

**Queer Newark Oral History Project**

**Interviewee:** Sharon Denise Davis

**Interviewer:** Kristyn Scorsone

**Date:** March 15, 2022

**Location:** By Zoom

*Kristyn Scorsone:* Today is March 15, 2022. My name is Kristyn Scorsone, and I'm interviewing Sharon Denise Davis for the Queer Newark Oral History Project. This interview is happening over Zoom. Thank you, again, Sharon, for doing this.

*Sharon Denise Davis:* No problem.

*Kristyn Scorsone:* Thank you for sharing your history with us. The first question is very simple. When and where were you born?

*Sharon Denise Davis:* All right. I was born in Brooklyn, New York. Yes, I will give my—I don't have a problem—1967, December 10, 1967. I'm a winter baby. Yes, Brooklyn, New York.

*Kristyn Scorsone:* Awesome. Who raised you?

*Sharon Denise Davis:* My mother and my father.

*Kristyn Scorsone:* Do you have any siblings?

*Sharon Denise Davis:* I have. I am one of eight.

*Kristyn Scorsone:* Wow.

*Sharon Denise Davis:* I have four sisters and three brothers.

*Kristyn Scorsone:* Where are you in that? Are you the older or the baby?

*Sharon Denise Davis:* Middle girl.

*Kristyn Scorsone:* Nice. Do you remember, I guess—what kinda child were you? I'm just curious.

*Sharon Denise Davis:* Wow. My first memory, as far as being a kid—and my partner will always say something about the—was I remember the holidays. I remember, maybe, I was two or three and sitting in a playpen and watching my dad prepare Thanksgiving Day dinner. It was so cool. I remember looking over and watching him, you know, standing up, watching him. He's saying, "Oh, there's my big brown-eyed baby."

*[Laughter]*

*Kristyn Scorsone:* Aw.

*Sharon Denise Davis:* That's as far as I can go back. That was really cool. I love the holidays.

*Kristyn Scorsone:* Yeah. You really close with your family?

*Sharon Denise Davis:* Yes, very close. Yeah, I'm very close with my siblings and my father—my father just passed away. I was very close to my dad. I was also very close to my mother too.

*Kristyn Scorsone:* Yeah, I'm sorry about your dad, by the way. Do you remember like, um—Did you live in the same place when you were growing up, or did you move around a lot?

*Sharon Denise Davis:* Let me see. Growing up, I remember us living in two different locations, but they were both in Brooklyn. When I was young, real little, we lived in—both were in East New York, Brooklyn, but one was at a different address. I recall the address: 863 Jersey Avenue, out of all places. Then, we moved over to 138 Fountain Avenue. That's throughout my childhood into my teens, those two addresses. Great times.

*Kristyn Scorsone:* Did you go to public school or private?

*Sharon Denise Davis:* I went to public school. My public school, PS159 in Brooklyn in junior high. Public school in junior high. Yeah.

*Kristyn Scorsone:* What did your parents do for a living?

*Sharon Denise Davis:* My mother was a homemaker. She stayed at home to raise us. My father was a machine operator for Coca-Cola Bottling Company, Upstate New York [*crosstalk and audio cuts out 00:09:25*]—

*Kristyn Scorsone:* Oh, [*crosstalk and audio cuts out*]—

*Sharon Denise Davis:* - New York. He commuted every day, Monday through Friday, early in the morning, Upstate New York to—

*Kristyn Scorsone:* Wow.

*Sharon Denise Davis:* Yeah, for a long time.

*Kristyn Scorsone:* When he did that, was he part of the union at all or anything like that?

*Sharon Denise Davis:* Oh, yeah. Well, he wasn't a union rep, but he was part of the union. Yeah, he was a union member.

*Kristyn Scorsone:* That's cool.

*Sharon Denise Davis:* He had strong feelings about unions.

*Kristyn Scorsone:* Oh, how so? What did he think about them?

*Sharon Denise Davis:* Oh, he had respect for the unions. Her felt like, I guess, in his time working for that company, they were there for him. It was a really good—you know what? When I think about it, I can't remember my pops ever coming home saying he had a bad day or a bad experience at his job or with his coworkers or anything, which it amazed me because—wow. He had a very strong sense of what a union was and how they functioned. He actually instilled that in me too. He was the only one I could talk to about my union issues, which was really cool. He understood.

*Kristyn Scorsone:* That's really cool.

*Sharon Denise Davis:* “Well, you got your union. Speak to your union rep. Blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, Yeah, yeah, yeah.”

*Kristyn Scorsone:* That makes me wonder, what other values did your parents instill in you?

*Sharon Denise Davis:* My family, wow. Definitely, the structure of the family and the family unit and us sticking with each other, helping each other. My mother was a Seventh-day Adventist. She never, though, pushed her religious beliefs on us, the children. But, she always used to say the family that prays together stays together. We always had a very strong sense of family values.

When my mother passed away, my sister pretty much took on the role of the head of the family. As far as what my mother would do, my sister took that burden on to keep the family together, and it works. It works. It really does because we have a very strong love for each other—very strong. That was instilled in us through my parents.

*Kristyn Scorsone:* Do you remember any pivotal turning points as a kid?

*Sharon Denise Davis:* Ooh. Turning points.

*Kristyn Scorsone:* If not, it's okay.

*Sharon Denise Davis:* Wow. Turning points. Well, as a kid, I do remember—it has nothing to do with my parents or—I remember, for me, the first time I knew I was interested in women.

*Kristyn Scorsone:* Yeah, so how would you identify?

*Sharon Denise Davis:* Oh, butch.

*Kristyn Scorsone:* Okay, butch. Butch lesbian?

*Sharon Denise Davis:* Butch lesbian, yes. I remember the first time—I think I was about 11, 10 or 11. Strolling through my neighborhood on my way home from school, I saw this woman, and she was just like, “Wow.” It wasn't a sexual thing—not like that. It was just more of like, “Wow.” I was really fascinated by her. I just wanted to be around her. I said, “Woah. That's pretty strong.” I couldn't wait to see her again. I saw her, again, walking through the neighborhood, and I saw her, again—every time I would see her, it was like, “Wow. Amazing.”

*Kristyn Scorsone:* How old do you think she—or what did she look like?

*Sharon Denise Davis:* Oh, she was probably 20, early 20s—something like that. Yeah, I remember that very vividly.

*Kristyn Scorsone:* Did you say anything to anybody or just keep it to yourself?

*Sharon Denise Davis:* I kept it to myself. I kept that to myself. It's funny because I didn't really act on what I was feeling until later in my teens. I don't know if it's because my life was busy because I was doing other things and not really, you know, have the time to mesmerize or just whatever. It wasn't until later on when I really began to hang out. That's when everything kind of like, you know, surfaced and I began to act on who I knew I was.

*Kristyn Scorsone:* Yeah. When you had that experience at a younger age, did you feel like, “Oh, this is wrong,” or did you just not have any sense of like if it had morality to it or whatever?

*Sharon Denise Davis:* Actually, no, I didn't. I didn't feel like it was wrong. The funny thing is, because my mother was a Seventh-day Adventist and the whole church thing and stuff like that, I didn't feel like it was wrong in no kind of way. I felt almost like it was natural, like it

was just me because I've always been a tomboy growing up. It was just natural, felt natural.

*Kristyn Scorsone:* Yeah. What are your pronouns, by the way?

*Sharon Denise Davis:* As in describing myself?

*Kristyn Scorsone:* Yeah.

*Sharon Denise Davis:* Well, I would say she.

*Kristyn Scorsone:* She/her, okay. You said, in your teens, then you started to act on it. How did you become aware of other queer people, LGBTQ-plus people, and how did you come to act on it?

*Sharon Denise Davis:* Just hanging out.

*Kristyn Scorsone:* This is still in Brooklyn?

*Sharon Denise Davis:* Still in Brooklyn. Yeah, still in Brooklyn, hanging out like at, I would say—back in those days—and it's funny because I hung out with straight, gay—it didn't matter. I hung out with everybody, but the funny thing was, though—and now, when I really think about it, I hung out with—let's say, one night, I'm hanging out with my straight friends. Another, I'm hanging out with my gay friends. It was quite an experience because my gay friends were older. They were in their 20s and 30s and stuff like that. Here I am, I was the baby. I was probably 17 or 18, and I was hanging out and around these people who were much older than me.

I saw a whole different lifestyle, but in a very respectful and caring way because they took me under their wing because there were other things going on. I was also involved in like the music scene. That was involved in it too. As a matter of fact, my closest friend, back then, she was much older, and her name was Sharon. Now, I'm getting to why I prefer Denise.

Her name is Sharon, and she was really my mentor. Wow. She was like big sister, my mentor. She brought me around that lifestyle, but around a lot of people who were very, like I said, caring, respectful, cool. She introduced me to it in a really lovely way, lovely way. She passed away, a few years ago, in the middle of having a heart transplant. What she did for me growing up, I'll never forget. I'll never forget that.

*Kristyn Scorsone:* That's awesome. When you said you were also part of the music scene, what do you mean by that? Were you in a band or going to clubs?

*Sharon Denise Davis:* Oh, growing up in Brooklyn, where I lived, in East New York, I was in the hip-hop scene and hip-hop music, rap music. I was actually managed by one of the groups that were out that were very popular back then called Stetsasonic. One of the members of the group was my manager. I was part of a duo.

*Kristyn Scorsone:* That's so cool.

