

Queer Newark Oral History Project

Interviewee: Maya Williams

Interviewed by: Esperanza Santos

Date: October 28, 2019

Location: African American Office of Gay Concerns, NJ

Esperanza Santos: Today is October 28, 2019. My name is Esperanza Santos and I'm interviewing Maya Williams?

Maya Willams: Yes.

Esperanza Santos: Yes.

Maya Willams: Hello.

Esperanza Santos: At the African American Office of Gay Concerns for the Queer Newark Oral History Project. Hey.

Maya Willams: Hey.

Esperanza Santos: How are you doing?

Maya Willams: I'm good, how are you?

Esperanza Santos: Good. I'm happy to—I think I emailed you last week and here we are.

Maya Willams: Yes.

Esperanza Santos: That was a pretty quick turnaround.

Maya Willams: Very much so. I appreciate you coming and having me here as part of this project. It means a lot to me. It really does.

Esperanza Santos: Yeah, so let's start with when and where were you born?

Maya Willams: Okay, well I was born here in Newark, Newark Beth Israel Hospital, July 26, 1988 at 4:33 in the afternoon. That's where God decided that this beautiful trans person would be brought into this world, honey. I grew up around the greater Newark area. I started off—well, actually after being born I moved to Harrisburg Pennsylvania for the first three, maybe four years of my life where my dad was a truck driver. My mom, she was a homemaker and due to unfortunate circumstances, my father and him dealing with his substances and going through you know struggles in his own life at that time, our house burned down. So we had to end up moving back to Newark where we moved to an illustrious apartment at 421 South Tenth Street in Newark, New Jersey. That's where I can remember a lot of different memories as far as you know families visiting and my mother's sisters coming up and my father being there and then later on moving literally down the street where my father received a job from a church to become the presiding elder, because they did not have a pastor at the time, so we ended up moving above the church and being a part of the church movement and my father being the

pastor, well, acting pastor at that time and presiding over the church and me being what they call a first kid or a PK, Pastor's Kid. That experience was a little bit challenging for me because that's when I believe that I started coming into myself. I remember a fond moment—

Esperanza Santos: Wait, what church was this?

Maya Willams: Well, the church name, and it still stands 'til this day. It's called Church of the Living God.

Esperanza Santos: Church of the Living God.

Maya Willams: Yes, and it's a small church. You know it's like I said, it's still there in Newark on 10th Street and 14th Avenue in Newark. Before we moved there, I just remembered this one memory, my father, we were getting ready on a Saturday morning because we actually followed Jewish traditions of going to church on Saturdays and keeping kosher and making sure that meals were prepared before the Shabbat came in which was on a Friday night. So, these different things have been incorporated into my life ever since I was young. Again, a fond memory of myself was when I first—my father first learned I could sing and I was literally standing in front of the TV and I had my favorite tape in and I went and I had my father's robe, had my father's long robe and I got a brush and I started singing. My father was like, "You can sing?" My father was a musician so he's like, "You can sing?" I'm like I don't know what to say because I don't know, you know like yeah, I guess.

Esperanza Santos: Like, I was just having fun.

Maya Willams: Right, I'm just sitting in there and I'm just having fun and just singing in front of the TV and my father established that I knew how to sing at that point. We moved down the street again. He got the job of presiding elder and as he did that, my father ended up passing.

Esperanza Santos: Oh, I'm so sorry.

Maya Willams: In 1998 but I still end up staying in Newark.

Esperanza Santos: You were ten years old.

Maya Willams: I was. I was ten at that time. I ended up staying in Newark. I moved to the Vailsburg area but ended up graduating from the Weequahic High School at number 20 in my class. I graduated top 20 percentile of my class.

Esperanza Santos: What? Get it.

Maya Willams: Yes.

Esperanza Santos: How beautiful is that?

Maya Willams: Yes. All of the struggle and everything and growing up in Newark, I still ended up coming out on top.

Esperanza Santos: There we go.

Maya Willams: Mmhmm Yes.

Esperanza Santos: Between that, and like when you were born in 1988 and throughout your adolescence, who raised you?

Maya Willams: My mom. My mom, my grandmother. Every now and then my sister, she would pop her head in every now and then.

Esperanza Santos: Is she older?

Maya Willams: Yes, my sister is older. I had three older—

Esperanza Santos: You have other siblings?

Maya Willams: I do. I have three other sisters.

Esperanza Santos: You're the baby daughter.

Maya Willams: I am the baby of my father's kids. I am the baby. I have three older sisters and I have three and a half older brothers. I say three and a half, well one uh, it's a difficult story because one of our brothers, we don't know the paternity but because we don't know the paternity, we just say he's our half-brother and we bring him in as one of our own.

Esperanza Santos: Absolutely, yeah so you're the youngest of seven.

Maya Willams: I am.

Esperanza Santos: Were all of y'all in the same house together?

Maya Willams: We were not. Actually, my older - my oldest brother and sister, they were raised by their mother, but they were raised more elite, you know.

Esperanza Santos: No, what does that mean?

Maya Willams: Elite I mean you know as far as advances with school and college and their moms and their—

Esperanza Santos: Like bougie?

Maya Willams: Kinda. My sister, she went to Howard University at HBCU, end up graduating with a Bachelor of Psychology continuing on to get her masters and PhD in

psychology and opening up a practice out of Washington. Then I have a brother who, he still—well, we all still communicate, and we talk. My brother actually moved—well, he introduced me to a lot of celebrities and everything like that when it came down to him, he- I first went into the studio with my older brother, which is my father's first son, where he's recorded with recording artists like Beyoncé and Destiny's Child and Missy Elliott and I was able to—actually I met the queen one time.

Esperanza Santos: What?

Maya Willams: Yeah, but I was young. I didn't know.

Esperanza Santos: You're like oh cool. It's one of my dad's friends like yeah whatever.

Maya Willams: Right, yeah. I'm like okay, wait a minute. So here I am not know—I watched this person on TV, but I wasn't star struck. You know I'm watching this person on TV and I don't like the way that they're making her image to be. I'm like oh my goodness but this is that person that's on TV—and my brother's name was Kareem. I said, Kareem, ain't that that girl that's on TV right there. He was like, "Yeah, that's Beyoncé." I'm like, "Okay."

Esperanza Santos: You're like whatever.

