

JOHNS HOPKINS UNIVERSITY
ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION

Legacy Forté

Interviewed by Rebecca Rivera & Samskruthi Madireddy

April 12, 2022

Johns Hopkins University
Oral History Collection

Interviewee: Legacy Forté (LF)

Interviewer 1: Rebecca Rivera (RR)

Interviewer 2: Samskruthi Madireddy (SM)

Subject: Home and family in the life history of Legacy Forté

Date: April 12, 2022

RR: It's good, right?

SM: OK so to start off, if you could just tell us your name and a little bit about when and where you were born.

LF: My name is Legacy. I'm a Baltimore native. I was born here in Baltimore City at Maryland General Hospital. I don't even ... that might still exist *[laughs]*. But, yeah, Maryland General Hospital and my birthday is exactly a week from today. Yeah, I've went to Baltimore City Public School my whole life for elementary, middle and high school. I went to the illustrious Baltimore City College for high school. I went to The Stadium Middle School, and I went to Northwood Elementary School. I don't know what else you want?

RR: Did I miss it or are you comfortable saying how old you are?

LF: Yeah, I'm 22 going on 23 and my pronouns are "they/she" – "they" preferably and ... yeah.

SM: Awesome. Can you tell us some more about kind of the neighborhood that you grew up in or what particular place that was?

LF: So I grew up actually not too far away from here because I grew up in the neighborhood that City College is located in, between there and the Loch Raven area. The neighborhood I grew up in was strangely still, you know, I mean not even strangely because it's like that with all hood neighborhoods for real but like it was still community-oriented while it still had its, you know, its violence and its situations of aggression.

But at the end of the day, it was just always communal, and I had a really interesting perspective to that just because my house and my grandmother was like the neighborhood grandmother and the

neighborhood house. So everybody on the block called my grandmother “Granny,” so it was just like regardless of the things, that, you know, did happen because outside of the block that we created a family. You know, if you went two blocks down the street or three blocks up the street, you’d be in a whole different hood and a whole different set of problems. But at the end of the day, it was just family. It was, yeah, nothing but love for real.

RR: So can you – did you live with your grandmother?

LF: Yeah, OK, so I actually was raised by my grandmother. I have a really unique upbringing in the sense that I didn’t meet my mom until I was three. And from about three months until the time I was three years old, I lived with my grandmother. And my existence in itself is just like really interesting because my mother told me this a few years ago. And it’s just always been something that I think about because I think about the fact that everything happens for a reason, and people are here for reasons.

But I was a failed abortion, and my mother didn’t find out that she was pregnant with me until she was five months pregnant, and then I came at seven months, so I came two months early. And then I spent the first three to four months of my life in the hospital. And then, yeah, after that I was given to my grandmother, and I was also my mother’s turn-of-the-century baby. And if you want to know what that means, it can mean a couple things. But in this situation, it means that I was the child that encouraged my mom to get clean because she was a drug user at the time.

So she basically gave me to my grandmother at three months and checked herself into rehab, and she’s been clean for ... how old am I? [Laughs] Yeah, she’s been clean for about 23 years since, so I’m really proud of her for that. Yeah so that was my introduction to life and family structure. So it’s always been interesting to me early on just like hierarchal power structures and how other people usually see them just because the average person grows up with their mom. They don’t meet their mom. That’s just like a person they know.

So to wholly separate that the person that gave you life and not conduce them down but for them to be introduced as just another person to you, that kind of like ... it doesn’t *mess you up*. But it definitely challenges the way that you view relationships from there out and just also like building relationships and stuff like that.

RR: Do you remember meeting her?

LF: [Laughs] I'm sorry. Yeah, so that was one of my first memories, and it's actually kind of a ... I'm OK with sharing it because if I wasn't, I would've just stopped and said "pass" like I know I said I would. But it was actually my first memory and also like a traumatic memory. But my mother is very, very fair-skinned. Think Rachel Dolezal. But my mother's Black, I promise, I promise, I promise. She gives like high yellow, you know, woman. But this comes into play, I promise. [Laughs] There's a reason I said this. [Laughs]

But so my first memory is actually meeting my mom, and I remember just being at my grandmother's house and playing. And then *Ice Age* had just come out. And a lady had brought the *Ice Age* movie, and I was so excited to open it and watch it that I ended up ripping the cover. And then, I mean, in retrospect when I look back at it, I realize that my mother was going through withdrawal, so this is a result of withdrawal. But I remember me ripping the cover, and she just spazzed like was all kinds of "little bitches." And I was just like—I just remember just breaking down so bad and running to my grandmother and just being like [imitating crying], "Granny, who is this white lady yelling at me?"

And she looked at me and I swear I thought – like even at that age, I knew what *Punk'D* was and I swear you couldn't have paid me to not think that Ashton Kutcher was going to like fall from somewhere. She looked at me dead in my face and said, "Baby, that's your mother." I said, "No, you my mother." [Laughs] And she was like, "No, Baby, that's your mother," and I'm like oh, wow. OK, somebody say "psych" now quickly [laughs]. But, yeah, so to answer your question, yes, I do remember meeting her, and that was the anticlimactic story, I guess. [Laughs]

SM: What was your mother's role in your life growing up after that moment?

LF: It didn't really exist, unfortunately. I tell people all the time I raised myself since I was about 14 because I lived with my grandmother—between my grandmother and my aunt up until the time I was 12 so, actually, like 12 going into 13. And the only reason I moved with my mom was the year I turned 14 was because I went to City. And even though it wasn't *because* I took German, but I took German and we had a German exchange program that every year either we went there or they came, you know, people from an exchange school that we had a partnership with came here.