*Sharon Denise Davis:* [*Crosstalk and audio cuts out*] duo.

*Kristyn Scorsone:* Wow.

*Sharon Denise Davis:* Yeah, so I met quite a few people, growing up, bein' in that scene, doing shows, and things like that and going into recording studios with these folks and stuff like that. At the age of 14, I would've went on a tour with a band, but me, personally, I was like, I said, "I don't think I can do this at this age."

*Kristyn Scorsone:* Wow.

*Sharon Denise Davis:* I was [*crosstalk*] do it. I was offered to be a part of this band, which it was actually my god brother's band and tour with them, but I felt like I was too young for that at the time. That's before the hip-hop thing. Oh, I have no regrets from none of it though. It was quite a run. A lotta fun. Met a lotta good people. I learned a lot too.

I learned a lot about the music industry and the pitfalls and things like that because I was blessed, though, at the time, with a manager in a group that not only they were doing their thing and trying to put you on out there too, but they were actually really intelligent men who wanted to educate you on the industry, to be aware of what's going on. They didn't want us to be comin' in blind. It's funny because we used to actually read books about the industry. He would give us a book. He'd say, "Hey, read this. Da, da, da, da, da, da, da." His wife was really, really sweet too. It was cool.

*Kristyn Scorsone:* That's really cool. Just to triangulate this, you're in your teens. Is this the '80s?

*Sharon Denise Davis:* This is the '80s. There's a lot going on in the '80s.

[*Laughter*]

*Kristyn Scorsone:* Excuse my squeaky voice. Is that how you knew—’cause, to me, that’s surprising that you would know so many gay people as a young person. Is that how you knew a lotta gay people, or were these gay people at your high school as well?

*Sharon Denise Davis:* My high school, no, not at all. I went to Erasmus Hall High School in Brooklyn on Flatbush Avenue. It’s the oldest school, actually—one of the oldest schools in the nation—from 1786, I believe. And that school actually—the funny thing, it was the Academy of Arts back then. What’s the other one in New York? Performing Arts where the show Fame derived from, the performing arts school. Then, you have Fiorello LaGuardia. That was another school back in those days. We had all these performing arts schools, and I went to one.

It was actually for—I went there, though, for—it was for singing. I went there for that, but I did other things. High school, high school was ... I was pretty quiet in high school because I had other things going on outside of high school. I was *[audio cuts out]* quiet. Had some good friends in there though—good friends that I grew up with. That one had nothing to do with the other. In all due honesty, I can’t remember meeting not one—no. Correction, my classmate, he was gay, but he wasn’t open.

*Kristyn Scorsone:* Okay. Were you not open as well? Were you quiet about it?

*Sharon Denise Davis:* No.

*Kristyn Scorsone:* How did you get involved in the music scene, being quiet?

*Sharon Denise Davis:* That was in high school. Outside of the school, it was a whole other story.

*[Laughter]*

*Sharon Denise Davis:* Because where I lived, my neighborhood, back in those days, it was very—the neighborhood people, the community was very close, close-knit community. We had things like block parties and community center events, like showcases and things like that. Also, my brother, my best friend—I don’t know. I probably knew four—they all had DJ equipment. They all had it. There would be a party here, a party there. I’m pretty sure it was like that here in Newark. At the drop of a hat, any one of us would say, “Oh, party’s at my house tonight,” and the music is there. Like I said, we did block parties because I was rapping and all this stuff. At that time,

my brother was actually one of my DJs, him and his best friend. We used to go around and do block parties all over Brooklyn and whatever for people. If they have a block party and they need music, they would ask us if we wanted to play for their block party. That's really how it started, to tell you the truth. That's really how it started because I would sit down with my brother's friends, who were my friends too, and we would write rhymes.

*Kristyn Scorsone:* Did you ever rap about your identity or no?

*Sharon Denise Davis:* No, I didn't. It's funny because, then, I wasn't even really—like I said, I wasn't even really thinking about it and acting on it 'cause I think I was just too much involved in all of the other things that were going on as far as music and doing shows here and then, like I said, coming in contact with these people who were making an album, and they wanted to put me on and all this other stuff. I was doin' all those other things. It wasn't until, like I said, later on—oh, when I got a real job.

*[Laughter]*

*Sharon Denise Davis:* When I had to get a real job, that's when I began to—me and my straight friends, actually, we used to go and hang out at some of the clubs in Manhattan in the city and everything—The Octagon, Meow Mix—whatever. We were out there. Prior to that, I was just in my little world with the music thing and stuff like that, you know. Like I said, a real job will open you up to other things because you're out there. You're meeting more people. That's what it is. You're meeting different people. I was in the city more. The city can change you. The city can bring a lot out of you.

*Kristyn Scorsone:* What was the real job?

*Sharon Denise Davis:* Huh?

*Kristyn Scorsone:* What was the real job?

*Sharon Denise Davis:* Oh, the real job was I was working for the post office. Yep, I was working for the post office.

*Kristyn Scorsone:* You get a job at the post office, and is that how—when did you start dating other women?

*Sharon Denise Davis:* Oh, wow. When? Ooh. Wow. I'm telling you, it probably wasn't until late 20 something? Yeah, probably so. Probably in my 20s



'cause I—and you know what? It's funny. If this one was here, she would have something to say about—

[Laughter]

*Sharon Denise Davis:* I wasn't even ... I never really thought about serious relationships. I just like meeting people. Yeah, that's strange.

*Kristyn Scorsone:* Did you have to have a—once you started dating and stuff like that, did you have to have a coming out with your family or the people around you?

*Sharon Denise Davis:* Actually, no, I didn't. You know what was really cool about that? My mother and my father, they were just so welcoming and loving with anyone I was with. That person became their daughter or family. It was a beautiful experience with my mother and my father and my mates—really, really beautiful. I wish Noelle would've met my mother 'cause my mother would've loved her. She would've loved her. Oh my god. I didn't have to, and that's probably because they knew. I don't know. They probably knew. Even with my siblings—same thing—I didn't have to.

*Kristyn Scorsone:* That's awesome. How did you find your way to Newark?

*Sharon Denise Davis:* Let's see. My younger sister, she used to live out here in Newark years ago—and in Jersey City at one time. She lived out here in Newark—actually right off Springfield—back years ago. I knew about Newark a long time ago. What brought me out here was, when I first moved out to New Jersey, I lived in Edison, and I was working in Manhattan in the Chelsea area. I said, “Oh, no. No, I can't. This is too much out here. I can't do this thing out here.” There was nothing.

It was strange because I went from living in Brooklyn with all of the hustle, bustle, and this and that and everything around you. It was just a stone's throw away to, now, I'm living out in Edison, which like was a 360. Also, the other thing that—I think another thing that brought me out to Newark—or let's say on this side—is my mother fell ill, and I wanted to be closer to my family, you know. I said, “No, I can't do Edison. I need to be almost right here. I can just [audio cuts out] in the tunnel and I'm in New York.”

*Kristyn Scorsone:* Right. Why did you move from Brooklyn to Edison?

*Sharon Denise Davis:* My girlfriend, at the time, lived in Edison. She lived in Edison, and so I moved out there with her. My mother fell ill, and we spoke

about coming closer. Actually, we were in Newark on Custer. When I first moved to Newark, I lived on Custer Street. I think it's Custer Street.

*Kristyn Scorsone:* What year was that, about?

*Sharon Denise Davis:* 2000 and ... Wow. Hold it. That had to be 2006? Yeah, 2006, I think.

*Kristyn Scorsone:* What were your first impressions of Newark?

*Sharon Denise Davis:* Well, over there, my first—well, you see, that wasn't my first impression.

[Laughter]

*Sharon Denise Davis:* My sister used to live out here, and we would come out this way. Newark ... Newark was ... Newark was Newark. To me, Newark was no different from parts of Brooklyn I lived in. Actually, the funny thing is, on my job—and I'm gonna go into my job for a hot second here. I'm around a lot of people, passengers, and all of that. I hear conversations and whatever.

*Kristyn Scorsone:* For New Jersey Transit, right?

*Sharon Denise Davis:* Yes. I hear people say—they come out to Newark to, let's say, The Prudential to watch a concert or a hockey game or whatever, but you don't spend real time besides coming out to Newark for other things that Newark has to offer. I think, much like Brooklyn and other places like Newark, there are misconceptions about what these places are about. You need to explore them more than just listen to their hearsay. You need to just really take the time out and say, "You know what, let me go in this sight and see what Newark has to offer."

Me coming out to Newark was nothing. Like I said, it's no different from where I came from. In all due honesty, where I came from in Brooklyn was a lot rougher than here in Newark or what people think about Newark. I've seen a lot of things, growing up in Brooklyn and East New York, that most people only hear about or read in the newspaper.

I've actually stood right there and witnessed these things because, remember, I grew up in the '80s. I grew up during the crack epidemic. So I've seen a lot. I've seen a lot of people go down because of crack cocaine, crime. This is a walk in the park for me.

It's a walk in the park, and it's actually—from where my old neighborhood in Brooklyn—I didn't have this a stone's throw away—I didn't have a museum a stone's throw away. I didn't have a Prudential Center like that a stone's throw away. I didn't have these things. This, to me, is beautiful. I had to do a little traveling to get to places like the museum, like the Brooklyn Museum. But I had to hop on trains and stuff like that.

*Kristyn Scorsone:* Totally. You are here with your girlfriend in 2006. What did you two do? Did you hang out in any LGBTQ-plus spaces, at the time, in Newark? What did you do for fun? Where'd you hang?