Maya Willams: Yeah. You know I'm just so blind and plus growing up in church we were-I had to sneak around and listen to stuff like that. Then there's another girl, well, there's actually two other girls above me and then another boy who's above me which is my older brother and I cherish him because of the simple fact that he's a leader. He's also one of the ones that taught me growing up. My brother, he's a pastor now.

Esperanza Santos: It sounds like you had a lot of people teaching you and being there for you.

Maya Willams: Yes, they were in and out, although I did not see it and did not really, really kinda focus in to appreciate it, uh, them being there. You know now sometimes I still kinda be reflecting and rebellious to the fact of them not being there when I wanted them to be there for me. But you know, they stuck their heads in and out and I can be grateful for that.

Esperanza Santos: Yeah, and like reflecting on the past.

Maya Willams: Yeah, yeah, and reflection. My older brother, I remember he just—I wanted to go with him somewhere and actually I wanted to go with him to church. My brother was 14 at the time, 14 or 15 and he was a musician just like my dad. My dad taught him everything, taught him piano, taught him singing, taught him everything as a musician he taught him and it was amazing because of the simple fact that I said, "I wanna go with you. I wanna go with you. I wanna go with you." He was like, "No, you cannot come with me." I was like, "Why not?" I was like, "I just wanna go with you." He's like, "No, you cannot come with me." I said, "No, I wanna go." I started crying. He's like, "Okay, if you wanna go, you're gonna have to

walk.” I was like at that point, because I just wanted to go with him so bad, I’m like, “Okay, I’ll go.”

Esperanza Santos: You’re like don’t test me, I’ll do it.

Maya Willams: Right! Right! I will go. And I kid you not, and this may sound like abuse, but it wasn’t. It was actually a lesson. My brother made me walk from Newark to Plainfield that day. I walked with him from Newark to Plainfield to church and then once got to church I fell out in the back and missed the whole service because I was so tired.

Esperanza Santos: Awwwww, yeah, and how long is that walk? How long do you think that walk was?

Maya Willams: It was at least, it was at least about five hours. We left literally at maybe around right after I got outta school, which was at 3:30 and we got there right when the service was starting at 7 so about 3-1/2, maybe 4 hours.

Esperanza Santos: Wow.

Maya Willams: Yes. Yes. It was a lot. It was a lot and I was just—I was taken back to know that I had this experience and taken back to know that if anyone- whenever you say that you wanna do something, just know how you want to do it because you never know how you’re gonna have to get to it. That was the lesson that I learned. I said I wanted to go with him.

Esperanza Santos: You’re like, I wanted to go, and this is what I had to do.

Maya Willams: Yes, this is what I had to do. I wanted to go, and this is what I had to do. I had to walk four and a half hours. Just to be in the company of my brother. That was all.

Esperanza Santos: Yeah, yeah that’s a lot of strength to be like I want this and I’m gonna go do it.

Maya Willams: Yes. Yes. It is a lot of strength. I kind of get my strength from my mom and my sisters because my mom, she gave me the pathway of waking up at five in the morning. Basically, the instructions is what I was looking for. The instructions, I had instructions every day to do something in the home. Not outside, not work, but in the home and this reflects, and this all coincides to the fact that how trans people are made by their families, but they really don’t realize how they’re making them. So, now remember, I used to dance with long robes and sing in front of my father and then—

Esperanza Santos: With the comb.

Maya Willams: With the combs and the brushes. Even sometimes when he wasn’t there sneak and put on a towel and a rubber band on my head inside out.

Esperanza Santos: Ayyyy, and flip your hair.

Maya Willams: Long hair while I'm singing and just okay, you know I knew what I wanted to be in that moment, but I couldn't express it to him because of the people that we were, because of the hierarchy that we were. We weren't able to be that. We weren't able to be these people who you know are outwardly gay in the community that's not accepting of this type of behavior. You know and it's like okay, how do I, how do I come into a community where I can identify myself and be who I am freely? So I, as I got older my mom kept giving me those same instructions. I would have to go to school. I would ride the bus. I started riding the bus when I was ten years old by myself. I would ride the bus.

Esperanza Santos: That's like fourth grade, right?

Maya Willams: Yes. I started, well, my father actually he rode the bus. He died going into my fifth-grade year. I had just turned ten. I literally my birthday had just passed. It was July 26, 1988 and my father passed away August 29th, 1998.

Esperanza Santos: May he rest in peace.

Maya Willams: Yes. So, right then within that time period, I was going into the fifth grade and got depressed. Went through a depression stage, which I later found out—

Esperanza Santos: In fifth grade?

Maya Willams: In fifth grade.

Esperanza Santos: Oh, because of your dad.

Maya Willams: Because of my dad dying and having to continue on in a new school without him showing me the way of how to get to school without him riding the bus with me.

Esperanza Santos: Oh, because he was with you and at that moment when he passed away you did it by yourself.

Maya Willams: Exactly.

Esperanza Santos: Oh.

Maya Willams: So it was different now going into the fifth-grade year because he's no longer there to catch the bus with me. He's no longer there to sometimes take me in his van, his blue and white Chevy van that he had with the lay-down bed in the back. He wasn't there to do that at that moment, so I had to build strength. I had to build a lot of strength and my mom, she held strong. Even to this day she still holds strong. We cried. My brothers and my sisters, we cried because my father was there. The last thing I said to him was, "Hey dad, can I have some ice cream?" He was like, "Yeah go head, go in the freezer." He was like, "Is your momma home?" I said, "No, she's not here." He said, "Go ahead. Go in the freezer, get some ice cream." I'm like, "Okay."

So, that was the last thing that I asked my dad before I found that he had passed. And moving on in those latter years of elementary, I started going through depression. I didn't really feel myself. I didn't wanna wash. I didn't really care for my hygiene. Not only that, because it was a form of depression only because of the simple fact that I did not have no one to go through it with. My mom really didn't understand. The only thing that she was able to understand was the fact of how to tell a girl what to do with her period, what to do with this, what to do with that. She really did not understand the fact that she wasn't able to do it. So I was molested when I was younger by a well, a now bishop. He was my father's godson, and he was an understudy of my father. And it was, I was- back then I was you know, I'm shapely now, I'm shapely now. I have a nice shape. I would think so that I do.

