

**Queer Newark Oral History Project**

**Interviewee:** Bernard McAllister

**Interviewer:** Esperanza Santos Santos

**Date:** October 25, 2019

**Location:** Rutgers Newark

*Esperanza Santos:* Good afternoon. Today is October 25th, 2019. My name is Esperanza Santos, and I'm interviewing Bernie McAllister at Rutgers Newark, for the Queer Newark Oral History Project. Hi Bernie.

*Bernard McAllister:* Hello. How are you?

*Esperanza Santos:* Good. Ready to get started?

*Bernard McAllister:* Yes, ready to get started.

*Esperanza Santos:* Okay. There's three main things that I want us to focus on today, and that's about like, [00:00:31] I think last time you talked about some songs of your life in chapters.

*Bernard McAllister:* Yeah, that would be My Life in Chapters.

*Esperanza Santos:* Yeah, and a little bit more about the House of Jourdan, 'cause you were House Mother for a pretty good—

*Bernard McAllister:* A long time.

*Esperanza Santos:* A long time.

*Bernard McAllister:* Like fifteen years.

*Esperanza Santos:* Yeah, and the last thing, fifteen years is a long time. The last thing is just your relationship to Newark, and how it's changed.

*Bernard McAllister:* Okay.

*Esperanza Santos:* Yeah, does that sound good?

*Bernard McAllister:* That sounds fine.

*Esperanza Santos:* Okay. So, when you—from what to what year would you say you were House Mother?

*Bernard McAllister:* From '89 to '95, maybe ... '97, so it was a little long, maybe about twenty years. It was a long time.

*Esperanza Santos:* Yeah, and you were saying that you inherited the House from Kareem?

*Bernard McAllister:* Hakeem.

*Esperanza Santos:* Hakeem?

*Bernard McAllister:* Yes, who died of AIDS at the age of twenty-two.

*Esperanza Santos:* Yeah, he was a baby.

*Bernard McAllister:* He was a baby.

*Esperanza Santos:* You were set like, I think for like, people knew that you were strong. People knew that you would be a good house member, but then there was some controversy when you—

*Bernard McAllister:* Actually, Hakeem knew it.

*Esperanza Santos:* Hakeem saw it, but other people didn't.

*Bernard McAllister:* That's true. Hakeem saw it, I didn't see it either. I was really like a real smart ass, and I was really like, just when you're young, and you don't know, we pretend to know. We put on a false confidence of I don't care, and that what was going on.

*Esperanza Santos:* Like how?

*Bernard McAllister:* Well, like taking directions. "Oh, I know how to do it, I don't need your help ma', I got this." When the fact that matters is nine times out of ten, you're gonna need your mother's help, or whoever's help. Whoever's your guardian, or whoever you look up to or whatever the case may be. With the House of Jourdan—the House of Jourdan has connects with my clean time.

*Esperanza Santos:* 'Cause it came right after you got sober.

*Bernard McAllister:* Yeah, 'cause I was at Revlon when I was getting high, and using drugs.

*Esperanza Santos:* With Miss Pucci?

*Bernard McAllister:* With Miss Pucci and then I left the scene for maybe three months. And then, I ... [00:02:37] it's a funny story, when I was—the last time I got high was when I was at a friend's house, Eric, Mother Grace. He was the head of the House of Grace, my first house

when I was a teenager. We were at Eric's house, and I was with a friend of mine, Tyrone, I won't say the last name, you know who you are. It was me, Grace and Tyrone, and we were smoking crack, and I remember looking at them. First, I got the money from my mom. I made up this exuberated price, this astronomical price saying, "Oh I need a bus car for \$200, for me to get back and forth." She was like, "\$200, are you sure? I don't have a lot of money, Bernie, but here 'cause you need it, it goes". I'm smoking the crack with them, and I just looked at them, and I just said, "I'm not doing this no more." They were like, we were in the middle of, we had the crack out, everything was out. I said, "Nah, I'm good, I'm not doing this no more." They said, "Well, just help us finish this up," so we finished that up.

We was walking home, and Tyrone was staying with me at the time and I just remember telling Tyrone, I said, "I'm done, I am spent, it's done for me." We were walking home, and it was cold as fuck, because I got clean February 10th, so it [00:04:05] had to be the 1st of February, and you're not from here, but it gets really cold in January and February. And we walked home, and I was freezing, and he said, "So, you really not doing it?" "Nope." I had been humiliated prior to that at a party, and you know my best friend Robert, Dude.

*Esperanza Santos:* House.

*Bernard McAllister:* Yes, House.

*Esperanza Santos:* Mr. Dude.

*Bernard McAllister:* Yes, we was at a house party which were really big then in the 80s and the 90s. And I was at the house party, and we were reading each other like queens do.

*Esperanza Santos:* How fun is that?

*Bernard McAllister:* It was cute until I was the subject of the read.

*Esperanza Santos:* Oh, until [00:04:45] you were in the hot seat.

*Bernard McAllister:* Yes, and the hot seat was that, "Oh, Bernie, you're walking around here like you're fab, you're not fab, we all know just you're wearing Dude's clothes 'cause you don't have any." Anybody who knows me knows my friend Dude is like a foot shorter than me almost.

*Esperanza Santos:* Yeah, he's like-

*Bernard McAllister:* I would have to wear his pants really down low, so they wouldn't look high. I have a big baggy sweater on, and the pants, because I was doing drugs so badly. The week after that was when we was at Tyrone, and me Tyrone and Grace. When I went home, I kept saying, "Nope, I'm done." So I called East Orange General, and said I'm coming up here, I'm coming up," and they said, "Okay, you can come in two or three days." I stayed in my room, and cried and was just miserable.

*Esperanza Santos:* Detoxing.

*Bernard McAllister:* Oh God, I didn't know I was detoxing, I just thought I was like, "Oh girl, I don't need this right now." What happens is I walked up there and I sat there, they put their, heavy— at this time they you had to come to the emergency room, and they would call you up to the Raft program. The Raft program is the detox program, and then after Raft then you go to Pride, which is a 90-day program, out-patient. I go there—

*Esperanza Santos:* What does it stand for Rab?

