

Queer Newark Oral History Project

Interviewee: Deion Session

Interviewer: Esperanza Santos

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Vetted by: Cristell Cedeno

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Esperanza Santos: Today is October 12th, 2019. My name is Esperanza Santos, and today, I'm interviewing Deion Session at the Queer Newark, for the Queer Newark Oral History Project. Hey.

Deion Session: Hey.

Esperanza Santos: What's good?

Deion Session: Tired. School.

Esperanza Santos: School. I know, right? It's the middle of the semester, right?

Deion Session: Yeah.

Esperanza Santos: Can you tell us, when and where were you born?

Deion Session: I was born and raised in Newark, New Jersey. St. Michael's. Where I was raised? I was raised, basically, on 18th Avenue.

Esperanza Santos: Aceifth Avenue?

Deion Session: 18th Avenue. A couple years after I was born, I lived in the shelter for a couple of months. I remember moving to the projects, and we always lived by 18th Avenue street, and I went to 18th Avenue School.

Six years later, we moved up the hill, and I still lived by 18th Avenue. Then moved out again, still lived by 18th Avenue. I don't think I ever am gonna leave 18th Avenue.

Esperanza Santos: You're gonna leave 18th Avenue?

Deion Session: I don't know. Because when we move, back in September, there was a little situation we was goin' through, we were staying with our cousin—well, my cousin—and I'm thinking like, "I hope I never move back into my old neighborhood."

Esperanza Santos: Why?

Deion Session: It sucked. I didn't like the neighborhood.

Esperanza Santos: What about it sucked?

Deion Session: The people in my neighborhood. The energy sucks. I don't really feel safe to be open the way I am. People just get on my nerves. People typically just get on my nerves.

Esperanza Santos: Is it cool if you speak up a little bit more?

Deion Session: Oh, my bad.

Esperanza Santos: No, you're good, you're good.

Deion Session: The energy, I don't like it, and it's a lot of history that I had in that neighborhood, and I wasn't before it. I was like, "I hope I move to North Newark because first of all, I'm going to Rutgers at some point, and I could just take the light rail." Psych. I ended up moving literally three blocks up from my old house.

When I say three blocks up, if you go to my house, and you go to the corner, and go three blocks down, and you look down the street, there's my old house. I'm just like, I'm never gonna leave this neighborhood. Then again, I'm never there, so I really never really cared, and then I moved here.

Esperanza Santos: To North Newark.

Deion Session: To Rutgers.

Esperanza Santos: To Rutgers-Newark.

Deion Session: Yeah. It's whatever. But, Newark is my bread and butter.

Esperanza Santos: What is your birthday?

Deion Session: July 3rd, 1999.

Esperanza Santos: Work.

Deion Session: I'm a baby.

Esperanza Santos: Babes.

Deion Session: Even though I look like I'm 29, it's okay. I'm still the baddest.

Esperanza Santos: You're not 29.

Deion Session: I look 29.

Esperanza Santos: No, you look good. At 29 year-old look good, too.

Deion Session: Mm-hmm.

Esperanza Santos: Work.

Deion Session: Period.

Esperanza Santos: Tell me, who raised you?

Deion Session: My momma, Patrice Bryan. Also raised in Newark.

Esperanza Santos: Oh, so y'all got some legacy here.

Deion Session: Yeah. My grandparents from the South, pretty much.

Esperanza Santos: Do you know what part?

Deion Session: I know my mother's mother was from Newark. But, my grandfather's from Florida, but I think he moved here when he was a teenager. He's still got that Southern accent, 'cause he from the South, the Dirty South. My father's mother was from Texas. All Southern, so I got family all over the place.

My mom, Patrice Bryan, she raised me and my sister. Wherever she went, we went. She always watched out for us, we never went away with nobody else, we never lived with nobody else. If we did, it was with her. That's my momma.

Esperanza Santos: She looked after you.

Deion Session: Always.

Esperanza Santos: Like, you were her village, and she was yours.

Deion Session: Basically. She sacrificed a lot for us because, from her past relationships with my family, people always did her dirty. Whether if it was siblings, or just people in general, friends and family, she always looked out for other people, but they never looked out for her, and if anything, they abandoned us. Whenever she did good—'cause we always made nothin' out of somethin'. That was a thing that goin' in Newark.

She had no problem with anybody staying with us, just as long as you respect her household, we good. Managed to fuck that up. At the end of the day, she always looked out for us. She was all we had. That was my momma.

Esperanza Santos: It was your mom, you, and your sister.

Deion Session: Yeah. My sister's father, he not a bad dude, but I know my mother did most of the—my mother did a majority of the work. If anything, 80%. My father, he was in prison.

Esperanza Santos: The work, like taking care?

Deion Session: Raising, taking care.

Esperanza Santos: And your dad's in jail?

Deion Session: Nah, he come out when I was 15, but he was in prison since my mother was four months pregnant with me, apparently. I don't got a problem with my father. He had to do what he had to do. He messed up. He messed up. I'm not the type to hold grudges.

Esperanza Santos: Yeah, it's not your style.

Deion Session: It's not my style. At some point in my life, I was a little hurt about it.

Esperanza Santos: Who wouldn't?

Deion Session: Yeah, but it came late. I remember 11 years old, I had a letter from him. I used to always get letters from him. I was just so upset, and I was like, "Why aren't you here?" For a little bit, I was so upset with him. I think I was a little upset about the stories that my mother told me about him. She was like, "I hate him." I got a little too old for it, at a young age, basically.

I got tired of the same bullshit. I'm just like, "I don't really care at this point. I'm not gonna let that hold me back. I hope you don't let that hold you back." I remember, I seen him in different parts of my life. I visit him in jail, I ain't visit him like that at some point in time. He was in a halfway house, and I was 11, and he visited me, and I would always be so happy to see him, but then he went back to jail.

Then he was officially out when I was 15. By that time, I stopped giving a damn. I'm just like, "You're here. Congratulations, you're

finally out. You finally get to start your life back. It's gonna take a while, it's not gonna be overnight. But just as long as you do your thing, I'm good, you good, it's whatever."

There'd be times when—every time I'd see him—every time—he'd be like, "You know, I'm not a good father, right?" I'm like, "You fucked up, but you're here now. I'm not holding the grudge against you at this point, you hold it against yourself. You need to stop." Yeah, that's how, my father he was just—he was my father. I got nothin' but love for him. Despite all the bullshit he did, I got nothin' but love.

Esperanza Santos: You told me really quickly about the different houses you were at. Can you tell me one time? It was mostly on 18th Street, right?

Deion Session: Eighteenth Ave. After I was born, I think we lived around the neighborhood that I lived in. We go on South 10th, I think. I remember apparently—yeah, we live in a shelter for a couple of months in East Orange.

Esperanza Santos: Do you know what shelter that was called?

Deion Session: I don't know. I was a kid, I was a baby. She told me stories that I didn't even know that happened. She told me about the time she almost died. Yeah. She passed out, and apparently, I kept her alive. I was three or four. I don't remember this, but I see why she made it.

I remember I kept her up, like this, I guess. I put a pillow under her head, and apparently, the cops came in. This all happened at the shelter. She was pregnant in her tubes, that's why she passed out.

Esperanza Santos: She was pregnant with her what?

Deion Session: She was pregnant, but she was pregnant in her tubes.

Esperanza Santos: Oh, like when the egg goes there, and then it like, it can cause a lot of pain, etcetera, etcetera.

Deion Session: Mm-hmm. I didn't find this out until I was 17. I was like, "What the fuck?" I'll just remember being in that shelter as just like, as vaguely I remember, but we ended up moving to Mohammad Ali Avenue, and we lived by 18th Avenue. We lived in the projects.

Esperanza Santos: Did those projects have a name?

Deion Session: We called it “Little Bricks,” it’s another formal name for it.

Esperanza Santos: Use what’s here, you know what I’m saying?

Deion Session: That’s a damn shame. I was livin’ there for six years, and I don’t know the real name.

Esperanza Santos: That’s cool, yeah. You gave it a name, right?

Deion Session: We all did. I lived there for six years. Growing up, I was an inside child, somewhat. It was a lot of shit that happened down there, too. Shootin’s, drug dealin’, some kind of violence. My mother, she wasn’t beef for that bowl. It was rare that I would go outside. I didn’t care, ’cause I was an inside child to being with.

Even though there was times, I have days where I wondered what it would be like to go outside, and interact, but some days, or at least most days, when I got older, I’d just stay in the house. It was a lot of stuff happening. Moved there, four years old. Went to 18th Avenue growing up.

I guess it was cool, but then it wasn’t. The shootin’s wasn’t really cool. When people die from a distance, take they last breath, and it wasn’t like—it was kinda triggerin’. Well, not at this point, I was a little kid. Because of that, I was afraid of the dark.

Esperanza Santos: Wait, because of shootings, you were afraid of the dark?

Deion Session: Yeah. Well, even though no matter what, a lot of things happened, like when the lights go out. You know they saying, “The freaks come out at night.” Plus, I was in school, so I wouldn’t witness much of the stuff that happened in broad daylight.

I was the typical Newark kid. We didn’t wanna be on the streets, we didn’t want to be in danger, ’cause everybody was gettin’ killed. Newark was under fire when I was a kid.

Esperanza Santos: Like 2005?

Deion Session: Yeah, around that time. No, it was still under fire at that time, too. I was in an after school program all the time. I was always in school up until like 6:00.

Esperanza Santos: Yeah, find safety, you know what I’m saying?

Deion Session: Yeah. Even though I get tired of it, I still did it. It was complicated. Raised around my mom. She had a boyfriend after she broke up with my father, and that wasn't cool, and shit. I witnessed abuse. Most definitely can say that, I didn't come into terms with it until a couple years ago.

She had a boyfriend. Seemed cool at first, but then, time passed by, started putting his hands on my momma. It wasn't too often, but it was like, he didn't know how to express his anger without puttin' his fist on her. I don't know how to handle that, because I accept him so much, because that's what I witness. I didn't hate him until years later. I remember one day, I wake up to them arguin'. This happened for years up until I was 17.

Esperanza Santos: Oh, so they were together for a minute, then?

Deion Session: They was together for ten years. Ten, eleven years. Yeah. I think that was the first altercation when I was seven? No, I had to be seven years old. I wake up to them arguin'. It's almost 7:00 a.m., so the sun's still risin'. They're goin' back and forth, back and forth. I remember, I was a kid—I wasn't sayin' nothin'.

Esperanza Santos: You were just hangin' out.

Deion Session: I was chillin'. This is all new to me. I remember she tried to call the cops, and he took the phone from her, and he broke it. I'm just like, "Oh, shit. What the fuck is goin' on?" I'm confused. I just remember, why is he yellin' at my momma? What the hell can I do? I'm seven years old.

One day, she asked me to go to my aunt's house, my Aunt Judy, who lived in the next corner in my section of the projects. Called the cops, come back. Called the cops, come back, and there's people outside my door. I remember there was four different people, and I remember seven years old sayin', "What happened to my mother?"

They was all silent. Go in the room, it's blood splatters all over the floor. She's in the corner by the bed, and I'm shakin' her, seein' if she's still alive, because she's on the floor, lyin' on the floor. She was cryin', she was sayin', "I'm okay, I'm okay. Just go in the room for a little bit, I'll be back." I'm just in the room, cryin'. My sister, she was at her—she had her first boyfriend, she was at his house, and I'm just cryin'. Cryin', cryin', cryin'.

She come back, and she had to get stitches. She had patched her eye up, and it was swollen. That's all. My sister come home, she bawlin' out cryin'. She older, so she understand things more than I do, and I'm just like, "What the fuck?" I'm just like, "I don't know what to do."

Esperanza Santos: You're more confused and in shock.

Deion Session: Yeah. And because I am a kid, I don't know how to react to things. I remember probably months later, she got back with him. I didn't know how to react to it, to be honest. Like I said, my mother accepted it, I accepted it, because that was my momma. My sister hated him for years. Shit happens.

Then, I think it happened again when I was 10, 11? I still didn't know how to react to it. He punched her. I had to be 11, because my sister was pregnant at the time, so it's not much she can do. Wait, I just thought about somethin'. The first time, I had to be like, eight or nine, because my sister was 14, so I was eight at the time. Scratch that, I remember I was 11 or 12.

They was arguin' again. This happens all the time. They argue pretty often. I'm on my way to school. I'm up for school, but they arguin'. He punched her in the face. My sister smacked him, he not gone do nothin', because she pregnant. He got kicked out, and I'm just like, "Okay." I remember my mother is goin' to school, and just findin' out that shit happened, it's not gonna process very well.

