes sense. I find, I think, a lot of the time, alternative spaces in general tend to be very loosey-goosey with what they'll let you get away with in terms of funky presentation.

Andromeda Russell: I mean, for lack of a better term, "gender fuck" came out of punk, hardcore spaces and stuff like that.

Phoenix Sherling: True.

Andromeda Russell: That was a whole thing.

Phoenix Sherling: Let's see. I think we're gonna stick on a Newark theme for the moment of, I know we've talked about how your identity itself has been a little bit of fluid, changing, going through different phases almost. Do you think that being in Newark has impacted that journey at all? Like, over the last year, do you think Newark's had a role?

Andromeda Russell: I think definitely. Just being in a place where it is semi-common—sorry—to see other queer people and stuff like that are doing things a little looser with gender, I think kind of made me—'cause it was like, when all you're seeing is a lot of cis men and cis women in a place, it's like, "Okay, well, if I'm gonna be trans, I have to be one of them. I have to be"—and that's the assimilationist mindset and all that. That kinda thing. It overtakes in a place where you don't have any reps that are doing things their own way. I think it really becomes, "Okay, well, I have to do the—I am trans.

I'm gonna be trans, but I'm gonna have to do it in a way that fits in what everyone else thinks of what it should be." I think being in Newark—even just the tunnel vision effect. Like, people do not stare at me or look at me funny if I am dressed in a way that is confusing. I guess I'm self-identifying it as confusing. People don't look in a judgmental way if I'm in a very complicated and gender—a very gender outfit, I'll say. That's the best way I can put it. I think there was a sort of—there's a sort of Midwestern panopticon, where it's just this concept of everyone is watching you.

Everyone's being polite, but they are watching you so they can talk about you once you leave the room. As much as that's a joke, that is just real. To be in a place where enough is happening that people aren't really looking that hard, it does kind of help. I mean it's also like, Newark is—I mean—a sanctuary city and everything. That's a thing where it's like I—while there is maybe some problems with the way that some things are handled, it does feel like a place that the culture of this place is safe enough that I feel comfortable being myself in public most of the time.

It did affect where I was like, I don't have to be the perfect woman, or I don't have to perfectly hide my transness in this setting or whatever. I can just be. I mean, I don't know. I get into Ubers now, and I don't raise the pitch of my voice to make sure that they think I'm a cis woman if I'm going out or something. I don't have to wear baggier clothes to make sure nobody knows I have boobs. Like, things are just different. I feel like the rules are just more lax. They're easier in the settings.

Phoenix Sherling: Definitely very different from most of the Midwest. Which kind of takes me into another thing I was gonna ask of, do you feel like there's been things that have surprised you about Newark? Things that you didn't expect when you were moving here.

Andromeda Russell: Yeah, I mean I really enjoy the— as much as I thought—'cause I really thought that cities were this very detached place. And I feel like in a way they are, 'cause it's like you just don't have time to say “hi” to everybody and everything else. The way that you interact with people, especially people you don't necessarily know, is very different. I feel like it's been a place where I've seen the way that community works together and seen the way that people in community can interact in a way that's not everybody always has to be best friends.

Not everybody always has to always be—we don't all have to go hang out on weekends, but this is a place that will be there for you. Especially if you're in a tighter-knit neighborhood, community, stuff like that. This is a place where people will be there for you and will—and do care about your wellbeing in a way that I feel like the—that's what I feel like people in the Midwest are faking, is this thing of trying to be like, “Oh, we're all here for you all the time.” But it's like, no. I don't think there—I didn't feel like there was a lot of people who were there for us in Indiana, even within spaces I felt were safe. I think that was a thing, where it was like people do keep to their own peace, I think, in Indiana. Whereas that is not necessarily the case here. People will be willing to help you if you need help, and that's a big thing here.

Phoenix Sherling: Mm-hmm. I feel like every answer you give just leads into the next thing I wanna ask you. It's like you're reading my mind. The next—

Andromeda Russell: It's like I'm reading your questions. I'm kidding. I'm not reading the questions. *[Laughter]*

Phoenix Sherling: The next thing I was going to ask was about community support in Newark, of what do you think the community needs the most right now to continue building that sanctuary space for queer people here?