And that year particularly people were coming here, and I was just like that would be so cool to be able to host a German exchange student. So I couldn't do it at my grandmother's house because, again, my grandmother was the neighborhood grandmother, so there was barely room for me at my grandma's house. But I was just like I'm going to go to my mother's house because she has the room. And then I'm going to go there, be there for however long she's going to be there, and then I'm gonna come back. That was always my plan.

And then I did it and I still talk—and to this day I don't regret that because I still talk to the German exchange student like now, like even when the Baltimore Uprising happened. She DM'd me on Twitter and was like – not DM'd me on Twitter, DM'd me on Instagram and said, “Is your family OK?” at least just checked up, so I don't ever regret that. But then when it came time for me wanting to go back to my grandmother's house, I wasn't able to because life had happened for other people in my family. And they ended up there in the space that I was occupying before I had went to my mother's house. So it was very interesting and, yeah, so then after that it was just a challenge I guess I'd say. And it was always really interesting – and I say “interesting” a lot. I'm sorry *[laughs]*.

I guess this all boils down to the fact that one of the conversations I had with my mom I guess now a few years ago. But in recent years as in the last two, she started to unconsciously do things that are better. So I try to not dwell more on that but think more about those things. But one of the conversations that I had was basically after I didn't go to college the way I was supposed to because some other interesting things happened.

And I remember just having this kind of fallout with my mom because I forgot what I asked her to do, but I asked her to do something. And she just complained about doing it. And I was like I don't even ask you for shit. Like I told you I been raising myself since I was 14, so if I didn't eat, I mean if I didn't make money for the food, I didn't eat. If I didn't buy my school clothes, I didn't have school clothes, you know, type shit. And she also like, unfortunately, because it's the truth, not just in the Black community but in multiple communities. She's also a woman that continuously would put her significant other before her kids, and that's why I found myself in that situation.

But after I was supposed to go out to college, like I said, I forgot what happened. But I ended up just blowing up on her and just

like, “yo, I never asked you to do shit. And the one time I ask you to do something, it’s all of this. What the fuck?” And I was just, I can’t even remember what I was saying because I was just so upset. And I remember her response to me, and I wish I knew what I said just because I could make sense as to why that was her response. I needed to hear it regardless, but to know what that was in response to would definitely help me a little bit. But she just said, “I’m sorry.” I guess it was just me breaking down and just breaking in front of her.

She just started apologizing. She was like, “I’m sorry. You’re definitely right. I did make you grow up faster than you needed to and that you should’ve. And it’s because out of all my kids” – I’m one of five. I’m four of five. My mother has four girls and one boy. And I am her third girl. But, yeah, she was like, “Out of all of my kids, I just knew that you would be OK and that you didn’t need me.” And I was just like it made sense to an extent, but it never made sense to me because –

[End of first audio]

RR: OK, it’s recording again. Yeah, I might have to change the levels, but it should be fine, yeah.

LF: And I guess to wrap up ... *[pause]*

RR: You can go.

LF: OK. I guess to wrap up to answering the question, her role although it was absent like, you know, the absence was very much felt because as a parentless child, not even just not having my mom but my father was also absent. Being as though I was a parentless child, not being able to—I don’t know—join in community in talks of Mother’s Day and going out and having Mommy-and-Me dates and just doing little things like going to the mall with your mom or just going to lunch with your mom, having a sleepover with your mom. Little things like that I couldn’t relate to. So in a way from an early age without even trying, unconsciously there was a disconnect between me and majority of – I want to just say “society” but like specifically my friends, regardless of if I wanted it to be that or not.

RR: Yeah so my follow-up question that I was going to ask before I had to run was that how did home or the feeling of home change? What was the difference of your home at your grandmother’s and your home at your mother’s?

LF:

Like you said, the feeling was gone. Home is not a place. It's a feeling, you know what I mean? People can live in a house for 100 years and it not be their home because it's a sense of safety. It's a sense of comfortability. It's a sense of opportunity to be vulnerable if I wanted to be. Yeah, like I said, it kind of disappeared after that because I went from being taken care of by someone that was very motherly, very matriarchal and very compassionate and so much so that she sometimes forgot to think about herself to the completely opposite type of person, someone that was so, I guess, selfish, yeah, selfish.

And you know what's crazy? I'm sitting here trying to think of a way to not say things that would hurt my mother if she ever heard this. And that's the craziest thing to me as well because even in trying to tell my story, I'm still trying to make space for other people and the way they may react to it regardless of the fact that the part that they know that they played in it. *[Laughs]* But I just had to say that because it was just really crazy, but going to somebody that was more self-centered and didn't really see beyond, yeah, past themselves.

And it was, yeah, like night and day. I went from being able to – like from wanting to come home and having somewhere that I wanted to go after school or couldn't wait to go after school for whatever reason to dreading being in a place. But I also don't – I'm not mad at that because that also is what made me find my love in extracurricular activities in school because once I figured out that if I got involved after school, that meant the longer I stayed out of the house. That meant I was in everything after school *[laughs]*.

And it's been from an early age I've been like, I mean, you would see it as an overachiever. But most overachievers are just vulnerable children seeking attention, but not in a way that you think of an attention-seeker. It's just like a child saying, "Look what I did! Aren't you proud of me?" and keep having projects to be like, "Look what I did again! Are you proud of me this time?" And that's the cycle of essentially what an overachiever is.

