

Queer Newark Oral History Project

Interviewee: Sky Lara

Interviewer: Alexander Rosado-Torres

Date: April 14, 2022

Location: Zoom

Alexander Rosado-Torres: All right. Recording has started, and just one more time, I'm gonna ask, Sky, do I have your consent to record your audio and video for the purposes of this oral history interview?

Sky Lara: Yes.

Alexander Rosado-Torres: Okay. Perfect. Thank you. Alright so I'm gonna share my screen now just so we can see the consent form, and so this is the consent form for the Queer Newark Oral History Project. This is your interview consent form with audio and visual recording, and essentially, this goes over the purposes of the study, and so I'm sure you are already familiar. This is part of the Queer Newark Oral History Project. This interview will be approximately one to two hours in length. However, we can go as little/as long as you would like, given your availability, and my availability, and essentially, I'm gonna be asking you to ask—answer questions that I pose from our research team. However, if there's any question that you would not like to address or you wanna retract an answer or anything like that you ultimately have all those sort of decision-making power in this dynamic when it comes to that sort of stuff. [0:01:21]

A question that people often ask is will the information I give be confidential, and ultimately, what we're gonna do is through this oral history interview process, we can share the final transcript with you so you can review if there are things that you would like to remove from the record or if you would like to scratch your whole interview from the record and from being preserved in our digital archive. Other than that, this is sort of public information, right, as an oral history interview where the stories and memories that you share with us will hopefully be made available to the public for historians and other researchers, and just people interested in the history of Newark to learn. We don't anticipate there being any risks to participate in the study.

Sometimes questions may make us feel—may trigger emotions or feelings or anything like that, but of course, if you ever need to take time or you wanna turn your camera

off or you wanna take a moment away, totally cool. Yeah. We'll archive your interview. It'll be part of our archive. There is no payment in participating, and then this is being conducted by the Queer Newark Oral History Project at Rutgers University Newark within the history department, and so I can share this digital copy with you so you have it just for your records. I have to check in with Kristen to see if we actually need to get it signed, but if we don't then we should be good to go since I have a recorded audio consent.

Sky Lara: Got it. Okay. Perfect.

Alexander Rosado-Torres: All right, and so at this point, I'm gonna get started with the more formal interview portion, okay?

Sky Lara: Okay. Yep.

Alexander Rosado-Torres: Today is Thursday, April 14, 2022. My name is Alexander Rosado-Torres. I'm interviewing Sky, and I am located in Champaign, Illinois. This interview is happening over Zoom for the Queer Newark Oral History Project, and so at this point, Sky, it'd be great to learn your first and last name, and where are you located, and tuning in from.

Sky Lara: Okay. I'm Sky Lara. My pronouns are they/them. Currently, I'm in Newark, and I'm residing in the HLLC dorm building at Rutgers University Newark. Yeah.

Alexander Rosado-Torres: Awesome. Thank you. All right. The way that we're gonna work through this interview is that we have three sections that we like to explore. The first one is your childhood/family origin, and so I'm gonna work through some questions there. I'm gonna do my very best not to really interrupt or interject, just kind of give you the platform and space to talk, and so if there's ever any awkward silences or anything like that, I'm just taking notes/taking in all the information that you're sharing.

Sky Lara: Got it. Okay. Perfect.

Alexander Rosado-Torres: All right. The first question is when and where were you born?

Sky Lara: I was born in the Clara Maass Hospital, which is actually in Bloomfield, so it's kind of funny because I can't really say born and from Newark, but obviously, my family, we all

lived in the Forest Hill North Ward area of Newark. My family has an Ecuadorian background. They are Ecuadorian immigrants, and I actually reside with my parents, my sister, my cousins, my uncle and aunts.

Alexander Rosado-Torres: You kind of started alluding to this, but one of the questions we have is who raised you, and did you grow up in one place or household or more than one?

Sky Lara: My family, we always resided in the same house from when I was born. Apparently, before I was born, they moved from some literally across the street, so it wasn't a huge move for them, but I actually grew up with a babysitter, a Puerto Rican babysitter that lives, oh, a couple blocks from my house. It's still the North Ward of Newark, and she was—well, they were because it was a family that was actually taking care of me. They were Puerto Rican background, so funny enough, when I was younger, I used to pick up on Puerto Rican Spanish and Puerto Rican foods rather than Ecuadorian foods, and that caused a little bit of a weird, I guess, culture difference because my parents were like, “why are you calling oranges china [0:06:26] when they're naranjas [0:06:27],” and I'm like “well, that's my babysitter.” She took care of me since I was two months all the way until I was five. I never went to preschool. I jumped straight into kindergarten at Ridge Street.