*Bernard McAllister:* Raft.

*Esperanza Santos:* Raft.

*Bernard McAllister:* R-A-F-T.

*Esperanza Santos:* Is it an acronym or they just called it that?

*Bernard McAllister:* No, it's an acronym, but I can't remember.

*Esperanza Santos:* Okay.

*Bernard McAllister:* I've been clean forever. We went on it's like twenty-eight years, twenty-seven years now.

*Esperanza Santos:* Congratulations.

*Bernard McAllister:* Thank you. What happened, I get there now, I'm sitting in there with this big trench coat on Dude's trench coat, and this big old wool hat so nobody could see me. They had me sitting there for like two or three hours, I sit there. Then they say, "Come upstairs," and they had this young lady with me, Joanne. Joanne looks just hideous, I guess she had [00:06:29] just got there too. They had her

as a greeter, and I walk in feeling very very, you know, dynasty, as you coming in.

*Esperanza Santos:* You're feeling very very fairy like, this is your runway now.

*Bernard McAllister:* Yes, this is it. You know I'm very white woman. I'm coming up to here covered up.

*Esperanza Santos:* With your purse.

*Bernard McAllister:* Yes.

*Esperanza Santos:* Your pearls.

*Bernard McAllister:* When I get there, I was fine until Joanne said, "Well, welcome this is where you belong." I just started sobbing, I said, "Oh my life, how did this happen to me? Who are you? Why am I here?" That was a beautiful journey for me, because some of the people I met in the detox program, I didn't meet many, I met Joanne in the detox program. When you move on to the next program, the Pride program, most of those, so a lot of those people are still in my life to this day. They're still friends of mine, and what happened was that I was using drugs.

Like I said, when I was in the House of Revlon, when I came home, Hakeem approached me and said, "Well, I heard that you got yourself clean, we wanna have a party for you." I was like, "Oh, that's cool." He gave me a party in a bar. I'm like, "Well baby, I don't think I'm supposed to be here." I was like, "'Cause this is where I messed up at [00:07:43]." "Oh no, you're fine." Hakeem made you feel fine, he was just that type of person. He could make you think that you could lift this building. He was so inspirational in how he talked to people. He knew how to gas you up, and put, like blow smoke, not up your ass, but under your feet so you rise.

You may not have risen anywhere, but in your head, you could conquer the world. I rocked and rolled with the House of Jourdan. Of course they didn't want me, Hakeem did. I used to fight a lot, and I went to the meeting, and they started asking me questions and I was like, "I don't have to answer these questions, child, I'm already in the house, Hakeem said it [00:08:25]."

*Esperanza Santos:* Why are you interviewing me? I'm already a house member.

*Bernard McAllister:* Yeah like, "Why are you even speaking to me?" They said something. I said, "Well bitch, I don't like you either," something

to that effect. So I said, "Well, you know what, this has been cute, I'm leaving." I said, "Jourdan", right, joking. When Hakeem, we were down the street from University Hospital, so I walked down to the hospital, it was a beautiful Spring day. I get there, I hear all these people in the hallway arguing, and they were arguing about me not coming, and Hakeem said, "No, now, trust me, I'm telling you, this is the right move." "Oh no, we don't see it, da da da da da."

I get in the house ... with protests from them, and what eventually happened is that I became friends with these people. It wasn't easy, quick-it wasn't a quickie, it was like maybe about five or six months before I gelled, but because they would have meetings, and wouldn't invite me. Because you get penalized for not coming to a meeting, and I'll get asked and say, "I didn't get a call." They'd say, "Child, the meeting was at three o'clock, why are you getting here at six o'clock?" "They told me six." They would do stuff like that to me, but it didn't make a difference.

Kareem rises to the top, and next thing you know I was Mother. I approached ballroom family much like I approach my family. All my family aren't blood cousins to me, but we were raised in the same crib. We ate the same food. We got the same spankings. We had the same experiences.

Women were very, very ... um, were very [00:10:00] important in my life, they ran my life, because most of the adults in my life were women, you know, so I raised it like my mother raised me. I would take people in to the house, and if I saw a potential, even if I didn't see potential, if I felt like you needed us, we would bring you aboard. What happened, the House of Jourdan was considered a joke before I took over, and then so one day we was gonna do something they said they had-

*Esperanza Santos:* Wait, why did people consider you a joke?

*Bernard McAllister:* One, we were a Jersey house, and two we weren't the "in" kids.

*Esperanza Santos:* Oh, so this is like, there's all the New York houses and this is the New Jersey house.

*Bernard McAllister:* The New York houses, and if you didn't hang with the New York girls, you weren't fab, you weren't anybody. So we were walking this ball, our first ball as Jourdan's, as a house. They had this thing called runway, but it was runway as a house where you have to be in sync in a group walking the runway, and do precision and all

that stuff. Well, we went there, we were the underdogs, we left there, we were champs.

And from then on it just grew, and the House of Jourdan was wonderful for me, because it allowed me to test my chops. It allowed me to make mistakes, and it allowed me to grow with my recovery. 'Cause I had one year clean. That's—when I got to the House of Jourdan I had maybe a year and a half. They followed me up until then, and it was a beautiful thing. We've had like—I've had—I've created almost more legends and icons than anybody in the ballroom scene. We were the first House to feed the homeless. We were the first House in the country to go to a state assembly and speak. We were the first House to have a—the Fireball with James Credle, Dean Credle and them, and Don Ransom. We were the first—we did a lot of stuff, like when we fed the homeless people, we literally cooked the food in our homes, put it in plates, wrapped it up, and gave it to them. That was Elaina Jourdan's idea and from there, I think we were the precursor to ballroom today.

Well, being on television, we just did a lot of—we were the first to do a lot of things. Now it's common, it's common for houses to feed homeless, it's common for them, like, there's a Sean Coleman transition to [00:12:32] Destination Tomorrow. I don't know if you ever heard of him. Beautiful, you should interview Sean too. Destination Tomorrow, trans man, and I believe that they were the precursor—we were the precursor to anything that had to do with government, and policies and politics, and we grew from there. Now, did we have our issues? Yeah, we were considered a gang once.