*Sharon Denise Davis:* Wow. You know what? She was older than me, maybe, by—it's funny—10 years or something like that older than me. We actually didn't do a lot of hanging out in Newark and stuff like that. She had a lot of friends that were like couples, married—older couples. You see where I'm going with this?

We did a lot of like couples things. It was a lotta fun though. We went to plays in the city, and we had events at home where invite everyone over and stuff like that. We didn't venture out too much into Newark. When I really think about it, we didn't venture out too much into Newark. I remember, though, at one point, living right around the corner from Bragman's, and that was awesome.

*Kristyn Scorsone:* What's Bragman's?

*Sharon Denise Davis:* The same person that owns The Yard—what's his name? Ky? The same guy that owns The Yard and the other restaurant over here on Halsey Street, he owned a sandwich shop right around the corner from me where I used to live at in Newark years ago. That's as far as I ventured out.

*Kristyn Scorsone:* That was Bragman's, that's what—

*Sharon Denise Davis:* Bragman's. That's as far as I ventured out.

[Laughter]

*Kristyn Scorsone:* I realize, too, before I push on, is there anything—I don't know if I, too much, skipped over the '90s. Is there anything I should have asked you about in that time or anything you wanted to share?

*Sharon Denise Davis:* Let's see. One thing ... when I came here to Newark to live in Newark—it's funny because that's when I really learned a lot about not just Newark, but about the state of New Jersey. There's a lot of

good, but boy I learned a lotta bad about Jersey, unfortunately. I was really surprised about the corruption and stuff like that.

*Kristyn Scorsone:* Yeah. How did you learn about it?

*Sharon Denise Davis:* Oh, experience and just watching the things that were going on in the neighborhoods and how these political figures weren't very supportive of the communities that they were supposed to support and help. They just didn't. It was very sad. I kept reading about—I remember that whole thing that went down with all of those mayors that were fired and all of that. This was a few years back. I said, “Wow.”

Even the mayor of Hoboken was involved in it. There was a whole lot of corruption. It's funny because my coworker said to me, last week, he said, “Do you know what, Sharon? You know that Jersey is very corrupt.” I said to myself, “Hold it. I learned, a long time ago, the hard way.” I didn't know at the time. I was very naïve to what was going on until I really took the time out to read more about Jersey and what was going on—and, also, my own neighborhood. It always bothers me.

*Kristyn Scorsone:* Why is that important to you? Are you very politically minded?

*Sharon Denise Davis:* I try to be, but not too much. I just try to be locally because, when I moved into—let me see. When I was in that neighborhood—I'm tryin' to think. Cory Booker was the mayor. Wow. Yeah. I felt like he was just a lot of talk. He did some things, little things that—nice guy, met him and everything and all that, but simple things like potholes and things like that that destroy your car coming over that little bridge over there off [*unintelligible*] and all of that was—and then, when you go over to the mayor's office and you try to—it's like a blame game. It's like, “Oh, no, it's the city. Oh, no, it's this one. It's the county,” or whatever.

It was like, “Wow.” That's the funny thing because, living in New York, I never dealt with that. I never had to deal with anything like that. If you had a problem with your landlord or something like that, you would go straight to the courts for housing in New York—that's it—in Brooklyn. You get everything done. Coming from there to New Jersey was a little bit of a shock to my system, learning these things. But I haven't lost faith.

*Kristyn Scorsone:* Yeah, I'm curious to know, what do you think about the redevelopment as you've been living here? There's been, obviously, a lot of change.

*Sharon Denise Davis:* Lots of change, yeah. Everywhere. You see it everywhere. I get into those conversations with my coworkers about—from the time we step on a train here in Newark or in New York and you're coming out into Jersey, nothing but developments everywhere. They're everywhere from Newark all the way down the coastline and Trenton. It doesn't matter. It's everywhere. Maplewood. They're everywhere. Everywhere. Wow. Jersey City. It's funny because I think, personally, it's good, but I think it's not so good if the rent you're charging is still so high that everyone can't—you're still pushing out a certain crowd.

You're still pushing them out. You're not making it accessible for them. It's horrible. In that sense, it's horrible. What's the point in all of these developments if you're offering 650 square feet of space for \$2,500 a month, 1 bedroom? How many low-income families can afford that? And you're not making it accessible for, let's say—I don't know what the average is—'cause I know, in some of these developments, they're supposed to—a percentage of the apartments are supposed to be for—am I correct—low-income family.

*Kristyn Scorson:* At least in Newark, yeah.

*Sharon Denise Davis:* Yeah, exactly. Some of them have found loopholes to get out of that. I know, for a fact, there are some in the Jersey City area. That's what they did. It's the mayor, too, because the mayor—he sold them out. He sold the people of Jersey City out. It's horrible. I'm like, "Wow, that's crazy." So coming to all of this development going on everything, developing everything is—it's good, and it's not so good.

*Kristyn Scorson:* Right. What do you think is good about it, versus the not so good?

*Sharon Denise Davis:* That it's actually there, but if it's not what's the point? If everybody can't get a piece of it, what's the point? It's just about *[audio cuts out]* is.

*Kristyn Scorson:* It's so interesting, to me, what you said about, because you work for New Jersey Transit and you are on a daily traveling—how long have you worked for New Jersey Transit?

*Sharon Denise Davis:* This is 17 years.

*Kristyn Scorsone:* Seventeen years. Just never thought about how you are constantly a witness to a changing landscape of the entire state. That is so interesting to think about.

*Sharon Denise Davis:* It is. It's funny because some of my coworkers, they've been working for transit even much longer. They'll say things like, "Wow, I remember when that was just a hole." Stuff like that. "Look at it now. It's a whatever. It's a station. See all those properties over there now." It's very interesting. Right now, they're building a new bridge to connect Perth Amboy and South—it's a new bridge for the train to connect Perth Amboy and South Amboy because Perth Amboy will become a high-level platform.

Right now, they're in the midst of developing, building this structure, this bridge. It's actually amazing to watch. I think the project is due 2024. That's supposed to be the—for everything. For the new station—everything—bridge—everything in 2024. Perth Amboy is a historical town. I was telling my partner about it. I said, "You know that bridge they're building over there," I said, "it's because of y'all guys, I think, because y'all put it out there—" the historical commission, y'all put it out there, and they have to pay more attention to that town because there are so many that they don't, like Elizabeth. Elizabeth is another one.

*Kristyn Scorsone:* Perth Amboy is the one where they have slave ship landing historical marker?

*Sharon Denise Davis:* Yes. There are so many stations and towns that they need to pay more attention to, but you know, it's about politics. You know? It's about politics because you can build a station all the way up in North Jersey in the middle of nowhere, \$2 million with a ridership of, maybe, 100 people a day—maybe, maybe not even that—for \$2 million.

You have the funds for that, and that's probably because of where it's located, the town, but you have another city, like Elizabeth, that's been suffering with that horrible station for—oh my god. Right now, they're fixing it and everything, but it was down for nine years. It took them nine years to begin the redevelopment of that station, Elizabeth.

*Kristyn Scorsone:* Horrible.

*Sharon Denise Davis:* It's horrible, absolutely horrible. That's how I feel. I can't stand it. You can tell that it's still gonna be a while before the westbound platform side and the eastbound platform side is fully up and

running. It's still gonna be a while because they have to put in new elevators and things like that. But it took them nine years. The people in that town had to suffer with a broken elevator. We're talking about people who are disabled, seniors. Horrible.

*Kristyn Scorsone:* Yeah, it's gross.

*Sharon Denise Davis:* Shame on them. I know it's because it's Elizabeth. It's not that small town up in North Jersey that's probably full of lawyers and doctors that live there. It's sad.

*Kristyn Scorsone:* That reminds me. Do you ever go into Newark Penn Station? One of my professors talks about how the changes there in terms of how people without homes could seek shelter there or stay there for a bit, but now they're being driven out of there all the time. Do you have any impressions of that or thoughts about that or that station, in general?

*Sharon Denise Davis:* I don't see that. I'm there Monday through Friday at 5:00 a.m., and I see the same people and then some—homeless people just walking about freely, doing whatever that they wanna do, hanging outside the station. I don't see that. No. I don't agree.

*Kristyn Scorsone:* Have you happen to see any cruising happening there? Oh.

*[Laughter]*

*Sharon Denise Davis:* You know what, I don't even hang around long enough to see that, but—

*[Laughter]*

*Sharon Denise Davis:* - I wouldn't be surprised, though, on the other side where the taxi cabs pull up. What is that, the Raymond? What is that over there across from the hotel? *[Crosstalk and audio cuts out]*. Now, I wouldn't be surprised over there, but thank goodness I've never seen anything like that. Thank God.

*[Laughter]*

*Sharon Denise Davis:* I'm glad I didn't see that. No, I don't agree with what he said or she said as far as—no.

*Kristyn Scorsone:* Yeah, maybe it was something that happened for a little while and stopped.

*Sharon Denise Davis:* They were still able to pretty much move about. The only difference ... No, not really. No, 'cause I was thinking, maybe, hanging out in the hall where the track is at.

[Laughter]

*Sharon Denise Davis:* Off track one or something like that, but no. They are able to move freely as long as they don't start trouble. That's a whole other story. It's scary some mornings. It's very scary. Very scary. My coworker was approached by one of the homeless people in the station. I think it was last week. We're standing waiting for our train to find out what track we're on and all of that. She came straight—you know, she just ... and I told my coworker, I said, "You should step aside," but she didn't hear me. The lady just came right up on her, and she moved at the last second. We both said, "Oh, let's go upstairs. Let's go upstairs. We don't want no problems or whatever."