Alexander Rosado-Torres: Thank you for sharing, and so during your first question, you shared that you were raised with lots of extended family members, and so within your household, would you be comfortable sharing who lived within your household?

Sky Lara: Yeah. Okay. Immediate family was my dad, my mom, and then my sister. Above us was my uncle and aunt. My aunt is blood related to my dad, and they had three kids, so three of my cousins I lived with and grew up with, and then my uncle had a daughter from a previous marriage, and she was the third family that lived another floor above them, and with them, it was her, her husband, and her child, which basically, I consider them my aunt, uncle, and cousin, despite not being blood related.

Alexander Rosado-Torres: Would you be able to share a little bit more about what that experience was like for you growing up, right, being

surrounded by so many of your family members and cousins and things like that?

Sky Lara:

Yeah. I would say I had a very positive experience having my extended family living in the same household because then, growing up, I had my cousins, we—my youngest cousin in the house, he was four years older than me, but the two floors above me [0:08:21], that cousin, he is I think two or four years younger than me. No, I think he's only two years younger than me, so I grew up always having someone to interact with that was near my age group. My older cousin, he would help me—he got me into Star Wars, all the dorky Pokémon, video games, and then my younger cousin, he kind of liked to play outside, so we always played tag and stuff. My sister, she's seven years older than me, and then my other two cousins are older than her, so they are in a different age bracket, so now that I'm older, now that I'm twenty-one, they are more open to interacting and talking about adult stuff, but when I was younger, we kind of—it was—we played Monopoly together, but it—I was treated as the youngest cousin because I was, essentially, but I think I grew up mainly interacting with my cousin that lived a block away from us, so there was another cousin nearby, and all of us kind of would come over and play outside. It was a very positive experience. Yeah. It was like having, I guess, a support system when I was younger.

Alexander Rosado-Torres:

Thank you for sharing that, illuminating more about your experiences in your childhood, and so let's see. Were there any big changes between your childhood and teenage years that impacted your household at all that sort of stand out in your memory?

Sky Lara:

Yeah. I suppose there was a bit of family drama between family from Ecuador and the family here. That is some tension, but I think the biggest one that influenced my personal views was I suppose when—it was actually when I was elementary school, but I was technically too young to know about it. It wasn't till much older that I started connecting the pieces where essentially, so I'm trying to think of the year. I was in the first grade, so I was only six, so my sister must have been eleven, twelve. Honestly, growing up, public schools at the time used to always push the rhetoric trust law enforcement. If you see a cop, they're helpers. My sister one day on her way to school, these two

officers just kind of stopped her and was like, “hey, we wanna just ask you some questions. Who lives in your household.” There was some—they didn’t really give her any context, but she provided answers because she trusted law enforcement.

Come to find out that a neighbor saw two Latino people walking down the block, and he just assumed that they were undocumented, so he actually contacted ICE to investigate, and so ICE raided the whole block, just checking house by house who was documented, who wasn’t, and unfortunately, in my household, there’s two family members that are undocumented. Then, that caused some tension because one of them is obviously blood related to me, and so it was unfortunate that it was like my sister was tied to the cause of it, but then it was also like she was also preyed on because she was a child that trusted an adult, so growing up my parents always told me, don’t trust law enforcement. If someone comes up to you, never give them answers, even if they show you a badge, if they do this and that and the other.

I was like, okay, so I kind of always grew up not trusting government as much, which kind of played in a role in my studies because now I study public and non-profit administration, and a big part of it is interacting with government, so it’s kind of weird ‘cause it’s like technically law enforcement is part of the public sector, and it’s a weird, fine line where I’m just like, I know I have to work with you at some point, but I don’t know if I could ever get past that specific experience.

Alexander Rosado-Torres: Yeah. Definitely, and I just wanna validate, right, that it’s so—your experience is so real and so true and it’s so unfortunate that that’s the case, right, that these are the real experiences of individuals who have to navigate this world undocumented, and so I really appreciate you sharing that with us and thank you. I guess one question I have from that is could you speak a little bit to what your neighborhood was like? What was your street like growing up and your overall community?

