

JOHNS HOPKINS UNIVERSITY
ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION

Brother Merrick Moses
Interviewed by Sophia Lola
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Interviewee: Brother Merrick Moses (MM)
Interviewer: Sophia Lola (SL)
Subject: Life and trans activist work of Brother Merrick Moses
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Sophia Lola: Okay. It is July 9, 2022. It's about 1:45 right now. We are in a study room in Brody Leaning Commons. This is Sophia Lola conducting this oral history. Now I'm gonna have my narrator introduce himself.

Merrick Moses: Hello. My name is Brother Merrick Moses. I am an Old Catholic priest, Benedictine Monk, community activist, writer, teacher, victim advocate here in Baltimore, Maryland.

SL: Great. Thank you for that introduction. We talked, obviously, in our pre-interview, so you're probably gonna repeat a fair amount of stuff that you talked about then. So I'm just gonna ask you to tell me about where you grew up and what your childhood was like.

MM: I was born in 1974. My father was black Panamanian from Colon, Panama. My mother was a Black American from the Pittsburgh area, but her family is from Virginia, West Virginia. So they met in Brooklyn in I think maybe '69, '70, got married in '72, and had me in '74. In '77 we ended up moving to Queens. Very little memories of Brooklyn, but I do love Brooklyn a lot.

So I grew up mostly in Queens. I spent eight years in parochial school, Saints Joachim and Anne in Queens Village. I went to Benjamin Cardozo for high school. Then in 1992 I got a scholarship to Morgan State University, which is how I ended up here in Baltimore.

My childhood was a very interesting mix. From I think it was '77 to '84 we live in a place called Cambria Heights. It was a very kind of like Queens suburban type feel. I had a very different childhood at that point. My parents were never really hooked upon gender stuff. So I was pretty much born out of the womb a tomboy, if you will. I had great summers with my cousins. We did a lot of playing in the backyard. You know what kids do, little rascals, that type of situation.

However, in terms of how my gender identity and orientation developed, I knew very young that I was different. People told me I was a girl, but I really kind of did not feel like that at all. I

actually wanted to be a Boy Scout, but that was not possible. It is not possible.

In addition too, I had a real love of church. My father's side was particularly religious. They were Roman Catholics from Panama. One thing I tell people is there are different modes of Catholicism. There is cultural Catholicism. So as an Afro-Latino person, that Catholic identity was very important to me and to my father's family. So that was interesting.

My mother's family is Protestant. I do remember being referred to as a papist at some point, "Catholics worship the devil," which made me strong in my Catholic identity. I'm a rebel at heart, so if you say left, I'm gonna go right. That's been my problem.

Anyway, that happened, but also in that time I started listening to hip-hop. I heard hip-hop for the first time in the summer of 1980. I was six years old and I just fell in love right then and there. So it was in that time that you had people like Rakim, Alok, KLS One, Queen Latifah, Monie Love, Choko Quez, Gangsta, all of these people, particularly Brand Nubian formed in me – and especially Public Enemy had a big influence on me.

It formed in me a yearning to learn more about Black history, blackness. My mother also was very a part of that, in that she taught me that Jesus was Black and showed me scripture. So that really imprinted itself on my consciousness. I started to self-study Islam at one point because I had heard about Malcolm X in Public Enemy music.

My mother was like, "Instead of me telling you, why don't you go read his autobiography," and that autobiography changed my life forever. The fact that this man literally transformed himself from a criminal to one of the most eloquent speakers of the 20th century is just an amazing story. So I fell in love with that.

There was a lot of racial tension in New York at that time, too. So all those things kind of merged together and started creating I guess an activist, this thought about speaking up for the least of these and things of that nature. So my cousin was pretty much like my brother.

SL: Can I ask you to just hold the mic a little closer?

MM: Okay, yeah. My cousin, who was pretty much like my brother, was murdered in front of a post office in Queens. I think he was about

14 at the time. It was very devastating to me. But simultaneously at that time, people all over the city were going through that because it was the crack era and drugs were just everywhere. I mean it was bananas. At times it was anarchy.

