

Queer Newark Oral History Project

Erica Harrison: Erica Harrison

Interviewer: Erica Fugger and Dominique Rucker

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Location: Zoom

Erica Fugger: Okay. We're here today. It's February 26, 2021. This is an interview with Erica Harrison for the Queer Newark Oral History Project. I'm Erica Fugger, and Dominique, would you like to introduce yourself, as well?

Dominique Rucker: I'm Dominique Rucker.

Erica Fugger: Thank you, and we're conducting the interview with Erica Harrison. Would you like to introduce yourself, Erica?

Erica Harrison: Hello. I'm Erica Harrison. Nice to be here.

Erica Fugger: Thank you so much. We're very excited to be interviewing Erica about some of her experiences growing up in Newark for the Queer Newark Oral History Project, so this is the first session that we're recording with Erica. Wonderful. Well, thank you so much for being here today, and for sharing some of your memories and stories from Newark. I think I'd just like to have you just start off by sharing your name, date, and place of birth.

Erica Harrison: Okay. I'm Erica Denise Harrison. I was born February 19, 1954 in Manhattan, New York. I grew up in Harlem. In '69—yes, towards the end of '69 I moved to Newark, 1969.

Erica Fugger: Thank you so much. One question I have for everyone here is do we have your consent for recording this interview today?

Erica Harrison: Yeah.

Dominique Rucker: Yes.

Erica Fugger: Thank you so much. Erica, if you could share a little bit about what it was like growing up in Harlem and where you lived in the city?

Erica Harrison: Well, in Harlem, it was really all I knew. One of my biggest memories was being able to go to the Apollo Theater and see everybody for 90 cents. Not like now. You go to a show. You see one show for hundreds of dollars, and you go home. However, then you could stay all day on that one payment [*laughter*] of whatever it was. It was 90 cents for children. That was one of my memorable times. I used to do—I would also go bowling. I joined a little bowling league for young people when I was around 11, 12, but it was always something to do. My mother was very—she was pretty strict on me, so I wasn't a street person or anything. I was very well-loved and cared for. However, she was very sick, and as years went by, she got sicker and sicker, so that was a big thing. My mom was a very good cook, but she had really bad asthma, so I had to care for her quite a bit. I went to a good school, so I went to Mother Cabrini located in Washington Heights up by—I forget the name of the area, but yeah. Oh yeah, something with a C. Anyway, I went to Mother Cabrini for three years, first, second, third grade. Then I went to PS52. That was also in Washington Heights, same area.

My mother was a homemaker. She worked for doctors, and dentists, and lawyers. She did catering and housekeeping, that type of thing. They were very instrumental in getting me in those schools in that area, because there was still a little segregation

going on at that time, and that was in the '60s. Yeah, so I went to school there, and then I went to school at—I went to PS52. Then I went to junior high school 152 when I got older. It was fun, but I missed it, having to move to Newark, cause to me, Newark was very dull.

Everything was closed early, nothing like New York, the city that never sleeps. *[Laughter]* It was quite different when I moved to Newark.

Erica Fugger: Are there any memories of your mother that you'd like to share?

Erica Harrison: My mother was very, very loving, very articulate about the home, and very clean *[laughter]* in that area. She was an excellent cook. People had her cooking at their parties, and baking cakes, and that type of thing, but she was very regiment. She was very regiment, not mean, but loving, but she was stern. She didn't play with me, but she suffered a lot from asthma. It was just another thing with her, but I was her only child. My father had four sons, so he married my mother, and my mother was 27. He was 41, and back then you married the young girls. *[Laughter]* She took a lot of abuse from my father. That's why she left him, and it was just her and I in the apartment building that we grew up in—I grew up in. My mother had rented one room until she rented one room at a time to own the whole apartment. Now I think they're like condos, that apartment building, but yeah, I just remember my mother being very caring. She would do anything for anyone. She loved children, and I have a lot of the same traits, from cooking to children. Yeah, I miss her very much. Her birthday was just this month. The 6th of February is her birthday. She would've been in her 80s.

Erica Fugger:

Her birthday and yours were very close together?

Erica Harrison:

Yeah, and one of my brother's, too. My mother's was the 6th. We were like a week apart, the 6th, the 12th, and the 19th. Then my son is a week after me now. His is the 3rd of March, so we were all kind of close together, and it was unfortunate. He never got to obviously meet his grandmother, cause she died when I was 15. Yeah, and I saw her take her last breath, so that kind of messed me up for a while. I started to smoke cigarettes. Then I started sniffing drugs, and I started smoking marijuana, and then we moved to New Jersey, and it really kinda got worse for me, because I didn't wanna be there. My stepmother, well my father's wife and I didn't get along, and so I used to get money from Social Security. When your children die, your parents die, you get Social Security. I never got it. They took all my money, so I wasn't able to save, and maybe get my own little place, or things like that.

It was really hurtful. It was total opposite of what I was used to. My mother was very, very caring. She was a parent. *[Laughter]* She was a parent. She left my father when I was three, but moving forward, she passed in '69, and shortly after that I had to move with my father in Flushing Queens, and his wife worked in New Jersey in Elizabeth, at the Burry Building where they make the cookies, the Girl Scout cookies and that. She decided it was better for them to move to New Jersey, because I was—by me living with them, I was bringing more of an expense on them. They lived in the projects, so there wasn't too much expense there. *[Laughter]* We lived in an apartment building. They lived in the projects in Queens, so they used that money that was my Social Security money, and happily moved to New Jersey. I cried

myself to sleep every day, 'cause I knew no one. I had no friends. I knew no one. My father's wife had a friend there. They worked together, I believe, but yeah.

Then I moved to Newark. It felt like, I don't know, I was in another world. *[Laughter]* Then I, of course, had to go to school. They signed me up, and I was in Weequahic High School. When I was in New York, I went to Brandeis. I just got out of junior high, and I went to—my first year in high school was in the Brandeis, and it was the Midtown area of New York, right across the street from Lincoln Center. I had to come from Queens to Manhattan to go to school, but after I got out of that class, I was able to go to school in New York. I played the cello, and I was referred to the orchestra, 'cause I was pretty good, so when I went to Jersey, I joined the—I was placed in the orchestra through my teachers, and I joined the African American club trying to meet people. That's when I met my first friend, Darryl Rochester. That's when I met him, but yeah. Want me to go on, or you have a question?

