

Queer Newark Oral History Project
Interviewer #1: Kristyn Scorsone
Interviewer #2: Lizzie Li
Interviewee: Kareem Willis
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Kristyn Scorsone: All right. Today is October 12, 2018. My name is Kristyn Scorsone, and joining me as an interviewer is Lizzie Li. We're interviewing Kareem Willis for the Queer Newark Oral History Project. We're in Conklin Hall at Rutgers-Newark. First off, thank you for doing it.

Kareem Willis: No problem.

Kristyn Scorsone: When and where were you born?

Kareem Willis: I was born in 1992, February 20th, in the beautiful Island of Jamaica. It's a small Caribbean island located in the middle of the Caribbean Sea. It's the only Caribbean island that's completely surrounded by the Caribbean Sea. I don't know why that's such a fun fact, but it helps establish where we are. Yeah, and now I'm here in the US of A.

Kristyn Scorsone: Can you tell me an early memory of your childhood?

Kareem Willis: The first one that popped up was Sunday mornings. Sunday mornings, or weekends generally, looked like this: Saturday morning, loud music from either an older sibling or your mom, and loud music was usually some gospel or throwback Reggae. And they're playing it, and they're cleaning, and the older you get, then the higher the expectation of actually being a part of that process of cleaning.

And then there's Sunday morning to get up and go to church, which was kind of like pulling teeth. Just like, "Oh, my god, I don't wanna go," but Mom's like, "You have to go. Clean your shoes. Get dressed." We were always well-dressed because my mom made sure that we were. Yeah, so getting dressed, cleaning, that was an early memory.

Kristyn Scorsone: What religion?

Kareem Willis: Christian. We were Methodist. Yeah, we were Methodist.

Kristyn Scorsone: So, your mom raised you. Who else was in your household?

Kareem Willis:

My mom, and I had four older brothers—no, I had three older brothers and a younger brother. It was also my niece and a cousin, and then a few, I want to say, visiting or revolving family members. My mom is probably gonna kill me for saying this on record, but we called our house – that was my younger brother and my niece – we called our house the orphanage because my mom was the kind of person who, if somebody, one of her friends or a family member was at a certain point in their life or needed some type of help, like housing-wise or somewhat, she was willing to take that person in. So, we had a lot of, you know, I would say, other siblings, quote/unquote, or family members, or cousins we would call them. Even if it was just a family friend, you automatically became a cousin or a brother or a sister in the house, but I would say, on a steady basis, it was just myself, my four brothers, my mom. Occasionally, my dad visited from time to time, and yeah, my niece. It was just us. We were like a tightknit family.

Kristyn Scorsone:

Did you like having a lot of people around?

Kareem Willis:

I did. It was kind of like my earliest memory of a sense of a community and what a community should look like and what a community should do for you because I was always supported. I was always celebrated. I always knew what love was and what love should feel like. I knew what a family should do, what a family should not do. I knew what it felt like to be a leader in some cases. I knew what it felt like – I knew what sacrifice meant. I knew what success meant. I knew what perseverance meant, and I learned all of those from being in a household with each of those individuals. Everybody, I feel like, contributed something different to my life.

There's one person that I forgot to mention, as I'm thinking, too, is my brother's girlfriend. She had been with us when she was like 18 years old, and she helped to raise those siblings and those other siblings that I mentioned. She was instrumental in that process. Yeah, and she was also instrumental at teaching me lessons of love and of self-care and of pride and dignity and so on.

Yeah, I think from having that family setup, I learned a lot of lessons that, in retrospect, I say, "Aha, that's where that connection came from. This is why I'm like this. This is why I like getting my nails done to make sure that I'm on point." You see I asked you, "Are we gonna have video?" because I was getting ready to tell you, "Can we push this back so I can run and get my hair done and get a shape-up?"

Kristyn Scorsone: Right. Yes. *[Laughter]*

Kareem Willis: But you said it's just audio, so I'm like, okay, I'm fine then. I can just go in. But yeah, those lessons of taking pride in who you are and ensuring that your best foot is always presented, your best self is always presented, I think came from that community of family members that I had growing up.

Kristyn Scorsone: Were you an outgoing kid or shy?

Kareem Willis: I was definitely outgoing. I was definitely the outgoing one. I was very outspoken. I remember I did a lot of performances at school. I was a part of the, at the time I think they called it the Speech Club, so we would go around the country competing in these speech competitions. You'd memorize a poem by a famous poet or one that was written for you or one that you wrote, and you're expected to deliver it in this over-the-top performance or with passion or something. I was very active, too, as a child, like I took a lot of leadership roles. I was very active in church. I remember leading Sunday worship. I remember being the youth spokesperson, the President of the Youth Fellowship, and so on. I would say I was definitely a very outgoing child growing up.

Kristyn Scorsone: Yeah. What was your neighborhood like?

Kareem Willis: Working class. A working class community. Everybody in there went to work. We definitely weren't wealthy or rich individuals. I wouldn't even say we were middle class. It was definitely a working class situation, but I didn't know that until I grew up, like later, and having conversations with Mom and just reminiscing on the past and so on. But it was definitely a working class neighborhood. Everybody went to work. Everybody did the best they could. Everybody tried to ensure that at least our basic needs were taken care of.

I'd wanna say that we might have had a few teachers. For example, my mom did a lot of days' work, housework, so she was like a housekeeper for a good while. My dad was a soldier in the Army. My older brother, he was a police officer. Yeah, those were the kind of jobs that we had. We had a few mechanics in the community. We had a few carpenters, skilled workers, so yeah, it was definitely a working class type community.

Kristyn Scorsone: Cool. Do you recall any events that you would consider transitions or turning points in your early life?

Kareem Willis: In my early life, I would definitely say a transition, and this is the first one that came to me, was my mom moving to the United States. She left, I wanna say in 2006 or 2007, October, and she left me in the care of my older siblings and my brother's girlfriend that was living with us. My dad was living here, too. He came here way before her, but his transition wasn't as, I wanna say, a shock to my system like it was my mom coming here. That was definitely something. It wasn't unexpected cuz she told us it was happening, and she told us why it was happening, but at the same time, it was just like your best friend moving to somewhere where you don't have access to them anymore. Like, you don't come home to them anymore. You don't run home to tell them the stories about what happened at school or share the good news, just like that. Yes, there was the phone, but of course, it's different. Yeah, that was the earliest transition that I remember as a child.

Kristyn Scorsone: Why did she move here?

Kareem Willis: She came here – So, one of my older brothers was living here. He's been here from when he was younger. He did high school and everything here, and he went into the Army, and so he petitioned for her to join him here. And so, she came here with the hope, kind of like the American dream – came here for a better life, better opportunities for us, with the hope that, one day, we would join her here, which we all did, thank God. But initially, her move was just so that she could come here and see what opportunities she could take care of or take advantage of, so that our life in Jamaica would have been so much better than perhaps the status quo, or so much better than it would have been had she stayed, and it was.

Kristyn Scorsone: Right.

Kareem Willis: In a lot of ways, it truly was.

Kristyn Scorsone: Where did she come to when she moved here?

Kareem Willis: She first came to Boston, Boston, Massachusetts, cuz that's where my brother still hails from. That's where he still lives and raises his family. That's where she came. She didn't start working immediately. She then went to, I think, Florida to be with my aunt who introduced her to the home health aide program, and she's been working as a home health aide since then. That's how we were able to afford, I would say, some of the luxuries that other people weren't able to afford, or weren't lucky to afford back in Jamaica.

Kristyn Scorsone: When did you join her here?

Kareem Willis: I came here in 2011. I think I was 19 years old when our petitions finally came through because it takes a few years. You have to wait for a visa number to become available, and then, when that's available, it's a whole other process that you have to go through. I remember us being interviewed by the embassy about our mom, and where does she live, and are we really related to her, and are we looking forward to joining her? Stuff like that. So, going through that process, and then not even knowing that we were actually going through that process because she was that kind of person. One, she was very superstitious and didn't want anybody to prevent us from being able to join her here, so she asked us to keep it on the hush-hush. She told my older brother to keep it on the hush-hush, so even while we were going through that process, we weren't quite aware that that was what was actually getting ready to happen until she showed up.

She's full of surprises. She loves showing up without letting us know, and it was so annoying at one point because sometimes you'd like to be able to prepare something nice for her, or you might be in trouble in the middle of it, so you're trying not to, but she was famous for that. And she came, and she just popped up, and she was just like, "You guys are leaving in a week and a half." We're like, "Wait, what? We don't get to say goodbye to our friends and da-da-da-da?"

She didn't even tell us the exact date that we were leaving. She told us we were leaving like the Saturday, and we didn't leave until the Monday afternoon because, again, she didn't want anybody to try to prevent that from happening. So, when that happened, that was another transition too, but that was one that I think was for the better, personally speaking. But yeah, she was like that person. She was that type of individual.

Kristyn Scorsone: Were you excited, or were you nervous?

Kareem Willis: Both, honestly, because in Jamaica, you kind of had this conception of what America is like, and it's essentially what you see in movies and what you see on TV and that part of the culture that is probably imported or exported to Jamaica. So, you see the clothes and kind of the glitz and glamour, but you don't see the complete picture as an outsider looking in. And so, coming in, that's what I was expecting. I was like, "Oh, my God, I'm gonna

get to shop. I'm gonna get to have all these nice clothes. I'm gonna live in a house that had multiple levels there."

Because that was a big thing. Having an upstairs house is what we called it in Jamaica. Having a bi-level house was kind of like a sign of status and a sign of being better off than those who just had the one flat level house. And so, I was looking forward to coming and living in my upstairs house here in America, and the smooth roads. Essentially, leaving the ugly parts of Jamaica behind, so the terrible roads that I was experiencing, or sort of like the verbal bullying or antagonists that I was experiencing. I was looking forward to not having to see them anymore, and finally, I think, be free to be who I am, whoever that was gonna turn out to be at the point because in that point, I was still in my formative years. I didn't know what I was experiencing. I mean I knew what I was experiencing, but to put words to it, or to fully describe it to another person so that they could understand. I was still struggling with that, so I was looking forward to that process.

Kristyn Scorsone: Did you come to Florida then first?

Kareem Willis: No. At the time, she had moved back up north, and she was still working in Boston, but she had reconnected with my dad. Well, they never really lost connection cuz they still spoke for the sake of my younger sibling and I. She informed him that we were getting ready to come here, and we were gonna need a place to stay and so on. And I think they got an apartment together here in New Jersey that would house all of us, all four of us, so my dad, her, and my youngest sibling and I.

Kristyn Scorsone: Okay. Do you remember that first day when you got here?

Kareem Willis: Oh, yeah, I remember it quite vividly. We got on one of those late-night flights. It came in, I wanna say – yeah, so we left maybe on the 20th or the 21st. I keep getting the dates mixed up, but when we landed here in America, it was after midnight. So, it was essentially the next day. I remember I was walking. We were excited. We were like, "Oh, my God, we're finally here. This is great." My brother and I, we got those carts that they allow you to stack your suitcases on, and I was struggling a little bit because I didn't know I had to press the handle in order for it to go forward.