*Esperanza Santos:* By who?

*Bernard McAllister:* By the city of Newark and the State of New Jersey.

*Esperanza Santos:* Well, how could they slap that label on you?

*Bernard McAllister:* Because we were a gang, honey.

*Esperanza Santos:* Like how?

*Bernard McAllister:* In the sense that you fucked with one, and it rained on you. No, no, no, no, look at me, when I say I rained on you, you'd have thought I was Don Corleone. I had seventy kids, anything I wanted done, they did. If somebody messed with one of my kids, I would say, "Oh, okay." I would call them up on the phone first, like I was Don

Corleone and say, "Well listen, I had, there's a problem." Oh, if it is a problem, okay. That night they would get beat up by ten people.

*Esperanza Santos:* How? 'Cause when I think of a house, I think of fifteen people you just described seventy. How did it work walking a runway with seventy children?

*Bernard McAllister:* Well, at the time we rose to seventy, but at the time we was probably about thirty/forty.

*Esperanza Santos:* That's still a big number.

*Bernard McAllister:* Yeah, and remember, we were representing Jersey. We were a Jersey House, so we didn't try to incorporate New York. We weren't infatuated with New York, and there were houses prior to us, there was the House of Richards. There was House of Adonis. Harmonica Sunbeam, I don't know if you've ever heard of her? Another person you should speak to, she's an entertainer, drag entertainer, personality. They were the precursor to the House of Jourdan. The House of Jourdan came from the House of Adonis. The House of Adonis came from the House of LaBeija, which we all know, the House of LaBeija.

*Esperanza Santos:* Pepper LaBeija.

*Bernard McAllister:* Yeah, Pepper and Freddie and them now, but all of them, that was the line. That's how we're their grandkids, and they never truly, they didn't wanna accept us. They always wanted to make us feel less than, and you know, there's just like Mean Girls, the movie. There's the "in" kids, there's the so-so kids, and then there's the kids who are like, ugh. At the beginning we were like, the ugh, then we became the so-so and then we became the premiere. The reason I say we're the premiere, almost every major House that's out now, one of my children are the Mother or the Father of that House.

*Esperanza Santos:* Wait, what?

*Bernard McAllister:* Yes.

*Esperanza Santos:* What, makes you think like ... what?

*Bernard McAllister:* Because my approach to ballroom was different. Remember, my approach was family. It was entirely family. Remember they were prostituting, they were writing checks, they were breaking windows in New York. They were more like a gang like, they were

criminals, not all, some. Most of the House of Ebony, but that's what they were at that time, and it was the early 80s, mid 80s.

That was their thing and we didn't do craft [00:15:50] what they do, writing checks and stuff like that. We didn't do that. Everything we did, we made. We couldn't as for the House of Jourdan, we hung together, we ate together. Even if you dated somebody outside the House, or in another House, you still only hung around us. That's what made the House of Jourdan different from most houses.

*Esperanza Santos:* Okay.

*Bernard McAllister:* Like I remember being in a club, and I have a thing of, I have a—I'm not claustrophobic, but I just hate when there's so many people around me, I get really nervous and have anxiety. Somebody bumped into me, and they just beat him to a pulp. That's when I say we were the gay bitches, we rocked it, like if you wanted it, we gave it to you.

Me being from the projects, I had to learn and grow that that's not what, it wasn't about that but I've always had the roots of the family there. 'Cause I remember how my grandmother raised me. There was never favorites in my family, she loved everybody. If you got in trouble, everybody got in trouble, and that's how I raised the House of Jourdan.

*Esperanza Santos:* I feel like in you saying this, there's like this like sense of feminine power to like care for your family.

*Bernard McAllister:* That's what led—my upbringing was women, Black, strong, independent mothers who may not even in today's standards they didn't even know they had feelings that they could have, that women have today, or the choices. My mother went to work. Me and my sister went to school. My mother never had any drug addictions, or anything of that nature.

*Esperanza Santos:* Yeah, it skipped her. No, it was on your dad's side.

*Bernard McAllister:* Yeah, and it came to me, and my sister and we—I was always on both sides of the fence. I was a good kid, but I was getting stoned. I was fifteen years old, but I was hanging with forty-year-old women. See women will play a very strong part in my being, they will play—that's mine.

*Esperanza Santos:* Okay.

*Bernard McAllister:* That's fine. They will play a very strong part in every aspect of my life. I had gotten so caught up in the House of Jourdan that I ignored my family. Not in a bad sense.

*Esperanza Santos:* No, no, no, you just—

*Bernard McAllister:* It was just like, girl when you're twenty something, and your mother is saying, "Well your sister—" "No, not right now girl." My sister was using, but she had kids and I wasn't trying to be. Those were her kids. I love them dearly, but I had to live my life.

What eventually happened was, when you're the head of something and you don't prepare the people that's following you to lead, and you're not willing to move out the way to allow them to lead. What happens is this, there's so much combustion it's almost, it has to burst, the air has to come out some way.

What happened was that the House fell apart. They went to other houses and I was devastated. Oh, I felt so betrayed, oh, woe is me, how dare you do that? I fed you, I've clothed you. Oh, but what I didn't do was prepare them, or myself, for the moment when we would go our own ways, 'cause I never saw it coming.

Some kids came to my house, they were fourteen, fifteen years old, they were twenty-five by now. You know twenty-five in gay years, honey, you're like forty. They needed to do what they needed to do. The biggest thing would come from me was with my members, a third of my members got with the House of Mugler.

*Esperanza Santos:* Why did they move?

*Bernard McAllister:* No, this is what they did. That my house members said, well, you know what they wanna start a house, a new house. I didn't hear about it until they was already leaving.

*Esperanza Santos:* Why would they wanna leave?

*Bernard McAllister:* They wanted to leave, 'cause I sucked the oxygen out the room. See, years ago I would have been like, "Oh, I don't know why they left," but at this stage of my life, I know exactly why they left, and I would've fucking left too. Because I'm the type of person when I speak, I work with doctors, I was a director in a hospital. When I talk people tend to listen.