Sky Lara: I feel like the Forest Hill area of Newark is honestly the most wealthiest part of Newark, so we actually had a lot of white neighbors, and so I know currently, I have an Italian family that lives on the same block. We have technically—

but I feel like still the majority is Latin or comes from Latin descent because there's a lot of Cubans. There's Puerto Ricans. There were Dominicans. My family were Ecuadorian, so there are other Ecuadorians on the block. I think there was also people from Peru, so they came from a whole bunch of backgrounds, and I feel like my mom in particular knows a lot, if not all of the neighbors because she worked at the local church, the local Catholic Church, and the minute you're a common face in a church, you kind of gather everyone that's literally in the community.
[0:14:40]

My mom knows everybody by face and name. I did not really have that much of a connection to them, if I'm being honest, because I had my cousins in the same household, and then my cousins a block away. I kind of always stuck to that bubble. Yeah, but for the most part, two blocks from my house, there's a bunch of local, Latin businesses. Everyone speaks majority Spanish in my area, which is why it was even weirder that the neighbor called ICE due to two suspicious Latin men, 'cause there was—everyone in the area is Latin. It was just unfortunate racial bias at that point.

Alexander Rosado-Torres: Yeah. Thank you for sharing that information. It definitely does help contextualize, right, how—I think you said earlier Newark is so huge, yet so diverse and there's so many people who come here to the city. I have one question, but actually, before I get to that, I wanted to ask, what sort of work did your parents engage in growing up or what did your family, the adults in your family do as you were a child?

Sky Lara: My mom worked at a factory. I can't say which factory because I don't recall, but after the whole ICE situation, I think during—when I was in second grade, during that time period, there was just a lot more ICE raids and it was just a lot of investigations, so her factory job was investigated because they had a lot of undocumented workers. Fortunately, I think that day, she didn't go in for some random reason, like I think she was either late or something just kind of prevented her from going to work. Her boss called and was like, "Don't come in. It's not really safe." Fortunately, from that, she stayed home, so then she was unemployed for a while. It was a blessing and a curse. My mom doesn't like not being employed. She really likes to

work, but at the same time, since I was young, it helped her take care of me essentially because, like I mentioned before, from second—since I was two months till I was five, I grew up with my babysitter, so it wasn't like my mom had a full on active parental role until that situation happened, but then, I think when was it?

Maybe the eighth grade was when she started—someone from the local church offered her a position there. Then, she started working at the local church, but then right before quarantine or when COVID happened, she lost that job, and then another friend offered her a position at a daycare center, and now, she currently works at a daycare and she's taking online courses to get certifications and ensuring that all of the stuff works out. She loves it there. She loves the kids. They're very cute. My dad, very consistent, always worked at Frontline Incorporated. It's essentially a boilers company. He makes boil and heating systems, very technical, STEM, I suppose, and yeah, he's worked there I think the whole time that he's been in America, and now he has a managerial position, but he likes to work as if he's every other worker, making his own boil systems by himself.

He still tries to pull weight and stuff, but now that he's aging, it's starting to affect him, and it's like, all right, let's take some stuff back, but he's a bit stubborn 'cause he's an Ecuadorian man. The very macho mentality resides heavily in him. My sister, she actually worked while she was a teenager. She worked as an assistant for an attorney for immigrant lawyers. That made her interested into studying Latino studies in Rutgers New Brunswick, and she did originally plan to go to law school, but then she realized, it wasn't for her, so now, she graduated with an anthropology degree, and she works as, I think, they don't use the word assistant, but I think it's office clerk for another law firm that also specializes in immigration cases and immigration law, and she lives in New York now. She's happy there.

Alexander Rosado-Torres: Okay. Awesome. Well, thank you so much for sharing that information. I think it always helps give context, right, to how we contextualize who we become and things like that, and so other than your immediate family members, were there any adults within your community or your school who really shaped your understanding of yourself or your life overall?

Sky Lara:

[Unintelligible 20:22] ‘cause I know my babysitter definitely has because this might not—even after they stopped taking care of me since I was—after I was five and I went to school, we still kept in contact. Every year, they always drop off a present for Christmas and my birthday to this day. I keep in contact with them. I feel like they always—you know when they say it takes a village to take care of a child? I feel like fortunately for me, I feel like I had a mini-village taking care of me at all times. Outside of her and the people that lived in that household, I don’t know if necessarily there was any influential teachers. I feel like I didn’t really like school growing up. I didn’t really quite understand it. Sometimes I wonder if it’s because I didn’t go to preschool, so it was like one day I was in my babysitter’s house, and then the next day, it was like, you’re now in a room full of children your age, and I was like, whoa.