And so, I was pushing it, and this really deep voice from behind me says, "Young man, you need some help?" And I was just like, "Who is this stranger?" And I turn around, and it was my dad. Again, my mom's so full of surprises. I didn't know that they had

made these elaborate plans for us. I didn't know that he was gonna be at the airport to greet us. I didn't know that I was coming to live with him again after not seeing him for so many years. We still kept in contact, but I hadn't seen him at that point in maybe over six years or so. Actually, over 10 years, I think, almost 10 years at that point.

We were just like, holy crap, this is our dad. He's here, and we embraced for a while, and it was like, oh, crap. Okay. Some changes that are gonna happen. I started formulating those. I remember driving from JFK over to here in New Jersey. You see the New York skyline, and you're like, "Oh, this is what we see in the movies, and oh my God, the roads are so much bigger here. Oh my God, look how fast the cars are able to drive. Oh my God, why are there so many cars on the road at one time?" It's all those things that you're like, "Oh, shit!" Wait, I'm allowed to curse?

Kristyn Scorsone: Yes. *[Laughter]*

Kareem Willis: *[Laughter]* It's like, oh, shit, this is happening. It's here. We're here. We made it. We made it out. And we're driving and we're approaching the neighborhood that we're living in, and the guy, he gives us a brief tour. I'm seeing the stores and everything. They weren't the Macy's and the H&M and those big Burlington stores, like I said you see on the commercial. They're more like community-oriented stores, like small entrepreneurs and so on. And my mom's like, "That's the supermarket." I was just like, "Oh, why is it so big?" You know, all this stuff.

Kristyn Scorsone: *[Laughter]*

Kareem Willis: The biggest one that we had in Jamaica was a MegaMart, and that was the size of a MegaMart, so you're just like, "Wait, this is your regular supermarket?" In Jamaica, this is the big place. This is where you go to buy your – and we were just like, "Oh, crap, this is good." So, of course it was dark and everything. So, we go home and we see the apartment and the way it's set up. It was a house, actually, and the way it was set up, and for the first time we have our own room. We're just like, "Ah!" Okay, we're sharing rooms, but it's still very cool because it looks like what we see on the TV. You have your bed here. I have my bed here, and this is a closet. Okay. Oh, and it's an upstairs house. What? We're winning!

Kristyn Scorsone: *[Laughter]*

Kareem Willis:

You're going through and you're like, "Oh!" and Mom has it all laid out nice because that's who she was, also. Like I said, we weren't rich, but I used to think we were. I didn't know I was technically poor until looking back because we had all these things that were considered nice in other people's eyes, and in our eyes, as well. So, her living room is well laid-out, and we have out three-piece couch set and a big flat screen TV which was like 55 inches. We were like, "Ah!" We just left a box TV in Jamaica. Now we have the big 55 inches, like, "Oh, we're here!"

The fridge is stocked up with orange juice and cranberry juice and boxed milk and so on, and it was just like, this is amazing. We're gonna make cereal. The Lucky Charms were at our disposal, and so when we came, we were just like, "Oh my God. We are living the life. This is what we dreamt about, and now we're here living it. Yes!" So, it was a lot of excitement when I actually touched down here in America. It was a lot of excitement.

One funny story. I got up in the morning, and I was with my mom. We were driving through, so, mind you, we're coming to see the big houses and the elaborate lifestyle cuz that's what you see in the movies. The next morning, she took us to go for a walk to walk to the supermarket cuz it's a close distance to the house. We were walking, and I'm seeing newspaper on the floor. I'm seeing garbage on the floor, and I'm just like, "Mom, is this what they call the 'hood?'"

[Laughter]

Kareem Willis:

She just busted out laughing. She was like, "I don't know, but your dad found the apartment. It was in our budget, and now we're here. We're gonna make the best of it." That was just kinda the conversation. I was just like, "Oh, okay," so I'm walking around now, and it was like, oh, this is nice. There's a lot of people. We see a lot of black people. I'm just like, oh, I expected to see a lot more white people, but that's okay. We're still in America. We're still here, and, of course, it's kind of like—

Kristyn Scorsone:

This is Newark?

Kareem Willis:

This is Irvington. It borders Newark, so it might as well have been. It sometimes gets lumped up into Newark anyways. It's just like, okay, all right. You know, you start to learn your environment, but it was a lot of excitement nonetheless. It was new. It was different still. I remember when I went to downtown Newark for the first time. We have this place called New Kingston. We have

a downtown, but downtown is known popularly for – I don't want to say the lesser thans. You go down there, and it's very dirty, and it's very loud and rowdy. You have a whole bunch of sellers that are not in traditional stores. It's a lot of market-type setup.

Then there's New Kingston, which is a bit more polished and more executive. You have the Hilton Hotels and the high-end executive, the head offices that's located in New Kingston. I went to downtown Newark, and it was just like, "Wait." I remember telling my friends, "Their downtown Newark looks like our New Kingston. This is—oh, my God!" Then we went to New York, and we were just like, "Oh!" We thought we had seen it all when we went to downtown Newark, but then we go to New York, and it's like you actually walk amongst the skyscrapers. We went onto the tour of the Empire State Building, and we were able to get onto that level that they allow you to look on, look over the landscape and so on. It was just like, "Wow, this is big!" The buildings are like – I remember giving weekly updates to my friends about what to expect when they come to visit us, if they get the chance to come and visit us.

Kristyn Scorsone: That's really cool. That's awesome.

Lizzie Li: Do you still remember the first friend you made in America?

Kareem Willis: My first official friend – I'm about to get in trouble for this. This person sticks out to me because—well, actually, my first friend was actually my mentor, but because I consider him my mentor, not that I don't consider him a friend, but I feel like he's almost like a parent, so I wouldn't consider him a friend. My first friend was my mentor, and I have two firsts, and I'll talk about them.

My first friend was my mentor. He was the one who – I forgot how exactly that we met, but he was the one who kind of helped get me acclimated. He was from Jamaica as well. He came here when he was about 18. I came here when I was about 19, so I feel like, in a lot of ways, he was able to relate to whatever it is that I was trying to navigate at the time. He was kind of like my cultural guide when I came here, like the what not to do, who not to hang out with. Stay clear of these type of persons. Stay clear of this kind of situation. Don't go amongst that crowd. Come to this organization. Helping me navigate the college experience. You might want to consider this. Don't consider that. That's just a waste of time. Take my word for it. So, in a lot of ways, he was kind of like my cultural guide when I came here.

Kristyn Scorsone: Mm-hmm.

Kareem Willis: His name was Everard [00:23:35]. Hey, Everard. A friend that I met was at one of my first jobs. I was working at Victoria's Secret, and I was a cashier, and I was also working in the beauty department, so selling the fragrances and so on. The first friend I met there, her name is Shameeka, and we spoke for a while. She introduced herself to me, and we spoke. She took me to my first Gay Pride. It was her. She, at the time, I think had recently lost her older brother, who was gay, who that was kind of like their tradition to go to Gay Pride together. She was telling me about them, and she was just like, "Oh my God, you've never been?" I was just like, "Yeah, this is my first time here. I've never been." So, that became our tradition for a few years after that. She took me to my first, and I was able to kind of explore that scene through her.

Then another friend that we're still close is Patrice. Patrice, I consider her one of my first friends, as well, because when I first came here to Rutgers, I remember my first day of class. I went through and I was a little bit late for class, not too late, but the professor had started to introduce herself and so on. When I went in, I was trying to find a seat, and I couldn't find a seat. She just raised her hand and then kind of tapped the seat next to her. Ever since then, we've been inseparable. We share the same birthday. She's February 20th. I'm February 20th. We're just a year apart, and so she, in a lot of ways, became my first friend, and we're still close to this day. So yeah, those are the three first individuals that introduced me to a lot of my first time experiences.

Kristyn Scorsone: Was that for your bachelor's that you were—

Kareem Willis: Yeah, that was for my bachelor's, yeah, my undergrad years.

Kristyn Scorsone: Cool.

Kareem Willis: When I was just a little baby.

Kristyn Scorsone: [Laughter] Talking about Pride and everything, how do you describe your sexual orientation or gender identity, if you do identify in any way?

Kareem Willis: Definitely I'm gay. I consider myself gay. I identify as gay, but when it comes to the gender identity portion, it's always weird. I ask myself, "Well, what do you identify with?" I feel like I'm so flexible. Today, I'm gender fluid, and tomorrow, I'm gender

nonconforming. Then the next day, in a certain space – I think it depends on the space that I’m in, and I think that’s because— amongst LGBTQ folks, I consider myself gender fluid or gender nonconforming. That’s because, not because of that, but in that setting, they can call me, like, “Kareem,” or, “Hey, girl.” I’m like, “Hey,” or that bitch or something, and I’ll respond. It doesn’t matter what they call me.

In certain spaces, I consider myself male, and I identify as male because, in a little way, I consider myself kind of disrupting those spaces. I go in, and people see me, and they’re not quite sure what to expect or what box to put me in. I kind of like try to—I tell them I like fuckin’ with gender, so I’m just like, “All right, I identify as male,” but you might see me with long nails and wearing some four-inch heels, four-inch or higher because anything below four is just, I can’t, but rockin’ some four-inch heels or just some other wardrobe choice. It’s just like, “Well, is he a man?”

I’m just like, well, why can’t I identify as male and still have nails? Why can’t I identify male and still wear heels? Why can’t I identify as male and still wear this blouse? As you consider I got it from the women’s section, but you’re wrong because it’s actually a man’s blouse, but for some reason, it looks like that. I feel like it depends on where I’m at and what my agenda is in that moment, but for the most part, I normally use male and he/him/his pronouns. Like I said, it’s also gender nonconforming. It depends on who’s asking, I guess.

Kristyn Scorsone: Right. How did you first become aware of your sexuality and how you identify?

Kareem Willis: Before I came here. I was young. I know I had to be in grade school when I was just like, I like boys, but for some reason, I just knew to keep it on the hush-hush. I knew that I was different. I knew that I needed to not really let any of this out. I remember, I know at one point I tried to ignore it, tried to prove others wrong, cuz I think, at that point, people were starting to catch on. I wasn’t sexually active or anything at that age, but I was definitely flamboyant. I was definitely more amongst the female crowd than I was the male crowd, just kind of like the stereotypically gay things that people would look at and try to like, checklist, checklist, checklist. “Oh, he’s definitely gay.” Like, try to do the math and add it up, like, “Okay, he’s definitely.”

I was that type of person, like I wasn’t outside playing soccer or football or cricket with the guys too often. If I’m going out, I’m

with a gang of females and people, to the point where, in my later teen years, that was kind of the basis for them casting me as gay, right? Going into, every week, like I said, I used to be big on my appearance, so every week, I was getting my eyebrows shaped up and getting a shape-up for my hair and so on. From time to time, I was still getting my nails done and getting my feet done and so on. And I remember one of my neighbors coming to me, and she was just like, “Kareem, you know they’re saying that you’re gay.” I’m just like, “Really? Why?” She was just like, “Well, for one, they say you’re always going out with females; two, you don’t come out and play soccer,” – but we called it football in Jamaica – “You don’t come out and play football with them; and three, they just think you’re just too pretty in the sense that you’re always at the barber chair.” I’m just like, “The barber is saying this? I thought that would be a good thing. I’m bringing you business. Why are you so concerned how frequently I come? Just do what I ask you to do, and then I’ll go.”