*Esperanza Santos:* If they don't listen then you make them listen.

*Bernard McAllister:* (20:37) Yes, and I tend to draw people in, so it could be your meeting, you feel me? If I come in the room, everybody take their eyes off you, and they automatically put their eyes on me. Me being like, "Oh no, no, oh, no, no, no, listen to her," really when ego was in charge and I'm doing—you understand, and see I can look back at it now.

I can look back on it now, I didn't see that shit then all I knew is that I was betrayed, I did this for you. See I didn't know about the triangle of victimization. The triangle where if you're doing something, for somebody, you get mad at them, 'cause they don't respond the way you want them to, 'cause now you think you could control them. Or the other way around is that somebody's doing for you and you don't think that they're treating you the way they used to, you get resentment. I was like, "Ugh, I hate y'all, I can't believe that," and I stopped being friends with them, many of them for years.

I did bring the House of Jourdan back a couple times, and it was good, but my heart was never in it because I never trusted myself the same way again. I never trusted myself that way again. Did I have some great moments after that? Fantastic history making moments, but it was never with the same—what's the word, for being naive? Naiveté, whatever saying.

*Esperanza Santos:* Yeah, sure.

*Bernard McAllister:* Let's say for the fact, lack of better word. I was never innocent again. As ballroom went on, and they went on [00:22:05] their way, I started doing other journeys. 'Cause see God, one thing about me, when I ask God, for something, he usually gives it to me. I remember being at church saying, "They're not my friends God, anybody that doesn't mean me well is not my friend, please remove them."

He removed everybody. So no, I wasn't getting the calls, I wasn't invited to the fab parties. Bernie's just bitter and mad, and I would come around, and then instead of me being humble and tell people I was hurt, I would bring it across as anger. You see, mind you I'm still in recovery. I'm about to come to full head how this happens, so when I realized that it became ego from sponsorship, and people in recovery, because they could tell things were going on.

*Esperanza Santos:* They can see that spiritual side.

*Bernard McAllister:* Yes, and I was like, "Well, you know what? I don't care, ballroom was ballroom, who gives a damn?" Guess what happens? I get a knock at my door, it's my mother, my aunt Helen, and my uncle Roger. My mother's brother is Uncle Roger, he's twelve years younger than my mother, and then she has a brother that's fourteen years younger. He came to the house to say, "Your sister is really messing up. I want you—we have to decide who's gonna take her kids."

Now mind you, I've had all these people that lived with me, I fed, I fought for, I visited in hospitals, I buried. Oh, my God, it's always that, but guess what God had in store for me? See, he wasn't done with me yet, and he was actually preparing me, but remember I said family in the beginning, right? Guess what? I ended up raising my sister's children, and I had them for thirteen years. Mind you, I was still doing the House of Jourdan, but I wasn't the overall Mother, or Father. I was still in charge of course, but I wasn't as active, 'cause now I had to do PTA. I had to go do what is that does that thing, when you go to school? Teacher-

*Esperanza Santos:* The parent-teacher conferences?

*Bernard McAllister:* Parent-teacher conferences. I was going to cheerleading practice. I was going to all these things. I was doing all this stuff, and it saved me. Me taking custody of my nieces, 'cause I wanted my nephew. My mother said, "No, I'll have him, can you take the girls?" I said, "Okay, I'll take the girls." This is the funny story. I was going with this straight dude, he had like five kids, and he was a really nice guy. He was trying to stay clean, always in jail. Cute sex, it wasn't great sex, cute sex, but we were very close.

And I remember calling my sister and saying, "Have you talked to mommy? She wants me to—" "Oh, ain't nobody taking my kids, don't call here with that. Mind your faggot ass business, you killed me." She'd been calling me fag since I was two, so I was like, "Hey girl, that's what killing and this and this and that." I said, James, I said, "I wanna go down there where she's at." He said, "Well, you don't wanna go down there, 'cause you'll get in trouble if y'all [00:25:25]get into a fight or something." James came with me and I used ... did we have cell phones then? We had something close to that.

And I remember calling her, and I'm looking at her on the back porch of the house she was at, 'cause she was staying with somebody. You could tell she was using, 'cause her conversation was erratic. I went there, I said, "Well, you know what, where your

boyfriend at? I'm gonna fuck him up, and you're gonna do this and this and that," and I just stopped. I said, "Let me talk to you outside."

She crying, "No, ain't nobody taking my kids." I said, "Gretta, you know what? We had a wonderful childhood, and we fucked up our lives and we enjoyed it. Shouldn't we give them a chance to fuck up their own life? Shouldn't they get that chance if they make mistakes, it could be their mistake and not ours?"

She gave me the kids. I took them with one pair of panties. Bria was in the third grade, Senaya was in pre-school maybe. When they left me, Bria was in 10th grade/ 11th grade, something like that and Senaya was—was she going to high school? Eighth, grade. No, Bria was a junior, Senaya was about to be a freshman. They go back with their mother and the reason I said I had it for thirteen years is because by this time now I'm really involved in their lives. Ballroom gets put on the back burner and what comes forefront is family, so you see how it comes full circle. I raised the people in the House of Jourdan on the premise of how I was raised. Now, I don't have other people's children, or peers, now I have people who have the same DNA as me.

That's when I became Uncle Bernie, and when I became Uncle Bernie, they put a pride in me. There's something, there's a pride that comes with being a parent. When your child does well, when the child goes to get her hair done, and you stand outside the school to see how the girls like her hair. [00:28:00]

That was that for me and that was what brought me the most, what made me the person that I am. Who is calling me? Oh shit. Well, I missed that call. Okay, I'll receive the next one if it comes. Oh, did they? Oh, they didn't, I'm fine. Okay, so anyway, back to that. It gave me a sense of, I don't know what parenting did from other people, but to me it made me feel as if I was doing something right. I had to teach the girls how to carry themselves, I had to teach, I had to learn how to do hair. I had to cook dinner at night. I had to go to, I had to watch Degrassi [00:29:05] over and over.