So another cousin of mine, who was kind of like my big brother, he asked me to help him create this group called CLIMB, Commitment to the Longevity and Improvement of Male Blacks. So I was kind of like the little secretary or whatever. It was a rite of passage program that was gleaned from selected works of noted psychologists and Latino experts like Liam (Naeem?) Arkbar, Leonard Jeffries, Jawanza Kunjufu, *Conspiracy to Destroy Black Boys* and things of that nature.

So I was very keyed up about that. I thought it was really a great next step. Unfortunately, because at that time I walked in a female body, if you will, that program was not available for me either.

But throughout this time, I was around a lot of men. So these were the men I instinctively wanted to emulate. It was hard, because when you're in a body that doesn't necessarily match how your mind works, things can be difficult.

So as I approached puberty, like around 13, 14 – yes, 13, 14, that's when the gender rules started to come into play. So around my first... that's when the gender rules started to come into play. You had to do this. You had to wear a bra. It was a drag. There just were so many rules in my environment on how to be a girl, and I just – I didn't want to do any of that. I just felt it was this real restrictive and it just seemed to be that the boys – Cyndi Lauper at the time said, “Girls just want to have fun.” Yes, because they had no fun.

Boys literally had all of the fun, in my environment at least. So I kind of envied that. I won't say I was jealous, but I wanted to do what they did, but I could not. So at that point in time, as luck would have it, there was a time in hip-hop where women were dressing in baggy clothes. They were dressing just like the dudes. So that worked for me.

So when that happened, I started stealing my father's clothes. He'd be looking for jackets and shirts, and he's like, “Where are my clothes?” and I'd say, “I have them.” The funny thing is he kind of just looked, but he did not – he was not upset about it. It was my mother who kind of was like, “Why you gonna dress like that?” but it was never him, which is very interesting.

So that was a very pivotal time and it gave me space to be myself to the fullest at that time. There were boundaries that I could push, but then there were certain things that just was not gonna happen.

So that being said, it was just a real stressful time. In addition to that, the AIDS crisis was going on at that time as well, and it was devastating. I think part of the devastation of all of that really – I had my first taste of grief that I could grasp and hold on. When my grandparents died, you know, I'm eight, seven or eight years old. I grasped death, but it wasn't like it hit home. I mean they were elderly anyway.

That being said, it was sad when they died, but then when my cousin died, he got shot. Then I had another cousin who I loved so much. She used to do my hair. She was the hairdresser in the family. We've had a series of hairdressers in our family and she was a hairdresser.

Unfortunately, she got AIDS. She got AIDS from – they say a blood transfusion, but I found out later through one of my aunts that she at one time was dating a guy in a halfway house. So in New York at that time, sometimes when you had an issue they'd put you in a halfway house to kind of acclimate you to things. I think she was dealing with somebody in a halfway house. That's what my aunt was saying, and that's how she came up sick.

I didn't find out until I'm in a club with my cousin, who I started CLIMB with, my cousin Jeff. He was like, "I need to tell you something." He was like, "Such-and-Such has AIDS" and it was like somebody hit me in the face. So I mean you got a double-whammy of my brother dying, and then you've got my cousin. She had AIDS.

Then there was another neighbor that used to come over and see my cousin, because we had cousins that lived in the house as well, and he died. At first they were like, "Well, he had cancer." That was in the summertime. By December we found out he had AIDS and it just was like – you know, people were lying. They didn't want to even say AIDS at one point in time, particularly in an era of homophobia where they were like, "Oh, God is punishing these people." Well, when the people that are not gay are dying around you from AIDS, then you start to have questions.

So that was going on in the midst of all that. It really caused me to go within myself. In addition to that, my uncle also lived in the

house that I grew up in, one of my uncles. Well, I had two uncles there, but this particular uncle was just a monster. He was an alcoholic monster.

It created a level of instability in my home, in that he – whenever I came home from school, I did not know what was on the other side of that door. Was he gonna be asleep? Was he gonna be drunk out of his mind and threaten us? He had physical altercations with my parents. I'm upstairs hiding.

It was just really a fucked-up situation for a good ten years, which is why I ended up cutting them off, because I wanted to leave New York because of all the trauma. I was over it. I wanted to leave New York.