I remember, at one point, my mom had bought me a Blackberry. Well, she got the Blackberry, but she doesn’t know how to use it, so I inherited that, and I was happy for that. So, I got the Blackberry, and they saw me with it. It was just like, “Oh, it must have been a man who had bought it for him.” She found herself constantly defending me. I remember this one dude. We went to high school together. He would come to me and try to give me tips, like, “Yo, the guys are planning on rushing you or ambushing you because of these such and such of things.”

I remember I had a niece in the neighborhood. We’re only a year apart. Love her to pieces. They wanted her attention, but because she’s always with me – well, she wasn’t interested anyways cuz she had herself identified as a lesbian, and she wasn’t interested in them – they thought it was because of my presence that they weren’t interested. They were just saying I need to back off her. I need to stop trying to act like I want her for myself and blah-blah-blah. And I was just like, “If you guys had the guts and the balls to approach her, you’d learn that she is not interested in you.”

So, eventually, we started getting subtle threats which would come to these two individuals trying to give me the heads-up about, I guess, appearing more masculine or doing more masculine things. The fact that they were trying to – I think I told them that, “She likes girls anyways, so back off.” Then the narrative became, well, that’s because she hasn’t experienced them, and she needs, essentially, that whole narrative, like, “You need some good dick, or you just need a good man to pull that out of you, and blah-blah-

blah.” That kind of became the threat. For me, it was more so threats to my wellbeing, and, eventually, I think threats to my life, but I think what worked in my favor was that I got out, meaning I migrated before those threats could manifest, or before they started taking a serious toll on me, as if I was actually in the situation.

Kristyn Scorsone: Those threats were mostly when you were in high school?

Kareem Willis: Yeah, most of my high school years. I mean growing up, it was kind of the taunting, the verbal, “Oh, he-she. You’re a he-she,” meaning male-female. “You’re a he-she. You’re a sissy. You’re a bitch. “You’re a…” in Jamaica they say, “batty man. You’re a faggot.” All those terms, but I think, to me, that was kind of like the lesser part of it. I was younger, and I was, I think, more outgoing, so I would respond to them, and it would be, essentially, like water off my back because then I had my mom defending me, or other women in the community defending me and so on, so it wasn’t so lonely so to speak.

Kristyn Scorsone: You didn’t internalize it?

Kareem Willis: I didn’t really internalize it at that point. During high school is when I think it started really getting to me because, in my mind, I was just like, if you had actual proof that I’m gay – and mind you, I’m still kind of navigating this for myself – then I could’ve understood where these are coming from, but they were all so baseless. They just seemed like these frivolous accusations, and I was just over it. That’s when I think I started internalizing, and that’s when I think it started really getting to me. But again, I started having these pockets of people who were looking out for me.

In high school, I was a teacher’s pet, so I had teachers defending me. I had my own group of support, which was me and my four other friends. We were a tightknit group, so I had them to fall back on. Outside of that, in the community, I had one and two people where, if I wanted to walk to the shop, but I was feeling scared, I could call them and say “Hey, walk with me to this store,” or something of the sort. I didn’t start to internalize any of – well, I started to, but not to the point where I was feeling like harming myself or having those suicidal thoughts.

I always tell people that I think I had one of the better experiences compared to what people normally associate with Jamaica cuz the moment I go, “Oh, I’m from Jamaica,” it’s like, “Oh, bless your heart. You made it out. Oh my God, thank God.” And I was just

like, “Well, I had one of the easy experiences. Yeah, I made it out, but there are other people down there who have no other choice or have no support system like what I had,” and I’m starting to recognize the power and the privilege that I had going on in navigating my experience as a gay man.

Kristyn Scorsone: Mm-hmm. Would you say Jamaica is – a lot of people are very homophobic?

Kareem Willis: Yeah. It depends on who you talk to. People will tell you that now it’s so much better. I don’t think I have the authority to make that judgment right now, only because I’ve been so far removed.

Kristyn Scorsone: Right.

Kareem Willis: The last time I was back in Jamaica was 2012. I do plan on going back to visit. It’s just, in terms of accurately assessing the climate and the atmosphere, I can’t do so, but just going off my social media, the people who are like, “Oh, it’s getting better.” My niece still lives there. She goes back and forth. She lives there. She’ll tell me, “Oh my God. When you come here, you’ll notice such a staunch difference because now we have this one club where they have a LGBTQ night and so on,” but not everybody is able to enjoy that because maybe you know the promoter, and the promoter’s like, “Alright, you could bring a few of your friends, and that’s fine.”

I remember when we wanted to go to parties, it was essentially so underground where the venue would not be advertised until a few hours before the party is scheduled to start. Now, she’s just like, “Oh, no, you know that if you go to such-and-such a club on such-and-such a night, then you’re expected that this is family, and this is the crowd that you’re gonna be amongst.” You don’t get so much of the taunting on the road anymore. But to say that it’s definitely been improved, I’m not sure. I just know that when I was there, it wasn’t as welcoming at all, unless you had those pockets of people who were okay with it, but they weren’t going around like, “Leave them alone, da-da-da-da.”

Kristyn Scorsone: Mm-hmm.

Kareem Willis: “I stand with the gays,” or something like what you see here now in America, where you have allies speaking on these different organizations. I do think that, based on what I’ve seen, different organizations are becoming definitely more emboldened in their approach to combat homophobia and so on, and just seeking out

more of an equitable life for LGBTQ identified individuals. So, like J-FLAG. I recently was briefly skimming through J-FLAG, which is the Jamaican Federation for Lesbians and Gays or something like that, or Jamaican Friends of Lesbians and Gays, who recently released the gay agenda and in it is just like, you know, we want healthcare that will cater to LGBTQ individuals, especially trans individuals. We want equal pay for LGBTQ individuals. We want protection. I know they were fighting really hard to repeal the buggery law and those other laws, and essentially advocating. I know their advocacy has gotten way stronger and way more upfront. For maybe two, three years now, they've been having Gay Pride in Jamaica, which is like, whoa, mind-blowing. I hope to, one year, be able to go down there and enjoy it and be a part of it, but that wasn't going on when I was there.

Like I said, everything was so underground, but now they have a whole week of events where they have speakers and they have empowerment sessions, and they have a sports day, a cheerleading competition. You're just like, oh, this is great. This is very progressive, and I think, for the years that they've had it, it has been incident-free. Don't quote me on that. I did see there was a scuffle one of the years. They were having a motorcade or their parade, and people were just – other, I guess not LGBTQ identified people – taking in the scene, and it wasn't like in New York where you have the people walking around and there's cheering and celebration. It was more so like jeering and booing, and I think maybe they were throwing stones at some of the cars or something, so I don't know. Yeah, don't quote me on that, but I think, for the most part, it has been a fairly pleasurable experience, and it seems to engage most, if not all, of the social classes of LGBTQ identified people at these events.

Kristyn Scorstone: Cool. Is your niece the first person that you knew that was gay?

Kareem Willis: Yeah.

Kristyn Scorstone: Is she the same niece that lived with you, too?

Kareem Willis: No, this was a different niece. She didn't live with me at the time. She lived with me later on. She later became a part of the orphanage. But so, I wanna say yes. Yeah, I think she was the first person to come out to me as lesbian. I think, yeah, she was definitely the first person because it was after that that I started developing my support group. I didn't come out to my group of friends until maybe the ninth grade. My friend first came out in the

eighth grade. He came out as bisexual, and then – it’s five of us – so one after the other, they all started coming out. I think I was the last to come out.

Kristyn Scorsone: Your whole friend group was.

Kareem Willis: Yeah, my whole friend group, which was so ironic because that’s not how we planned it. We met in the first year of high school. High school for us started in the seventh grade, and my friend, he was short and chubby at the time. My mom just went over to him, like, “Oh my God, he’s so cute,” and started playing with his cheeks, and like, “You have to be his friend,” and so on. Then we became friends from that interaction.

My other friend, we were in the spelling bee competition together, but he actually went on to go to the international competition. I think he placed maybe within the top 10. I’m not sure. My mom recognized him, and I also recognized him, and he recognized me, so that’s how I became friends. And he was friends with another guy, and so we kinda grew into the circle. Then the last guy, we were just in class together, and we all just became, it was just the five of us, so much so that, later on in our high school years, one of our teachers – we were top performers in our classes, and so I think it was a math teacher in our ninth grade – called us the fab five, the fabulous five.

And I went to an all-boys high school, so you could imagine what fab eventually became. Fab became fag five, and so, for the rest of high school, we were known as the fag five. That’s how we were greeted, “Fag five! Fag five!” If it’s three of us, it’s still “Fag five, fag five,” and that followed us all throughout high school, but like I said, we had our group. I feel like that’s what – even when I talk about it, and people are like, “Oh my God, no!” I’m just like, “Don’t feel sorry for me. There are people who literally have to change schools because some scandal broke out.”

I remember one time this eighth grader, they found his diary that lists who were his crushes for that day, and the guys that he was into and the guys that he would be in a relationship. It was like his fantasy diary, and I think everybody does that. Then it got into the hands of the wrong person, and he was put on blast. He ended up having to change schools because it got so bad. I remember this one time, there was this one guy that he was walking, and you saw masses of guys just following him. I forgot what that scandal was about, but they would just follow him everywhere that he was going. You knew that he was coming because there was a group,

an army of people just jeering and taunting him and throwing stuff at him because of that.

I had one of the more pleasant experiences, like I said. I had friends in high places is what we called it. We were friends with the teachers. The VPs knew us by name, by first name. They were just like, “Kareem,” calling us to come to the office for whatever reason, and so I feel like, in a sense, as much as they wanted to, people knew not to mess with us because then it wouldn’t be pleasant for them. I think we used that to maybe our advantage at some point.

Kristyn Scorsone: Did you do any dating at all at that time?

Kareem Willis: We did. Oh, we did. It was also very much underground. Those were the days – I was reflecting with a friend the day before yesterday, the days of MSN and Yahoo Messenger. It was actually one of my friends who essentially taught me how to date safely in Jamaica, which, to this day, I still don’t know how he knew this stuff cuz we were the same age, in the same group. How we did it was we came up with aliases. I remember mines was like Kevin Murray, and I hope as Kevin Murray, I didn’t break any hearts or do anything bad cuz when this gets out, then people are gonna know that it was me, but I became Kevin Murray.

I created a fake Yahoo and a fake MSN Messenger. That’s how we were able to take advantage of the different chatrooms. There were chatrooms, text chatrooms. There was Adam4Adam. We had Adam4Adam. We have BGCLive. Then, once you make your profile on those, you meet people. You don’t have pictures up because it’s very private. You don’t share those until you’re very comfortable with the person that you’re talking to, or feel very safe. At one point, we learned that people were making these fake profiles to out people, so you had to be careful about what it was. Then that’s how your network started growing. You meet one person. One person introduces you to this person that he knows, and so you starting getting insights into the places to hang out.