I don’t know any of you. It was kind of funny because apparently, I did not adapt very quickly in kindergarten. I was a bit of a cry baby, but all the way from kindergarten to eighth grade, I feel like there was the early signs of queerness that looking back, I’m like, goodness, there it is, but I don’t think necessarily any teachers and I got along ‘cause I don’t—eighth grade me and younger was obviously in this very insecure state of confusion. I feel like school was the first place where gender roles were really being implemented, and that led me to spiral without even knowing. I think I ended having a bit of an identity crisis or just natural puberty stuff where I was starting to question the way I identify myself, not necessarily just as—only my queer identities, but also my religion, and the values and the morals and my stances on different things was just changing, but in high school, I had a way more supportive friend group, and they kind of helped shape, I think, a lot of my values in a very positive way, but yeah.

I don’t know anyone beyond that, except some maybe random bus people. I feel like there was actually because I used to take the bus to Science [Park High School], sometimes I would sit next to an older woman, and every time, they’ll try to strike up a conversation. I remember talking to someone. She told me that she doesn’t know how to read. She complained to me about her son, who also doesn’t like school, and she was like, but he has amazing

opportunities. I hate that he's not taking it seriously, but she was like, I had a daughter that she's very successful, but she just told me to value education because she herself never was able to have one in El Salvador, and now she's—in her words, she was stuck collecting trash for money, and that's not somewhere she really wanted to be.

Alexander Rosado-Torres: Yeah. Thank you for sharing that. A quick question I had is what bus number did you used to take?

Sky Lara: The Ninety-nine.

Alexander Rosado-Torres: The Ninety-nine?

Sky Lara: Mm-hmm.

Alexander Rosado-Torres: Awesome. Alright so you kind of started going into it a little bit and I would love to dive in even further. What schools did you attend throughout your life, and you can sort of just walk us through your schooling experience, essentially?

Sky Lara: From kindergarten all the way to eighth grade, it was Ridge Street, and then all four years of high school was Science Park High School. Yeah. Not a lot of changes from there. It's actually the same exact path that my sister went.

Alexander Rosado-Torres: Oh, wow. Okay. Very cool, and did you—what education level do your parents have?

Sky Lara: Both of them have some college. I'm not very familiar with the Ecuadorian college system because it's a bit stranger, but I think my mom, she was studying accounting over there, but she immigrated over here, and never really finished those studies, but apparently, she also studied cosmetology. She didn't really like it. She wasn't really that good with it. My dad, he studied engineering, and some other specific engineering things, a lot of the sciences, but he also didn't finish his degree. Yeah.

Alexander Rosado-Torres: Yeah. Totally understand and I feel like that's really the case with so many families who migrate out here and started programs, and differences in education systems. One more question I have about your upbringing and childhood is what role, if any, did religion play in your life? I know you shared that your mom was affiliated with the

Catholic Church in your community and so what role did that play within your life?

Sky Lara:

I mean, religion. My family, everyone identifies as Catholic. There's a few cousins that were like—that have expressed that they contemplated Christianity because Catholicism is a bit too conservative and traditional in certain ideologies, but because of cultural significance and Ecuador itself is a very Catholic-dominant country, it's almost like we had to identify as Catholic to be a part of the culture, so I feel like despite some of my cousins being like, I feel like that they're personally more leaning towards Christianity, they still verbally identify as Catholic for the culture, essentially. From my understanding, I think I'm the only one that's an atheist in the family. I didn't realize I was an atheist until I was in the eighth grade. In Catholicism, you have to go through baptism, confirmation, and then—I literally forget every time. The Eucharist or something.

Alexander Rosado-Torres:

Yeah. Yeah, yeah, the baptism, communion, confirmation.

Sky Lara:

Communion, okay, okay, yeah. It's because—

Alexander Rosado-Torres:

Which is receiving the Eucharist, yeah.

Sky Lara:

Yeah. I used to always say communism by accident, but I did all three. Because my mom worked at the church, she kind of helped, and I think my cousin actually was a teacher at the church, so all of them kind of put extra attention onto me, making sure I passed my exams. I was horrible at Catholic school though. It was incredibly ironic because everyone was like, oh, you're such a good student. You get all A's at Ridge Street, but then at Catholic school, I'm like, god, I don't understand. I'm like making jokes. I'm distracting everybody. I was the worst one there. I never studied for it. I just lacked a lot of interest, and even little, younger me in mass, and they would hear the preacher, I just always remember disagreeing. In some shape or form, I would just disagree. I can't exactly recall what it was. Maybe it was the fact that sometimes he'll put vague statements, like oh, it's the parents' responsibility to make sure that the kid is this, that and the other.

If your kid is not a, b, and c, then you're a bad parent, and I'm just like, that's terrible. What a blanket statement.