Erica Fugger: You said that you met him at an African American Club at your high school. Is that correct?

Erica Harrison: Yeah, at Weequahic High School. Yeah.

Erica Fugger: What was the club like?

Erica Harrison: Actually, I don't even remember. I just joined to meet friends, meet people, to be honest with you. I don't recall much about it. It was once a week. Sometimes my father would pull me from things when he felt that I was doing something wrong. I don't know. He didn't want me to be outta the house too much, but I wasn't doing drugs then. I would smoke a little bit, but I wound up takin' pills

from my father and selling them, because my father had a bad back, so he used pain pills. I decided I was gonna take his pills and sell 'em since he took my social security money. Excuse me. I'm sorry. That was that, but so Darryl introduced himself to me, and we just became fast friends, really, really. We had a lot in common, stepmothers, and our fathers remarried, and all that type of things, but it was so lively. It was a group of them. It was such a lively group of people, and I was like, "Wow. They are different and vibrant." You can imagine, just being in a parade, always colorful, and always laughing, and jovial. I thought, "Wow. Those are pretty cool guys."

Darryl asked me did I wanna meet—they were called the clique. Did I want to meet them? Excuse me. I said, "Okay." Well, we had lunch the same period, so I met them at the lunch table, and there was Tommy Garrett [00:12:50], Jamie McDonald, Darryl, and—Darryl Rochester. There was some more people, but they were just classmates and friends. They weren't our group. Jamie was interviewing me *[laughter]* and asking me, "Where are you from? What do you do? What grade are you in? Would you like to be in the clique?" I said, "No, not really," because I felt like he was being condescending. I said, "Not really." He said, "Oh, no. We gonna have you. We love you. We want you to be with us." That's how I wound up being in the clique. *[Laughter]* Darryl and I were very, very close, and then he led me to meet everybody else. I would listen to his interview, and Albert—I sent you the pictures of Albert, and Tracy, and it was a bunch of us. Yeah. They became my family, actually. They became my family.

Erica Fugger:

You said you were class of 1972, is that correct?

Erica Harrison: Yeah. They were in '70—Darryl came out in '71.

Erica Fugger: Gotcha. Were you a sophomore then when you met them?

Erica Harrison: When I met them, I was a junior. Yeah.

Erica Fugger: Okay. You did your first two years of high school in New York?

Erica Harrison: In New York, yes. Well see, back then when I was in junior high school, it was seventh, eighth, and ninth grade. That was considered junior high. Then 10th started high school, so I went to one school up until '69—'68. Then I went to Brandeis. That was 10th grade. I only went there for one year, and then that year after that, that's when we moved to New Jersey [*distorted audio 00:14:57*]. I went to Weequahic for two years.

Erica Fugger: Gotcha, thank you. Were there any teachers at your high school that you grew close to?

Erica Harrison: Well, Ms. McClenden 00:15:12, very close—we got very close with. She was a gym teacher, phys. ed. teacher, and also Doris Henderson, who was Tommy Garrett's mother. They were my phys. ed. teachers. Back then, children were able to talk to administration when they couldn't talk to their parents. It's not like that—not much like that now, but it was very much like that then. I need a lot of counseling, 'cause suddenly [00:15:50] I just lost my mother.

That was just me and her. I was really pretty messed up in the head emotionally, crying all the time, just outta nowhere. They befriended me, and they wrapped their arms around me, and gave me support emotionally. That was Gwen McClenden and Doris

Henderson. Ms. McClenden is still around. She was on the obituary with Darryl, on the Zoom service we had for Darryl Rochester. She was there, and Doris Henderson passed some years back. Yeah.

Erica Fugger:

What would your clique do? I know you said that you originally met them through an African American Club, but what kind of things did you do together during and after school?

Erica Harrison:

Well, everybody was in something different. Tommy played tennis. Darryl was in a class by himself, but everybody knew Darryl. He was very, very, very, very popular. We did a lot of pep rallies, because there was a great basketball team. On Thanksgiving, we played what's now called Shabazz High School, Malcolm X Shabazz. It used to be called South Side back then, so South Side and Weequahic always played on Thanksgiving. We did a lot of pep rallies, and I was in the drama club, and there was a lot of assembly time and things like that. Everybody kinda went on—everybody had a two-parent home pretty much. It was two adults in my house, but only one was my parent, but we went to school. We were very active in school. I didn't like school, but I liked being around my friends. I made the best of it. I did what I could to meet people. I was in the orchestra. I did become a member of the orchestra, but I couldn't take lessons. They suggested that I go to class. It was in Newark too, down at Lincoln Park. There was a school there, music school. They wouldn't let me. My father wouldn't let me to go, so just that was another thing. Four dollars a week, and I was getting money for Social Security, and I couldn't go, so those type of things. It made me bitter, angry, and I was just looking for an outlet, so anything that seemed forbidden and

flamboyant, I wanted to be a part of that. That's how we became—we were like-minded, even though we came from different places. Most everybody is from Jersey except me. Yeah.

Erica Fugger: What were some of your first impressions of Newark when you first moved there?

Erica Harrison: I liked the fact that there were a lot of homes. We lived in the Weequahic section, so it's a lot of homes there, one, two family homes, so it was that family camaraderie that I didn't have anymore. I didn't like that it was so quiet and slow. The corner stores were there in Harlem, and everything was kinda close by, but in Newark it was just slow for me. I wasn't used to it. It was just too quiet and too slow. I would start going to New York in the weekends. I'd go on the weekends. I had to come back Sunday night, but that's what we used to do after we got out of high school. We started going to the clubs in New York. Yeah, and they were fun. *[Laughter]* Yeah, they were a lotta fun. They told me one time—I have a little crazy story. The first time I went to this club called the Planetarium. I didn't consider myself gay or whatever. I just wanted to have fun. I said, "Okay. Well, if this is a gay club, who am I gonna dance with?" 'cause I was real corny about that. I didn't know. If everybody's gay, and the guys dance with the guys, who am I gonna dance with? *[Laughter]* little did I know, I didn't need a partner once I got in there. The music was outstanding, and I didn't need a partner, but what I didn't know is they had acid in the punch.