I remember I started going to this lounge. It no longer exists, but it was called the Oasis, and it was meant to be this place LGBTQ people could come and just be themselves. It was very low-key, so it wasn’t really advertised. It was membership days. You could pay to be a member any amount of time for the month and so on, and so I did date. I dated males my age. I dated older than myself. But yeah, I did a little bit of dating. I didn’t do a lot of dating because by the time that I got into dating, I was just not into it because the

community was so small, and DL culture was just a lot. I mean we were all on the DL because that was survival tactics. You had to be on the DL.

As much as you were flamboyant, you tried to disguise it some other way, but then by the time – and I remember I stopped dating so much because, or I started dating older men at one point because I would go, you know you get excited, and you meet somebody on the weekend, and you can't wait 'til Monday so you and F-five, so you and the fabulous five could sit down and chitchat. "So, I met this guy and his name is so and so. He goes to such and such a school." And then your friend goes, "Wait, what's his name?" And you're like, "His name is John," and your friend is like, "Oh, I met John last week."

Kristyn Scorsone: [Laughter]

Kareem Willis: You're just like, "Fuck you. Never mind." So then, I think I got tired of that process of, not just my friends knowing the people beforehand, but my friend probably knowing somebody who went out with John, and now John is two-timing you. And you're just like, all right, I want no parts of it. So, I really didn't do a lot of dating.

I remember my first relationship with this dude. He went to another all-boys school, and I think we dated for like nine months. For a number of years, that was my longest relationship. We dated for like nine months, and it was cool. I don't remember a lot of the details of it, except that I lost my V-card to him. Sorry, Mom, but that was about it.

Dating was an interesting experience. It was kind of fun, but sometimes it was like, all right, you really have to know what you're doing because, if you don't, then you end up in some very messy circles, or you end up outing yourself to one of the predators who are just trying to – or you just become like a piece of meat to somebody. You just had to know the game to play, how to play it, and, essentially, play to win.

Kristyn Scorsone: How did other people, like your family, become aware of your sexuality?

Kareem Willis: In my mind, I felt like people knew or had their suspicions, but just never confirmed it. I never confirmed it. They never bothered to ask. Like I said, I was very flamboyant, so in my mind, I was just like, you can't miss it. But I think what set that confirmation

process in motion was I came out to my mom when I first came here. I wrote a letter to her, and I slipped it in her purse before she went to work, under her umbrella.

I remember when I came out to her, because when I was coming here, she gave us – well, gave me, or maybe she had the talk with my brother. I'm not sure, but she had this talk about like, "Don't come to America and pick up their weird and freaky lifestyles, and don't get drawn into that. Remember where you're from. Remember your morals. Remember your values and all of that." She didn't specifically say, "Don't become gay," but in my mind, I felt like that's what she meant.

She was never the type to bash gay people or anything like that, but for me, I felt like – at the time, that's what it meant to me. And so, I felt like I needed to come out to her sooner rather than later so that when I actually started interacting or requested to go to places and asked her permission to do this, that, and the third, she wouldn't feel like, "Oh, you came here and you picked up a freaky lifestyle I asked you not to pick up."

So, I came out to her, and I think she just showed me the letter the other day. She was like, "Do you remember what this is?" I'm just like, "No, what is that? Is that money? Is that a check?" She's just like, "No, silly, it's the letter." I was like, "What letter?" cuz I even forgot that I wrote her the letter at the time. So I was like, "What letter?" "This is the letter you hid in my umbrella." I said, "Oh my God. You still have that? That's nice. That's cute."

She reads it from time to time. I was like, "Oh, okay." She gets teary-eyed sometimes, but I came out to her in that letter, and essentially said, "There's something I need to tell you. I need to tell you now, and I hope it doesn't change the relationship that we have. I hope that we'll still have that close relationship, but I think there's something that I need to tell you that explains maybe why you and I are so close or maybe explains my love for fashion and all these other things, and why I walk the way I walk, talk the way I talk."

I was using my gayness to explain, essentially, who I am, which I learned later in life that could be potentially problematic, but we're not gonna go down that path. But, you know, I was explaining to her, and I think the last two sentences I wrote was, "I hope you don't get a heart attack or your blood pressure doesn't go up, but, Mom, I'm gay." I remember that conversation, and she

was essentially taking too long to find the letter, so I was just like, “Do you see the letter? Did you see?”

[Laughter]

Kareem Willis:

It was nerve-wracking. She worked away, so she was going away, and it was like a weekend. She’s leaving. I won’t see her ‘til the following weekend, which I learned later that that’s kind of a good tactic to use. She could blow off steam. You could blow off steam, so the next time you see each other, you could have a level-headed conversation. So, I was just like, “Have you emptied your bag?” She’s just like, “No. What is it?” I said, “I put something in your bag.” She’s like, “What is it?” I said, “You’ll know when you find it,” and she’s like, “Well, where am I looking for it? It’s a big bag.” I said, “Well, look under your umbrella.”

She finds it. She hangs up the phone. She calls me back, and I kid you not, this is like this rollercoaster of emotions for like two minutes, which was, like I said, people have it hard. I wasn’t one of those people. It wasn’t perfect, but to me, it was just like it could’ve been a lot worse. She was just like, “Are you sure? Oh my God. Is this a phase? Did anybody break your heart? Is there a girl that broke your heart, and now you think you’re gay? Is your penis too small?” I was just like, “That’s embarrassing, Mom. No.” She was like, “Oh, I’m just trying to figure it out. What is it? Why are you gay? What caused it?”

I was just like, “I don’t know. I’ve just always felt –” She’s like, “How long have you known?” I told her, and she’s like, “Why didn’t you say anything?” I said, “Because I felt like it was wrong, for the most part, and I felt like, in my mind, I was trying to pray the gay away, but it’s not leaving, and so I feel like I need to tell you. I feel like, once you know, I can live with myself, and I’m all right. I don’t care who else knows. As long as I still have your support and I know that I’m still your son, then I’m good.”

She was just like, “Well, you know, this can’t be. You’re not gay. You’re not gay. This is just a phase. We’re gonna talk to God about it.” I’m telling you, this is in the same conversation. “Well okay. All right. You need to be safe. You need to understand that you’re in America now, and I know it feels like it’s better, but –”

At the time, she was referencing something that happened with some guy that was kidnapped and raped, and she was just like, “You can’t wear those tight jeans anymore because people are gonna be looking at you, and I can’t have that. Just be safe, and

just don't take it too far." And I was just like, "Don't take what too far? What are you talking about?"

[Laughter]

Kareem Willis:

I was like, "I don't know how far you could take being gay." In my mind, again, I think she was talking about me deciding to identify as trans or not, or being a drag queen. In my mind, I was just like, "Mom, you can't say that. That's not good. Why would you say that you hate –" I wasn't using those words, but as best as I knew how. I was just like, "You can't say that. You hurt other people," and so on. I think, in retrospect, and in having the conversations that she has with other people, it was more so to protect me because she felt like the more obviously gay that I am, the more of a target that I become.

She was keen to some of the events that were happening, so like the murder of trans women, especially trans women of color, or the attack on drag queens after work when they're going home and still in costume, stuff like that, and so she was bringing that up. I was just like, "Well, you don't have to worry about that when it comes to me." Then, at the same time, I didn't really know what I was stepping into when I came here cuz, like I said, I did it very early. I didn't understand why her reasonings and her worry and her fear were so strong until I myself started engaging with the community and becoming keen to what the news was saying and the statistics and so on.

Yeah, I came out to her first, and she begged me not to tell anybody until we knew for sure. To be honest, she has outed me to more family members than I have. It's so funny. She's like, "Keep it on the hush-hush. Don't tell anybody," but at the same time, one of my older brothers, he was living in London at the time, he knew. My grandmother knew. My aunt knew. My uncles started to become aware. My brother's girlfriend that I mentioned growing up, she found out. One of my aunts, extended aunts – what is an extended aunt? One of those family friends that you call aunties, she became aware of it, and I didn't come out to any of these persons. I was just like – I thought I was supposed to – I was holding up my end of the bargain, but then again, I guess you're a mom, so that overrules everything.

I think she just wanted to preempt them. I remember when we would get visitors to the house. She said she used to tell them, "Now, listen, my son is gay. This is his space. If you're gonna come into his space, you should at least know that, so if you

choose not to be in that type of company, then you have the option, but what I can't have you do is come into that space and make him feel uncomfortable." And I respected her for that. I was a little bit upset that she was telling all of these people without giving me the chance, but at the same time, I felt like it made my job easier, and they would already know, and I could just show up and not have to deal with those uncomfortable conversations and have people all up in my business and asking me all these different things about who's a man, who's a woman. I didn't wanna deal with all of that, and so, in a lot of ways, she made my job or my experience easier by kinda like coming out for me, or telling people or giving people the heads-up. It became so like – and even her had a journey because when I came out to her, I thought it was like it'll be glorious going forward, but it really wasn't. She had to come to terms with it.

When I started dating here, she had her apprehension. She was skeptical about me actually dating, and a part of me felt like it was becoming real for her, like, okay, he really is gay, and this is really not a phase, but also, back to that safety piece and ensuring that you're doing things correctly and doing things right. Yeah, she was instrumental in a lot of ways in that process, and to the point where now I have to remind her that, "Mom, I'm not just gay. I'm also a Ph.D. student," because now it's just like, "Oh, I have a son. He's gay."

Like if she has a guy that's interested in her, "If you can't accept my gay son, then we can't date. I need to know that upfront." I was just like, "Ma, you have to give people the option. I appreciate you being proud enough to say that and bold enough to say that cuz not a lot of people do that, but you kind of have to give people their own options. You can't just dismiss them on the fact that I'm gay, and they don't wanna accept me. That's their process to come around to, just like you had your process, and just like you were able to learn for yourself. Not because it's 2018 means people aren't still ignorant."

My other friend had the same experience, too. It was just, "Yeah, my mom, the first thing, it's like, 'Yeah, I have a son, and he's gay.'" And I'm just like, "Well, we're also educated. *[Laughter]* We're also smart. We also have jobs and titles," but yeah, it's been a bit of a journey with her.

Kristyn Scorsone:

I want to go back a little bit to the first time you came out, basically, to your mom. Do you feel a little bit disappointed about her attitude at the time?

Kareem Willis:

At the time, I didn't know what to expect. Right? At the time, I expected – and I think I was a bit relieved after we're having the conversation, honestly, because I expected rejection. I expected disapproval. I expected her blaming herself. I don't know if she went through this privately, but I never sensed that. I expected her upbringing and her culture to kind of cloud her judgment, so being from Jamaica – super religious, kind of old school, we're not tolerant of anything that's too different – I expected that to play a major part because I remember I started making plans to like – alright, I may have to move out. I don't know where I'm gonna go.

I was researching shelters. I was researching programs and organizations that I might need to know if I get kicked out and so on. So, I was expecting kind of that, and then when I said she went through that rollercoaster that people take years to go through sometimes for other individuals. For me, it was kind of a relief. It wasn't quite perfect after that, but it was a process for both of us. I think I allowed her to understand where I was coming from, and I somehow knew how to have certain conversations with her and so on.

