

Queer Newark Oral History Project

Interviewee: Beatrice Simpkins

Interviewer: Kennedy Didier

Date: March 7, 2020

Location: Rutgers University, Newark, NJ

Kennedy Didier: This is Kennedy Didier interviewing for the Queer Newark Oral History Project. I'm interviewing Beatrice Simpkins. Today is March 7, 2020. Hi Beatrice.

Beatrice Simpkins: Hi Kennedy, how are you?

Kennedy Didier: I'm good, how's your day been so far?

Beatrice Simpkins: Pretty good.

Kennedy Didier: You said it was good and nice and quiet.

Beatrice Simpkins: Yep.

Kennedy Didier: The sun was shining outside.

Beatrice Simpkins: Nice and quiet. It's sunny. That's right. Spring is almost here.

Kennedy Didier: So close. Then they said it was gonna be 70 next weekend, I really didn't believe, but—

Beatrice Simpkins: I believe it.

Kennedy Didier: I will hope that the meteorologists are correct. We'll start off with when and where were you born?

Beatrice Simpkins: I was born January 14, 1960, in Jersey City. I was born in what was the Margaret Hague Maternity Building on Clifton Place. The uniqueness about my birth is that I was given up for adoption. The story they tell me in my family is that my adopted mother, Lillian Simpkins, was in the hospital at the time that I was born.

Kennedy Didier: Wow.

Beatrice Simpkins: She called my adult sister, who turned 96 on Thursday—'cause my mother was 58 at the time—that she was bringing her something home, and that would have been me.

Kennedy Didier: (Laughs)

Beatrice Simpkins: She always wanted a little sister. Now, at the time, she was like 30-something years old.

Kennedy Didier: Wow.

Beatrice Simpkins: That's how I became a Simpkins. I did find my biological family in 2007, and so I know my original last name is Byrd. Annie Byrd is my real, my biological mother, but I was born in Jersey City.

Kennedy Didier: Who raised you?

Beatrice Simpkins: Lillian and James Simpkins, her husband. We grew up on Orient Avenue.

Kennedy Didier: What was that neighborhood like?

Beatrice Simpkins: It was a beautiful, middle-class neighborhood. Predominantly African American, but we had very clean streets and people who took care of their properties, and very little crime. The only annoying thing probably was Archie the Drunk, who would stagger up from the pub, the bar at the end of the corner. But we had a very wholesome, you know, typical upbringing.

Kennedy Didier: What were your relationships with your neighbors like? Was it like a very social—

Beatrice Simpkins: Yeah, very social. I mean, we all knew each other, we all knew each other's kids, we all played together. Ms. Button was over here. Ms. Johnston was over here. The Jacksons were over there.

Kennedy Didier: Big summer block parties.

Beatrice Simpkins: The Doris's were over there. We all barbequed together, we played football out in the street together. Basketball, rode our bikes. It was a beautiful neighborhood. Very safe.

Kennedy Didier: Very safe.

Beatrice Simpkins: And very clean.

Kennedy Didier: In your household, was it just Lillian, James, and you?

Beatrice Simpkins: No. My mother used to babysit children, and so there was always a whole bunch of kids in the house. Some of them stayed overnight. She was a woman before her time, in terms of her babysitting, was 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

Kennedy Didier: Wow.

Beatrice Simpkins: You could drop your child off at eleven o'clock at night if you had a night shift, so a lot of single working mothers used my mom and they would bring the kids, ten thirty, eleven o'clock at night, because they worked nights. A lot of them were nurses. Did social work, that kind of stuff. Worked in factories.

Kennedy Didier: Yeah, where the hours are very—

Beatrice Simpkins: Right, so they would work overnight. I have an adopted brother named Reginald, who grew up with me. Then my nephew, Reggie, grew up with us in the house as well 'cause my mother raised him, not his parents. That was my brother, Odessa's son. So it was me, James, all the kids my mother babysitted, and then me and the two Reggies in the house.

Kennedy Didier: Two Reggies.

Beatrice Simpkins: The two Reggies, yeah.

Kennedy Didier: Did you stay in that one home on Orient?

Beatrice Simpkins: My entire life.

Kennedy Didier: Wow.

Beatrice Simpkins: My entire life.

Kennedy Didier: When did you eventually move out?

Beatrice Simpkins: When I was 18 and about to get married to my ex-husband. Then went back there during a bad patch in my marriage and stayed there, and then lived on the block across the street on the other side with my two children. So yeah, I spent a lot of time on Orient Avenue. A lot of time.

Kennedy Didier: Wow.

Beatrice Simpkins: Yeah.

Kennedy Didier: Wow. It was very busy, you had a lot of kids coming in and out.

Beatrice Simpkins: Close neighbors. A lot of kids in and out. Yep, a lot of kids. All the time, kids, kids, kids.

Kennedy Didier: Do you recall any events that were like big transition periods in your youth? Any—

Beatrice Simpkins: Well, my biggest transition I think is when I found out I was adopted. I might have been like 8, 9, 10 years old. That I remember—it having an effect on me because, as I started to age, I started to realize that my parents were way older than everybody else's. They were—when I came home Lillian was 58, James was probably like 61, 62.

Kennedy Didier: Wow.

Beatrice Simpkins: They were old enough to be my grandparents.

Kennedy Didier: Yeah.

Beatrice Simpkins: Their children, their biological children, were in their 30s. They had moved out except for my sister, who was living—my sister lived upstairs, and my mother lived downstairs I think then. Yeah, that's basically how it was.

Kennedy Didier: What was navigating that like?

Beatrice Simpkins: When I found out I was adopted, I started questioning how come my parents were way older than me, and I think from me having those questions, they finally said, okay, we need to tell her she's adopted because she's—

Kennedy Didier: She's too smart.

Beatrice Simpkins: —and then my brother Reggie was always teasing me about how they found me in the alleyway. That kind of thing. Like, 'you ain't really part of the family, they found you in the alleyway.' With all of that going on and kids at school saying, 'wow, your parents are old,' I started thinking, hmm. I guess I must have been questioning them, so eventually they sat down, and they told me I was adopted. From then I went through, like, a little somewhat traumatic kind of emotional thing. Then it passed, honestly. It really did.

Kennedy Didier: Were your relationships with your parents after that, or before that—I guess the whole time of your childhood—would you characterize them as loving and healthy and—

Beatrice Simpkins: Oh, yeah, they gave me a great upbringing, absolutely. They were really nice, beautiful people. I got the best of everything as a kid. I

went to St. Aloysius Academy. They paid for me to go to Catholic school. I had a really, really great, basically normal upbringing. I went to church on Sundays. My father was a barber. He had his own barbershop on Ocean Avenue in Jersey City. I used to spend my weekends there with him playing in the barber chair and getting those really cold Fanta sodas out that old ice machine. Oh my gosh, I loved that ice machine. He had one of those old soda machines with the—just looked like a refrigerator.

Kennedy Didier: The pull handle, yeah.

Beatrice Simpkins: Right, with the pull handle, and you pulled the sodas, and they clank, clank, clank, clank. I remember it like it was yesterday. I love orange Fanta soda.

Kennedy Didier: I would have brought one if you told me. I would have brought one!

Beatrice Simpkins: No, it's okay.

Kennedy Didier: But it will never be as good as the pull.

Beatrice Simpkins: I shouldn't drink it. Nah, it's not as good as that—nah, it's not.

Kennedy Didier: I remember I went—totally off topic—but I went to Texas once and had Coke that was out of, I don't know, it was the different wiring of the machine, you know?

Beatrice Simpkins: Yeah.

Kennedy Didier: Where it's like straight from the concentrate and I thought it was amazing and I think about it all the time.

Beatrice Simpkins: Oh, wow. Yeah. Isn't that funny?

Kennedy Didier: Like I drink—(laughs). It's like insane how prominent the first taste—

Beatrice Simpkins: I haven't had one of those—that machine's been gone for years, but I remember it like it was yesterday.

Kennedy Didier: Just not the same as the stuff in the can.

Beatrice Simpkins: Yeah. My father was a business owner, my mother had her own business from the home. I saw that as a kid, that they were very entrepreneurial. They were sharecroppers from the South. My

adopted mother was born in 1902. Their experience was of being sharecroppers.

Kennedy Didier: Wow.

Beatrice Simpkins: And coming from being sharecroppers to finally transitioning their adult children up North and then them coming up North and owning their first home. Then my father buying another piece of property where he had his barbershop for years, and then my sister bought a home on Clinton Avenue, which is actually where I'm living now, in Jersey City. I had to move back in with her 'cause she's getting old and needs somebody to look after her. I had to leave Newark, it broke my heart.

Kennedy Didier: I can't wait to ask you that.

Beatrice Simpkins: I'll be back though.

Kennedy Didier: I can't wait to ask you that.

Beatrice Simpkins: Yeah.

Kennedy Didier: In your adolescence, do you feel like there were any other adults besides your parents—who sound like they were phenomenal—that really shaped your adolescence, besides those direct influences?

Beatrice Simpkins: Yeah, well, because we were—my family was very involved in church and the Eastern Star and the Masons. So like everybody in my family was either an Eastern Star or a Mason. My father was a Mason, my brother was a Mason, my sister was an Eastern Star, my mother was an Eastern Star. So from all that, we got all of these adults who we interacted with because we were part of all of that. So like Ms. Watson and Ms. Wilson, and Loretta McKnight, there were all these different older women in the neighborhood or in these churches, or within the Eastern Star that basically raised me as well. So it wasn't just my parents. I was influenced by a lot of different people from my community.

Kennedy Didier: You had a good network, you had a community.

Beatrice Simpkins: Yeah, oh, definitely. I had a godmother, her name was HESSIE Buccamper. I spent a lot of time with her and her husband Raymond. The Adams from the Friendship Baptist Church. There were a lot of adults around who served as pseudo parents for us and made sure that we behaved ourselves.

Kennedy Didier: Kept you in line.

Beatrice Simpkins: Oh, yes. Very much so. We had to really strategize about how we got away to act up.

Kennedy Didier: Because there was so many of them.

Beatrice Simpkins: Everybody knew you. My mother was fairly prominent because she was active, she was a community activist, and so wherever I went as a kid, just about guaranteed somebody was gonna know who I was and that I belonged to Lillian Simpkins. I could not get away with much in Jersey City as a kid. I really couldn't so I had to behave myself.

Kennedy Didier: Wow. Wow.

Beatrice Simpkins: Yeah, she was a human rights commissioner in Jersey City. She was an officer of the—they had something called the Citywide Block Association, and I got drug to all these meetings. I've been attending city council meetings since I was probably six or seven years old.

Kennedy Didier: How do you feel that your parents, both their entrepreneurial spirit and their incredible achievements have impacted you now—both in your adolescence and then as an adult?

Beatrice Simpkins: Yeah, it did. I mean, it did. I knew that I needed to do something beneficial, not only for myself or my family, but for my community, and that came from my home. It wasn't good enough to just live in the community, you needed to be a part of it, you needed to know what was going on. You needed to have a relationship with your government. You needed to *vote* every single time it was—

Kennedy Didier: Like an activist consciousness was cultivated.

Beatrice Simpkins: Oh, absolutely, all the time. If something was wrong you're supposed to fix it. That's how I grew up. I've always been like that. I can't just kind of sit back and watch things go by. Sometimes I wish I could. I'd have a lot more free time on my hands.

Kennedy Didier: I can't wait to ask you more about that.

Beatrice Simpkins: Yeah.

Kennedy Didier: What schools did you attend in Jersey City and then, also—

Beatrice Simpkins: Yeah, I started out in P.S. 24, and then I went to Catholic school after that. So I went from kindergarten and third grade, public school. Then from third grade all the way through high school, I went to Catholic school. I went to St. Pat's on Ocean Avenue. And then St. Aloysius Academy, which was an all-girls school.