Erica Fugger: Oh boy. *[Laughter]*

Erica Harrison: Okay? I'm like, this is like—I was having the time of my life. I couldn't stop laughing, so Tommy and another friend of ours, Jimmy, they were takin' me—'cause you come home. You come out the club and it's daylight, so they were takin' me to get some coffee and some things to bring me down. I was just laughing at everything, everything until—they laugh at me to this day about this—until my face got like this, in a cramp. I couldn't talk anymore 'cause of the acid. *[Laughter]* That's what you get for laughing at everybody. I said, "I can't help it," but that was just one of those—that was my first time going to a gay club. Then I was initiated. *[Laughter]* One time Darryl was coming home on a Sunday morning. He was coming past, 'cause he had to pass my street to get to his street, and he was there, and my father and I were coming out of the house. Darryl ducked behind the car so that my father wouldn't see him, so he could say, "Where you comin' from this time of morning?" My father had a thing about me hanging with them anyway. He said, "I don't agree with those people. They're strange." Yeah.

Erica Fugger: Most members of the clique, did they identify as LGBTQ at the time?

Erica Harrison: Yeah, and I wasn't. I was just—I just loved life. I was just glad to be with people that can give me some life from losing my mother. That was very hurtful and very painful loss. Everybody was. Everybody, whether they were active or not, that's the life we chose and the life that was the most fun. We were young. We were really, really ahead of our time. We *[Jaime? 00:22:28]* gave a free fashion show, the first fashion show, at Studio 54. It was unheard of. It *[00:22:36]* was 18, 18 or 19, and Ms. McClenden, the teacher

that I mentioned, her boyfriend was one of the Temptations at the time.

Erica Fugger: Oh my gosh.

Erica Harrison: She got them to come—yeah, she got them to come and perform, so it was a really big thing. We would give these fashion shows. Those were fun, too. They were every Mother’s Day Albert would give fashion shows. We all had a part in it. He always made sure he got jobs for us to do somethin’ to make money. At that time, we would get maybe 35, 50 dollars [00:23:19]. That was a lot for us. We were just kids still. Eventually I got a job at this place called Valley Fair. Last I knew it wasn’t there anymore. It was in Irvington off of Chancellor Avenue, and I started working the little lunch counter, and making donuts, and pizza, and hotdogs, and that type of thing. I would do that, and we would still be ready to go out on the weekends. Albert got a club downtown called Le Joc. I know Darryl told you about that. That was our club. It was just so personal. I actually wound up living there because I was living with someone who wasn’t paying the rent, and I wound up—well, I was there first. Yeah, and then I wound up going to this other place, and they weren’t paying the rent, so I had to leave, and I came back, and I stayed at Le Joc. That’s where I wound up living, which was really a mess. It was like they were having a club in my house every weekend. *[Laughter]* I had my cat, and he just would roam freely through the club, and we had doves, and it was the high-class, high-class models would just be there lounging, and dancing, and getting high, and having fun. Yeah.

Erica Fugger: Were you, I guess, staying at Le Joc while you were still in

high school, or after you had already graduated?

Erica Harrison: No, this was after high school. I was out. I was outta high school, and I left my father's house. I went back to Queens, I mean, back to Harlem when I got outta high school. I had to do summer school that year, but I left. When I finished summer school, I left, packed up the same day, and I left to go back to Harlem, because I wasn't treated properly. I was able to leave, and I left, and I stayed there for quite some time and wound up coming back to Jersey, because I realized all my friends were there. My childhood friends were in another headspace than I was. They were on drugs really bad, just really bad, so I wound up going back to Newark, and I wound up making that my home.

Erica Fugger: When you were living with your father and stepmother, were any of your brothers in the household at that point, as well?

Erica Harrison: No, my brothers were—the youngest one was 10 years older than me, and these were my father's sons. I was my mother's only child, so my brothers—my oldest brother—well, let me start from here. My mother took all my brothers to live with her, because when my brothers go old enough to get outta high school, they moved up here. They moved to Queens with my father, but his wife's son was stealing from them, so my mother said, "Just let them come and stay with me," so they did. My father got them jobs and everything. They were doing really well, so they stayed with us. One of my brothers my mother raised, she raised herself, but the other two, or the other three, she didn't raise them. Yeah, they didn't live with us. It was just me with my father and his wife. Now, when I went back to New York, though, I lived in my mother's apartment where my oldest brother was, so I was able to

stay there until I decided to come back to Jersey.

Erica Fugger: Where—

Erica Harrison: My father moved. He moved out of the area altogether. He moved to South Carolina, so I rarely saw him anymore. I went down one time to visit, and then the next time I went, I went to his funeral, 'cause we didn't—his wife wouldn't allow us to get along.

Erica Fugger: Did you say that your stepmother also had children?

Erica Harrison: She had two sons. Yeah, she had two sons. I grew up with them when I lived at my father's house on the weekends, I would go and they was just there, them two and me. Yeah, so they're gone, too. They're also deceased.

Erica Fugger: Were you close to your brothers?

Erica Harrison: I was pretty close to my brothers, yeah. I was close to them, but I knew that they were my father's children and not my mother's. It was just what it was, 'cause they were close to my mother's age, 'cause like I said, my mother married young, so they were closer to her age than my father's—than she was to my father's age, but yeah, we were close. One in particular, my last brother that passed, I—

[Extraneous conversation 00:28:49]

Erica Harrison: Like I said, my mother raised him, 'cause he didn't wanna stay in the south. The other two, they left. They didn't wanna leave, but we were close. We were raised up together. As they got older, my one brother got married. That was the one that was closest to me.

He got married and then he was—it was two of them. Only two of them got married, actually—no, three. My oldest brother never married. They never had children, none of them, so my son is the first grandchild on both sides, my mother and father's side, 'cause my father didn't have any grandchildren. My mother didn't have any grandchildren, so my son is the only one, and they weren't here to meet him. That always kinda grips us, you know.

Erica Fugger:

Uh-huh. Maybe I'll just ask one more question about family and then we can move back to talking about Newark, but are there any fond family gatherings or holidays that you'd like to share memories of?

