

**Queer Newark Oral History Project**

**Interviewee: Donald Ransom**

**Interviewer: Bianca Abrera**

**Date: December 22, 2018**

**Location:**

*Donald Ransom:* —Branch Brook Park, and I saw all of those beautiful cherry trees. We went by the Cathedral Basilica, and I went like, wow.

*Bianca Abrera:* Oh, it's beautiful.

*Donald Ransom:* Oh, my God.

*Bianca Abrera:* The rose windows. Yeah.

*Donald Ransom:* Yeah. I know when a friend of mine got married there, I said, "You need roller skates to get down the aisle." I said, 'cause I was one of the attendants. I went, like, "Holy God," I said, "We should have taken the subway." It's a beautiful church and the city, and I love all the different neighborhoods and the wards. Then when they have the various ethnic festivals, Lincoln Park Music Festival, I love that. It's just a wonderful city. I love Newark. I think Newark is wonderful. It's great.

*Bianca Abrera:* When did you first move here?

*Donald Ransom:* In '83.

*Bianca Abrera:* What places in Newark do you associate with the LGBT community?

*Donald Ransom:* Hmm. Okay. I'll start with when I first moved here, I moved in with a friend that I knew that lived at the Colonnades. That was where a lot of gay folks lived. I remember going to Murphy's—the bar. I remember going to First Choice. Remember going to the Zanzibar, also. Also remember coming to the Robeson Center, because I had been invited—they were doin' a, an outreach to men who have sex with men.

We were talkin' about HIV-AIDS. They said that they were doin' work over at UMDNJ on what was goin' on. Between there, between the various places you could go—see. First Choice, Zanzibar, Murphy's, there was a Black Box. Also the Branch Brook Cherry Tree Festival, and then Lincoln Park, the music festivals—everybody and his brother was there, and the various places that you can go.

*Bianca Abrera:* Would you mind, 'cause we learned about Murphy's and Zanzibar in our class—would you mind telling us more about it?

*Donald Ransom:* Oh, my God. Zanzibar was a club where you could go. The music was hot. People would work all week and then they would wanna come and relax and enjoy themselves, 'cause you could meet your friends there. For a lot of folks, they could come and be openly gay there, where they couldn't be in the streets, or whatever. My

friends would always say to me, “We’ll meet you there.” I’d say, “What do you mean?” I said, “Because I’m going.” For me, I could not live that closeted life. I was openly gay. If you saw me on the street, you could assume that, okay, yeah. He’s that way.

You could go to the Zanzibar and dance and have a good time and meet people. You could tell by how packed the dance floor was whether it was a good DJ or not. Then we would go—we would start our evenings off at Murphy’s. Murphy’s was a wonderful place. During the day, I would say from when it opened at 10 a.m. ‘til like 5:00 it was a straight businessman’s club, where people from the area would come in, get a sandwich or drink or somethin’.

Then at 4:00 it would flip to being a Black-gay bar. The different bartenders would come in, the doormen. Then we would party and have a good time. You could always see a crowd of people standing outside smoking. A lot of ‘em were generally smoking weed. Between that and then First Choice—and then on weekends, a lot of times we would go into New York to Christopher Street or the Village. That’s when the Village was totally different. Then we’d also go to the Paradise Garage. I’m sure you’ve heard about that?

*Bianca Abrera:* Yeah.

*Donald Ransom:* Oh, my God. That place was legendary. I tell people the most memorable time we had there was either when Grace Jones showed up with her crazy self, or Patti LaBelle. Then another time, they did an evening with Bette Midler.

*Bianca Abrera:* Wow.

*Donald Ransom:* Barry Manilow was her accompanist on the piano. That’s where you could just go and you go in at 11 or 12:00, and leave 9 or 10:00 the next day. You come out and the sun is up, or we would leave First Choice or Zanzibar at 6:00 or 7:00 a.m. Some people would either go home and change, or you could go right to work. That’s what we would do. We could just party and have a good time. Also back then it was—losing friends, people, especially when men, the guys that were dyin’ from HIV and AIDS, and their families wouldn’t even allow people to come to the funeral or whatever, ‘cause normally they would just do a closed coffin.

They would always put in the obituary died of cancer or died from a sudden illness or something. In ’90 we developed a project called Project Fire where we were doin’ safer-sex parties for men of color. Then we developed that into a project. It was called Hot, Horny and Healthy for men. Then we also developed a program called Wet, Wild and Well for women, because we insisted that women are being infected with this disease. How do we teach people to take care of themselves? That was done through Newark Community Health Center. Then we wanted to address the issue of the house community. Of course you’ve heard of the house community?

*Bianca Abrera:* Mm-hmm.

*Donald Ransom:* Well, I knew of them and quite frankly, did not wanna be bothered with them, because for me, I did not like effeminate men. If I'm gonna be walking down the street with someone, the brother's gonna look like a football player or a wrestler or something. From working with this project and knowing that a lot of these kids were infected—not only with HIV-AIDs, but could have been clinically depressed and all that, and had problems, we started the project Fireball. We would do these big balls every—at the Robert Tree to get people involved. Also to work educating everyone, the whole community.