Kennedy Didier: Was that for high school?

Beatrice Simpkins: That was high school.

Kennedy Didier: Okay.

Beatrice Simpkins: That was right next to Lincoln Park, it's a charter school now.

Kennedy Didier: Got it.

Beatrice Simpkins: Then I went to—I got my bachelor's—well, I went to St. Peter's for two years and got a certificate in urban studies. Then I went to—the next time I went to a formal education would have been University of Chapel Hill.

Kennedy Didier: Oh, really, that school?

Beatrice Simpkins: Yeah, I went down there for a leadership program for public health administrators. I did two years in Chapel Hill. It was called Emerging Leaders in Public Health. And then—I finished my bachelor's late in life. I didn't finish my bachelor's until 2012? 2013? And then I went straight and got my master's here at Rutgers.

Kennedy Didier: When you got your bachelor's, was it from here?

Beatrice Simpkins: No, my bachelor's is from University of Phoenix, online.

Kennedy Didier: Oh, okay. Yeah.

Beatrice Simpkins: Then I came here to do my MPA.

Kennedy Didier: Wow. That's so cool.

Beatrice Simpkins: I graduated in 2015.

Kennedy Didier: That's so cool.

Beatrice Simpkins: Yeah.

Kennedy Didier: I have a lot of friends over in SPAA [*unintelligible 00:14:02*]. In the graduate program?

Beatrice Simpkins: Oh, yeah?

Kennedy Didier: Yeah, yeah. I live with a bunch of them.

Beatrice Simpkins: Okay.

Kennedy Didier: What were some challenges you faced in childhood and how did you manage them?

Beatrice Simpkins: Well, I think I took a little ribbing from, like I said, the older parents thing, and people—even kids—figuring out I was adopted. Kids would tease you about that sometimes. I think probably my biggest challenge was I went to private school, where a lot of the kids on the block went to public school.

Kennedy Didier: What was that like?

Beatrice Simpkins: I took a lot of ribbing for that. When I got off the bus and hit that corner and was getting ready to come down that street, I had to really steel myself because it wasn't a lot of kids that did it, but there was a couple of houses on each side of the block that I knew when I got past the house somebody was gonna say something about my uniform. I was gonna be called a nerd. 'You think you're smart,' that kind of stuff. Yeah, I did get a lot of teasing for being intelligent.

Kennedy Didier: You're like, actually, I do think I'm smart, thank you for noticing.

Beatrice Simpkins: Yeah, yeah. Also being able to go to the private school. It wasn't my choice, that's where my parents sent me and that's where I went. I knew the kids on the block in that I would play with them sometimes, but there was also this stay away from those kids 'cause I don't want you to grow up to be like those kids. We had this clear idea where we want your life to go, and we need you to do this and this and this and this and this. Because I was in the community and not in the community, once you become teenage and all that stuff, you get all that flashback from folks.

Kennedy Didier: You said that your parents had these expectations. What were those expectations that they had? What were the expectations?

Beatrice Simpkins: I was supposed to go to college. I was supposed to be a lawyer or a doctor. Oh, yeah, I had those typical kind of—yeah, that's what they wanted from me. They said I was really smart from the time I was very small and I used to read a lot as a kid. Even though I didn't know how to read, I was always pretending to read.

Kennedy Didier: Fake it till you make it.

Beatrice Simpkins: I would sit in my mother's bed, they told me I'd sit in the bed, and I would get a magazine and I would sit there and be talking and saying stuff and I was just constantly always looking for something to read. So they wanted to put me in private school, and they wanted me to go off to college. They had that 'get married, have kids' typical stuff.

Kennedy Didier: You mentioned earlier that you had these big church networks that really played a huge role in your upbringing in terms of non-parental adults that oversaw you. What role would you say that religion has played in your life?

Beatrice Simpkins: Religion has been in my life since I was very, very small. I'm a deacon in my church now. Even when I've strayed away from organized religion I guess, I've always gone back to it because I was raised in it. I was raised as a Baptist. I went to church all the way until my adult life, then when I was like 18 I was like, 'I'm never going to church again.' Yep. I'm staying in bed on Sundays. I've had enough. I'm an adult now, I can do what I want. So I did, I stopped going to church for a long time, not that my spirituality really changed or that I felt disconnected from God or anything like that.

Kennedy Didier: You still had a relationship. Yeah.

Beatrice Simpkins: Yes. I just wasn't participating in formal, organized religion. Partly out of rejecting the fact that I was taken to church as a kid whether I wanted to or not. But I always found my way back there. I've always found my way back there. Now I belong to Unity Fellowship Church and I'm a deacon in my church.

Kennedy Didier: So cool. Will you remind me again what the responsibilities of a deacon are because I don't—

Beatrice Simpkins: We are really the people who take care of the sanctuary, the actual, physical space. Making sure that the pulpit is correct, and the seats are straight, and everything is in place where it belongs. We usually serve as pastor aids to the pastors. We can give communion

and of course we can pray for people, bless babies, that kind of stuff. We're really the keeper of the sanctuary and the safety of the people in the sanctuary is really our primary role. As well as being spiritual examples to people of what it's like to have a spiritual life. The word deacon actually means the best example.

Kennedy Didier: Really?

Beatrice Simpkins: Yes.

Kennedy Didier: That's so cool.

Beatrice Simpkins: I know.

Kennedy Didier: I had no idea.

Beatrice Simpkins: I never knew what it meant until like three years ago. I was at workshop, and he was like, 'you know what the word deacon means?' I'm like, 'nope.' Grew up with deacons and deaconesses in my family, never really knew what their—

Kennedy Didier: I'm so excited to know that. That's so cool.

Beatrice Simpkins: Yeah, yeah, yeah. Yeah. That's what it means.

Kennedy Didier: Is it okay if we transition from childhood to Newark?

Beatrice Simpkins: Yep.

Kennedy Didier: Cool. What is your earliest memory of Newark/how did you come to be in Newark from Jersey City?

Beatrice Simpkins: How did I come to be in Newark? I guess when I was like, oh, okay, so I mean, I've shopped in Newark as a parent. Once I had my children.

Kennedy Didier: Wait. (Laughs). So you moved out when you were 18?

Beatrice Simpkins: Yeah, I got married.

Kennedy Didier: Okay.

Beatrice Simpkins: I got married, I had two kids: Evita and Cecily.

Kennedy Didier: Got it, and then you shopped in Newark.

Beatrice Simpkins: Right.

Kennedy Didier: Got it.

Beatrice Simpkins: With these kids, I was still living in Jersey City. With the kids, this is where we would shop at. Especially for special occasions because they had all these really better quality stores than they do now in Broad and Market. This is where I did a lot of my shopping, so that would be my first—even as a kid we would come to Newark to go to different churches. We would come to Newark for like little convention type things. Then, as a high schooler, junior in high school, I was in the NJIT summer program.

Kennedy Didier: Oh, really?

Beatrice Simpkins: Right. I used to take the city subway from Penn Station and then get off, and then climb up that hill to go into the—what was the architectural building at the time. From shopping and the school programs that I would get involved in, I was introduced to Newark when I was younger. And then, when I was about forty-ish, I actually moved here. I was working here in St. Michael's Hospital, St. Michael's Medical Center.

Kennedy Didier: Yeah, yeah, I live right by there.

Beatrice Simpkins: I moved literally a block away from the hospital on Burnet Street in the downtown area. The University Heights edge.

Kennedy Didier: Yeah. Was it your job that brought you to Newark?

Beatrice Simpkins: Yeah, my job was here. I was never one for commuting. I'd always worked in Jersey City. Well, I worked in New York for eleven years, and then after that I really, all my jobs were in Jersey City. I was like ten minutes from home, fifteen minutes from home. I was never one to want to be in traffic and stuff like that, and this really nice apartment became available, so I was like you know what? I'm moving to Newark. I lived on Burnet Street. I've actually lived on that street three times.

Kennedy Didier: Three separate times?

Beatrice Simpkins: Three separate times.

Kennedy Didier: That's so cool.

Beatrice Simpkins: Left, came back, left, came back. I *love* that little street.

Kennedy Didier: Tell me, describe it to me. Tell me what it was like.

Beatrice Simpkins: Burnet Street is this little secret.

Kennedy Didier: I'll move there maybe.

Beatrice Simpkins: It's between Orange Street and James Street, so it's in that historic James Street District.

Kennedy Didier: Yeah, I live on Washington, [address redacted]. So James and Essex.

Beatrice Simpkins: Oh, you live right, yeah, you can walk up there.

Kennedy Didier: Yeah, I'm sure I run—

Beatrice Simpkins: Yeah, if go to James Street and just walk up—

Kennedy Didier: Yeah.

Beatrice Simpkins: You're gonna run into Burnet Street.

Kennedy Didier: Oh, really?

Beatrice Simpkins: Yeah, yeah.

Kennedy Didier: I probably run over there.

Beatrice Simpkins: Yeah, yeah, it runs out into James Street from Orange.

Kennedy Didier: Yeah, I run—

Beatrice Simpkins: It's this really quaint little street where there's almost no houses, there's about ten houses on the entire street. So at the top of the block is Rutgers parking lot, then there was a school there, and on the other side, they had built a Seventh Day Adventist Church and a big parking lot. But all of that was empty lot when I lived there originally.

Kennedy Didier: Wow.

Beatrice Simpkins: It was just all a big huge lot. Mr. Holloway owns five of the nine or ten houses that are on the block. He grew up in one house with his grandparents and his parents, and then his grandmother left him the house. Then he bought the house across the street, and then he

bought the house next to that one, and he bought the house next to that one. And so his whole family lives on this street. His ninety-two-year-old aunt was living upstairs with him. His brother lived in the other house. His kids, his kids's kids. Between one side of the street and the other side of the street you had this very successful Black family who owned several properties and really welcomed you as a member of their family when you lived in their properties. Mr. Holloway is like my pseudo dad kind of guy. We had block parties every year and they shut the street off and everybody would come out with their grills and stuff. I mean, it was just a beautiful experience. Quiet. Everybody literally knew everyone else because there was only so many houses on the block.

Kennedy Didier: Yeah.

Beatrice Simpkins: One of the houses was abandoned because of some issue with ownership or whatever. What I loved about the neighborhood was it was diverse. There were white folks, Black folks, Spanish people, Asian people, young people, old people, because you had the college sitting right on the edge. Some college students lived on the block. Some people rented their places out to the college students. So you had this young—it's intergenerational. Then all kinds of folks. It's just a really great street to live on. He believes in keeping his rents reasonable. Even though he had this jewel to me, these apartments, and they weren't bad. The apartments were nice. He kept things up. He wasn't like he was just buying properties and just letting people live in them and didn't fix them, he put money into 'em and rehabbed them. It was a really—it was just fantastic. Even when I left—I went to live with my partner in Bloomfield—when we broke up, I went back to Burnet Street. I thank God, I just happened to go drive through the block and Mr. Holloway was outside. I was like, Mr. Holloway, I need an apartment. He's like, 'oh, this one right here's available. I've been holding it for you.' I was like, 'really?' He was like, 'yeah, come on, let's go see it.' We went and saw it—

Kennedy Didier: That very day?

Beatrice Simpkins: That very day.

Kennedy Didier: Whoa.

Beatrice Simpkins: By the next month I was living there. Because we're like family.

Kennedy Didier: I wanna cry.

Beatrice Simpkins: I still call him. He still calls me. We were like family. His daughter-in-law knows my best friend, Kim. That was another thing from working in Newark, I developed friends in Newark, and so my social life also started to become in Newark. Way more so than in Jersey City.

Kennedy Didier: So wait, just to clarify—sorry I always say ‘wait,’ I don’t mean to tell you what to do!