Esperanza Santos: Come on Coke bottles.

Maya Willams: You know, I'm trying to get that, you know.

Esperanza Santos: Eight, eight, eight. Word.

Maya Willams: He back then was like, "Yo, you have such a good shape. You have a nice shape. Let me just see your butt." and then he'd go, "Oh, that's nice." and he would touch, but that was, even then, beforehand there was a young guy in my church who would allow me to come downstairs and just, I would fondle him, but I was young. I was like maybe around six, seven where I would do that and then in my mind it would be a recording because this is what I knew and sometimes I would look at it or look forward to doing it because it was a recording in my mind that this was right, and it was wrong. Even when it came down to the fact of molestation in my latter years of teenage years, it would be like okay, this guy is asking me to do this because he's right. You know, he's right and I'm supposed to listen to him, and he knows better and you know he knows these things.

Esperanza Santos: Like I'm trusting him.

Maya Willams: Right. It was very much a trusting aspect. It was nothing wrong with it, so I did it. Never told my mom. Never really - I didn't think that she would be able to understand.

Esperanza Santos: Do you know how old were you when it happened or where it happened?

Maya Willams: So I was young, around maybe six or seven when it first started. That's when we were living at 421 but we were going to the church down the street that my father later presided as an elder. That's where it first started happening. Later on, when we moved down the street and we lived upstairs, even sometimes, I believe it was a few times when my father was alive that it happened, but I just never said anything because honestly speaking, and I don't mean to sound biased or racist when it comes down to this.

Esperanza Santos: You can say whatever you want.

Maya Williams: Mental health issues have been a big problem in the Black family and in the families of color because Black men are taught not to express themselves. They are taught not to be subject to a White man's power because of the simple fact that a man of a different caliber is able to express himself and be expressive and allow sometimes his emotions to get the best of him because of the simple fact that he does not want to be overwhelmed with the circumstances of his family but yet provide to his family. And it's different for me because I didn't know how to handle those issues. I didn't know how to go and say, "Mom, hey, you know, this guy's touching me." Because it was do as I say, not as I do. And I just, have I forgiven the person that did it to me? Yeah, because he's dead. It's like... the guy got locked up and when he got locked up, he came home and after he came home, he got shot.

The other young man, who is now a bishop in the church, he went to jail because he got caught molesting a handicapped child on the bus. I've learned to bottle my emotions and bottle tears and try to make sense of confusion when it's like I should be crying in this moment, but I can't because of the simple fact that for one, these emotional tactics that are placed among us, and mind you, this is not even half of my story. This is just the beginning. This is what molded me into being this strong Black woman, this strong Black trans woman that I am now.

People don't understand the struggle that a person has to go through mentally, physically, you know, to get where they are. They don't understand. And it's like we even and I'll bring it more to present time, we even now have to—we always have to categorize how trans we are with other trans people. I don't wanna signify my transness because of the simple fact that this person had surgery or that person had surgery or this person's on hormones or that person doesn't take hormones. I don't wanna do that. I don't wanna do that because of the simple fact it makes no sense to do it.

If we are all sisters, if we are all sisters of the same kind, the same breed, what makes you more beautiful than me? Why can't we be beautiful together? I'm so serious. You know what, later on when we get to it, I'm sure my name has to be up in there somewhere, but Maya will get in there somewhere. I'll explain to you how I got Maya. My birth name is Jeremiah Walter Williams. Jeremiah comes from the book of terms in which is a Hebrew term for weeping prophet, which means that the person is—Exactly, I study my names, honey.

Esperanza Santos: [Laughing]

Maya Williams: I had to know who I was. I had to know who I was.

Esperanza Santos: If I'm gonna take this name, I better know what it is.

Maya Williams: I had to know who I was before I sat up there and just decided to be oh yeah, my name is—a lot of the times we give ourselves our given names or we give ourselves these names that don't hold no weight or meaning to it. So Jeremiah came from my mom and my dad because of the simple fact that we were in church and most of everyone in my family have biblical names. The only ones that don't have biblical names is my older brother and sister. Theirs are more leaning on the Islamic faith as far as their names is concerned, but I was more the Christianity and out of the Bible. But Jeremiah is weeping prophet and Walter was named

after my great uncle which is my father's uncle and my father's mother's brother. His name was James Walter, so they gave me that name after him to keep that generation going and then of course our last name Williams. My mom when I was little used to call me Maya all the time out of Jeremiah. And I was like, yes. And I would say it so just soft. I'll be like, "Yes."

Esperanza Santos: Like hello Mr. President. Like very that.

Maya Willams: Yes. Yes, mommy. She would be like, "Why you talking like that?" I'm like, "Because you called me." I would literally say it like that because you call me. She was just like okay. My mom knew. My mom knew what was going on with me the entire time. She just never told me. She knew I popped her shoe one time. I was trying on her shoes.

Esperanza Santos: Oh, no!

Maya Willams: I used to try on my mom's shoes all the time. My mom has small feet. My mom wears a size eight. Now because she done lost weight, she's down to a seven and a half. She lost weight and back then she used to use to wear eight, eight and a half wide width. I used to put my feet in them shoes and I'd be like, "Yes." I used to pounce around that house. Then I started getting older and thought that I could still fit my mother's shoes and realize I can't fit her shoes no more after I done popped that one.

Then I hid it girl. I hid it behind everything and she's like, "Oh my goodness, why would you—." Then she asked me one day, she said, "Maya." I'll be like, "Yes." She said, "Did you see my shoe?" I'm like, "Which one?" A mother knows her child. A mother knows. She said, "Which one." Well, I asked her which one actually. She pointed out the exact one that I popped. I said, "No, I don't know."

Esperanza Santos: No ma'am.

Maya Willams: I don't know. She was like, "Okay," and left it. My dad kinda knew before he passed away. Well, he did know before he passed away should I say. My sister, she was in her last year. She had just graduated high school after my father had passed, well, both my sisters had graduated high school after my father had passed away. Well, before he passed away actually, excuse me. My sister went to prom, and she had this red dress and it was a red dress slit to the side.

Esperanza Santos: Ooh, a nice long slit by the thigh? Oh.

Maya Willams: It was a nice long slit to the thigh with the beads going across.

Esperanza Santos: Ooh, the chest and the straps, oh.

