

Queer Newark Oral History Project

Tamara Fleming

Interviewed by Monica Liuting

Date: December 21, 2016

Location: Tamara's home in Orange, Newark

Monica Liuting: Hi, this is Monica Liuting interviewing Tamara Fleming. Today is December 21st; we are in Tamara's home in Orange. Hi Tamara.

Tamara Fleming: Hi. How are you?

Monica Liuting: Good. Hi, could you introduce yourself a little bit?

Tamara Fleming: Yes. Or tell, tell you more about myself?

Monica Liuting: Yeah.

Tamara Fleming: OK. My name is Tamara Fleming, and I'm originally from Jacksonville, small place called Jacksonville, North Carolina. I was born and raised there and I came to New Jersey, when I was about 19 years old. I started off working in Corporate of America and then eventually started a entrepreneur venture, a multicultural marketing communications agency. And then on the side, I was a photographer so, since which rolls to be primarily a photographer documenting my community and focusing on lifestyle and portrait photography, um say a little bit more about myself, I'm recently married. I got married in May of this year to a beautiful woman. Her name is Eileen Helms. We got married in Mexico 2016, and um I'm a gay or lesbian woman and extremely happy yeah (laughs).

Monica Liuting: Could you tell me, could you describe the place you grow up?

Tamara Fleming: Umm. So I grew up in North Carolina, a very small city in Jacksonville, country so long with the coast, so there was water within, I don't know, maybe 30 minutes either way for me but, I grew up in the projects called Sandy Run and Sandy Run was not the most, I guess it had its own um reputation to live up to, or live down to or whatever. But that's where my, my mother moved us and actually started out with just me. When my mom, she had me when she was about 19 years old, and we moved to Jacksonville and to a place called Sandy run. And then I had a little brother, he's about, we are about seven years apart, his name is Timothy Williams. And we lived at the very beginning of the projects, so in my mind, the beginning of the projects is like, when you first come in, it was maybe the first one two, the second building that you would see in the projects, that was in my mind, better than being further back, like the further back you went, the perception was the battery died or you know you just don't want to go back there. So I did have my little, you know, safe zone of being towards very front, when you, when you walk into or drive into the complex. It was, I don't know, I'm just trying to think about how many buildings, probably 20 buildings but very different from what you would see in New York or something where the buildings are so very close to each other, these buildings were spaced out. So you had lots of land and lots of places to be outside and just run around. So that's what my childhood was, was a lot of nature, a lot of running around and, and being able to just roll in the grass and do whatever. I had beautiful grandparents and they lived in a place

called Maple Hill, which is about maybe 20, 20 minutes to a half an hour from where I grew up, and there you would even see more opportunity to just be outside and, and out in the nature. My grandparents owned a home and it was on the corner, so it was kind of like a central spot of her particular community. My grandmother's name is Marietta and my grandfather's name, it was, we called him Boot. So her name for short we call her grand Mat, and we call him grand Boot. And so they had a huge home in Maple Hill, right next door was a large land, large opportunity for growing everything you can think of, fruits and vegetables. There was like a chicken coop in the backyard. We had everything that you can think of when you're you know in this country setting and you want access to fresh fruits and, and eats whatever, it was just all natural, was wholesome and, and it was exploratory, because I was right next to the woods. I spent a lot of time there, kind of just exploring, you know, finding birds nest and eggs and just wanting to, just see more, do more, and create more. And it was a lot of very, we'd say, like just tomboyish, cause I'll climb a tree in a minute, had access to horses, just everything you can think of, when you talk about nature, food, plentiful, you know, opportunities to just get access to organic things, you know, and they worked on a, what was called, a blueberry farm so I would spend some of my, what would I say, yeah my junior high years picking blueberries. So within walking distance, my grandparents worked at a blueberry farm and my grandfather would be the one who drive his tractor-trailer around to, to gather the picked blueberries and issue tickets. Based on the amount of tickets you get, that's how much you exchange in, in, in order to get actual currency, get, get money. So he would collect when everyone's trailer full, I think was like 12 carts, that's completely full with fresh, wonderful blueberries, then you would get the voucher or the ticket so that later on in the day, you can cash it in for, for money. And my grandmother would, they were entrepreneurs themselves, so they would sell different items, she had actually a truck, food truck, food truck that would drive around. And when people wanted soda, snow cones, chips, pickles, like they would make these wonderful, like fried chicken sandwiches or sausage sandwiches. They had so much on that, on the food truck, and, and that was the saving grace, cause when you saw that truck go around, you knew that it was time for a break, you can get something nice and fresh and cold, cause it was super hot out there, just nothing but sun and heat beaming down on you. And that was a cool thing to have, one my grandfather gave me actual tickets and so I can cash it for food, and my grandmother would be, I don't have to pay anything, you know just get on the truck with her and just have my, my picking of anything that I wanted, so that, that made things really special, that really did. I think for the most part I spent a lot of time there picking blueberries and I was goofing off but it was a good way for me to go see my grandparents on the weekend, and spent sometime with them and I probably did a lot more playing around than I did actually working to get blueberry, except when I was in the eighth grade and I had very awful, did awfully bad in eighth grade and I'm, was going to have to go to summer school, basically, so I had to pay for summer school. And my mom already told me, "Look she's not, I'm not paying for anything. So you're going to have to find your own way." And my way was to make money picking

blueberries. And I remember one time in particular, I went to go pick blueberries, I was extremely sick, I didn't feel good at all. But I went there cause I knew that I needed to get the money for summer school and I got sick while I was there and went on the bus and just lay down because I was ill and my grandmother must come around, "Where's Tammy?" That's another thing. My family at home they all know me by Tammy. I came up here and I'm like I don't want to use Tammy anymore, I want to be Tamara. So at home everyone knows me as Tammy, they called me Tammy since the day I was born. So she's looking around for me, "Where's Tammy?" They told her that I was on the bus and I didn't feel good. So she was being the awesome woman she is or was, gave me, I could see her now, reached in her pocket. She gave me like this wad of money that I needed for school and even plus, even more than that. But she gave me the money that I needed for summer school, which was really awesome, of course, that that gave me an opportunity to even just rest for the rest of the days. I really wasn't feeling good. But that's a very special memory that I have. The way I grew up, where I grew up and the people that I had in my life. My mom was a single mother and she worked as a beautician and would do hair and do people's hair around the community. So growing up I'd always have my friends coming over and my mom would, you know, get paid for doing the hair. And I remember she worked at a beauty salon, Essence Beauty Salon, like the corner of Billfold Road and she, she worked there. And that's where I spent a lot of my time, there just being around the beauty shop and listening to people talk, watching television, having a good time probably being a pain in the butt. But yeah that was a little bit of the childhood I had, just really loving, open and beautiful people.

Monica Liuting:
Tamara Fleming:
Monica Liuting:
Tamara Fleming:

In your description, you mother is pretty young at that time.

Yeah.

In your memory, how's your impression to, to her?