Today a lot of these folks are still my friends. I learned, starting in '85, I would look in my address book and I would be crossing out names, so I stopped sending Christmas cards. Because you look in your—you look at page one, there could be ten names on there and eight of them were crossed off. Then you think of the people that—I don't know, they said the issue of the hate crimes and all. I believe some people put themselves at risk, others don't. I know a couple weeks ago when I was on the 24 bus, a couple kids were sayin' somethin' about faggots on the bus or whatever.

I said, "Well, if there are on the bus, what you gonna do about it?" The guy went like, "Well, you know, where we come from"—I said, "Where we come from I have a PhD in whip ass. Either whipped or get whipped. If you think you're going to be"—and then on the bus there were two young girls. This young girl got up and she said, "I got your back, Rev." I said, "Where do you know me from?" She said, "My aunt goes to your church." This guy gonna jump up, she said, "Don't worry about it. He ain't nothin' but a biscuit anyway." I went like, "Oh, wow." The guy went to get up, and she said, "Sit down."

*Bianca Abrera:* Oh.

*Donald Ransom:* He said, "Okay." When I keep thinking of—I have a lot of friends, and I tell people because you see me with someone don't assume that that's my sexual partner or I'm interested in them sexually. I mentor a lot of young guys to the program with the mayor called My Brother's Keeper. I also believe that we need to—we're all human beings. Live and let live. I tell people I know in my program when I was working, a lot of folks would come in and I knew they had a drug or alcohol problem. I knew they were depressed.

I know what society says. By the time you're 21, 22, you need to be married, you need to have 2.5 kids, the house with the white picket fence and the dog, or whatever. For some people, that's just not it. My five brothers and sisters have carried on our family name. I would tell my mother I'm not gonna be living a life where I'm gonna be living a lie. I'm very happy that I have a lot of young men in my life that I mentor that don't mind telling their friends, hey, this is my godfather. This is my mentor. This is Reverend Don and he's gay.

It's okay for me to hug them and for—they can hug me and to not to think anything, 'cause a lot of people, when they say, oh, you're that way. They go like, and I say, "What do you mean 'that way?'" You have to deal with that when people say if you're gay and

you're older and you're with someone younger that you're trying to pick them up or you're a child molester or you're a pedophile. No. 'Cause I worked for the Catholic Church for 35 years. I used to tell people, "Wow, these brothers and sisters are in trouble." Now we see what is happening.

I tell people I love my nieces and nephews, my great-nieces and great-nephews. I have a great understanding. They know who I am. They know that I'm gay. They know that if I'm coming home. If I have a friend, I'll say this is a friend. This is someone I'm dating. I don't have to say to them, well, you know. No. This is my friend so-and-so. This is my friend So-and-So. I'm dating him. Where my brothers and sisters are like, when you come home, can you just chill? I'm not coming home to chill. I'm coming home and be who I am. I love my great-nieces and nephews, especially when we can talk sports.

Diehard Eagles fan. My nephews will go, oh, God, no. They like the Steelers and the 49ers, and the Redskins and all that. I sit there. I bleed green. It's also has been very good 'cause I've been able to baptize their children, marry them. I know about eight years ago my niece called me—and my great-niece, and she said, "I'm getting married." I said, "Okay." I said, "Well, your mother's been calling me. What's going on?" "Oh, she's upset." I said, "Are you marrying Chuck?" She goes, "Yeah." I said, "Okay." She's Black, Chuck is White. I said, "Okay." "Uncle, you don't have a problem with it?" I said, "No." I said, "I already know that you two have a—you're living in a house, your name is on it. I also know that the life insurance policies, you're the beneficiary. You've been together five years, you've got two kids. It's about time you get married." I said, "I'll marry you."

My sister was like—my, her grandmother was like, "I think it's wrong. The race issue and the intermix of—". I just said, "Shut up." I said, "We're all family. We're all kin." I said, "We're all mixed up nowadays God knows what." "Oh, my God, I don't believe you gonna be marrying your great niece." I am. I said, "I'm chargin' her, too, because this is what I do to get paid." It's just so wonderful nowadays that people can come out and be who they are and live. Then you think with someone like Kate Spade, Anthony Bourdain, people that got all this money that livin' a luxurious life, and they're takin' their lives.

*Bianca Abrera:*            Yeah.

*Donald Ransom:*        I always tell people, they say that if you could get married, who would you marry? I said, there's two people I wanna marry. The guy from Amazon or Oprah. They go, why? I said for the love of money. It's wonderful when—and I can remember when Martina Navratilova came out. I'm like, oh, my gosh, they crucified her, but I said finally she can be herself. You can get out there and do what you wanna be, and then you don't have to worry about someone coming back to blackmail you, or someone come sayin' I know what you did, and blah, blah, you're this, and I don't wanna be your friend, or whatever.