It's not the first time. I remember one guy, when I was standing there watching the board—what did he do? He came from like behind me or the side of me, and he bumped me. He said sorry, and his friend said something. I don't know what he said. He said the guy had a problem. He said, "He has a problem—blah, blah, blah, blah. Don't mind him miss—whatever, whatever." I said, "See, I can't deal with this." It's infested. It's a lot worse than it's been—I've seen in years. There's a new face or new people in that station every single day.

Now, there're more wheelchair-bound people in the station, believe it or not—wheelchair. I'm like, "Where are they coming from? Are they just dumping them right there at the station? What?" They just givin' them a one-way ticket to the station and say, "Here, fend for yourself,"?

It's horrible. It really is. It's horrible. I understand the people who are activists for the homeless and all of that, but you have to understand the other side of that, the people who are commuters and folks who would like to feel like they're in a safe environment and they can stand there and watch for their train to pop up on the screen without worrying about being harassed or attacked or no place to sit and stuff like that.

See, there are two sides to that. Sometimes I think they don't really understand that, or maybe they don't wanna understand it. Who knows? They don't want to. Wow. In my time with transit, I've met quite a few homeless people who are mentally ill. One guy, he was



a lawyer. I forgot. What did he say? He fell ill. I don't know what kind of mental health issue he had 'cause I haven't seen him in a while. Like I said, he used to be a lawyer. How do I know that? Because transit police told me he used to be a lawyer. It's very sad. I know that a lot of them—I'm pretty sure there are quite a few of them in there. They're not just there to hang out and whatever. Some of them are just mentally ill. It's hard, though, because you have these people's safety and everything else.

I give it to them. Not really. I'm talking about transit. They just need to—I don't know—work closer, maybe, with the mayor and the mental health professionals, the hospitals better. They really need to do something because it's worse, to me, now than I've seen in my years. I'm over there every day. It's not like I'm sayin' this just out of my imagination. It's what I see every single day and what I experience every single day.

*Kristyn Scorsone:* Do you think that the change has anything to do—do you think it's 'cause of the pandemic?

*Sharon Denise Davis:* No. That's the other thing. They don't even wear a mask or anything like that. They just roll. You'll see the transit police—and some of them don't even wear a mask. It's not even about that. It's just the life, the station. They did a couple of things to keep them from hanging out—well, I should say putting up their little tents and beds and everything along railroad back that way by putting up some barricades. They put up barricades. Okay, you put up barricades, but all you did was drive them closer to the station. That's really what they did. They just drove them to the station because they used to sleep under the underpass. What is that? What street is that? Ferry?

*Kristyn Scorsone:* Oh, maybe.

*Sharon Denise Davis:* Hold it. No, Edison. I think that might be Edison under that bridge back that way. They used to sleep under there. They had tents and everything. They moved them from there because, now, they'll have a patrol car there and stuff like that in the morning, and then they put the barricades up along railroad closer to the station so they won't block the sidewalk by setting up their beds and everything like that. All they did was really actually just drive them closer to the station because they set it up along the station.

*Kristyn Scorsone:* Right, yeah. That's tough.

*Sharon Denise Davis:* I know it's hard because they have to get all of these entities together, and they have to come up—but they gotta come up with a plan because it's pretty bad.

*Kristyn Scorsone:* Yeah. I wanna come back to your job, but I wanna ask you, too, first, I guess, is—you were on Custer Street. Where did you go next after that?

*Sharon Denise Davis:* Baldwin. I lived on Baldwin. That's where I lived around the corner from Bragman's.

*Kristyn Scorsone:* Okay. With the same person or did you move [*background noise and audio cuts out*]—

*Sharon Denise Davis:* Yeah.

*Kristyn Scorsone:* Where did you go after that?

*Sharon Denise Davis:* After that, Jersey City.

*Kristyn Scorsone:* How long did you live there?

*Sharon Denise Davis:* I lived in Jersey City six years.

*Kristyn Scorsone:* Okay. Now, it's 2014 or something that you left?

*Sharon Denise Davis:* Probably. Hold it. Let me see. No, that was probably—hold it. No, you're probably right. Might be somewhere around 2014 or before—no, before 2014, I lived in Jersey City because I went through breast cancer surgery in 2014. That's when I lived in Jersey City.

*Kristyn Scorsone:* What brought you to Jersey City?

*Sharon Denise Davis:* I was already in Jersey City when I was with that particular ex. We moved from Newark to Jersey City. When we broke up, I moved into Heights in Jersey City. I was living in the Heights in 2014. Prior to that, I was living—what was that? What's that street? I can never remember the name of that street in Jersey City.

*Kristyn Scorsone:* I only know one, and that's Tonnele.

[*Laughter*]

*Sharon Denise Davis:* Popular.

*[Laughter]*

*Kristyn Scorsone:* That's the one I know.

*Sharon Denise Davis:* That's a popular one besides JFK—I mean besides Martin Luther is Tonnele.

*[Laughter]*

*Kristyn Scorsone:* That's the extent of my knowledge.

*Sharon Denise Davis:* I know. That's a major street though *[laughter and audio cuts out]* 'cause it leads to the highway.

*[Laughter]*

*Sharon Denise Davis:* What's the name of that street? I always forget it, and Noelle, used to live right around the corner when she was a child.

*Kristyn Scorsone:* Oh, wow.

*Sharon Denise Davis:* I keep forgetting the name of that blasted street though.

*Kristyn Scorsone:* We'll have to reference her oral history to find out.

*Sharon Denise Davis:* She laughed.

*[Laughed]*

*Sharon Denise Davis:* It will probably come back to me. I don't know why I can't—you know what's so funny? The reason why I can never remember the name of that street is because it's only about three blocks long. It's one of those types of that *[crosstalk and audio cuts out 01:15:41]*—

*Kristyn Scorsone:* No, totally.

*Sharon Denise Davis:* Yeah, and then it's over.

*[Laughter]*

*Sharon Denise Davis:* When I first moved to Jersey City, I lived there in that particular neighborhood for a year, and then I moved to the Heights in Jersey City. I went through the whole breast cancer and everything in 2014 into 2015, and I'm here.

*Kristyn Scorsone:* How did you get back here?

*Sharon Denise Davis:* How did I get back here? Let me see. Well, before that, after JC, I lived in Bayonne.

*[Laughter]*

*Sharon Denise Davis:* From Bayonne, we moved back to Newark.

*Kristyn Scorsone:* Who's we?

*Sharon Denise Davis:* Noelle.

*Kristyn Scorsone:* Oh, okay. Did you meet Noelle in Jersey City?

*Sharon Denise Davis:* When I lived in Jersey City, yeah.

*Kristyn Scorsone:* How did you all meet?

*Sharon Denise Davis:* Originally.

*[Laughter and extraneous conversation]*

*Kristyn Scorsone:* What'd she say?

*Sharon Denise Davis:* See, I knew she would be around and be nosey.

*[Laughter]*

*Sharon Denise Davis:* No, we met at a club.

*Kristyn Scorsone:* That's cool.

*Sharon Denise Davis:* With one of your other Queer Newark—I won't give names, but you interviewed her too. She was with her.

*Kristyn Scorsone:* Oh, cool. Very cool.

*Sharon Denise Davis:* That's how I met the great Noelle.

*Kristyn Scorsone:* Yeah. Did you just go up and talk to her?

*Sharon Denise Davis:* No, opposite. Let's just say she made her presence well known.

*Kristyn Scorsone:* That's awesome.

*[Laughter]*

*Kristyn Scorsone:* I love Noelle.

*Sharon Denise Davis:* Oh, yeah. You can't resist that.

*Kristyn Scorsone:* Obviously, you hit it off, and then you—did you move in together in Bayonne and then come here, or did you move in together in Newark?

*Sharon Denise Davis:* In Newark, here, where we're at right now 'cause she lived in North Newark, and then she moved out this way a few blocks away first. Then, when we decided to move in together, we came here.

*Kristyn Scorsone:* Okay. What year was that when you moved into this place?

*Sharon Denise Davis:* 2020.

*Kristyn Scorsone:* Okay. All right. I guess, with Noelle and stuff—with you guys being together and—

*Sharon Denise Davis:* Oh, no, correction, 2019 because COVID hit in 2020. It was October of 2019 we moved in here together 'cause COVID—everything shut down in March of 2020, if I'm not mistaken—somewhere around there—March/April. Yeah, it was 2019 we moved in here together.

*Kristyn Scorsone:* When you and Noelle hang out and stuff, do you hang out in any queer spaces in Newark?

*Sharon Denise Davis:* In Newark? No. Not really. No.

*Kristyn Scorsone:* How about Newark Pride or anything? Sorry.

*Sharon Denise Davis:* Oh, yeah. Well, you know yes. Yes, of course. I love Newark Pride.

*[Laughter]*

*Kristyn Scorsone:* How many years have you been goin' to Newark Pride?

*[Extraneous conversation]*

*Sharon Denise Davis:* She said, "Oh, we've been to Twister."

*Kristyn Scorsone:* What's Twister?

*Sharon Denise Davis:* Exactly. There you go. That's all you need to know.

*Kristyn Scorsone:* Wait, that's a gay club in Newark, right? Then, they closed down durin' the pandemic?