Oh, you know, that is so funny that you asked that, because I always try to figure out at that time, my mom had me at 19, like I was not, I am not prepared even now to have kids. I just think there's so much responsibility. We grew up, you know, as she was a single mother but she never, she never, I guess I didn't see what I didn't have, I didn't notice what I didn't have, I didn't know that I didn't have access to certain things because she'd always tried to make a way for us. I know that she was, I am just trying to think about like really early memories, I can't remember like where she's 20 or 21 or 22 but when I think about it, that's probably when I was going to, head started in kindergarten, I remember specific times in kindergarten. She was in her 20s she was 21 or 22 so that was pretty young. You know, we were, we were really close. And she was always protective. I never really got an opportunity to spend the night out somewhere, because you never know, even back then, you just like you can't go spend the night with everybody, because you just don't know what their culture, what their household is, just want to be protective. And I remember that she must've been through 19, 22 to 23, maybe 23 years old she got married, and we moved to Philadelphia. And so when we moved to Philadelphia, I just remember that I didn't have my own anymore. I was with other kids there. I remember that it was, it was like, like a brownstone in Philly. I remember it's one particular time, she had gotten a splinter in her foot walking on, on the wood

floors or something. So that's one thing I remember. And I also remember one particular thing and that's, that's something that I don't like to visit all the time. But recently I've been more welcomed with having a conversation about this, because it helped me to define who I am or want to be. And this is one that's not so concerned about what people think basically. I remember particular I'm sitting at a table in the kitchen, where we were in Philadelphia, and this guy comes to sit at the table, I am eating cereal. So this guy comes to sit at the table and he puts the cereal box in front of his face, like he covers my face because I was looking at him. So he puts his cereal box in front of him so that we could not, I couldn't see him anymore. And to me, to me that resonated in a way that was negative. Right? So in my mind, I'm thinking, 'Oh, he does want to look at me', or 'I must be ugly', or I must be this or I must be... So it was all negative things associated around that. And that's something I kept for a long time. So for a long time even I've been grown up, I was in junior high school, I never really made eye contact with people, I didn't look at people directly when I had a conversation with them. I was always having a conversation in my head about what I look like, what my appearance is, if I was talking, right? So it was a lot of labeling, a lot of conversations, that was, you know, just concerned about my, who I am. And eventually, even smiling, I would not smile, if I didn't have my hand over my face, and that, you know, it was just because I wasn't happy with who I was and what I looked like. So I got all of these labels and all of these things about me comparing myself to others. And so that one little situation with the cereal box carried over and manifested so many ways in my junior high and adult life, until I was able to kind of free myself from that, like kind of focus on accepting who I am and loving who I am. It's worked I do even today, even now. This is a constant saying that you are more than what you were, or what you thought you were back then, and associated with that label to put onto myself. When, when I broke free of that thoughts, a lot of things opened up for me. A lot of things opened up in a way that allowed me to feel like some of my work will be around helping others and having conversations about this to other people and accepting ourselves, you know, cause I've always thought, I've been especially very socially awkward and that social awkwardness has me where I'm quiet, reserved, but in my mind I'm expressive, I'm excited and I just love people, but in my mind, lets, it lets me push back a little bit, because it's always a concern of being accepted or measuring up and different things like that. So I feel that my work would eventually show, that's other people can be free about seeing who they once were. And then also be free about seeing who they still are and working towards getting through that mess, that, that clutter, that's inside of our heads about who we are yeah.

Monica Liuting:
Tamara Fleming:

Do you remember the day you moved to Philadelphia?
I don't, I don't. I don't remember the day that we moved to Philadelphia. I do remember the day that we left though. So turns out my stepfather was abusing my mother. And during that abuse, I could, if I kind of think about it. I do remember yelling and doors being shut. I do remember not feeling safe. I do remember not feeling welcome. And that could be where a lot of my internal dialogue about myself came in, because of listening to him yell, what he said to me, so those things are things that I could see where some of those my insecurities come from, cause

even as a child, you remember those things, you, they, they actually kind of stick on you like tape or something, and you have to work towards getting that off, you know. I remember leaving and caught the Greyhound bus back to Jacksonville, North Carolina and where my family set up camp in Jacksonville, a small town small community called Georgetown. So I remember going back to Georgetown with my mother. We caught the bus back. I remember many tears, I remember many, you know, I knew that something wasn't right. I knew that we weren't agreeing to leave with bless or leave with oh high expectations for a great wonderful future. It was a let's leave in the middle of the night, we have to get out of here, it was a survival mode, and I remember that, like just knowing that, you know, being quiet was important, and being um, um, good was important, and being you, just I guess kind of almost supporting my mother in her need to leave, you know, being that person that was, I have to be quite, I have to be good, I have to be, this is what I have to be, so that we can get out of here and get out of here safely. So there's a real urgency around us leaving. And I remember that just like it was yesterday. And I also remember too, that he came, he found us, he, we went to my aunt's home and aunt Seles, he came there, and I remember that mean tragic in words and physical. I remember that it was not going to be, and it wasn't one where, 'Oh we left and now we are free', it was like, 'No, you left and you think you're free, but I am going to get you one last time before it's finally over.' So yeah, yeah I remember not the day we got there, but I remember how we left there, and that was definitely all in making sure that we were safe and I know that she was doing this to protect me. I knew that she was doing this to make sure that she didn't have to live like this anymore. And I know that being 22, 23, having a 4 year old, that you have to protect, it had, she had to make a lot of uncomfortable decisions, but stuff that was mandatory in order to survive, and to continue to seek out the best life for her and child. My mom's name is Andrina, Andrina Williams.

Monica Liuting:

Uh, what do you think is the reason she finally made her decisions?

Tamara Fleming:

I think it had a lot to do with just not knowing her worth, you know. You can stay in the situation like that, because you don't know your worth, you don't know that there is better. But if I, If I could think about it, I could say that she probably heard from my grandmother, who was a woman that just a beautiful woman, but she was also a no-nonsense type of woman, too. And at any time you can have, like pulled out a gun or something, because she always has something on our household where she was in Maple Hill was, there was guns on the wall, there was a gun cabinet like, you, you were around those things, it was, you know they went hunting. So you could see like raccoon's head, or a snake on the wall. So they, they, they kept those things as trophy, so pulling out of gun was no problem, you know, especially if it's to protect a child, you know, and I think it was definitely one of those where my grandmother may have told her with urgency and demand that you better get your ass out of there, you know, and so that's what she did. She had to probably master up all of her strength and confidence to get out. But that's what she did. And I think she did it, because she had a child and knew that this is not something that would be good for either one of us. And it could have been where she thought if it's me today,

it could be my daughter tomorrow and didn't want to have me in that particular environment in that situation.

Monica Liuting:

Did you feel safer when you got your aunt's home?

Tamara Fleming:

I did. I felt safer, although I knew that by him coming back, as he did, I knew, it's kind of knowing, that um knowing that it was over, but you knew that you didn't get to that end, is not, is not the end just yet, there's going to be a little bit of bad before we get to the good part. So him being there and this big explosion, I knew that, that was going to be the last time we saw him. So that gave me some sense, a sense of security and probably where I got that feeling was that, we were no longer in Philadelphia. We were in, in, in Jacksonville, North Carolina. We were in our family's home. And so I know that surrounded by my aunt and my uncle that nothing was going to happen to us, that did make me feel a lot safer.

Monica Liuting:

In your description to view in the, in the garden, in the field, is a farm? Yeah, I saw a big view, seeing beautiful things in there, but later in your career, you took pictures of people, the face especially beautiful color, everything, so where do you think this kind of focus come from?