But ever since elementary school, I was in the choir for like seven years. I played the violin for a few years. I started the first photography club in my elementary school. I literally created ways. *[Laughs]* That's what I mean. I created ways to stay out of the house. If there was no way for me to stay out of the house, I made one, so I did that in elementary school.

Then in middle school I was, well, middle school was really interesting for me because I was very ... I'm not gonna say I was "disrespectful" because that's not something – I mean, I was to an extent. But disrespect is only seen as disrespect most times, when it comes to youth, because that youth won't allow that adult to disrespect them, so that's what it was. That's just – I was a youth at a point that would not – well, in sixth grade I was a menace. *[Laughs]* I'm not gonna excuse that either. I was supposed to not – my record was supposed to be shattered for that year, but it wasn't. Thank you, Mr. Redcroft.

But after that, I was just a youth that refused to tolerate disrespect, regardless of who it came from. And that, in turn, turned me into a "combative" and just all of the adjectives that get associated to women when they—well, Black women specifically—when they assert autonomy over themselves and over their whole everything.

So if like I remember – OK, this is a little trifling and I know so I'm saying it. But perfect example: In eighth grade my math teacher, he was very interesting. I'm not gonna say his name but he was very interesting. You know who he is. He was one of the adults that craved the power trip that came with being a teacher and exerting that power over a student. And I had asked to go to the bathroom and he kept saying no and I'm like all right. He said no for a specific reason at first, and I'm like all right, I understand. So then I asked like 20 minutes later and I kept like periodically asking and he just kept saying no. And after a while, there was no reason for him to say no. He was just saying no because he – I'm not gonna say he didn't – he specifically didn't like me. Yeah, I'm gonna say that, yeah. He specifically did not like me.

Yeah, so he after a point was just not letting me go because he had the authority to tell me not to go. I said, "Look, if I'm gonna piss on the floor or your coffee cup. Pick one." And I got in-school suspension for that. I got suspended for that. How I got suspended for that? And you know what? That's what I'm saying like, case in point. Like just because you're an adult does not give you any right to sit here and power trip over any type of children. And that goes for teachers. That goes for parents. That goes for, you know, you name it.

Either way, middle school, anyhow, I played lacrosse, just did a whole bunch of stuff. Then high school I was in drama club. I was in student debate. I helped – and this is where my activism kind of like blossomed, I guess. But, yeah, and then I just did everything in

high school and kind of never stopped from then because I realized that that was like an escape. And I literally only would go home to sleep. It wasn't home. Like I would go in the house to sleep and that was it.

SM: And where did you – I think you said that you have been out of your mom's house. You were only there for a year?

LF: So I stayed with my mom from the time I was 14 until I was about 17 so maybe three years, and I guess on and off throughout middle school as well. But, yeah, I actually *[laughs]* ... I actually left my mother's house before that big blow-up. I was technically gone before I left, well, I was supposed to leave for college because I was also kind of repeating her cycle and finding refuge in relationships at the time.

And I was with a woman and we were together for almost two years, but she lived in DC, and she was four years older than me? I can't remember. And, yes, that was bad. It might've been five but, yeah, I don't know. It was bad but it was all me because I will say that I lied about my age because a lot of people don't like to own up to that. But the way that we met I lied about my age. But before we even continued anything, I very upfront-ly was like, "I know on my profile it say this but I'm not. What you want to do?" But either way, she was four years older than me and she lived in DC.

And I lived there with her basically from the time that we kind of got in a relationship until my graduation from high school I want to say or our breakup, whichever one came first *[laughs]* so from then until I tried to go to college. I lived in DC and I would commute from DC. Well, tried to commute from DC every morning to get to school and, yeah, I had to be to school at 7:50. I had to be in my first period by 7:50, and that would mean I would have to get up at 3:45 or at latest 4:00 to be in school on time.

But, yeah, so then after college didn't work out the way I wanted it to, I ended up staying with my best friend at the time and kind of subletting in a way. At first I was just sleeping on their couch, and then it turned into a sublet situation. And I've been out of my mother's house ever since, and that's been about five years ago I guess.

RR: So, I mean, you were going through a lot of trouble to stay in DC, so what was that place like?

LF: It actually *[laughs]* ... not you making me think about my ex. Oooh, child! It's OK, it's OK. You know what? You know what's crazy? I had been thinking about her this week anyway. And I only think about her specifically because our relationship and just that whole time period in my life was very interesting because her family – I'm not gonna say was more of a family to me than my family, but I guess to an extent they were. Why is my... I don't feel like I got to cry. What's going on?

But her family to some extent was very much my family. Like her father would just randomly like, even after we broke up would just randomly call me and just be like, "I'm just checking on my other daughter because you're still my daughter." And it was interesting. We went through our fair share of traumatic experiences there as well because while I was living in DC, we also experienced a house fire that kind of traumatized both of us for quite some time. But it was a really ... I'm not gonna say eye-opening because it wasn't really that life-changing, but it was a really affirming and reassuring experience and made me just appreciate Black people in other places and just know there's other Black mothers and other Black aunties out there just without the blood and it just felt nice.

SM: And can you tell us about the space that you shared with your best friend when it was initially you were on their couch and it became a sublet?

LF: *[Laughs]* That's not my best friend no more. Add *that* to the archive but why am I such a shady bird? Anyway, we – it was actually around the corner from here. Y'all know where the University Market is, that house attached to the University Market? That's where I used to live *[laughs]*. And that is a house broken up into two apartments. And I basically lived there with my best friend at the time and two other people. One of them was like somewhat like a mutual like an associate that we had mutual friends, but we weren't really that cool. And then another person was just completely random.