Maya Willams: Yes. She had that. I'm like okay. I was like, "Let me go in and try it on." I didn't wanna try it on, try it on. I didn't wanna get all undressed and try it on because I'm like okay, I'm trying this dress on. Better watch the door just in case my father comes because I really don't know when he's gon come—

Esperanza Santos: Cause it's a family and you don't lock doors.

Maya Willams: No, not in there. We did not lock doors, honey. So, I put the dress on. Got the dress on and I put on her red shoes.

Esperanza Santos: Your mom's red shoes.

Maya Willams: No, my sister's, her red shoes.

Esperanza Santos: How old were you, ten?

Maya Willams: I had to be around nine.

Esperanza Santos: Nine.

Maya Willams: Nine and there were lit- it was literally, I could just still even picture it now, like, my father's room and my mother's room was to the front of the house. Then there was the entrance door that led into the house which led into the living room but when you went to the left, there was a door here, which was the bathroom. There was a bedroom there and then there was a bedroom in the back. Now the bedroom in the back was my bedroom, so I went to that bedroom, but I snuck my sister's dress out of her bedroom. So I'm getting dressed and everything and I'm just playing and playing in the dress. Next thing you know, I didn't even hear the door downstairs. I heard the door upstairs that led into the living room, 'cause usually I'll hear the door downstairs, but I don't know where the hell I was this day. I don't know what was going on. I must've been in some type of a fairy tale or la-la land.

Esperanza Santos: You were living your fantasy.

Maya Willams: I was. I was just living in that dream and that moment of that dress. My father came through that door. When he came through that door, it slammed, and I looked, and I literally ran into my room and took the dress off. I put on some pants. I threw the dress in the back of the closet, but I left the shoes.

Esperanza Santos: No!

Maya Willams: I left the shoes. My father looked down at the shoes and he said, "Did you have them shoes on?" I said, "No, daddy." He said, "I'm gonna ask you again." That's when I knew I had to say yes. He said, "Did you have the shoes on?" I said, "Yes." If I wasn't chastised no other day, I got a good lick. One time. That was the only time my father had ever put his hands on me. He gave what he called, what they call, he caved my chest in. I got a nice, good thing to the chest, a nice, good punch to the chest because back then, to harden men, they would—and I cried and I cried, but I was his baby, and I think he felt so bad.

My dad was an amazing person. He was a musician. He was a truck driver. The ten years that I did have him, I was able to just be a baby with him. I was able to just be his baby and I'm still

his baby ‘cause every now and then I always, well, I most of all, because I didn’t really grow up with him. I visit his grave, I take him flowers. I talk to him, and I share with him. So, after graduating high school, well, actually let’s go during high school. Wait, I’m trying to follow the script here. I’m sorry.

Esperanza Santos: Okay, no, you’re good. You’re good. I’m letting you feel your feelings and do things as they come. My priority as an interviewer is to be with you and be here. You are first. This script is secondary.

Maya Willams: Okay, all right, I just wanna make sure ‘cause I don’t wanna go off topic.

Esperanza Santos: Yeah.

Maya Willams: My dad, like I said, he was a very, very good man. He had his ups and he had his downs. Don’t get me wrong, he wasn’t perfect.

Esperanza Santos: Who is?

Maya Willams: Right. He wasn’t perfect. He- I think that society we have—and this is something that even plays into me as far as that, and I wrote this down in my book the other day. I was writing. I was upset at my husband, and I just started writing in my book. I said to myself, I said, “Sometimes I feel as though that we as trans people look for our dads within another person because I have been searching for that person to fill that void of a father for so many, many, many years. In trying to fill that, in trying to understand that part of me, sometimes that going to a—Maya said we’re okay, my father, he gave up because he didn’t really want to see that through with me. He didn’t want to see that part of his child. He wanted to leave a legacy of children that he would be proud of and sometimes I do feel as though he’s not proud of me, only because of who I came to be. I love that man. I did, and I pray that you know, he sees success. I think like I said, that’s what we want. We want success. We want to be successful. Don’t cry girl. Cuz you don’t wanna make me cry.

Esperanza Santos: It’s okay to cry.

Maya Willams: Seriously.

Esperanza Santos: It’s okay to cry.

Maya Willams: We want success within our community. We want success within ourselves because here we are, we’re the bottom of the fucking totem pole. And it’s like- like I said, I just look for him to be okay and accepting of who I am and who I really, really am and know that I’m not here to disappoint him and how that I’m not here to shed any type of darkness to his legacy, you know. I look at him and I find him through my brother. I keep in contact with my brother all the time because when I look at him, I see my dad.

I try to keep in contact with my sister because she’s that—I used my brothers and sisters to contact my dad or as a way of contact to him. My brother mainly for the physicality of my father

‘cause he is a splitting image, so much so it makes me sick that he looks just like my dad. My sister, I go to her for the responsibilities of my father. My older sister, who is also gay, she’s a lesbian -wuh.

Esperanza Santos: [laughs]

Maya Willams: She’s a lesbian. I go to her for the rejection of my father because my father really did not agree with the lifestyle of LGBT because my sister went through it. He would yell at her. Be like, “Go put on some panties. Take them daggone boxers off. Go put on some panties.” You know, and she went through that for me. I didn’t have to go through that, thank God but I look for her for the rejection and even the cooking because Thanksgiving—she cooks like my dad.

Esperanza Santos: Ooh, Thanksgiving is coming up.

Maya Willams: Yeah, but I’m spending it this year with my husband and his family. Oh, God, like I said, my sister, I look for responsibility like my father taught my sister the responsibility of how to take care of a family and he would want his family to be raised even after he was dead. When I look to her I’m like, “Hey, listen,” she’s like, “I work for this.” My sister, she works in human resources. whenever I have questions about jobs and what I’m supposed to do—

Esperanza Santos: She’s got a civil paycheck.

Maya Willams: Exactly and I’m like, “Okay, girl, so how do I go about handling this in the workplace?” She’s like, “Well, this and this is what you have to do in the workplace.” Okay, cool. So, like I said, my brother is just the splitting image. I don’t know, I’m trying to get my thoughts together ‘cause that just kinda coloredd me.

Esperanza Santos: Is it okay if I just reflect so far what we’ve talked about?

Maya Willams: Yeah.