I just think it's crazy. It's like whenever I go somewhere and I see the mayor. He always gives me a hug or whatever instead of a handshake. I tell people we have a wonderful mayor here in Newark. Wonderful city council people. Also the provost, chancellor here, Nancy Cantor, is wonderful. Well known in the community. People know her. That's what we need. We just need to be able to say I'm okay, you're okay. I love when I can get on the bus and I can see these kids get on—even the guys now, with different colored hair.

*Bianca Abrera:* Yeah.

*Donald Ransom:* I'm sittin' there goin', wow. When I was growing up, boom. I couldn't have had the dreadlocks that I have. I couldn't have cut my hair, because my parents told me what to do, when to do, how to do it. It's just so wonderful that people can be open, they can be free, and there's all the programs. When I tell people whenever I'm tellin' them about Rutgers North, they always ask me what about that Robeson Center? I said, well, that's the heart of the Newark Campus. I said a lot of people will say we're in relation to the Robeson Center, where's the building? That's how you do things. I just tell 'em now, well I'm not sure because of all these new buildings goin' up and the honors dorm.

*Bianca Abrera:* Yeah.

*Donald Ransom:* You got all this stuff around here. It's just so wonderful. I just wish that the women's basketball program was here, 'cause I love to see Vivian Stringer, who makes sure that she takes care of the women in that program, makes sure they graduate, makes sure they're not taken advantage of. A lot of the programs and things, hey, we just want you to come and play. You're a big-time star, or whatever. She insists that they get that degree. That's what happens, I think, at a lot of the colleges and Newark, I think, has been in the forefront of the LGBT community in doing things, and especially the Women and Gender study program and working. It's been a pleasure to be involved in all of this.

*Bianca Abrera:* Yeah.

*Donald Ransom:* I have to remember, and I tell people, I've met Bayard Rustin a couple times. He was very involved in the March on Washington and all. He said if you want someone to be a part of your cause, then you must certainly be willing to be a part of theirs. That's what I live by. Working with people, doing what I can, speaking, getting involved. I know three years ago I was honored by the [Carnegie](#) Washington Foundation for 35 years of HIV work. I said, well, I may have been working for the community and all, but I was also working for myself to find myself living healthy, high T-cell count, undetectable.

*Bianca Abrera:* Yes.

*Donald Ransom:* I'm 74 and know that someone today is going to love me, to touch me and hold me. Because when this disease first came, nobody wanted—even in our own

community we were disrespecting and shunning people. Now today we find out that a lot of the work that has been done in HIV work was done out of UMDNJ, and the studies where they did with women and ACT and other things. Newark has been very involved, Rutgers has been very involved, and we have a community and the state. Also we've always had a health department from the state level that's been very progressive and very out of the box.

*Bianca Abrera:* Since you're very openly gay and everything, I was wondering when you first realized that you were gay?

*Donald Ransom:* When I was 12 years old and I was in love with the kid that lived across the street. Because we would be playing games and things, and he would always wanna be close to me. I was sittin' there goin', okay, what's going on? Because he was in the next building, because in the military, you live in apartment buildings, maybe 20 apartments to a building. Whenever, if there was a weekend or something and overnight or whatever, we would always—we could stay at each other's homes or apartments. He would always wanna—then we all didn't have individual bedrooms, so we would all sleep together. Then that's when I knew and that was our little secret. I like you, you like me. Boom, boom, boom.

*Bianca Abrera:* When did you first learn about LGBTQ in general? Did you know about it when you first realized that you were gay?

*Donald Ransom:* I was able to talk to one of the teachers at the school because everyone knew Mister Stewart. We were sitting one day, 'cause he was the librarian. I said, "I need to talk to you about something, about my feelings," and whatever. 'Cause by the time you're in eighth grade or whatever, you—oh, one second. [*Extraneous noise 20:40*].

[*Extraneous conversation 20:47 – 20:54*]

*Donald Ransom:* I told him. I said I like So-and-So. He's goin', "Oh," he says, "How do you like him?" I said, "I like it when he holds me, when we touch and when we kiss." I remember at 12 one of my aunts was telling my mother, because we used to be at my grandmother's house for dinner on Sunday. "Something wrong with your son." My grandmother said, "Listen. He didn't ask to come into this world. You two blanked, he's here. Love him the way he is." That was the last discussion that I ever had with my parents.

*Bianca Abrera:* They were very accepting? Yeah.

*Donald Ransom:* They were accepting. When I could come home, my mother would say, "Okay. Do you like him or what?" "Mom, if I'm sleeping with him, you'll know." What was really wonderful for me when I lost my mom seven years ago, I actually had to ask friends of mine to go to the fellowship hall of the church so that the rest of my family and people there could come in, because my mother knew everybody. My brothers and

sisters were like, who are all these people? I said, “They’re all friends of mine that know mom.” Oh, my God.