Tamara Fleming:

Hmm, that's a question I really don't know. I don't know I can't say that's I've always been inclined to, to be a photographer. I've always, you know I was a nature girl, I was running around, had access to everything, didn't have to want for anything, didn't have everything but didn't notice that or didn't think about that, being something I was, I should have been self-conscious about. When I was little, I was told, I was, I was, when I was little, I was in an accident, there was like a toy chip that fell off or something during the accident that ricocheted into my eyeball and it scratched it and, and, um it tore a part of my eye, I leave a complete blank right now. But so the scar is in this eye, the scar tissue is in the eye, right, but the vision loss is in this eye. So there is, if you look at it, like you have peripheral vision where you can see the other side, I have peripheral vision, I just can't see someone directly, if I'm looking at you just straight ahead, it's like you're not there, you're not there, it's I can see around you, but I can't see you. And that's only if I like this particular vision here is, hold on, cause wait a minute, I can see, so (laughs and claps). It's this eye, it's this eye here, so the scar is here, but the loss of vision is here (pointing to her eyes), where I can see on the side, but I can't see directly. And so all the power of my vision comes from this eye. And I remember when I was younger, feeling like I was going to eventually be blind one day because it was scary, you know, when you're doing an eye test, and you can't see a thing like nothing. And so it was a lot for me to kind of get, you know just to that, I remember looking at things as if it was going to be the last time I ever saw it, as if I was trying to take a mental picture of what the garden looks like, what a mountain, or birds and little things look like cause I wanted to always keep that in my mind and know what it looked like if I ever lost my vision, cause in my mind I was, I was going to, like I'm young and you know the doctors are saying there's no help, there's nothing that they can do. And on top of that, there was also a disease that toxoplasmosis and I heard that you can't get that if you don't have a cat in our home or something. But they said that people get that got scratched by a cat could be something, I don't know something weird and I'm trying to reflect back over the doctors were saying but I know that it was,

it was also the effect to my vision and limited my ability to heal prepare for having vision in that eye. But when I was growing up, to think around maybe anywhere from 10, my mom got really into a church. She got really I was a religious and started to go to church more. So we were into this search of God and Christ COGIC, and it wasn't a Baptist, or Methodist, it was Pentecostal, it was a church of God of Christ, people shouted, they praise, dance. It was all about healing and, and, and being able to believe that God can deliver you or remove your suffering, putting bless on your forehead and different things like that. So I remember many times, when the pastor or preacher would stand in the front and want people to come in to get blessed and be anointed with oil. One of my, one of the things that had to do was get up and stand in that line, so that God or the pastor could look at me with oil and bless my eyes so that I could see. And they believed that with intense faith, intense focus and, and prayer that I would be able to get my vision back, and maybe I just didn't believe hard enough, maybe I didn't have strong enough of faith but it never happened. But I remember my mom would tell me to read the Bible, "Just read the Bible, read the Bible with that eye you can't see." But I was like, "I can't see." She was like, "No, just read, just try." You know, as if, as if the words were going to start to become, where I could see them. I get what she was trying to do, I get it's all about faith, and trust and praying and really putting everything you have into a possibility, that a miracle would happen out of it. But I think in my mind that I was OK with it, you know, I was OK with also trying to attain this miracle, and cause that was a beautiful thing, as well to, you know, trying to get to a place where my faith matched my desire, and therefore, a miracle was performed or introduced, or manifested, but that did not happen, but I still like the practice of trying and believing it's not a bad thing, yeah.

Monica Liuting:
Tamara Fleming:

How, how does religion influence your life in general?
I (pause), I think I've probably looked into all kinds of religions and, and it's always been, like I was reading something so as I have a seeking soul and I am always seeking something and, and that's the beauty of that too for me, because it allows me to always continue to look for better ways for me to self-improve and to really get out of this world, this earth in my time here. What supposed to get out of it, you know what am I supposed to do? Religion started in Baptist, Baptist Church. I used to go to Sunday school, especially cause my grandmother was a Sunday school teacher, so I would go to Sunday school and then we had a church just right down the street from us. I think it's called Evening View Baptist Church. So I would go to church and I remember being baptized, sitting in the very front pew of the church and we're all white and being baptized, dunked, I remember right now being dunked in the water and coming up. I don't think my mother was able to go or attend because she was at work. But I remember being baptized was important to her for me. So that's a memory I have very fresh, probably because I'm more than like 4 years old then. And so I got baptized and when I was in junior high, I don't remember being in church when I was you know 5 to 10, but around 11, 12, 13, I know that we were in the Church of God Christ, so lots of, I sang on the choir, my mom is a singer, so she was singing for a wedding or funeral or baptism or whatever people would just call her to sing that's what she does. And so I was singing on the choir. And so

religion to me was always something I had to do, because that's what my mother exposed me to. Religion now is not about religion to me, it's about reaching for a, seeking greatness internally and connecting with the universe and my own ability to connect with my higher power, so that would be my ancestors, angels in my spirit guides, God, Jesus, Buddha, everyone. I'm now into Buddhism, and I've been chanting and having a beautiful Buddhist family. But that's very different from where I grew up and even I've studied with Jehovah's Witnesses before. So I kind of dabbled everything up. I had a friend that was Jewish and we would go to the synagogue and I would just kind of be really interested in what was going on there. And so yeah religion was always something like even with Saint Terrier, I've, I've been interested in that cause I feel, that I always felt that my spirit, my, the makeup of who I am is, is, there is a strong, very strong force of, it's almost like a very ancestral feeling of African based roots, you know rooted in that, of almost a calling and it used to be an energy you would have felt, it was dark energy that I didn't feel good about, like I was, didn't know what to do with it. Like I just feel like there's something always around me and just something is not dark and I needed to be lighter and I need to, you know I want to try more. But what I'm learning is, is, there's many levels and different, I guess, different things that make up a person and the dark doesn't mean it is dark and evil, it just, there is a darkness and there's a, there's light as well too, cause in the same time I believe that I, I am the perfect union of two different, you know, two, the light and dark, and the dark definitely comes from an ancestral feeling, like I've always at one point I used to think that I was carrying the weight of the world, like it would get heavy with a feeling like that. But when I shoot, those kind of things you're pushing through whatever dark it is, when you, when you're able to live your life shooting or do whatever you want to do. You're taking away the, those dark feelings or negative feelings, you're in your adding, too. So that's why I've always felt like my gift when I do for my community in the world is, is needed and appreciated and my role of responsibility is to fight past any inhibitions, second guessing or anything so that I can get to the giving part. Because I do believe, you asked me before, you know, how did, you know, photography coming in, you know, where did it come from, but I kind of always say that it chose me, it could have been my thought of like not ever seeing again or losing my sight, but it's, it develops to a passion of burn, like a burning passion, like if I could only just shoot, photograph, document it and, and help other people feel amazingly well about themselves, or fight through whatever it is that they're fighting through. That's what I want do. Just creating beautiful, beautiful things out of what people may overlook, or using the camera as a vehicle to bring to the table some very uncomfortable conversations. It could be of race, it could be gender, it could be just normalizing or, or, culture. It could be those things, but it's definitely on people agreeing to use their life that they had to push past whatever issues they may have. You know so, yeah.

Monica Liuting:

In your works, I, I, I could see that part, you are seeking like for the light, for the perfect light, for the perfect color, for the perfect face expression.

Tamara Fleming: Yeah.

Monica Liuting:

Yeah, and uh, uh, about conversation, do you think it's also

conversation with, the photography, is also a conversation with a person, in your shooting?