*Sharon Denise Davis:* I think so, yeah. It was more like a boys club down there. Yeah, it's in Newark, somewhere around the Ironbound area, somewhere back that way. We went there a couple of times and that's it.

*Kristyn Scorsone:* What's it like inside?

*Sharon Denise Davis:* What was it like? It was not very spacious, but it was comfortable. It was very comfortable. The drinks were... I'm gonna leave it at that. I'm not gonna say anything. Get the beer. That's all I have to say. It was a nice atmosphere though. It was really cute. Yeah, it was really cute.

*Kristyn Scorsone:* Lotta seating?

*Sharon Denise Davis:* It was a really cute place.

*Kristyn Scorsone:* Was it a lotta seating?

*Sharon Denise Davis:* Huh?

*Kristyn Scorsone:* Was it a lotta seating?

*Sharon Denise Davis:* Not a lot. Not a lot of seating. That's why, if you're able to grab a couch, you're good. Stay there 'cause they didn't offer a lot of seating, but the music was pretty good. The atmosphere was really cute. The crowd was nice too. The couple of times we went there, it was nice. I was surprised they did—think they did close down. They did close down.

*Kristyn Scorsone:* What kinda crowd? Is it racially, age? You said it was more men, right?

*Sharon Denise Davis:* Oh, yeah, but they had a—it was a lot more boys in there, but I would say 25 and up—like that. Fun crowd.

*Kristyn Scorsone:* Yeah. Is that more Latinx?

*Sharon Denise Davis:* [Audio cuts out] times, fun crowd. Huh?

*Kristyn Scorsone:* Was it more Latinx people in there?

*Sharon Denise Davis:* Actually, no, which was very surprising. It was very surprising. Actually, no.

*Kristyn Scorsone:* Or African American or white?

*Sharon Denise Davis:* Mainly African American, yeah. It was cute. The two times we went there, it was cute. *[Crosstalk and audio cuts out]*.

*Kristyn Scorsone:* What kinda music was it?

*Sharon Denise Davis:* Oh, they played all kinds of music. They played '80s. They played house. They had good music. It was cute.

*Kristyn Scorsone:* Did they have any drag shows there?

*Sharon Denise Davis:* No, we didn't see a drag show, but drag queens did hang out there though. Yes.

*Kristyn Scorsone:* That's cool. Drag queens from Newark?

*Sharon Denise Davis:* I would have to guess yes 'cause I remember, one time we were there—I may even have a picture of her with Noelle, I think, one time we were there. She was a lotta fun. It was *[crosstalk and audio cuts out]*—huh?

*Kristyn Scorsone:* If you find the photo, would you be willing to send it to us to Queer Newark? *[crosstalk and audio cuts out]*—

*Sharon Denise Davis:* Sure.

*Kristyn Scorsone:* Cool.

*Sharon Denise Davis:* Sure, I'll send it to you. No problem. That places was a—it was cute. Just the drinks...

*[Laughter]*

*Kristyn Scorsone:* Yeah. No, that's interesting. That's good to know because, just historically, we always like to hear what any LGBTQ-plus clubs were like in Newark. That's cool to have that insight. I don't think many people have talked about that place.

*Sharon Denise Davis:* Yeah. I don't know. It was short-lived. I don't know what happen *[crosstalk and audio cuts out]* find out what exactly happen to it. It

was cute. We don't have that out here. We don't have the—well, we don't have it everywhere, especially lesbian clubs. They're almost a thing of the past. We lost so many, especially in New York too. I mean, wow. We're down to, I think, three or four in New York. It's horrible.

*Kristyn Scorsone:* Was there any lesbian spaces that you know of in Newark?

*Sharon Denise Davis:* In Newark? No. Even, like I said, how I met Noelle, it was at a space in New York, and we would always go to New York. I really didn't know of any out here even before I met Noelle. I always spent time—it was always in New York. Oh, no, but, also, I think I remember going to Elizabeth to a spot in Elizabeth, but mainly in New York City, Queens, Brooklyn. Yeah, New York, Manhattan.

*Kristyn Scorsone:* Yeah. All right, I guess I wanna come back to your job for a couple minutes, if that's okay. Workin' for New Jersey—what's your role there?

*Sharon Denise Davis:* Oh, I'm a train conductor.

*Kristyn Scorsone:* Okay. That's so cool. Do you drive the train, or are you—what does a train conductor do?

*Sharon Denise Davis:* Train conductor doesn't drive the train though, but the train conductor is the boss of the train, meaning the train conductor monitors everything that's going on, even the engineer, to make sure the engineer is doing what he or she should be doing. The conductor manages the crew, which are the other ticket collectors and rear brake of the train because, as far as the crew goes, the crew consists of an engineer, the conductor, ticket collectors, and a rear brake. It's the same even if you're on Amtrak. It's the same thing, same breakdown.

*Kristyn Scorsone:* What's the engineer?

*Sharon Denise Davis:* Who drives the train. In New York, they call them motormen.

*Kristyn Scorsone:* Okay. How do you get to be a train conductor?

*Sharon Denise Davis:* Well, like just, I guess, anywhere else, you just apply for it and this and that, but you also go through training. It's two years of training before you can actually be a—well, you take exams, two years of it, before you can actually be a conductor. Engineers training is very—theirs is very hardcore. For them, I think it's almost 2 years, too, or 18 months or something like that of training. They're



training for an engineer. As far as the exams, they have to be, basically, perfect because they're driving the train. There's a lot involved in both jobs that I think, most people, they don't know. We let them assume things because they think they know more than we do, so we let them assume. Whatever.

*Kristyn Scorsone:* While you're trying to get through these exams and stuff, this two years of training, are you doing a different—are you the ticket taker in that time [*crosstalk and audio cuts out*]—

*Sharon Denise Davis:* Yeah, you go through that too. Yep, you go through all—that's all part of the training because some of it is on-the-job training, and some of it is in class. It's training all the way through. From the first day in the classroom to, like I said, up to two years, you're gonna be out there—well, for me, it was two years you're out there training. You're in class, and then you're out. You're in class, you're out.

*Kristyn Scorsone:* Do you have to pay for that?

*Sharon Denise Davis:* Say it again?

*Kristyn Scorsone:* Do you have to pay for that?

*Sharon Denise Davis:* No. It's paid training too. It's all paid. You're earning a salary just like if you just started a job. Every three months, you get a raise. It's on-the-job—it's paid training.

*Kristyn Scorsone:* What attracted you to want to work for New Jersey Transit and even the post office too? When I think of these jobs for myself—'cause I've thought about being a postal worker, a mail carrier. To me, the reason why I would wanna do that is I feel like there'd be more freedom, in a way, to not be in an office. Do you feel similarly, or what attracted you to these types of jobs?

*Sharon Denise Davis:* Absolutely. That's a big part of it because—even, like you said, when I did mail carrying, that was a big part of it. I love the freedom. I love to be out there and meet people or whatever. I don't really care for being in that whole office environment type thing and all of that. I really don't. That's not me. I like meeting new people. I like mingling. I like doing things with my hands or whatever and new adventures because there's always a—I think we have—you know they say there are eight million stories in a naked city. I think a lotta those stories were told by trainmen—

[*Laughter*]

*Sharon Denise Davis:* - 'cause the things you see out there, it's totally different from what you see, let's say, if you're at home or, let's say, if you just go outside—I don't know—to the store or whatever, just do your—the behavior on the trains, it's just unbelievable. The things we see, it's just, wow. I never dreamed that I would witness some of the behavior that I have witnessed on these train rides.

*Kristyn Scorsone:* What's the wildest thing you've ever seen?

*Sharon Denise Davis:* Well, okay, the grossest one—I'm gonna go into that first. One of the most gross was a guy defecating on a door.

[Laughter]

*Kristyn Scorsone:* Oh god.

*Sharon Denise Davis:* One of the craziest is probably a passenger that we used to have on our trains who used to bring a mannequin head on the train with her. She used to talk to the mannequin head like it was a real person. She used to curse it out. She used to give it a ticket, put a ticket up there for the mannequin head.

*Kristyn Scorsone:* Aw.

[Laughter]

*Sharon Denise Davis:* She would curse at it and call it all kinds of names. She said the mannequin head was cheating on her with her husband.

*Kristyn Scorsone:* That's awesome.

*Sharon Denise Davis:* That was an adventure in itself. That would clear out a car in a second.

[Laughter]

*Kristyn Scorsone:* Do you have any—your coworkers, your colleagues, are any of them queer or trans?

*Sharon Denise Davis:* Oh, yes. Some are queer. Some are definitely queer and gay men. It's funny. No, the women too, they're pretty—my coworkers, we pretty much stand together. Yeah, we pretty much stand together. I'll put it to you like this: you don't have to guess because we don't leave you to guess. We let you know. We're pretty much open, the

women are. The men, some are not, and we know that for a fact. Some are not.

*[Crosstalk and audio cuts out]*

*Kristyn Scorsone:* You all?

*Sharon Denise Davis:* They are gay. The women, we're pretty much who we are on the job. With that being said, sometimes it's a challenge. It can be very, let's say—wow. It's rough. It can be rough dealing with passengers who give you a hard time just because of that. They judge you right off the bat, and then they want to be insulting, and they wanna insult you. They wanna verbally assault you, threatening too. It's really not easy for us just to be your normal self while working on the trains.

*Kristyn Scorsone:* The other women that you work with that are gay, are they also butch?