What if I'm just not that person? Who I am is not a direct reflection of my parents' parenting necessarily. I never had any interest in Catholicism or religion in general, so in elementary school, I remember in eighth grade, a friend of mine was—we were all sitting as a group, and they were like, let's go around. What are your guys' religion? Every time without fail, if someone used to ask me that question, I used to be like, I'm Catholic, but I don't believe in God. The longest title, and such a paradox. It doesn't really make sense. It wasn't until I said that that he responded with, oh, so you're an atheist? I was like, what is that? It wasn't until I started looking it up that I actually realized that there are more religions beyond Catholicism. I felt like growing up, it was always sort of like a box that my parents kind of placed. I was like, this is the things that exist and the things that exist is the only things that we want you to be, and I never really questioned it until I ran over it [0:29:50] and I was like, oh, there's a whole other world of stuff and identities that maybe I respond better to than all of these moments when I'm like, I'm this, but not really.

From that point on, I realized I was an atheist, and I didn't really tell directly to my parents because they really didn't get it. They were like, you're totally Catholic. Don't be ridiculous. God's with you. I used to still go to church once a year when it was Easter because of the specific significance in Catholicism that Easter holds. Ash Wednesday, I still get the cross, but I never really went for confession anymore. I never went up for the blood and bread of Christ, body of Christ. I didn't do any of it. I just kind of just sat there, and every time they were like, okay, now, kneel and pray for something, I would just kneel. I'm like, okay, so how long do I have to wait until I can sit down again? It wasn't until recently, like maybe one or two years ago that I started to hone in on the fact that I was like, mom, I genuinely just don't believe in this. You can't really force me to pray on something that I don't believe. It's really gonna be really anti-statements and anti-thoughts, but it is a bit conflicting because my parents—my family, when there's certain things that happen, like for example the ICE raid, unfortunately, one of the doors to our specific apartment, it was old door. It was a really old door, so it kind of like jammed. You have to really pull it, so the ICE searcher or worker, when he pulled it, it didn't budge, and he was like, what's in there?

My uncle was just like, that's the basement. He was like, oh, okay, and they didn't check it, and my family thought that was so weird because ICE protocol is that they have to check every single room, and fortunately, both of my undocumented family members were in the basement, so they actually didn't check it, so my family uses moments like that where they use it to strengthen their own faith. It was God that helped us and protected us. I'm not gonna invalidate their beliefs, either. It's one of those things where I validate theirs. I'm respectful for their beliefs. It's not really mutual. They can't really understand mine, but I guess it's fine. In a way, I'm still willing to look as if I'm praying. As long as they don't call me out, then I don't have to mention, yeah, guys, I don't pray, and I don't believe in God. Every time my mom calls me out like don't do that, and I'm just like, why? I can't do the other. Yeah.

Alexander Rosado-Torres: Thank you for sharing. Super, super, super insightful. I have so many things to say, but this is about you, so I'm gonna move onto my next question. One question is what is your earliest memory of Newark? But you were essentially born and raised there. However, I'll still pose it to you. In your own way, what would you say is your first memory of whoa, I live in Newark?

Sky Lara: I feel like I think it was—little me was very obedient. To go to elementary school, I only walked two blocks down to school and I came back, and that was the only path I took every, single day, and it wasn't until one day I went to school, and my friends were like, hey, come with me to this bodega for empanadas, and I only knew one bodega for empanadas that was in Mt. Prospect, but they were going to a different one, and while we were walking, I was like, whoa, I've never been here before, and it just had a completely different look to it. It was a lot smaller. I feel like the Forrest Hill area were very privileged into having a lot of big places and space, but for this specific area, it was small and condensed, so there was a lot more bricks. It was I guess in more way—it gave more of an urban feel, and so we went in. They bought their stuff. We walked out and we went back to school.

Then, I realized, yeah, I'm not obligated to constantly go through these two blocks in and out all the time, but unfortunately because my family is—are immigrants, they mainly used to Ecuadorian community, so Newark

community was very different because they came when there was the 90s and it was high on crime. My parents themselves are kind of fearful of Newark. They don't really trust people all that much, so I grew up also sort of fearing the Newark community, but it wasn't until that walk with my friends, I was like, what's there to even be afraid of? There's so much of the city that I wasn't even aware of because since I was so close to the border of Newark, my family and I would always leave Newark for stuff. We used to go to Bloomfield.