Beatrice Simpkins: That's okay.

Kennedy Didier: I don’t mean to tell you what to do! (Both laugh). I mean it’s your interview, you can just be like, ‘don’t wait.’ What year did you first move, you say you were forty?

Beatrice Simpkins: It was probably 2000.

Kennedy Didier: 2000?

Beatrice Simpkins: Yep. I've lived here basically in Newark—well, I mean I had a couple years in Bloomfield and a couple years in Charlotte, but I'd say I've lived in Newark probably in these last, about fifteen years.

Kennedy Didier: And how do you think it's changed so that you’ve seen—since over this time period?

Beatrice Simpkins: Well, I think because, and I kinda stayed in that neighborhood, in this downtown area 'cause that's where I worked at and that's where I lived at. I've seen the development that's going on all around. I've seen St. Michael's get bought by two or three different hospital systems. Shutting down part of it, opening up other parts of it. The different plans they have for that area. Then you watched this influx of people where it became much more populated, I guess. You could see the gentrification stuff starting. We're getting ready to move in and we're gonna move some people out. I don’t know if you're familiar with Baxter Terrace, it used to be up James Street. There's all these big empty lots that NJIT right now uses for parking lots. They used to be projects on those lots. Notoriously horrible projects.

Kennedy Didier: A bunch of people just got displaced?

Beatrice Simpkins: Yeah, they just tore 'em down, they had to. It's funny how you can cross the street, and everything change. If you come out of Burnet Street and you go down Martin Luther King, you head towards the college, you get the college. You get Rutgers and NJIT and

everything's bustling. But if you go the other way, it was completely different. Baxter Terrace was notorious for drugs and crime, but the funny thing was they never came down the street. They kept in their world. If you went through *their* world, that's on you, because you knew what to expect. It was like an invisible line.

Kennedy Didier: You just wouldn't cross it.

Beatrice Simpkins: They just didn't cross. We were on Burnet Street living wonderful, middle-class kind of lives and then if you went up to Baxter, it was like the O.K. Corral. They didn't bring it down into the neighborhood. They really kept it there. Then you had the college, and I think as Rutgers started to plan its development and think about its image and the safety of its students and stuff like that, Baxter had to go because that's where their students were getting their drugs from. So they had to go. It had to go. They had to take that element away from the students. That's what they did. It's thriving, but it also leaves people out. Development always leaves people out. I mean, I'm the executive director of the Newark LGBT Center, which used to be on Halsey Street. The reason why it used to be on Halsey Street is because they've identified that area as a development area. The same folks that did Newark Express and all that are going to be doing that part of Halsey Street—

Kennedy Didier: Yeah.

Beatrice Simpkins: —where we used to be located. And they came in and met with us and stuff like that, but they clearly let us know that you will never be able to return back here because you won't be able to afford it.

Kennedy Didier: Wow.

Beatrice Simpkins: We're now located in the Newark Public Library.

Kennedy Didier: Yeah.

Beatrice Simpkins: Development is great, and I understand Rutgers' footprint is getting bigger and bigger and bigger and bigger and bigger, and I love my school, I do. And I love its citizenship, but it does do things in the community and stuff like that, but as it's spreading out, it's displacing people.

Kennedy Didier: Oh, absolutely.

Beatrice Simpkins: It's displacing organizations who have been here for a long time. So that's something that concerns me a little. I wanna see Newark have a gayborhood.

Kennedy Didier: Yeah.

Beatrice Simpkins: It doesn't have one. It *had* one. Very small.

Kennedy Didier: Where was that?

Beatrice Simpkins: It was pushing—well, I mean, Halsey Street really was—

Kennedy Didier: Halsey Street. Got it, got it.

Beatrice Simpkins: —you had the Artisan Collective, there were businesses on there that were owned—Artisan Collective is closed. It is no longer there. You had businesses that were owned and operated by LGBTQ people and now they're slowly exiting because the real estate and the use of the real estate is changing. Who they want to be there is changing. They're pricing people—

Kennedy Didier: Out. Yeah.

Beatrice Simpkins: —out of the neighborhood.

Kennedy Didier: Absolutely.

Beatrice Simpkins: They priced us out of that building. We even tried to negotiate staying there. Just give us a little space, you know, 1,000 square feet or whatever, but on the first floor. Nope.

Kennedy Didier: Wow.

Beatrice Simpkins: Nope.

Kennedy Didier: Do you think that there's any ways that the city's changed that most people don't know about?

Beatrice Simpkins: I think Newark is a lot safer than people think. I think it has a—this reputation of being this really—

Kennedy Didier: I honestly—I agree, yeah.

Beatrice Simpkins: —dangerous place. That is not—I don't think that is true at all. If you live in Newark, you *know* where you shouldn't be going if you want to feel safe. That's not the place to go. It isn't. I have walked

the streets, like when my friend Peggie used to have Diamondz N Da Ruff down here on Clay Street. I've walked from my house to the bar, restaurant, had a couple drinks, walked back home, and felt completely safe. I've walked my dog at four o'clock in the morning, felt completely safe. It depends on where you are, but I don't think Newark is a very dangerous city. Actually, I think Jersey City is more dangerous than Newark, I do. They have *way* more guns to me. I've only been back there for a couple of months, but gunfire is something I hear on a regular basis in Jersey City. I did not hear that when I was living Newark. I've lived in Burnet Street in Newark, I liked on, I think, what the heck is the name of that street? It's off of 7th Avenue. And then I also lived in Forest Hill. Forest Hill is one of the most exclusive Newark communities because that's where all those half a million, million dollar homes are, and that's where the county sheriff lives, and this guy and that guy, and so nothing much is going on. That's on the side of Lake Street.

Kennedy Didier: Yeah, yeah, yeah. I've heard of—

Beatrice Simpkins: Where the park is at?

Kennedy Didier: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Beatrice Simpkins: Yeah, really nice, cushy neighborhood. Newark has its pockets of danger and crime, just like any other U.S. city does, but it's *not* to me a place where you should live in fear.

Kennedy Didier: Yeah, I think the conception of it too in people's minds is a little overblown.

Beatrice Simpkins: Yeah. Right.

Kennedy Didier: Yeah.

Beatrice Simpkins: It's very much overblown.

Kennedy Didier: When I tell people in California that I live in Newark, they're like—

Beatrice Simpkins: You know, 'Ohh!' I'm like, no.

Kennedy Didier: 'Ohh!' I'm like, I walk around all the time.

Beatrice Simpkins: All the time. All the time.

Kennedy Didier: I'm outside all the time.

Beatrice Simpkins: Yep.

Kennedy Didier: I always walk alone.

Beatrice Simpkins: I can go downtown and go out and have a nice meal if I want to.

Kennedy Didier: I walk to the train station. Yeah.

Beatrice Simpkins: Thank God, right, the train stations are here. There's a hub! You got the airport right here. I've taken the GO bus out to Liberty Airport instead of driving. It has a lot to offer.

Kennedy Didier: I really like it. Yeah.

Beatrice Simpkins: Yeah, Newark has a lot to offer. It does. It's, to me, your typical urban city. If you go in the wrong neighborhoods, you're gonna have a different experience. But it's not rampant, it's not all over, it's not everywhere. I think it's a good place to live.

Kennedy Didier: Can you chart for me the places that you lived and when? So 2000 you moved to Burnet Street.

Beatrice Simpkins: Burnet Street was 2000 until maybe 2002—three, probably four years. Then I was in Boone for a couple of years, so say 2006 to 2008 or 9, I was back on Burnet Street, but just in a different house. Yeah, so that was 2006, I stayed until 2009, and then I went to live in Charlotte for a couple of years.

Kennedy Didier: Charlotte, North Carolina?

Beatrice Simpkins: Charlotte, North Carolina. I was down there working. I was doing some consulting work and stuff with a friend of mine. Then, when I came back, I came back to Burnet Street again. I came back from Charlotte in 2010, so then maybe 2011 to—yeah, 2011 until 2019.

Kennedy Didier: Oh, so you lived there all through your master's.

Beatrice Simpkins: Right, but I was living on Burnet Street and then there was—I had a fire, which displaced me. That's how I wound up in Forest Hill.

Kennedy Didier: Got it.

Beatrice Simpkins: I moved into a friend's house who goes to my church. She had like five bedrooms, and so I stayed there thinking my apartment was

gonna get redone on Burnet Street, it still isn't redone. Yeah, I dunno, the insurance and all this other stuff. I stayed in Forest Hills for almost two years and now I had to leave to go take care of my sister. So I've lived in Forest Hills for at least two years. Burnet Street probably on and off was the majority of my time, so that would have been probably a good thirteen years. And then one year on, I can't remember the name of the street 'cause it was so horrible. It's funny how your brain blocks out stuff. But it was off of 7th Avenue, between 7th Avenue and Bloomfield. There's a school that sits right there, and there's like the furniture store, there's the Family Dollar off of Broadway, and I just can't think of the name of that street. Wow, that is strange.

Kennedy Didier: Memory suppression.

Beatrice Simpkins: Now I gotta go drive over there and remember it 'cause—yeah, but mostly in the Central Ward and the North Ward of Newark is where I've lived. Now, when I was on that street that I can't remember, I saw a dramatic change in that street. Yeah. One thing I loved about that, it was predominantly Latin. That was the first time I had lived around a bunch of—a really predominantly group of Latin people. I've always lived in like Black neighborhoods where the population was predominantly African American and then there might have been whites and white folks that hung around, and then maybe the Asian folks, and a few, a couple of Spanish families. This was like *everybody* was Spanish except me. (Laughs). That was different, but one thing I loved about it was it was a neighborhood that woke up very early in the morning.

Kennedy Didier: Really?

Beatrice Simpkins: Oh, yes. Four thirty, by four, four thirty, those folks were up—

Kennedy Didier: Four thirty!

Beatrice Simpkins: —and on their way to work. Which I really appreciated about that neighborhood. You could get up and walk around that neighborhood at four, four thirty, you're gonna encounter someone.

Kennedy Didier: Wow.

Beatrice Simpkins: You weren't gonna be alone on the street, and then, it would be somebody going to work. They'd have their little lunchboxes or they're on their bikes. The women are pushing a baby carriage, trying to get the kid to the babysitter so they can go to work. Hard working folks.

Kennedy Didier: Yeah.

Beatrice Simpkins: Very family-orientated. But it only takes like two or three families to change on your block for somebody to bring in an element. And that's what happened, and then all of a sudden there was people selling drugs on the corner. Fights, that kind of stuff.

Kennedy Didier: Just in the course of the year that you were there you saw this change?

Beatrice Simpkins: In just the course of a year.

Kennedy Didier: Wow.

Beatrice Simpkins: Yep, and I was like, okay, it's time for me to go.

Kennedy Didier: Go, yeah. So you moved back to Burnet Street?

Beatrice Simpkins: Gotta go. Yep. Went back to Burnet Street.

Kennedy Didier: Wow.

Beatrice Simpkins: Yep.

Kennedy Didier: What do you like about living in Newark? Tell me about your favorite things—

Beatrice Simpkins: I love the proximity to my job. I like the fact that my church is here, that we do work in the community here. I love the fact that I can get to New York quickly, twenty-two minute ride on New Jersey Transit, or I can take the PATH train and go down to the World Trade Center. I mean, the transportation options are great. I can get out to the airport without taking my car or having me somebody drop me off or pick me up. I like the fact that we have all these new restaurants now. The food's definitely gotten better. Your food choices are much better.

Kennedy Didier: Oh, really, in what way?