I think, later on, when she was reflecting, she started asking me certain things, like, “Well, is it because you were gay?” I call this period my fall from grace because I was very active in the church, and before I came here, I stopped being so willing to participate in church and so on, and so she was asking me. She was more intrigued, like, “Why did it happen? Is it because of you being gay?” I also have Ellen DeGeneres to thank because she was a big fan of Ellen, and Ellen was like, she still to this day talks about who she is, how she identifies, and so on. And so, I think because of that, my mom was also able to see people, LGBTQ-identified people in a different light.

They weren't just that label. They were also philanthropists. They were also educators. They were these different types of people, and then they were just basically human who are deserving of love and happiness. She was asking me about my fall from grace, and those intimate conversations allowed me and her to develop that kind of a close relationship to the point where I could talk to her about issues that I might be having dating or in my relationship, and she might not have the best advice or know what to tell me, but she tries, and she does the best that she can.

She annoyingly always sides with my partner, which is just like, if I'm having an issue – like, even now, my husband and I, and I go

to her and I'm complaining, like, "Oh my God, he is so dumb. I can't do this. I feel like I married a man child." She's just like, "Kareem, essentially, you need to chill. You're being a diva right now. You're being overreactive. You need to fall back, let this man be what he is, and stop trying –" You know, we can have those conversations, and it won't be very awkward or anything like that.

Kristyn Scorsona: When you mentioned religion and trying to pray your gay away and the fall from grace, was your church very homophobic?

Kareem Willis: See, I don't know if my church was homophobic or they just decided to not pay attention to the fact that I might have been flamboyant – so, I didn't come out to them. Of course, I didn't, but like I said, I was very flamboyant. I had nails. I polished them, but with a clear polish. I just seemed very well put together. Older women would be like, "Oh my God, you would be perfect for my granddaughter," those type of conversations. But I was also very, very active in that I was bringing kind of like prestige to the church. If there's a big gathering, then they're requesting me to come and represent the youth group, or I was so willing to attend these conferences. I was willing to lead Sunday worship.

At one point, I was talking about going into ministry, and so on and so forth, that I felt like they kind of, I wanna say, looked past it, but my tussle with religion happened when one time in devotion at high school – we'd have these morning assemblies – and our guidance counselor, he was a Reverend, and he came and he – every morning, they'd normally do like a Bible reading, and he would do a short interpretation of that. I forgot what exactly the – I should look that up – what exactly the Bible scripture was that morning. But essentially, the way he interpreted it was just that – and in just an all-boys school, like – "We ought to be men, and men are supposed to walk like this and talk like this, and you're supposed to look like this and dress like this." And he started talking about not having long nails and all these things. And essentially, anything outside of that was not of God. God wants nothing to do with you, and you're not worthy in the sight of God, and you shouldn't be amongst other men who are God-fearing and so on and so forth.

And so, hearing that and having, at this time, I think we had like 1,200 students turning around and looking in your direction because you're nothing that he described. Your voice wasn't deep. You grew your nails out. You carried your bag like a purse. You tailored your pants so that they were a little bit more fitted than the average. You know, people at the time assumed that I wore

eyeliner and makeup, when my eyes just naturally have that whatever it is. Again, the whole idea of being too pretty. You weren't rugged enough. I wasn't playing sports. I was more so in the service clubs, and at one point, I remember advocating for us to take this class called Home Economics, where it was offered to our sister school, and that's a girls' school. They had Home Economics where they learned how to cook and sew and everything. And I riled up a group of boys, so we were advocating, like, "Why can't we go take that class? Why is it not offered here?" and so on. "Why do we have to go do woodwork? Yeah, we were doing art, but I wanna learn how to cook. I wanna learn how to sew", and like stuff like that. And so, having them look at you, and you're just like, "Whoa, okay, this is awkward." And then I think, out of everything that I went through, I think that is the thing that I internalized the most.

Because whereas other things that had social support, my social support groups and so on, like informal support groups, and people who'd be like, "Don't like listen to that bitch. Oh, whatever. They could say whatever they want. We love you," stuff like that. I didn't have a religious community that I could go to and be like, "Is this true?" I couldn't certainly ask, "Is it true that God doesn't approve of me? Is it true that God does not want me to have my nails? Is it true that because I'm gay, I'm less than in the sight of God?"

That's what I consider my fall from grace. I stopped going to church. I stopped participating. I stopped leading school because in my mind, I was just like, well, why am I praising this God that does not approve of me? What good does it do me going to God every day praying to this man, and he wants nothing to do with me? It doesn't make sense. At the time, I wasn't keen to using the Internet to Google certain questions and so on. I was more so doing homework on the Internet. I knew how to go to Wikipedia, or Encyclopedia.com or dot-org, Britannica, and get what I needed, write my report and give it in, but in terms of those higher-level big questions, thinking questions, I didn't know that I could turn to the Internet for that.

I didn't know that I could turn to the Internet for that kind of thing cuz you don't see that happening in Jamaica. Like I said, I knew I was different, but I need to keep it on the hush-hush, and then growing older, you don't see those support groups. We don't have GSAs in high schools in Jamaica. We don't have guidance counselors and counselors who are, I think, really equipped. Maybe they are right now. Maybe they're starting to come around

to the idea, but equipped to handle those conversations of identity and so on.

You're just expected to be a man, be attracted to females, eventually marry one, get a baby, and stuff like that. Anything outside of that, you're a deviant, and it was like you are supposed to die, essentially. That was the sentiment, and so that tussle. I stopped going to church, and so that was a conversation for my mom and I when we came here, and she wanted us to start going to church. I was just like, "I don't go to church because the God that you guys praise, he doesn't approve of me. I don't know of any other God. I've only been taught about one God, and if God does not approve of me, then I don't need to be going to church."

I remember one time in Jamaica, my mom had bought me a brand-new laptop for graduating high school and graduating successfully with all my examinations, and that laptop got stolen. My prayer to God before I came out, before I told Mom about the laptop being stolen, I wanted it back so bad, it was, "God, if you bring me back this laptop, I will stop being gay." That was my prayer, every day, day in and day out. "I promise you I will stop being gay. I will stop doing all these things. I will just disband this lifestyle." Like, I don't need – any ways I could invent. You know, I stopped going to functions. I wouldn't really engage in conversation about my sexuality or sexual orientation because I'm expecting God to return that laptop.

Then the laptop never came back. I never got it back. I tried. I got in contact with the person who stole it. I just never got it back, and to me, I was just like – that was years after, when I started to engaging the concept of their being a God, and engaging with my spirituality again because for some reason, I just couldn't shake it. I started learning about God myself. I started reading the scriptures myself. I was like, "Aha, there's nothing wrong with you, and maybe that's why you never got that laptop back cuz, if you did get that back, it might've sent the wrong message that you are supposed to cash in on what you promised God. You need to stop being gay. And the fact that you didn't get it back is also confirmation that you're okay just the way you are, and your healthy identity is not tied to that material thing. Your love for God is not tied to anything material. It's just a strict relationship between you and whoever he, she, they, whatever that spirit, or whatever that higher power is, that's your relationship with them, and nothing else could determine that."

I remember I had this one guy that I knew. To this day, we still haven't met in person, but I don't think he'd have a problem saying this name. His name is Damien Williams. We were friends on social media, so Twitter, Facebook, and so on, and I started having these conversations with him. I think he, to this day, was very instrumental in me exploring the idea of God on my own. His advice was just, "Read it for yourself. What does it tell you? How do you feel when you read it?"

Just having those brief conversations with him, he used to let me listen in on some of his Bible studies, and then I was introduced to the Newark Social Justice Center. At the time, the church was Liberation in Truth. I visited their worship service, and just being in that environment. And I think the one thing that, apart from conversations with Damien, the one thing that really brought it home for me as it relates to my spirituality and my relationship with God was I remember one day when Kevin Taylor was preaching, and he centered it on – I forgot what the general theme was, but the general theme was essentially you are worthy.

Kristyn Scorsone: Was this at LIT, too?

Kareem Willis: Yeah, this was at Liberation in Truth, and it was around the theme of being worthy of God's love and being worthy of being in God's presence. He was just like, "A lot of people will tell you otherwise." He quoted John 3:16. Now, mind you, John 3:16, I knew that from when I was like a baby in Sunday school. "For God so loved the world that whosoever believeth in him shall not perish, but have everlasting life." He was just like, "Whenever somebody comes up to you, and they tell you that you are not worthy, you just tell them, 'John 3:16,' and you walk away. If they still need an explanation, you go back in and say, 'For God so loved the world that whosoever believeth in him – ' and you just say to them, 'Baby, I'm a whosoever,' and walk away."

From that day on, I kid you not, it has just been like, oh, I wish somebody would come to me and tell me I'm not worthy of God's love, or I can't be in God's worship. I can't be in the house of God. I can't be in church worshipping God. I can't be part of a church community because of this, that, and the third. John 3:16 kind of stayed with me, and I've discovered multiple others since then, but John 3:16, the way he delivered it, even now, I listen to a lot of his Wisdom Wednesday talks because – on Instagram, I set up a post notification, so every time he posts—it might go off during this interview – every time it posts, I listen to him because he was so

instrumental, and I'm not even sure if he really knows that, that just that one visit that one Sunday afternoon was so instrumental.

Now I go to a church that is not strictly LGBTQ crowd, but I feel like I'm prepared to have those conversations with those who would be like, "Well, why are you here? Why don't you go to one of those churches?" I'm like, "Why can't I praise God here? What's so different between you and I that I can't – " You know, and I'm getting ready to lead with John 3:16 and so on, but it was that kind of experience and that kind of whirlpool for me, not believing in God anymore and thinking God hates me, to going back and learning and having conversations with Damien and Kevin, and then learning about God on my own, and then having this conversation with my mom, as well.

That allowed her to speak about me differently and about other people who look like me or identify, have similar identities as myself, to the point where she even started visiting Liberation in Truth, as well. We were going together on a Sunday, along with my mentor, Everard, who introduced me to them, and it was great. It was lovely. It was a time for her to learn about other people outside of herself and to learn about people like myself, and how God views them, to the point where she's also quoting John 3:16, or she's also defending, like, "Well, let them come to God on their own. If they have to change, then let God be the one to change them. You don't need to change them. Our duty as Christians is just to love them, and if it is that they need to be changed, then we let God do it. If you feel the need to pray for God to change them, by all means, go ahead. You might be wasting your breath, but go ahead."

But, I think just that full circle moment, that was instrumental in my journey as an LGBTQ individual, as a gay man, as now an out gay man. That not being able to shake my spirituality, not being able to shake the influence church has had on my life, and my faith has had on my life, has led me to come back, and I feel like somewhere in there is like a testament that I share with other people.

I met this other young man who started coming to our church, and, immediately, the lady was just like, "I have somebody that you have to meet." And I'm the youth coordinator there, so I go there, and he's just like, "Well, somebody told me that I have to meet you, and I'm trying to see why I have to meet you." I had conversations with him. He was going through the same struggles that I was recently going through. I told him how I was able to

overcome them and how I was able to ground myself, and I see him doing that. I see him becoming firmer in his faith because of my story and because of my truth, so I take every opportunity I can to share that with people so that they know and see that they also have value, and they are worthy, and that they're worthy of love, and they're capable of loving and being loved.

Kristyn Scorsone: Around what year was it when you were going to Liberation in Truth?