Andromeda Russell: I think the biggest thing is just that the community really—I think we just need more—I don't wanna say more organization. Yes, I think that is true. I think that's a cop-out answer, like, duh. Yeah. We need to organize more. I think it's just that it's—of the queer stuff I've seen—the way that the community is growing and strengthening here, at least in the spaces that I'm in—I think the biggest thing has just been

getting people to show up. It's not that there isn't queer people, and it's not that they're not all friends.

It's just that the overarching organization of things, I think, hasn't kept up. There is community. I have so many more queer friends that I think I could just text at any point and figure something out and we'll talk and talk to whenever. I have a support network that I couldn't have imagined in Indiana. But I feel like we're not really using that fact as well as we could be. I mean, that's the thing, there's a lot of issues right now, and I understand we're all pulled in a lot of directions.

But I think there could be a lot more rallying around our community and our people, especially within queer spaces and stuff like that. I have felt that divide of people who can fit into—even people within the LGBTQ community and stuff like that, who can fit into, you know, more—I—fit into the box that cis people wanna put us in have a little bit left community behind. That's countrywide. That's not just here; that's everywhere. I feel like a lot of people have started to ditch those of us who are visibly queer and those of us that can't really hide what we are and hide what we're doing. We have been left in the middle a little bit.

I think that's a thing where I do think that if there's anybody who will have our backs, it's us. I think we just need to be having more things, organizing together, getting together more often. 'Cause I feel like there's just—the connections are there. I think it's just that the actual bonding and community-building is not happening at the rate that I think we need it at this point.

Phoenix Sherling: The passion is there but not the funding.

Andromeda Russell: Yes. Exactly. Yeah, we definitely don't have the funding. I have such a big friend group. We have a collective \$30 between all of us, I'm pretty sure, to spare for anything.

Phoenix Sherling: I feel like that—I think that gets most of the big questions I wanted to ask.

Marissa Myers: Yeah, I have a couple of questions.

Phoenix Sherling: I was gonna ask if you had anything.

Marissa Myers: Yeah. Honestly, what you touched on—what you just touched on, I have a question about. I wanted to ask something before that about how have you seen a difference between the queer community in Indiana and in Newark? Because I feel like you've said some things where you feel like you're getting support more in the Newark community,

but you know more people in the Indiana community. I'm curious about the differences and similarities between the two.

Andromeda Russell: I do think it's a little bit of it is that I was in a college community as well, 'cause I feel like that is—having a queer student union and stuff like that is very condensed. Here, I think, the fact that the way that people are interacting is a little looser and more open, I guess. It's like, my queer community is just my friends over here. But when I was in Indiana, there was QSU which was Queer Student Union for over there. There were a lot of—there was a whole section of—there were school-run groups and stuff like that that were part of that. Which I feel like you guys probably—you guys are that here.

Phoenix Sherling: True.

Andromeda Russell: I think me not being in it, I think it was more of a perception thing at the time. Where it was like, “Well, yeah, there's a highly condensed group of people who are all queer. I'm at the Queer Student Union, where else would they be?” I do think that is the biggest difference for me is—it's also the effect of living, at the time, in a blue dot in red state. Not to get all politics about it.

But I think being in places that did force people to repress and then finding a space where you can be more open about it, I think that did just create this very dense population of all of the people who were—who experience gender differently and were queer, were all in that one spot. There was a lot happening because we were all bunched up in this one little town. We're all in the same college, and we're all going to the same classes. We see each other every day. And it's like, now I'm an adult, and I have jobs. The people I hang out with are at a club, and that's like, I can't go to a club every night.

Would love to. I don't got the money. I think that literally is what it is. It's just that— it's resources. It's the fact of, we're all adults trying to make our rent every month and stuff like that over here. I think Bloomington, if I lived there as an adult, would've felt different. I think it would've felt very different.

If I'd lived there as an adult and if I had not been a student, that would've been very different for me. And I feel like even—'cause Bloomington is basically just IU and then a few—a little bit of town outside of that. Most of that town is the college, whereas you guys have a lot of programs and stuff running at Rutgers Newark and stuff like that, but Rutgers Newark is a very small part of Newark. And it cannot make up for the fact that this place does not have a lot of queer places to go—at least within the city—

does not have a lot of queer spaces and stuff like that you can go into and is lacking places to build community at.