*Sharon Denise Davis:* Yeah, actually, they are. Yes, they are. Yeah, they are. It doesn't matter if they're white, black, Latino, but we're all pretty much openly gay.

*Kristyn Scorsone:* Is there a lot of you?

*Sharon Denise Davis:* There are a few of us. I would say I know—as far as the women, I know at least—and that includes train engineers too. I'm pretty sure the engineers probably have it, maybe, even tougher from their own colleagues, the men. There are probably, I know, 10 of us. It might be more.

*Kristyn Scorsone:* Are any of them from Newark?

*Sharon Denise Davis:* Think two are. Two are from Newark. Two live in Newark.

*Kristyn Scorsone:* If they'd be willing, I'd love to interview them, if you wanna ask them. If they don't, of course, obviously, no problem.

*Sharon Denise Davis:* Oh, yeah. I know the perfect person because she could probably give you more insight on the club thing in Newark.

*Kristyn Scorsone:* Awesome.

*Sharon Denise Davis:* Yeah, I'll ask her. I will definitely ask her.

*Kristyn Scorsone:* Thank you. That's so interesting to me. Yeah, so, I guess, because, if you're butch—and obviously, I get this, too, 'cause I'm very masculine looking. You're visibly queer. You know what I mean? You're visibly butch. How do you deal with passengers that are threatening or insulting or verbally abusive?

*Sharon Denise Davis:* Wow. I think it's just that you have to—sometimes just the best thing to do is just walk away. Just walk away because you know what you're dealing with. You know what you're dealing with. It could be they homophobic—all of that, all of the above. It's all negative. You can't stand there and try to be—how can I say it? Someone who's verbally attackin' you and they're getting loud and aggressive is not going to listen to you because that person pretty much has his mind made up.

This is what they think they're looking at. This is what they set out to do. Sometimes it's premeditated. Let's say, if I'm walking through and I'm asking for a ticket or whatever and this person wants to give me a hard time, sometimes you can tell that this person was really just waiting for the opportunity to attack you, believe it or not. I've seen it. I've been on the other side being attacked. For what?

*Noelle:* Like the guy at Walmart.

*Sharon Denise Davis:* Yeah, we're talking about the train.

*[Laughter]*

*Sharon Denise Davis:* That's Noelle.

*Kristyn Scorsone:* Oh, that's okay. In Harrison?

*Sharon Denise Davis:* Hmm?

*Kristyn Scorsone:* In Harrison Walmart?

*Sharon Denise Davis:* Yeah, that's the one she's talking about.

*Noelle:* I won't say anything else. Sorry.

*Sharon Denise Davis:* That's the one she's talking about, yeah. She said she won't say anything else. Sorry.

*[Laughter, crosstalk, and audio cuts out]*

*Kristyn Scorsone:* That's all right.

*Sharon Denise Davis:* She probably thought I was talking about that incident, but I was telling her I was talking about the train 'cause she [*crosstalk and audio cuts out*]—

*Kristyn Scorsone:* Wait, she through us off track. Sorry, that's my train [*crosstalk and audio cuts out*]—

*Sharon Denise Davis:* No, exactly. She threw us off track.

[*Laughter*]

*Sharon Denise Davis:* [*Unintelligible, crosstalk, and audio cuts out*]—

*Sharon Denise Davis:* She threw us off track.

[*Laughter*]

*Noelle:* That's so funny.

*Sharon Denise Davis:* Yeah, you try to cause a derailment?

*Sharon Denise Davis:* Yeah.

[*Laughter*]

*Noelle:* [*Unintelligible*] made that you always crack up [*crosstalk and audio cuts out*]—

*Kristyn Scorsone:* Unruly passenger.

*Sharon Denise Davis:* Off the rails.

*Sharon Denise Davis:* Oh, off the rails.

[*Laughter*]

*Kristyn Scorsone:* That's an unruly passenger.

[*Laughter*]

*Kristyn Scorsone:* She needs to be ejected.

*Sharon Denise Davis:* Yeah, but being queer, gay, butch—whatever, all of the above—is a difficult life on the railroad. It's not even the colleagues. It's like I

said; it's really dealin' with certain passengers. I'm not gonna say anything else about that part because I don't wanna go into specifics because I can break down specifics as far as never female. It's always male. What I hate to say is it's always a black male. That's what we deal with most of the time.

*Kristyn Scorsone:* Do you think there's a reason for that?

*Sharon Denise Davis:* I have my theories. In the beginning, I really didn't think about it at the time, after, maybe, the first or second time that it happened. Then, after so many times—because we share these stories, me and my coworkers, and they feel the same way too. It's very troubling. It's very troubling. I have my own theories about it.

For me, I keep that in the back of my head. If I come across it again, I have to say to myself, "Okay, this is what you're dealing with. You know what you're dealing with. Just walk away, or whatever. Don't get into the back and forth because you have no wins with this. Just leave it alone." I've been threatened physical harm. I've been threatened as far as, "I'll shoot you—" stuff like that.

*Kristyn Scorsone:* You're part of the union, too, you said, right?

*Sharon Denise Davis:* Mm-hmm.

*Kristyn Scorsone:* What is the union for transit workers?

*Sharon Denise Davis:* UTU Local 60.

*Kristyn Scorsone:* Do they help with these kinds of situations?

*Sharon Denise Davis:* Not really. I'm not gonna lie. Not really. Their thing is, pretty much, you just have to walk away from it. Just walk away from it. Blah, blah, blah, blah. That's pretty much what they say for any type of situation where a passenger is being threatening or whatever—or verbally attacking you or something like that, to pretty much just walk away. That's what I do. I really don't know what, but more needs to be done to protect us out there because you shouldn't be—oh, here's the other reason why I think they can do what they do, and that is because they know there are no consequences to their actions.

*Kristyn Scorsone:* The passengers, you mean?

*Sharon Denise Davis:* Huh?

*Kristyn Scorsone:* The passengers, you mean?

*Sharon Denise Davis:* Yeah. There are no consequences. If they had more police presence on the trains and things like that walking through the cars and stuff like that, I think there would be less incidents of verbal and physical attacks on us.

*Kristyn Scorsone:* Right. Sorry. My cat pushed the door open.

[Laughter]

*Kristyn Scorsone:* Does the union do anything, specifically, for LGBTQ-plus people, beyond these incidents, I mean? I don't know. Is there anything else that they do, I guess, for you or with you?

*Sharon Denise Davis:* Not specifically for us. It's basically for everyone. It's nothing specifically directed towards the LGBTQ community. The same rule goes for everyone. There's nothing specific laid out for us. In all due honesty, they can't even get that part right—

[Laughter]

*Sharon Denise Davis:* - because you can't say one thing, but then do another. You can't say, "Oh, yeah, this law is going into effect that will help protect conductors from being attacked," and all of that—being assaulted and all of that, but then you don't provide us with police presence, which, to me, if you put two police officers—I'm talkin' about transit—on a train and just walk through the cars, that will create an awareness.

"Oh, the police are on the—oh, okay. I'm not going to curse this conductor out today," or, "I'm not going to verbally abuse this conductor or physically attack this conductors 'cause I just saw the police come through the car." They don't do that. They don't do it. They know what they should do, but they don't do it. I don't know if it's because—and they're not shorthanded. I don't believe that, for one cent, that they're—they can't be shorthanded because they're always hiring more officers.

They're not shorthanded. Any given time, I can walk into Newark Penn Station, and I guarantee you I will see at least four transit officers just standing around talking, holding a conversation with each other. That's it. Actually, I just saw that when I came off the train and into the station. They were just standin' there chatting it up. Blah, blah, blah, blah. Blah, blah, blah, blah. Meanwhile,

homeless guy was over there screaming his head off. I'm like, "Wow. Such a waste." Yeah, something as simple as that—that's it—just walking through the cars. It's just that simple. [*Crosstalk and audio cuts out*]—

*Kristyn Scorsone:* Do you think, in this—oh, I'm sorry. Do you think, in the 17 years you've been working, do you feel like it's gotten, maybe, worse or better, the passenger abuse? Is it more frequent or less?

*Sharon Denise Davis:* Worse. A lot worse because, when I hired out, I remember transit police officers that used to come on my train. If I had problems, they would come on my train, and they would walk through my train. They would, yeah. As the years roll on, they just don't do it, at all, unless, let's say, somebody did get assaulted. Now, there's a report and this and that, and it went up the chain and up to the top. The union raised H - E hockey sticks. Then, maybe, you'll get them on the train, but this is after the fact. They know the trains that are hot. They know it. It's crazy.

*Kristyn Scorsone:* What do you mean trains that are hot?

*Sharon Denise Davis:* Hot with passengers who are unruly, fare beaters. They know the trains because we file the reports. We file the reports, so they know the trains. That's why, when I have students, I always tell them, "Look, if you have any issues on your trains, especially things like that, being attacked verbally or physically or whatever, always file a report—always. You know why? Because, guess what? Those passengers and the company, they'll file a report on you in a second. Passenger will call in on you in a second. The company will write you up in a second. If you're being attacked, assaulted—whatever—don't take it lightly.

"File that report because you don't know that person that verbally attacked you or physically came at you or something like that might be a real problem or, in the future, might do something really, really bad. If they have a record of it, they can't say you never said anything." Paper trails. Gotta have the paper trails because they have their paper trails, the company does. They have their paper trails. You write up a report; leave a paper trail. Make sure you get a copy and give them theirs. That's it. Leave a paper trail.