Tamara Fleming:

Oh, yeah. I said that all the time. I said that because, with me you know, being, I'd say an introvert or socially awkward person, I have to pack myself up to go to a networking meeting, I have to pack up to sit at a board meeting or to do things and I know a lot of people do as well too, but me especially, because I was a quiet person who was reserved and I was having these conversations about who I am in my head. I think it stopped me from being like this very open, like, 'I'm going to come here and meet everyone and be authentic and be wonderful'. So what's come up for me is that inside conversations, is that's when I shoot, when I'm working with people, I see so much of a common, a commonality in that person, right, that photos make people uncomfortable sometimes, you know, being on camera (laughs), makes people uncomfortable sometimes, because they have to sit back and look at this or they are looking at every single thing and I get it, you know, I get it because I'm always, I've spent thousands of hours, minutes, seconds, whatever analyzing and looking at me. Right? Because when I grew up, I did not like what I looked like, you know, I didn't like lips, I didn't like my eyes, didn't like my hands, my feet, my feet are too big, my hands are too big, and didn't have any shape to them. My nose was too wide, my ear, ears were too big, my eyes are too big, everything, I just everything (claps). I pick it apart and I know that I'm not the only person that does that. So when I shoot, I think that people come to me, because they also know she can understand, you know, she gets me. And I love coaching, I love coaching with people, because eventually and, so here's the cool thing about it, in a network meeting, I may stumble on words or forget to say things and, you know, not say things the perfect way, um, get super intimidated by someone that's a leader in my community and may not speak to them or just say you like a hi and smile, keep it going because I'm so intimidated by them. But when we get a chance to shoot, I see that's where all the magic happens. That's where people say, "Oh Tamara, you're really cool, I didn't", you know, "I didn't know." Or they just have a good time with me. And that's why I feel, that, that my experience working on myself and being a little uncomfortable but seeing there is a great opportunity for a connection with people, because that's what I seem to seek so much of I want to be, I want to be attracted to people, I want to, you know, there's a law, a universal law of attraction, I want to use that for people to gravitate towards me for me to gravitate towards people, and I just feel good. So I think a lot of what I do is just about me, you know, "Oh, I don't want to be socially awkward, I just want to feel good around, I just want them to know who I am, and feel good about me and just, it just my awkwardness, my awesomeness, my empoweredness, all those wonderful things, I bring that to the table when we shoot. I bring um, the opportunity for people to let go and to say what they're intimidated about. And a lot of times, it's just about being photographed or a lot of times it's just about being in front of an audience but not an audience, it's about some people feel better in front of an audience than they do when it's a one-on-one thing, you know. So in my sessions when I work with people in different projects, I do try to strive with just bringing the normalness to the room, and let down your hair,

and let's just be regular, um, and that took me some time, because even when I was shooting, I was bringing this nervous energy, cause I wanted things to go right and 'Oh my god, OK'. But then I'm talking to my mentors and talking to people, then I just calm down, you know, just have, you know, just walk slower, cause I'm like (finger snapping), you know, I'm zooming all over the place, but I know that they're also kind of creates a negative energy to someone. So I try to slow down my pace and to just be real with someone and I feel that's when you get the best laughs, that's when you get the best stories, that's when you get the best eye contacts, that's when you get the best expressions, that's when you get people just being and living in the moment. And that's what it's all about living in the moment. So when I take down my, you know, thoughts of, 'Oh my god, it has to be this, it has to be this', and I just live in the moment, like I give it to what was going on now, that's when everything opens up, you know, the, the beauty comes to the room. To me the confirmations of, this is what you're supposed to be doing with the universe, she works on your behalf, and all of those things, that's what I see that comes to light when I'm, when I'm aware of myself, because my prayers always been to be used as a vehicle, you know, you're here for a very short time and I want to be used in the right way, you know, and trust that, that's what's happening, cause sometimes even though you pray for those things, you wonder, 'Oh God, what do you want me to do, what am I supposed to do with my life?' And he said, 'Well, what you are already doing, you know, you're doing fine.' And it's just like this, I swear just last night and I had conversations about being living in my purpose, and cause that's what it's all about, you know, so yeah, uh (pause), I bring that to our sessions and to the shoot of let go, let's have fun, and I love making people feel good, I love bonding with people after I have an opportunity to shoot someone, it's never the same, our relationship is definitely a lot better than if it was at networking event (laughs).

Monica Liuting: Cause I have read your, the, the introduction, a little bit on your website, your favorite color purple and The Color Purple, the book (laughs).

Tamara Fleming: Yes.

Monica Liuting: Cause to me, I have read the book, but before I read that, I thought it would be more like a prayer.

Tamara Fleming: A prayer?

Monica Liuting: Yeah, a prayer, I pray for something, but later I find it's conversation. Yeah it's called itself.

Tamara Fleming: Yeah.

Monica Liuting: Yes. That's, so I also find the magic, the courage you reflect a lot about yourself. And so you have the magic to put fragmental things together.

Tamara Fleming: Yeah.

Monica Liuting: And yeah, and I... (Unclear), this conversation kind of distracts me (laughs), uh, oh, I also want to ask a question about how do you understand the relationship between oneself and his or her picture, his or her photo?

Tamara Fleming: Hmm, yeah, well, documentation of who we are, is, is important, right, is one of the only things whether it's documentation from a picture or from video or from a sketch or whatever, those things are so important. I had often at one point

struggled with that, like you take pictures like, really you just a photographer, you become a dominator now. And I believe that people shoot for different reasons. I use it as therapy for me, like it's an immense therapy because I get to direct and support and visualize and create and demand and explore all these wonderful things when I'm working. There's nothing that stops me when I'm shooting and I know that nothing stops like that person, when we really connect, it gives him an opportunity to live outside their comfort zone, right? So as CEO of a major institution could have such, you know, confidence running this organization but in front of the camera, he's like a 5 year old, you know, you're like, 'Oh I just...' you know, 'look ok', everything is just, you know, 'Wow, this person is all concerned and over there, and they just telling people what to do, and you do this and you do that. And then when you bring him in the front of the camera, you're just a human, you're just a human being and you're amazing at what you do. That's why I really think I like photographing, the business community, like a small business or work corporation. I love photographing people in power positions because I get to the normalcy of it, because when the lights are off (claps), when the closed, doors are shut (claps) and when you're in your home (claps), you are just yourself in your regular, when you go out there, this person, you know, persona or whatever, and people are expecting from you, but all in all you just this person with your own insecurities, your own inhibitions, your own concerns and everything else and after all, it's all set and done. I always say my mom once says this, you know, "After we all setting down, all you, all we all was just dust. All we are is dirt, dust walking around in a human body and that's it." So that picture is what keeps the conversations going about who you are and referencing where you are at that moment at that time, what your skin and what your body looks like as we transform as we take new shapes and forms, like my body is not the same as when I was you know a baby, is changing every single day, every single minute, and I love the idea documenting that. One thing I've always wanted to do for myself and I never did, I mean I don't like photographing myself as much as I love photographing other people. But at the same time I believe that I'm very conscious of the transformations I've had. I have a lot of self portraits and I not put out there but I do from time to time just take a picture, a portrait of me, this is who I am, and this is who I am at 20, 30, 40, 50, 60, 70, you know, and start to see those beautiful things that happen, you know with wrinkles and physical changes and challenges. I think that's what portraits say that there's, there's change and it's freezing that moment, um, right then and there, and then looking later at it to, to understand that, that's that person's walk then, they, they are totally a different person right now, they, they have totally different cells in their bodies and thoughts in their minds as they did back then. So that's why photography and documentation means a lot to me. I love when clients are excited about their in results of their photos cause that says a lot too. When someone is happy about their pictures, that says a lot. Because people we can pick ourselves apart, I'm not the only one, I know the most gorgeous person in the world will see something that they don't like, 'Oh my God, my nose,' you know, 'one nostril is bigger', you know, I know that we pick it

apart, you know, just like if we've taken a group picture, the first person you look for is you, cause you want to know whether I was ok, did I look ok. And I think that what we do, have our time kind of making sure that we're represented well and we see something that we like and connects with us. If someone did a really good job with the lighting and the composition and then the composure of the photo, you're having, you know that's your, that's your biggest brand or selling point with someone's nailed it and you are satisfied with that. You're like, 'Yes, that's, that's who I see it myself as'.