Esperanza Santos: Yeah? I know we started talking about your siblings and your neighborhood and what it was like growing up in church and then we talked a little bit about experiences being molested and then you putting on the red dress and being in your fantasy. You know, how sometimes we hope that we make our family’s spirits proud and we don’t wanna cast darkness on them, but we know their spirit is watching and we hope they accept us.

Maya Willams: Yes.

Esperanza Santos: And Just how your father still lives in your spirit and in your siblings’ spirits.

Maya Willams: He does. I took my fiancée to my father’s grave at the time he was my fiancée, before we got married and he reminds me so much of my dad because my dad was very,

very hard on me. I told him the other day, well, last night actually we had a conversation before bed and I said, “Sometimes I can’t even share with you what makes me happy.” He’s like, “Why you say that? You ain’t have to say that.” I’m like, “No, I did.” I said, “Do you not know” and I literally broke it, I had to break it down to this man. I’m like, “Do you not know what makes me happy about you? You always say I’m sad. You always say I have an attitude. Of course, I have attitude. Of course, I’m sad.”

Well we both, we share hurt with each other because he lost his father too after Vietnam so I tell him, I said, “You know, you have this most humbling way of giving me water, and you have this most humbling way of giving me something to eat and it’s so quirky and kiki and it makes me so happy and it makes me smile when you do that.” He’s like, “Well, you don’t remember,” I’m like, “No, listen. I can’t forget anything that you do. You won’t allow me, same thing with my dad, I can’t forget anything that he’s done for me, even after the fact of him passing away and making sure that I was taken care of after his passing with my mom.” My mom, she got money for us every month to continue on with bills and make sure that I had somewhere to stay. My mom wasn’t really the most responsible person. Not only because, not because she was a bad mother, it was because she had to maintain. She had to put this here and put that there off of one income.

Esperanza Santos: That’s rough.

Maya Willams: Three boys at the time. One household and she had to work. Which is why she gave me the rule of—again, I’m gonna go back to the roles. Now we’re gonna talk about roles. I’m gonna talk about the roles and the aspects of the house and lay those down. A man is supposed to play a man’s role. A woman’s supposed to play a woman’s role. Be a woman, the children are supposed to be the children and that’s how you make a family. The man is supposed to care for the household, go out, work, bring—men that don’t work don’t eat. That’s what they say in scripture. That’s what the Christians teach.

A woman is supposed to—man is the head of the house. A woman’s supposed to be his backbone, his helpmate, help the man when the man falls. That’s how they structured everything. Now it was a different structure for us because we had no man as the head of the house. The only man that we had as the head of our house was my great uncle. My father, he said, “Hey, look, I’m gonna need you to look after the kids.” But He had his own family of his own. He had a wife, he had kids, you know, that he had to care for himself.

Every now and then he would come, and he would—it was one year, well two, maybe three years I had got pneumonia every year, tonsillitis, every year, three years straight and one year he bought me Popeye’s chicken and he thought that that was gonna work. I’m like, “That’s not gonna work.”

Esperanza Santos: The medicine for pneumonia is not Popeye’s chicken.

Maya Willams: Right. I’m like, “What are you thinking, red beans and rice? No, that’s not gonna work.” That’s not gonna work so he did his best with helping us, but one income of a single mother raising three boys is very, very, very, very hard. I wasn’t privileged growing up. I

say privileged in the sense of most of us don't recognize the privileges that we have and I'm saying this in a grateful manner.

Esperanza Santos: This is the reality. This is what we lived.

Maya Williams: Exactly. Exactly. I'm not saying this because I wish. Well, yeah, I'm not saying it because I wish I had a mother and a father to grow up in the household. No. Do I wish I had a—yes. I do wish that, but this is not why I'm saying that. I'm saying that because of the simple fact that I did not grow up privileged. I did not grow up with a mother and a father in the household being able to wear the latest Jordan's or go to downtown areas and shop and look fancy or have the pretty—or be able to come out and be expressive in high school as some parents would encourage their children to do.

I wasn't able to do that. I had to go home. I had to cook. I had to clean. I had to make sure that the dishes was washed before I went to bed. I had to make sure that my little brother was fed. I had to make sure that my mother had something to eat before she went to bed because it was imperative that I was the one that was the role that I was given because my mom was now the head. She went to work, which goes back to the instructions. Five-thirty in the morning there was a knock at my door every morning. Hey, I have this in the kitchen, go put that in the oven, make sure it's cooked. I'll do the rest when I get home. Okay, and then we ate when she got home.

Did I sneak out to go see friends sometimes? Yes, and I was good at it. I was good at it, honey. I'm gonna tell you, in high school, I was 14. I just went to—now mind you I transfer—well, in fact let me go back to my elementary lateral years because I do have some ups to that, although my father placed me in a private school, which was an all-boys school.

Esperanza Santos: Oh, Catholic?

Maya Williams: No. Musician school.

Esperanza Santos: Musician school.

Maya Williams: Right here in the city.

Esperanza Santos: Oh, because you're the singer.

Maya Williams: Exactly. Right here in the city of Newark. I attended a all boy's chorus school, which is located at 1016 Broad Street.

Esperanza Santos: You know your stuff.

Maya Williams: In Newark and I went there from the fourth grade and they allowed me to pass through all the way to the eighth grade.

Esperanza Santos: Okay.

Maya Willams: Although my mother did need help, I had sponsors although my mother did need help paying tuition. They allowed me to pass through.

Esperanza Santos: Gorgeous.

Maya Willams: I got the experience of going overseas in the seventh grade. That was my first experience at going overseas. We were the choir that went to Russia. I went to St. Petersburg, Russia. I went to Helsinki; Finland and I went to Riga Latvia. We did I think it was a month tour. We sung for different various cities and across seas. So I was very, very excited about that, very, very excited. I had my first passport in the seventh grade.

Esperanza Santos: Already visiting three countries.

Maya Willams: Yeah, already visited three countries and that was the blessing part of it. Later on in life, in high school, I ended up transferring from private school to public school, which is a hard transition. My God, that's a hard transition. Because now I have to meet new friends and now, I'm co-ed. There's boys and girls.

Esperanza Santos: Oh, okay.

Maya Willams: Now this is where the gender sexuality comes in.

Esperanza Santos: Do you know which school you went to for high school?