I remember my mother, at the time, she would meet me halfway from school. I remember she would wear shades, so she could cover the swollen eye and everything. Happened again when I was 14. When time passed by, I just really got sick and tired of him, because I'm just like, "I'm not gone be here, y'all gone wake me out of my fuckin' sleep with y'all arguin'."

I'm not be for it. You're not gonna come in my house, bro, you don't even do shit." I was just like, "Bro, I'm not here for it." I remember the last time, this is why I got involved—I was 14. I'm bigger now, I played football, so that tough mentality is like, when you get—

Esperanza Santos: You're like, "I'm ready. Watch out."

Deion Session: Football do things to you, 'cause I was workin' out a lot. I'm physically capable of whoopin' yo ass. I don't really care. I just remember they arguin'. I remember my mother's ex-boyfriend,

there were best friends, but they dated back in the day. He was staying with us after he got out of jail. His cousin was stayin' at his kids', and everybody was there.

I remember this was freshman year, I think this was before I'm tryin' to go to school. I don't remember if I was tryin' to go to school, and they goin' at it. This is when they was really goin' at it. During the winter. She tryin' to kick him out, but all I'm thinkin' is, "If you touch my mother, I'm fuckin' him up."

He ended up pushing the door, and she ended up fallin' down the stairs. I rushed down stairs, and I don't fight. I was mad, I ain't fight fair. I remember puttin' his shirt over his head, and I was just like, "Boom, boom, boom, boom."

He run off, my mother, she get back up. That's a strong-ass woman. She get back up, my sister, was still—no, she wasn't pregnant. It's been so many altercations with him. We had a pole that would hold up our clothes, I grab the stick, I think my sister had the bat, and my mother had a knife.

We was all tired of his shit. "So, you want to put your hands on me? You want to put your hands on me?" We just had him in the middle of the street, and then the cops came. There was just so much shit that happened. For many years, I'm slow to realize this shit, he was on drugs for many years.

Esperanza Santos: Wait. Pause. What happened when the cops came?

Deion Session: He ran off. They never caught him.

Esperanza Santos: They didn't report him?

Deion Session: I think he got arrested at some point when he got back out. She still took him back. Three more years later—well, a couple more years later, he finally got back out. I remember he was back at my house a couple months ago. I was livid. I'm way too old. It was a point in my life when I'm just like, "I'm not dumb. My eyes are wide open. I'm not stupid."

My mother, she tend to—let me just pull in the concession—my mother had done nothing but sacrifice many things for me, but it was a couple of things, that it just wasn't acceptable. I understand that he did all this shit to you, but then it's like, "What do you think your child witnessed? You don't think I got a position in this shit?" He came into my house—first of all, I knew he was in the

house, because I smelled him. He wasn't smell like ass, but I smelled—

Esperanza Santos: He's distinct.

Deion Session: A distinct scent. Her door was closed, which is rare, 'cause she don't like closing her door like that, 'cause she's claustrophobic. I'm just like, "Who here?" Knew it was him. She was like, "Toussant." I was pissed, but I ain't say nothin', 'cause of my momma. 'Cause if I said somethin', I would have cursed her out. She asked me a dumb ass question, sayin', "Am I pissed about it?" Yeah.

Then he comes back again, but cleaner, and bigger, actually. He worked out a lot, but he got bigger. I'm just like, "Is that Toussant?" She was like, "Yeah." She be actin' real nonchalant with this shit. She asked me if I was pissed about it, I was livid. He was sayin' some shit to me, I wasn't listenin', because you said this shit so many times in my life, and you have not yet showed any action about it. I'm just like, "I'm not listenin' to you."

It took me a while to—'cause I know abuse. I tell people, "I know trauma, 'cause I witnessed this stuff." Newark ain't no joke. Well, not even that. Shit happens, it really does. That was all I had. I didn't know how to react to this stuff, you feel me?

Esperanza Santos: Yeah.

Deion Session: What was the question, again?

Esperanza Santos: It's cool. This is the Queer Newark Oral History Project, we're gonna gather your oral history, and then this is the part of your history that we're gonna record it.

Deion Session: Basically.

Esperanza Santos: The question was, where you lived, and the places, and then you talked about this. It sounds like here, who were people who made up your household, and it sounds like it was your sister, your mom, and then Toussant comin' in and out, right?

Deion Session: Yeah. That motherfucker.

Esperanza Santos: Of these experiences from pre-college—even in college—do you recall any events that were transitioned, or turning points in your life?

Deion Session: Yeah. I told this story, 'cause I had a retreat last weekend, and it was a self-reflection somewhat about who the fuck I am, and why am I the baddest bitch. I'm playin'.

Esperanza Santos: Yes. Come on.

Deion Session: Boom. I took a two-year gap after high school. It's interesting, because I'm around a lot of freshmen who are fresh out of high school. People go through different shit even when they in high school, and they experience life early.

Life outside of school, and you not getting your education, it's different for some reason. I'm like, "I don't understand how important this education shit is." I wasn't doin' anything but trying to figure myself out, but it was hard. After I graduated high school—graduating high school was one of the best days ever. I was like, "I'm free, fuck all y'all. Fuck y'all."

Esperanza Santos: Outta here, middle fingers up.

Deion Session: Well, a couple months after I graduated, I started being around Rutgers a lot, even though I wasn't a student. I was around there for two years.

Esperanza Santos: Just hangin' out?

Deion Session: Not even hangin' out. Well, in the beginning, it was. Then it was a point at life when life was beatin' me down, but I was like, "I can't let this shit stop me." I let it stop me for way too long, it's been months since I really did anything.

A couple months, the semester started, and I was cool with people on campus, but then it started being hella people that I was cool with. Next thing you know, I think life took a real turn on me. I experienced loss like a motherfucker.

Esperanza Santos: Losing what?

Deion Session: Friends and family.

Esperanza Santos: To what?

Deion Session: Either to violence, or they were just sick, and they passed. It started with my friend Eddie. He got killed. I don't know what happened to be honest. He was 20. We was cool with each other in

high school, me and his brother went to school, me and his brother went to middle school with each other. His brother was a grade under me, I was in eighth grade.

Graduated, went to ninth grade, his brother was a grade over me, and then both of them ended up going to the same school. Eddie, it was me, him, and a bunch of other people that was always hanging with each other. Life happens, and we didn't see each other in a while. That was still my boy, we was always here.

I remember I was at rehearsal for opera, and I see a couple of pictures of him, which was weird. One of them just had a heart on it. The second picture, it had him and a couple people, they was practically best friends, and knew each other for years. The caption said, "I'll always cherish the memories." I'm like, "Okay."

Another one, it's like a long paragraph saying how he passed. I was like, "Are you serious?" This is me going through shock. I didn't lose a friend at the time until a couple years. It was somebody I grew up with, he passed away from—I don't even remember. I didn't cry at the time, but I was like, "This shit is ridiculous."

I remember I had a dream that next night. I was at my friend Ezra's dorm. The dream was, I was across the street from that Hanes building, and he was crossing the street. I was like, "Oh, shit. Eddie, yo, what's good, D?" We was catchin' up, chattin', and he was like, "Yo, you be safe out here." I was like, "Yo, you be safe, too. Love you, bro."

I remember I woke up from that dream, and I was like, "What the fuck just happened?" I always cherish that dream. It's rare for me to remember any kind of dream. That dream will always stick with me. I always thought of the dream as a way, it was like, that was my last conversation with him. I'm sorry. I was just walkin' home, and that's when the shock went away, and I just started cryin'. I'm just like, "Wow. He gone."

I'm like, "I hope I never go through some shit like this ever again." But then, it just never stopped. It started with him, then the next month, this was December—my cousin goes missin'. My cousin Ant was practically my childhood. At the end of that month, my godmother passed away, because she was sick.

January hit, my friend Nyja 00:28:10 I ain't see Ed in a couple years, but he was doin' his thing, he was makin' music, and all that

good stuff. She and I ain't seen in years, but that was my godmomma. I was always cool with her kids. That was my godbrother, and my godsister, so I was always with them. I just haven't seen her in years.

Then Nyja, who was my cousin, I saw him two weeks before he went missin'. His last words to me—we was on Shepherd and Bergen, and I was with my friend Joel. It was some little block party goin' on, it was kind of whack. He was checkin' up on me. I ain't see him in years, I didn't even know he cut his hair. I was like, “Oh, shit, what's good? What's up, Nyja?”

Then we was chattin', catchin' up, and everything. He was akin' how my mother was, I said she was good. I don't know who had to dip first, but his last words was, “If you even need anything from me, I'm always here.” I was like, “Of course, bro. I got you. Love you, cuzzo”

A couple weeks later, he go missin'. I'm just like, “What the fuck is goin' on?” Those two are related, too. He goes missin', and man, February hit. You know the community center over here, Newark LGBTQ?

Esperanza Santos: Wait, the one at the library, or the one on University?

Deion Session: The library, but this is when we was at Halsey at the time. My aunt—she wasn't my aunt, but I always called her my Aunt Toya. When I came out—the first day I came out was when I was at the center.

Esperanza Santos: What? When was that? What year was that?

Deion Session: This was back in—I was a junior in high school—this is in May of 2016?

Esperanza Santos: That was three years ago.

Deion Session: Three years ago. Oh, God. Time go by fast as hell. Time passed by. I think after I graduated, I started bein' around there a lot more. It was my aunt, my Auntie Angie, Toya. I would see them every Thursday, it was game night—no, every Wednesday. Toya, that was somebody I'd always see, and I'll never forget her, because she was the funniest person to be around. She was always dope.

After I graduated, I performed for the first time solo at a thing that was goin' on in Newark. Nobody was there, but she was, and she

said she saw me, she's like, "I love your voice." I was like, "Oh, my God, you was there?" I felt like I was alone, but she had to leave early. I was happy to know that she was there.

That was my aunt, I loved her. She was the most competitive person I knew. I can never play Spades because of her. She scares the fuck out of me when it comes to Spades, because she get real aggressive. When we played Taboo, she'd make it aggressive than it already is. She like, "Wait, wait. I got you, I got you. Hold on," and she would just pause. I'm like, "Damn, you good."

She passed away in February. She had a asthma attack, and I ain't found out until a week after she passed. That hit me hard. That shit threw me off, because I'll come here on a Wednesday, I'm like, "Oh, we about to play some games," you feel me? I'm comin' in, the energy shifted. My Auntie Angie, she don't do well with emotions, or people crying in general.

I remember I walk in, everybody kind of quiet, everybody playing games. I'm like, "Yo, everybody good?" I'm like, "What's goin' on?" She had to step me outside. I'm like, "Am I in trouble? What did I do? I ain't do nothin'." She's like, "It's not that, baby." She looked at me in my eyes. Straight into my eyes. She said, "Oh, my God, don't look at me like that." I'm like, "Okay, now you scarin' the fuck out of me." What was goin' on?

I look in, I'm like, "Where's Toya?" She said, "She passed away last week, two days after"—I think it was Friday or Saturday that week. "She had a asthma attack." I'm just like, "What?" I couldn't do nothin' but leave. I had to step out for a minute, because that just threw me off. I was like, "No, that shit's just crazy."

March hit. They find my cousin, Ant, and Nyja in the same month.

Esperanza Santos: Your cousin and your aunt?

Deion Session: No, no. My aunt passed. Then my cousins, Antoine, who went missin' in December, and Nyja, who went missin' in January, was both found two weeks apart. We found Ant in the beginnin' of the month. I was so hurt. I was so fuckin' hurt.

Words can't describe how much pain I was goin' through. It was really off, because Ant had one of the best energies. He was hood as hell, don't get me wrong. He was from the hood.

Esperanza Santos: Hood people can have good energies.

Deion Session:

Uh-huh. He wasn't a gang-associated person, he fought a lot, but he was no gang-associated person. I remember my sister—I saw my cousin. My cousin Zenaya and Ant was practically brother and sister. I think she said—no, no, no, no, this is what happened. My sister called, saying they found Ant in Weequahic Park. I can never go to that park ever again. They found his body in the pond, decomposed.

I called Zenaya, I'm sayin', "Is this true?" She said, "Yeah." I just broke down cryin'. I was like, "This shit is not real." Then we had his memorial, because his body was too decomposed, so we ended up cremating him. I hated that day, to be honest. That was my big cousin. The reason why it hurt so much, because he was practically one of the people that got me into art in general.