Monica Liuting:

Tamara Fleming:

Monica Liuting:

Tamara Fleming:

Do you remember the day you took the picture of Jae?

When I took, ok, Yeah. Yes I do.

Could you tell me about that day?

Yes, so that particular project, Queer Newark, um, I don't know how I first heard about it. But I went to one of the very beginning, planning sessions just we're having a group of people to come together to talk about the launch of this new initiative. And it was all about the brainstorming, who is going to be involved, what we're going to do. And I came in and just took pictures documenting the people in the circle. No one asked me to do it. And I feel there's a lot of times my gift is the documentation part of it, to archive the experience, the people, the conversations, the expressions and, and I'm always seeking the best angles, you know, even though I do most of my work in studio, when I'm doing events, I really love to, um focus on how to make that person look powerful and awesome in that particular moment. And so the birth of the Queer Newark started to develop and I got to understand more about what it was, about collecting artifacts and stories and conversations and, and, and everything about people in my community. So it makes perfect sense to document my community, my LGBT community, people I thought were leaders that people that were doing stuff that it ain't easy, not easy. You work a lot of hours, especially nonprofits. You do a lot of stuff and you, a lot of time, don't get the credit and recognition for it, you know. But me documented or started on that project and I got a chance to photograph Jae and, like so many people in my community now and I did that within it was a matter of two weeks or something, it was just such a short turnaround that I amazed myself, you know, in, in putting together, you know, contacting everyone... (Not clear), having discussion on what we're going to shoot, working around their schedules, making people feel comfortable enough to like at the snap of a dime or drop of a dime, they felt comfortable, they could be who they are and have really wonderful conversations. I remember Jae's shoot in particular um and um, I know her for some time. But again it's always good to see person, a person in front of a backdrop, in front of the studio, cause they are coming being vulnerable, you know, I believe that the backdrop is a way to express and it can be like, 'Yes I can't wait, I want to do this', but it could also be a way of like, 'Ok, I'm bringing my baggage, I'm bringing my insecurities', you know, so I was honored to help people let go, 'Put you bag over there, your bag of insecurities and doubt and I don't know what I'm doing. Leave that away and just come here and let's just work through some stuff.' And so that day we took several pictures, different ways different ways she is standing and all of us you know standing in different ways and trying on different things but everyone was so very trusting

because that's what I think to, bring to a session of trust where people just eventually let go of their inhibitions, and they lead with trust. And so that particular day was all about trust and documentation and being vulnerable and loving at the same time and very giving to, on both sides, I believe that the photographer is giving and loving and open then that makes a subject be the same way.

Monica Liuting:
Tamara Fleming:

Do you have a lot of training on the photography or...?

Um, I would say collectively what I've gotten the most, is shooting, shooting, to shoot and get my experience there. But I took several classes, got several certifications. I started out in Essex County Community College. I did courses at FIT in New York. I took some courses at New York Center for International Photography. I've done loads of training classes from videos to books, have mentors. So yeah, I definitely have gotten myself into a lot of training when it comes to photography because everything is changing so much. I initially learned a film and using a dark room. I went to New Jersey City University and at that time I took classes of photography using darkroom as well too, so I was always thrown myself into something that was creative and something that was allow me and I had a friend that had a darkroom equipment and one of my apartments, I set up my own darkroom and we printed out my own pictures and so and then I used to work at a place called Picture People in the mall in Jersey City so I was a photographer there. So a lot of, all of that is, is my training, my mentors my, now actually training and teaching people photography is, is one of things that I just really love and I'm passionate about as well too, because I knew how much of a breakthrough it was for me and I see that being the same opportunity for them. In 2010 I went to Haiti after the earthquake and I wanted to go to work with girls. At this point a friend of mine, we were running in Newark and we stopped at one park and were stretching and she said, 'Yeah I go to all these places or, you know, all these different countries and I, you know, worked with a group of girls and we, you know, sports related or something'. I thought, you know, I've always wanted to do something like that but I wanted to teach some photography at that point, at that time I was thinking now you going to a third world country, talking about you want to teach somebody photography and what kind of sense that make you know, kind of that's the last thing they have access to is cameras and whatever. But at the same time it wasn't about me teaching them how to use a camera to be the next, you know world-known photographer, but it was more so about me teaching them about the confidence, the love, the connection, the role, the possibilities you get through using your camera. So I know personally that I use the camera to shoot through my own shit, you know, my shit was me, you know, what I look like. And so I started to think about what you know I want to be able to do the same thing, and that's when I created as a program. That was really kind of like, it's almost, my life as a GPAC, with even learned all of the things that, you know, I would actually kind of talk in training about the camera, the photography, but using the definitions of, like composure carry, helping them to understand that it's important to compose the right photo as it is to compose a right thoughts in your mind, because they can lead to you make the right decision, the wrong decision, it's important for you to use the right aperture because

sometimes you want things to be focused and sometimes you want to have, you know, things out of focus but know that, you know, focus means making the right decisions and doing the good things and doing, you know, I always had this kind of example of depth of field, you know, teaching them the languages of Photography, but the depth of field is the thing that, you know, was blurred out in the background, you get a shallow depth of field was blurred out in your life should be the negative conversations, the friends that are not supportive, the peer pressure, all of that should be blurry, all of that should be something faded, so what to a point where you can't really see it, so use, use the right aperture so that you can blur out your background, using right aperture in your decision-making so you can blur out those, you know, incorrect decisions or, or those naysayers you want to blur that out and whenever there's some darkness in your life, you want to add the right light, how do you add the right light, where do you want your light to be, you know, so always kind of using a way to teach photography but using a way for them to think about, you know, life in general, where there's a shadow, shadows come up on your life, get shadows come in, you didn't get into the school you want it, your parents, you know, parent, mother passed away, shadow could be just a bad day, a shadow could be whatever, but you can always add light to it, you can always kind of, you know, soften up your shadow a little bit, so kind of teaching them different ways to think about photography as a way to say, "Hmm, now I know what shutter is, aperture, depth of field, rules of thirds", so they're learning all of these really cool things but then they're also learning about how to apply, apply this in life in general and so we, we have those conversations about self-esteem and confidence and body image is just a bunch of me being taught to them and ways that save me can also save you and my, um, even going back to Haiti, when I went there we got an opportunity to work with 100 girls and I have them teaching them photography but using the concept of, you know, um, composition, shadows, lighting, with a story behind that was that, I didn't like myself, my eyes, my, you know, what I look like and I'm looking at a whole bunch of girls and I'm tearing up crying because I'm like, 'Oh my', you know, 'this is my story', and then the interpretive is telling my story, she's crying, and then the audiences I see, the girls crying, so everyone got super emotional and I know they can resonate, I know that someone is compare them to another person and saying unit this, unite that, I know that I was sitting with them um, and so I would give them cameras, I would borrow, I borrowed some cameras and I, the people that came with us on the group, I begging, "Please let me use your", you know, "your point shoot camera so I could give them to the girls, I put them in small groups and they would take pictures", and they, my hope then was to help them understand, to love them more, to know that it gets better, to keep pushing, and to, if are a photography or any type of way of creativity, if that comes to you, feed that, do not suppress it, feed it, you could be the next wonderful superb photographer, you can document your community in a way that the media almost refuses to, the media will always document your community as rubble, as down falling, are, are, are just ill willed, or, or negative and disease or famine, but I don't see that particularly within your hearts and

your spirit, I can see there's a beautiful mountain behind me I can see that we just came from the beach and the water in your beach is blue and clear and the beach I got in Jersey that water is gray and muddy so you have natural resources, you have a way of using that camera to change the perception of your community, um, and you can do that, you know, and so if certain things keep coming back up for you, explore that, you know, and it may be in the shape of photography, it could be in the shape of painting or whatever it is, just feed it, instead of suppressing it.