Maya Willams: Yes, I do. I have a very, very vague memory. I know. I went to the west side ninth grade success academy. That's when—

Esperanza Santos: Where is that at?

Maya Willams: That was 301 West Kinney Street.

Esperanza Santos: How do you know—you have really good memory.

Maya Willams: I do. I do, 301 West Kinney Street. It's still there. They're now a vocational high school. I entered in the very first day in the gymnasium and I sat there. I was up against the wall and I met this one girl. Her name was Ebony McCloud. Ebony McCloud was my friend. Ebony, she was fun. She got me knowing how to be a little bit more free. I wasn't so uptight. I was smart because I knew that mom got home every day no later than 5:30 but I knew I had to make it home by 5:00, no later.

After school, school had let around 2:40 and I had to go pick up my little brother from down the street at the babysitter's house. What I would do is I would go hang out with Ebony. After hanging out with Ebony, I would leave Ebony's house around 4:30 and get on the bus. I got on the one bus and it took me all the way up, I would get off and I'd walk the back roads to pick up my little brother and we'd be in the house by 5:00, have all of our homework laid out, made sure our homework was done before mom got home because mom is coming home between 5 and

5:30. Already had the food in the oven ready and prepared and she'd be like, "I'd thought you'd be done by now." I'd be like, "Listen, I came home late. I stayed after school." Like that. She'd be like, "Okay."

That's when I started getting into the coed aspect everything. I met this one girl; her name was Bonnie. Decided that I wanted to try to talk to Bonnie but I'm like that's not gonna work. It's just not gonna do it. Then after that I ended up transferring to another school.

Esperanza Santos: Why?

Maya Willams: Well, again, all three boys and my mom having to go to work and rent to take care of three boys by herself. You know she had to find something more affordable.

Esperanza Santos: That's heavy.

Maya Willams: She had to find something more affordable, so we end up moving downstairs from one of the mothers of the church that we continued to go to after my father passed away. He was the presiding elder, but we still decided to go even after he passed, and they had appointed a new pastor. So we still decided to go so we moved downstairs from the mother at the church. She had a house over on Maple Avenue and it still stands, 74 Maple Avenue. My mom said, "You have to go to a new school." I'm like, "Mom, I don't wanna go to a new school. now I have to—I just transferred from a private school to a public school and now I'm meeting friends at this public school and now I'm gonna go to this school." My mom in her mind knew, she was like, "You can't go to that school because that school is not good for you."

Esperanza Santos: Oh.

Maya Willams: This is in her mind. She never said this, but this is what I evaluated.

Esperanza Santos: Okay, okay, okay.

Maya Willams: As years came by because my brother went to the same school and my brother went to the school that I was getting ready to transfer to after going to the Success Academy, but my brother was going through psychological issues because his class literally stood right next to the graveyard which my father was buried in.

Esperanza Santos: Oh, no.

Maya Willams: Yeah. So he would go into panic attacks and he would have panic attacks and he would have very bad anxiety.

Esperanza Santos: Yeah!

Maya Willams: My mom transferred him to another school. She had to transfer him. She transferred him to Newark vocational—

Esperanza Santos: Dang, your mom. She's handling a lot.

Maya Willams: Right. She transferred to another vocational high school and he end up graduating from North Tech down here at Essex County Vocational High School. I end up going to Weequahic High School and going there. That's where I got the best experiences of my life.

Esperanza Santos: Yeah?

Maya Willams: Mm-hmm. I started meeting people. It started feeling more like a family because of the simple fact that I didn't have to move all the time. I even 'til this day still see my Indian family. We're the Weequahic Indians. I still see my Indian family to this day. A lot of people know me, and I made a reputation. Jeremiah actually made a reputation as the voice of Weequahic.

Esperanza Santos: Oh?

Maya Willams: I ended up becoming the voice.

Esperanza Santos: What's that? Is that a thing?

Maya Willams: It is. If you were to ask anyone who went to Weequahic High School in between the years of 2002 to 2008, or even beyond, maybe to 2010 'cause that's four years after I graduated 'cause they was freshman. All the way to 2010 they knew me as the voice of Weequahic. Our illustrious Mayor Ras Baraka was the vice principal at the time.

Esperanza Santos: What?

Maya Willams: Yes.

Esperanza Santos: Okay.

Maya Willams: He was the vice principal at the time, and he gave me a job. He gave me the job of making the morning announcements in the morning and in the afternoon.

Esperanza Santos: Oh.

Maya Willams: I think he gave it to me my junior year. I actually had two jobs within the high school. I sung the National Anthem for the basketball games and the football games.

Esperanza Santos: Look at you.

Maya Willams: Yeah. I sung the National Anthem for them every football game and I got paid \$30.00 a game.

Esperanza Santos: Hey.

Maya Willams: Yeah, back then, \$30.00 is some money. That's where my mother started teaching me money management 'cause then I opened up a bank account and she got another check in the mail and she was like, "What you gonna do with that?" I bought me a cell phone. I had my first cell phone at 16. I had bought me a Boost Mobile cell phone. I was putting minutes on it, everything. Girl, I was just talking it up. Had bought ringtones, all that. I was just trying to stay current.

Esperanza Santos: You were just trying to be cute; you know.

Maya Willams: I was trying to be all I could be, honey. I became the voice. Every morning my introduction was good morning Weequahic High School. Yes, yes, yes, this is the voice of Weequahic with your morning announcements. Everybody knew that voice. They be like [groans]. Everybody knew that voice; everyone. In knowing that, I build a reputation, a good reputation to build rapps with different people. The senior class president didn't like me for whatever reason. She was head of the cheerleading squad and she was the president of the student council, but you know, whatever reason that she had her things, I ended up becoming president of the middle state's committee, in which we provided—well, we did a number of surveys for the middle state's community.

Middle states community was the community that came to what is the word I'm looking for, oh, my gosh. Basically, see how the public-school system is ran and keep it—what is that word I'm looking for? It's gonna come to me. They basically give that validation for the school to keep running.

Esperanza Santos: Either keep going or shut down?