Before he was rappin', he was a sketch artist. He was an artist. He was one of the best artists I knew at my age. I always bring up this story. When I was a kid, it was between seven and nine. I had no hair, that's all I remember. We was at my aunt house, and I loved drawing before. I was singin', and dancin', I was drawin'. That was my first love.

He came around. He was a year older than my sister, so he was a teenager. He was like, "Oh, shit, little cuz. You draw, too?" I'm like, "Yeah, I draw." He was like, "Yo, I could draw, too." I'm like, "Really?" He was like, "Yeah," so boom, right? He grabbed an orange crayon, and flat out drew a whole car in a couple seconds.

He did nothin' but piss me off. I'm like, "How you gone shit on my dreams, bro?" I'm still beginning, he just drew like, "Yeah, watch this." He drew the car, it was lit. I'm like, "Motherfucker. You just shit on my dreams."

He was one of the best artists I knew. I remember he drew a mural on my wall. Right before I moved out the projects, he took a Sharpie marker, and drew a whole marker—a person, I think it was a book in one hand, and a gun in one hand. It was a halo around his head. I was like, "Oh, shit. Sucks that I be movin', though." That always stuck with me.

I think the last time I saw him, I was 16. We was at some party. It was my cousin's birthday party. His strong ass. He was like, "Cousin." Smacked the shit out my hand, smacked the shit out my back givin' me a hug. I'm like, "Uh, what's good Ant?" That was

the last time I saw him. That memorial, I'll never forget that shit. Just bawlin' out, cryin'.

I remember that same day, it was my mother's surprise birthday party, 'cause she turned 49 the day after. Then a couple days on her birthday, she finds out they find Nyja down the street from my house. That didn't sit well with her. That was her baby cousin, 'cause her and all his siblings all grew up with each other. Then we went to the funeral.

Esperanza Santos: How many siblings did your mom have?

Deion Session: I lost count. On her mother's side, she had two sisters. On her grandfather's she had—fuck. Four or five, maybe? I'm not sure. That was her cousins on her mother side. That was my Aunt Dee's kids. I think he got shot. We don't know really what happened to Ant, they couldn't really tell, because his body was so decomposed. I think he got shot. All that happened in one month.

After they died, I gave up. I was like, "This shit is just way too much." All this stuff happened to me, could happen to me anytime soon. 'Cause it was like, "What's the point?" This made no sense. I never thought it'd really happen to me, 'cause my sister, she experienced loss dramatically, my mother, she experienced loss dramatically. I'm like, "This shit is really happenin' to me at the wrong time." Then again, it's never a right time.

I remember after that, I was like, "This shit. I can't let this stop me." I put a hold on what I wanted to do. I have imposter syndrome, so it was hard to see any good in myself. All this shit happened, I'm like, "This gotta stop." Until April hit.

Esperanza Santos: April, what year?

Deion Session: April 2018.

Esperanza Santos: So, last year.

Deion Session: Yeah. Time flew by. It's crazy. Like I said I was always at Rutgers, so, so many people that was around here saw the pain I was goin' through, and shit, and actually tryin' to pick the pieces up, 'cause all of them was all shattered, and shit. I was always on campus. Keep in mind, this is a public campus. They practically welcomed me with open arms, even though they was surprised when I tell 'em, "I'm not a student here."

I was like, “There gotta be something I could do around here to get involved.” I started bein’ around here, ’cause this is when I finally found people that I identify with, people I can connect with, and learn so much about the spectrum of the LGBTQ community.

Esperanza Santos: When you say, “identify with,” you mean the LGBT community?

Deion Session: LGBTQ, and intercultural in general. Being a person of color, then identifying as queer, and coming from an urban setting, but then again, also getting an education. I was like, “Ight, this is probably where I want to be. This is practically my second home.” I was never home because it was like every time I sit alone, I get lost in my thoughts, and I get a little depressed. I was like, “This was my escape, in a way.” I don’t like that term, but shit happens.

I remember Yoleidy Rosario—I ain’t gonna talk nothin’ bad about them, so I’m just gonna snitch on them a little bit. At the time, I was always with RU Pride, who was a student org here. I always loved bein’ around them. They was around when I was goin’ through my shit, even though I wasn’t a student here, I always came in there, like what’s up?”

I remember just being this gay kid, this gay, cisgender male, which I’m not any more. The conference happened around that month, they was sayin’ they was bringin’ NELGBT conference to Rutgers-Newark.

Esperanza Santos: What conference was it called?

Deion Session: The Northeastern LGBTQ conference. I remember a couple people kept asking me if I was gonna be involved. I’m like, “Can I? I’m not a student.” They was like, “Well, I think you can be involved.” I was like, “Hee, hee, hee, hee.” I signed up. I remember when they was askin’ me, are you gonna sign up? I’m like, “I’ll do it, ’cause I want to be around.” I remember one day, me and Yoleidy, we were like this. When I first met them—

Esperanza Santos: Juletty? Julady?

Deion Session: Yoleidy, they were the old director for the Intercultural Resource Center.

Esperanza Santos: Oh, okay.

Deion Session: I met them at a comin’ out monologue in October of 2017, and I was scared of them, ’cause I was like, “I’m not a student here, and

I'm always here. I have no business being here." I was just overthinkin'. One day, it was a meeting that I thought was for people that signed up to be participants in the conference, but no, it was a conference for the facilitators. Don't even know what that means, but I was just like, "Fuck it."

I go in the meeting, with me and my friend, Juanita. We walk in, they was like, "Oh, this is for the facilitators, so this is the wrong meeting." I'm like, "Oh. I'll dip." They were like, "Wait." I was like, "Okay." They was like, "If I ask you to facilitate, will you still do it?" Sure. Sure, I don't mind.

I got involved, scared as hell, most definitely. I never led anything, and I'm still learning. The info wasn't going through the other ear, it was like, I wasn't 100%—thought I was 100% ready to be around people. I'm tryin' my best to respect people's pronouns, so I didn't want to mess anything up. Plus, I have stage fright. We trained for it.

The conference started, and I actually didn't bad. I was a head of activities, giving lessons, doing breathing meditations, doin' all this stuff, keepin' the energy alive, because people are not really social, just to keep the energy alive. Being active in different activities that was goin' on. Giving directions to people, all this stuff.

I remember at the end of that Saturday—'cause it was a whole weekend of it—that Saturday, they wanted to know my story. I said, "Bet." They asked me what was my plans, am I in school? I said, "I plan on going to Essex first, and then going to Rutgers later on." They said, "No. They're gonna make sure you come to Rutgers." I thought that he was playin' with me, I'm like, "No, no you not."

They was dead-ass serious, and then I told them my story, basically everything I just told you. They recognized that it was a very hard thing, but hey, I'm still standin'. They tried everything in their power to get me to Rutgers. I was always under their wing, not because they were tryin' to get me into Rutgers, because we clicked. Evan, my best friend, they became my mentor, and everything.

Esperanza Santos: It sounds like to me, for you a turning point in your life was, all this thing happened back to back to back to back.

Deion Session: Mm-hmm.

Esperanza Santos: You found your way to be connected to RU Pride, and then the turning point was, you were at the conference, and people were like, “Yo, you’re bomb. What are you doing? Of course, we want you to come over here. Let’s do it.” It sounds like for you, that was the turning point.

Deion Session: Basically. The thing with Newark is, some people in Newark don’t got much, but we always make the best with what we have around us. I have my friends, I have my family, and I had RU Pride. They always welcomed me. I’m just like, “There’s something that I can do with this.”

The conference came through. Meetin’ people that I learned from. Learning different identities, learning about intersectionality, and embracing the identities that you have. In every sense, I just stuck with it. I’m not even gonna lie, it was still stuff that was happening during that period of time. At the end of all that, I was always here. I broke my neck for Rutgers, even when I wasn’t a student.

Esperanza Santos: Literally, or figuratively? You broke your neck?

Deion Session: No.

Esperanza Santos: Oh, okay, okay.

Deion Session: Figuratively. After that I started—I was facilitatin’ for the student conferences, I performed, I looked out for—there was a dance group here, I was helpin’ out with choreography, I hosted two shows. It was a Beyoncé tribute, and then I hosted a dance battle. I performed a couple of times. I tabled for RU Pride a couple times.

I was always here. I was a student, but I wasn’t a student, basically, what I always say. We all knew that I was gonna end up going to Rutgers. Through all the stuff that I was goin’ through, it was that one thing that I just need at this point, I said get my education. I’m gonna get to the moral of the story, I got you.

Through the process, lost a family friend, Steve. He was sick, and he didn’t know it, and he ended up passing. It was hella people I lost still that same year. We got evicted from my house on South 10th Street. We were stayin’ with our cousin for a few months. I remember bein’ depressed as shit. I lost 40 pounds from it, ’cause I just stopped eating.

At the end of the day, I was still here. I had Riley, my partner. It was good stuff, but it was still a lot of bad shit. At some point, I just stopped crying. I felt like it was getting too numb to it. As time passed by, I had to learn from somethin'. In life, you do lose people, but do you really lose them? Depending on your beliefs? No matter what, it's still gonna hurt.

In some case, it's gonna hurt, because they physically not here. I always learn, no matter much you lose people, 'cause that was a lot. I lost probably 20 people? Eighteen to 20, I'm not sure. It's sad to say that I lost count, but it happens.

Esperanza Santos: Just in the year 2018?

Deion Session: From November of 2017 to December of 2018. After Ant, I lost Steve. He was my mother's—she say, "I don't have best friends." Sis, that was yo best friend, low key. Even though y'all butted heads, he was always here, he always loved you. That hurt me.

It was weird when he passed, 'cause my mother always showed at his liquor store, and they always with each other. They was chillin', and shit. G-mackin'. It was always good to see him, he was such a goofball. So funny and annoyin', this old dude, always "Talkin' like this," and everything, "You gone tell yo momma to come outside, right?" I loved him.

Esperanza Santos: Why you bein' extra?

Deion Session: He was just so extra, but I loved him.

Esperanza Santos: Yeah, that's his style, you know?

Deion Session: That's his style. My mother get irritated with him, but he always came back around. They was always cool. Even though it was best friend shit low key, but she doesn't realize it. I always called. After me and Yoleidy met, I was always at the office. When I say we clicked, we clicked. That was my baby.

I always called my mom when she at the liquor store, I'm like, "Oh, you with Steve, ain't you?" She was like, "Yeah. I'ma put Steve on the phone." He's like, "Yeah, what you want, boy?" I'm like, "You watchin' out for my moms, right?" He was like, "Boy, get outta here." You will. "I hope you watchin' out for my moms, I'm countin' on you." He was like, "I got you."

He got sick out of nowhere from—I think it was pneumonia, maybe? I'm not sure. It was April. I thought he was gonna bounce back. I couldn't see that happenin' to Steve, to be honest. That was Big Steve. We called him "Big Steve." I remember I was with my ex-best friend, called my mom, seein' she was okay. She said, "Steve gone." I was like, "Goddamn it."

Shit was different, but it wasn't. No matter what, we always brought up Steve like he was still here. After him, it was still people that—I remember this boy that I went to school with—no, not went to school with, but I knew him. He committed suicide. That was random. That shit kinda hit hard. I was like, "That sucks." He graduated from Central right before I went there. I remember him bein' on the team, and everything.

Then, I found out late about Kwan. Me and him went to school with each other, first two years of high school, then he transferred. I didn't know he got killed until months later. Him and his brother got killed.

I think the last person I remember losin'—I fuckin' miss him. Oh, my uncle passed away. He stayed with up numerous times. We butted heads with him too, but that was still my uncle. I got nothin' but love for him. He passed away from diabetes. They found his body months after. That was my uncle. I loved him, but that shit hurt.

Weeks later, I found out my friend Aaliyah passed away from pneumonia. She was a student at GCU. We were all in drama with each other. I was like, "This is really a lot. It is." This is around the time I lost my uncle, and I lost Aaliyah, that's when we was practically homeless.

We were stayin' with my cousin, and my mother's tryin' to find a house for us. I just stopped eating. I lost 40 pounds. Then I got injured, so a lot of stuff is really just happenin'. Too much at one time. But, I stumbled and fall, but I got back up.

The whole thing that I learned from it was, is when you cherish someone, and when you cherish the memories that you had with them, you bring them up, and it's practically like they never was gone. They never will be gone. As long as I cherish those memories, then they'll never be dead, they'll never die.

I always felt like they lookin' down, they seein' what I'm doin'. If they see me stop, and now keep pushin', they'd probably whoop

my ass. It's with love. They'll always be a part of me, and I'll still keep pushin', no matter how much shit I'm probably gonna encounter in the future. It's whatever. That's life. That's what I learned, you feel me?