Erica Harrison:

Not really. The only time—my mother gave parties a lot, like card parties. She always gave me a party every birthday. Birthdays, Christmas were monumental for me, because like I said, I was the only child, and she bought me everything. I got pretty good grades. Back then they used to give telegrams, so when I'd get a good grade, in the summertime I would get this telegram from Santa Claus, and you were a good girl. I just wanted to let you know that I got your Christmas list, and I know some of the things you want. I was blown away. *[Laughter]* Easter, she would always give me—buy chicks or ducks. She really gave me a great childhood. She really did. Those are the special times, Thanksgiving, those times, birthdays, Christmas, Thanksgiving.

Erica Fugger:

How would your family celebrate the holidays once you moved to Newark?

Erica Harrison:

Well, my father would have—they would have Thanksgiving. That's about it. Yeah, that was it. It was a different family now. I'm

with my father and his wife. That's what my mother did, so when I moved with them, it was a whole different thing. It was all about her family, my father's wife's family. It was *[unintelligible 00:31:28]*. They got married on Halloween, and my brothers and I used to always laugh and say, "You got a trick instead of a treat." *[Laughter]* Yeah.

Erica Fugger: Once you moved to Newark, you were finishing up high school for your junior and senior year, what were some of your favorite subjects at that time?

Erica Harrison: Art, and drama, and music. I didn't care about numbers. I could count my money. I did care about that. Yeah, I'd be figuring all the history, and then I wasn't really interested in—English, I did pretty well in English, but those are my favorites, anything creative, art, and that's what I wound up being with my friends. We're a very artsy group.

Erica Fugger: You said that most of your clique was LGBTQ. How were they viewed at school? What was the perception [00:32:39] of them?

Erica Harrison: We were the rockstars. We stood out. Everybody want to emulate us, and back then it wasn't so much—it wasn't so much negativity towards the LGBTQ community in that area. Maybe not universally, but in our neighborhoods, it was like we was stars, really, because we stood out everywhere we went. After we started going to the clubs, and we hear the music that we never heard on the radio, or anybody's party, or anything, we would find and seek that music out, 'cause back then it was albums. We would be invited to little house parties in the neighborhood, and we would take our music with us, have them play it. We would

dance with

each other and leave, and take our music with us. *[Laughter]* They was like, “Wow.” We were like celebrities. It was really true, yeah.

Erica Fugger:

What neighborhoods would you hang out in most?

Erica Harrison:

Just in the Weequahic section, 'cause we all lived in that area, so we would either be at Tommy's house, Weequahic Park. We couldn't go to Darryl's house much, not in the group. Maybe I would stop by. Maybe somebody else would stop by, but mostly we would be at Tommy Garrett's house and in the park, in Weequahic Park. You go to Jamie's house. He would be sketch—you could find Jamie sketching at any time. He would sketch somethin' on a Monday, and he would be sewing it up on Friday, and Sunday somebody'd be wearing it. He was a genius. He really was ahead of his time. By me leaving New York, not having my mother, I really, really became real protective of my friends, because they showed they loved me. They really cared for me, and I wasn't getting that at home, so I became very protective of everything. When we had the shows, I was a person that got people dressed. I was the person that could make sure nobody that wasn't supposed to be in the back wasn't in the back. We were around a lot of very, very expensive garments, and some of 'em were from designers. A lot of 'em were for designers in New York, and we were responsible for those clothes, so I didn't have \$500 for a bikini *[laughter]*, so I wasn't letting nobody come back there stealing clothes, 'cause people would do it.

Erica Fugger:

I guess I'm curious. I know you mentioned that when you were living in Harlem, going to school there, that there was still segregation that was happening in New York at that time, and

when you moved to Newark in '69, what were the race dynamics like in the city at that point?

Erica Harrison:

It was quite different. We ate lunch on the lawn in front of the school. I don't know if you're familiar with Weequahic, the Weequahic section, but it's all fenced off now, but everything was free. It was like the hippie time. It was that Woodstock and Jimi Hendricks. It was that time, Janice Joplin. We were just really bellbottoms and tie dye. Everything was just really cool and free, and it was quite different from what I was used to in Harlem, 'cause I was surrounded by the Panthers, and the Panthers were real prevalent at that time, and helping the neighborhood, feeding children, feeding low-income families. It was quite different, 'cause everybody—it seemed like a well-to-do area that I moved to with my father. Like I said, it was homes, and where I lived it was apartment buildings, tenement projects, but it was a different culture in Harlem than it was in Newark.

There was different spots in Newark, too, little pockets of different, so where I was was the Weequahic section was supposed to be real up-to-do area, and there was quite a few racists, different nationalities. I don't remember too many Spanish people, maybe one or two, but they were mostly African American, [*unintelligible 00:37:34*], and Caucasian. In fact, Jerry Lewis used to go to Weequahic. They said he was a terror. He used to ride up and down the hallways with his skates or his bike, something, but he was a mess they said. [*Laughter*] Yeah.

Erica Fugger:

Dominique, I'm sure your ears are perking up here. Any questions that you might like to ask?

Dominique Rocker:

No, I was thinking about several things. One of course, when you

were talking about the Panthers in Harlem and stuff, and I'm just wondering if you interacted with them, or if you just saw what they were doing in Harlem, just a little bit more, I guess, about their activity at that time.

Erica Harrison:

Well, I used to see them feeding families, 'cause I was quite young. Like I said, my mother died when I was 15, and I was hauled off to Flushin', so I guess around between 10 and 14 I was here, but I'd be afraid [00:38:42] of them, because I was so young. What I would do—but I wanted to be one. I wanted to be a Panther. It was [laughter 00:38:52]. What I did was once I moved to New Jersey, I would get a stack of the Panther papers, and I would sell them in the—what was that thing—the terminal. There's a bus terminal in midtown. I forget the name of it, but yeah. I used to sell. They would sell things. They would sell papers and Panther papers. I would do that, but I was afraid, but it was nothing to be afraid of, 'cause I was home with my mom and with the church and that kinda thing, so I didn't have any direct contact with them, but they protected the neighborhood. You were safe around them, but as a child, you didn't really know who they had guns drawn for. You know what I'm saying? They never bothered us. They were protecting us, but it wasn't a whole lot of interaction, but that's basically what I did have.

Dominique Rocker: Wow, that's really cool.

Erica Harrison: With all that experience I moved—go ahead. I'm sorry.

Dominique Rocker: No, I was just gonna ask where you—did you purchase the papers and then resell them, or did you [crosstalk 00:40:12]?