A couple of my friends came and they were up in drag, or whatever. My one nephew said to me, “Are they real?” I said, “Ask ‘em.” He said, “I don’t know, Unc. They look better than the women here.” I said, “Well, they’re women, okay? If they look it, they act like it, they are.” My brother was sayin’, “Aw, the one there with the blue suit on—”. I said, “Yeah. That’s Charlotte. She did Momma’s makeup.” “Oh, can I get her digits?” I said, “No, no. She’s high maintenance.” I said, “No, no.” I said, “Trust me, you can’t afford her.”

When I look and I think, and then when I have friends of mine that tell me how their families treated them, and I go, wow. That’s sad. I know when I was ordained and my mother was standing there with me in the church, I said, “Wow.” I said, “If everyone who’s bein’ ordained, if their parents could be there.” I tell people I really miss my mom. When she got sick, I was there and she looked at me, and she says, “I’m not gonna get better, son. I’m going home.” I said, “What do you mean?” She said, “My mother’s here. I’m going to die.” I went like, “Oh, shit.” As I was praying for my mother, she quietly passed.

I tell people I was mad at God. Wait a minute. Why’d you take my mom? I got four brothers, four sisters. You could have taken one of them. Then I had to resolve that. I resolved that in therapy. I have a therapist that I see every two weeks, dealing with being clean and sober, livin’ with HIV, bein’ a cancer survivor, and then losing my mother who I used to call every morning at 6:00. “Hey, Mom.” She would call me, goin’ like, “What’s goin’ on?” I said, “What do you mean?” She said, “Something’s going on. I feel it.” “Well, Mom, I’m going to the doctor’s today. They’re going to do this. They’re going to do that.” She said, “I knew it.”

We had this connection where if something was going wrong she would know it. Especially when I called her, she said, “Why were you at the doctor’s?” I said, “Well, they found a brain tumor.” “Okay, let’s pray on it.” When you have that open relationship, and then when you can meet parents and they go, “What do your parents say?” Well, that they’re loving, they’re accepting. The people say, I wish I had that. I say I wish I still had it. There are some parents that are wonderful and great, and then there are others that say we’re gonna disown you. We don’t want you around. Then when somethin’ happens in the family, who do they call?

All my nieces and nephews, great-nieces and nephews and family members, they’ll call me. This happened, that happened. We’re going through this. What would you say? What would you do? How would you deal with it? I know when a few years ago, about ten years ago when my one brother went to jail, my two nephews came up here to live with me so that they wouldn’t go into the system. I helped raise them. Now they tell people, yeah, our Dad’s in jail. This is our uncle, but this is really the man that raised us. They’re married now and they’re with their own families. That makes me feel good, knowing that, wow, I’ve done something with my life.

*Bianca Abrera:* [Crosstalk 26:12]. Wait. You said you were the youngest of 11?

*Donald Ransom:* Mm-hmm.

*Bianca Abrera:* You keep saying “four brothers and four sisters.”

*Donald Ransom:* Well, I have a brother and sister that passed.

*Bianca Abrera:* Okay.

*Donald Ransom:* Now I’m down to—I have four sisters and only one brother.

*Bianca Abrera:* Oh.

*Donald Ransom:* As they say they have made transition. My mom and dad, my dad’s been gone about, I would say, 20 years, my mother 6 years.

*Bianca Abrera:* Were you very close with your siblings when growing up?

*Donald Ransom:* Not really. One brother, Christopher, I was close to him. My one sister, Christine. The others were like—we were, we could disagree and disagree, but if anyone got into a fight or whatever, then we’d, we would all take care of one another. My one sister tells me—‘cause she’s Jehovah Witness, that you gotta get right with God. You find yourself a good woman and you’ll be okay. I’m lookin’ at her, well, you been married three times, so did you find a good man yet?

*Bianca Abrera:* Oh, my goodness.

*Donald Ransom:* You know what they put you through.

*Bianca Abrera:* Yeah.

*Donald Ransom:* I’m sittin’ there goin’ like, okay. If marriage is so good, why is the divorce rate so high? I just tell people it’s just amazing. I think of the number of gay and lesbian couples that have adopted children, especially the at-risk children, have raised them, that have been—when they said what is the traditional family? What is the non-traditional family? Look how many of us have been taken care of and raised by single parents, whether it’s male or female. That’s why I don’t understand what’s going on with Ben Carson, and he’s Secretary of Housing and Urban Development, raised by a single parent, mom, who went on to become a neurosurgeon, and now he’s actin’ like a total idiot.

Of course, with individual one bein’ his boss, I guess I’d be an idiot, too. I’m just so glad when people can say—I know when I was in Atlanta once and I was at the King Center and I read the inscription on Doctor King’s tomb, “Free at Last, Free at Last.” When can

we all say that we're absolutely free, totally free? I believe that if Margaret Thatcher could run England, a Golda Meir could run Israel, that a woman could run—be president of the United States.