I remember goin' to the retreat last weekend, and going over what I went through, and what really changed me. People was misinterpreting it. When it comes to self-reflection, it's not to just trigger you, which it can do, but then again, it can see how you're built, how strong you are when you have so much weight on you, it's only gonna make you stronger.

I kind of lost myself this past couple of months, but I got it back. I bounced back, game strong. I was proud of myself for getting' through all that. Stuff like that ain't easy. It's hard survivin' in Newark sometimes, even though I love my city so much. That was a shiftin' point, when everybody was gone, gone, everybody dyin'.

I'm still here, but why? Then I found my purpose. It was around me this whole damn time, but at least I found it, 'cause some people don't get the chance that piece of them that keeps them pushin'. It was over my head all along. That was my turning point. I wound up being in college, at a university, and finding my identity, specifically. Yeah, that was a shiftin' point. That was a lot. I guess that's it. Yeah.

Esperanza Santos: When you say, "I found my purpose," what do you call that purpose?

Deion Session: Doin' what make you happy. I'm a versatile person, I guess I could say that. There's the side of me, I love art. I was drawing for years, actually. I stopped doin' that for a little period of time, 'cause I started lovin' music, and then I started dancin', I did acting for a minute, tryin' to compilin' all that stuff, and it gives you musical theater.

Then there's the side of me, that I like to help people. I like to interact with people. I like just bein' me, but then just keepin' the energy alive by bein' that ray of sunshine. It took a while for me to try to not have people knock that sunshine out, and just keep me in the darkness. I got my light back.

It was all about finding my purpose in the case of realizing why I am the person I am, because I was just always this energetic person. Then again, I was still goin' through a lot of shit, but nobody really understood why.

Being able to go through life, and tell my narrative, because you never know what person can learn from it, and it can inspire people to keep pushin', but then you also inspire yourself. It was just a case of, "Why are you the person you are?" I remember EOF, God damn that shit was hard.

Esperanza Santos: E-O-F?

Deion Session: I was in the Educational Opportunity Fund, which is a college readiness program. It's mainly for people that come from a low-income household, and I'm broke. I was perfect for the job.

Esperanza Santos: Work. Jump in.

Deion Session: Hey, wassup? Instead of being me for me, I was trying so hard to prove to a bunch of other people my worth, and proving people, "Hey, I'm cool. I can get down." Tryin' so hard for people to like me, and shit. That's not good, 'cause the thing is, other people's perception ain't none of yo goddamn business.

Deep down, it was basically, because of the fact that I tried so hard for people to like me, but the outcome of people fuckin' with me wasn't the reaction that I wanted. Then people wasn't really diggin' my vibe. I kind of shut myself out.

I just felt like I didn't really see much in myself like some people did. I guess I was around these people so much. If they gone be like this, everybody on campus gone be like this. It was also weird, because people in my program that I thought didn't mess with me.

Esperanza Santos: Pause. What year was this, again?

Deion Session: This was last summer.

Esperanza Santos: Last summer. The summer of 2018.

Deion Session: Yeah, basically.

Esperanza Santos: In the middle of that strike of so many people passing away?

Deion Session: No, this was actually after. I didn't really lose nobody this year. The last person that I lost was back in December 2018. This is when I was—right before. We ended up getting our own house again. I was tryin' my best to get into school, and I got injured, so

that sucked. I had sprained my knee real bad, and I ended up being off my feet for months.

EOF start. I'm around a bunch of these kids that was fresh out of high school, and I'm the oldest EOF student. The age gap wasn't that different, but I experienced life out of high school. You jumpin' right in, I took a break. I'm tryin' to get back on my feet, so it's hard. I'm tryin' to figure out what my weaknesses are, and what my strengths are.

I'm also concentrating too hard on other people's perception of me. I was makin' it seem like my judgement was like, "Oh, I can tell people don't like me." My judgement ain't that goddamn good, 'cause it affected me way too much, but then again, that was wrong. This past month, I was practically depressed.

Esperanza Santos: Wait, this last month?

Deion Session: Yeah, this past, from—

Esperanza Santos: From September 2019?

Deion Session: Yeah, basically. I'm like, "Yeah, it's that." Strangely, I was just tired all the time. I just kind of just shut myself out away from people. I felt like I was just this annoying child, and I needed to just either—I was always in my dorm. I was just antisocial all of a sudden. I didn't want to be around people.

Esperanza Santos: This year?

Deion Session: This year. Then again, I didn't want people even really dealing with me. I got real lazy when it comes to my work. Then me half-assin' everything, and just tryin' to get it out the way reflected on my final grade. Most definitely did.

It was just like, everything just started affecting me, because this is how I saw myself. I just got real tired, and then real—not even tired. It's just exhausted. My mind was like, "Keep goin', keep goin'," but my body was sayin', "Fuck that."

I'm the vice president of an org, and I haven't got the chance to do much with that, because it was just like, tryin' to balance out everything. It took a toll on me. I just started feelin' overwhelmed. It was just so much goin' on.

Esperanza Santos: Wait, so we jumped from the fund to the semester, and now we're reflecting on last week. I'm just tryin' to make sure I'm understanding where we're going.

Deion Session: Yeah, from EOF and bein' around people all the damn time, and then bein' in school, and I still gotta deal with people, then I'm tryin' to balance out work, and all this stuff. I got a lot of shit to deal with. This past weekend, I just didn't like doin' anything that I was so used to doing. Dancing, interacting with people, that was out the window for a while.

I just wasn't that energetic, extroverted, happy. Not everybody knew. I'm over here thinkin' like, "Oh, I'm finally in Rutgers, shit about to get on and poppin'." It wasn't like that for some reason. This past weekend, I went to retreat. I didn't want to fuckin' go, 'cause I still had to deal with people.

Deep down, deep down, I really wanted to go, but it was the concept we was on top of that was A, I have to do interaction. I'm just like, people. Then I just didn't want to bring that bad energy on anybody else, because I've been shutting myself out from people. It'll be, people see me all the time, and all of a sudden, they're just like, "Yo, I ain't seen you in a while, where you been?" Oh.

Then the retreat happens. We went to the Poconos at Trout Lake, well, we went to Trout Lake in the Poconos in PA. It's a beautiful scenery, bein' around—even though it's like the modern day—it was like a campsite, but it had Wi-Fi, so it was interesting.

I think the point where I started figuring myself out was when we had the self-reflection part, when everybody told their narrative, and basically, what was their shifting point. What made them the person? What weight they had on themselves.

Everybody was openin' up about their stories, and I was the first one to speak. I had to stand up, 'cause it was just a way of me to face who I am, 'cause the only person that stopped me from all the stuff that I wanted to do was me. We're all our biggest critics.

I told them my narrative, and my shiftin' point, and I told you basically what I told you, my loss, and what I went through, but how I went through it, how I got through everything, and everybody was telling me their stories.

Everybody was putting their self down in a way. I had to remind everybody the whole point of this isn't to just bring you down, it's for you to see who the fuck you are. How you da baddest, and how you got through everything, and how you still standin', and how you got stronger. I don't want nobody to just put themselves down, because at the end of the day, you here standin' on your feet.

If I'm lyin', I'm flyin', and my feet has not left the ground yet. I was just like, reminding my selves to just keep it pushin'. 'Cause in life, more stuff is gonna happen. You're still gonna be able to tell your narrative at some point. At the end of the day, if you nobody told you that they loved you, I got nothin' but love for y'all.

After that, it reminded me what my purpose is, and what strives me to be the person to just go around sayin' hi to people, even if I don't know you, I'ma still say, "Wassup? I see you," and just show 'em positivity, no matter how much stuff I go through. I think the first test of me figurin' out if my purpose is my purpose, I get back home, and I got a grade from one of my reflections I have for one of my courses.

When I say, "half-ass," I literally mean, "half-ass." They gave me five out of 10. I was just like, "Fuck." Piss me off? Yeah. I understood why I got the grade. I remember I was like, "I'm not gonna put myself down about this, 'cause you know what you did wrong, but only the way you could do it. The only way you could make it better is to just do better."

I remember, I talked to my professor saying, "This ain't no excuse, and this ain't me askin' for a curve, or anything, I just want you to hope and expect for me to do better in the future, and that this won't—I'ma try my best to not make this happen again, 'cause this isn't me."

After this past week, I've just been happy. I've been tired, because it's college, but I'm happy. I've been very productive. I'm back to bein' an extrovert again, and just interactin' with people, and just being that ray of sunlight through the rainy days, and just being me, because that's what makes me happy. Not puttin' myself down every time, and just keep goin'. Me, in the past week, I performed for the first time in a couple of months, and—

Esperanza Santos: Yeah, it was beautiful.

Deion Session: Thank you.

Esperanza Santos: It was really beautiful.

Deion Session: I was actually happy. I had a slight anxiety, but it was just, I did different things to have a better confidence in a way. I usually shake a lot, and my stomach turns like a motherfucker. I actually had fun, and I was still maintaining the energy in the room, but then still tryin' to balance out the two songs I'd have to sing in an hour. I went through it, and I was actually happy. I was just like, "Okay. I think I'm back on track."

I found my purpose, and I found a way to just go on and just do my thing. I do understand that there will be shit that I will face, but then again, I'ma still continue on. It's not my time to go, either, so I'ma make the best of every moment that I have on this Earth. That was when I found my purpose, I guess. Oh, Lord.

Esperanza Santos: You got a lot to say.

Deion Session: Sorry.

Esperanza Santos: You're good. What I'm gonna do, is I'm gonna go down the list of questions, just to make sure that we touch all the bases, and then if I have any questions, I'll be like, "Oh, what about this? Or, what about that? Or like, hey, let's move onto the next one."

Deion Session: Yeah.

Esperanza Santos: Does that sound good?

Deion Session: Yeah.

Esperanza Santos: How are you feelin' right now?

Deion Session: I'm good. I'm chillin' like a villain on the ceilin' listenin' to Bob Dylan.

Esperanza Santos: Okay. What schools did you attend? Elementary to now.

Deion Session: Oh, boom. I went to 18th Avenue for, pre-K to seventh grade, and then they closed down, because they were shuttin' down hella schools at the time.

Esperanza Santos: What was the time?

Deion Session: Seventh grade, that would be from 2003 to 2013.

Esperanza Santos: Okay, that was middle school.

Deion Session: No, no. Damn, I graduated 2013—so it closed down in 2012. I was 13. Well, 12, technically. Then I went to Cleveland for one year, but it didn't really feel any different, because the principal, vice principal, half the students, and half the teachers were all at Cleveland. I don't think I ever talked this much.

Esperanza Santos: You can take your time, it's okay.

Deion Session: I was like, "Damn." It wasn't much of a different setting, it was just people just adjusting, so it wasn't fun. Then I went to Central High School.

Esperanza Santos: Central High School, where?

Deion Session: On 18th Avenue.

Esperanza Santos: Eighteenth Avenue, yeah.

Deion Session: Yeah. Told you. I was raised in a bubble. Yeah, that was cool.

Esperanza Santos: Then you worked for what? A year and a half, two years, and then came to Rutgers?

Deion Session: Yeah, I was doin' different little things, just tryin' to be interactive. I did work with kids for a year. I worked for ICE, the Ironbound Community Corporation. It started as a summer job when I was a TA/activity leader, and I was a dance teacher. Then I worked in the afterschool program for Hawkins Street for the past year, then I ended up going here.

Esperanza Santos: Cool.

Deion Session: Yeah, that was fun.

Esperanza Santos: You talked about some challenges with your mom and her boyfriend, and the neighborhood you grew up in, is there any other challenges you want to talk about?

Deion Session: We could talk about my comin' out story.

Esperanza Santos: Cool, we can do that.

Deion Session: Yeah, that was like—in terms of my identity, being black was something I never fought against, before anything, I knew I was black. It was when I came across my sexuality, that I could stop. That was the next one. When I was 15, I came across my sexuality.

Esperanza Santos: Fifteen in 2014?

Deion Session: Yeah, basically. Sophomore year. I told you, it was this guy that liked me.

Esperanza Santos: No, you did not tell me about this guy.

Deion Session: Yeah, I had to give it a five-minute—

Esperanza Santos: Oh, that’s right at the coming out dialogues this past Tuesday.

Deion Session: Yeah.

Esperanza Santos: People here don’t know about that, so tell us.