We used to go to Montclair, Nutley, but we rarely interacted with the actual—our own city, so much so that my older cousin who I grew up with, he—despite we were both living in the same household, because I went to public schools. He actually went to private schools. He's not aware anything of Newark, so he only learned a few years ago that we were in the Forest Hill North Ward area of Newark. He doesn't even know what the wards are. He hasn't really interacted with the city as much, and I don't think any of my older cousins have much either, and it was mainly my sister and I who because we were in public schools really went into the city, but I feel like that was my first memory, where I realized that the city is really big, and there's a lot to see and that there's a lot of different living experiences outside of my own, and that other people knew stuff more—other places to get the same things. That was kind of new to me.

Alexander Rosado-Torres: Thank you. So many questions just came up for me, and I'm gonna go with the first one. Do you remember there being any reasons as to why maybe your cousins went to private school and you went to public school?

Sky Lara: Yeah. My uncle and aunt, they're both documented, so they both worked pretty well-paid jobs. Like I mentioned, my mom, we kind of were relying more on my father's income, but they always went to Catholic schools. I'm wondering if it's maybe because my—I don't know if it's because my aunt and uncle really are religious, and they wanted their kids to really have that Catholic experience because personally, my dad, despite him also being religious and Catholic, he always said that he didn't like the church. It's kind of—he loved the religion. He had a lot of faith, but he kind of took a more spiritual route, rather than an institutional route, which is like [0:37:52] he didn't believe

that you would have to go to church every Sunday to practice your faith. He felt like as long as you personally had that connection, then you're good. My dad didn't want us to go to a Catholic school, but also, when my sister—that was obviously their first kid.

My sister went to a Catholic preschool, and my mom hated them, not hated them, but hated it because when she—one day when she took my sister from preschool to actual school or a different preschool or something like that, the place asked my mom, where was she before this? She doesn't know anything. She doesn't know the letters. She doesn't know the numbers. What was she doing before? My mom realized that the Catholic preschool was just making them play games all the time, nothing actually educational. From that point forward, neither of my parents really were supporters of Catholic school. They were supporters of the Catholic church and the Catholic faith, but not the schools, and I figured, I guess, from there, just automatically public schools. I don't think they wanted to really pay or I don't know if they could pay for our education.

Alexander Rosado-Torres: Awesome. Thank you for sharing that, and so just really quickly, I wanna check in on time. Are you good to go fifteen minutes?

Sky Lara: Yeah, I could go for longer.

Alexander Rosado-Torres: Okay. Perfect. All right. What year were you born?

Sky Lara: 2001.

Alexander Rosado-Torres: Okay. How have you seen Newark change? I mean, obviously, I don't know that you have any conscious memories from 2001, but from your earliest conscious memories to right now, how has Newark changed, and are there any ways that it's changed that you think most people aren't aware of?

Sky Lara: I would say, I might almost go in order. I know my elementary school has changed a lot. When I went—it wasn't until my friend pointed this out. In kindergarten, first grade, and I think maybe even second grade, we had gym in the classrooms. We had to pushups between the desks, and it was like, okay, kids, do jumping jacks

between the chairs. Make sure not to hit the chairs. I never questioned it, not one bit. It wasn't until my friend years later, she ended up in second grade transferring to a different elementary school. She went to Park Elementary the minute it opened, and she was like, oh, we had a gym, and I was like, yeah, we had a gym, and she was like, no, for all ages, we had a gym. You don't remember when we had gym in the class? I was like, you're absolutely right. I completely did not question that at all. I feel like now Ridge Street has changed a lot.

Now, they have an engineering club. No. They have a robotics club. They have the Math Olympics now more frequently in Newark. I noticed that my elementary school is providing a lot more extra-curriculars, and a lot more resources to the students, which is great, very much well needed because I feel like my elementary school was such important—in a very important state when I was there. That for sure changed. Science, I don't know if science really—they've definitely been changing administrations often. I know there's been more conflict with teachers' rights and excessive hours of labor, but that's something that I'm an almost like an outsider to, and don't really know how much it's been changing all that much. Beyond that, my actual neighborhood and city, oh, my neighborhood itself has gotten [0:41:56] way wealthier. It's such high pricing.

The house next to us, it sold for \$500,000, and we were all very confused because we're like, my god, that roof was rotten. The house wasn't even all that. It had to be reconstructed and renovated, and it was just a very crazy price, but I think when my family bought our house, they were able to pay off the mortgage now, and it was okay, but it was just very baffling that the house sold for \$500,000 because that signifies that a lot of the houses in the Forest Hill area are now gonna be around that price range or even higher, and that's honestly the biggest thing that we're noticing in Newark is a lot of prices are going up for housing. A lot of other changes that I know is that Newark has been really honing in on the art in Newark, a lot more call for Newark pride and Newark is for artists, Newark is for immigrants, and it's interesting 'cause all my friends we were like, it's a bit of a double-edged sword where as children of immigrants, it was like our parents told us to be fearful of Newark, and that Newark has a lot of growth to do before we can really be proud of it.