And the associate and the completely random person ended up moving out completely after – I don't know. I'm not good with time. Time doesn't exist to me. But after some point in time, it might've been like six months or something like that. They moved out, and I just basically sublet one of their spaces.

And ironically enough, because of some interesting things that ended up transpiring with the other person that ended up being a sublet tenant at the end of that, I ended up being randomly

homeless and unhoused for about three months because of, yeah, like I said just things that went on because of that, yeah. Being unhoused. Thank God I was never sleeping on the street homeless. I was more so like couch-hopping homeless.

But I also would never even wish that on my worst – I would never wish unhoused, instability and housing instability on anybody whether it be on-the-street homeless or couch-hopping, regardless. But at that time it really did continuously put stress on a lot of my relationships because a lot of my best friends – not a lot of my best friends. One of my best friends at the time had her own place. And then my other best friend was also one of my longest friends, so her family was like mine anyway. So I would sleep on a futon next to her bed. But either way, it would put strains on our relationships just because it's like *you* know that I'm in this space because I have nowhere else to go.

And then regardless of if you want to get tired of somebody being in your space sometimes, it just happens. And I'm a really big feeler of energy, and I would immediately feel when they would want me to leave and then whether or not they would tell me was neither here nor there, but I could feel it. And that was one of the, you know, just being unhoused for that amount of time was just one of the toughest times in my life. And I ended up at my grandmother's house again, you know, before signing the lease with my niece to – interesting enough, me and my niece are two years apart. She's older than me but still my niece. Yeah, we signed a lease together to live kind of right around the corner from where we grew up at, and we were staying there for two years. And we moved out of there in like 2018 I think, 2019? I don't know. Again, time doesn't exist to me. Sorry.

RR: So maybe a bit of a pivot, but we were wondering how your queer identities or identity interacted with your home life or if it did in any way?

LF: *[Laughs]* Oh, my gosh. Y'all can just put a whole reel of my laughs from these, but it was really interesting because the cousin that while you were getting the new mic set up, I was talking – we were talking about, the cousin that made me realize that I could be a psychologist. But she was also one of the first queer figures that I seen in my family. And it was just really interesting to see the way that people reacted to her while she wasn't around in aspects of a lot of things.

And then shortly thereafter, she came out and she is five years older than me. Yeah so she came out. My niece came out, the one that I said is two years older than me, and she came out as like bisexual or something at that time. I was just like *OK, we getting a little queer in here. It should be OK for me.* Because, I mean, from really as early as the age of six but like I didn't come out to anybody. Well, I came out to my friends I guess in like sixth or seventh grade, something like that. Seventh grade? Yeah and I don't know. Once I came out to my friends, I'm gonna say it took some time to get to the family. But I was always the weird one in my family anyway. So I'm not gonna say people expected it, but a lot of people weren't surprised.

But even still with that, my mother acted, like, very strangely homophobic in a way that was very interesting to me because she loved my niece's girlfriend, like loved her and could not stand mine. And I'm like *hold on, stop press. What's going on?* So I mean, I guess it was because I was her child which also was even more wild. But either way, it was interesting because I never really got to come out to my mom. I was kind of – wow, this is gonna be archived for history. I just had to – I didn't come out to my mom. I was kind of forced out to my mom because she caught me having sex with my high school sweetheart. *[Laughs]*

And that, as you could probably imagine, would kind of change the way that the conversation could've happened. But, yeah, I'm a romantic and I kind of took my high school sweetheart's virginity without knowing because I was still like kind of ignorant to how virginity worked and still thought like a penis had to be involved for you to lose virginity and stuff like that. And, yeah, I kind of took her virginity without knowing and then felt really bad and I did like a little redo and, again, different dynamics because to me like people hear this story and are like, "How old were you, in your mother's house, da, da, da?"

To me, I had just moved with my mother. I don't – like this lady is a regular lady to me. You feel me. I pay for my phone. I pay for my everything at this point, so we roommates more *[laughs]*. For real that's not really my mother for real because people hear this story and be like, "why you in your mother's house, da, da, da?" This is *our* house *[laughs]*. But, yeah, and I kind of did a redo – well, not a redo but like, yeah, a redo of her whole virginity because she – because virginity is a social construct as well, and it does not matter. But if it matters to somebody, I respect their opinion. So because it mattered to her, I did this whole thing that

was just very romantic and one thing led to another and shoop da, da, da, boom, yeah.

And so the way my room is set up basically it's just like a patch of wall before you seen the actual room that made up my closet. And so we were by my wardrobe on the floor, and she walked in and she didn't see anything. She was at where the patch is, that you can't really see my room at. But she saw like – I'm not gonna get into the story, but she saw bitten strawberries all over the floor, and she saw my high school sweetheart's clothes at the door like *[laughs]* in a pool on the floor at the door. And she's not a brain surgeon, but it didn't take that to figure out one plus one was two. And she just kind of just – she didn't really see anything. She just one plus one equals two and slowly backed out the room and then texted and then like, "We need to talk." *[Laughs]*

And then the talk went something like this. She's like, "You don't think I know you're gay?" This is almost verbatim because I remember that. She's like, "You don't think I know that you're gay? You're my child." You know? But this is the not verbatim part but this is basically what happened after that. She was just like, "You're my child. I know you, da, da, da. But basically, that makes me uncomfortable, and since I make all your decisions 'til you're 18, we're just gonna chalk it up and say that you're confused. Now, if you turn 18 and after you turn 18 you tell me that you still like girls, then I'll have to respect it because then it's your decision. But until then, you're confused. All right, love you, good night." And that was kind of not the first and last, but after that she told me she was not allowed in my house for a good amount of time. But, again, who was she? Nnot like that but, who was my mother to me? So after about maybe two, three months, she came back. We really ain't like ... *[laughs]* We really ain't trying to hit it as hard and do as much then.