Beatrice Simpkins: They're healthier. Whole Foods is here now. Better restaurant food. Better choices in restaurants. Before everything was basically Chinese food, fast food, and Spanish food. Now you have vegetarian options, you've got the Korean barbeque place, you have Chipotle, and just much better eating. It's getting new businesses all the time. All these great fabulous housing is going

up and all that stuff is wonderful. Although like I said, it's a lot of times priced beyond the regular folks ability to be even to stay in it, but I mean, cities have to survive and so they do have to do a lot of development and attract a certain income-earning person who can pay certain taxes. I like the fact that I can walk around. Where I lived at, I could walk to my job. Especially when it was St. Michael's, it was literally right down the street.

Kennedy Didier: Yeah, literally right there. Yeah.

Beatrice Simpkins: I worked for AIDS Resource Foundation for Children which is on 77 Academy Street, I could walk to Academy Street, so it was like in the snowstorms or whatever, I could just throw on my snow boots and truck my way to work.

Kennedy Didier: Ready to go.

Beatrice Simpkins: Didn't have to move my car. I like the fact that it's kind of a Black run city. I mean, if you go down to City Hall, there's a lot of people down there that look like me who are in charge, which is great. I feel the police force is relatively professional, although I understand that sometimes they're not. I like the fact that I can engage them as a citizen. They do offer many opportunities for you to talk to folks about the things that concern you about—they're making a serious effort at doing community policing better.

Kennedy Didier: In being open and—

Beatrice Simpkins: In being open and—

Kennedy Didier: —able to be conversed with.

Beatrice Simpkins: Right, and so I feel a certain safety here. Especially living as someone who's out. I wish we had more places that I could go because we don't have a lot of LGBTQ-type entertainment places. We have our little party, like Theresa's party on Tuesday at Rio's. We used to have Murphy's Bar.

Kennedy Didier: Yeah.

Beatrice Simpkins: And that was *definitely* my introduction to the Newark nightlife.

Kennedy Didier: Wait, describe it. Tell me about it. Describe it to me. What was it like?

Beatrice Simpkins: Murphy's was *the* icon of gay life. In my mid-thirties, all the way into my forties, I guess, when I was forty—it's because I think by the end it was dying out.

Kennedy Didier: Like the mid-90s?

Beatrice Simpkins: Yeah, right, it was the mid-90s, yeah. That was the place to go. Thursdays, Fridays, Saturdays and usually Sunday afternoons you would find me in Murphy's. (Laughs).

Kennedy Didier: Wow! Okay, wait, tell me about it!

Beatrice Simpkins: Yeah, it was a regular thing. We had these—you could go in there with like \$10 and get so drunk. Oh my gosh. That's the best drinks in town.

Kennedy Didier: I've heard they're very strong.

Beatrice Simpkins: Super strong. Chucky was an awesome bartender. It really looked like your typical neighborhood bar. Long bar, and then this little dance floor area in the back, which we would pack. Then everybody would be lining up on the sides and you had to walk down like this because it was all crowded. We would dance, dance, dance, dance, dance, dance, dance, till it was time to go. Really fun place. Never had any bias issues or anything. Nobody ever came by to bother us. That was one thing that—Murphy's was very safe. I don't even recall all the years I spent in there ever seeing any kind of an incident where people came to just antagonize the people that were there or bother them, because we used to party between the bar and the parking lot. There was a parking lot across the street that one of the businesses was nice enough to leave open so folks could park in there. So you never felt intimidated. I never felt like somebody was gonna—

Kennedy Didier: Trouble the street.

Beatrice Simpkins: —come and confront me or anything like that. Lot of friends. I met one of my best friends, Curtis, there. My friend Kim, we were in St. Peter's together, and just a whole lot of different people, and it was a lot of fun. I was there like several times a week. Really, 'cause that was the only place to go!

Kennedy Didier: Yeah.

Beatrice Simpkins: You had to go all the way to the city. We were there on a regular basis, and it was everybody, it was Black people, white people,

Asian people, young, old, everybody. Everybody hung out in Murphy's.

Kennedy Didier: It sounds like a real loss when it shut down.

Beatrice Simpkins: Oh, it broke my heart. 'Cause there was nowhere else to go. When Murphy's closed there was no other place in Newark for you to go. I don't know why that is. I don't know why that is.

Kennedy Didier: Has the community bounced back in any way?

Beatrice Simpkins: Well, you know there's Twister's now on Market Street, I guess as you're going out. Is it Market Street? Yeah. As you're heading back down through the neck and heading back towards Jersey City there's a new gay bar now. It's been there for about, I wanna say it's going into its second year in June, is its anniversary. I believe it had an anniversary, I think. That was good. And then, I don't know if you've heard of Diamondz N Da Ruff, but Diamondz N Da Ruff was the place that was a partnership between my friend Peggie and Jay-Z's mom, and Deb, and it was really wonderful for a while. It was very sophisticated. And it was a place for the *ladies* because it was lesbians that owned it—

Kennedy Didier: Yeah.

Beatrice Simpkins: —and so they kind of catered to the lesbians!

Kennedy Didier: (Laughs). God I wish I was around.

Beatrice Simpkins: When I went there I felt like that was *my* space. *My* friends, *my* space. Guys could come in, it wasn't like we told them not to come in or anything like that, but we all supported that business. All the lesbians around here wanted to make sure that that place stayed open. And now it's closed. (Laughs). So we lost it. I think they ended up doing some development there, 'cause they put the Taco Bell there.

Kennedy Didier: What year did it close?

Beatrice Simpkins: Maybe about two years ago. It was like a slow death. It was great when it first started for a couple of years, and then they—it was bring your own booze because they didn't have a liquor license. The food was absolutely amazing. The food was great. I mean, the best catfish you would ever eat, okay. Shrimps, grits, it was wonderful. Deb cook her behind off. Then they got a liquor license and it changed how people came in because, first of all, you only

had one bar and it was too small. And so we went from being able to hang out and drink and party and drink and party, to waiting 45 minutes for a drink.

Kennedy Didier: Yeah.

Beatrice Simpkins: And then you had to wait another 45 minutes for a drink. When it got crowded it was *terrible*—

Kennedy Didier: Yeah.

Beatrice Simpkins: —because you couldn't *get* to the bar. Then you're trying to support the place, and so you don't wanna bring your liquor and like hide it in your bag and pour it under the table, because we do that. It seemed to thin the crowd out because people got frustrated and stuff like that. So then they started using it for booked events, if somebody wanted to have a birthday party or baby shower, that kind of stuff. Then eventually it got away from that. I think they needed a bigger place.

Kennedy Didier: Yeah.

Beatrice Simpkins: They got to the point where they needed a bigger place. I think they decided that they would temporarily stop and then try to find a better location for it.

Kennedy Didier: That just never happened?

Beatrice Simpkins: Not yet, but they're still working on it. They are still working on it.

Kennedy Didier: Good, good, good.

Beatrice Simpkins: Yeah, because I want it back. I miss that place. I felt so at home there. I felt so safe there. It's like everybody knew each other, it was just a really—it was like hanging out with friends in your house—

Kennedy Didier: Yeah.

Beatrice Simpkins: —but there was music and a bar. There was a DJ and bar. Then they would have singing nights and they had open mic, and it was great. It was so classy. It was like a little—just a little diamond in the rough. Just like they said, it was. I was really sad to see it go. I'd taken people on dates there and they had really great martinis, and like I said the food—

Kennedy Didier: A lot of memories.

Beatrice Simpkins: Oh yeah, it was fantastic. I was sorry to see it go. Now we have Twister's. I've been there a couple of times, it's okay. It's not—I haven't been there often enough to know whether it's really catching on or not. But I hope it stays 'cause we do need something. To me the one thing that's missing in Newark is a gayborhood. We need a gayborhood. We need both sides of the street, bang, bang, bang. Restaurants—

Kennedy Didier: What's your vision of it? If you could *build* a gayborhood, what would it look like?

Beatrice Simpkins: Yeah, it would have a couple of really huge dancehall type restaurants that could be open door restaurants in the summertime. Then at least a couple of blocks of LGBT owned and operated businesses. Restaurants, maybe a tailoring shop, salons, places where you can go get your hair groomed and that kind of stuff. Things that LGBT people like. Like exclusive type of boutiques, and at least a good—it would be nice if it would be like eight blocks, but I'd take four right now. Both sides of the street. Somewhere downtown there should be a gayborhood. There should.

Kennedy Didier: There should.

Beatrice Simpkins: They should.

Kennedy Didier: What do you dislike about Newark besides the fact that there's no gayborhood.

Beatrice Simpkins: Yeah, I don't like that. I mean, I just don't like the fact of development. I know that's what happens, always moves out the folks who are always in the neighborhood. That's always sad to see that happen, see the businesses close.

Kennedy Didier: Yeah.

Beatrice Simpkins: I've been going to the Artisan Collective for years.

Kennedy Didier: Especially as a child of small business owners.

Beatrice Simpkins: Right.

Kennedy Didier: Yeah.

Beatrice Simpkins: Right. My dad did not go out of business, he retired and sold his shop. My mother watched kids until she couldn't watch 'em anymore, so they were always enterprising kind of people. I would like to see more business opportunities in Newark for people who are not necessarily wealthy, let's put it that way.

Kennedy Didier: Yeah, absolutely.

Beatrice Simpkins: If there was a way to get more of those folks into areas where they can have their own business. 'Cause small businesses do a lot for communities, and one thing they definitely do for LGBTQ people is give them someplace to work.

Kennedy Didier: Yeah.

Beatrice Simpkins: 'Cause a lot of times you get rejected depending on how you express yourself in terms of your gender and stuff like that, when you go to your typical Prudential or your big company kind of thing, or if it's not a nonprofit—

Kennedy Didier: Yeah.

Beatrice Simpkins: —where people have a tendency to be more accepting of diversity and stuff like that. With the small businesses, those are places where the LGBTQ youth can work, where they will receive more support to me, and so, I would like to see more of those opportunities here in Newark. There's not a lot I dislike about Newark. There is one thing though, there is one thing. There is one thing. So there's this cemetery in Newark, it's called the Woodland Ceme—Woodlawn, Woodland, Woodland Cemetery, Woodlawn Cemetery—anyway. When I was at Rutgers, one of my classmates, Karima Jasckson, we met—first time I ever met Karima, didn't know Karima from—me, Karima, Romelyn Dones, Aisha kind of connected. Then we actually went to Greece together as a graduation presents to ourselves.

Kennedy Didier: That's so cool.

Beatrice Simpkins: Yeah, we went to Greece, it was *wonderful*. We went to Mykonos and Athens. Can't wait to get back there.

Kennedy Didier: I would die to go to Mykonos! It sounds amazing!

Beatrice Simpkins: Oh, you gotta go. It's just the beach parties all day long, like by eleven o'clock, it's on and popping, man. It's great. *Loved* it. Beautiful people too. Really nice people. The food is fantastic.

Anyway, **Karima** is an activist. She started her own nonprofit, she's actually started her own female cleaning company— female-owned cleaning company. She's still at SPAA trying to get her PhD. She was way more courageous than me, she went straight for her doctorate, and she's been living as a poor student. But, she's a hustler! One day she takes me out to this, 'I want you to come see this cemetery, I'm trying to get it cleaned up, blah, blah, blah.' I'm like, 'okay.' She took me to this cemetery, and it is in the South Ward, thirty-seven acres of neglected cemetery right in the heart of this city. In the same ward that the mayor lives in and grew up in. Matter of fact, his family's house is maybe two or three blocks away from the cemetery. We organized, really **Karima**, and I was just helping, but we would organize these cleanups. We would have cleanups, and veterans would come in, and all these different people would come in. We even presented a couple of times to Rutgers to try to get money through the—they had these, what's it called, the Seed Grant? I think they used to have this thing—

Kennedy Didier: Yeah.