*Esperanza Santos:* You're rolling your eyes.

*Bernard McAllister:* It was like Drake, and I knew all of that, and it allowed me to become a man. You understand what I'm saying? I wasn't a gay man. I wasn't a straight man. I was a man raising cubs. I look at it, and you might even say, I'd look at it as like a lion, I was a lion. That allowed me to not be so harsh, not always having to have the

answer, not always having to read. 'Cause when you were gay people, if they're your children, you still have to be on point.

*Esperanza Santos:* You gotta be slick.

*Bernard McAllister:* Slick, but when I'm with my children, if I was slick, I would hurt their feelings, and remember I had girls.

*Esperanza Santos:* And you had to be soft.

*Bernard McAllister:* I had to be soft, but stern, but I also had to understand that they were beautiful young girls. I also skipped something too, when I was in the House of Jourdan, we've always had strong women, cis women. That was something that I kind of demanded.

*Esperanza Santos:* Wait, okay [00:30:15] pause, 'cause as far as I understood it, a lot of people think of houses as places for gay men and some trans women, but it sounds like for you—

*Bernard McAllister:* The House of Jourdan did, I mean other houses had women, but our women were different. When the AIDS epidemic came along, our women was the ones who soothed us, helped us get through it. Allowed us to have—they were our connection to the real world, 'cause we were under fire at this time.

We weren't being slaughtered and killed like trans are today, we were dying. Literally, I lost like twenty-five kids to HIV and AIDS. Easy, I've lost over 150 friends, probably. Remember I came out in '81, and that was at the height—excuse me, can we just one second?

*Esperanza Santos:* Yeah, take, go for it.

*[Extraneous Conversation 00:31:12-00:31:30]*

*Bernard McAllister:* I'm captain save-a-hoe. Okay, so with the cis women, 'cause there was Hakima, Baby, Jamie, Samira. Oh, my God it was all of these women, Melissa. We always had cis women to someone, most of them weren't even lesbians. They were just straight women that hung—they were fag hags.

Our fag hags saved our lives, because it was the fag hags that would go visit you in the hospital. It was the fag hags, if some straight boys said something to you that it was the women that stood in front of the boys. They said, "You ain't gonna do nothing

to my brother." When they were shooting queens, and beatin' us up.

Again, just the strong thing with women and I learned from raising the people, or being in charge of the House of Jourdan how not to act with my children. And how they hung on my every word, and they needed me to show them everything. You know, I had to show them how to feed the homeless. I showed them how to be kind.

I remember one day my niece was laughing at a homeless person, and I turned to her, I said, "It's funny? I was homeless, you would laugh at me?" She held me in the highest esteem, "I would never laugh at you, I love you Uncle Bernie." "Yeah, but you're laughing at them, so you're laughing at me, baby. You understand what I'm saying? That's not how, I didn't raise you for that. That's not what you do. Now we gotta go find some homeless people to feed now since you wanna laugh." I will never forget like Bria was in the sixth, I wanna say sixth grade, and she was with these girls.

Now, this is how close me and my oldest girl are. She always went to visit her mother for the Summer in Harrisburg where there was a recovery town in Pennsylvania. My sister says, she hears this fighting and she goes back there and say, "Well, what is going on? Bria, why is you choking this girl?" "She said Uncle Bernie was going to hell, 'cause he was gay, and Imma whoop her ass again."

My sister calls me dying on the phone laughing saying, "Bernie, the girl almost killed somebody, 'cause she said something about you." I had to get on there, and get on her butt even though I was really happy she did, I had to tell her that it was wrong for her to put her hands on somebody, 'cause you're nobody's parent.

You don't put your hands on anybody, and I was like, "But did you get her?" She said, "Yeah, I got her." I said, "Okay." That was my life, for many many years and not only did I raise my sister's two children, I raised my cousin Gerard. I raised my cousin Jody, and I brought her—when she was pregnant her first child, she lived with me, and my girls. Then when she got her, finally got her own apartment, I brought her kids home from the hospital, her twins. It was like I was becoming more family-oriented. Everything was family.

That was cool, because I think it slowed me down from having sex a lot, because the girls was there. I did have [00:34:40] James, but we had broken up, and that was just part of my thing. "Nah, I got girls, you can't come to my house." That saved me, and that

molded me to be the man that I am today even more than the ballroom scene.

*Esperanza Santos:* What was different about being a father figure that was different from being a House Mother?

*Bernard McAllister:* Because I always had the thing with when they said House Mother, and these your House kids. These kids were smoking marijuana, prostituting, making money, doing all the things that gay regular grown gay people do and what was I going to tell them? Not to do it? It was kinda like, it was like you're guiding them, I was more like their guardian, or their mentor. When you have children, and children look to you, when your child is hungry, and your child is sick, they're not looking, they don't wanna hear all that shit about, "Well, girl maybe if you-."

Hm-mm, get in bed, hold them, make them better. Go to the doctor, get their teeth fixed, get them glasses. Oh, I dealt with menstruations and all this other shit. It just made me have this thing with family that was already instilled in me but that had to blossom. I believe we can put seeds in the ground and you think they're dead, but weeds and flowers grow through the concrete. You understand what I'm saying? It's all the time I'm thinking I'm not doing the things my grandmother and grandfather taught me, all of it was leading to. The bond that me and my sister had, 'cause I told you my sister passed, it has been almost five months.

*Esperanza Santos:* Wait, pause. Your sister passed away.

*Bernard McAllister:* Mm-hmm.

*Esperanza Santos:* Oh, my goodness, may she rest in peace.

*Bernard McAllister:* Thank you, and can't even go into that. I'm in deep therapy for that. Anyway, it just allowed me to, and one thing I would mention [00:36:52] to my sister, I never allowed her children to say anything bad about her, never. I would curse her out, I said, "Y'all wait right here." 'Cause I remember Bria was crying, she said, "I saw mommy, she looked like she didn't want to, she didn't even speak to me." "Oh, she didn't speak to you? Where is your mother?" "On the other side of the projects." "Is she? Wait right here."