But it was just kind of don't-ask-don't-tell kind of thing. Everybody knew that I liked girls, and it made people uncomfortable and whatever. But nobody ever really ... like they *cared* but only cared enough to gossip about it but not actually speak to me about it because it wasn't a problem to speak about. They just, again, just wanted to gossip. So, yeah.

SM: What was that dynamic like for you?

LF: Well, I mean, it really wasn't too bad just because, just because like I said, I've always been the weird one out of my family. So I'm used to being the one they talk about for whatever reason

whether it be that I'm gay, whether it be because I broke a lot of the familial cycles in my family. When it came to schools, I was the first one not to go to the middle school everybody went to. I was the first one not to go to the high school a lot of them went to. And just a lot of stuff. So I was already kind of used to that, but it was just different in the way that I seen, like I said, the way that I seen my mother interact with other people that identified as queer and their counterparts in my family.

And that shit really burned me up for a long time. I remember it was a Facebook little memory I got that was like 10 years ago or 11 years ago today. And it literally said, "It's crazy how my mother can sit and embrace my niece's girlfriend but won't sit and do it to mine, you know, sit and embrace mine." And I just—I looked at that and I almost cried, but I was just like, I didn't because I'm in a better place. I feel like we – even though time is what time is, we as a unit are in a better place.

But I was just like that was just hard, yeah. And then as of what made it even harder as of recently is, again, every time I'm about to say something that I know is true I'm like my mama gonna hear this. Anyway, as of recently, with me getting the notoriety that I was also clowned in my family about it because I got clowned in my family about being the Afro, you know, "power to the people," all this, all that. And it's just like, after being clowned for it and now that it's like paying off in the sense of like the opportunities that it's presented me and the way that I'm able to brag on myself but also by extension they're able to brag on me.

It's just like things became different because then my mother recently when I got her in her car, she said something, something about like, "Because you know..." something about "me used to be messing with girls, Legacy, something, something, something ..." and she said it so casually like this is a regular Tuesday morning conversation that we already had. And I'm like, "Girl, what? You like who? Coochie? *You?* You didn't say that. That wasn't you. Mm-mm. I don't know. Not that one." But, yeah, so it's just been really interesting because now, yeah, like I don't know. How would *y'all* feel, basically like ...

RR: Yeah, especially after growing up how she acted, I guess.

LF: Yeah, and it's just like, "Yeah, girl. You know I be liking all girls." I'm like, "Girl *what?* Stop—*Huh?* OK, OK, no comment, thank you, no thank you [*laughs*]. Thank you, come again." I just ... so, yeah, it's just been interesting to see that shift over time for sure because

at first it was like, “We gonna keep it on the hush because it makes me uncomfortable.” But it’s just like, “Now that that’s kind of what you’re being known for, I now feel comfortable enough to tell you about my past experiences even though I used to shame you for yours.” Boom, that’s it. Yeah, drop my mic for that one.

RR: I was wondering what your relationship with your siblings is like?

LF: Unfortunately, it’s kind of non-existent. Like I said, I’m like four or five – I technically have two brothers. All of my mother’s kids are half-siblings, so none of us have the same father. On my father’s side, I am the only girl, and I’m the youngest. But on both of my sides I have a – my eldest sibling is old enough to be my parent. So on my father’s side, he only has myself and my brother.

And my brother ... how old am I?

RR: 22.

SM: You’re turning 23.

LF: I’m sorry. Look, look [*chuckles*]. So he got to be like 45, something like that because my mother’s eldest daughter is turning 40. Oh, she gonna get mad if I record this and be wrong. But I think it’s 42 or 43, and he’s older than her. Yeah so in terms of them we were too, I mean, obviously kind of too far in age to really have any type of relationship if it wasn’t them bonding over the fact that me and my niece were close. I mean close in age, but we were never really close until recently, so that didn’t happen.

My other sister, yeah, we just aren’t close unfortunately because we just aren’t, not even because of the age gap, because it is the age gap with my brother from my father’s side. And my first two sisters are the same to some extent. But on the other end, like I said, I’ve always been the weird one. You feel me? Everybody – I was more in...was more academia, you feel me? They was in the streets. And while I still understood the streets, I just wasn’t out there with them for real, and that made them look at me different. Like I grew up with an aspect of like, “*she green for real.*” Urban Dictionary definition: “*Green*” is when you are naïve to the world. Yeah, I had to break it down for the listeners just in case.

But so I grew up with that kind of trope because I continuously picked academia over the streets. I was like just viewed differently in general. So the closest sibling I’m close to is my brother on my mother’s side, but I’m not even really that close to him. But we

were close in the simple fact that we were both sent to live with my mother at the same time. So we basically had to team up to fend for ourselves. And I also just always had a really big respect for him because he was the reason that I didn't have to work when I was 12 and 13 because he did what he had to do to get us food and make sure that we ate. So that's my closest sibling if any at all, but we aren't really close.

I have a little sister that makes her own waves in the city because she's a very, very talented artist of many media. She's a make-up artist. She's a model. She's a visual artist. But she's also very disrespectful, and that is where we have a disconnect. And she also was the only child that my mother actually got a chance to raise to some extent and in that was very, very spoiled rotten to the sense of now she walks around with a sense of entitlement to the world. And just the way that she interacts with my mother is just not a way that I can condone and allow in my space and still be cool for her. Because no matter how I feel about that lady, that's my mother. I'm still gonna love her. But no matter what she's done to me, that don't mean that you get the right to disrespect her.