I know there was; I know there used to be. Historically, Newark was a very—well, it was a very queer area. It had a lot more places where there were ways to build community, and there were more spots. And I feel like that is kind of what it is. I was like, I went from a very condensed place with a lot happening because that was just where everyone was. Newark is so big and has so few rallying points that we all are just spread out. We're all kind of everywhere. I think that's what—that's where the biggest difference is, it's just the distance, it's just the space. The pond is bigger, and there's less places to go.

[Pause 1:05:04 – 1:05:09]

Marissa Myers: I have two more questions, I think. Phoenix, did you have any other questions that you wanted to ask?

Phoenix Sherling: I think that got everything I had written down that I wanted to ask, unless anything else comes up based on your questions.

Marissa Myers: Yeah, so second to last question that I have is just—so a lot of things have been happening in the news lately. Not great things. We're living in Rump's America. I am wondering how you feel about this increased visibility for trans individuals right now and what your personal, just, feelings are towards this, what's going on right now, I guess?

Andromeda Russell: Obviously, there's a lot happening. There's been a spotlight put on trans people just in a general sense. I think there's a lot that has been like—I don't know. I think it all at once—not that I'm—I'm not gonna say it's done good things. What I am saying is that being put in this place, I think, has tested the bonds of things like the city and things like our government and the way that we—and the way that they think about us, in that sense. I think it's definitely—putting a spotlight on us, I think, has definitely shown where their allegiances lie and stuff like that.

How much they actually meant all that stuff they said about how this place was safe for people like us and stuff. It really has just—I mean, it's polarizing, I think is the best way I can say it. It's extremely polarizing. I think that's part of what made me feel so inclined to leave Indiana because I think just—I don't know if everybody else knows how things had been going with Mike Braun and stuff like that. There was a lot. There was things like changes on passports being suspended before I left. Anyone with different identifiers was starting to get more scrutiny and things like that.

The stuff that's happening in Kansas. I think the things that have been happening is what led me to move to Newark because that was—it just really showed who was on whose side. I think being here, especially being here and near—between, the two places I go between is New Jersey and New York—it's like there is good reason for that. These are the places that I think have shown that they meant what they said. 'Cause I was in a lot of spaces where in Indiana, we were told that we were safe. We were told that they would never do—the government would never turn their backs on us and switch up what they had said before. And it was a bit of a rug pull after the most recent presidential election to see how strong the shift was in Indiana. I mean, Indiana has been a red state for a little while. It was always a place that was a little repressed. I feel like the fact that that shift in power just immediately made me physically feel how the—how unsafe that place had been.

Phoenix Sherling: Once Mike Pence was no longer enough for him, Indiana had to pivot hard to prove we weren't Mike Pence. And that was noticeable, I would say.

Andromeda Russell: Yeah. It was—yeah. I don't know. It's also just—I don't know. Things have been very scary in the news and things like that. But I do think that having this—having all of what's been happening recently has forced queer community to get a little more close-knit. We really wanna find each other right now. Like I had said before, it's like, we don't have that many spaces.

It's like people want to find someone who they can feel safe around, who they can understand, who can understand them. As much as things have been awful, I think it has been kind of incredible to see people in the way that they've organized and tried to find each other. In seeing all of this terrifying news going on and all of the executive order or executive—yeah, executive orders of it all. I think that's really—it's really shown me that—just shown me what community really means, I think. Having other people to weather this storm out and fight for what we believe in. It's just been very cool to see that in person.

Phoenix Sherling: Yeah.

[Pause 1:11:00 - 1:11:05]

Marissa Myers: Yeah. The world sucks. *[Laughter]* But let's look to the future. My last question is just, what do you hope for in the future? In Newark, in general, in the United States, in the world? What do you hope for, or what do you wish for in the future?

Andromeda Russell: I hope we can start seeing more—I think my biggest thing is I just wanna see us start to find our way around this and the place that we're in. I feel like, like I said, we don't have a lot of places to rally at. We don't have a lot of places to find our community in. I think I just wanna be able to see even just events and things like that. I just wanna see more people getting together just to show that we're all here, and we're all part of one thing. I wanna see more queer people organizing. I have a good amount of friends who were going to rallies and stuff at Delaney Hall and stuff like that. That's the thing is it's like, I am a strong believer in the “until we're all free, none of us are free.” Is that how it's phrased? Yeah. That's the phrase, right?