Monica Liuting: Which identity are you, um feel more sensitive about, or focus more in your career?

Tamara Fleming: Oh, say that, say that one more time.

Monica Liuting: Um, which identity, are you more sensitive about, or feel you want to focus, focus more?

Tamara Fleming: So I'm trying to figure out, so what identity, um like what area of focus you mean like?

Monica Liuting: I mean your own identity, being a woman, lesbian,

Tamara Fleming: Oh that.

Monica Liuting: And race and...

Monica Liuting: Yeah.

Tamara Fleming: I think it's all, all three. For me really I mean when I think about it, I always kind of, I was, I did a presentation for, in front of this, the board of the Human Rights Campaign in Washington and I let them know I'm, I'm this walking by industry standard some three strikes you're out, right? Because I'm a woman, I'm a black woman and I'm a lesbian, so automatically got three strikes against, against me. Every know you can get, I've gotten it, I will get it in my lifetime, so I always say that I'm always I'm the walking three strikes because you know if I was white I would have more of advantage or more privilege, if I was straight I would probably even have more people that were more comfortable around me, but I know that people may have some reservations about working with me because of my sexual identity. I've had other people had the same kind of conversations where they feel like either something worked, something work against them because of them being out. I can certainly be in someone's closet, but I wouldn't be happy there and I feel like the only person I need to hide anything from was like my mother, family and once I came out to her, I'm like, 'Hey, you know who cares what anybody else thinks?' Uh, and as a woman, definitely because I know that my voice is not as strong or powerful, they don't think anyway because I am a woman and so I have the three these three identities, that's three people or I guess, yeah, identities can be against me, but it's a really good thing when you can still walk with your head up and appreciate, carrying all of that and living your life 100%, you know, so that, that's amazing for me. And I, I have in my portfolio career covered and embrace all of that, you know, from uh, working with the LGBT community, whether it's in, in, you know, working with homeless children, whether it's with um, young adults brother, whether is documenting the transgender community on projects, whether documenting the LGBT leaders in my community or, or doing classes for kids that or young adults that are LGBT, whether it's, you know, the working to um, help the business community, the LGBT business community, um, whether it's talking about small business development as a small business person and using my

brown skin, my femalness, just everything, you know, those, those are the areas of concentrated on, in addition to, you know, my work with just, um, self-love and self-acceptance and everything, those, those are the things that kind of make the person who I am.

Monica Liuting: Do you remember any experience you have to face your identity?

Tamara Fleming: Uh...hmm...

Monica Liuting: Or you have the struggle...

Tamara Fleming: With regards to, with the blackness, me being a black person, being raised down south I, I heard the “N” word, “nigger”, I’ve been called that at least twice in my lifetime as, as a young person by, by individual, so I remember one time I was in, I had a boyfriend in high school and we went to go to Dunkin Donuts, and I asked for a coffee, she made my coffee but she made it with too much sugar or something like that, so she goes in the back to complain, but she’s calling me the N-word in the back to her employee and then she comes out and she says it again and I’m like furious. Um, so that has been a challenge like what you kind of like, ‘ Oh, God”, you know, ‘I wish, I wished, I didn’t happen, that didn’t feel good’, you know, I was upset and it hurt but I kept moving and then there’s another situation, well, where a person said that and it’s it does make you feel uncomfortable, you are (pause), you do kind of reflect on, wishing that, that didn’t happen, or wondering why that happen. So that always led for me to have a difficult time trusting, trusting white people in particular, cause I never knew what they were really thinking, it was going to come out of their mouth or you know, it’s just who wants to go around being hurt, I’m definitely not one enjoy that or want that on anybody, but it gave me pause because I was always from that point on just very, you know, taking on protection because I didn’t want, you know, build my wall, basically, cause I didn’t want that to ever happen again. When my sexual identity, I think making an announcement of me being gay, it didn’t bother me, I can’t think of any one particular thing like I do know that when I was working in, in one job in Jersey City, I did want to hide that part of myself and I did do that, and I did want people to know but once, no, I think I left the one from the job knew, but when I went into another job with younger people, with more people that around the same age as I was, and they were free and expressive and that gave me the ability to, you know, if they ask, I’m going to say yes or say what it is, and I haven’t had hesitation by it. Um, when I came out to my mother, uh, I was visiting her in North Carolina and North Carolina one time and so I went down with a cousin of mine and we went to like, um, Jacksonville is a military base camp, huge presence of marines there, I mean, you walk on any corner, boom, you got a marine, you get married the next day, you got kids two days later, so it’s like, that’s the lifestyle that most people, you know, you got, if you want to man, no problem, you can find one there and so that was just not me, I didn’t want, I didn’t want it (laughs), and it’s not like I was, even I didn’t even know that, that’s something that didn’t attract me at all, you know, cause I didn’t (pause), I didn’t start expressing myself or seeking the opportunity to be me until I was in my twenties. Um, but as a teenager, definitely, um, I had a boyfriend and um, but and we ended up getting married, so I got married like fresh out of high school and that’s

how I ended up in New Jersey, cause he was from New Jersey and he, what was question, okay yeah, with that I told my mother one day because she was surprised that when I went, when I came down and visit and I went to go play pool with my cousin, I told her we went to this like you know Billiards place and she asked me how it went, and I told her that we were playing you know, pool, couple guys came over and they want to play with us, so I kind of knew about my, like, this is okay if it's two women playing pool, two guys come over, "Hey, did you guys want to pair up?" I kind of knew this is going to be like aww, and it was not something I was interested in, so I excused myself from the game and I went to go play Pac-Man and so my mom is like, "Uh, why", like, "Why won't you want to go play with the guys and you know, end up meeting a nice guy." And she said, "What, are you gay or something? And we were in the car and I remember at Sonics, ordering food and I said, "Yeah, what you said, yes." And she's like, "What do you mean?" I said, "What you just said", I said, "I am." I remember my little brother, cause my mom had another kid when she was, when I was 18 years old, um, she had just given birth and he was young, maybe three or four and in the back seat of the car, so I was trying to kind of talking in code, because of him, because he was so young, but he wouldn't know what gay lesbian all that stuff was, anyway but I was just trying to talk in code, but also I was very nervous, like, 'Oh my god, really coming out to my mom'. And so of course it was like, "I was going to pray for you", and you know, "this is something you got to get over", and da da da... so that was an awkward point but once I got over that point, it was from that point on, I don't care what anyone else thinks, the other time of concern with my sexual identity was when I started my business and we decided to come to Newark, film works, um, decided to, let's move to Newark and we're going to be who we are, we're going to be women, black women, gay women, and we're small business owners and we're going to help companies, corporations what not reach the people of whom we are, and I am okay but then it was like, 'Oh, darn, do we get to put the whole gay thing on our website?' So I was really having some concerns about that, cause it's not like we saw that, and any other example in the city of Newark, someone was coming out as a small business owner saying, 'Hey, we are gay and we want to help you reach more gay people or more brown people are more women', so we were like the pioneering this culture of acceptance of, you work with us and love us because we do great work or you can keep it moving. And I remember one of our clients was faith-based cause we were even that was like a copy on our website, like some of the people that we do work for, our faith-based organizations and I remember feeling like, 'Oh, I think we lost a client', you know because we lost, we are LGBT, it was kind of like, 'Oh, okay'. These are, you know, just two women that are friends and have a business and they are saying that they are LGBT owned and operated of like, who's operating it, who's the gay people, who's the gay one, you know (laughs), so that was another time of like, "woo, ok, so now people are gonna know, what is this going to feel like, if I'm going to get business, or if people are going to feel comfortable, are people going to like me, are people going to talk about me, and people going to be afraid of me, am I going to lose, you know, trust