Maya Willams: Yeah, exactly. They do that. We built surveys and each class had a survey that they had to do and we had to take the committee—the committee had to do the survey and when we did the survey, we micromanaged the survey into what needed to be improved, what needed to be not done or what do we think was satisfactory and moved on from there. Then I did my first big presentation before the Newark board of education where they had a big middle state's dinner. I had to present a speech with the middle state's president, which was Miss Evonne Blake, who was a physical education administrator at that time. I've always been prone to that leadership aspect where I was in the forefront. Graduating high school- in high school actually I started traveling again and singing again. I met my brother, again, my brother ended up being a musician and he ended up meeting—

Esperanza Santos: How much older is he or younger than you is he?

Maya Willams: He's four years older than me. My brother is four years older than me. We have the same father and mother. He end up allowing me to meet a most famous, one of the most famous people that I could've ever met in my life and still he's in my life to this day as we speak. He's my godfather. His name is Joshua Nelson. Joshua Nelson is a Black African-American Jewish man, orthodox Jewish man who emulates the late, great Mahalia Jackson and he came to the house. I was about maybe 16 I would say.

He pulled up, he had needed some singers to go sing with him at this event on a golf course and he said, “I need a singer. I need a singer.” He was telling our brother, “I need a singer. I need a singer.” My brother said, “Okay, I got one for you. I got one.” He came home. He said, “Can you sing? Can you still sing?” I said, “Yeah. I take chorus. What do you mean can I still sing? Yeah I can still sing.” Course me being smart. He was like, “Okay.” Joshua then brings me—he pulls up in a 1968 aqua Chevrolet Corvair with the top down and he’s in all white.

Esperanza Santos: Ooh.

Maya Willams: Yes. I’m sitting out here like who is this damn man pulling up in front of this house like this? He was like, “Hey, I’m Joshua.” I’m like, “Hello, how are you?” Okay. Yeah, you a little bit too happy for me. He pulls up. Mind you I came out and Joshua saw this in me. He saw already the woman in me before he saw anything else. He said, “Who is this big breasted—” he asked my brother, he said, “Who is that big breasted woman sitting outside on your porch with wet feet like that?”

He said, “That’s my brother.” He was like, “Oh, I’m sorry.” It was funny ‘cause then he came to me. He gave me a CD. He said, “Here’s a CD. I need you to take this and I need you to learn this in a week.” I said, “Okay.” I learned it in a week, and he gave me a job.

Esperanza Santos: Oh.

Maya Willams: I sung with him. I still sing with him to this day. I am now 31 years old and that was when I was 16. Over 15 years I have been singing with the illustrious Joshua Nelson. I have traveled to Spain three times in tours with this man. I have done tours in Sweden. I have done tours in England. I’ve done tours in Italy. I’ve done tours in France, singing Jewish music. So I do understand Hebrew and I know Hebrew.

Esperanza Santos: Check you out.

Maya Willams: Yeah, yeah. People don’t think I’m a smart trans girl but I am. So I got to do that tour. I ended up graduating, like I said, from Weequahic High School in the year 2006 at the top 20 percentile in my class. I got into three different colleges after I applied, just for myself. I applied on myself. I said, “Hey, listen, I think I’m gonna go to college. I wanna continue on education in school. I wanna continue to go.” So I did. I put my foot down to the ground. I filled out my own FAFSAs, I signed my mother’s names.

I did everything myself and not realizing that it takes a village. Not realizing that I couldn’t do it myself. I can’t do it myself all the time. It really actually takes a village. I went to college. I attended Essex County College under a music major for a year and a half and eventually it became a little bit too much because I started working. In that moment it’s like hey, listen, I have bills.

Esperanza Santos: Those are two big commitments.

Maya Willams: I have responsibilities. I have to choose one. I chose to work.

Esperanza Santos: It's like am I gonna learn or am I gonna eat?

Maya Willams: Right.

Esperanza Santos: I'm gonna eat.

Maya Willams: I'm gonna eat, honey. I was a big bitch back in the day. Excuse my French.

Esperanza Santos: You think so?

Maya Willams: I had to eat. I had to eat. I ended up taking a job at Wendy's. That was my very, very, very first job straight outta high school. I had to get working papers and everything back then. Back then they wouldn't let you work without working papers and I was still—

Esperanza Santos: What's a working paper?

Maya Willams: Oh, you don't know? Girl. Newark had a system where you could do a work study. You was able to go to work after school hours, but you could not work a certain amount of hours because you were still in school.

Esperanza Santos: Oh, so that way they make sure you don't just drop out and get a job.

Maya Willams: Exactly. Exactly. They were basically monitoring exactly how—I mean sometimes, that system back then was a little bit—it was a little bit, it's way different from what it is now because schooling now is so much more structured than it was back then.

Esperanza Santos: In Newark.

Maya Willams: Yeah. In Newark it's way more structured now than it is back then because back then you had liberty. You could work. You could go to school. You can do all of these things. Now it's like hey, listen, you need to go to school and it's more chartered. We didn't have as many charter schools back then as we do now, and elite schools now than we did back then. I worked at Wendy's. My starting salary was \$7.25 an hour. I said, "Okay." I used to treat Wendy's like shit. I'm like, "Listen, I'm not coming to work today." My sister said, "I wish I could talk to my damn job like that." I was like I'm not going to work today. I'm going to school. I'm doing this and I'm doing that. She was like, "Okay, go ahead." At that time, she was pregnant with my very first nephew.

Esperanza Santos: Oh, how old is she?

Maya Willams: My sister is—

Esperanza Santos: How much older is she than you?

Maya Willams: She's eight years older than I am.

Esperanza Santos: Okay, so when you were 18, she was 26.

Maya Willams: Mm-hmm. She was like, "I wish I had that mentality," and she was pregnant with her first child. She had actually, no, this is her third child. She was pregnant with twins, but she miscarried. She then got pregnant again and she was able to carry him full term. So I worked there and I went to school. I ended up stop working at Wendy's and going to school full time.

Esperanza Santos: At Essex County in—

Maya Willams: Yes.

Esperanza Santos: You had to get working papers as a college student?

Maya Willams: No, no, no, I had to get working papers as a high school student.

Esperanza Santos: As a high school student.

Maya Willams: Because I was still 17 years old. I was 17. After graduating high school and my birthday didn't come up yet, and they wanted to hire me right away, so in order for me to work I had to get those working papers signed or wait until I had turned 18 and I didn't really wanna wait.