So in 1992 – and that was also the time of a lot of conscious hip-hop I would say, conscious hip-hop. It was like buy Black, go to Black school. So the high school that I went to, Benjamin Cardozo High School, we ended up taking a trip to four historically Black colleges below the Mason-Dixon line. So there was Morgan, Howard, Hampton, and Virginia Union. That trip really kind of opened my eyes to some things.

My mother did not want me to go to a Black college, because she felt like it would not mirror the real world. But when I told her there's a good possibility I would get a scholarship, she relented.

So after the tour, I applied to Morgan because they said if you had this score, between this and that, you were eligible for a curriculum-based scholarship. I got a full ride and I said, "See ya'" to New York. At one point of the summer of '92, I declared to my friends I was never coming back. I was like, "Y'all will have to catch me on the phone because I'm never coming back."

But that was a lie because once I got down here it was a complete culture shock. There were very few people like me in terms of being Afro-Latino or West Indian. I just felt so homesick for culture. I mean people didn't even know – when I would tell them where my father was from, they didn't even know where Panama was. Was it on the map and shit like that.

I had one girl tell me, a Black girl tell me that my father wasn't black because he was born in Panama. I said, "Well he's Blacker than you." Like this concept, because I grew up with the concept of Pan-Africanism. The liberation of African people depends on our unity around the world.

These folks had never even – a lot of these people had never even heard that. If you weren't born on the continent or if you weren't born in America, you are somehow not black. It's just ludicrous and crazy and insane. It made me mad because I had never encountered that level of ignorance before.

Even my mother's family literally disdained immigrants, particularly Black immigrants. I don't really know why to this point. It's so interesting because my grandmother, my mother's mother, did not like Caribbean people, but at least four or five people within the family have married Caribbean people. So that was a thing.

But I did find intellectual kinship at Morgan that had strengthened my life. I literally gained a new family at Morgan.

So I came down here in '92. Coincidentally, and I will let you attribute this to Buddhism. That year, simultaneously while I was self-studying Islam, I was also self-studying Buddhism. I know this is a lot. But I'm saying this because it really helped to develop my consciousness around the work that I do.

So I started studying Buddhism because as a fan of Kung Fu movies, every Buddhist monk I saw was peaceful. Because my house was so chaotic and unpredictable and violent, I was like I don't want that type of scenario. I want to be able to be in a space where if people go off, I'd just be as calm as that monk. So I started to get books on meditation. One of my favorite books was *Techniques of Chinese Meditation* or something like that. It was just – I just had to get out.

So the summer of '92, I had been studying this for like ten years – no, it was actually eight because I started reading it at ten, and in 1992 I decided I needed a teacher as opposed to just self-study. So I went in the phone book and Queens has a large Asian population particularly Korean folks and Chinese folks and Filipinos.

So I looked in the telephone book. Remember telephone books? Oh my god, a telephone book. Under churches, there were two Buddhist centers. There was a Chan center which is Zen. Chan is basically the Chinese version of Zen. Chan actually came before Zen.

Then I saw a Nichiren Shoshu Buddhist temple. I said, “I know about Chan. Maybe I should find out about Nichiren.” I don't know who that is. It seems intriguing.

My mother, even though she had – my parents had problems. They were separated. There was a lot going on and I felt very unprotected because it was just mayhem at any random moment. She always let me roam. She was okay with me going out and things of that nature, because she knew she had given me enough of a moral compass to say no to a whole bunch of shit, particularly sex and drugs. Because even though she was Baptist, she raised me with a lot of Roman Catholic values, particularly around sex and gender, which I had to undo later.

But anyway, I decided to go to that Buddhist temple. There was a Japanese priest there. We really couldn't communicate because he knew very little English, but he pointed me to this older white woman. And it's so interesting, because as I said before, there was a lot of racial tension in New York at the time, but something within me told me to trust this woman. I don't know what it was, but I said okay.

I said, “What does Nam-myoho-renge-kyo mean?” because that's what the priest was telling me, people chant Nam-myoho-renge-kyo. Other than that, he could not tell me. She said, “I don't remember what it means, but I do know it will change your life,” and something in me was like, “I need that.”

So I started chanting actually in July of 1992. It's been 30 years this year. Even though, unfortunately, I haven't always been consistent with my practice, I will say it has transformed my life immeasurably. So now I can confidently say I think that becoming a Buddhist that summer enabled me to get that scholarship and come down here.