Granted, I feel like now, Newark has been trying to really hone on the community building aspect of their projects and events, and that's refreshing, and I feel like that's what helps make Newark pride a bit more realistic because previously, it was like, how can we have Newark pride if our textbooks are years old. We're constantly having lead-poisoned water, all of these other infrastructure issues, and we're just like how much pride can we have, and is this pride really blinding us to constructive criticism of city governance? But yeah, a lot of new buildings are coming in. My god, when my friend and I, when we went to the Ironbound like a week ago, and we were seeing such modern buildings in the area, and we thought that they stood out so much.

Ironbound has a very specific look to it. It has a very community, local business vibe, and these glass buildings are just right there, and we were just so confused. I was like, it was clearly new. It was so out of place. It was just in a way disgusting because we were like, my god, is Newark really transforming how it looks from actual local creativity to this very modern glass vibe, and we're not for it in that regard. The argument is that it makes it safer, but it's also driving the prices up, and all my friends and I were just like we wanna stay in Newark, but we can't stay if it's unaffordable. Yeah.

Alexander Rosado-Torres: Yeah. Very much that last part that you said, right? Affordability is so important, and even you, right, you said that you're at the HLLC building, and that's a new building within the city of the Newark, too, right?

Sky Lara: Yeah.

Alexander Rosado-Torres: Do you ever think about that? One question I have is you currently attend Rutgers University Newark, correct?

Sky Lara: Yes.

Alexander Rosado-Torres: Do you ever think about the way in which the university takes up space in the city of Newark?

Sky Lara: Yeah. For sure. In one of my classes for HLLC, it's Local Citizenship in a Global World, and it's interesting because in that class, they encourage us to check Newark archives,

and they would teach us about Newark history. They were very transparent about the fact that the administrative offices, they're in houses that was previously owned by Puerto Rican residents that they were all evicted when Rutgers decided to expand, and from the highways and all this other stuff. They were transparent that this area used to be Puerto Rican, and it was like a question. We're like, okay, where did they go? I don't think anyone really knows, but there was an image of a black resident or house owner of one of the houses, and the guy or the professor, he was like, that's my office.

Her house is now my office because of these laws that allowed it—and these specific events, and it does bring a huge question mark because a lot of the Rutgers buildings are considered historic buildings, but I know they've also been renovated. One of the dorming buildings, Talbott, was previously a hospital. They changed it now to a dorming building, but in terms of that, I think the weirdest part is when we see Halsey [Street] because the HLLC building is very close to Halsey. It's on New Street, and right there on Halsey, all of the buildings or the businesses there are pretty new. That's where the Hahnes building is. A lot of the professors reside in the Hahnes apartment buildings, and all that was new to me because granted when I was younger, I was always in the Broad Street area, so I don't think I ever went to Halsey when I was younger, but I can imagine that it did not look like this a few years ago because everything looks so modern and new.

It's clearly new, and it's interesting because a lot of presenters from my classes still mention, oh yeah, art institution is thinking of building housing for this area, like the Newark Museum is going to end up—build town houses where the parking lot is. NJPAC too. And they keep saying that they're gonna build these housing plans so that people could have housing options, but then when students ask, what's the price range? They're like well, a percentage of it is gonna be for affordable housing. Yeah, and then, they never really say a specific number, of course. They don't, and so it was like, in theory it's nice. We'll have housing options. Some of it will be affordable, but then the reality is like, people from Newark are gonna be competing for that affordability, and if it's only ten percent or fifteen percent of the whole building, then that's not a lot. A lot of people are gonna still be left houseless and unsheltered, and

it's weird because I remember one presenter, they asked so what happens when people from outside of Newark are coming in and taking space from Newark citizens?

They're like, shockingly, in the Hahnes building, the majority of people who live there are Newark—are from Newark. There's not a lot of outsiders, and granted, we didn't get any statistical data to back that up. We just had to take his word for it, so to speak, and then because of the question, can we really trust it? I don't think at any point in history has Newark really allowed residents to trust their housing plans because as I mentioned, Rutgers buildings took away homes from Puerto Rican residents and black residents in the past. There have been so many highway constructions that have taken homes from other communities. I don't think there's ever been a point where we could really trust their word when it comes to housing, but I do know [Mayor] Ras Baraka is trying to pry and keep Newark but gentrify Newark at the same time [0:50:34], which is also a bit of a paradox, but that's another conversation.