Esperanza Santos: Yeah, it's the space between graduating high school and turning 18 and you're like, I need working papers for what? I'm just trying to—

Maya Willams: I was so mad about that damn thing. I don't even want working papers 'cause I feel as though I was ready to work.

Esperanza Santos: I was a homemaker but growing up. I know what it's like.

Maya Willams: Exactly. Exactly. It was a lot like all of these things were transitional parts and I believe is what makes my story so great and what makes me as a trans person of color so great. I went to, when I was 18, I lived with my mom and we had just moved. We moved from the Weequahic section back across town. I had turned 18.

Esperanza Santos: Across town where?

Maya Willams: Literally in back of the cemetery where my father was passed.

Esperanza Santos: Oh, no. Was it cheaper there or something?

Maya Willams: Yeah, it was.

Esperanza Santos: Okay.

Maya Willams: It was, and it was a full house. My mom had the first floor. At the time she moved in, it was a smaller apartment.

Esperanza Santos: How old were you when this was happening?

Maya Willams: I was around 18 or 19. That's when I decided that I wanted to be me.

Esperanza Santos: Ooh.

Maya Willams: I walked outside in a dress and my mom, well, literally I believe no, I came out after that because my mom ended up kicking me out for whatever reason. We got into a argument about me going to the same church that she wanted me to go to and she was like, "Well, listen, it's my house, my rules and if you don't wanna abide by that then you can leave." I'm like, "Well, I'm out. I'm gone."

Esperanza Santos: Wait, because you were both going to the same church or you were both going to the same church and you being out?

Maya Willams: No, we were both going to different churches, but I wanted to separate from her church because the church that we were currently in had pushed her out. When they pushed her out—

Esperanza Santos: Wait, why did they push her out?

Maya Willams: Because my mother had a baby out of wedlock after my father, well during my father's—

Esperanza Santos: Hence, your baby brother.

Maya Willams: Yes.

Esperanza Santos: Okay.

Maya Willams: So They end up pushing her out of the church and she ended up finding a new church that was way more welcoming.

Esperanza Santos: What was the first church again?

Maya Willams: Church of the Living God.

Esperanza Santos: The second church is?

Maya Willams: Newborn Holiness Church.

Esperanza Santos: Newborn Holiness Church, okay.

Maya Willams: She ended up going to that church and becoming a member, but I was not ready to leave that foundation.

Esperanza Santos: That first one.

Maya Willams: Right. Because I felt even now at that moment, in that moment that was the foundation that kept me close to my father. I kinda felt that. I wasn't ready to let that go so in moving forward, I ended up getting kicked out and I ended up moving with my sister, which hence the job.

Esperanza Santos: The 26-year-old.

Maya Willams: Right, which hence the job Wendy's.

Esperanza Santos: Oh, that's why you needed to feed yourself.

Maya Willams: That's why I needed to feed myself 'cause now with her, she has a child now and there ain't no free rides anymore.

Esperanza Santos: You're gonna live here you're gonna work.

Maya Willams: Right. I got, she gave my first car to get back and forth to where she said, "Listen, it's not much, but you can have it. It gets you back and forth to work, you do whatever you want." That's when I got freedom. My first car was a Dodge, 1998 Dodge neon red. I was out here. When I say I was out here girl, I was out here in the streets. I'm going to work. I'm making me a little coin. I'm keeping gas—but I did not know the responsibility of a car.

Esperanza Santos: Wait, can we pause for one second?

Maya Willams: Yeah.

Esperanza Santos: We're just at about a little over an hour. If you'd like we can schedule another interview.

Maya Willams: Okay.

Esperanza Santos: Just so that I wanna make sure I'm respecting your time.

Maya Willams: It's okay. It's okay, yeah.

Esperanza Santos: Does that sound okay?

Maya Willams: That's okay. Yeah, we can do that.

Esperanza Santos: Okay. I think just can I just ask you a few questions and then we'll wrap up?

Maya Willams: Yeah.

Esperanza Santos: Yeah? Then our point, next time we interview our starting point will be about this neon red Dodge.

Maya Willams: Okay.

Esperanza Santos: Okay? If you're comfortable sharing, how did your father pass away?

Maya Willams: The point of me being here is because my father passed away and my father did pass away due to the AIDS epidemic. My father was an injective drug user in which he injected drugs, but he shared needles. Back then we did not have the accesses to resources that we have now so being that we did not access to those resources, he unfortunately got the wrong needle. Us not knowing about that epidemic, I just went along with it. That's what my mom, she just said, "Daddy died from AIDS," and that was it. Me being the person, the inquisitive person that I am, I dove a little bit deeper into it to understand that this was something that we needed to fight.

This is why I sit in the position that I sit in. this is one of the reasons why I'm here in this epidemic to fight and to keep the momentum going and to save lives and to continue to let people know that we don't have to lose any more lives. We don't. We don't have to lose any more lives. The resources that we have are totally made available to everyone. That's how he passed away.

Esperanza Santos: Okay. My second question is I think folks who aren't in the LGBT community or in the trans community or spiritually connected or whatever the case may be, may not understand how we feel about the spirits that watch us. I think that's something that some people miss. If there was something that you would wanna say to your daddy's spirit, what would you want his spirit to listen to?

Maya Willams: I hope you're proud of me. I hope you see me and, in this journey, before I meet you get to know me. It's one thing to—and I'm not gonna hold this one long, but I just have to say this. It's one thing where you kinda meet someone that you don't know. You can meet someone that you don't know by reading their biography. I didn't know you before today, but in phone conversations you know the energy was there and it's the same thing.

Hey, I feel you here. I feel him sometimes in my presence. He comes to me in dreams every now and then and he warns me. He tells me to watch out. Look out for certain things. Be careful and I just want him to know that I hear him, I feel him, I see him and thank you.

Esperanza Santos: Yeah.

Maya Willams: Oh my God, I wasn't supposed to cry today.

Esperanza Santos: It's okay to cry.

Maya Williams: It wasn't on the agenda.

Esperanza Santos: Those are for Fridays.

Maya Williams: Yeah, crying is at 3:47. It's 3:46.

Esperanza Santos: All right Baby. So again, today is October 28, 2019. My name is Esperanza Santos and I'm interviewing Maya Williams at the African American Office of Gay Concerns for the Queer Newark Oral History Project.

[End of Audio]