I would go and say, "Bitch, let me tell you something. What the fuck you won't do is treat them like that, now take your ass around there, wipe," 'cause I would make her cry. "Wipe your face, and go

give 'em girls a hug. I ain't asked you to be mother of the year, but I'll be damned if you're gonna sit out here and be a crack head of the year." My sister got it together, and she got her girls, eventually, right, the one year before she graduated. I was still in charge still, because it's now my mother's getting older, I'm becoming the patriarch of the family, and that was that. That was what molded me.

*Esperanza Santos:* When?

*Bernard McAllister:* In the city of Newark. I did all that in the city of Newark.

*Esperanza Santos:* When you talk about being in the projects and raising people, and having kids, did you stay in one house or one area?

*Bernard McAllister:* Well, when I got my children, I lived on 2 West Kinney street out right on the corner of West Kinney and Broad, right across from the unemployment symphony hall. I don't know how, or why, but I just took to taking care of them so easily that I remember I had slept in the front room, and I gave them my bedroom, 'cause they had bunk beds. I bought them bunk beds, 'cause they had nothing, and we grew from there. We moved from a one bedroom to a two-bedroom, two bedroom to a three bedroom. That was my life, and I was still walking balls and everything.

*Esperanza Santos:* Oh, my goodness.

*Bernard McAllister:* I was still active in the community and I was getting my, I quit school in the ninth/tenth grade. I got my GED, I told you but then from when I've got the kids, I said, "Well, huh, they're here." I was talking about my lot in [00:39:07] life, that's how I got to college. I used to have to have somebody watch them three days a week, for like three years till I got my bachelor's. I was being a living example not even knowing I was being a living example, but they were my example of what I wanted to become, or what they needed. Then when I did get back in ballroom, it changed again, 'cause again, I understood my error.

*Esperanza Santos:* What do you mean?

*Bernard McAllister:* My error with the House of Jourdan ending. When you're a leader of a group, you can be a leader or a dictator, and since I had been the leader so long and I wasn't letting nobody else lead, I became a dictator. Ideas need to flourish. There's this commercial by GE, you really should see it, I don't think a lot of people really got it.

They said, an idea and they would show this little ugly, furry thing. He'd be walking down the street and people would turn from it ugh, nobody really saw the idea, and it kept going. You gotta keep going, then he got maybe about three feet tall. He looked dirty, slothy, whatever now, he's still an idea. To make him come into fruition, they finally show him into fruition, he's on stage, and everybody's clapping. What a great idea, that's a great idea.

You see, the idea grows and it becomes more than an idea, it becomes a fact, it becomes a policy. It becomes a—and that's what I wasn't allowing. As much pressure I've put on this thing, if I keep pushing pedal on it, the water is going to come out, 'cause it has to. Nothing, especially when you got people have ideas and more people coming, you have to let people breathe, and I didn't. Then I went on to the new area with the parenting, and then after the kids left I was like, "Well, I don't have the kids anymore, what do I do?" I went back into the ballroom scene, and I became a Ebony [00:41:10].

*Esperanza Santos:* Oh, okay so, 'cause so can you help me go from the first time you were in a house when you were fourteen to now?

*Bernard McAllister:* Help you how?

*Esperanza Santos:* 'Cause before you were in the House of Jourdan you were with the Revlon's, and before the Revlon's you were with the-

*Bernard McAllister:* I was at Grace.

*Esperanza Santos:* You were at Grace?

*Bernard McAllister:* Yeah.

*Esperanza Santos:* It was Grace, Revlon, Jourdan, and now it's in Ebony.

*Bernard McAllister:* Yes.

*Esperanza Santos:* For you, how is it like being an Ebony now?

*Bernard McAllister:* Well, I really don't, I'm somewhat semi-retired from the ballroom scene at this point. Ballroom has changed, which its supposed to. Again, like I tell you, you can't keep shaking something, it's gonna explode. Ballroom is exploding right now, there's Universal, there's the Me Too movement, which has affected ballroom.

*Esperanza Santos:* The hashtag Me Too movement?

*Bernard McAllister:* Well yeah, remember, 'cause remember Me Too is connected to Black Lives Matter, which is connected to Trans Lives Matter.

*Esperanza Santos:* Yes.

*Bernard McAllister:* Everything's connected. Six degrees of separation, so if this is a shift in this, there's a shift in this. As this come on, we start to see houses become more politically pole . If I had done it ten years for twelve years prior.

*Esperanza Santos:* Oh, okay.

*Bernard McAllister:* Meeting with the Mayor, and all the things they were doing in New York. We were the first ones to feed the homeless, but now all houses feed the homeless. We were the first ones to discuss, we were the first ones to help get the kids who wanted to get on body shots.

*Esperanza Santos:* You were telling me about the hormones and the breasts and the everything.

*Bernard McAllister:* We were the first ones to do that, and we weren't crafting. We would, me and William, who was the Father at the time, and the other leaders of the house, we would put our money together and like focus on one particular femme queen who wanted it badly.

*Esperanza Santos:* Shut up, you would help the femme queens get their stuff in a time when people had to fight for that?

*Bernard McAllister:* Yeah, we were able to 'em breasts, but it was black market, but we were-

*Esperanza Santos:* You made it work?

*Bernard McAllister:* We made it happen, and um, you know, to this day I still have a great rapport with most of the kids in this house. Even the ones I don't speak to, or we're not really friendly or not say friendly, we're still friendly. We don't really use each other, but we still, there still a recognition of who I am, and the respect that comes with that. Also, the change is that I can now respect them, and what they've done. My daughters have become Mother Blahnik, Mother Balenciaga, Mother Garson, Father Ford. All these people came from me, and which is cool.

*Esperanza Santos:* That's pretty beautiful.

*Bernard McAllister:* But it's not cool if you don't have the—if you're not ready for the next stage of life.

*Esperanza Santos:* Tell me that I don't get it.

*Bernard McAllister:* Okay. The next stage of life is okay, you've done all these great things, your kids grow up, now you have an empty house. What do you do next?