Beatrice Simpkins: —called a Seed Initiatives or something like that, so we tried to get money through that to try to get more resources for this cemetery. It is, to me, disgraceful that people lie in that state. I don't know, well, I kind of do know, I think I know. The board of this— cemeteries in New Jersey, if they're not affiliated with a church, they're usually nonprofits, that's how the law is written. So we met with the board and at first they were being really friendly towards us 'cause we were getting all this attention and there was an article in the *Star Ledger* and—

Kennedy Didier: Yeah.

Beatrice Simpkins: Then things just went south because the board started feeling like we were bringing the wrong kind of attention to them. In other words, the reason why the cemetery is like this is because you folks are incompetent.

Kennedy Didier: Yeah.

Beatrice Simpkins: Which is true.

Kennedy Didier: It's very true, but they don't wanna hear it.

Beatrice Simpkins: But they didn't want anybody to know that. Right. All the board was white, none of them lived in Newark.

Kennedy Didier: Wow.

Beatrice Simpkins: Not a *single* person lived in Newark. One of them was a council person from like Ridgefield or somewhere. When we first went out to the person's house it was in Union. I was like, wow, I'm like, why are these people on the board running this cemetery and they don't even live in Newark? These folks on this board, once they really became antagonistic towards the group, including **Karima** and **Karima's** boyfriend, and they had a physical altercation, we actually—**Karima** actually caught Warren, one of the board members, dumping his trash, because he owned a construction business, he was driving his trash into Newark and dumping his trash in the cemetery. And so **Karima** was in the cemetery—this is the funniest thing—**Karima's** in the cemetery with a Rutgers intern introducing her to the project, right?

Kennedy Didier: Yeah.

Beatrice Simpkins: SPAA student. The SPAA student witnesses him dumping his trash. Not just **Karima**. So **Karima** confronts him and they get into a physical altercation. He put his hands on her. She goes and tells her boyfriend. And Lucky—Warren is still in the cemetery, I don't know why he didn't just leave. Him and Lucky get into an altercation. Lucky knocks him on the ground, his phone breaks, and now they're back and forth in court charging each other with stuff. And now, after all of that, they banned us, which to me they can't do, 'cause it's public land to me, from coming in the cemetery and doing any work. So we were cutting the grass, we were taking pictures—

Kennedy Didier: That's so spiteful.

Beatrice Simpkins: Yeah, just out of pure spite. Now there were people in that neighborhood who had family members buried in there who could not even go see their graves because you could not walk through the grass that was up to here and the bramble and the trees falling down, and so we cleared a lot of the area where people for the first time in like sixteen, seventeen years could go and visit the grave of their grandmothers, and their moms, and their sisters. It was beautiful. They would come out, bring us food because they were like, 'this is the first time I've seen my mother's grave in ten years and I appreciate what you're doing, I hope you guys don't stop.' And then all this stuff started happening with the board. I don't like that.

Kennedy Didier: Yeah, that's awful.

Beatrice Simpkins: I don't like that cemetery sitting there that way. I don't like the fact that it's in a Black neighborhood and I think that's why they don't care about it. I mean, you use eminent domain for every darn thing else to take over whole sections of the city, so you can build this beautiful building and charge people three-thousand dollars for a one-bedroom apartment, but it's okay for you to let those people lie in that state in that cemetery.

Kennedy Didier: No, not at all.

Beatrice Simpkins: That really irks my nerves.

Kennedy Didier: It's so awful, it makes me like sick inside.

Beatrice Simpkins: It irks my nerves. The New Jersey Cemetery Board is useless. They were *scared* of the board, they were just scared of them. They do nothing. There are laws that govern how you manage cemeteries in this state, and these people were just doing whatever they wanted. They weren't even having annual meetings. So now we get the whole community more aware of all of this and now they start trying to join the board, and that's when the board turned on us because everybody who has someone buried in that cemetery has a right to be on the board—

Kennedy Didier: On the board.

Beatrice Simpkins: —and that's in the law in the state of New Jersey.

Kennedy Didier: Wow.

Beatrice Simpkins: So they started making all these rules, oh you gotta be this, you gotta do that, you gotta show us this, you gotta show us that, but you gotta understand something, the cemetery fell apart sometimes in the prior generation so the paperwork that you're asking for, the current generation of family that's still here may not have that paperwork, and they can't get it because you don't have it either. All of the records, the burial cards are at the Newark Historical Society because they couldn't even keep those, so they decided to donate them to the Historical Society. Then there's this one woman who's been with the cemetery for like years and she's the *one* woman—she has all the maps and all this other stuff—and she won't give it to the board. She won't give it to 'em. She *refuses* to give it to 'em.

Kennedy Didier: Wow.

Beatrice Simpkins: So it's just all this dysfunction.

Kennedy Didier: Yeah.

Beatrice Simpkins: This was one of the first garden cemeteries created in the state of New Jersey. It used to be this beautiful place where you could see, if you look up the historical records, you used to be able to see from there, parts of that cemetery, all the way to Staten Island.

Kennedy Didier: Really?

Beatrice Simpkins: 'Cause back then, there was no tall buildings and stuff.

Kennedy Didier: Yeah.

Beatrice Simpkins: It talked about how it was this garden cemetery and families would come there on Sunday to visit their—they'd have picnics, and it was this thriving place. Beautiful, thriving place. Then, as it got older and older, the folks that owned—the Kruger family—that owns the Ballantine, that mansion that's falling apart on MLK.

Kennedy Didier: I don't know it.

Beatrice Simpkins: They're the brewery family. They were the, I guess, the Ballantine Group, yeah, the Ballantine Brewing Company. Which has the Ballantine Gate in the Branch Brook Park. They have a whole section in that cemetery. The fascinating thing about the cemetery is you will see the development of Newark. You'll see that—

Kennedy Didier: It's like reflected and stuff?

Beatrice Simpkins: —these were the first families. You got the 1600 people, the 1800 people that was buried here. You have a German section. There was a public health problem in the forties I think, and you will see on the—you'll see all these children dying. And so we went and tried to figure out *why* are this cemetery full—and this area—full of all these dead children. Well, there was an outbreak of some sort of disease and a lot of those kids got buried in that cemetery. So that cemetery's fascinating. It is a treasure to me of the history of this city and it is in horrible shape.

We met with the mayor a couple of times, we met with his brother. They were like supportive, they would send the Department of Sanitation down there to give us tools and weed whackers and shovels, and if we needed something like heavy lifted, like some

boulder moved or something. Everybody was like, ‘yeah, great, great, great,’ but they would not really engage themselves. They found dead bodies in that cemetery. We found a dead dog in that cemetery when we were cleaning it out. We had to tell the gang members—we had to develop a relationship with them because we started going up in the cemetery and they were like, ‘what are you doing?’ We ain't messing with your stash, and if your stash is there, I suggest you move it because we're gonna be working in this area on Saturday, okay? And they would! They would take they stuff and go somewhere else with it. So there was this wholesome community support for us—

Kennedy Didier: Yeah.

Beatrice Simpkins: —but the city never really got behind it. I think it's disgraceful that those people—there's over 650 veterans buried in that cemetery from fourteen different wars.

Kennedy Didier: Wow.

Beatrice Simpkins: It is an historical treasure.

Kennedy Didier: Being treated terribly.

Beatrice Simpkins: And they're just ignoring—but in the meantime, I'm watching all these buildings go up everywhere.

Kennedy Didier: Like the city has all this time—

Beatrice Simpkins: Yeah! There's all this stuff, but ya'll leaving this—and I'm telling you, if *that* was sitting in the middle of a white neighborhood, it wouldn't be that way. It would not be that way. It wouldn't. It wouldn't. It would not be that way. So they just continue to ignore it, so on my list of things to do is somehow, in the course of my, whatever many years God has for me to live, do something about that cemetery.

Kennedy Didier: I can't imagine anyone listening to you talk about it and not wanting to do everything in their power to fix it.

Beatrice Simpkins: Right, right! We had people at Rutgers like, ‘oh, wow, it's fascinating. My god, this is really something. Yeah, keep at it!’

Kennedy Didier: (Laughs). Keep at it!

Beatrice Simpkins: No, I mean, the resources—

Kennedy Didier: Yeah, and money.

Beatrice Simpkins: —and the power of this university, who has this whole agricultural, environmental program, and all this other stuff, to put some resources and some effort into correcting that 'cause I think that is just wrong. I just think it's morally wrong, and it's a disservice to those people who are lying there who's families can't—like in my family, we have a tradition of visiting cemeteries. I have to go put grave blankets on my mother's and father's graves, my brother's grave, and my brother-in-law's grave—my sister's husband. And I *better* go do it 'cause if I don't, there's going to be trouble. Now my sister's usually the one that did it, now she can't do it anymore, so now it's my responsibility and I told my kids, I said, look, I'm telling you right now, you gonna take care of these graves. I don't care where y'all are, what y'all doing, figure out a way, whoever's graves or wherever they are, you gotta take care of these graves. My brother-in-law, who's deceased, birthday was just a couple of weeks ago. I went and got him some flowers and we put it on his grave. That is a tradition in our family.

Kennedy Didier: It's very important.

Beatrice Simpkins: It's a tradition in a lot of Black people's families. They can't do that because their loved ones are in a section of a cemetery they can't even walk in because it's too dangerous, because it's overgrown. The headstones are turned over, there are big dips that need to be leveled. It's *horrible*. They can't do that. They cannot go see their mother's grave. And that's wrong to me.

Kennedy Didier: So wrong. The headstone, just the imagery of the headstones being turned over is so disrespectful.

Beatrice Simpkins: Knocked over, laying on the ground, yeah, they're just lying on the ground. It doesn't matter whether it's the Johnsons or the Krugers, everybody is laying in the same state of disrepair because cemeteries are equalizers.

Kennedy Didier: That's true.

Beatrice Simpkins: They are.

Kennedy Didier: Everyone—

Beatrice Simpkins: Whether you're rich, whether you're poor—

Kennedy Didier: —gotta go in the ground.

Beatrice Simpkins: —you may go in that ground in that same cemetery. You got in that cemetery these really, really wealthy families that had a whole family sections. You can see, oh, the Black people started moving into the neighborhood, so now the names change. To Black names, Jackson, Johnson, Smith, Williams. You see it. You see the difference in the shifting populations of that area of Newark because you have these wealthy, older, traditional families with German names, and Italian names, and Irish names, and then all of a sudden, you see it shift to a different population, and then you see it shift to a different population. It's really fascinating.

Kennedy Didier: Wow.

Beatrice Simpkins: It is a treasure to me, and they just ignore it.

Kennedy Didier: Throwing it away. God, that's an incredible story.

Beatrice Simpkins: Yeah. I really don't like that about Newark.

Kennedy Didier: Yeah. No, I would—

Beatrice Simpkins: Yeah, I don't like that. I don't like the fact that the city just thinks it's okay to let that stay there like that.

Kennedy Didier: Wow, thank you so much for sharing that story with me.

Beatrice Simpkins: Yeah. Yeah.

Kennedy Didier: Wow. I'm so upset now.

Beatrice Simpkins: Yeah, yeah, yeah. It's bad. It's just not right to me. It's an injustice. So we'll see. I know **Karima's** gotten so disheartened by how the whole thing worked out, it's hard for me to get her like engage—well, first of all, she's banned from being on the property now so that doesn't help. But somehow, maybe one day we'll get back to it.

Kennedy Didier: I hope. What is your perspective on Newark's—I know you mentioned that it's so easy to get to the city and other places—but as someone who's lived a little bit around Newark too, what's your perspective on connection between Newark and surrounding neighborhoods?