and are people going to be afraid to shake my hand and leave the kids around me or just like all those things come up. Can they, do they feel like they can do business with me, who's going to really feel comfortable about me taking their photo or whatever, you know, so it was, it was a lot of internal conversations and hesitation on that. And I already to as a woman's like, okay, if you look at it back, then women photographers not too many and it wasn't too big and that's another thing to, it was like, 'Oh, she's a woman, you know, so I almost kind of like, oh okay, well guess I'm expected to take pictures of babies and you know bellies or whatever so as a woman I've talked about some hesitation, but it's all with woman in business too, because the meetings were mostly men at the meetings uh, and I brought a lot of those insecurities, cause I'm like, 'Okay you can be confident, be cool you don't know...', but at the same time like, 'Man, it's such a male-dominated atmosphere community, and everything else will accept me and should I', you know, 'keep?' yeah, it was just a concern, yeah.

Monica Liuting:

I miss a part of your life story from you teenager years. You said you got married right after your middle school, is that your decision, or you feel that is the traditional way, you should do that?

Tamara Fleming:

Umm, I think, so right after the high school, I got married. I took a year off as I was going to a community college, um, but growing up, um, I think what I just never wanted was to be that girl that stayed in that city, got pregnant, got married to a marine, I didn't want that for my life, I just did not want, I feared it actually, because it was happening like, in 10th, 11th, 12th, my friends were getting pregnant, you know, and I didn't want that like, no, that's, you know, and I just made every step possible to make sure that didn't happen cause I did not want that for myself, but I was in love. I love the person, I can say I was in love, yeah I love the person but I also and that person really loved me, his name is Tori, Tori Cooper, and Tori and I dated for like probably 10th, 11th, 12th grade, so since the 10th grade, I was, I was infatuated with this boy that I went to school with his name's Frederick Law and, oh gosh, he was just amazing and so awesome, he was like two years older than me, and he graduated high school, guys to the military, we dated on and off, like well we dated and I thought it was always on, but I think it was all for him, because he was out doing his thing and when he come home to visit, then we be back together again, but inside it was like, I was started to really have great conversations with Tori and he worked at McDonald's with me, that was my very first official job when I was 16, so drive me home, both, he lived in Sandy Run as well, so we spent a lot of time together, we would sit in the car talking for hours, hours, hours, hours, and so we had a lot of, a lot of dreams, a lot of things to talk about and so fun. And that's why I was with, but I do remember too that I wasn't given 100% of myself and I could say that because I remember like when I was in, we can get into an argument or disagreement and I would not talk to him for 3 days, like straight up just be seriously mad and not talk, just I don't want to talk to you, blah blah blah, meanwhile, he's looking for me, he wants to talk, he said I'm sorry, calls or whatever it is and I'm just being very headstrong and then I also remember we were in a car, we had a Yugo, was a small, small,

small car, we were in the car one day, I said, "Do you ever just wonder when you meet your soul mate, like you're just wonder when you're going to find that person is out there just for you?" And it was something that came out of my mouth so naturally; I didn't realize that he saw forever in me you know, and (laughs), so saying that to your boyfriend, he's looking at me like, 'What the hell was wrong with you', like, 'why would you say that to me?' And I apologize profusely but even then unless my god, I know this isn't it, you know, although we were together, we got married, I came up here, we only stay married for maybe a year when I got up here, even like three years before non-stop 'I love you', 'can't wait to see you', then we get married and it's just like two ships passing by, but I think you know things happen but after we got divorced, or slit up, I just knew that I was not going to end back in in Jackson North Carolina, I just knew that, that was not going to happen. So I made some things happen and I stayed here, and that was even a challenge, too, because we, things got physical for him and I, leaving out I remember, I did something we got two big argument he would, he pulled so much of my hair out, he pulled so much of my hair that I I'm surprised that I even have hair, you know, cause it was just so much, and I remember being upset and then I will break his (clap), he was also DJing, that I would crack the records, like some of his favorite, most hard to find, value records, I would split them in half and then I remember when I was trying to leave, I went back to get my clothes, and he slashed all of my clothes, like every single piece of clothing that I had with a big rip, like took a box cutter through everything, so all of my things were ruined. Uh, before then, I remember I was working in Jersey City at a place called ICF Kaiser's engineers, and he came to pick me up, and I was so frustrated, cause I was hungry, so hungry I just want to go home, I want to eat and just like how, you're so late, you didn't even tell me, you know, so we're fussing and arguing in the car, and I don't know when, but he mused my head up against the, the, there's a, what you called it, the safe belt has a little locket on a side, and he smashed my head into this thing and he did it over and over and over again, while he's driving and hit me and I'm, kept doing it, and all I'm thinking like, 'Okay well, I'm way too far from', like we're on a bridge and I couldn't get out and started snowing and everything is just going wrong at that moment, he pulled my hair, is knocking me in elbow, mush my head up against the door, like and it's, it's, it's hard and I remember when we finally got off the exit, uh, I felt like, 'Okay I'm just going to jump out the car', I jumped out of the car and it was a moving car but it was kind of slowing down, because it was coming to a light, I jumped out of the car, I got out of his car and then I called my aunt, right? Just it was my cousin, so I just met her, she was a relative of mine, my grandmother's and I found out she was living, she lives here in Newark and I had met her maybe once, once or three times and so I called her up and I'm like, "I'm out here, stranded, I didn't know the community at all, I know it was cold, as, as raining and snowing at the same time, so many different things going on, but I know I just had to be safe and my, my cousin came to get me, I was afraid to go back to the house by myself, so I went to Burger King, cause his sister worked at Burger King and I said what, I can at least go get the key from her, so I can go get my things, uh, so I went to Burger

King, and I had like a black eye, red my eyeliner everything was all over the place, my hair was all over the place and she just looked at me, and just burst out in tears. She knew that we had been fighting and she knew something was wrong and I said, you know, "I just got to get the key, I got to get my stuff", you know, so I got the key and I got some things, but when I came back to try to get more, that's when I found that he had slashed everything that I owned, and it was even hard for me to go and get some things at first time because his mother would, she didn't want me in the house, she was afraid to allow me in, cause she didn't know what would happen, you know, between him and I, but it was, it's like a fighting to survive type of thing and, and I got out of it, and since I was say, say to people, "It's a very thin line between love and hate, and someone you can just love to death, and then before you know it, it's extreme, you know, trying to get out of a situation or having a physical altercation that could just, you know, a push can, killing you, you push, you fall, or something, you know, you just never know", so it's very fortunate to get out of that situation with sanity, bumps and bruises for sure, but I got out of it, so I was happy about that, you know, but my childhood, my, my upbringing and then I think even going back to with my mom situation, I was not going to have it, I could not stay in a relationship where I was getting abused and so I had to move on and move forward.

Monica Liuting:

Tamara Fleming:

Monica Liuting:

Tamara Fleming:

When did you find out you, you love woman?