Erica Harrison:

Yes, I did. That's what I did. *[Laughter]* Yeah, but one thing that I really wanted to share is how I went from that to meeting Maning Obregon. Maning was from the Philippines. He was a designer—I mean, an illustrator for *New York Times Magazine*. He needed a housekeeper. I wasn't working at the time. I was still a baby, like 19, 20, like that, and looking for a job. Tommy told me to come over there, to come to New York, because this guy needed a housekeeper and a cook, so I was like, "Wow." I didn't really have anything to wear. He said, "Listen. Wrap your head. Put on some red lipstick, and get over here." *[Laughter]* I came over, and this is on 34th Street right down the street from the Empire State Building. I got there, and introduced him to me, and he wanted me to cook dinner that night. That was my test, so I cooked dinner.

All the supermarkets were closed. Only thing that was open was a deli, so I had to work my magic, and get creative, and I got a meal, made a meal for him. He had two little Yorkshire Terriers, and a Siamese cat. The Siamese cat was huge. No, this man lived in a penthouse, and I went from Harlem, to New Jersey, to being homeless, to living in a penthouse. I was there. I thought I was just gonna stay for a couple days, and he told me did I wanna live with him, 'cause he was gonna need me more than that little bit of time, so I said, "Yeah." *[Laughter]* In a penthouse? Sure, so I did stay. He paid me \$100 a day, so I'm like, "Why do I need \$100 a day to go shopping?" He gave me \$130 for my pay, but \$100 a day to go shopping for his groceries, because he often had guests over, and he entertained a lot. I had designers give me clothes, and they were in and out. One model named Billy Blair was a vegetarian, and so when I cooked, I had to make sure to keep that in mind, and it interests me. At that time, I became a vegetarian. I'm not now, but I'm conscious, but I was a vegetarian back then, but took all the

drugs I could find, by the way, but I was a vegetarian. I couldn't eat no meat but give me the joint. *[Laughter]*

Yeah, so I stayed with him for a while, and I had to really—he didn't walk the dogs like he should and care for his pets like he should, so I had to really clean up the house, and clean up the pets, and create a home, a nice, nurturing environment. My father got sick, had to go see him. When I went to go see him and I came back, all my clothes were packed, and he told me that he couldn't use me anymore. Here I am back to square one. Where am I gonna go? Where I'm gonna live? What am I gonna do? I wound up going back to live with my brother. Then I started really doing drugs really more. I just started doing 'em, 'cause I was still hurting. I'm still grieving for my mom, and my father moved away. Yeah, but I had that experience. I met so many people, and I was just blessed to be exposed to that lifestyle, because I was always the person behind the scenes. I wasn't on the runway. I wasn't in the pictures. I was making everybody else beautiful and keeping them focused, so that was a lot for me to have to live there like that. At night it looked like you could—I was so close to the Empire State Building it was like you could touch it if you were out on the penthouse at night. It was just fabulous, uh-huh.

Erica Fugger:

Before you moved in with Maning, were you living in Harlem right before that, or were you still in Newark at that time?

Erica Harrison:

No, I had moved back with my brother in Harlem in the house I grew up in. Yeah, I had moved back there, and Tommy told me to meet him, meet him there, 'cause I was living in New York, so all I had to do was take the train to Maning's house, but yeah. I had moved back there. Eventually I just wound up moving back to

Jersey, and I got married. I met up with, I guess my first love.
[Laughter] We wanted to get married, and we would just run into each other from time to time, but he was from Newark, and I was from Harlem, and we met. He was impressed, 'cause he loved New York and he thought I was a fly girl, all of that. He was pretty fly his self. [Laughter] We wound up getting together, and years later we got married, had a son. He went his way, and I went my way, but yeah. It was like that. [Laughter]

Erica Fugger: When you moved back to Newark, what year would that have been?

Erica Harrison: That I don't remember. That's very foggy, but it was sometime in the '70s, because I remember getting the job as a waitress. I don't know. I really can't remember. It had to be the late '70s because I got married in '81, so it was probably '78, '79, probably that.

Erica Fugger: Gotcha. Just to make sure I have the timeline correct, so you graduated from high school in '72, and then after summer school that summer, you went back to live with your brother in Harlem, and then you went to work with Maning, and then you moved back.

Erica Harrison: Maning, and [crosstalk 00:47:20]. Yeah, I went back to Jersey, but I stayed—no, I stayed in New York, and then I wound up working for Maning, so that was the late '70s. I'm not quite sure, but it was the late '70s.

Erica Fugger: Gotcha.

Erica Harrison: Yeah, but I stayed with Maning about a year. Yeah, I stayed with him for about a year, but—what I didn't know, he had a little issue,

some type of addiction that was causing him to blow his money, and the money that he was giving me was outrageous, \$100 a day for groceries was—so I was saving that. I knew how to shop, so I would buy the food, but I would save some of that money for myself. He didn't question it. He was so carefree and reckless, so that's why he couldn't afford to keep me there anymore. I didn't wanna go back to Harlem, actually, but I didn't wanna stay where I wasn't wanted, either so I just went back. Yeah.

Erica Fugger:

Thinking a little bit more about the clique and the spaces that you would all hang out in, were you going to some of the clubs in Newark while you were still in high school?

Erica Harrison:

No. There wasn't really clubs in Newark at that time. There was a bar. I forget the name of it. Oh, boy. Murphy's, there was a Murphy's Bar. I wasn't involved in bars and things like that. Darryl, they grew up there, so they knew about Murphy's, but no. There wasn't any club there. We would go to clubs in New York, and a lot of people in Newark, they were afraid to go to New York, and we wanted to share what we experienced in New York with the people in Newark, so they found this building. Albert found this building and purchased it. He purchased a building, and just set us up for different things. Maning did a big mural on the wall with the face of one of the models and the body of a man, and it had a jockstrap, because the name of the club was called Le Joc. It was a gay bouncer club, but other straight people came, as well, but it was really—we were the staff. I was in the kitchen at the—when you walk in, you pay. There's a coatroom and all.