Deion Session: Yeah. When I was 15, I remember having my first girlfriend that sophomore year, and she broke up with me, because she was going through her stage of comin’ with her sexuality. I was like, “Cool.” I hold no grudges. Then again, she did lie. Yeah, so that was funny. I was like, “Oh, you bitch.” I was like, “Do your thing.”

Then I remember a couple months later, this boy commented on one of my pictures on the ’Gram. I was like, “You know everybody can see this, right?”

Esperanza Santos: It wasn’t even DM status? It was straight up a comment on your Insta?

Deion Session: Under my pictures. I was 15, he was 18, goin’ on 19.

Esperanza Santos: Four years older.

Deion Session: Three and a half, basically. Oh. No, that was like, “Oh, you messin’ with a kid.” Yeah. You know Kik, right? The Kik Messenger?

Esperanza Santos: Yes, I know Kik.

Deion Session: Yeah.

Esperanza Santos: We talkin’ about Kik?

Deion Session: Yeah.

Esperanza Santos: Oh, for folks who don't know about Kik, can you tell us real quick?

Deion Session: Kik Messenger, that's a little trend that went on for a little bit. People had Kik Messenger for chattin', and everything.

Esperanza Santos: It was a way to electronically connect through an app on your phone. You don't need a phone number, you can just connect that way.

Deion Session: Yeah, but we got hella stuff like that at this point. He was tryin' to get in where he could fit in, and he was always flirtin' with me, and everything. I, personally, did not like him like that. I look back at it, I was A, kinda fuckin' with his feelin's, 'cause I did know he liked me, but I didn't know the depth of it. Two, he lived in Florida, and I never met him.

Esperanza Santos: How did he find you?

Deion Session: Instagram.

Esperanza Santos: He just threw a hashtag, or he just found you, like, whatever?

Deion Session: I guess he just found me. I followed hella people, and then hella people followed me. That's how it went. This is the period of time where everybody was worried about how many followers that they had.

Esperanza Santos: If you wanna be cute, and you wanna be popular, you gotta get followers.

Deion Session: Basically. It was little kid shit, so I wasn't worried about it. After that, I was like, "Bro, I don't care." I ended up deleting that Instagram. Basically, he was always—he was diggin' me, and I was bein' friendly, and cordial, I was just chillin'. At the same time, I was still entertaining it, 'cause I know he feels me, and I could just easily just leave him alone, so he don't have to go through anything further.

I don't remember much from my conversation, because junior year sucked. Oh, there is another period, too. Shit. That's another story, but basically, sophomore year, he was diggin' me.

Esperanza Santos: How was that a challenge? I think it was a cute moment.

Deion Session: It was a challenge when I came out to my mom, I guess.

Esperanza Santos: What year was that?

Deion Session: This was sometime after it. I stopped entertaining that, 'cause I was like, "This is getting' old." When that started, yeah, I did get of track for a little bit. When that started, I was thinkin' to myself, I don't like him, but I'm like, "Do I like guys?"

Esperanza Santos: Oh, so by him messaging you, you got to question, "Wait a minute, do I like guys? Is this a part of who I am?"

Deion Session: Yeah, 'cause I like 'em, but then again, I do like him. I'm not acknowledging that.

Esperanza Santos: What does this quote thing mean?

Deion Session: I was just like, I knew I didn't like him, but I'm not minding that he's a guy flirting with me. Girls flirted with me also, but I'm just like, "He's a guy. I'm not seeing it any differently." I'm just like, "Oh, shit. Do I like guys?" I took time. 'Cause me, personally, I was always open minded. In terms of my identity, I'm not gone fight it. If I like guys—

Esperanza Santos: You'll be straight up about it.

Deion Session: Yeah. I refused for people to strip me of my identity, and who the fuck I was.

Esperanza Santos: My expression, my attractions, my likings, my etcetera.

Deion Session: Basically, because I come from a school of homophobic people, just like, "You gay, bro." Gay this, gay that.

Esperanza Santos: At your high school?

Deion Session: Yes.

Esperanza Santos: People were like that to you?

Deion Session: People in my neighborhood. People in my environment in general.

Esperanza Santos: High school and neighborhood.

Deion Session: Basically.

Esperanza Santos: They were like one in the same, right? You grew up there, you went to school there.

Deion Session: These were all people in the same area.

Esperanza Santos: That's why I was like, "Everywhere around you?" People were saying this of you?

Deion Session: Actually, yeah.

Esperanza Santos: At you?

Deion Session: Not at me. I guess 'cause the fact that people still was cool with me, then I came out. People still was cool with me, in a way. It's nothing you could hold against me but my sexuality, and if you hold that against me, you're just wrong. You lookin' stupid, yourself.

One time, I took time. It was sophomore year, and I was just like, "Wow, do I?" Then I remember I turned 16. I remember my first guy crush was my drama coach.

Esperanza Santos: Cute.

Deion Session: Yes, he was so fun. I would low key say cute, flirty stuff to him. I'm like, "Hey, tall, handsome guy." He's like, "Hey, shorty." I was like, I was takin' my time. I was not fightin' it. It was just like, "Hey, it's whatever. Boom." Then again, at the time, I was talkin' to a girl that I was talkin' to for a while.

I remember I came across the term, "pansexual." The fuck is that? It was like, "Oh, acknowledging different identities and accepting and being attracted to it." I was like, "That's me. I think that's me." I remember 16, I identified as pansexual.

Esperanza Santos: At 16, in 2015?

Deion Session: Mm-hmm.

Esperanza Santos: 2015?

Deion Session: Yeah, 2015. Going into junior year, came out to different friends, came out to my ex-best friend, he accepted me, Nelson accepted me, and Matthew accepted me.

Esperanza Santos: They were all cool?

Deion Session: Everybody was cool.

Esperanza Santos: So, the challenge was with your mom. Then what happened?

Deion Session: I'm comin' out to hella people in my school, 'cause these was people I was around every day. Not everybody, I was takin' baby steps. I remember at some point, I just really wanted to tell my mom. I felt like she was just automatically accept me. For a while, I'm thinkin', "Oh, she gonna be cool with it. That's my momma."

Esperanza Santos: You're like, after all these people, they're cool with it, why wouldn't she be cool with it?

Deion Session: Yeah. One day, the first day I go to the Newark LGBT Community Center—

Esperanza Santos: Wait, wait, wait. That, with your mom, caused you to go to the Newark LGBT Center?

Deion Session: Not even that. Oh yeah, so, boom. How I found out about them, I came out to—I guess you can say, organization—that was in different high schools in Newark called The Future Project. I think the question was, "What is something that you would want to face?"

I think I remember sayin' I wanted to come out my shell, and then, out the closet. Everybody was like, "Oh, shit." Everybody accepted me. I remember sometime after my advisor, he gives me a flyer, and it says—

Esperanza Santos: Advisor at Future Project.

Deion Session: It said, "Newark LGBT Community Center." I'm like, "What the fuck? We have that in Newark?" I think I came there a couple times, and they was closed, I was like, "Fuck." I'm like, "Please be open, please be open, please be open." They were closed. I'm like, "Ight, now I'm 'bout to wait, 'cause they not open. I know they gonna open at some point."

Forty-five minutes passed by, and they opened. Come in, talk to them. I say, I really want to come out to my mom. Beforehand, I gave my mother a flyer, this gay-ass flyer, and it said, "LGBTQ," and it has what it means, and what it stands for. I'm thinkin' if I

leave this on the refrigerator, that she's going to acknowledge this poster, and ask me questions, instead of me confronting her about it, and it would probably give me an easy way to explain my sexuality.

I remember I left it on the refrigerator, and I'm just like, (shivering noises). Then that same day, I went to the community center, and I was like, talkin' to them about my situation, and everything. Then I remember I called my mom, 'cause—remember, this was junior year, and I was preppin' up for prom for my friend.

I remember I call her, I'm like, "Hey mom, are you home?" She was like, "Yeah." She was like, I have a surprise for you." I was like, "Okay, that's cool, we gone have to talk about it when we get home, but did you see the flyer?" She said, "Cool." I'm thinkin' she saw the flyer, and she liked it, I'm thinkin', "Oh, she don't got no problem that's it's a gay-ass center. Oh, we're good, it's super queer, she's probably cool with it."

I get home, take the cab home. I walk in the house, and we chatta', she tellin' me, "Oh, your grandfather gonna get you your prom suit." I'm like, "That's cool." I'm like, "Oh, so what'd you think about the flyer?" She said, "Oh, the activities seemed cool on the flyer." I'm like, "Ma, did you read the bottom of the flyer?" She was like, "No. Why?" I give her the flyer, she reads the bottom of it, and says, lesbian, gay, bi, trans, and queer. She was like, "What does this mean?"

I'm just like, "Mom, I'm bisexual." 'Cause I didn't want to explain what the fuck pansexual meant, and damn well she didn't know what that meant. Then she was like, "What?" I was like, "Yeah." She was like, "You lyin'." I was like, "No, I'm not." I remember she was just quiet as hell, she was kind of being in denial about it, and I thought it was hard. I thought she was just gonna be cool about it.

She tries to call my sister. She ends up crying, breaking down. I'm like, "Are you cryin'?" She's rubbing her eyes, and I'm like, "Oh, shit. I just made my mother cry." Take the phone, I'm talkin' to my sister, and asked me, "Why is mommy cryin'?" I'm like, "I just came out to mommy." She was like, "What you mean?" I was like, "Oh, I'm bisexual." She was like, "Stop playin'." I'm like, "I'm dead-ass serious."

My sister rushed to the house, she pacin' back and forth, and she's like, "Oh, my God." She like, "Deion, I'm bisexual, too." I'm like,

“What? What?” She was like, “Yeah, you remember this girl, that girl?” I’m just like, “Oh. Oh.”

You know that point, when you just look back at things, I’m like, “Oh, that’s what the fuck happened.” Yeah, that’s basically what happened. I just remember her, she was trying to be calm, but she did say stuff like, “It’s probably a phase.”

Esperanza Santos: Your mom, or your sister?

Deion Session: My mother. Then she just came in cool about it, but in my eyes, I thought she was accepting it. Looking back, I think, no she wasn’t. I remember her saying, “At the end of the day, you’re still my baby.” At that point, I’m thinkin’, “Oh, she accepted it,” but she really didn’t. She swept it under the rug. She does this shit all the fucking time. When you look back, it’s just like, “What the fuck?”

I talked to her about it again, she was like, “Honestly, I don’t know how I feel about it at this point.” I’m just like, “Wow.” It made me regret even telling her anything. I kept that away from her. I’m just thinkin’, “Oh, since she’s being so judgmental about it, she might as well not know about my personal business,” because I wasn’t really open to my mom for a while. I had a hard time speaking to her about anything. I remember after that, I started—not experimenting, but dating guys. She would never know about it.

Esperanza Santos: At 16 years old?

Deion Session: Seventeen.

Esperanza Santos: Seventeen years old now, okay.

Deion Session: It was some time before I turned 17. After I was 17, going into senior year, I remember I talked to my first guy ever. His name was Janere, we went to school with each other in eighth grade, and I remember she met him before. It was a bunch of different stuff. She tends to sweep things under a rug a lot. I remember last year, in July—last year during the summer.

Esperanza Santos: 2018, summer, when you were doing the ideas? No, hold one, what was it called?

Deion Session: At the time, last year, it was after I worked my summer job. I’m with Riley, who’s my partner. He identified as male at the time. He was my first boyfriend, but no. My mother knew him as a friend

who's a guy, not my boyfriend. This is my first boyfriend at the time.

Then again, I've interacted with many men—well, I talked to many men—but she would never know. I just kept that to myself because if it ain't a girl, she don't want to hear it, low key. I remember in the past, it was certain guys that I would bring, and I would be like, “Oh, I gotta go see this guy.” She's like, “Oh. Okay.”

Esperanza Santos: It's like she looks down, looks away, stops paying attention?

Deion Session: Yeah, basically. If it's a girl, she'd be like, “Oh, I wanna know,” but if it's a guy, I would just handle my business. She just sweeps shit—I hated it. I always hated that shit, because it's not the only thing she would sweep under the rug.

I was spending so many days with Riley, I was always with him. Me and him started talkin' in June, but he became my official boyfriend in the middle of July. I think some weeks after she found out about us accidentally, my best friend at the time, who I'm no longer friends with anymore, he accidentally mentions that he's my boyfriend. Accidentally. I wasn't really mad at him. He was stupid.

Esperanza Santos: It was a mistake, it wasn't malicious.

Deion Session: It wasn't malicious. Then again, he's a dumbass in this situation, but then again, you not any different, either. My mother. I didn't have a phone at the time. I would always contact her through Riley, and there would be times where I would forget to tell her that I'm spending the night out, 'cause I always talk to my mother.