And that's kind of the premise that my youngest sibling operates on, so we don't have a relationship. And let the whole family tell it, she looks up to me and she's always wanted a relationship with me. But I only have relationships with *[phone rings]*...y'all see that? What kind of number is that? I'm sorry. But, yeah, she wants a relationship with me, but she doesn't want it enough to actually be a good person. And I only hang around with good people, and that's just it. So I really don't have a relationship with my two older siblings because they were very much whole adults before I was born and all of that.

When I turned 21 *[laughs]* when my sister was turning like 38 or something, like that was, you know, and I have always wanted to go out drinking with them. And I thought about it when I was younger but not really until it actually hit, and it was just like, damn, by the time I'm 21, she gonna be pushing 40. She ain't gonna want to go out with me. So I still love them. I still have love for my siblings and all that. I just don't really have a relationship with them. I mean, can that change? Absolutely, but it goes back to I don't give a fuck if you're my brother, sister, cousin, whatever depending on blood. But if you're not a good person, I'm not gonna be around you and that's it, and that's just the principle I live by.

SM: Yeah. Is there anyone that you kind of looked up to growing up or any mentors in school or other spaces that were helpful?

LF: I mean I actually did have, I will say, my older sister. And you know what? Maybe I'll just air them so that if they read this, it can be a wake-up call for them because they need it. You know, real shit. Because I keep, you know – as I'm speaking to y'all, like I said, every time I always do this anyway because I try to think before I speak, regardless. But I feel myself doing it extra now so just to make sure that I don't hurt my family's feelings in what I have to say about my experience but, regardless, it is what happened.

My sister, my oldest sister is very much, yeah, was very much one of my role models growing up. She was one of the reasons that ended up going to City because she went to City for a little bit. But she wanted to be a nurse, so she ended up transferring to Dunbar. But she was the reason that I wanted to go to City, and she pushed me to go to City. And she went to school for medical assistant and that was that and then ... I'm gonna just say the pandemic has had a way of definitely taking hold of people's lives for worse.

But other than that, I didn't really have any, I guess, familial role models growing up, especially women that I could look up to that wasn't to strive to take care of other people, which is, no shade, what I do already anyway [*laughs*]. But that's also just not what I was striving to do even back then. In terms of just school and stuff, like I said, I had a lot of teachers – goes back to the "Assassination Classroom" I also was talking about, a very interesting anime that is one of my favorite animes. And it just reminded me of a lot of the teachers that was very instrumental to me growing up. A few of my teachers actually came to see my TED Talk a few days ago because I let them know, and I was like, "I really want you there."

I actually grew up next door to my second-grade teacher. Before she was my second-grade teacher, she was my neighbor and then she was my second-grade teacher. And then she's always been like a second mom to me, and she was there on Saturday. And that was like really awesome and I had – I've had multiple father figure-ish teachers growing up. But one of them specifically was my teacher, coach, mentor. The list just goes on. Mr. Redcroft – y'all heard me. "Thank you, Mr. Redcroft." That's really a quote that I like to live by because he's told me, I mean, tough love in its own sentiment. I believe in gentle parenting, so that's a whole other story. But Mr. Rory did it in a way that was tough love, but at the end of the day, he still knew you was a child, and he was gonna treat you like

a child because a lot of people like that doesn't extent to that phrase. They're just like, "Well, it's tough love, da, da, da, da. You got to suck it up!" No, yes, you can still try to deliver a lesson in something but still treat them like the child that they are.

And Mr. Rory, like I said, he has so many roles in my life to being like one of my first coaches and one of my favorite teachers. I ended up—I follow him on Facebook to this day. And he ended up going through some hardships in the last few years as well. And last year or the year before last—again, time doesn't exist—I ended up taking him to lunch. And I been trying to do this thing just in general now that I can not only afford to survive but afford to live, and I have like excess money to take care of myself, I try to do a thing of like inviting one of my influential teachers out and trying to get them to sit down and just have a lunch and catch up.

Yeah so I took him out for Father's Day last year, I think, and it was just really good. And I just told him, "Thank you," just because there was one specific conversation I remember us having because, like I said, me being a parentless child has always been interesting because I've also been very bright and very involved in school. So it was hard for teachers to—I don't know—not *accept* it. But it was hard for them to see a child with so much potential and vigor for learning with nobody there to support them because that was my whole experience.

And I remember us having – like I said, I played lacrosse. We played at Loyola University's halftime show for their championship game. I can't even remember what year that was. It had to be like 2013, '12, something like that. I don't know. But either way, we played at the game, and it was like a really big deal for a lot of people, and everybody's family was there. It was just a whole thing. And I remember Mr. Rory looking around, and then he looked at me and he was just like, "Nobody's here"—And I had gotten used to it, so I didn't really think too much of it. But when he said that, it made me like almost like, I think I *did* break down at that moment because I was just like he made me think about it. But he looked at me and was like "Damn!"

And he used to cuss, what I said, and that was what made him cool because it was just like, he showed us that teachers are real people, you know what I mean? And at the end of the day like, "yes, I have power over you, but you are still your own person, and I'm gonna treat you as such. And I'm also not gonna treat you like you don't know what the fuck you're doing because I know you do." Because a lot of people, yeah, a lot of people emphasize youth after even a

certain age where they know what they're doing. And they're just like, "No, they're a child. They don't—." No, they know.