Beatrice Simpkins: Well, I don't know, people in Newark have a tendency to stay in Newark and live and entertain themselves in Newark. That was always the case, even when we were growing up. If you were in Jersey City and you ran into somebody in Newark it was like, 'oh, you're from Newark? It's a million miles away.' Because there's enough here for people to not *have* to go outside of their neighborhoods to shop or to eat or even visit relatives or to travel. I think part of the dynamic of Newark being where it is, and then you have these suburbs around it, like Bloomfield, Belleville. There's some drift sometimes of Newark's problems kinda drifting over into those neighborhoods. And a feeling of people from Newark not necessarily being welcomed in those neighborhoods either. I remember—like the Bloomfield police are very serious police. They don't play. I remember they had a carnival up there, and there was a bunch of kids that came from, I think, East Orange in Newark and, matter of fact, one of the kids wound up getting killed. They shot and killed one of those teenagers. They didn't like that element and they don't—they're kind of quick on the trigger in Bloomfield. You don't go up there messing around.

Kennedy Didier: Yeah.

Beatrice Simpkins: 'Cause you might get shot by the police. Yeah. You definitely don't. Same thing with Belleville, but not as bad. There's still some perceptions that Newark folks stay in Newark and the folks in the suburbs kind of stay, and those little suburban towns around it, kind of stay in their suburban towns. Yeah, and never the two shall meet. They don't like, if you're like in Bloomfield or Belleville or Montclair or those kind of places, you're not gonna get a lot of Newark teenagers drifting up that way 'cause they're not welcome. Especially if they look a certain way, they're dressed a certain way. That's not necessarily the best place—

Kennedy Didier: Like a stigma.

Beatrice Simpkins: Oh, yeah, absolutely. Oh, there's a stigma here. When you travel outside of Newark into the suburban areas, not so much for an adult so much, but if you're a young person, yeah, you're definitely gonna experience some stigma. People may not wanna rent you an apartment. That kind of stuff. You'll experience that a little bit.

Kennedy Didier: What places do you associate in Newark with LGBTQ people? If there are any left that haven't been developed—

Beatrice Simpkins: What places do I—do we get together in, you mean?

Kennedy Didier: Yeah. Yeah, get together in, hang out, associate with.

Beatrice Simpkins: I hang out probably with more gay people in church than I do anywhere else. Really.

Kennedy Didier: That's an answer. That's a great answer!

Beatrice Simpkins: Unity Fellowship Church Movement is where I spend most of—that's where my social LGBTQ community is. Kevin Taylor?

Kennedy Didier: Do you know Leslie?

Beatrice Simpkins: Leslie?

Kennedy Didier: She was an—

Beatrice Simpkins: Oliver?

Kennedy Didier: Yes, yes, yes, yes, Leslie Oliver. Yeah.

Beatrice Simpkins: Yeah. Yeah!

Kennedy Didier: Yes, yeah! I recently talked to her, yeah, yeah, yeah!

Beatrice Simpkins: Oh! Of course you interviewed, yeah. You would have. 'Cause she from Newark!

Kennedy Didier: Yep. Yep.

Beatrice Simpkins: She down in Charlotte now.

Kennedy Didier: Yeah.

Beatrice Simpkins: Yeah, yeah. When I joined the church, I joined the Unity Fellowship Church when I was in Charlotte. When Leslie was the minister of music.

Kennedy Didier: Wow! Okay, yeah.

Beatrice Simpkins: Right. Then I came back to Newark, and I joined the church here in Newark. Yeah, yeah, yeah. Leslie comes to our convocations and stuff, yeah, yeah. Yep. Yep. She was raised up in the Unity Fellowship Church Movement, yes she was.

Kennedy Didier: Yeah, yeah, 'cause she told me that it started in Brooklyn—

Beatrice Simpkins: Yep.

Kennedy Didier: —and then that it came here—

Beatrice Simpkins: Yep.

Kennedy Didier: —and she was part of the founding—

Beatrice Simpkins: Yep. Now there's like 16 churches all over the country.

Kennedy Didier: That's so cool. The name sounded familiar.

Beatrice Simpkins: Right, and Carl Bean is the archbishop. He wrote that song and performed that song “I Was Born This Way.” The L.A. church is the mother church, considered the mother church. Then they started—it really was a movement that was born out of fighting against HIV and AIDS, which was spreading in the African American community. Well, this was the mid-80s. No drugs, no nothing, just fear and death. It was a ministry to help people, and people of color who were HIV positive or had AIDS. And then it grew into Unity Fellowship Church Movement, and they started opening up different churches, and so we got churches in like Atlanta, and DC, and Philly, Newark. There used to be a Newark and a New Brunswick church here in New Jersey, now those two churches merged.

Kennedy Didier: And it's in Newark?

Beatrice Simpkins: Yeah, it's in Newark, yeah. As far as being social within my community, it's usually at the center, it's at church, or the occasional time when someone will have like a party. Like Theresa, have you interviewed Theresa? Ms. Theresa?

Kennedy Didier: I haven't interviewed Theresa yet.

Beatrice Simpkins: Oh, you gotta interview Ms. Theresa. You do. You really do. She has been throwing parties, LGBT—mostly lesbian parties though, but everybody comes, for years.

Kennedy Didier: Really?

Beatrice Simpkins: She's moved them from different places. One time it was on Washington Street.

Kennedy Didier: I would *love* to talk to her.

Beatrice Simpkins: Yeah. One time it was—now it's at the Rio Lounge on Tuesdays. It was at the Guitar Bar one time on Railroad Avenue. Oh, gosh, and then she had another location. She was, if it wasn't Murphy's, we were at Theresa's party. That's how it was. It was Murphy's or Theresa's.

Kennedy Didier: It's been going on for that long?

Beatrice Simpkins: Murphy's or Theresa's. Yes, Theresa been out there for years and she's still doing it! She said the young people need someplace to go and have a good time where it's safe. She says she's never gonna stop doing parties. Most of the parties she does, she does attract a very young crowd. Late twenties, thirty-ish. For me going in there now, I would be like an elderly, mature person. And even though me and Theresa are probably not, she might not be exactly my age, but she's probably pushing late forties, fifties, I think by now. Don't tell her I said that. That was our nightlife. For the first time I went to one of her parties recently, I hadn't been in a while, and it is a very young crowd, but nice. But still nice. I always had a ball at Theresa's parties.

Kennedy Didier: Is that at her home?

Beatrice Simpkins: No, she moves it to different restaurants and locations.

Kennedy Didier: Oh. Okay. Wow.

Beatrice Simpkins: Yeah, so right now it's at the Rio Lounge on Tuesday nights.

Kennedy Didier: Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah.

Beatrice Simpkins: At one point it was at the Guitar Bar on Railroad Avenue. Before that it was on Washington—she had a brownstone.

Kennedy Didier: So she rents out a place?

Beatrice Simpkins: Right. And she has these regular parties. She would have them every Thursday or every Wednesday, whatever the night was. We would go and party and dance—

Kennedy Didier: And how do you find out about them? I wanna go.

Beatrice Simpkins: Well, word of mouth. You know, 'Theresa's having a party on Wednesdays!' Or she put flyers, whatever, and we'd find out that Theresa's new spot is over here or it's over there. Or you'd go to the party, she'd be like, okay, we can't get this place anymore, I'm

moving it over to such and such a place. It was either Murphy's or Ms. Theresa's. Ms. Theresa's is for a very young crowd. For the mature person, there's not a lot for us to go out. That's what I loved about Diamondz, Diamondz was the mature, sophisticated, older person's club. We'd get dressed up to the nines and go hang out in there and it was wonderful. That's gone. Yeah, when it comes to me socializing here, it's either going to be through church, through somebody's house party, literally in their home, or sometimes we'd meet up at a restaurant, stuff like that. We used to frequent Mix 27, and we still do, but they've gotten a little—they did something during pride that pissed everybody off and so we don't support them as much now. I'm not sure, I can't remember exactly what the story was, but they were kind of rude to people or something. There was this little backlash against them for a while so people stopped going there the way they used to. Sometimes we just take over places. A bunch of us just meet at this particular spot and it becomes *the place*.

Kennedy Didier: Yeah.

Beatrice Simpkins: Right. It's not that the owner said, 'oh, I'm gonna make this gay night.' We just take it over on that night and so it is! Our money is green, they take it. There aren't a lot of places for us to go, so a lot of times when I go out, I go out in the city 'cause there's really not much here anymore. Not with cultural diversity. I could go down to Asbury Park, or I could go to New Brunswick, but that's not necessarily me partying with people that look like me, or have my experiences, or people of color. A lot of times I'll go to the city if I really wanna go out because I like to dance. I don't have a place to go dancing. I wanna tell the mayor that. Can I please have a place that I can go dancing at least three days a week? I'd be a lot thinner. (Laughs). For real. I haven't slowed down as I aged in terms of socialization. I still wanna go out and enjoy myself.

Kennedy Didier: Yeah. It's fun.

Beatrice Simpkins: I work hard.

Kennedy Didier: It's so fun. It's so fun.

Beatrice Simpkins: You know what I'm saying? I contribute to my community and stuff like that, I wanna go and cut up every now and then.

Kennedy Didier: Yeah.

Beatrice Simpkins: I would love to have someplace where I can go do that, but our options are very limited right now.

Kennedy Didier: Here's to hoping that it'll come.

Beatrice Simpkins: Yeah. Yeah. Yep.

Kennedy Didier: Is it cool if we move onto the last section?

Beatrice Simpkins: Sure.

Kennedy Didier: How would you describe your sexual orientation or gender identity?

Beatrice Simpkins: I am a lesbian. I identify as a woman. My pronouns are she and her, you have to say that now. I'm still trying to get used to that. My friend Mecca, when I was down in Charlotte, we were talking about all the different complexities in our community, who's Black, who's a fem, and who's a butch, and who's this, and who's that, and all those labels, and then there are even more labels now. I can't even begin—

Kennedy Didier: So many, it's so hard.

Beatrice Simpkins: Right, are you a masculine identified lesbian, are you this, are you that? There's all this new stuff. The cis gender thing and all that. It was so funny and cracked me up 'cause we were sitting and trying to get to how would I ident—which one of those labels would best fit me? Anyway, Mecca said you're a crossdressing female, Beatrice. (Laughs). She said, 'it's really simple.' She said, 'you're overcomplicating it. You're just a woman who likes wearing men's clothes and you wear them. That's it. It's just like men who like wearing women's clothes, you're a crossdresser. I wouldn't even take it to—.' She said, 'because you identify as a woman.' She said, 'so as far as you putting on, the way you dress and stuff like that,' she said, 'you just like to cross-dress. That's it.' I said, 'you know what? I can go with that.'

Kennedy Didier: I like that. That has a ring to it.

Beatrice Simpkins: I think it's very simple. Yeah, it's very me. I'm a tomboy, always have been. Hated dresses, hated heels, couldn't wait to become an adult. Well, I became an adult, got married, but once I got divorced, I was like, okay, that's it. No more stockings, no more heels, no more makeup, I'm done. I'm so done. Oh, I'm so done.

Kennedy Didier: All my girlfriends always think, they're like, 'how do you do it?' 'Cause I'm very fem and they're like, 'why are you doing it?' They're like, 'what's the point?' (Laughs).

Beatrice Simpkins: Right, right. But that's how you feel!

Kennedy Didier: Yeah.

Beatrice Simpkins: That's how you feel. You feel like that. You want to get your hair done and put on makeup and, yeah.

Kennedy Didier: It's what I live for. I love it.

Beatrice Simpkins: Right, right, right. Me, I wanna a pair of jeans and sneakers and a t-shirt, and I'm good. If I get dressed up, I wanna be in a suit, in a tux or something.

Kennedy Didier: How did you first become aware that you were a lesbian?

Beatrice Simpkins: Oh, I was aware I was a lesbian when I was a little kid. I just couldn't tell anybody 'cause I came up in a Baptist family and it was—I heard them talk about the gay people that they did talk about, and it wasn't nice.