*Esperanza Santos:* Oh, from your perspective?

*Bernard McAllister:* From my perspective. 'Cause you hear me speak, I only speak from mine. I never speak, for others this is my experience. Again, this is what I'm perceiving and how I'm remembering it, and that's how it was for me.

*Esperanza Santos:* That's pretty beautiful.

*Bernard McAllister:* It took me a long time to understand the beauty in it, 'cause again, I was resentful because the phone calls weren't ringing, the phones weren't—the calls weren't coming in let me say that. I wasn't sitting on judges panels the way I once was 'cause I was on everybody's judges panel. If Bernie wasn't on the judges' panel, ugh.

As time went on and I understood that's not my role anymore, and I respected the kids that came behind me. I understood how they would feel like, "Why is he there and not us? He's like, grandpa," and they needed to move up. I was smart enough to say, "Okay." When I'm needed I respond. I'm not one of those legends, I'm not gonna mention people's names, or icons that it's my way because—Nope, that's fine, I'm good, I've had my time. I understand that, I kinda liken it to, you know, I love Diana Ross and I love the Supremes and she was that bitch, but I knew when to leave the stage. I knew when to let that go and the reason, I could let it go was, because I had what a life outside of ballroom.

*Esperanza Santos:* You weren't just in the fantasy you had a reality besides that fantasy.

*Bernard McAllister:* Exactly, and it just changed my whole way of thinking, because now I'm thinking like, "Okay, I'm a force in the community, I'm just not part of ballroom. I'm the face of gay in Newark. I'm the face of—I spoke with the State Senate, I can be Wikipedia-ed. [00:46:41] There's this university called Fairleigh Dickinson, which I'm gonna eventually get my master's from.

*Esperanza Santos:* Hey.

*Bernard McAllister:* But they came to me, and they wanted to put me in their time capsule as one of Newark's, I don't know what's the word I want to look for 'cause I don't wanna make it seem like—

*Esperanza Santos:* Just use.

*Bernard McAllister:* The most interesting people.

*Esperanza Santos:* Okay.

*Bernard McAllister:* They did an interview with me, which was, I didn't know it would be such a big deal at the time, but a lot of the things I said came to fruition ten years later, fifteen years later.

*Esperanza Santos:* What are you talking about?

*Bernard McAllister:* On where ballroom would be at, what life could be like, what I wanted for the future. 'Cause remember I dropped out of school in the ninth grade, I got my GED. I always knew there was something for me, I just didn't know what. I didn't understand how I was mature enough to deal with the deluge of respect that comes with it, and not letting it go to your head.

That's things that come with life. When ballroom ended, my life didn't end. I have a friend, he's walks ballroom, and he's the same age as me and I don't remember him ever having a job, ever. He still walks balls. He's still vogues at fifty. "Girl why?" "Oh, because I like it." Yeah, but do you have anything else to like? You have nothing to compare to, it's like when somebody says, "I love vanilla ice cream, all I eat is vanilla ice cream." "Have you tried anything else?"

*Esperanza Santos:* Have you tried chocolate?

*Bernard McAllister:* Yeah, you see what I'm saying? Have you tried another way of life? It's not enough for recovery, but do you sit on boards? Like I've sat on boards for NJCRI [00:48:48], I've sat on boards for Gay Men's Health Crisis. I've sat on boards for POCC (People of Color Concerned). That's where it became—that's when I felt like an icon when I was doing iconic shit. Not necessarily that—not the ballroom wasn't cool, but when I started doing some shit, that's when I started becoming comfortable in my skin saying, "I did some good shit. Okay, I can see it now."

*Esperanza Santos:* It sounds like to me there was some seeds your mother, and grandmother gave you and you were—

*Bernard McAllister:* My mother, my grandmother and her sisters, but mostly my grandfather, 'cause he was the only male positive role model. My mother, and my Aunt Ethel is the reason I am the man that I am today. Why I can take a family shopping, don't know them, drop them off, enjoy your food. Why I can raise 700 coats for a coat drive, me alone, 700 coats.

Why kids have graduated from high school and I was their chaperone, no kin to me. Why I can work in a food pantry, and feed over 500 people a day for two years. All those things came from a combination of ballroom, living in the city of Newark, and how I was raised to make me the person that I am. I'll give you an example, they have this thing called Fun Day down Pennington Court. Actually, I never lived on Pennington Court, I always lived down the street. I was always in the projects, me and my sister, and it was two years ago, maybe or last year. I went and bought two bikes, parked the bikes right there, told the DJ, "Call me when they get to the end, near the end." I came back down there, I'm raffling off the bikes and the way I raffle them off is a raffle is a dollar, a sleeve is \$5. They raised that money, you ready for me? I left the money in the projects for them. When you mention my name, my name, I'm proud to say is synonymous with doing well for people. I say doing well, 'cause it's not just, I'm not being just not good.

Well to me when I hear well comes from my spirit. I'm doing well by you, that means we have no connection whatsoever, but that you're a human being and it's my job. God has put it on my chest for me to do well by you, so that you can then pass it on and do well by others. My girls, I raised, my niece is twenty-six years old. She has a daughter, she works, she's not smutty [00:52:00], she doesn't do any of those things. Not that I'm reading other people's children, my youngest girl who's getting—well, both of my daughters is gay. My nieces, I call the daughters.

*Esperanza Santos:* Oh my gosh, how beautiful.

*Bernard McAllister:* They're bisexual women, and it's all right with me, what do I care? They talk about me, 'cause the one thing I miss about my sister was that as much as we argued, she was my biggest cheerleader. She would tell people, even people that was getting high, "Oh you don't know my brother." Mind you, she was older than me, but I'll never forget when this woman, excuse me one second.

[Extraneous Conversation 00:52:43- 00:52:47]

*Bernard McAllister:* That was, that was my life. That was it and that's who I am today. We never got to the part, the question about living in Newark, 'cause. That clock doesn't work.

*Esperanza Santos:* I don't know if it works but it is 4:15.

*Bernard McAllister:* Oh, yeah gotta go, my thing is almost out.