I was in the kitchen where it had fruit, and we never served alcohol, but everybody had their little drugs of their own, but we didn't have a license for alcohol or anything, but yeah. We would

have food. For special holidays, like Valentine's weekend or somethin' like that, we would have Valentine's cupcakes. Sometimes Albert would make a turkey for Thanksgiving, so we had all of this in the—it had a stove and a refrigerator behind the bar. It was just a little counter at the club, so we would cook, and sometimes we—'cause we would be there to the next day. Sometimes we'd make breakfast for whoever was leftover. *[Laughter]* That was our place. That was our spot. Then we left there, and Albert met a gentleman that owned Lincoln Motel on Broad Street, and we wound up having a spot there, 'cause they was already like a ballroom type of setting anyway, and a bar, and that, so we wound up working there. I had the same job. I made fruit skewers.

At this time actually, I was working at Broad National Bank located on Broad Street, and I would leave work and go to the Lincoln Motel. It was called Zanzibar. That was the name of the club. We named it. I would go there, prepare the fruit, and make the skewers, and get the counter ready. We would be there early testing the music, make sure the sound was right, and different stars came, different celebrities like Phyllis Hyman, Grace Jones. People would come, the weather girls, Sylvester. It was really fun. Well, backtrack a little bit. When we tried to expose other people to Le Joc, which was our club, like one night we would have it all girls, and then all guys, that didn't work out too good, so the crowds started falling off, because back then, nobody want—the guys didn't wanna be with the girls, and girls didn't wanna be—and it didn't work. It worked out better, actually, when they were together.

We combined everybody, but yeah, so then we get to Zanzibar, and it was a whole different thing. It was quite interesting. We had a—there was a pool in the back of the building, and at the opener we had cages with live animals in it. I think one was a tiger, a leopard, and a panther in the cages at the pool party. *[Laughter]* Yeah, and we still like 20, 21, 22 like that. We were still young. Often this dance floor was just vine. You could smell these gardenias before you get to the dance floor, and they were live gardenias on vines hanging from the ceiling. It was amazing, so we were just really creative and doing all that stuff here in Newark, 'cause we would try to emulate what we saw in New York and try to replicate those types of things, really creative and exotic. Yeah, it was a lot of fun *[laughter]*, a lot of fun.

Erica Fugger: While you were involved in this club scene, were you—this is when you had already moved back to Newark, or you were still living in New York at that time?

Erica Harrison: No, I was back in Newark now. Yeah, I had moved back to Newark, and I stayed—from that point I stayed.

Erica Fugger: That as late '70s then?

Erica Harrison: Yeah, it was—I think it was like '78, '79, like I said. I think it was around that time.

Erica Fugger: How did you come to live in Le Joc?

Erica Harrison: To live in Le Joc, I lost my apartment. I lost my job. I had nowhere else to go. There was a mattress on the dance floor underneath the

staircase. Albert told me I could just stay there and be like a caretaker of the club, of the building, that kinda thing. I wound up staying there. That was dreadful. I wound up staying there, and one of our friends, Shelton Hayes 00:55:29, told me I could stay with him. You don't have to stay in here like this. I was a young lady.

He said, "Come and you can stay. I have another room. You could stay at my apartment, and I'm not home a lot." I said, "Cool." I moved with him. The rent was like—I had to pay \$100, or it was \$100. I don't know. It wasn't a lot. Everything was cheap back then.

I was paying this guy to live there, and he wasn't paying the rent. The woman came up to my apartment with the sheriff and said I had to leave. The rent wasn't being paid, so I didn't know what I was gonna do or where I was gonna go. I have a friend who's now my partner. I just called her and told her, "I got to leave. I don't know where I'm gonna go, what to do, or anything." We were just friends, and actually we just started kinda talking. She said, "Well, I'll be there as soon as I can." She came. Everything I owned, I put in her car. I stayed with her for a couple weeks. I found an apartment, and I moved. I just wound up staying there for a while, and she moved in with me. *[Laughter]* We wound up being a couple, and time went by, and she moved outta the area. She moved to New York, upstate New York for a dream job that she wanted working with young girls in the youth house, a girls' home, so I thought she was coming back, but she never came back. We stayed in touch, but in the meantime, I had a miscarriage. I was all by myself, and I lost a baby, and I was devastated. I came out of the apartment building, and the busses

had stopped running. It was 1:00 or 2:00 in the morning. The busses had stopped running, and somebody was just so happened to be getting out of a cab. When they got out of the cab, I was able to take the cab.

They said if I had to walk from where I was, I would've hemorrhaged and bled to death. I had so many close calls like that. Yeah, so I wound up being in there, and then got my own place, and one thing led to another. Like I said, I got married, and I don't know what else after that what happened. My son now is—he'll be 35. I have a granddaughter that's 11, but after all those years I wound up being—I had a stroke in '07, and I got in touch with my friend. She said, "Well, I'm gonna be in Jersey for the summer, 'cause I don't work in the summer." Okay. She came and visited me, and we just connected just like that all over again. I was like, I don't know how to tell my son. I don't know what—you know. It was kinda weird. I have a very alpha male son. Trust me. Anyway, we wound up getting together. When I was sick, I came down here to recover for a while, and I was starting to come on the weekends and wound up getting back together. Boom, here I am. We bought a house a few years ago, and very happy. *[Laughter]* I hadn't been with anyone, any other women. I was in that circle, and I would flirt and that type of thing, but I wasn't in the life, would you say, but I was not—that was my life, because that's who embraced me, the people in the life. That's how it was. I wound up meeting someone that we fell in love, and here I am.

Erica Fugger:

Thank you for sharing that. How did you and your current partner originally meet?

Erica Harrison:

Well, I met through—we met through a mutual friend. He was also

in the clique. His name was Jeryl Rogers 01:00:00, and he introduced us, and when I saw her, and she saw me, it was like, “Oh, hay. How are you?? I’m fine. How are you doing?” We just connected like that, and we were going on. We did a lot of outdoor stuff, like go to Bear Mountain, the row boats, and the recreational things we did a lot. I was over the top outgoing, just extroverted. She’s total opposite of me. Anyway, when she moved, she thought that I’ll be fine, ’cause I was so popular and busy. I wouldn’t miss her. I’d meet somebody else and go on with my life, but that’s not how I felt. One thing led to another, and we wound up, like I said, getting in touch with each other again, but Jeryl and her had the same last name, so they would say they were brother and sister.

Erica Fugger: I’m sure Dominique and I both have some initial [01:01:15] questions, but I do wanna check in on the time, ’cause it’s 1:30. What’s your schedule like this afternoon? Do you have some additional time to continue, or do you prefer us to pick up in the next week?