One of the things I did 15 years ago, I was at a confirmation class for a Catholic Church, and young girl said to me, "What would be the role of the women in the Catholic Church?" I said, "Wouldn't it be great one day if we could say Her Holiness the Pope?" Well, I thought the pastor was gonna crap on himself. I said, "Just think of the faithfulness of the women—the lay women, the nuns, the religious sisters and what they've done. Yet they can't be priests, they can't be cardinals or whatever?" that's why I like this new pope when he told who am I to judge?

*Bianca Abrera:* Francis? Yep.

*Donald Ransom:* When can we be free? When can we imagine a world where it's all wonderful and great? I remember Michael Jackson's song, *The Man in the Mirror*. We have to take a look at ourselves and life goes on. [Pause 30:07 – 30:13] It's wonderful that all this history's being recorded, because as they say, if you don't record your history you're doomed to repeat it. I would not like to see us go back to the days—the early '80s, when this HIV came along. It's like now with this new opiate addiction thing, opiate thing, everyone's screaming opiates are a problem. Drug addiction's been around for years. Now all of a sudden that well-to-do people are OD-ing and taking their lives, they're gonna make it a problem, but when it was in other communities and those that were less fortunate, excuse me, they could care less.

I know like on the third Sunday when our church—when we go down to Penn Station to give out bag lunches and stuff, I tell people let's stop and talk to these people. Find out what's going on. A lot of these people have college degrees and a lot of them are veterans. A lot of them have fallen on hard times. When you can see a family with two kids and they're—where are you living? We're at a shelter. That hurts. This is supposed to be the wealthiest country in the world. For me, we need to turn that Statue of Liberty around, 'cause it says on there "Give me your poor, your tired, those yearning to be free." Here in this country, we're not.

*Bianca Abrera:* Yeah, definitely. I was driving Montclair yesterday, and there they're putting up a new building. My mom's like, "Oh, they're not done putting up this hotel." I was like, "Hotel? Montclair has enough money to put up a hotel but they can't put up a homeless shelter?"

*Donald Ransom:* Mm-hmm.

*Bianca Abrera:* There's so many people in Newark, people who are definitely [crosstalk 32:01].

*Donald Ransom:* As they say not in my backyard.

*Bianca Abrera:* Yeah.

*Donald Ransom:* I tell people there's a new book, and I bought it. I got it from the Rutgers bookstore. It's a conversation between the Dali Lama and archbishop Desmond Tutu. I bought two copies, one for me, one for my pastor. When I read it, I cried. Bishop Desmond Tutu talks about when he had to chair the South African Reconciliation committee where they talked about all the atrocities that happened between the White government, apartheid government, and the DNC—the RNC that Mandela ran or was involved in, and how the atrocities on both sides, and how he cried as he said listening to what people did to one another, what the government did. Yet we can sit here and say I'm a man of God, I'm this, women shouldn't do this, children shouldn't do that.

I know a good friend of mine when he was over in Vietnam said, “Why am I over here?” Muhammad Ali said I'm not gonna go, because those people didn't do anything to me. The same thing is I have lots of Muslim brothers and sisters. I remember coming back from Amsterdam when we were going through customs. How long we been friends, where did you go, what did you do. I'm sittin' here goin, damn, all we wanna do is get on the plane and go home. Then you get this idiot now who's talkin' about we don't want 'em comin' across the southern border. Meanwhile, every wife he's had has been an immigrant. You think that he's tellin' us to buy—make American great again, and everything in his hotel is made overseas.

*Bianca Abrera:* He's a hypocrite.

*Donald Ransom:* That's the conflict I have. To me, my grandmother used to always say, “Say you're gonna do something and do it.” She said, “Actions speak louder than words.” This country, I tell people, we are in trouble. We are truly in trouble when we can't do—we do one thing, we say one thing and we do another. Yet we give all this foreign aid to countries. I tell people until Israel apologizes to the South African people—because they kept the Apartheid regime supplied with military things, yet they won't let Palestine survive.

I get really, wait a minute, you've done this, you done that, and you're brothers and sisters right next door can't live, can't survive, because of what you say that you want. We got a lot of work to do. I remind people that the first time I went to the Vietnam Memorial with a friend of mine and he was looking for the names of all the people that were in his company, and he said, “Wow, I cannot believe that I lost all these brothers over there.” Yet our thing is stand up and salute the flag. I think what has that flag done to harm a lot of other people?

Then now the government is shut down because this idiot wants a wall. A wall isn't gonna do it because the tunnels are already there. They've already dug the tunnels. Now people are sayin', oh, the fields, the lettuce can't get picked, the beets can't be—the vegetables can't be picked, because all the people that you're keeping out are the hardworking people that wanna come here for a better life. They're not all thieves, they're not all robbers. I get that, to me the have and the have-nots.

That's why I love Bill Gates who's sayin' that when I leave all of my money will be given to charity. My kids have been provided for. Yet you get that one percent that can stand there. I just tell people how can—I know when our president was over in France and wouldn't go to the cemetery because of the rain to honor the men and women that died over there, bullshit. He's in a bullet-proof limousine. He's got bodyguards. He can't even go to the bathroom without five people standing outside the door. Oh, but for his safety, he couldn't be in a motorcade for two hours. That's why I love when Barbara Bush says, "I don't want him at my funeral." She should have been the president.