*Esperanza Santos:* Okay, so-

*Bernard McAllister:* We've got to do this again, 'cause we haven't got to the Newark. We're throwing a three-parter here! Oh, my God, this is like-

*Esperanza Santos:* You got a lot to say.

*Bernard McAllister:* This is lethargic for me, it helps me, cathartic, I'm sorry. This is cathartic for me, 'cause it helps me get better, it helps me remember, 'cause sometimes you forget how much stuff you have in your attic until you start dusting things off. Oh yeah, I remember this, and I remember we had a straight boy in the House of Jourdan, and I was trying to convert him. It didn't work.

*Esperanza Santos:* Well, just get warm up spaghetti, it'll be okay.

*Bernard McAllister:* I'll never forget his cousin said these guys were up there trying to jump him. This was in Orange, now we're a bunch of queens now. I told everybody, "Put on your straight looking gear, your baggy jeans, and your hats turned up there." fifteen of us went up there, no weapons, no anything and he had to get from one spot to another without them trying to get him. He stood in our circle, and we walked down the street, and I remember walking up to a straight boy, "You've got a problem?" Girl when he started talking to us like, "Ooh girl." I said, "Was I good?"

*Esperanza Santos:* (Laughter) 'Cause that straight boy realness!

*Bernard McAllister:* You see that's what we did, 'cause that's what family do, and you don't do it for anything to come back. I could never say to my kids, "Oh look what I did for you." They will be like, "Well, weren't you supposed to?"

*Esperanza Santos:* Did I ask you?

*Bernard McAllister:* That's what the whole thing is that to be able to do it without anyone asking you.

*Esperanza Santos:* That's wellness. That's doing well.

*Bernard McAllister:* That's wellness, and all is well in my soul. I'm not a religious person, but I'm a spiritual person, and when I say all is well with my soul, have I done the best I can by you? Not knowing you walk up to a family, "Are you hungry, baby? Let's get you and these kids something to eat." "What's your name?" "Don't even worry about me girl. Here, you eat this food, Ooh, you're good." Like I do it in my building, I'm a tenant president, and they're like inspired.

They think I'm the Martin Luther King of tenant presidents. Like I said, "Of course yeah, we could do this for the kids this month." "That's what you think we should do then?" I'm like, "Yeah, don't y'all do that?" See, I have to remember that I'm a unique specimen. Even in my family people aren't as giving as me. I truly believe, like I tell everybody I say, "I think I have an empath thing where I can feel—I'm empathetic to people's situations to how they feel." I've sat there, and sat with my staff members when I was a director, and the lady told me she has cancer. She looking at me, tears running down my face, I said, "Girl, we got this." Now, have I done, I have not always been a sweet, sweet lady now, cause there's, I've done my share, but [00:56:10], and I told my therapist this the other day, I truly believe that I had this agreement with God, if I do right by them God, will you look out for me? Have an extra eye out on me?

It may not be true, but I know it's a fact that's how I live my life and that's what's been done for me, 'cause I could've been dead ten times over. You understand what I'm saying? That's how I am, people like Dude and Unah, they be like, "Oh Bernie, you know you're this and that." They can say what they want, that's my thing. That's my thing. Unah has his thing where he likes working with the prevention aspect of it, Dude has his thing where he's very Black power. I encompass all that. They do it, because I think they even said it to me, I inspired them to do it. So when I leave here, that's what I wanna be remembered for. That's what I wanna be remembered for.

*Esperanza Santos:* That's your light.

*Bernard McAllister:* That's my light and when I took Pucci to the store last time.

*Esperanza Santos:* For that oxtail?

*Bernard McAllister:* Them oxtails girl that she just had to have, she just had to have these oxtails. I'm like, "Pucci, take me to get the Oxtails." Took him to get the oxtails, and that's my story. Do you believe this? My sister's children's children, my niece, my nephew's daughter, my mother raised her, and she was raised in a really country part of North Carolina.

She's now with her mom in Harrisburg, and she's been on my mind for like three or four days. I call her [00:58:01] two days ago, it was the day she got suspended, 'cause she had a fight. She was like, "Oh, Uncle Bernie, yeah 'cause I told her you better not put your hands." I said, "Oh that's what you told her? What else happened girl?"

"Yeah, we was fighting, they broke us up. I had jumped off the bus to fight her again." I said, "You jumped off the bus, it wasn't moving, was it?" "No, it wasn't moving Uncle Bernie, and I let them know they're not gonna disrespect me." I said, "Oh." I said, "Can I ask, can I tell you something?" She said, "What?" "I'm very disappointed, and embarrassed by you, that's not what you were raised for, that's not what you go to school for. If you feel disrespected, that's probably, 'cause you disrespected yourself to allow yourself to let these idiots get in your psyche. When you out there fighting is because you don't accept yourself and you need these kids-" You know how the kids, not the fighters, "Get 'em girl, you should fight her, you should fight [00:58:52]."

*Esperanza Santos:* They gas them up.

*Bernard McAllister:* Yes, she's gassed up and I'm saying, "Yeah, they gassed you up just, 'cause they knew that you are beautiful inside, and you have a light, and they wanna dim your light, because there's not that they're mean. It's what we do, we take energy from people. Be it that why would—why is she so happy? Now they know how to get to you, so what you did was really foolish. You gave away one of your tools, one of your secret weapons and I'm disappointed in you, and I don't think you, I don't want you to think that I'm laughing with you. I'm being very sarcastic when I talk to you. If I hear about you finding again, I'm gonna come down there, and tear your behind up because we don't do that." She-I said, "Do you understand me?" "Yeah." I said, "Do you understand me?" "Yes." "Exactly, I'm not your friend. I'm your uncle, I'm here to save you." I'm captain save-a-hoe, that's what I do, that's what I do.

*Esperanza Santos:* All right. Well again, this is Esperanza Santos with Bernie McAllister, for the Queer Newark Oral History Project at Rutgers Newark. It is October, 25th 2019. Thank you again, Bernie.

*Bernard McAllister:* You're more than welcome, and thank you, for having me.

*[End of Audio]*