Kareem Willis: I was introduced to LIT, the social justice piece, in 2012. Yeah, in 2012 is when I started my strong engagement with them. I was going to their events on 11 Halsey, but I was really entangled up into the center when they were going through this transition. They were moving from their New Street office and locating permanently at 11 Halsey, so I volunteered with them to help pack up and move. That's when my mentor introduced me to them, and they were actually one of my first internships. When they formally became Newark LGBTQ Community Center, they were one of my first internships. I was volunteering with them. Then I applied to be an admin assistant there, so, yeah, my experience of the LGBTQ community here in Newark I think was formulated, that foundation was based on my experiences at Liberation in Truth.

Kristyn Scorsone: What was it like inside the New Street Liberation in Truth location?

Kareem Willis: It was mostly like a social justice center, so they did these feedings. People could come in, take a bath, do their laundry, get a warm meal. I think, at that time, I didn't really know much about them, but at the time, they were helping with job placement. I think a big portion was HIV awareness, testing and awareness, so they did that, and that all happened through the center. It wasn't more so just LGBTQ focused at the time because it was just like a center for everybody, at least that's how I experienced it, until they transitioned to become the Newark LGBTQ Center.

Kristyn Scorsone: Let's see. What other places in Newark do you associate with LGBTQ people?

Kareem Willis: Apart from them, a lot of my LGBTQ involvement to this day was Rutgers University. At the time, it was the LGBTQ Diversity Resource Center under the leadership of Maren Greathouse. She was also another instrumental figure – she calls me her gay-bee – in the evolution of my identity and the leader in me, the advocate

in me, the speaker in me was all due to all of the programs that I engaged in through the center.

I remember when I started college, I was particularly interested in finding out what RU Pride was. I knew from going to the New York Gay Pride with my friend that I knew what the rainbow stickers meant, and so when I came here and I saw the rainbow sticker, I was just like, there's something here, and I managed to sniff it out. I went to student – you know how when you're new, or in the first part of the semester, they have the student showcase where they have the student organizations – I saw the table, and I remember them being so welcoming and so open and warm and so inviting.

I was hesitant about going, and even that experience was weird because I remember that day, before going to school, I tried to ensure that my outfit was on point, and I tried to ensure that my hair was done because I'm going to go meet the gays, and I heard that they're so catty. They're so fierce. I need to make sure that I'm on point. I came in, and it was nothing like that. It was just like, oh, I could come up here looking raggedy, and they'll still be like, "Oh, hey, Kareem, thank you so much for coming." And I started my first year. I didn't take positions. I was just going through it. I went to the events and so on. I think it was in my second year, maybe around 2012, around the same time that I was – no, it was 2013/14 that I started engaging with them in a leadership capacity, and that was through the help of, like I said, Maren Greathouse.

People are always seeing things in me that I don't instantly see in myself, and she was just like, "You'd be good for this program." I was doing OUTspoken. I was a part of the OUTspoken Speakers Bureau. I was a part of the OUTfront Mentorship Program. I was sitting on the E-board, the Executive Board for RU Pride. In a lot of ways, I was instrumental in a lot the firsts that were happening on the campus. So, I remember when the lounge that we had, I remember planning the opening for that. We were like, "We're gonna call it the House of Pride."

At the time, I was the event coordinator, so I had my team, and I was working. They created the logo for the House of Pride. We did a big opening. We invited the Chancellor's Office to come down. It was this big soiree because this was big. It was the first time we had a lounge dedicated to just LGBTQ-identified folks. I remember I did the first queer fashion show here. I was talking to Maren the other day, and she was just reminding me that, "You

were instrumental in inviting the community to campus.” I opened the events to community organizations. I partnered with a few of them to throw these events and so on.

We had Ally Coming Out Day, instead of just the regular Coming Out Day. I think the day before or the day after, we did Ally Coming Out Day. We explained to them the significance of coming out as allies. We gave them T-shirts and so on. That’s when I learned about – I remember earlier, I mentioned about not being able to explain my experience so another person could experience it. This was through my interactions with this that I learned about what it meant to be trans, what it meant to be pansexual, what it meant to go beyond LGBTQ “A” in the alphabet soup that we are. I remember meeting different individuals and actually meeting trans individuals up close and having conversations with them and talking to them and so on. A lot of my education about the LGBTQ community and my role and my experience as an LGBTQ-identified individual was here on campus and at the LGBTQ Center.

Kristyn Scorsone: That’s awesome. What’s OUTspoken?

Kareem Willis: OUTspoken Speakers Bureau was, at that time, the concept was that a group of students would volunteer themselves to travel around the campus, and in some cases, off campus, to different groups. At the time, professors would request them for different classes, something like a diversity class or a health and human sexuality class, a politics of sexuality class. What we essentially did was, it was meant to be a peer-to-peer education thing, so we go in front of the class. We individually – it’s usually like four of us – we tell our coming out stories. We tell our personal experiences as LGBTQ individuals, and we open up the floor for questions. It’s so people can ask us – like, a lot of times people would focus more on my Jamaican experience, and so my opening would go something like this, “Hey, guys, my name is Kareem. I’m originally from Jamaica. No, I do not smoke weed. No, I’m not related to Bob Marley. And no, I’m not from Kingston.” That kind of breaks the ice because people are like, “Okay.” They know why we’re there, but you could tell that there’s this tension, and so we try to work on openings that will help to break the tension.

I was like, “Yes, in case you are wondering, I’m a man,” and they’ll laugh. And so, you break the ice with that, and you tell them your coming out story, and you open it up for questioning, and professors were really open to that. I remember Maren saying that professors were praising us as speakers, and how instrumental

it was in explaining things that they probably could not have explained, or didn't want to just use a textbook to explain. Some of the classes would rate our services, and they would be so warm, and like, "Would you be open to seeing us speak again?" They were just like, "Yeah, great."

For a few years, that became a thing where we would go to different classes, and it would be used as a tool to educate, to increase tolerance, increase awareness, and increase knowledge about the lived LGBTQ experiences. And I think the part that really stuck was that these are your peers. You're not reading about it in the textbook. It's not in some movie. These are people that live here, that work here, that you see on an everyday basis.

Kristyn Scorsone: That's really cool.

Lizzie Li: Do you ever help someone to come out to their families or their friends?

Kareem Willis: A lot of the time. As part of the OUTfront Mentorship Program, you'll find – so you'll be a mentor. Like, I'd be considered a mentor. You'd be assigned a mentee. They fill out this intake form. They tell you what they need help with. You meet with them. You talk about what your situation's like at home and so on. You become like guides for them, especially navigating the college experience, but in a lot of ways, people are talking to you about their personal situations, like, "I'm thinking of coming out."

I remember Maren used to – we would have those conversations in our meetings, and kind of like roleplay. Well, you have this person who wants to come out. What do you do? What do you tell them? What is your duty as a mentor? How do you help to facilitate that process? You're not supposed to follow them home and be like, "Hey, your son is gay, and I'm here to help you facilitate that conversation," but it's just like, if you're gonna do it, you kind of have them talk about, "Well, what considerations should you be making if you're gonna come out? What preparations should you make? What kind of experience are you expecting? Would you like to be connected to the counseling center, so that when you do this, you have that, so that you could have a professional?" because we weren't professionals. We were just there to help guide you to these services and so on.

We were equipped, like if you came out, and you were told never to come back home or something, or if you live at home, and you decided to you come out, and you get kicked out, we were

equipped to connect you to emergency living conditions or emergency home services and so on. So that was our role as mentors.

Personally, I've helped a lot of my friends come out, and that's just essentially just by affirming them through my experiences, and in some cases, actually helping them navigate the process after coming out, or even just being there as they come out. A lot of the times, not just coming out to their friends or their families, just coming out to themselves. It's just like, "Listen, you're okay as you are," and telling people, "You don't have to label this if you don't feel like it, at least not right now. You don't have to label it ever because this is not what it's about."

So, having those kind of conversations and helping them navigate their experience as best as I know how, cuz at the end of the day, I'm still not a professional. I'm not a licensed psychologist or a therapist or something like that, or even a licensed social worker, but I've had to connect people to services, like, "You might want to consider going to this organization. I know this person. Tell them I sent you," or, "You might want to consider not coming out just yet because you sound like you're still trying to come out to yourself. When you have it figured out, and you feel like you could answer all the questions, then that's when you come out, and when you're comfortable."

Because I've had people who come out and literally just run right back in the moment they start getting either opposition or too many questions. I was just like, "This is what I was saying to you. You want to make sure that mentally, physically, emotionally, that you're prepared because coming out is not just saying, 'Oh, I'm gay,' and it's all okay from there. It's anticipating all the outcomes and weighing whether or not you think you can handle it." For me, like I said, when I came out to my mom, I was Googling, like, where should I go for shelter? What organizations should I be contacting, just in case?

Kristyn Scorsone: What were you studying for your BA?

Kareem Willis: It was supposed to be some pre-law thing, but I ended up doing public and nonprofit administration, and my minor was LGBTQ studies.

Kristyn Scorsone: Have you attended, or are you involved with Newark Pride?

Kareem Willis: Yeah. Newark Gay Pride, I'm not involved with them heavily, but I do attend the events that they throw. I know a lot of the organizers of the events and people on the board, so they also play a part in establishing a sense of community through the events that they put on. A lot of the friends that I have here in Newark that are LGBTQ identified, I met them by going to some of these events, so people like Love, who is very affirming, and so on. I met Alonzo. Well, I met Alonzo generally from the community, but even more so now in his capacity as being one of the organizers and the board members of Newark Gay Pride.

Kristyn Scorsone: That's cool. Let's see. Do you still live in the same home that you first moved here to?

Kareem Willis: I do, yeah.

Kristyn Scorsone: You said that, I don't remember if this is before we started recording, but you have a husband, right?

Kareem Willis: Mm-hmm.

Kristyn Scorsone: How did you guys meet?

Kareem Willis: We met on BGCLive, Black Gay Chat Live, or something. I hope that's what it is. I think that's what it is. We met on there, and I had just came out of this relationship, another like nine-month stint, and I was supposed to be going through my whole phase. I'm not ashamed of talking about the whole phase because I was supposed to be exploring, right? Because I was just like, "You know, you're young. You have time." And I was just like, I need to see what's out there, so I was on all these different websites. I was on Plenty of Fish, Adam4Adam, BGCLive, but then it got exhausting cuz I was just like: One, these are the same people that I see on here when I was on here when I was younger. And I was just like, I never liked you guys then. I'm not gonna like you now. And I was essentially just trying to get off the website, and I took down all my pictures. I stripped it of everything that was personal. Then I looked on the online tab, and there was just one dude that was online in a neighboring community, Maplewood. This is the bordering town. I looked on it, and it said he was 20 – I forgot, or 22 or 23 maybe, and he was 6'6" or something like that. I was just like, "Ooh, okay, maybe I could say hello."

Kristyn Scorsone: [Laughter]

Kareem Willis:

I sent, “Hello,” and then I logged off. A few days later, I still didn’t get any response, so I went literally to go deactivate the thing. I was trying to navigate the website, and then it made this noise, “Ping!” or something like that, to say I have a new message, and it was him. I was just like, “Well, I’m getting ready to get off this website, so if you have Kik, you can message me there,” and I sent him my Kik, and I deleted the website. I deleted the account.