Kennedy Didier: Wasn't favorable.

Beatrice Simpkins: They were a traditional Black family from the South. They didn't have any gay people in their family. They *did*, but they weren't gonna admit it. Neither was anybody else in the community. So we had this family that lived up the street, and they had what would now be considered I guess, transgender male to female type folks living in a house. It was a whole family. It was like five boys and every single one of 'em all were—expressed their gender in a female way, let's put it that way. And I saw how they got treated. Homophobia was alive and well back then. I had a great upbringing, I was loved and all that other stuff, but I wasn't coming out nobody's closet, and I wasn't having any discussion with anybody about my sexuality. But I knew from the time I was very small that I was attracted to girls.

And it worried me in a way because I was wondering if I would ever be normal. As long as I can remember having an attraction or an affection for anyone, it was always a female. Now there were boys that I dealt with when I was in high school. I went to the prom with Chris and our families tried to put us together, and all that kind of stuff. Then it was Dennis up the street, and then little

John next door. I mean, I had, I guess, my *behavior* was more—my behavior was heterosexual. How I *felt* was that I was a lesbian, but my *behavior* was heterosexual. That was all to try to fit into what people's expectations of me were. There was no one around for me to talk to about it. There was no—I had no—I mean, I do remember seeing mannish looking women, but I was never given any explanation for why they looked that way, other than that they just didn't like dressing up or you know, 'some women just don't like being fancy.' It was never that Aunt Frida is really a lesbian.

Kennedy Didier: (Laughs). Yeah.

Beatrice Simpkins: That was not the case. They weren't gonna tell you that.

Kennedy Didier: Weren't gonna spill the cards.

Beatrice Simpkins: They were *bulldaggers*. I heard that word bulldagger, which is like a hard, really super masculine-looking woman that no one would ever be attracted to, kind of thing. I knew from a very young age that I was gay.

Kennedy Didier: How did you become aware of the existence of other gay people? Was it the house up the street?

Beatrice Simpkins: The house up the street. Seeing women, people who looked like I felt. Let's put it that way.

Kennedy Didier: Absolutely.

Beatrice Simpkins: I *felt* like I wish right now I had on what you're wearing, but I gotta have on this skirt and this slip and these stockings and these frigging heels 'cause this is what my mother put on me. That would have been my awareness. Then, as I became a teenager, maybe eighteen, nineteen, twenty-ish, I think there was a couple of PBS programs that were on. It was a program called *In The Life*, and actually, we're bringing them to Newark to the Newark Museum. I'll let you know about it, it's June 20th.

Kennedy Didier: Please do.

Beatrice Simpkins: They're having a pride community day—first time—and they're partnering with the center. We're bringing the *In The Life* production folks, who created the PBS series, 'cause it was probably the first PBS series to ever deal with gay life, back to do a ninety minute retrospective. I'm really excited about that because I used to watch that show! And that show gave me hope—

Kennedy Didier: Yeah!

Beatrice Simpkins: —that one day I'd find a community.

Kennedy Didier: What years were this?

Beatrice Simpkins: This was like the late 90s, early 2000s. I was like thirty five, thirty six when the show was on. I think it started when I was in my twenties. It was on for a few years. I can give you the exact years. I'll send you their whole little bio thing. I remember that being like, wow, maybe I can find people that are like me. I remember as a kid, maybe seventeen, eighteen, sneaking over to New York, 'cause we weren't supposed to be going over there, and going to the Village. I was like, wow, there's a whole *world* full of gay people over here. Rainbows everywhere and just everybody being just themselves. I started venturing out of my safe little world and going over to New York. There was no gay community in Jersey City. There was no gay community in Newark, except Murphy's, but I mean, as a kid, growing up—

Kennedy Didier: Yeah, there was nothing.

Beatrice Simpkins: —when I was a teenager and stuff like that, there was no gay community over here. My exposure would have been either through television, like you said, that little family that lived around the corner. I mean, there were couples in the neighborhood, but no one identified them as couples, 'Oh, that's so and so's friend, and they're roommates.' 'That's so and so's cousin, and they roommates.'

Kennedy Didier: They just happened to have one queen bed because [*unintelligible* 01:24:23] of space, space saving.

Beatrice Simpkins: Right! Right! But! Right! As you get older, you start to realize, there was only one bedroom in that apartment.

Kennedy Didier: You're like, wait, they were gay!

Beatrice Simpkins: Where were they sleeping? Ohh. Okay! All right! Okay! And that's kinda how you found out.

Kennedy Didier: Yeah.

Beatrice Simpkins: Yeah, nobody was telling you that these people were gay, or those people were gay, or they've had this wonderful loving relationship for fifteen—nobody was telling you that. It was a secret. Had to be a secret.

Kennedy Didier: How did other people in your life come to know about your identity once you—did you come out at one point?

Beatrice Simpkins: I wouldn't call it coming out so much as I just said, okay, I'm gonna live the way I wanna live now, and I just did. People didn't necessarily *question* the transition. Some people were like, 'I was wondering when you were going to say it.'

Kennedy Didier: When was this?

Beatrice Simpkins: Like in my mid-thirties. I was like thirty five, thirty four, thirty five. Eventually the way I dressed changed, not immediately, but the way I dressed changed. My kids were like teenagers then, so I could have an honest conversation. They were wonderful, my children were wonderful. They were totally accepting of me. They're just great, my kids are great. Yeah, so it was like my mid-thirties, and my friend Robin across the street was a lesbian, and her and her friend Lottie were living over there, in Jersey City. Anyway, we all started hanging out together and having parties in the house. I just started living my life that way. People didn't really ask me. Even within my family—my mother, Lillian, died, 2001, I guess. Even within my family it was suspected but not discussed.

The first time I had a conversation with my sister, who was probably in her nineties at the time, maybe her late eighties, was when Jim McGreevey came out, and I went to see her and she's like, 'you know, I feel bad for him.' I said, 'what do you mean you feel bad for him?' She like, 'yeah.' She's like, 'you know, whatever floats your boat is whatever floats your boat.' This is coming out of an eighty-something year old woman's mouth, and I was like, wow, that is so beautiful. Anyway, she was like, 'yeah, and I feel bad that he had to hide from people and then he had to get married.' She's like, 'that's just horrible. I feel really bad for him.' She's like, 'if that's the way you are, that's the way you are.' She said, 'you shouldn't have to hide that from anybody.' I said, '*really?*' I said, 'Well! Then let's talk about me!' That's exactly how I said it. She looked at me, we was talking, I was like, 'I am so glad that we can sit here and have this conversation. I can't believe it.' She was like, she said, 'well,' this is what she told me—her husband was Clifton, she said, 'well me and Clifton been

waiting for you to come out the closet since you were a little kid.’ I said, ‘well, how come nobody said anything to me?’

Kennedy Didier: (Laughs). Tell me!

Beatrice Simpkins: She said, ‘oh, probably momma would have probably just lost her mind.’ She said, ‘but me and him used to say all the time, you know, I think Bertie's a little queer.’ My nickname was Bertie. They used to have conversations about me.

Kennedy Didier: Wow.

Beatrice Simpkins: Well, then why didn’t y’all say something to *me*? She said, ‘well, you know, we just didn’t talk about things like that.’ I said, ‘that is unbelievable.’ I said, ‘so we could have had this conversation when I was like fifteen, sixteen? I wouldn’t have even had to get mar—. Although I would never change anything because I have two beautiful children, and I have grandchildren, but the fact that we could have, I could have had that conversation with her and my brother-in-law, who I loved and respected tremendously. And just everybody was sitting around just being too scared to say it.

Kennedy Didier: Wow.

Beatrice Simpkins: ‘Cause she said she always thought I was gay.

Kennedy Didier: Wow.

Beatrice Simpkins: Yep. I was a tomboy. I *hated* wearing girls clothes. Hated it. Hated it. By the time I was like five or six, I was ready to give up the dolls. I wanted my brother’s toys. He was always mad at me ‘cause I was messing with his 007. I wanted to play with the trucks. I wanted to go outside and dig holes in the ground. They're sitting there trying to feminize me and in the meantime I'm just like, ahhh!

Kennedy Didier: How do you feel that your racial and religious identities have impacted your experience as a lesbian?

Beatrice Simpkins: I think it's given me more courage to just be who I am. Especially somebody who grew up as a child of the Civil Rights Movement. I remember those experiences of Martin dying and what it did to my community. Seeing everybody on the block crying. When Kennedy got killed, even though I was very young, I just remember this tremendous sadness. The emotions of it I remember. Not so much that I understood it, but I remember the *emotions* in my

community. The sense of this loss of hope by their deaths and stuff. Having been a product of that, Civil Rights Movement, I don't feel like I need to be anything other than who I am, and you should not be intruding on my rights. Whoever you are. Then, spiritually, having a spiritual life just gives you courage to fight the fights that you have to fight. To say the things that you need to say. To demand the respect that you need to have, that you should have, that you're entitled to as a person. To walk in my authentic self *fully* and not feel like I need to explain that to anyone. That wherever I go I'm just me, I'm here. I'm here to contribute and I don't owe anybody an explanation for things. It makes me love myself and think of myself as a beautiful person. And so here I am. (Laughs).

Kennedy Didier: How do you think that being a lesbian has made your life different than it would have been otherwise?

Beatrice Simpkins: Well, the economics are different. Especially when you are seen as the aggressor, or the male role, in the relationships you have with women because there are certain expectations. It's funny how we mirror heterosexual behavior. I think it's fascinating to me.

Kennedy Didier: Yeah. I'm so interested in that too! I'm so interested.

Beatrice Simpkins: So fascinating to me!

Kennedy Didier: Yeah.

Beatrice Simpkins: So here we are, we're gay, and we're supposed to be all different and stuff, but we mimic heterosexual behavior. Whether you're a gay male couple or you're two lesbians, somebody's got to be the man, somebody's got to be the woman. Somebody's got to be top, somebody's got to be the bottom. How come we can't just be like this? How come you can't just be who you are, and you can be who I am.

Kennedy Didier: Then it's so confusing.

Beatrice Simpkins: Right, and so now you have all these different layers of who should and shouldn't get together and what expectations are, and it just gets crazy. So as the person who's more seen as the male role in the female relationship, economics enter into that because there's certain expectations. You're gonna pay for dinner. You're going to, if you go on vacation, you're gonna pay for that. If I need a bill paid, you're supposed to pay it 'cause you the man! But I'm a woman just like you. I make 73 cents on the dollar the same way

you make 73 cents on the dollar 'cause I'm still female. My wage equity is really no different than yours.

Kennedy Didier: Yeah.

Beatrice Simpkins: The reason why I have some is because I went to school and got a bachelor's degree and a master's, but it wasn't my blackness or my being feminine that allowed me to earn the money I earn. It was me getting back into a classroom, it was me having a lot of experience, it was me having mentors. It was somebody giving me an opportunity. The reason why I'm at the agency I'm in now, 'cause I was sitting next to Annie in class. Me and Annie developed a friendship. When a position came open she said, 'hey, Beatrice, you wanna come work for us?' 'Sure! Yeah.' That kind of stuff. Yeah, that makes it a little different. I mean, and then, also, you still run into people who misgender you. Depending on like if I wear a suit and a tie, sometimes people will get it right, sometimes they don't. Sometimes it bothers me, sometimes it doesn't, it depends on how it's said. Sometimes it's the sound of my voice. I have a very deep voice, so I know sometimes I will be called 'sir' before anybody even looks in my face. Like I walk into a store, and I'll say to somebody, excuse me, can you help me? 'Hold on a second, sir,' 'cause you haven't looked up to even see that I'm a woman. You're doing it—it teaches you that people are so conditioned to treat people a certain way because you're female or you're male, because you're Black or you're white. To have to navigate all of that stuff.