Erica Harrison: I have about 15 more minutes.

Erica Fugger: Okay.

Erica Harrison: Yeah, and then we could continue another time, but right now, yeah. I didn’t even realize what time it was.

Erica Fugger: [Laughter] Yeah.

Erica Harrison: I feel more comfortable with you, ’cause it’s so much to me. I’m being honest. I would feel more comfortable with you actually asking me questions, if you ask me questions about certain

things, because I could go on and on, and I get off topic, so just keep me in the loop.

Erica Fugger: [Laughter] For sure. I definitely have some follow-up questions. Maybe in the next 15 minutes I'll turn to Dominique and ask if there's anything that's coming to mind for you right now?

Dominique Rocker: Yeah. I have questions around your conceptualization of your identity and things, and your love story with your current partner, but I also have a random question. In the beginning you talked about going to the Apollo as a child. I was just wondering if there were any standout performances that you saw or remembered from—any really cool things that maybe in hindsight you're like, "Oh, that was maybe somebody really famous," or whatever.

Erica Harrison: Well, there's quite a few. I don't know how cool this one was, but I'm still a bit James Brown fan, and if you're familiar with him. Are you familiar with him? It was just before they put the cape on him and that, and he would get up and stomp his feet. Girls would run up to the stage reaching for—you know how they do. They would reach up to him, wanna touch them and all like that. I was trying to catch his foot to say I touched him, and he stepped on my hand and cut my thumb. [Laughter] Well, you would think he gave me a million dollars. I came home. I was still bleeding and everything. My mother said, "What in the world happened to you?" I was so excited. I was saying, "James Brown stepped on my finger. James Brown stepped—" She said, "Get in that bathroom and take care of that hand. Get a band-aid."
[Unintelligible 01:03:29] That's one thing.

Another one, she would always threaten me about getting up on the

stage dancing with the people, 'cause I love to dance still. I'm thinking, I was like—she's always threatened me, so you never know where I was gonna be, where I'll pop up. For some reason, your parents tell you things, you still think you're smarter than them. I don't know if you ever heard of Wilson Pickett. That was another one I liked. Yeah, so he was singing. He was singing, and I jumped my little chubby self up there on the stage, and I look back. When I think about it now, I was young. I was 9 or 10, and I didn't have no business up on that stage with a grown man, but I was up there, and he hugged and kissed me, and you couldn't tell me nothing, but I saw everybody. I saw little Stevie Wonder, the Five Stairsteps, Jackson Five, all the Motown. They would have Motown Review, so there would be one week it'd be—the Supremes would be the headliner. Martha and the Vandellas would be there, maybe—what's his name—Billy Stewart, and a movie, but the Supremes would be the headliner. Then they'd be a Motown Review where it would be everybody, the Supremes, the Temptations, the Four Tops, Martha and the Vandellas. Everybody would be there. I've seen Gladys Knight and the Pips. It was just amazing. Like I said, 90 cents and you could see—and the thing is, they even—when you get there, you might be in row 20, and maybe six rows of people would move or leave. By the time at that third show, you might be on the front row. It was really exciting.

Dominique Roker: Yeah, that's really cool.

Erica Harrison: Yeah, see with this—I would go to the amateur night. It was a real amateur night at the Apollo. I would go with my brother and hear all the dirty jokes and everything, and my mother, she said, "Tell me the jokes," so she could be entertained. She said, "Now, don't you go to school and tell those kids them jokes you told me."

[Laughter] Don't you tell them this joke."

Erica Fugger: Yep. Were there any similar venues to the Apollo in Newark?

Erica Harrison: No. Listen, when I wanted entertainment, and when I moved to Newark I went to New York. I didn't stay in Newark. I went to school, and I might go visit my friends, but for the most part on the weekend, I was in Harlem. As I got older and we got closer, I stayed in Jersey, and then that didn't last long, 'cause we were going to New York to party, so I would go to New York. I had to call 'em and tell 'em I was gonna go to church the next day, even though—but yeah. I would just go to New York. We'd go to 107, get the 107 bus and go right to New York. There was really nothing to do in Newark. School was really the highlight, the different activities in school, but other than that it wasn't really nothing to do. We'd go to each others' homes. Nobody could really come to my house. I couldn't have something, but I could go other places, but the Harlem was it when it came to entertainment. Yeah.

Erica Fugger: Uh-huh. That makes sense. Dominique, anything else that you were thinking of?

Dominique Rocker: I don't know if we might wanna save this for another interview, just 'cause I don't know how the answer will be, but I just am curious about the arch of your love story with your current partner, how your son reacted to you and her, and also your own conception of your sexuality, 'cause you said initially when you were hanging out with the clique and stuff, they were all LGBT, but you didn't necessarily identify as such at that time. I was just wondering—

Erica Harrison: No, but I was curious.

Dominique Rucker: Okay.

Erica Harrison: I was very curious. My son now, when he was 10, we came down here to visit my partner, which she wasn't my partner at the time, but we came down to visit. I was kinda nervous, but back then it was like, eh. You're fine. I'm saved now. I'm in a church and everything. I'm not like that anymore, or I better not be like that. When we got to the train station, when I saw her and our eyes met, I wanted to turn back around, 'cause all of my feelings came back. Mind you, I've been married, in the church for a while, had a child, and everything came back to me. I got nervous, because for the last few years I'm hearing that it's a sin. I'm gonna go to hell and all that kinda thing, but I wasn't acknowledging none of that, 'cause I was married.

Yeah, that's what happened, and I came back home, and we talked, and we just shared our feelings how we felt about each other, how we really loved each other so much and always did. Like I said, I thought we were gonna be together again, 'cause she moved permanently, so I was broken, and that's when I realized—I wrote my father, and I told him that I think I'm a lesbian, and would you rather for me to be with a man that abuses me, or be with another woman who cares for me unconditionally, because that's what was happening. You're talking about poor, we were poor. We worked at the Y part-time. Sometimes we didn't have gas in the car. We had to walk from Newark to Elizabeth to go to work, and we had—my same cat that I had at Le Joc her name was Bianca, 'cause I really liked Bianca Jagger. She's so beautiful. You know Bianca

Jagger?

Dominique Rocker: Yeah.