*Kristyn Scorsone:* Does the train go to Newark Airport at all?

*Sharon Denise Davis:* Yes.



*Kristyn Scorsone:* Yeah. Do you ride it to Newark Airport ever?

*Sharon Denise Davis:* Yep.

*Kristyn Scorsone:* Yeah?

*Sharon Denise Davis:* Mm-hmm.

*Kristyn Scorsone:* Do you ever meet any of the workers at Newark Airport? Is there a lotta—do you know if there's LGBTQ-plus workers at Newark Airport, or do you not really have to interact with those employees?

*Sharon Denise Davis:* No, I don't have a chance to interact with them.

*Kristyn Scorsone:* Oh. I was just curious.

*Sharon Denise Davis:* Yeah, I'm not there long enough. Let me see. Yeah, I'm not there long enough.

*Kristyn Scorsone:* When the passengers get on from Newark Airport, is it a lot of different tourists? Do those people abuse you guys ever?

*Sharon Denise Davis:* Ooh. Actually, no. For the most part, no. They're pretty cool. They're pretty friendly because, for them, it's like, "Ooh. I'm going into the city," or whatever. They're pretty cool.

*Kristyn Scorsone:* Oh, nice touch.

*[Laughter]*

*Sharon Denise Davis:* The problem children are usually repeat offenders, in all due honesty. They're usually repeat offenders. The reason why they're repeat offenders is because the company doesn't do anything about them. Just that simple. They would have to physically harm one of us in order for the company to even put an officer on the train or something like that. They don't care about that other stuff. They don't. They don't care about you being threatened. They don't care about you bein' physically abused by someone. Heck, let me tell you something. This is pissin' me off because the company will give them courtesy tickets if they complain about you.

*Kristyn Scorsone:* They can be like—

*Sharon Denise Davis:* Yeah, any old story.

*Kristyn Scorsone:* - “The conductor was super gay—”

*Sharon Denise Davis:* Anything.

*Kristyn Scorsone:* - “and I did not appreciate that,” and they’ll be like, “Here’s a free ticket.”

*Sharon Denise Davis:* Anything. I had this one passenger, and he’s a nice guy or whatever and stuff, but he just complained about some petty nonsense. Anyway, he got his little courtesy tickets. He came on the train one day after he got his little courtesy tickets, and he said, “Hey, look, this is what transit gave me for my troubles,” which he showed me his little tickets. He said, “Well, I guess I’ll use one today.” I said, “Oh boy. You know what, whatever.” They can complain about anything, and the company, pretty much, will take the passenger’s side, and that’s the truth. They’ll take the passenger’s side.

I’m not talking about just my other coworkers. As gay men and women, we got it rough out there. We do. I’m blessed that, as far as my coworkers go, I’ve got nothing but respect from them, me. As far as working out there on those trains and stuff like that and what we have to deal with, it’s hard. It’s hard, at times—very hard. I think I remember the first time I was really, really verbally attacked. When I stepped off, I was in tears. It drained me, mentally. It just drained me. I’ve toughened up since then. It’s hard.

*Kristyn Scorsone:* You’ve never been physically attacked, right?

*Sharon Denise Davis:* No, thank God.

*Kristyn Scorsone:* What about the other women you work with—the other queer women?

*Sharon Denise Davis:* No, thank goodness. Thank goodness, no. None of them, not that I know of. No. Verbally, yes. Physically, no. Like I said, the last time I was threatened, which was the guy said something about he was gonna shoot me, that was, maybe, a few months ago. That was a few months ago.

*Kristyn Scorsone:* That’s scary.

*Sharon Denise Davis:* Yeah, I told Noelle about it.

*Kristyn Scorsone:* Do you all ever hang out together, you and the other women? Do you have any fun together outside of work?

*Sharon Denise Davis:* Yeah. Actually, me and Noelle went to one of my coworker's, her wife—she gave her a birthday party. We went to celebrate her birthday with them.

*Kristyn Scorsone:* Nice.

*Sharon Denise Davis:* We had a lotta fun. That was somewhere in South Jersey. I forgot what town it was. Oh, Hamilton.

*Noelle:* Oh, that was in Hamilton?

*Sharon Denise Davis:* Yeah, that was outside Hamilton.

[Laughter]

*Kristyn Scorsone:* You guys support each other then?

*Sharon Denise Davis:* Yeah, definitely. We definitely support each other. We have each other's back. We don't get to work with each other a lot because of—the way that the jobs work is everyone is on a different type of schedule unless you're just part of a three-man crew, which is the engineer, conductor, and the rear brake. That's a three-man crew. You work together every day. Five days a week, you work together. Most of us, we don't get to see each other. The life on a railroad is crazy. It's very crazy. Sometimes I won't see another person for—one of my coworkers for like two, three years.

*Kristyn Scorsone:* Wow.

*Sharon Denise Davis:* Yeah, two or three years. I haven't seen one of my—actually, one of my dearest friends that work out there, I haven't seen her in—oh my god—four years out there on the railroad. Four years, I think. It's crazy. It's a crazy lifestyle being a railroader. It's a crazy lifestyle.

*Kristyn Scorsone:* How many hours do you work a day?

*Sharon Denise Davis:* Me? Eight. About eight hours. You can work anywhere from 8 hours to almost 12 hours a day out there. When you add your travel time, you can be out there 15 hours a day—

*Kristyn Scorsone:* Wow.

*Sharon Denise Davis:* - away from your home, your family, and stuff like that. It can be really hardcore. On a relationship, the divorce rate is extremely high.

*Kristyn Scorsone:* Wow.

*Sharon Denise Davis:* You know what? You gotta really have a very strong relationship. Both parties gotta have a really strong understanding of the lifestyle out there on the railroad.

*Kristyn Scorsone:* Do you stay overnight a lotta places?

*Sharon Denise Davis:* Not me, but some of them, yes, they do. [*Crosstalk and audio cuts out 02:06:43*] do. Yeah, some of them do. Goin' back to the union, also, because of the crazy hours, the shifts, and everything, there are issues with stuff like sleep apnea. What's the other thing? There are other health issues like just dieting, just eating right, and stuff like that because of the crazy hours and things like that. The union worked with a company—they've been working with them a lot more with trying to—what is this? Blue Cross Blue Shield also.

They're all working together to—they have more of these health clinics and things like that, which is really good because what they do is they have it at certain locations. If you have the time, an employee, like myself, you go out there and you get to speak to the doctors and learn better eating habits and things like that, things to help you with your sleep and stuff like that. That's one thing that, collectively, the union, the company, and Blue Cross Blue Shield are doing more of to help us because it's a rough lifestyle.

*Kristyn Scorsone:* Yeah, so you have health benefits and everything like that. Do you have vacation time and stuff like that?

*Sharon Denise Davis:* Yeah. They need to work on that.

[*Laughter*]

*Sharon Denise Davis:* They need to work on that because the company, with the union—because it's not just the union—I mean, it's not just the company. It's also the union because the union—you don't have to settle for what you settle for, but they—I don't even wanna talk about that part, but you know how it can be. It's a union. There are things going on that we don't know that's going on behind closed doors. Deals are being made. We're the last to know. The membership, we're the last to know when it's a done deal. As far as vacation time and all of that, to me, they could do better because

you pretty much have to be with the company—what is it—25 years to get 5 weeks of vacation time. Twenty-five years of your life.

*Kristyn Scorsone:* Wow.

*Sharon Denise Davis:* You have to think about it like that, 25 years of your life doing that, doing what I do and what they do—25 years of that before you can see 5 weeks of vacation time. Five weeks. I was with a company for 10 years—not even 10 years and I saw 5 weeks of vacation time.

*Kristyn Scorsone:* Wow.

*Sharon Denise Davis:* Twenty-five years of your life.

*Kristyn Scorsone:* Damn.

[Laughter]

*Kristyn Scorsone:* I guess I have two more questions. One is kind of a biggie, but you don't have to go super into it if you don't want to. I know it's getting late. I'm just curious to know, what was it like to work during the pandemic, COVID-19?

*Sharon Denise Davis:* Oh, you know what, the first year, I wasn't even out there because I was still recovering from my knee surgery. 2020, I was still recovering from my knee surgery. Last year, while I was out there, like I said, the only difference was—and it still is—the passengers are more aggressive and more threatening and more combative. That's in transportation across the board because you hear about it on the airplanes and this and that. It's true. It's horrible. To just do your job, it's horrible. It's pretty hard out there.

*Kristyn Scorsone:* My other question is—'cause I don't think you got to answer this—why Denise?

*Sharon Denise Davis:* Oh, yeah, because I grew up with—in Brooklyn, I grew up with four Sharons. Four Sharons I grew up with and not to—I also went to school with a Sharon Denise in my class.

*Kristyn Scorsone:* Wow.

[Laughter]

*Kristyn Scorsone:* Oh my gosh.

*Kristyn Scorsone:* In my class. Whenever I have a—look, I prefer Denise any time. I grew up *[laughter and audio cuts out]* had Sharons everywhere around me. It's a generation name. Like I told you, my best friend, who was also my mentor back when I was young, her name was Sharon too. My neighbor, her name was Sharon. *[Laughter and audio cuts out]* that live above me, her name was Sharon. Oh, they were all around me.

*[Laughter]*

*Kristyn Scorsone:* Yeah, I guess, is there anything that I didn't ask you that you wish I had or any—did I skip over anything that you wish I had asked you about? I don't know. Or do you feel like it's good?