But, yeah, so he was just like, "Nobody's here for you?" and I was just like, "Yeah, no." And he was just like, "That's OK. You're gonna be just fine." And I literally – I always think about that whenever I'm like ... He don't even know what that did for me, and I told him that day like, "You really don't know like, when I'm going through the roughest of days, I just like – that saying just replays in my head, and I'm like, 'I'm gonna be just fine. You're right, Mr. Rory. You got this.'" So teachers have definitely been my family away from family before I found my friends for sure.

RR: So just to make sure we get through everything, do you want to talk about how you got into activism and your organizations, what they mean to you?

LF: [*Crosstalk*] Yeah. I guess that's kind of the perfect segue because when it comes to influential figures, when I talked about high school and I started high school, I was given just a lot of tasks, just due to the leadership ability that a lot of people saw that I possessed. And I was asked to help with the grassroots organization at City at the time called City Block. I was asked to help assist in the creation of our Latine community initiative called Somos.

And then I went into the community and I met Jabari Lyles. At the GLCCB, which was the Gay and Lesbian Center of Maryland—Baltimore at the time—and now it's the Pride Center. And Jabari didn't know this until recently but me and Jabari was what sparked my want to have a career in activism if that makes sense, because I was just like, "You can do this for a living?" Like he was the first person that I saw that made me realize that you could do this for a living and actually enjoy what you do. You can *like* what you do like that—He was the first person I saw that did that and it blew my mind.

And then I helped create Youth Against Oppression, which was a queer youth safe space that convened in the city from 2016 'til I guess about 2019-ish. And I just, I was asked to also create the first Youth Pride for those under 21 in the city at—that same year that I had created Youth Against Oppression. And just a lot of this and just all of this and all that groundwork is what led up to just being presented with this opportunity. And that's why I wanted to add that on in here just because it's like without the planting of the seeds that I didn't think grew, I would not be here.

And BMORE BLXCK although it is, I guess, to date my most successful organization, it's not my first organization. But I'm very, very, very thankful and very proud and grateful for the opportunities that BMORE BLXCK has been allotted and yeah. But I had to realize – and I was, we was just talking about this earlier as well – I had to realize that these opportunities aren't just – they just don't just happen. I sat and worked for these opportunities and it's not – if anything that's happening to me, it's because I deserve it. It's not because somebody gave it to me or it was handed to me. I worked for this.

And just giving myself grace and owning my power and just realizing that this is just a long time coming and just to continue fighting and just, yeah, to continue to open doors for other people that look like me to share their stories and be sat in parts of history and to just know that even though it might not happen now, don't mean that it never will. Because I'd never in a million years thought that I would be sitting now here, a couple weeks after giving a TED Talk about the organization and at my third organization that I've helped create and just, yeah, I didn't think that activism had this much longevity for me. I didn't think anything really had this much longevity for me.

And as a queer person, not to get cynical, but I barely imagined living to be 18 or 21. So I just want to share that piece that if you out here in the streets, if you do digital activism because being grassroots is not the only way to show that you're out here. But no matter how you come out here and no matter how you show up, no matter how many times you show up or how much energy you bring, you show up, you're there, and that's what matters. And just continue to fight and continue to be the change that you wanted to see when you grew up. And yeah, thank you.

RR: Thank *you*.

SM: Yeah, if we could just ask a couple more...if you have time, I'm not sure.

LF: Yeah, no, no, no, you're fine. I thought that that was a close-out question.

SM: That was very, very good ending. But, I know that you wanted to kind of talk about your relationship with your “children,” the people in your organization. So if you could speak to what that relationship is like and what you learned from that experience?

LF:

It's just that – and I'm really glad that I told y'all to ask me about that *[laughs]*. It's been – and that's what I'm saying. It's been really rewarding to just see the fruits of my labor come to fruition in ways that I didn't even imagine that they could, which were in forms of queer babies coming to me not even knowing what a queer identity is and then us sitting and having a conversation about what queer is, what that means, and if that means that they identified that, what that means for them. And just being able to just be a source of knowledge, community, and just safety, and like, you know. And being a mentor, period, it makes me feel old, no shame, but it's so fulfilling. I would not change it for the world.

And like, it definitely puts the fact that you're aging into perspective *[laughs]*. But you also in really, really good ways you're just like well, I'm kind of glad I'm not 16 anymore so that I can help you and tell you what I wanted to know at 16 that I didn't. And like I said, I literally – my protégé literally we had a conversation. And I called them my protégé because I see so much of myself in them. It's really crazy because they just have a passion. They don't even know – they don't really have nowhere to put it all. They just got the energy and the passion and want to do it, and that was so me when I was 16.

And I just remember us having a conversation because I was like, “yeah, I'm queer” because I identify as queer or say I'm pansexual or something, but I usually say “queer.” And we were having one of our general weekly meetings because we meet on Sundays. And we were like – she was like – they were like, “So what's queer?” I was like...and for a second, unfortunately, I thought she was joking. I thought that they were joking. I was just like, “You're not serious, right?” *[chuckles]* I was like, “Baby, you in a queer grassroots organization, right? OK, OK, OK, all right, all right, all right.” But then I realized she was serious and I always leave room for no judgment so it didn't even give that judgmental feeling. But I was like no, “queer” just means that you fall somewhere within the community. If you don't really want to subscribe to a label, you know, it just means that you are under the LGBTQ umbrella.