Erica Harrison: Yeah, gorgeous. Yeah, I named her—you said Dominique, “Yeah.”
[Laughter]

Dominique Rocker: Can you tell I’m bisexual? [Laughter]

Erica Harrison: Yes. [Laughter] She’s beautiful. Yeah, so that’s what happened. We just struggled, and so when she got an opportunity to get this job that she been wanting all her life, of course she took advantage of it, but I thought she was coming back. She didn’t come back. I was broken. That’s when I got pregnant and had the miscarriage, and all of that. Yeah, and the thing is, like I said, I didn’t wanna go into a whole lot of things about the church, but there’s so much hypocrisy in the church. There’s so much, and you’re told that once you’re in Christ, you’re a new creature, and old things have passed away, so that part of my life was supposed to be dead, but as time goes on, it’s like, “Who’s your first love?” those type of things. My ex-husband was, as far as a male is concerned, he was my heartthrob, and then when it comes to a female, it’s my current partner, and they’re both the same sign, by the way. Both are [crosstalk 01:12:08].

Yeah, we come down. My son and I come down when he was 10. He didn’t know anything. All he knew was that she had a collection of Michael Jackson videos that he was able to sit and watch over and over and over again. That’s all he cared about.

[Laughter] He didn’t know anything, but as time went by, it was in ’07 and I let him know that we did have a relationship, but that’s how it was. He was just recently married himself. He was young,

22, somethin' like that. We [01:12:51] wound up getting along. It wound up being what it is. He accepted her. She accepted him. He wound up staying with us for a little while, actually, for a while. Now he lives in North Carolina. I was scared. I was scared to say somethin', and when I was talking—I came down here. She was like, "Why don't you just come down here and visit for a while?" so I did, and I cried for every day. I came on a Wednesday. I cried every day, because I was sharing how much I really loved her, and I didn't know that she was leaving and not coming back, so that messed me up. It furthered me—it pushed me more into drugs. Now I'm shooting dope. I'm shooting dope, and coke, and when I was in the clubs, I was just doing all kinds of psychedelic, acid, and I always smoked, but just a lot of psychedelic drugs, 'cause I was in pain.

Mind you, I watched my mother die, and I'm trying to fill that void all these years. I'm going with this pain all these years, all these years, so I lose my mother. I lose my partner. I lose a baby, and I lost my husband. Now as an adult, I lost both parents and all my brothers. Recently, I lost my first cousin who was like my sister. It wasn't even due to COVID. It was last year I lost her, so I had a lot of loss, three deaths, and so I would cling to people quickly, and then I would also dismiss 'em, 'cause my heart was hard. I was broken, but my son is cool now. He has his opinion, but he respects us, because he said, "It's not like y'all. You all are just—you're all in a different class." He's talking about the gay people now, the lesbians now, the young girls how they're just so disrespectful, and the men—he could take the women better than the men. Most men say that. I can take the women, but I can't take this—it's that kinda thing, but we're cool. We was tighter than we ever been, actually. Yeah. Yeah, we're tighter than we ever been.

Dominique Rocker: That's good.

Erica Harrison: What's the time? Oh.

Erica Fugger: Yeah, we're just one minute between 1:45.

Erica Harrison: [*Crosstalk 01:15:47*].

Erica Fugger: Yeah. Is there anything else that you'd like to add, Erica, before we wrap up for today? Are there any questions you'd like us to ask when we meet again sometime soon?

Erica Harrison: No, I'm good. Anything that's on your mind, just let me know. If you think of somethin', give me a text or email, and I'll be ready.

Erica Fugger: All right. Well, I think we'd like to definitely schedule a follow-up session, 'cause I'm sure both Dominique and I have a few more questions to ask.

Erica Harrison: Okay.

Erica Fugger: Are Fridays generally good for you?

Erica Harrison: What day did you say?

Erica Fugger: Fridays.

Erica Harrison: Oh, Fridays. Yeah, Friday is good.

Erica Fugger: Okay. Would you like the same time next week, or two weeks from now? What works best for you?

Erica Harrison: Next week.

Erica Fugger: I think that's March—oh, sorry. Actually, I'm booked next week at noon.

Erica Harrison: Okay. I was getting ready to say I don't think that'd be good. The following week is better.

Erica Fugger: Okay, so it's March 12th. Dominique, does that work all right for you? That's the Friday right before spring break.

Dominique Rocker: Oh, yeah. Yes, I didn't even realize that, but yeah. Fridays are usually good for me, so that should work.

Erica Fugger: Okay. All right, so should we say March 12th at noon? I'll text and email you both copies of the Zoom information, and then hopefully I think we got each other here in terms of being able to see you, Erica, but hopefully you can see us for the next round.

Erica Harrison: Hopefully we'll be set, because I'm gonna—I have a IT friend. I'm gonna have him look at it for me, so hopefully. Okay?

Erica Fugger: That sounds great. Thank you so much for all of your time and being so open [*crosstalk 01:17:33*].

Erica Harrison: You're welcome.

Dominique Rocker: Thank you.

Erica Harrison: You got the pictures. You're welcome, Dominique. You got the

pictures I sent you, right?

Erica Fugger: Yes. Is it all right if we include those along with your interview?

Erica Harrison: Yeah, sure.

Interviewer: Okay, awesome. I'll share 'em with Dominique, as well. Maybe I'll ask some questions off the pictures next time. *[Laughter]*

Erica Harrison: Okay.

Dominique Rocker: Are they in the Google Drive, 'cause I looked at them?

Erica Fugger: They are, yep.

Dominique Rocker: Oh, cool. Yeah, they were really cool. I looked at them right before this.

Erica Harrison: You did? Okay. Yeah, we could talk about them. Every one has a story. *[Laughter]*

Erica Fugger: Yeah.

Dominique Rocker: Thank you for sharing yours again, and I look forward to continuing in a couple weeks.

Erica Harrison: Sure. Okay, ladies. Have a good weekend.

Erica Fugger: Thank you so much. Take care. We'll be in touch.

Erica Harrison: Okay, thank you. Bye-bye.

Dominique Rocker: Bye.

[Pause 01:18:18 – 01:18:32]

Erica Fugger: Okay. I think it's just the two of us, so thank you so much. I'm gonna turn off the recording now, but I'm just gonna note that this is the end of the first session with Erica Harrison.

Dominique Rocker: Great.

[End of Audio]