*Bianca Abrera:* Where do you think that leaves LGBTQ people now?

*Donald Ransom:* Now more than ever with this new evangelism and the conservative and the far right coming up, we really have to stand strong. We have to be able to come together as a community. We can disagree. I can say I don't like your glasses, you should wear contacts, but if you need the glasses, you need the glasses. We have to support you. We have to come together and support the whole community, because when they say—when they came, in Germany, when they were coming for the Jews, I'm not Jewish. When they were comin' for this—I'm not that.

At the very end when they say, okay, we're gonna come for the LGBT—okay, well, I'm not lesbian. Okay, I'm not this. I'm not that. When it comes to your turn, if you haven't been there to support and encourage and help someone else, when you go—when your back is against the wall, who's gonna be there to support you? We have to be able to—that's why I love Ellen. I can remember, oh, my gosh. She came out. Okay.

You get all these people in sports that can't come out and say who I am. This is my partner. This is not my college roommate. No, this is the man I'm living with. This is the man I'm sleeping with. I have a wonderful friend of mine that's a doctor. He and his partner live in Atlanta. They're very prominent in Atlanta. When I've been around them, I can just see women going, oh, God, what a waste. I'm sittin' there goin', what do you mean, what a waste? He should be with me. He's not. Just because he's a doctor and his partner's a lawyer doesn't mean these two men can't love one another.

Doesn't mean that two women—I have some friends of mine that own a very successful funeral home. They're in the business of helping people. Their lifestyle should not matter. Quietly they help a lot of people, but they give and say anonymously. We should be able to say today, I've given this, I've given that, I've done that. If we all came together and united whether we're lesbian, gay, straight, bisexual—and I have a couple kids now that I'm talking to that are 18 and virgins. I applaud them, because we know now the pressure starts when you're 10, 11, or 12. If I knew at 10 what these kids know today, wow. We as a community have to come together, we have to support one another, we have to entertain one another, and we have to let people know.

Some people will do the right thing, some won't. When they get sick and tired of bein' sick and tired, they'll do the right thing. I tell my friends if you're going through

something, let me know. Don't call me after you decide to go out and drink. Don't call me after you decided to take a hit or something, because now all these people that are OD-ing, almost every day you pick up the paper, three to four people have OD'd. It's everywhere, just not in Newark. People say Newark has a problem. The whole country has a problem with drugs.

Now because they're going to tax recreational marijuana—I think if you can smoke it and have a good time, fine. If you gonna act crazy or stupid, then don't do it. People are gonna do it anyway, 'cause I can remember my—when we were growin' up, my brother had a *Playboy* magazine. He had it hidden under the mattress so we would look at it. Because my mother and them told us you don't look at those kind of books. Because we were told we couldn't do it, we did it. I think once if we as a community can come together and stand up, it's going to be absolutely amazing.

Then when you hear peoples' struggles and sacrifices—I deal with couples who, if a partner dies, that the family don't want the partner to come to the funeral or to put their name in the obituary or anything. It says “longtime friend, a coworker,” or something. When we can record and let people know, hey, they've been a couple 40 years. I know a couple that's been together 52 years and were finally able to get married when marriage equality came in.

I tell people all the time if I marry, find a man and marry, how will that affect your marriage? You're telling me, oh, you're getting married, that's wrong. Two men shouldn't be getting' married, two women shouldn't get married. How is that gonna affect your marriage? I'm not sleepin' with you or him, so if I find someone to marry, I'm gonna marry them. If you say okay, fine. If not, bump you. If there's kids out there that are in foster care that can come out of foster care so they won't be abused and everything, and can be raised in a nontraditional home, why can't they? I think it was a couple months ago there was a thing about a young girl in Brooklyn or somewhere that was homeless that's now gonna be going to Harvard.

*Bianca Abrera:* Oh.

*Donald Ransom:* Can you imagine if she had decided I'm still going to be going to school every day, I'm going to be doin' this, I'm gonna be doin' that—if she were told you can't do that? We have to be able to support one another, help one another. I just tell people we all bleed red. If I cut, you cut, you cut, and the issue becomes let us just learn how to take care of one another. Let us learn to be human. I don't care what spirituality you practice, because there are people that sayin' this religion is okay, this religion is not okay. You can't do this, you can't do that.

I just say, “To the God of your understanding.” For a long time, and I tell people I don't know why they lied on Eve said that apple was her problem. You have to remember Adam was the man. He was the one that was supposed to have been superior. He was the ruler of everything. 'Cause Eve brought him an apple, don't blame it on—don't on her. He could've said no. You go through all these things, and I just say I just want people to

be happy, to be free. It's like, hey, I can walk down the street and hold someone's hand, and I can walk down the street and have someone hug or kiss me. Do I think it's disgusting? No.