A few days later, still no response, and I was just like, “Shit, I should’ve waited,” cuz now he lives in Maplewood. I’m trying to see who this person is. Anyway, so he messaged me on Kik a few days later and explains that he works a crazy schedule, and that’s why he never really got the chance. He’s always too tired. He didn’t want to start a conversation that he couldn’t finish and da-da-da, so you know we were talking, we were exchanging, and then one night I was on one of my fat runs. I went to Wendy’s to get me a four for four, and I was bored because, again, this was supposed to be my whole phase. And I messaged him, like, “Hey, what are you doing?” He’s like, “I actually just got off work. I’m waiting for the bus.” Mind you, this is like at 2:00 in the morning. I was just like, “Would you like a ride home?” He’s like, “Yeah, I’m at Newark Penn Station. Would you really do that?” I was like, “Yeah, sure.” I was like, “Wait a minute, Kareem. Pump your brakes. This is a stranger you don’t even know.”

Kristyn Scorsone: *[Laughter]*

Kareem Willis:

“You’re just going off his age and his height right now, no other demographic details. Come on, now. You know better,” but in my mind, I’m still heading in the direction of Penn Station. So, I go, and he comes in the car, and I’m just like, he’s not that bad looking. Okay, he’s cute. Then we were talking. He’s very quiet. He’s very laidback, not really shy, but very calculating. I was just like, all right, I’ve gotta break the ice. “Hey, how are you. How was work?” We started talking, and then we got to his house – not to his house, outside of his house, and we were talking.

He was just like, “Yeah, I’m tired. I’ve gotta get up early for work tomorrow. Thank you so much. This was great. I hope to be able to meet in a more formal setting,” or something like that. So here I go. I’m just like, “So, you’re not gonna give me a hug?” And so, we get out of the car, and I knew I was wearing some short shorts, *[laughter]* and I was just like, “See my short shorts?” He was like, “It’s all true.” *[Laughter]*

That's how our relationship took off. In my mind, I was just like, well, if anything, at most, he's gonna be like a friend with benefits, but he kept doing things that I was hoping he wouldn't, like, "Oh, my God, please don't ask me out." It's just the friends with benefits type of thing, where I'm going through my whole phase, and I'm sticking to it. I know I came off all those websites, but I need to stick to this. He's just like, "Oh, I'd like to take you out." I was like, "On a date thing?" He was like, "Yeah," and I was just like, "Oh, shit." I've never had somebody ask me out like that before, not that formal, and I'm just like, "Crap, all right, he's doing all the right things. Stop doing all the right things. Don't do all the right things."

Then he asked me, after dating for a few months, and I've never had that experience before. He goes, "I'd like to pursue more than just this with you. Would you be interested?" In my mind, I was just like, "Oh God, I shouldn't be here. Oh my God, I'm supposed to be going through a whole phase." I'm clinging onto it, and I was just like, "Yeah." And now we've been three years and some change in. It's been a very good ride, and I'm glad I made the decision. I'm glad I accepted his proposal. I'm glad I'm now his husband, and I don't regret not going through what should have been a whole phase.

He has been very supportive of everything that I do. I tell people that it works because he just gives me space to be me, me being whatever I feel like being in that day. If I'm loud, extra over the top, he knows how to handle that. He knows how to handle my smart mouth, and just not be offended by the things that I say. Not that I'm naturally an asshole or anything, but when we play and we say things, he knows that, okay, in that moment, he's just playing. This is not to be taken to bed, but yeah, it's been a very pleasant experience.

Kristyn Scorsone: How did you get married?

Kareem Willis: Well, he proposed, and I was looking really raggedy. I was just like, "I wish he didn't do that." It wasn't over the top because he's not that type of person. We got married on a summer day in July, July 1st, and it was in a park. I was trying to be so different. I wanted an outdoor wedding. I wanted it to be not as formal as traditional weddings. I wanted it to be really relaxed. I didn't even call it a wedding. I called it a celebration of love. It was just us and some friends, and we were in the park, and it rained like crazy. It rained so bad that day, to the point we were like, "Yeah, we're gonna have to do it again." *[Laughter]*

Then we tried to put up tents, and the wind starting coming, so it took away the tents, but it was still beautiful. Everybody who was there kept reminding, like when I start to lament about the rain, they're just like, "It was still so beautiful and so uplifting and so encouraging." I've had friends who actually came out after my wedding. I'm not taking credit for them coming out, but some of them had shared that part of it was just being a part of that experience.

One of my friends was like, "This is the first wedding I've been to, and it's monumental to me because this is a gay wedding. I never in a million years thought that this would've been possible to be, and it's just so inspiring and so moving." It was great to be able to be that for, not just myself and my husband, but for other people who were in attendance, as well.

Kristyn Scorsone: What year was that?

Kareem Willis: 2017.

Kristyn Scorsone: In what park?

Kareem Willis: In a park in Maplewood. Oh my God, it just slipped. It's a park in Maplewood though in his hometown.

Kristyn Scorsone: Okay. Have you ever been to any gay bars or clubs in Newark?

Kareem Willis: Not in Newark. I've been through a few what I call one-off things where a particular club would have a gay night, like an LGBTQ night, but not really, not anything that was strictly LGBTQ all day, every day. It's not like New York where you have a club where you know that it's strictly LGBTQ.

Kristyn Scorsone: When you finished the BA at Rutgers, is that when you went straight to Ph.D.?

Kareem Willis: Yeah. I was in the five-year BA/MPA program, the accelerated master's program. I did that, and then after completing my Master's, I went straight into my Ph.D., so I haven't had a break yet.

Kristyn Scorsone: What are you studying for your Ph.D.?

Kareem Willis: Right now, I'm studying public administration, public management, nonprofit management, philanthropy, nonprofit

leadership, all of those titles and themes and topics that I'm looking to explore. I'm looking to explore social equity issues, especially from an LGBTQ standpoint because I went into the Ph.D. program hoping to be able to merge my passion for LGBTQ advocacy, and even though it was a minor for me at the time, being able to merge that with my professional work as a nonprofit administrator and somebody very interested in public leadership and so on, public management.

I've started exploring some of those angles. I met with one professor who was explaining to me that LGBTQ studies and LGBTQ-focused papers from a public administration, a nonprofit standpoint, has been severely lacking in the field, and so I'm hoping to begin some of that groundwork to establish some of those narratives because I feel like LGBTQ individuals, our narratives and experiences have been erased or omitted from so many different fields, or if not, it's been confined to just so many different fields. So, the fact that when I was preparing the process to apply, one professor at the time told me that there is no way to link LGBTQ studies with nonprofit and public management. I was just like, "What?"

And so, when I'd go up and I'd talk to other professors, like, "No, that's where we're lacking, and that's where I'm hoping that you go. I'm hoping that you're actually serious about this and you really want to pursue it." So, a lot of my time now is spent trying to establish that link. I came across a few papers that spoke about the state of LGBTQ nonprofits, so nonprofits with an LGBTQ-focused mission, and how they're severely underfunded, or there's a funding disparity when you look at the foundation fundings that go to other types of organizations compared to ones that go to LGBTQ-focused organizations. That's lacking.

So essentially, I'm trying to figure out how to develop a research question or research that would involve looking more closely at the state of LGBTQ nonprofits and how they manage themselves, how they could potentially be more innovative in funding and in managing themselves, and also, especially since perceptions are continually changing, how to take advantage of those changed perceptions or different markets that they probably have not considered before.

So far, the working title that I've come up with for my dissertation – look at me speaking things into being – is "Sustaining Safe Spaces." That's what I want it to be. That's what I've been classifying it as, and I'm hoping that I'll be able to stick to it and

see it through because my potential advisor was explaining that there's a lot of work in terms of trying to make a breakthrough in a part that there is no literature. You have the piece from here and here and here. I make a very persuasive argument as to why this is so important and why this needs to be studied and why now. That's what I spend most of my time doing.

Kristyn Scorsone: That's so interesting. Once you graduate, do you want to work for an organization or start an organization or be a consultant or something?

Kareem Willis: I do. I definitely do. I want to use my different sways of influence or points of access. My former boss was big – Rodney Gilbert – he was big on using whatever platform or access that we've been given to the benefit of others. That's what I'm hoping to do because I've convinced myself that this Ph.D. is bigger than me. Parts of it are for my selfish reasons, like Dr. Willis, Dr. Kareem Willis has such a nice ring to it, but at the end of the day, it's really bigger than me when you think about the opportunities and the platforms that having a Ph.D. affords you.

Yes, I still want to teach. I want to do research. I want to continue pushing the gay agenda, or through research in whatever platform I can, still making those connections, but I do hope to one day work at an organization, whether it's mine or something that's already established, that still focuses very heavily on LGBTQ work because I feel like we – the article talks about how perceptions are changing, and I feel like, yes, perceptions are changing, but our experiences are still lagging. When I say experiences, I talk about personal individual experiences to talk about the access to resources, access to healthcare and so on and so forth.

When you look at the lived lives of trans-identified individuals and what they still have to endure, and how they have to piece together, piecemeal the services that they might need and so on. When you're thinking about the population here in Newark, who is still having to go to New York for services because either the services that they require are not available here, or if they're available here, they're on a limited basis. I want to be able to help to make those lived experiences a bit more pleasant using whatever access, whatever networks, whatever places I can tap into to do that. I'm willing to do that, and I'm looking forward to actually being able to do that.

Kristyn Scorsone: That's really awesome. You mentioned Rodney Gilbert. You work for Yendor?

Kareem Willis: Mm-hmm.

Kristyn Scorsone: Do you wanna talk about that?

Kareem Willis: Yeah, sure. I was introduced to Yendor by—I was doing a summer program called Freedom School – go Freedom School. I was working with them, and one of the artists that we worked with the last time I was there worked for Rodney and told me that he’s on the market for an admin assistant, and if I’m looking for a job, I should strongly consider it cuz he could recommend me. I was like, “Oh, that would be great. That would be great.”

And so, he did that, and Rodney reached out to me at the time. I was just like, “Oh my God, he reached out. I’ve gotta send him my resume and everything.” And at the time, I didn’t know that Rodney and Maren were close friends or close colleagues cuz they have done work together through the Mural Program and bringing it here to Rutgers on campus and so on. And so, when I go before him, he goes, “Hey, Miss Thing.”

Kristyn Scorsone: *[Laughter]*

Kareem Willis: In my mind, I just wanted to burst out laughing, and I couldn’t because I have to keep it professional. I’m just like, “Hey,” because you could see that he’s very professional. At the time, he didn’t have a suit on. He was getting ready to go teach and telling me how busy he is and all these things that he needs to get done. I was just like, “Hey, Mr. Gilbert.” He was like, “No, Rodney is fine. You could call me Rodney.” He was just like, “I’m not even gonna front. You come highly recommended.”

I was just like, who is out there talking about me? I met the artist, but I only met him for a few weeks. We’d talk about my experiences and so on and I want to do, but it was never that deep. He’s like, “You come highly recommended.” Then in the long scheme of things, I found out that he had spoken to Maren about hiring me, and he had spoken to a few other persons that I’ve actually worked with before about hiring me. They were essentially telling him that, “If you don’t hire this person, then you’re a fool.” That’s how our relationship started.