And they were like, “So if I like girls but I don't really think I'm a girl, am I queer?” And I was like, “Yeah, baby. *[chuckles]* Like absolutely. Welcome to the club.” Just, you think that that's so simple and so small, but that one thing could change somebody's entire world and being able to have that power and the knowledge and ability and access to do that to just open that door and break that box for other people is just something I wouldn't change for

the world. You know, it just made me think I have to text them because now they like, “I want you to come speak at my school because da, da, da.” [Laughs] So I have to call them but it’s just like I’m getting all of the – I’m a teacher without the degree [laughs] I like to say. I’m a life teacher. But my children, they are just everything. And being able to provide them with just spaces that I wouldn’t have been able to think to exist when I was younger is so, so, so, so, so, like, so rewarding.

Like—I’m sorry. Perfect story as well. My best friend, like I said, we’ve been friends for 11 years. So she’s one of my longest friends. She has a younger sister. I also call her my little sister. And ironically enough, we look alike so much that her mother grew up calling us the same thing – anyway – but she – I don’t think it was her. I think it was her little sister, but she came out as pansexual, and she’s younger than my best friend’s little sister, and she came out to the family as pansexual.

And when my best friend told me that, I busted out crying. And I didn’t even – it came out of nowhere. Like you know how you just get overwhelmed with emotion? I’m like, “bitch, I’m not crying.” Like that’s what it gave. I’m like. “y’all, I’m not really crying.” And then she’s like, “Is you really crying?” I’m like, “yeah, y’all.” She’s like, “What is you crying for?” And I guess like, you know...I would’ve loved to go to the prom with my girlfriend, you know? I would’ve loved to come out as pansexual and for it to not have flipped the whole table [chuckles] in my house. Like she just came out as pansexual and the next day went to the prom with her girlfriend.

And that shit made me feel so happy but like sad – It was so many mixed emotions. But it was initially it’s just *hope* because it’s just, like I said, regardless of what I went through, I always impart the knowledge and stuff that I do so that people don’t have to experience what I went through and so that y’all can live a better life than I did. So just, yeah, being able to hear stories like that as well as be a part of the transformation of those stories are, yeah, it’s what queer community is about. It’s just seeing where your sibling needs help and uplifting them and making sure they have support.

RR:

Yeah so either we can wrap up, but the last question I was gonna ask was like a wrap-up question was what does family or home look like now? It could be about your family growing up or it could be a new...like what family has come to mean to you?

LF: Well, family never really meant to me what society had taught it to mean to us in the first place. Family to me is always – you create your own family. Like I’ve always been a firm believer of you build the family for you because, you know, people always talk about blood is thicker than water, but that’s actually not the whole phrase. And the whole phrase [chuckles] actually is a testament to how sometimes friends can be there for you better than your family can. So it’s just like, you choose your own family.

And while you also choose your own family, you have to realize that everybody is their own person, and not everybody thinks like you. Your common sense is not as common as you would like it to be. And just those things and just basic understanding and comprehension of like a person and whether – As long as we don’t have to debate on somebody’s humanity, we can be friends, we don’t have to – or we could be *family*. I am somebody that, you know, my best friend hates that about me, but I’m very nice. I’m very open to complete strangers cause like, I’m not gonna say that I trust you until you give me a reason not to. But I’m a kind person, so I’m gonna impart that kindness on whoever I meet until they give me a reason to not.

So, yeah, just find the people that match your kindness. Find the people that just love the same way you love and even if not, love in the ways that you like. And, yeah, as long as they make you feel like tomorrow is worth living, they your family, you feel me? Blood or not.

SM: Yeah. I guess if there’s anything else that ... I know that you mentioned wanting to talk about Formation Week. I don't know if that’s still something you want to talk about now, but you're more than welcome to. But, I guess, if there’s anything that you want to talk about or ...

LF: No, Formation Week was just—because you all had mentioned something about how cultural relevancy and that was like one of my first actions that I had planned as a community leader. And it was a week dedicated to basically saying “Fuck you!” to the school board and their anti-Black dress code policy. And it was Formation Week because that’s when Lemonade came out. And it was comprised of a week of like the first week was Mindful Mondays and that whole week, the first half of class was a fishbowl discussion about whatever the day was about. So it was Mindful Mondays and we talked about being a person of color and being Black and what that means.

And, yeah, the second one was Traditional Tuesday so then all people of color that attended the school wore their traditional garments from home of all kinds and types and stuff like that, and it was just a week full of stuff like that. We actually ended up in the *Baltimore Sun*. I was trying to find the copy to bring to y'all, but I am not that organized. But, yeah, and that was I guess one of my trajectory moments as an activist, but it definitely was a very culturally important moment for me because, yeah. And 'cause it started with them basically trying to ban Black girls from being able to wear their hair wraps. Like if our hair wasn't done, we wanted to just *shoo, boom, boom, bang*. Yeah, they was just like, "Yeah, no. Unless you're practicing it for religious reasons, you can't wear a hair wrap in school." And it's just like, "What? I just came in here with my hair wrap last week. What you talking about?"

Oh, that was the first day too, and we all wore hair wraps of different, you know, everybody in different cultures with their types of hair wraps. And, yeah, so it was just like that was one of the first times that I organizingly said "Fuck you!" to an establishment.

RR: We're good, I guess.

SM: Yeah, so thank you so much for coming and for being so open to speaking with us about so many things. I guess next steps, once we get the recording, we will send that to you. And then I don't know how long it'll take, but maybe a week, we'll have the transcript, and we can send that to you as well. And if you have any immediate edits, you can let us know. You can also do that later on if that works better.

[End of Audio]