So when I came down here in August of '92, I hooked up with some Buddhists, but because I was such an independent kid, the fact that somebody had to come pick me up to go to Silver Spring to chant as opposed to me just getting on a bus in New York and going and minding my business, I was not with that. I didn't like it. I was like, “What is this about?”

So I didn't really practice, but I started to get into some African spirituality stuff. Then because I was in such a rich Black environment with so many diverse Black people – but it's so funny. The diversity on campus does not mirror the city of

Baltimore at all. It does not mirror the city of Baltimore at all, at that time. It may reflect better now, but at that time it was not really a thing.

So I met people from all over the world. Then in 1993, I became a sweetheart with the brothers of Phi Beta Sigma Fraternity, Incorporated. I was attracted to them because I was walking across campus one day and there was this guy named Joe, who was stepping. I had never seen it. In New York, people don't get into fraternities and sororities like that. You know what I'm saying. Honestly, once you come below the Mason-Dixon line, it takes on a whole new flavor.

But at any rate, I was like, "Wow. That's interesting." It reminded me of African dance I've seen. Then they had an invitational for sweethearts, I guess. That's how I got in touch with them. Then I helped the boys cross. That was a really interesting process. I had good times with my sweetheart sisters or what we called at that time flame sisters. It was a great time.

I remember celebrating when the guys went over and became official. We were in one of the dorms, one of the newer dorms actually, and somebody was so excited they literally put their head through a wall. So that was interesting. We were like, "Uh-uh." It was like a scene from – it would be like *Black Animal House* in the old days without the colorism.

So then I decided that I wanted to join the sister organization. I took the tour. I had always wanted to be a Sigma, but because I was female at the time that was not gonna happen. Again, it's the boys having fun and I'm on the sidelines with people with all these rules I have to follow. I just was over it.

But I was like in order – through therapy I can process this now, but at the time in order to get closest to Sigma, that's why I became a Zeta, just to keep it 100. I crossed April 8, 1992, and my 20th birthday was the next day. That was, oh my god, it was so amazing.

But the funny thing is that when I went home to New York and started wearing my letters, nobody knew what the fuck it meant. They were like, "What is that? What's that Z-O-I-B (ZΦB)? What is that?" Again, I had to realize that this doesn't mean shit to me at all. So that was interesting.

Then that same year I started dating this white guy named Rick – no, '93 I started dating this white guy named Rick that I met through one of my high school friends, who I love to this day. That was interesting. My father did not like it, but he didn't tell me to my face. He told my mother who told me. Sometimes that's how our communication went. He wouldn't tell me directly, but he would tell my mother things. So they didn't understand how my pro-Black stance jibed with dealing with this white guy.

That being said, I think that what drew me to Rick was we were very alike in spirit. He was Sicilian and Irish and I was Panamanian-American, so it was kind of like some New York mix. That was very common in New York, not so much once you go below the Mason-Dixon line.

So we had great times. We enjoyed a lot of the same things. His father did not like that at all. He kicked him out of the house. He was staying with me and my mom at one time – she was not happy about that at all – because he had nowhere to live. The kids in the neighborhood knew he was white, so they would steal shit from his car. They picked the lock on his trunk and stole his guitar. It was crazy.

So that was interesting going to a Black university. Then when some of my friends found out, they were not happy, but a lot of them were like, "Live your life."

That being said, the next year, 1995, my mother died in January of that year. It was hellacious. My whole world fell apart. So she died on the 15th of January. She had come to me in a dream the day before and said she was tired and she had to go. I begged her to stay. She was like, "I can't do it."

So when that happened, I was at the mercy of my mother's brother and some of her – I wouldn't say my aunts. I would just say some of my cousins. They were mad because she – as I said, she was part owner of the house with her brother. She had put some of them out because they weren't paying any rent. They weren't doing anything. Like gas bill, \$3,000.00, it was insane.

So when she died, a lot of the acrimony resurfaced. So I was set adrift for a while. In fact, that was my first summer in Baltimore, because my uncle threw me out of the house and I was pretty much homeless. I am a late bloomer, so it took me years of therapy to realize I was literally homeless, because in my mind at that time, okay, he threw me out, but I had a place to stay in Baltimore. I was

with my friends. I had gotten a little summer job, so I was able to pay rent. I was doing me. So I didn't necessarily consider myself homeless-homeless, homeless at all.