I also have to let people know that I'm not going to be in a relationship just—people say to me you gotta have a partner. I'm alone, but I'm not lonely. If I'm in the relationship with someone, you're not puttin' your hands on me, okay, 'cause that's not love. I know a lot of couples that I've been counseling that are in abusive relationships because society says, oh, you gotta be hooked up. Society says you need a man or you need a woman, or whatever.

I always go back to the Ike and Tina story when Tina got the—made the decision to leave, and leave everything, to save her life and to save her children. But then there are people, oh, I can't do that. My husband's a congressman. I can't do that because my husband's the pastor of the church, and boom boom, and I need to stay because financially he's gonna cut me off 'cause I'm used to living a luxurious lifestyle and I don't wanna go back.

*Bianca Abrera:* That's horrible.

*Donald Ransom:* I said, no. We have to change. Wow, there's a lot going on. That's why I love Bill and Melinda Gates, who—'scuse me, do the Gates Foundation have done an awful lot of work all throughout the country.

*Bianca Abrera:* Yeah.

*Donald Ransom:* 'Cause they've got more money than they'll ever spend in four lifetimes.

*Bianca Abrera:* Yeah. You might as well give it back.

*Donald Ransom:* Mm-hmm. Then you get someone like Oprah, who—God, her mother was dead for a month before she could publicly tell people. I said, oh, my gosh, wouldn't it have been nice she could have said I lost my mother this morning? No, she quietly had the service, buried, and then let people know a month later. We get to the point where I don't need to know who you're sleeping with. I don't need to know what you're doing.

If it affects me positively, that's good. Affects me negatively, then I'm going to be the one that's going to change it. I don't have to be your friend just because—that So-and-So, So-and-So, she's this, she's that. I could care less. I need to be happy. I need to be human. I need to have my own identity. That's why when I can remember one time I had gone for a job interview. They told me that my hair was inappropriate. That right there told me I can't work for this company. You have to be, as my friend Mitchell would say, your authentic self. Be real, live real, and you'll be okay. I tell people I'm wonderful, I'm great, I'm happy.

I always believe it's like I'm gonna be leaving goin' to a party, and I have some gifts for friends that don't expect it. I'm gonna, hey, you're my friend, I'm gonna give you this now. I'm not gonna wait 'til I die and say oh you can have my jacket, you can have this, you can have my African sculptures, or whatever. I have been quietly, the last 10 years, giving stuff away, because I have too much. I can give it to you, I can give it to you, and you can go like, oh, wow. Where'd that come from? Oh, my friend Don gave it to me.

I know that I'm going to go to a party and someone's going to see this stone or necklace and say, "I like it." I'm just gonna go, I'm gonna gift it to 'em. You do that and people can say, oh, my God. Okay. I told my family when I leave here you all are gonna have not that much to work with. I've already planned my whole service. I went to a local funeral home here that some friends own. I told 'em, this is what I want. This is how I want it done.

Because a lot of people don't wanna do that. What do you mean you planned it? I said, "Because I don't want my brother and my sisters messing things up. This is what I want. This is the music." Boom. Good, and I want the logo for the Philadelphia Eagles put in the coffin with me. A lot of people don't think that they're gonna be leaving here. You look at the trains and the busses and the accidents, and I was thinkin' of that massacre in Las Vegas.

*Bianca Abrera:* Yeah.

*Donald Ransom:* All those people got shot. When I'm at the mall or somewhere, I'm nervous when I'm—I was at Penn Station Saturday a week ago. It was so packed in there. My thought was like, what if some idiot yells fire? What if some idiot starts shooting? All of us innocent people here are going to be hurt. My friend and I had been outside and said, "The train is not coming for another hour. There's a store across the street. Let's go do some retail shopping." We went across the street, did some shopping, came back and got on the train. Our other friend said, "Where did you two go?" We went shopping. I said, "If I'm gonna go, I'm gonna go bein' happy." It's just so amazing that now we're always on guard, what's gonna happen.

*Bianca Abrera:* Yeah.

*Donald Ransom:* Is someone going to snap? Is it going to be terror related, or whatever? I just wanna be able to—can I go somewhere? I gotta go to the airport, I gotta little [*unintelligible 50:43*] get undressed. Boom, boom, boom, boom, boom, boom, boom. You walk through something. People are afraid to speak to people, or people are afraid to say things. Good morning. I know this morning when I got on the bus, a lady got on behind me. I'm sure I was older than she was. Instead of taking the seat, I said, "Have a seat, ma'am." She looked at me, said, "Why?" I said, "I was raised to respect folks. I know that I'm okay. I'm physically able to stand up. You get on the bus, you got two packages, and I can tell that you're 29 and holding." I said, "It would be nice if you were to have a seat and I can stand."