I've had the experience of being out with a woman and having somebody, some man usually, say something derogatory about me or the fact that she's with me. That kind of stuff. 'You're not a man. You can't do for her what I can do for you.' I go through those exp—I've been through those experiences. Not that much, thank God, but it's getting better now, but early on sometimes when I was walking in the Village with someone. I believe that the way I express myself in terms of my outward appearance, which leans more on the masculine side really, is—could be problematic for me if I was job hunting. There are certain companies that are better to work for than others. The company I work for is a fantastic—diversity reigns at the AIDS Resource Foundation for Children. It's wonderful. But I know that if something happened and I had to go look for a job, I would have to think twice about what I wear and how I present myself because somebody may get intimidated by it, somebody may think it's just horrible and I shouldn't be dressed that way. You just never know. As you mature and stuff and get

more comfortable in your own skin, you have a tendency to wanna stay in those safe environments that—

Kennedy Didier: Absolutely.

Beatrice Simpkins: —support and promote who you are. So I would, as a professional now, I would be more drawn to LGBTQ work, because I know I'm gonna be affirmed in that realm of industry, whatever it is. Surrounded by people who are like me, understand me, don't have a problem with me wearing a tie. Whatever. My sister's still trying to get used to my shoes. But she's used to me. She just doesn't like the fact that I wear men's shoes. She just could not understand that. It's okay though. She doesn't do it in a bad way. The economics of it can be challenging, the expectations on you in a relationship in terms of being the provider, in that provider role. Just being able to feel safe however you express yourself when you're out and about in the world.

Kennedy Didier: How has your perception of your identity changed over time?

Beatrice Simpkins: I think, if anything, I perceive myself as being more authentic. I am no longer pretending to be somebody I am not and that's the most wonderful—

Kennedy Didier: I wear the shoes I wanna wear.

Beatrice Simpkins: Right. I wear the shoes I wanna wear. I go where I wanna go. I act the way I wanna act. I say the things I wanna say. I'm in the company of people I wanna be in company. I feel comfortable walking down the street holding someone's hand or being affectionate with someone in public.

Kennedy Didier: Yeah. It's such a good feeling.

Beatrice Simpkins: It is. It's a wonderful feeling 'cause there was a time when you couldn't do that. You felt it was dangerous. I don't feel that way anymore. I think the biggest thing is that I am truly living as the person that I am. In *all* aspects of my life: my religious life, my work life, my community life. It's all interconnected and it's all authentic. That would be the biggest thing.

Kennedy Didier: What do you like most about being a lesbian?

Beatrice Simpkins: Women. (Laughs).

Kennedy Didier: (Laughs). Let me tell you, whenever I ask this question, I always think of my own answer, and I always think of saying exactly that!

Beatrice Simpkins: (Laughs) Right!

Kennedy Didier: You're the first person to have ever—

Beatrice Simpkins: Right!

Kennedy Didier: —actually said it.

Beatrice Simpkins: Yeah, I love women! That's the thing about it!

Kennedy Didier: [Unintelligible 01:37:47] I'm freaking out! But like every time I giggle to myself. Sorry, sorry! I'm like obviously—

Beatrice Simpkins: Yeah. Right, right, right, right, right, right. Just go ahead and say it! 'Cause people don't wanna say it, but that's what I love. That's what I love the most. That is what I love the most.

Kennedy Didier: God, they're amazing.

Beatrice Simpkins: Right. Exactly. Right, that is the most incredible thing to me and such a wonderful thing. Women are so much more interesting to me than men. I'm sorry, but they are. They just are. The emotions and the power they have. That's what I love. I love that. I like being in the company of women, I like being around women. It's not all sexual, it's just the energy of women.

Kennedy Didier: Enchanting.

Beatrice Simpkins: Right. Right. Yeah, exactly.

Kennedy Didier: They're just so smart.

Beatrice Simpkins: Meditating or—

Kennedy Didier: Yeah.

Beatrice Simpkins: Right. Or just having one of them girl talks where you be sitting around having a cocktail and somebody's got a blunt and you just smoke and you're like waiting to exhale. You're just lying around trying to figure out the world.

Kennedy Didier: Like does life get any better than this?

Beatrice Simpkins: Right, right. The things that we tackle as people. The things that we can change when we're together and we're of one mind. Women can do some incredible stuff. Besides the fact that they're the people that bring life into the world. That's what I like the most.

Kennedy Didier: And what do you find most challenging?

Beatrice Simpkins: Making sure that you have a good social life as you get older. So much of socializing is for the young. You can be—if you're not married or if you're not partnered as you age, it can get, I think, emotionally challenging for people 'cause they start to feel lonely, and they start to feel like they're never gonna have anyone. I don't wanna ever experience those kinds of emotions but I see it. I see it in a lot of older lesbians who are not partnered. They very much worry about being alone. Will they ever find someone? And then there's not a lot of places to go to find someone of your, say your economic group or your maturity level, whatever. You can go out there and find a thirty-year-old, party all night kind of thing, but is that really what you want in terms of you trying to find partnership and having a family and that core part of your life. Yeah. That's a little challenging.

Kennedy Didier: This is the last question, but I have another follow-up, have you found community or support from other people in Newark or elsewhere?

Beatrice Simpkins: Yeah, big support from my church of course. And then, of course, from working with the center.

Kennedy Didier: What's that like?

Beatrice Simpkins: It's challenging because the center went through a lot of stuff when it had to move away from Halsey Street, and we shut down for a while. We kind of got lost and people drifted away from the center. We had a lot of volunteers, a lot more activity, now we're in the library space, but by being in a library space, you're limited to the hours. You can only do things when they're open. We used to have the Halsey Street location, it would be open all day. We'd open at like twelve o'clock in the middle of the day and be open until ten o'clock at night.

Kennedy Didier: Yeah.

Beatrice Simpkins: We had game night, we had youth night, we had spoken word, we had community dinners on Sunday afternoons and the church

would use it for different things. So there was always something going on. Now that's not the case because we're limited by the library's hours. We can't do a lot of programming during the day because people at work.

Kennedy Didier: Yeah.

Beatrice Simpkins: For our community center to thrive it really needs to be able to operate in the evenings, and that's not—we can only do that a couple a days a week now. Saturdays we have to be finished by three. My thing is to get us back—get us into our space within three years. We have a three year of memorandum of agreement with the library. If we can get out of there sooner than that, we will, because we need our own—that's what I'm saying about a gayborhood.

Kennedy Didier: Yeah.

Beatrice Simpkins: We need something that anchors that gayborhood. Why can't the community center anchor that gayborhood and then from that community center we grow programs. Health programs, entertainment, spirituality, and personal development, whatever it is. I think the center should be the driving engine for that. It needs to land in a prominent place in the city. That's my plan, is to pitch this to the city of Newark and say, 'hey, you guys need to get us into a prominent space and look at this area as a potential to create the gayborhood that Newark doesn't have.' I'm happy to do the work. I became the ED last year. I was on the board for like three years. I felt like we were lacking in identity and lacking a niche or relevancy. That's what made me say to them, 'look, we need someone from the community to be the ED,' so they can bring some validity and connection to the school and the businesses and the this and the that. Janice Jackson retired and went down South, she's the one that started this, well, not just her, but her and several other people. Then the founding board members left, and so for a while we—and then with the building problem, the ceiling falling down, and then we couldn't get in the building.

Kennedy Didier: Oh, god.

Beatrice Simpkins: Because you know that building was owned by Prudential, and they just let it sit there because they waiting for somebody to come and get it from them. They had it in a holding company. They would provide heat and everything like that, but if something broke and needed to be fixed, we had to go fix it. And then there

were squatters in the building, it was crazy, but it was our place though. It was *our* place.

Kennedy Didier: Yeah.

Beatrice Simpkins: *Our* place. And now we don't have that, and so that's what I wanna do. I want us to have our place again.

Kennedy Didier: This is a great kind of segue into my last question, which is just, where do you see yourself in like ten years from now? What would be the best—

Beatrice Simpkins: My actually pie in the sky craziness?

Kennedy Didier: Yes, your pie in the sky, craziest thing you could possibly, you would love to do.

Beatrice Simpkins: I would like to be, me personally, either an elected official or running the Department of Health and Human Services for Newark. That would be my ideal thing.

Kennedy Didier: That's so cool.

Beatrice Simpkins: Yeah. That's what I would really like to do.

Kennedy Didier: What initiatives would you do as director of Health and Human Services? What would your focus be?

Beatrice Simpkins: I would make healthcare more accessible to people. I would definitely do something about the quality of care because I don't care what people say, there is a huge disparity still in this country about how you receive your healthcare and how good it is depending on where you are, where your zip code is, how much money you make, and whether you're gay or you're straight. I would like to eliminate that here in the city of Newark. And I think the mayor's, you know, he feels that way too because he had a sister who was gay. You got the health center and all that stuff. I would do more about bringing healthy foods to everybody and not just in particular neighborhoods. I would probably, I don't know if I could, but I would probably start to reduce the number of liquor stores in this city and have less of them in neighborhoods. I would do something about air quality and water quality. The healthiness of the buildings that our children spend their days in, at schools and stuff like that. I would create more open space. There's just too much concrete. We're losing—and I would definitely do something about Woodland Cemetery. I would implement eminent domain

and take over that thirty-seven acres, kick that board to the curb and let the people who are in that neighborhood rebuild that cemetery and manage that cemetery 'cause I think they're capable of doing it.

Kennedy Didier: That's so cool.

Beatrice Simpkins: Those would be some of my agenda items.

Kennedy Didier: Do you have any final things you want to share?

Beatrice Simpkins: I think this is a great project. I hope that maybe the center at some point can do something to help promote it or—

Kennedy Didier: We'd love that.

Beatrice Simpkins: —stage, show some of the interviews and films.

Kennedy Didier: Yeah, we have that exhibit. Yeah, yeah.

Beatrice Simpkins: I saw the exhibit at—you had an installation in JIT.

Kennedy Didier: Mhmm.

Beatrice Simpkins: Yes, and I was there for the day that they opened it up.

Kennedy Didier: Oh, cool.

Beatrice Simpkins: Yeah, so me and Reverend Jerry Lee were there for that. I really think the school needs to be a little more active when it comes to stuff like this.

Kennedy Didier: Absolutely.

Beatrice Simpkins: I came from SPAA, School of Public Affairs and Administration, so to me, my education was about learning how to make public systems work better for people. And also, learning how to do grassroots community level organizing, that kind of stuff, so things change. Oftentimes, change doesn't come from the top down, it comes from the bottom up when it comes to community change. Something happens, there's this groundswell of people and—

Kennedy Didier: A lot of organizing and social movement.

Beatrice Simpkins: Right, organizing, and all of a sudden, something changes. I feel like SPAA needs to be more—SPAA has such a global focus.

Kennedy Didier: It should practice right here.

Beatrice Simpkins: But it needs to be also more local.

Kennedy Didier: Yeah.

Beatrice Simpkins: There's a lot of issues we should be tackling. Alumni can be involved in, and stuff like that, but they wouldn't hear that mess. (Laughs). They consider alumni associations here really a part of fundraising more so than anything else.

Kennedy Didier: Than activism or—

Beatrice Simpkins: Not activism.

Kennedy Didier: —actual change.

Beatrice Simpkins: Yeah, nah. Yeah. And for me, that school should be an activist school.

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

Beatrice Simpkins: Yeah. That's what I think.

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

Beatrice Simpkins: It was great.

Kennedy Didier: This is Kennedy Didier signing off with the Queer Newark Oral History Project, interviewing Beatrice Simpkins on March 7, 2020.

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