Alexander Rosado-Torres: Oh, yeah, that is a whole other conversation, and so, unfortunately, I definitely have a hard stop at 2:30, only 'cause I have—I work full-time, and so I have another thing that I have to go to. I'm gonna ask you two more questions, and then what I'm gonna do is if you're available/interested, I would love to schedule a part two for us to sort of wrap up the second half.

Sky Lara: Yeah. That's perfect. Yeah.

Alexander Rosado-Torres: Okay. Awesome. My last two questions are just gonna be closing out on Newark. Excuse me, but also, sort of entering the conversation about LGBTQ+ sexuality and gender identity and things like that.

Sky Lara: Got it.

Alexander Rosado-Torres: And so my first question is earlier you shared a little bit about how you were raised at the border or near the border, and so could you speak a little bit more about what towns or cities bordered the Forest Hill area, and more about how that shaped your experience?

Sky Lara:

Yeah. I feel like the main one is Bloomfield. Conveniently, obviously, Branch Brook Park is right there. Branch Brook Park is part of Newark, but for example, I had always access to the Cherry Blossom Festival. When I took my friend, they were like, oh, this is my first time. I never saw it before. This is such a huge park, and I'm like, I've always had access to this. Beyond that, that's the train station of Branch Brook Park, the train, always had access to transportation, was able to always go to Penn Station to travel anywhere from there or go to school that way. I always had two options, buses and trains, and leaving Newark, it was like Bloomfield, and right there was supermarkets and other laundromats. My mom used to tell me—we used to go to a laundromat right there, that in the laundromat they sold empanadas that little me was obsessed with, so every time, I would look forward to laundry day because I could have these great empanadas, but another big issue of Newark is food insecurity.

A lot of people didn't have access to grocery stores, so it was a privilege that we were always able to leave Newark, go to Bloomfield right there, and have Stop and Shop. Next to Stop and Shop, it used to be another clothing store. Now, it's Marshalls, so we had more clothes there, and essentially, if you wanted to walk, you could to a bunch of other stuff, like Dunkin' Donuts. There was Staples. We always had access to other stuff. Yes, by the McDonalds on Bloomfield Ave. Yep. My dad always had a truck, a pickup truck, so he always had a car, so with him, we would sometimes go to either Nutley or specific restaurants, Blockbuster used to be in Nutley, obviously before they closed. Fayer Buffet Place. We used to drive through Montclair. We used to go to Kearny because a family friend was there, so I was familiar with those other cities, specifically.

Alexander Rosado-Torres:

Wow. I have so many things to say, and I'm like, trying to curate what to say. What I'll share is I have empanadas in the refrigerator waiting to be cooked once I'm done with work today, and this call is making me excited for that, and so my final question is what places in the city of Newark do you associate with LGBTQ+ people and identities?

Sky Lara:

I would say definitely, I feel like most of it is in central Newark because of there's a pride center. The Newark Public Library has the pride center within them. There was

other LGBT spaces, some of them have shifted. I believe the pride center used to be on Academy Street. Now, they're at the Newark Library. Apparently, HMI shut down, but they used to be here. There's a lot of LGBT institutions that I learned through the LGBTQ services at Rutgers-Newark. I feel like I don't know if I have ever—well, I guess I did actively search for LGBT spaces when I entered college because I never really previously engaged with it in high school. I would just not really all that—I didn't know I was non-binary during high school. I only realized that once I—my last year of high school. In that timeframe, I knew I was bi or queer, but I never really focused on relationships in high school. I was really very much an academic student, but in college I looked for LGBT services, and there was the pride—Rutgers Pride, which is the LGBT club on campus, and then I ended up joining the LGBTQ Raiders Internship at the LGBTQ resource center.

They actually told me, oh, the role was to connect local LGBT services to Rutgers Newark students, so I researched a lot about what resources are available in Newark, but in a way, I guess I associate it with this specific area, with Academy Street, Halsey, Rutgers, which is in the central ward, but I cannot say anything about the north ward. I believe the queers are there, but my mind's always like, the Catholic Church, Latin neighborhood, everyone speaks Spanish. Everyone is older. A lot of people are just a bit more traditional and conservative, so for me, it's just the central ward where everything just kind of is, but yeah.

Alexander Rosado-Torres: Yep. Yep. Yep. Yep. Well, thank you so much for that. What I'm gonna do now is at this point, I'm gonna stop the recording.

[End of Audio]