I wasn't really communicating with my mother that much, it was a bad habit, but it was a reason why it all started. With Riley, every day we were together. That was my baby. Still is. I remember that same day, I was with Orlando, but we split. I went to Riley's house, he went home. Then I go spend the night at his house, forget to tell my mother that I'm out spendin' the night with Riley.

I wake up to my mother texting Riley, 'cause I always text her, saying I'm with Riley. I just see her message saying, can you tell Deion to call me, please? I answer the phone, I'm half sleep, I'm like, “Hello?” She was like, “Deion.” I'm like, “Yeah?” She says, “Why is Orlando telling me that you're with your boyfriend?” I'm like, “Oh, shit,” low key.

I have very bad anxiety. Yeah. Very, very bad anxiety. Usually the symptoms kick in at this point, but they didn't. At this point, I don't give a fuck. At the end of the day, she with the problem, not me. She tell me, "Why is Orlando telling me that you got a boyfriend?" I'm like, "Oh, shit."

I'm not like, "Oh shit," because oh, she know that I like guys, woman, I been told you this. I'm just like, "Oh, shit, she knows that I have a partner in general," because I didn't want her to know that I had a partner. Not to hide Riley from my mom, but it's just, I don't want her, really, in my personal business. 'Cause I was very private, 'cause I didn't talk to my mother as much as I wanted to at the time.

Then again, he's trans. That also play a factor at the time, at least. I remember she was just sayin', "Oh, we gone talk about this when we get home." I'm like, "Okay." She wanted me up with her to do something real quick, but she had some business to attend to, but I was gonna see her later that day. This whole time, I'm really just chillin'.

This is weird, but this is not the first time this happened. Because at the same time, I'm sick of this shit, because this is like, "Bruh, for real?" This is like, literally you just—and then, it's just like she's just pissed. I'm tryin' to figure out why are you so mad about this, really, though? I remember Riley was asking me if I was okay, I'm like, "I'm good. I'm chillin'."

Then Yoleidy, I called them, and I'm tellin' them what's goin' on, and they asked me, "Are you okay?" I'm like, "I'm all right." "Are you sure?" My heart's stable, my mind not racin', really. I'm not shakin', nor am I sweatin'. My stomach seems to be stable, and I don't have to puke, or get the shingles, I'm good.

I remember, I met up with her, and I'm low key pissed. I'm like, "What the fuck she got to say to me now?" It's like, say one thing bad about me being the person I am. I identified as gay at the time. I'm like, "Say something bad," just so I could just prove to you what you just said was just fucked up.

At this point, I know my identity is, and I know how to support myself, and stand my ground in this situation. I just want you to just say somethin', so I can just put you in your place.

I remember we met up. She was basically like, point her anger to Orlando. Not at me, 'cause I'm her baby, but to Orlando. She said,

“Oh, he had no business tellin’ me, that’s for you to tell me.” I told you this when I was 16, goin’ on 17. Why is you actin’ like this is brand new to you? I’m like, “Yeah,” ’cause he felt like shit. I brought that up to him, he was crying ridiculously.

Esperanza Santos: Orlando?

Deion Session: Orlando, who basically accidentally told her. He dumb as hell for the situation, but it wasn’t on purpose, I know this wasn’t out of spite. My mother doesn’t like Orlando, so she just brought his anger against him. I’m like, “Hell no,” because this shit ain’t brand new to you. I’m just like, “Okay. What the fuck is goin’ on?” Then we split, and then I end up seeing her later on that day.

I’m with Riley at the time, just like, “Wish me luck.” I’m just tryin’ to hear what she got to say. She’s sayin’, “This is new to me.” She’s still pointin’ her anger at—she’s still tryin’ to point out the fact that she pissed at Orlando for sayin’ that.

I’m not even worried about it at this point, I’m just tryin’ to figure out what else dumb—but she ain’t say nothin’ crazy. I think she just announced that she got to take time with it. At the time, I didn’t realize not everyone can help with what they know, or what they don’t know, because that’s how she was raised. My grandfather’s a deacon, he’ll never know that I’m queer. Ever.

Esperanza Santos: A deacon in what faith?

Deion Session: In Christian.

Esperanza Santos: Just general Christian?

Deion Session: Baptist. She was raised as a God-fearing woman. She wasn’t Christian, but that’s how she was raised. She had that connotation of being queer. I’m a God-fearing person, myself.

Better than the day I’m gonna live the life the way I want to. Nothings gonna stop me. I love who I love. I think she was just basically sayin’—well, she was most definitely sayin’, she just need to take time with it. She was like, “I’m alright.”

Esperanza Santos: Was the challenge that she didn’t get it?

Deion Session: Basically.

Esperanza Santos: That she was acting brand new?

Deion Session: No, the challenge was, there's a very big elephant in the room. It's a fucking colorful rainbow. A gay, pansexual, queer rainbow that I've—you made it seem like this wasn't—okay, here's my thing. It's already hard being a person of color, and then being a person of color and queer.

The fact that even in my community, and/or my family, you're makin' it seem like this identity doesn't have a social construct already, and you're just sweepin' it under the rug like this doesn't exist. As if this isn't a factor into what's goin' on in this world that we live in right now. My identity is somethin' that can never be swept under the rug, Boo. This shit is light and bright, and it comes through the rainy days.

I was hurt, and I was so confused. The fact that she sweep all these issues in a rug, it's not the first time she did it. It was just that, and other things. I'm just like, "Wow, this is really fucking sad." At this point in life, she's getting better with it.

She does acknowledge that I have a boyfriend. I'm fairly open about it at this point. It's certain things, like the femininity that she couldn't work with. She's like, "Don't do that." I'm just like.

Esperanza Santos: Ever since you were a little kid, or more in high school?

Deion Session: I probably did something super feminine, and then she probably didn't like it. Then I had did a walk, because my walk is pretty damn good, but she's like, "Don't do that again." I'm like, "Okay." The slang that I use, and the tongue popping. I fucked up. The tongue popping, and all that stuff, she just wasn't working with it.

The concept of me dating a guy, it was a completely different perception at the time. It sucked, because I knew that being who I was, was just such a big issue to her. I felt really uncomfortable even just being around her, 'cause I knew that she had this problem with me being like this. It really kept me from opening up to her with anything, even if it was my emotions, or my anxiety, or me just being generally depressed.

I just didn't feel comfortable around her. I kept me really distant. I felt like I was living in the same house as a stranger. I did not like that. That's basically my biggest problem with that. At this point in life, one, it's clear to her, it ain't no secret, 'cause I make it known. Two, she's also keepin' it calm with it, 'cause sometimes when my mother and my sister would butt heads, and she would feel as if

I'm the only person she has, and took time to accept it, to actually look through it, I guess.

You could read it through little things. If I get a haircut, or something—if I get a shave, she's like, "Oh, how many guys and girls is comin' up to you, complementin' you?" I'm like, "Did she say guys and girls? Oh, shit." I'm like, "Yeah, there's people comin' up to me." The little stuff that I realize, she open—she's keepin' her cool about it, but then, back then, it made me uncomfortable.

Esperanza Santos: Back then, in 2016, or back then in 2018?

Deion Session: Basically, before 2018. It sucked. I wasn't really open to her for a while. I'm a lot more open to her now.

Esperanza Santos: If you, back then, identified as someone who was pansexual, but used the word, "bi," how do you identify now?

Deion Session: I identify as gender nonbinary, panromantic, demi sexual.

Esperanza Santos: Work.

Deion Session: Yeah. Damn, that's long.

Esperanza Santos: A lot of syllables, but if it fits, it fits.

Deion Session: Hey, Boo, I'm still queer, it's whatever.

Esperanza Santos: It sounds like the first time you became aware of this was when you were talking with that guy on Kik when you were 14, or 16? No, 14.

Deion Session: Fifteen.

Esperanza Santos: When you were 15 on Kik, with the guy from Florida, right?

Deion Session: Uh-huh.

Esperanza Santos: That was one of the first times?

Deion Session: Yeah.

Esperanza Santos: How did you learn about the existence of LGBTQ people? Was it someone out in high school? Someone out in middle school? Someone in your family?

Deion Session: It would probably be high school. It was probably a couple of openly queer students in the school.

Esperanza Santos: What was the demographic of your high school?

Deion Session: What do you mean?

Esperanza Santos: Race, background, citizenship?

Deion Session: Predominantly people of color. It was predominantly black and Latino.

Esperanza Santos: Latino, from where?

Deion Session: Puerto Rican, Ecuadorian, Dominican, Mexican, Guatemalan. Hella shit, to be honest.

Esperanza Santos: A lot of Central, Caribbean, and South American?

Deion Session: Yeah. Then we had a lot of African students and Haitian students.

Esperanza Santos: Pretty Caribbean, then.

Deion Session: Yeah, but it was predominantly black, though.

Esperanza Santos: There was a moment where a guy was hitting you up when you were 15, and then you came out to your mom—

Deion Session: It was two months before I turned 17.

Esperanza Santos: Two months, that was a year and a half-ish later?

Deion Session: Yeah.

Esperanza Santos: How did other people become aware of how you identify, or how you are?

Deion Session: I took baby steps.

Esperanza Santos: Oh, 'cause you were saying a few people at a time?

Deion Session: Yeah, I first came out to my best friend, Orlando, who you know. I told him, and he accepted it. He said, “No matter what, you’re still my bro.” So masculine, but I loved him. I still do, it’s just I gotta keep my distance from him.

Esperanza Santos: Yeah, that's real.

Deion Session: I'll feed you from a spoon on a stick. Here's the love, but you can't get close to me, Boo. I came out to my friend, Nelson, who I don't really talk to like that, but I guess we cool. He accepted it.

Matthew, he had the fun-est reaction, 'cause I came out to everybody that's pansexual. He's like, "Oh, my God, bro, that's so cool. You could date—" We was in the cafeteria, and I told him he was, "Oh, my God, you could date him, her. Him, her, him, her, her, him, him, her." I'm like, "I don't like no fuckin' body in the room, but at least you gettin' the gist of it."

Esperanza Santos: Thank you for getting the picture about the buffet of opportunity I got, but I'm not interested in this buffet.

Deion Session: Basically. I don't like none of these motherfuckers, but at least you get the gist of it, Boo. Then I came out to my friend, Jasmine. That was my—

Esperanza Santos: She got you.

Deion Session: That was my—

Esperanza Santos: She got you.

Deion Session: She know I got her, we got each other.

Esperanza Santos: It sounds like you came out little bit by little bit, but was there a moment where it was like everyone just knew?

Deion Session: I don't even know, to be honest.

Esperanza Santos: You were just like, "This is what I do, this is the people I love, this is the folks I'm telling, everybody else can figure it out."

Deion Session: No, I wouldn't say that. I don't think people really knew, because—I thought everybody knew, but they didn't, apparently, because I was just a generally flirtatious person. I'ma just gladly admit that. I was flirting with every girl in there. I wasn't really flirtin' with the guys.

Esperanza Santos: Oh, okay, okay, okay.

Deion Session: It was honestly a way of acknowledging that I'm cool with you.

Esperanza Santos: But it was nothing sexual or romantic?

Deion Session: Nothin' sexual, but I was like, "Wassup, beautiful? How you doin'?"

Esperanza Santos: To the guys, or the girls?

Deion Session: To the girls. I was wasn't really likin' none of the guys. I kept me likin' guys low. It was probably some people that said that they knew. I'm like, "Okay," but then some said they don't. Okay.

Esperanza Santos: It was a mixed bag.

Deion Session: It was a mix.

Esperanza Santos: It was ambiguous. It wasn't clear to folks, at least, right?

Deion Session: They was like, "Is he? I don't know." You'll never know unless I say it. I came out to Jasmine. I miss that girl so much. She knew, because she identified as pansexual also, at the time.

Esperanza Santos: Was there a GSA club on your campus?

Deion Session: Nope.

Esperanza Santos: No?

Deion Session: Hell, no.

Esperanza Santos: Was there any LGBT teachers?

Deion Session: No.

Esperanza Santos: Of the queer folks— "queer"—that you saw on campus, were they bullied, or people were just like, "whatever," about it?

Deion Session: Yes and no. No, they was whatever about it. Straight men who don't acknowledge gay things, they say dumb shit, like, "Oh, my God, yo, I think he like me." Nigga, he don't like you. Mothafucka, he don't like you.

Esperanza Santos: You're not that cute. Don't play.

Deion Session: I'm like, "Boy."