At first, I was a little bit apprehensive because I was just trying to figure out, like: What are my boundaries? How do I refer to this – He was short, but he’s just like this big man, and he was out. And I was just like – I aspired to be able to just be out and walk in my

truth and just own it like he does. He was wearing a three-piece suit, but he wasn't wearing a tie. He had a scarf around his neck. He had like a Louis Vuitton tote that he would bring from time to time, or a Gucci clutch, and it wasn't even about the name brand, but it was just the items themselves. I'm just like, all right, if I'm gonna be a professional, if I'm gonna make it, I need to make sure I'm wearing a gray or navy blue suit with this. He was going to meetings in like a full white ensemble. I was just like, whoa, this is real life manifestation of what I hope to be able to become.

And so, we started developing that relationship. I started learning from him, and it became less of a boss-employee relationship to more of a mentor and mentee relationship, to more of like a family friend, to more like, okay, he called me like a daughter. Everything, in our private moments, it would be like, "Daughter, what do you think of this, and what do you think of that?" That's kind of how we came to know each other. I worked for him through Yendor up until his transition. I was still working at Yendor, and now my coworkers and I have decided to take over Yendor.

I like how Jeremy Johnson framed us as the gatekeepers of his legacy. We take pride in being able to do that because I don't think anybody else would have been able to do it the way that we are doing it, and plan on doing it, because we were with him day in and day out. We knew what his visions were for the company. We knew what he wanted to see happening, and we're not just doing it for him, but we're doing it because it's really passionate stuff for us, as well. This is something that we really want to do, and we really believe that it's relevant work.

I don't have a problem doing it because he was an advocate for the LGBT community because he identifies like an openly gay man. He stood firm in his truth, and he knew what that was. He knew what that meant to a lot of people like myself and other professionals, or other just younger gay men, gay men of color coming up and exploring themselves and exploring their identities and exploring their own experiences. I love him dearly. I miss him dearly, but doing things like this, like before I came to do my interview, when Kristyn told me that we could go on the website and listen to the interviews, his popped up. I listened to his, and I was just like, "Oh, I could do this," because at first, I thought, I was sitting there and I thought it was like a history project.

I was like, I don't know much about the LGBTQ history in Newark. I just came in, and assumed my role and kept it going.

I honestly didn't – I felt like there was so much relevant work that needed to be done that I needed to do that I didn't really spend much time trying to do research on who were the movers and shakers before my time. They come up, here and there, but to say I knew, for example, Tracey Africa, the supermodel. I didn't know her story until being at another event. I didn't know of Dean James Credle until I applied for a scholarship through the Circle of Friends, so all of these other movers and shakers. I didn't know of a Janyce Jackson until I started working for her, working under her leadership at the Newark LGBTQ Center.

I don't know a lot about the history, so I was about to step back, but after listening to portions of his interview and seeing what it was and what he spoke about and what he wanted his interview to do, I was just like, well, if this something I'm going to take seriously, then, no, this is a move that I need to make. I'm honored that I was invited, too, because at first, I was just like, I don't have anything profound to speak about. My experiences are not that big. It doesn't need to – but from listening to the other interviews and his, I was just like, oh, it's really just about you and what you've been doing and how you helped to play your part in this massive movement of making the lives of LGBTQ individuals more pleasant.

Kristyn Scorsone: Exactly. Congratulations on winning the Newark PROUD Award.

Kareem Willis: Oh, thank you. That was so unexpected. I should stop saying it's so unexpected. It was really unexpected, but at the same time, I felt like I had so much more to do, and I needed to do so much more. I still plan on doing though so much more, but at the time when it came, it was just like, but you've done so much already. You're doing it. You're living in it. Sometimes that's the lesson. You need to step back, take account of what you've done, what you want to do. Don't be so hard on yourself. Ensure that you're taking time to reflect so that you can be proud of you as well, and not just people around you. Like I always say, people always see things in me that I don't see in myself, and it's not really a self-esteem issue, but it's just that I feel like I'm always pushing myself to aspire to more greatness and more greatness, that I tend to overlook the strides that I've made already.

Kristyn Scorsone: Yeah, and that award was in his name, right?

Kareem Willis: It was. It was the Inaugural Rodney Gilbert Award, and it was for his dedication to LGBTQ advocacy and community service, and to commemorate his work through advancing the arts, and for his

support of Newark Gay Pride, and Urban and Out, and so on, and Newark PROUD Awards. I think he was one of the organizers, like the very first one, so it was appropriate that they named it in his honor. Love, Sharonda, and Kendrick had such beautiful things to say about me, because, apparently, my school reached out to them through a quick comment, and they were just like, “Well, who else would you give it to?” I’m like just like, “Oh, wow, really? Thank you. Great.” *[Laughter]*

Kristyn Scorsone: He also was at the beginning of Queer Newark, too.

Kareem Willis: Yeah.

Kristyn Scorsone: What was it like for you to see the crosswalk for him?

Kareem Willis: I drove down there. I wasn’t there when they were painting it. I was out of town, and I came back, and I drove on it. It was just like, this is so him. The colors were meant to represent like ancestors, and I think the artist, Malcom, named it Ancestral Steps or something cuz that’s kind of like where he frequented, and the whole dashiki theme was so him. You’ll see him at the most formal event in this full-length dashiki ensemble, and it’s just like, oh my God, only you could pull this off, and nobody looks at you weird.

And so, to see that and to know what it meant, and to be able to pick up on the meaning behind it was just like, this is so befitting. This is great, and I’m glad that; one, he was able to get Rodney Gilbert Way, and that Rodney Gilbert Way was adorned and spruced up the way he would have done that.

Kristyn Scorsone: Where is it? Where is it located?

Kareem Willis: It’s right at Washington and Spruce Street, which is where he spent a majority of his life. That’s where Yendor was located. It’s now Rodney Gilbert Way, and all of the crosswalks in that intersection are painted in that mural, in that theme to kind of commemorate him and his legacy.

Kristyn Scorsone: You’re also, if I’m saying this wrong, correct me, but you’re also a graduating class of Leadership Newark?

Kareem Willis: Yeah, I just finished up Leadership Newark, which, again, Rodney introduced me to. The two-year public policy fellowship introduced us to a lot of policy issues here in Newark, educated you, put you in the driving force of policy creation and policy

design, and education on how to ensure that you're inclusive of, or considering how this policy might affect these different identities, and so on. I just wrapped that up – go me – graduated from that.

Kristyn Scorsone: Congrats.

Kareem Willis: Thank you. Graduated from that, and now looking forward to use that as another part of my toolkit to advance my gay agenda.

Kristyn Scorsone: What do you like to do when you're not working so hard and studying?

Kareem Willis: Oh my God. I like shopping a little bit too much, and then a good day for me is just some quiet in my room, even if it's by myself with the door closed, and I'm just window shopping. I'm browsing all these different – I'm browsing these different websites. ASOS is like my go-to. I like planning, and I daydream a lot. I have all these big plans for my life, and I use those downtime moments as much as possible to map this out or daydream some more, and try to write it down, convince myself to write it down so that it could become manifested somehow, or I just lounge about and Netflix. I Netflix, Hulu, Amazon Video, all of that. I use that time to just catch up on, or the DVR. I just try to catch up on *The Bold and the Beautiful*. Yes, I still watch *The Bold and the Beautiful*, or maybe it's *Grace and Frankie*, or I'm on a mission to explore a lot of LGBTQ-themed movies and films on Netflix cuz I see a lot of them just popping up in my suggestions, like, oh Netflix, what do you know about me? *[Laughter]* They're popping up, and so I try to explore those as much as possible.

Kristyn Scorsone: Have you watched any especially good ones?

Kareem Willis: I watched some interesting ones. I forgot the one that I watched. It was like two Muslim boys who were exploring their sexuality together. I watched *Pariah*. I watched, there was this other one about a trans woman who had just been released from prison or something like that, and I just saw a few more pop up that I'm hoping to be able to explore.

Kristyn Scorsone: Are you into music?

Kareem Willis: I am. My music used to just be like mainstream pop. Now it's rap, hip hop. I think working with Malcom, my coworker at Yendor, he's put me onto a whole 'nother subculture of music which seems very underground, but it's neo soul, and it's so peaceful. I try to

listen to that as much as possible. Yeah, so those are my top. I used to be a huge Beyoncé fan. I still am, but not as much as I used to back in high school or something because I've been exposed to these other not-so-popular genres of music.

Kristyn Scorsone: Is there any questions you have?

Kristyn Scorsone: I actually have one, but this might be a little bit meaningless.

Kareem Willis: That's fine.

Kristyn Scorsone: Just as we talked a lot about coming out steps, I mean some of those things, that if I just come out with families and society, it means I admit that I am different, that me and the LGBTQ group is different with others. What do you think about that?

Kareem Willis: I'm always careful when I talk to other people, especially if they are not LGBTQ identified. For example, if I'm doing a panel, I always try to make sure that I put a disclaimer that my experience is not the same as other people's experience, and take it for what it is. This is Kareem telling you. Yes, there are some similar experiences. You might even try to push it and call them norms, but when I speak, I speak for me, and I try not to speak for everybody else.

Now, if I have an opportunity to shed some information, maybe on the experience of trans individuals, then I might do that, but I try to always allow people to understand that you can't keep boxing everybody in. I try to also not reinforce a narrative of LGBTQ individuals being so different. I remember I did a whole art project. I think it was Maya Angelou's thing. "We are more alike, my friends, than we are apart," or something like that. That was kind of the theme of the project. Just trying to get people to understand that when somebody comes out as LGBT, it's not for you to further alienate them. It's for you to understand certain things about them. It's for you to understand your own prejudices and judgments or whatever hang-ups you might have. It's for you to just kind of check that and be mindful of that, and be mindful of what you say, and be mindful of the heteronormative narrative that you've been exposed to or subscribe to. When somebody comes out, it's sometimes even not for you, but more so for them, so that they could feel free, that sense of freedom, so that they could feel like they no longer have to hide and be deceptive, almost, and just respecting that and respecting those boundaries.

Kristyn Scorsone: Cool. Okay. Good. Is there anything else that you want to add, or anything that I didn't ask you that you wish I had asked you about?

Kareem Willis: Not really. I feel like we've covered all the bases. I feel like I did what I was expecting to do, and I'm glad I took part in the experience because it allowed me to be reflective of a lot of things, a lot of things that I don't really get the opportunity to talk about. Not that I just wanna go about talking about myself and my experience or anything, and a lot of the things I don't really share because I feel like they're not significant, but I feel like I'm at a point where you don't get to determine – when you're in a position like this, or have the opportunity to do that, you don't get to determine that your story is not significant enough to empower somebody else or to help them out of whatever rut they might be in. I think I was able to do that. I think I was able to, hopefully, if there were any, dispel some myths about Kareem and who he was, and his upbringing and so on. I think I'm just overall grateful for the opportunity to have been here and to have been considered for this project.

Kristyn Scorsone: Thank you so much. You're awesome.

Kareem Willis: Thank you.

Lizzie Li: Thank you.

Kareem Willis: Thank you.

[End of Audio]