Phoenix Sherling: I think it can go—yeah. No one's free until we're all free.

Andromeda Russell: No one's free until we're all free. Yeah.

Phoenix Sherling: I think you can say it either way.

Andromeda Russell: Yeah, I think the biggest thing is that we need to—I wanna see people understand that we're not some small, isolated thing off into the dist—being queer is not putting us in a small box but is in fact putting us in the large box of people who have experienced oppression and who have been othered by normative society and stuff like that. Let's be real, white heteronormative society is what I'll say. I'll use that as how I describe it.

But it's like, I think the big thing is that I would hope people start to understand that we don't—not only do we not—we have each other, but we don't just have to look to each other because what we really need to be understanding is that the intersection of being oppressed is something that so many people have experienced. We can find community with one another, yes, but I think that's where we find a way to make change, I think is the intersection. The finding other people whose experiences are—they got there a different way. Different kinds of things, different history, but it all comes down to the same thing, is that we just wanna live. I feel like to find other people who are experiencing that kind of oppression and that kind of minoritization, that's where we need to get. That's where I would hope we would end up in the future.

Phoenix Sherling: Yeah.

Marissa Myers: So Phoenix, do you have anything else that you wanted to add?

Phoenix Sherling: I don't think I have any other specific questions. Just basically is there anything you wanted to talk about that you didn't get to? Is there anything else that feels important to you to include in your own personal queer history?

Andromeda Russell: Can I throw a pseudo hot take into this real quick? It's about gender and stuff, I promise. It's gonna be on topic. I just, I think my biggest thing is that I think we need to be getting away—not—I mean, still use 'em if you want 'em—but I think we need to be getting away from the idea that we need to force queer identities into hard boxes. And like, duh, I would say that. Considering I'm—what I said earlier. I think we just need to stop trying to put hard rules that decide what people can be in community.

And I think we just need to understand that everyone's gonna be a little different, and we're gonna all use words differently. Because I just feel like it—of all the times that it is, it is not the time to be policing gender. I think it's not the time to be policing sexual orientation. It's not the time to be telling people what they can and can't be. I think what we need to be is a united front. And that starts with who cares how you use a label? It's really just not that important. I was gonna say “right now,” but I just don't think it's that important at all. I think queerness is meant to be something that is flowing and changing. I think to try and put it—put names on it and put it in a box is—

Phoenix Sherling: Counterproductive.

Andromeda Russell: I mean, I would say it's shootin' yourself in the foot. Trying to demand that you have to be something is what we were already experiencing before we came out. Before you're out, you were always told you had to be something, and coming out is this big moment of being like, “But I don't have to.” I think Mo said it really well one day where they were like, “We've gotten out of our hard boxes of gender, and we've created a lot of smaller, more condensed, specific boxes. Those are the ones you need to go”—no, that's dumb. We just—

Phoenix Sherling: The whole point was to not be in a box anymore.

Andromeda Russell: The whole point was to be not in the boxes at all. I think we just need to have a more expansive view. I think we need to understand that perhaps—I don't—I know there's some people who are very connected to the “born this way” idea of gender and sexuality. I think that these things change as you go on in time. As you grow as a person, I think things can and should change. I think those, your gender and sexuality, are included in that. I think to limit that, to limit yourself to one big change in your whole life is just a waste. It just hurts you in the end.

Phoenix Sherling: Yeah. Let yourself play.

Andromeda Russell: Yeah. Just have fun. Get weird with it.

Marissa Myers: Yeah. My last question was also just gonna be: anything else? Sorry, my cat has this toy that's loud as hell if you—it's so annoying. But yeah, I think that that's all. Thank you, Ann, so much for coming and interviewing with us. It's definitely been a good one. You've gotten— You've had a life.

Andromeda Russell: I certainly have.

Marissa Myers: And you're only 25. Just wait for the next 25.

Phoenix Sherling: We'll have to do a part two interview.

Andromeda Russell: Yeah, when I'm 50.

Phoenix Sherling: When you're 50.

Andromeda Russell: God.

Marissa Myers: Yeah. We can end the recording. Yeah. No, that was really fun.

[End of Audio]