We don't do that. Kids get on the bus, what's the first thing they do? Those first three rows. People don't wanna hold the door open for people. I came yesterday, I was at the 7-11, a lady asked me for a dollar. She said, "I'm hungry." I said, "Okay, come in. I'll buy you a coffee and a sandwich." "Why'd you do that?" I said, "Well, I have a few extra dollars. I can do it." She said she was hungry and I bought her a sandwich and coffee. I said, "For all I know, that could be me tomorrow, could be you the next day." When I come through Penn Station-Newark, I have to close my eyes to see—there's so many young folks out there that are homeless. We know that they have mental health problems 'cause they're all talking to themselves. They're yelling, they're screaming, they're fighting imaginary things. I'm going like there but for the grace of God go I.

We don't know the abuse. I remember my grandmother tellin' me a long time ago, someone in the church, and I said, "Mom, why is So-and-So crying?" She told me what had happened to her. I went like, oh, okay. If we don't know someone's journey—because someone'll say I wanna be like her. I wanna be like Mike. I wanna be this. Do you know what it's taken for him or her to achieve that? When I think of how young Michael Jackson didn't have a life growin' up as a teenager. When I think of all these stars that have—and sports people, whose lives were changed because they had to practice and practice and practice.

Now all of a sudden they get to the age where they're 32, 30, whatever, they don't have friends, or they only have friends because they've signed multimillion dollar contracts—I tell people if I win the lottery or the Powerball, I'm an orphan because then everybody's gonna come out of the woodwork. Oh, that's my cousin, that's my good friend. I know him. I don't know you. Also, and I tell people bein' able to help people, bein' able to have people come back and say, "Thank you, several years ago you helped me." "Thank you, you helped me get into a drug treatment program."

Like last week when a friend of mine lost her wife, I happened to be at the hospital with her. I said, "You know she did not want to be resuscitated. Somethin' happens she wants to go." She said, "I know that and I have to let her go." It's okay to be able to be there for some time in their time of need and just to support them and say it's okay, boom. Let's take a moment, let's pray, but—rather than see her partner bein' put on life support and bein' in ICU for five or six days or weeks or whatever. My thing is there's a reason, there's a season, there's a time. Some of us, our time is longer than others. I have an aunt who's 106.

*Bianca Abrera:*           Whoa.

*Donald Ransom:*       I don't think I wanna live to be that long. I love her. I call her at least once or twice a week. "Hello, baby girl, how you doin'?" "Oh, I'm okay. I just got some aches and pains, but I'm good." "Okay." "When you comin' home?" Because whenever I go home, I take her to her favorite place, Golden Corral. When I go in with her now, I can say, "Aunt, okay. Two senior meals." She go like, "Baby, are you old enough to get that senior discount?" "Mm-hmm." "Oh, wow. Time sure has fly. I

remember used to change your—”okay. I know you used to change my diapers. Now I’m not changing yours, because—not that you need it, but you’re a senior, I’m a senior. When I can go and take her out, and we can go shopping—and she still wears high heels.

*Bianca Abrera:* Whoa.

*Donald Ransom:* They try to tell her you need to wear flats. Mind your business. Then we need to do the multi-generational thing, because when I look at now Cicely Tyson, 94, Betty White, 92 or something, still working. Still acting, out there doin’ your craft and bein’ wonderful. I’m just amazed, really amazed. I know when I retired, it was about eight years ago, my mother told me, “I worked ‘til I was 82.” I said, “Well, I’m glad you did. I’m not workin’ ‘til I’m—”. You know. I took advantage of early retirement.

*Bianca Abrera:* Awesome.

*Donald Ransom:* Everything is good. I’m grateful. When I first heard about this project, I said, “Finally. Finally, people will know what’s going on.” Last year when Rodney Gilbert, who was very involved in Newark, when he passed and his funeral was at NJ PAC, it was so wonderful. His daughter said, “Oh, my God, I can’t believe my father was so honored.” And the fact that his partner was there with her. She just said, “Oh, my dad would have loved this.” One performance, one show. NJ PAC. I said, “You know your dad was a hot mess?” She goes, “I know.” She said, “and when we can go through his clothes, which ones do you want?” I said, “All of ‘em.” I said, “I want all of his African garb and whatever.” She goes, “Okay, well come by the house in a couple weeks then. I’m gonna start givin’ his stuff away.”

It’s wonderful when people—‘cause I have a lot of friends who’ve gotten married, had kids, are divorced or whatever, and are now seniors who are now openly gay and said, hey, I’ve had a wonderful life. My children love me, my grandchildren love me, and I can say, yeah. I can be godfather to all of ‘em and spoil ‘em. I have a good friend now that I told her I’m bringin’ toys for her kids on Monday. I said, “And I’m bringin’ extra batteries.” She said, “You’re dead.” She said, “Didn’t we tell you what toys to buy?” I said, “Did you give me the money to buy ‘em?” I mean, I want the—I want my godchildren to enjoy themselves. It’s been wonderful. It’s been good. As I say, it’s been a wonderful life. Great. Wonderful.

*Bianca Abrera:* All right. Thank you so much.

*Donald Ransom:* Thank you.

*Bianca Abrera:* It’s a great interview.

*[End of Audio]*