Umm, so,

(Laughs)

When I was married, still, we were still living in the same household, uh, he was from New Jersey, and I was new and I hadn't enrolled in school yet, so I was temping, so as you go, you temp, you come home and that's it, it's like, this is like three or four months. I don't this is, I don't want to do this (claps). Six months go by and I'm still kind of, I don't know anybody, there's nothing for me to do here, I don't know anybody and so what I wanted to do was find people, meet people, and so back then there was a, I don't know if they do this anymore, but the Star-Ledger was newspaper and they had a section like for dating, so and not even just dating, in my mind, it was like men and, so ok, it is men seeking women, these are the sections, men seeking women, women seeking men, and then alternative lifestyles, right? So alternative lifestyles was for, used like lesbian seeking lesbian, men seeking men so that, 'Oh my god, what? What is that?' So I'm thinking, I'm just going to place an ad, just to meet people, I want to meet more women, I couldn't meet a guy cause I'm like that will be like dating, and I'm married, so I am like, I just want to meet people, I want to meet, you know, so we can go to the mall and stuff like that and, and, um, and I would have friends here and so I place an ad, I set up my voicemail and everything and I would just meet a couple people, but clearly they were either lesbian or looking for relation, like they knew they liked women. To me, it was more like, I just want a girlfriend and hang out, we just want to go shopping and whatever, and so I think in conversations uh, and then maybe release accepting it. I was like, 'That's kind of curious, oh, okay', so that's when I started to explore more and so I changed my ad from looking for friends to hang out and go to the mall

wait to, you know, I don't know what I could say, looking for a special friend or something like that, we know what special is, just exploring and I remember my first uh, encounter, I met a woman and, and, um, we actually met, so before it was kind of like, have calls, but she's going to meet me here in the parking lot, she was from Boston, "Meet me here the parking lot", and, and, we'll just say hi to each other", you know, so I pull up to the parking lot, she pulls up to her car and I think she got out of her car and she came into the passenger seat and I'm all, I am nervous, this is like, this isn't the type of nervous to get from me in a friend for the first time, this is like a, oh my god, I got butterflies in my stomach and happy kind of nervous and anxious, that's totally like a dating nervous, so it felt like, 'Oh my gosh' you know, and so after we met um, as all I can think about it's her, 'Oh my gosh, she's so pretty and, and she was so cool", and, you know, and I got the butterflies and that's what I knew, like I never felt like that with a guy, like I said with Frederic, I'm like, 'Oh, I really like him, he's so cool", but with her, it was just like, 'Oh my goodness', um 'very interesting', and so from there, you know, we explore things, you know, and I put more ads and I met more people and it started to become (pause) even more of a desire for myself is to be around more people like, like that and so that's what I set out to do, but it was around, gosh maybe 20, 21, I'm guessing around that time that's how I ended up meeting quite a few of my friends and, and eventually one of my business partners met her that way too, by placing an ad, yeah.

Monica Liuting:

Tamara Fleming:

Monica Liuting:

I know you are going to... so could I ask one more question?

Yeah.

When you are talking about your mother interpret your, keep a distance with men as "are you a lesbian", cause to me, I, I would say there are lot of interpretations, like you have been hurt by your last relationship, but why, why she interpret that way?

Tamara Fleming:

Because I think, your, she probably saw her daughter's young, attractive and single, and you're telling me that you're, you don't want to talk to this guy, he's trying to talk to you, and then I think at that time, I already started to date women and so when I would come home to visit, this one woman I was dating, she would call my grandmother's home, "Oh, may I speak to Tamara?" And it's like, "Okay, who is this?" "This is Chris." And so my grandmother would give me the phone a couple times, so "Go ahead, you got a friend, nickname Chris," or whatever, but I think when Chris kept calling (laugh), Chris kept calling and I would probably be smiling and cheeing from ear-to-ear, whatever, and so my grandmother is probably looking, it's like, 'Wait, what the heck is going on? So no man's calling her, her, her , is this woman', and so I'm sure my grandmother and my mom had that conversation, so that's why it was easy for my mother to ask that question, um, I don't know if she would've done that if it was, you know, not, that didn't happen, but because when I came to visit, Chris will call, uh, then I think they were talking, definitely and she probably wanted to just make sure if it was true, and I'm sure after I confess to her, she came, and she told my grandmother, and let her know as well too. Um, but something about it just made sense for me to be okay with saying it, like you going to love me or not, you know, I am, this is who I am, I'm not going to

hide it, cause I certainly could have, I could have lived a whole completely different lifestyle up here, and my mother wouldn't be none the wiser, because she was in North Carolina and then only had limited family here, I could have been doing anything, you know, and um, but I just wanted to be honest with her and, and not be sheltered. So I'm happy that I came out to her. Uh, it took her a while to get used to it, but eventually, um, she accepted it and I know that because, (I got something on my lips) I know that because she, she openly accepts Elaine, my wife, you know, like two 'clock this morning, she calls, "I just want to say happy birthday to Eileen", I am like, "Ma, Elaine is upstairs, sleep", and so she's like, "Oh, yo yo, sleep", I was down, I actually down here, I spend a lot of my time upstairs, I mean, downstairs and Elaine is upstairs. But, so, so I like, "No, I'm up here." I think I was working on something, to do with something, she's like, "You need to take your butt to bed." I was like, "I know, I'm going to go to sleep." But I have been staying up late night, I'm trying to get used to getting back to going to sleep, cause sometimes I don't go to sleep until 5 in the morning and then I wake up at 8, so my sleeping patterns have been, they've been changing a lot, kind of wired, but it's a lot of, that's the best time I can get some work done, the most, uh, but it also means that it kind messes up my energy level, sometimes about the day as well too, but I knew, at first I was a little hesitant about Elaine, because Elaine has, she dresses male, with, most masculine clothing and, and, and her body expression everything is, is male, Lord, you know and I'm like, man, I don't know if they're gonna, but she's such a sweet person, such a wonderful person that she won them over, and I walk with my head up even higher with my family, and if I'm sure my community and home knows, I'm sure they got eyebrows raised up, but at the same time it's still like, I don't care my mom knows, my, my family is happy, and they love her to death, then I'm happy as well too. So I'm glad they, they have a family that accepted me, and if someone didn't like it, no one expressed that to me and I'm glad because I wouldn't care anyway, you know, but, but yeah I have a really great family that took me in with open arms.

Monica Liuting: Thank you very much.

Tamara Fleming: Oh, you're welcome.

Monica Liuting: Thank you. I wish I have more time, thank you.

Tamara Fleming: Is there anything you wanted to ask, it didn't say cause you know I just want to make sure you have enough.

Monica Liuting: Yeah, I have. Do you want to say more about anything I didn't ask?

Tamara Fleming: Not really, I just feel, yeah, I, I, I think I did like a kind of a good overview, left some things out including some things but you know, in general, I think it's been a good opportunity for me to self reflecting, to be vulnerable in a lot of ways, I think even being rapped is very vulnerable, cause you know, I wish I could have prepared another style or whatever but I'm like you know what, just be who you are, cause that's what all matters to be, uh, that's what matters anyway, yeah.

Monica Liuting: Thank you very much.

Tamara Fleming: Thank you.

Monica Liuting: And happy birthday to, Elaine?

Tamara Fleming: Yes, yes, we're gonna, I am gonna take her to a sauna and get a spa treatment and everything like that, so we'll have fun and

this Friday, we're putting uh, of a birthday party for her together so we're going to have a hundred people,

Monica Liuting:

Is that a surprise party?

Tamara Fleming:

No, it's not a surprise no yeah we have like a hundred people and they're going to come out and have a great time so yeah.

Monica Liuting:

Thank you.

Tamara Fleming:

Thank you. Yeah.