Esperanza Santos: If girls don't like you, what makes you think guys are gonna like you?

Deion Session: Like, "Boy, did you brush yo teeth this mornin'?" No? Then get outta my face." It was shit like that. I think they just didn't give a damn, somewhat, I guess. Sometimes, some of them can be very uncomfortable, and I acknowledge that. I went to school with a bunch of hyper-masculine, cisgender men. That was how it was. At the end of the day, I knew it was just like—'cause I played football, so you can imagine how that was.

Esperanza Santos: No, I can't. I didn't play football.

Deion Session: Oh, well, sorry.

Esperanza Santos: Not my world. Wait, did you play football all throughout your four years?

Deion Session: No, I played my freshman year, but I played for a 14 and under team. Then I played senior year. I guess one thing—

Esperanza Santos: It was freshman and senior year, but not sophomore, and not junior?

Deion Session: No, I did not like none of the seniors at the time.

Esperanza Santos: It sounds like you weren't sussed, 'cause you were doin' that.

Deion Session: One thing, people always want to be curious, and then want to be nosy about it. They want to drag you out the closet, and they just want to know.

Esperanza Santos: Was that happening to you?

Deion Session: I guess, because people just askin', but then, again, by the time I hit senior year, I was practically open. I didn't blab my mouth about it, 'cause it's like, if you know, you know, and if you don't you don't. Oh, well. I remember I get them questions like, "Do you take or receive?" all the fucking time.

Esperanza Santos: Wait. Oh, at a certain point in your senior year, it was common knowledge to the point that people asked you invasive questions of being a top or a bottom?

Deion Session: Mm-hmm, 'cause that's the only thing they give a fuck about, if anything, about me being queer. That's the only thing they care about.

Esperanza Santos: Did they ask you when you were, what? Playing football, or something?

Deion Session: Mm-hmm.

Esperanza Santos: In the locker room, or something?

Deion Session: Not even locker room. On the football field, if I was on the sideline, or something. I'm just like, "Mind your business, before I crash you on this goddamn field."

Esperanza Santos: Yeah, we're playing football? Focus.

Deion Session: I remember one time, this boy named—we called him Schmurder, even though he wasn't murderin' anything on the field. He asked me that shit on the field, and he knew I was gonna kick his ass if he said anything stupid, because it was football. We kick asses.

One day he was like, "Yo, bro, can I ask you somethin', but don't get pissed off?" I'm like, "It depends on what you ask me." I was intimidatin' with him, 'cause that's how it was. He was like, "Yo, bro, don't do nothin'." I'm just like, "Just say it, just say it." We was both linemen, but he know I'll crack him. He was like, "Yo, bro, dude, do you take, or do you receive?"

I'm like, "Schmurder, step on the field." He's like, "What'd I do?" "Put your helmet on, step on the field." I'm like, "You want to ask if I take or receive, you 'bout to take and receive this ass whoopin'." On the football field, that's how I initiated everything. Other than that—

Esperanza Santos: What made you want to join football?

Deion Session: I played football when I was 14, but I lost the stride for it.

Esperanza Santos: You lost the stride for it? Why?

Deion Session: It wasn't my energy at the time. I wasn't very active like that, you feel me?

Esperanza Santos: No, I don't feel you. Help me understand. Paint a picture for me.

Deion Session: I wasn't feelin' it. After that, I feel like I wasn't that good at it, and I was like, "How do people even really play this game like that?" even though we was undefeated. It wasn't my thing. I remember I played it for fun, I'm like, "Oh, it seem cool, I don't like watching it, but I like playin' it." I remember I was supposed to play for sophomore and junior year, but I was like, "No." I didn't do it.

Especialy junior year, 'cause I was extremely depressed. I was like, "Ight, senior year, either play it now, or regret it after I graduate." Played it. Didn't play any varsity games, even though I was on varsity, 'cause I was performing at the time. I think I played the JV game. We won. I was pretty okay. It was fun, plus, I needed the exercise.

Esperanza Santos: It sounds like it was a combination of something to do, fun, exercise, you had your stride for it, and then you lost it, then you got it back, and you're like, "Cool."

Deion Session: It was good anger relief.

Esperanza Santos: Yeah, you jump in. That's where you lay it out. If you have nothin' else, at least you have that.

Deion Session: Mm-hmm. People always misinterpret, thinking that queer people are weak, but yeah, I'll kick yo ass on the field.

Esperanza Santos: Watch out.

Deion Session: Mm-hmm. Honey. It was cool, thought. It was cute, even though I left it early to go in the band, and everything. That was a lot more fun, I guess.

Esperanza Santos: Why?

Deion Session: 'Cause I was a drum major, so I danced a lot, and I'm a dancer.

Esperanza Santos: Wait, you were drumming and dancing at the same time?

Deion Session: The drum majors are the people that's in the front leading the line, but they're also dancin'.

Esperanza Santos: Oh, are y'all with the sticks?

Deion Session: Yeah, we marched. Yeah, that was me. That was fun. Lost a lot of weight from it.

Esperanza Santos: Is it cool to ask you the next question?

Deion Session: Sure, sure.

Esperanza Santos: We've been talkin' about—you knew that off the jump, I'm black. This is who I am, right?

Deion Session: Mm-hmm.

Esperanza Santos: We talked about that you're mom's dad was a deacon as a Baptist Christian? Christian Baptist?

Deion Session: He was a deacon at Abyssinian Baptist Church.

Esperanza Santos: Did y'all go to church growin' up?

Deion Session: Well, my mother did, but I went to church at 11, and I stopped going at 11.

Esperanza Santos: Oh, that's when you started and stopped.

Deion Session: Yeah. I think at the time, I just didn't like gettin' up in the ass crack of dawn on a Sunday. That was just me bein' lazy. My grandfather, I don't really—I love the dude, but I keep my distance from him.

Esperanza Santos: It sounds like your family practices Christian Baptist, and you also identify as black. How do you think that influenced your LGBT identity now, as a—hold on, I'm gonna mess it up, but I'm gonna try—as a gender nonconforming, panromantic—

Deion Session: Gender nonbinary. Panromantic. Demi sexual.

Esperanza Santos: How did those two things influence that thing?

Deion Session: One thing I know about God, God makes no mistake. I'm on this Earth to learn, and to live the life the way I want to, but then leave my footsteps along the way my life, so that people can, hey, inspire to make their own trail. Everyone's on their Earth to learn a lesson.

Life is like college. You gonna learn everything that's in your field, and you gonna need it in the aftermath. What I learned was my identity, and I kept going. That was my life. It's like people pressin' their beliefs, and everything on other people, never really messed with it, 'cause it was just like, “Who am I hurtin'?”

Faith allowed me to find mine, you feel me? That's just how I live my life the way I want to, but as long as I'm makin' other people happy, at least before anything, makin' myself happy, I'm good. That's how it correlates.

Esperanza Santos: Where did you learn those terms? Your mom, she's from a different time. She was like, "I don't know about no pansexual, but I know about bisexual." You were pretty strategic in how you shared that with her. How did you learn you could identify with those things?

Deion Session: Identify as queer?

Esperanza Santos: Like, demi—hold on.

Deion Session: Well, just queer in general, I guess.

Esperanza Santos: Yeah, we can start with queer, and then go from there.

Deion Session: Wait, can you clarify the question, again? I'm sorry.

Esperanza Santos: You're good. Let's say we're in 1990. People have the words, "lesbian," "gay," "bisexual," "transgender," and sometimes, "queer," depending on where you're at. You listed a lot of identities that are not encompassed in that LGBTQ. How did you first learn about those?

Deion Session: When I first came out as pansexual, I honestly don't even remember. I don't even remember, but I just knew when I first saw it, and how I interpreted my attraction, I was like, "This is me." The fact that I do acknowledge somebody's sexual identify, or their gender identity, I acknowledge it, but then again, there's more to them than what their identity is.

Esperanza Santos: Yes. It's a category, but that doesn't mean it's end all be all.

Deion Session: Exactly. I look deep into that. I was like, "I don't give a fuck. As long as you treat my heart right, and I treat yours, as long as your heart is pure, I'm good." That was how I identified for a minute. I thought, I was like, "This is how I'ma live my life." I'm tellin' people what the hell it meant. It was interesting, because people'd be like, "What the hell is pansexual?" I'm like, "You got Google."

I told my mom I was bisexual because she wasn't the first person—if I told her that I was pan, she wouldn't be the first person that I would have to explain what pansexual meant. You get

tired of explaining who the hell you are. You just want to be like, “This is who I am. No buts about it.” You get tired of explaining yourself.

Esperanza Santos: What about panromantic, and what was the other thing?

Deion Session: Demi sexual? I came across that when I was probably—I knew what demi sexual was when I started bein’ around RU Pride, because they have a whole row of flags. At the time, when I first started bein’ around there, I just identified as gay. I think I identified as gay. I feel like my sexuality wasn’t that broad, and I always pulled towards men, but the time passed by, I’m just like, “No, I don’t.”

I saw different flags, lesbian, gay, bi, trans, I saw gender-fluid, nonbinary, demi sexual, demiromantic, agender, demi gender, all that stuff. I was like, “Oh, this is new to me, but I’m willing to learn.” It was like, this is what it was taught to me, so I was just like, “I want to learn every bit of it.”

Some time passed by, and I always looked into demi sexual a lot, because after going through my—finding my curiosities, and finally going through my identity with being gay—I always talk to men. I was on Grindr. If you’re a demi sexual on Grindr, it’s not for you, because people tend to always hook up, which is perfectly fine, don’t get me wrong.

Esperanza Santos: Some people go there, and that’s what they look for.

Deion Session: Mm-hmm. I feel like in life, you’re going to go around. What other way to find yourself, than to just go through different experiences? I was like, “That’s cool.” Grindr helped me find out that I was demi sexual because I’ve—

Esperanza Santos: Oh.

Deion Session: Yeah. I was just like, “Oh, my God, hookups are not for me. Don’t touch me, I don’t know you.” Demi sexual is you have to have a—it’s between pansexual and asexual. I have to have a strong bond for you for me to do anything with you.

The panromantic plays a factor, because people can pull towards more—it could be homoromantic, biromantic, or panromantic. It’s whatever you pull towards, as long as you have that deep connection. I probably met up with a guy one time, and ...

Esperanza Santos: Why do you shiver?

Deion Session: It was a very, very, very weird encounter.

Esperanza Santos: Do you want to talk about it?

Deion Session: It's actually funny, we can talk about it.

Esperanza Santos: This is a guy on Grindr, and how old was he?

Deion Session: He was 30.

Esperanza Santos: How were you at that time?

Deion Session: I was 18.

Esperanza Santos: That was two years ago.

Deion Session: Yeah, he said that he was 26, and he wasn't.

Esperanza Santos: Oh, it's funny how people lie about that.

Deion Session: Mm-hmm. I wanted to drop kick him. I'm like, "You lyin' motherfucker."

Esperanza Santos: That picture was from four years ago.

Deion Session: I was like, "What the hell?" It was all so weird, and very uncomfortable. I always say, I can never watch Futurama the same ever again. I go to his house, he lives up from my house. This is when I lived on South 10th at the time, he lived on South 17th, or some shit like that.

I pull through his house, and I'm thinkin', "We chillin', we chillin'," 'cause I'm not the type to just hop into anything, plus I never had sex before. I was goin' to his house, he doesn't have that much furniture. "What the fuck? Okay." I remember, I think it was right before he was going to work, and then I remember—that was strike number one. Strike number two, he had no underwear on. He bent over to pick somethin' up, and I just saw all ass. I'm just like, "Oh, okay. All right. This is his house, he's comfortable. Cool."

Then we go to his room. I'm chillin', I thought we was gonna be chattin'. Shit happens with me. Either we're friends, or we're not. It's whatever. I'm new to Grindr, also, so I don't know what to expect from this shit. I remember he say little slick shit like, "No outside clothes in the house. No outside clothes." I'm like, "What?"

What?" I remember he was like, "Oh, I'm just kidding." I'm like, "Oh, okay. Sure."

Then, he laid in his bed, he was like, "Yo, you could lay in the bed with me. You could lay in the bed with me." No, I'ma sit in this comfortable-ass chair, and just stare into Futurama, 'cause I do not want to look into your creepy eyes.

I'm like tryin' to start a conversation, I'm like, "Oh, so you're 26. Cool, cool. When's your birthday?" He's like, "I'm not 26. What do you mean, 26? Why you so curious?" He said, "No, I'm 30." I'm like—

Esperanza Santos: You were 18?