*Sharon Denise Davis:* No, it's cool. I felt like I had a chance to even talk about the company.

*[Laughter]*

*Sharon Denise Davis:* I love talking about the company, and I said to myself, "Oh, try not to say anything really hardcore against the company, even though it's gonna be put away and it won't—whatever. Don't name names," which I wasn't gonna name names anyway. I think I said what I had to say as far as the company goes.

They need to do more for the workers, and they—you gave me an idea, and that is to dig a little bit more deeper into what can be done for us as far as LGBTQ employees out there because—and I've always wanted to really have a—I don't know—get-together with some of my coworkers and really give them a chance to talk about it, talk about what their experience is out there.

I know a couple of them because they told me. I think the hard part is the guys. It's the guys. The guys, they don't say much of nothing, and I know they go through it. You know why? I know they go through it with our coworkers because guys talk, especially older men. They talk all kinds of crazy—they say things. I also work around a lot of racist people. I can't even imagine some of the—yeah, I have to think about that. I would like to get together with some of my coworkers and have a discussion.

*Kristyn Scorsone:* If I'm understanding you right, the men that are gay that are your coworkers, they're more closeted because they get it more from their colleagues rather than—or maybe in addition to the passengers—

*Sharon Denise Davis:* In addition, yeah.

*Kristyn Scorsone:* That's tough.

*Sharon Denise Davis:* Yeah, it's tough.

*Kristyn Scorsone:* On top of that, you have racism going on.

*Sharon Denise Davis:* Yes, racism too. Oh, yeah, definitely a lot of racism. Oh, man. There's this little group of coworkers of mine who are racist. They call themselves the table of knowledge.

*Kristyn Scorsone:* Eww.

*Sharon Denise Davis:* They get together in the men's locker room area, and they talk about people, and this is when they get to spew all of their racist views and things like that.

*Kristyn Scorsone:* Is it a bunch of white dudes?

*Sharon Denise Davis:* Yep.

*Kristyn Scorsone:* [Crosstalk]—

*Sharon Denise Davis:* The table of knowledge.

*Kristyn Scorsone:* That's terrible.

*Sharon Denise Davis:* The table of knowledge. She's laughing 'cause I told her, before, about them. That's what they call themselves. That's what they call the table of knowledge.

*Kristyn Scorsone:* Do they bother you?

*Sharon Denise Davis:* Oh, no, they don't bother me, but when they're not in the room—and let's say they're in the same space I'm in and they start talking, I shut them down because I don't wanna hear it. I don't wanna hear your crazy whatever. I have other coworkers who have shut them down too.

I have other coworkers who call them out for what they are, which is good because you should call them out for what they are. I was tellin' Noelle one of my coworkers, he called one of the guys out for what he was. I told her, I said, "He's about to retire," this particular coworker. I said, "I'm glad he's retirin' because he's had

enough of that nonsense, altogether.” Can you imagine he’s over there and he gotta listen to that crap all the time? He’s Italian, and he call them out. He be callin’ them out.

*Kristyn Scorsone:* Good.

*Sharon Denise Davis:* I told him, I said, “Vinny, I don’t blame you.” Retire. Relax. You have to deal with that crap. Besides the trains, you gotta come here and listen to this nonsense, too, and then feel like you have to speak up because it sickens you.

*Kristyn Scorsone:* Yeah. Do you have an HR department?

*Sharon Denise Davis:* Yeah, we do.

*[Laughter]*

*Kristyn Scorsone:* They can’t ban the table of nitwit *[laughter and audio cuts out]*?

*Sharon Denise Davis:* See, it goes back to the company and the union. I would say the membership and the—this is something that I think, as an employee and as a coworker and all that, a lot of us have been dealing with from one to the next, from back in the days because I hear the stories from some of the older guys of color.

They tell me the stories about the racist *[audio cuts out]*. They’re from one generation to the next. The father they saw or did or said, it’s just the son doin’ the same thing or whatever. It’s from one generation to the next—things like that. These people have 25 years, 30 years with the company—35 years. They don’t touch them.

*Kristyn Scorsone:* The table of knowledgers, they’re mostly older guys?

*Sharon Denise Davis:* Yeah, like 50-something, 60-whatever.

*Kristyn Scorsone:* That makes me wonder, too—this is an aside, but the white butch lesbians that you work with, do they have different experience? Obviously, I’m sure they experience homophobia, I guess. Is it a little easier for them, or do they get just as much abuse?

*Sharon Denise Davis:* You know what, that’s what I would like to know. See, I don’t get into those stories too much with them. Me, I’m an open book. I don’t feel like there’s a reason for me to just—I wanna talk about it. Why keep it inside? I wanna talk about it. I wanna share it. I want people to know what’s really going on. I want them to know



this is real. The threats and everything else, it's real. Why keep it to yourself? God forbid if something happens. No one knew anything. Or, like I said, paper trails. Oh, he threatened me. Da, da, da, da, da, da, da. This, that. This, that. File it so they'll know. I would like to find out. I would like to—that's why I said I would like to get together with them and talk. It doesn't have to be all about the job, but I would really like to know because the company need to do their job. Part of their job is to make sure that we're safe. It's not just the passengers, make sure the passengers are safe. Hey, they give the homeless people better protection than us.

*Kristyn Scorsone:* Yeah. Have you seen any LGBTQ-plus passengers getting harassed or anything?

*Sharon Denise Davis:* No. No, because even for pride, like New York City pride, we get a lot of passengers coming into New York from Jersey for pride—costumes and the whole nine yards. It's like everyone is so used to seeing these individuals on the trains 'cause a lot of them have been doin' this thing for years. I can't remember one time someone said something to another passenger or whatever on the train that was threatening them because they're gay or whatever.

*Kristyn Scorsone:* Right. Is that a fun day for you when it's pride?

*Sharon Denise Davis:* Oh, for me, it is. It's a lotta fun. The strangest thing I heard one of my coworkers say, though, one day—but this also caught my ear because I was like, "Ah-ha, he knows what's—" he said, "Wow, you know what—" I forgot. I think he was talking to another coworker of mine. He said, "You know what, let me tell you something, you don't ever say something out of line to one of these people on the train." This was pride, I think. It was pride. I think he was talking about my—one of my passengers, he dresses up as Bo Peep for pride.

*[Laughter]*

*Sharon Denise Davis:* He has a small friend who's his sheep.

*[Laughter]*

*Kristyn Scorsone:* That's awesome. I love that.

*Sharon Denise Davis:* It was funny. We were all on a train, and I was listening to my coworker, and my coworker said to my other coworker, he said, "Well, you better not never catch yourself saying something out of

line because, let me tell you something, one thing about the LGBTQ community, they have lawyers ready.”

*[Laughter and crosstalk]*

Noelle: So problematic.

*[Laughter]*

Sharon Denise Davis: He was like, “You better not say nothing outta line because they’ll hit you with a lawsuit in a second,” or something. They were cracking up. It was funny, though, the way he said it. I looked at him, and I was like, “I’m not gonna say nothing about that.”

*[Laughter]*

Sharon Denise Davis: That’s because he was looking at Bo Peep’s little sheep.

Kristyn Scorsone: Don’t make me call Lambda Legal.

*[Laughter]*

Sharon Denise Davis: That is the coolest costume, oh my god.

Kristyn Scorsone: That is awesome.

Sharon Denise Davis: Yeah, it is. It’s totally awesome. I love them. When I see them, I’m like, “Yes, I know it’s pride.”

Kristyn Scorsone: I guess it’s pretty celebratory, then, on the train that day?

Sharon Denise Davis: Yes.

Kristyn Scorsone: That’s nice. That’s really nice.

Sharon Denise Davis: It’s funny. Bo Peep, he’s been riding the train—wow. He’s been doing it for a long time. Well, for me, it’s gotta be—wow—eight years.

Kristyn Scorsone: Is Bo Peep from Newark?

Sharon Denise Davis: That’s for me. Hmm?

Kristyn Scorsone: Is Bo Peep from Newark, do you know?

*Sharon Denise Davis:* Huh-uh. He's coming from the Metro Park area. Yeah, he's coming from the Metro Park area. They're so sweet though. They're real sweet. There are times when it's really cool.

*Kristyn Scorsone:* That's so cool.

*Sharon Denise Davis:* Pride is always a lotta fun. Pride is fun. Pride is a lotta fun on the trains. Pride is fun. Other celebrations, like Patty's Day, is not so much fun.

*Kristyn Scorsone:* I was gonna say...

*[Laughter]*

*Sharon Denise Davis:* It's not so much fun. Not at all. It's not so much fun.

*Kristyn Scorsone:* Yeah, I can imagine.

*Sharon Denise Davis:* Yeah, different type of crowd.

*Kristyn Scorsone:* Well, is there anything else that you should talk about or anything else that I've missed?

*Sharon Denise Davis:* No. *[Crosstalk and audio cuts out]*—

*Kristyn Scorsone:* Is it okay, if I think of other questions at any point, if I contact you or anything like that?

*Sharon Denise Davis:* Sure.

*Kristyn Scorsone:* Yeah? Awesome.

*Sharon Denise Davis:* Like I said, I'll ask my coworker—

*Kristyn Scorsone:* Yes, please.

*Sharon Denise Davis:* - if she wouldn't mind being interviewed. I'll ask her.

*Kristyn Scorsone:* Awesome. Great. Yeah, thank you so much for doing this. I'll stop recording now. Stopping—

*[End of Audio]*