Deion Session: I was 18. I was just like, "Uh." I'm like, "Wow. Just, wow." That was strike seven, fuck that. I was just like lookin' at the Futurama TV, I'm just like, "I made a big mistake. This is not my thing. I don't know this man, and I don't want to know this man, 'cause he's so weird."

All I remember is walking. I was like, "I gotta go to class," even though I wasn't in school. I was just like, "I gotta go to class, I'ma have to see you later." I walked from South 17th Street to Rutgers Campus.

Esperanza Santos: How long was that walk?

Deion Session: That was like two miles.

Esperanza Santos: That was like, what? Forty minutes?

Deion Session: Somethin' like that. Forty-five, fifty minutes. I was just like, "Let me get the fuck out this house." I was just like, (shivering noises) Hey, it made me acknowledge the fact that shit like that is not for me. I didn't realize, lookin' back at it, I was like, "Oh."

I'm like, "Something about demi sexual just really catches my eye." I thought I was just—'cause I peeped that whenever I try to have sex, I get real bad anxiety, because of the fact that I don't know—I held my sexuality for so long, plus I identified as abstinent for two years in high school. I held onto my sexuality for so long.

Esperanza Santos: Which two years of high school?

Deion Session: Freshman year to the middle of junior year.

Esperanza Santos: So, two and a half.

Deion Session: Two and a half. I think after me acknowledging my sexuality, I think me being abstinent turned me into this person that viewed as people havin' sex, or having early pregnancy to these spiteful people, and I didn't like that. At the same time, it was like, "Why not experiment? Why not just live the life you want it to, and not under other people's expectations?"

Then again, it's like, "It's my life. Do whatever the fuck you want, just as long as you do it safely, and just do your thing." I try to live freely as I can, but even if I tried, it was really hard for me, 'cause it was just somethin' stoppin' me.

I think last year in August, me and my friend, Juanita, who's demi sexual—I was like, "Oh, my God, I'm the same way, I have to have that deep connection. I can't just go around, just have sex, it's just not for me." I'm just like, "Oh, shit." I'm like, "Oh, I'm demi sexual. Oh, Lord. Jesus, Lord, Heavenly Father." I'm texting Riley, we were dating at the time, I'm like, "Babe, I'm demi sexual." I'm like, "God damn."

Esperanza Santos: Why "God damn?" Cool.

Deion Session: Yeah. It was "God damn" in a good way. I'm just like, "Wow. Wow, this describes me in general." Then the gender nonbinary part came in. I was just like, "I don't identify as male." I asked myself, "Do I truly identify as male?" I'm just like, "I don't know." I don't think I identify as anything under binary spectrum. I'm like, "What identity has this?" Nonbinary. I actually love bein' nonbinary.

Esperanza Santos: Because?

Deion Session: It makes me stick out. I feel like I stick out, and it makes me feel more like I'm me. It's something I identifies with. I'm just Deion. Deion can be whoever the fuck they want to be.

Esperanza Santos: What pronouns do you use?

Deion Session: They/them/their.

Esperanza Santos: Cool.

Deion Session: I think I confirmed it earlier this year in January.

Esperanza Santos: January, 2019?

Deion Session: Yeah. I was just like, “Yeah, this is what I am. It makes a lot more sense.” I think bein’ on the campus is like, I learn everything that I know. Now that I know what I know, how much does these things stick with me? This cisgender, gay male—I was like, “Let’s just figure that out.”

I never fought it. That’s what I learned, no matter what sexuality, gender identities, it’s very fluid, so however you feel, is however you feel. Nobody can stop that. I was just like, “Ight, let me look for my identity, where is it? Found it. Deuces.”

Esperanza Santos: Work. That’s it.

Deion Session: Yeah.

Esperanza Santos: What do you like the most about being within the LGBT community, the queer community?

Deion Session: The history behind it—the history, and then the strength that—the resiliency that we had from it after the riots that happened.

Esperanza Santos: Which riots?

Deion Session: The Stonewall Riots. I didn’t know nothin’ about the riots, and then learnin’ from it, and takin’ time to realize that pride—at the time, I thought pride was just the celebratory thing about being gay, which it is, but it wasn’t always celebratory, it was fighting. It was standing up. It was civil rights.

Esperanza Santos: It was throwing a brick.

Deion Session: It was throwing a brick. “Bitch.” It was that, and then just finding people that also either face the same thing you have, and then you learn from them. After hearing all the narratives that you see, it just make you learn so much. It makes you take pride. You just love it, and you live for it, and it inspires you to don’t beat yourself down about it.

It’s nothin’ wrong with you, and don’t let anybody make you think anything different, ’cause at the end of the day, you still that bitch for livin’ your narrative, and your truth. It’s just the interactions are different, and it’s so fun.

Esperanza Santos: Different, how?

Deion Session: With some people that identify, or at least take the time to get to know the community, the conversations are different. My conversations are different. They just don't understand. They put it in roles into the situation, "Who's superior? Who's the man in the relationship?" That shit is dumb to me.

The knowledge that I know about the community, and how it's more than just male or female, or the fact that it's not only gay or bi, it's more to it. My horizons are a lot more longer than a typical normatives that people live by. It's good to find people that have that same—

Esperanza Santos: That get it.

Deion Session: That get it. It's just so dope. Just finding that space when you could just be open and free. You see how much your eyes are open compared to other people. It's also a curse, because people don't accept it, and they have a hard time just doing so. At the end of the day, I know what's right, and I know what's wrong.

What's wrong is the fact that you tryin' to change my perspective on it, and you're not. It's nothin'. If anything, whatever you're doing to me is just gonna make me stronger. You just provin' my point. You tryin' to bring me down, but you not. It makes me know better.

Esperanza Santos: It sounds like the beautiful thing about bein' in the queer community is you got history, you got people, people get it, but the curse to that is you're gonna face rejection. There are other people who aren't gonna get it.

Deion Session: Yeah, and in situations like this, I try so hard not to just snap about it, how I say, them tryin' to press their beliefs on me is provin' my point. If I try to fight fire with fire, if I try to convince somebody's perception with my fist, that's just gonna make their perspective more valid.

That's somethin' that I have to learn, because I always had a bad temper from back in the day. When I realize somebody says somethin' dumb about gay people, I would snap, and get aggressive, but that's not the case.

Esperanza Santos: Was that in high school that happened, or after high school?

Deion Session: High school, and afterwards, a little bit.

Esperanza Santos: It sounds like it was senior year, and then the last two years.

Deion Session: Yeah, I'll give you an example. A couple days ago, I would say, it had to be Thursday—a man comes to campus.

Esperanza Santos: Student, or just some random guy?

Deion Session: Some random guy.

Esperanza Santos: Some random guy comes on campus?

Deion Session: Yeah, he's outside of [unintelligible 02:08:12], he's talkin' 'bout some, "Oh, this is why you're goin' to hell," he's saying, "Potheads."

Esperanza Santos: Oh, that guy.

Deion Session: You know what I'm talkin' 'bout. He's saying, "Homosexuals," and all this stuff.

Esperanza Santos: He's like the, what is it called? The radical Christian people who come on campus, and then tell you you're gonna go to hell for A, B, and C reason?

Deion Session: Basically.

Esperanza Santos: That guy? Okay.

Deion Session: I know everything that it takes to resolve a situation in this case, but my problem was, my instant reaction was just me wanting to grab him by his ankles, and send him blastin' off. I know, in this case, that's not right, but it's hard, 'cause after all the shit that you put people like me through, you deserve this ass whoopin', but I'm not gone do that, it's not right.

What makes me any different if I put my hands on you, or anything? Even if I use aggressive tone with you, it's still proving your point, because it's still verbal violence. I couldn't really do anything, because one, I had class, and two, the director told me, "Just go to class, we'll handle it."

Esperanza Santos: Gary?

Deion Session: Yeah.

Esperanza Santos: Okay. Gary's the new director of the LGBTQ Intercultural Resource Center.

Deion Session: He was tryin' to advise me to make the right decision.

Esperanza Santos: Bounce. Be like, go do you.

Deion Session: Mm-hmm. I wanted to fly kick him. He was irkin' me. I was really angry. The fact that I wanted to swing low key, but high key. When you compress your anger, and you just want to do so many things to that person, even though what you tryin' to do is the right thing, it started buildin' up a lot of emotion. I was just crying in class.

Esperanza Santos: It triggers stuff.

Deion Session: It triggers stuff. It's probably one of the main glimpse of seeing people being so negative to people like me. It hurts. Me, being in the situation, I almost didn't handle the situation the best way possible, and also puttin' my future, and my reputation in danger, 'cause I just don't like fightin', even though it's hard to control. I'm glad I didn't do anything wrong. It hurts to see stuff like that.

At the same time, the same week, I learned it's basically the cycle of socialization. In the beginnin' stage when you're brought into the world, you're brought into people who you're familiar with, and you're brought into somethin' that you didn't ask for. You didn't ask to be this person of identity, whether if it was your race, or your gender, you didn't ask for this, this was how you were born.

You didn't ask to be surrounded by the people that you were possibly raised around, your loved ones, even though some people aren't raised around people that cared about them. They was raised around that abuse, so they don't know what love is. You were raised around what you were taught, and what you seen, and what was taught to you, and how you reacted to it. This is how you was taught, and this is how you was brought about.

What kills me, is the fact that people tend to think that whatever happened into their circle is the only thing that's right. But, no. That's not how I was raised. My mom, she taught me a lot of things, but I also was taught by all the things that I've seen outside

of my family, and was in the world that we live in today. That's a problem.

You're so sucked up and stuck into the things that—it was taught to you, but then again, people were the same way, but yet, they never took the time to find out if their whole hypothesis was valid. Is there really anything wrong with me datin' the same genders—dating outside, or inside of my gender? It irks me. It's understanding, but it's unacceptable.

Esperanza Santos: I can understand that you were taught to think this way, but that doesn't mean that I'm gonna accept it, and just go on with my day.

Deion Session: If I just accept it, it's just gonna go on for longer, and longer. The only thing that makes the situation worse is that somebody's not telling you that this shit is wrong, or you're just not letting the information sink in. Sweetie, stop. His whole situation was like—I'm just like thinkin' about it, I'm like, "I'ma just pray for him."

That's just how life is. I just hope people just tend to just realize not everyone's value is gonna be the same as yours. Also, nobody's gonna be Christian like you are. Some people don't believe in higher power. If that's how you keep goin' with yo life, keep goin'. If you're livin' life well, but you're livin' under God's will, that's good. If you livin' by a non-higher power, that's good, too.

You can't just press your values on another person because you believe that it's right. If anything, you're misinterpretin' the values of God, and you just puttin' shame on God's name, showin' so much hatred to people, because that's not what you was brought on this Earth to do. It irritates me.

So many things was just rushin' through my head. I was just like, "Ight, I'ma just pray for you, I'm not gonna put my hands on you." It's not cool. Then again, I put my scholarship on the line, 'cause I got a full ride.

Esperanza Santos: Just to close up, we talked about you finding community here at Rutgers-Newark, and then being exposed to new flags, and new people, and learning new skills, and finding a community of people who get it. Are there other places in Newark that you relate to the queer community?

Deion Session: There was Rutgers, there was the Newark LGBTQ Community Center, I was there every damn week of my life, and I started

volunteerin' there. There was the Hetrick-Martin Institute, HMI. I started bein' around them since this last summer.

Esperanza Santos: The last year?

Deion Session: Yeah, last year, basically. There was Project WOW. I started bein' around them this past year, too. Them, but it was mainly Rutgers.

Esperanza Santos: This is your place.

Deion Session: Yeah, this is my heart, the city, basically. After meeting people on campus, I also connected with people outside of campus, I connected with QP, Queer People of New Jersey—well, Queer Performers of New Jersey. I performed for them a couple of times.

Esperanza Santos: Queer Performers of New Jersey?

Deion Session: Uh-huh.

Esperanza Santos: Okay. Are they based in north New Jersey, or south New Jersey?

Deion Session: In here. In Newark.

Esperanza Santos: Oh, okay. Cool.

Deion Session: Yeah.

Esperanza Santos: Okay. How about for now, we close off today, and then if I need to follow up, I'll follow up.

Deion Session: All right.

Esperanza Santos: That sound good?

Deion Session: Yeah.

Esperanza Santos: Okay. Again, today's date is October 12th, 2019. My name is Esperanza Santos Santos, and I'm interviewing Deion Session at Rutgers-Newark for the Queer Newark Oral History Project. Thanks again, Deion.

Deion Session: No problem.

[End of Audio]