Then as I started to work with youth later, I was like, "Oh, I was homeless." I realized through my Buddhist practice that I was shielded from that reality through my own delusion. However, I think it really protected my psyche at the time. So that happened.

Then I graduated in '96. I worked at Child Protective Services in New York. That was a very, very, very tough job, but it was a very necessary job for me to see how the people were living. It's one thing to read about it in books. It's another thing to actually see a woman give up her child so she could smoke more crack. That's a whole other story.

Then I did about a year or two of professional writing for Vanguard Media. That was when I did some media journalism. So I worked for *Radio* magazine. *Impact 24/7* it was called. They had a hard copy magazine called *Impact*. It was a *Radio* magazine.

So I got to go to at least two music conventions, urban music conventions. I learned so much about the music industry and how corrupt and crazy it is, and like there's actually a casting couch. I was never on the casting couch. I would see people come out of the office. They was coming out of the office from the casting couch, but I was never on the casting couch.

I made a very clear decision, because at that time I was also coming out. So at that time, I was like, "Nope, that's not for me." So I came out in 1998, moved to Brooklyn. I was living with my father for a while, and then I ended up moving to Brooklyn because I was – I moved to Atlantic, between Washington and Grand. So Prospect Heights was right above us, and then below us was Bed-Stuy, Fort Greene.

When I tell you it was the gay '90s, it was the gay '90s. I loved it. Oh my god. Lesbians were in and that was great. I had a ball going to these parties. I'm a green Catholic kid from Queens and – I mean it was just a cornucopia of delight. I was just looking around like, "Oh my god. Where has this been all my life?"

Then at the time, my first year of coming out, I hung with mainly gay men. I got introduced – my cousin introduced me to the scene. She took me to my first lesbian party.

SL: Can you tell me about that?

MM: That was amazing. I told her – I came out to her. I was like, “This is what I want to do.” Now she basically confided in me that she was also down with girls. She’s bisexual. So I said, “Okay.” So she’s like, “Do you want to go to this party?” At the time, the *Village Voice* would have their ads on the back page. That’s where the words back page come from, the *Village Voice*.

So I was seeing this girl named Lisa, and I think Lisa lived in Brooklyn. So I made arrangements. We made arrangements for me to get to Brooklyn and I did. Then at that first party we was playing spin the bottle.

It was the first time I had kissed girl. I was like, “Wow.” I thought my head exploded. I was seeing stars. That girl didn’t want nothing to do with me after that, because I was super-green. I was wide open. I told my friends about it. They laughed and it was fun.

Then that summer of ’98, that was my first Pride. This is a couple of weeks after the party. Then also, in between that time, I started hanging out in the gay bars with the boys. Sometimes people would buy me drinks to talk to my friends. I was like I’m okay with that. My friends didn’t like it, but I was like – all you had to do was say hi. That’s it. You could just say hi, but I had my drink.

So I remember the first Pride. I came up – we came up from the subway on West 4th. The basketball court is to our right. When we come up the subway, we started walking back towards the corner. There was this woman in a mesh shirt, breasts all out, and I think she had pierced nipples.

So again, I’m green from Queens. I’m so green. My mouth flew open. I’m like – you know. And I don’t know whether to be disgusted or delighted at this point. Because of my Catholic indoctrination I’m like I don’t know what to do. My friends were like, “Just close your mouth and act cool,” because these were the cool kids. So I could not nerd out and spaz out because I’m the new kid.

So after that, they helped guide me in the ways of being in the community. They looked out for me a lot. I met a friend of mine through this guy that I used to date, my friend Camille, who I love to this day. She was like America’s butch idol. She was like the ultimate butch – I wouldn’t say she was necessarily aggressive, although if you saw her on the street in New York she probably

would be termed an aggressive, but she's more of like a stone butch, if that makes sense.

She introduced me to the life and how to deal with girls, and don't let girls take advantage of you. She introduced me to the party scene. I remember we went to the Lenox Lounge in Harlem. My thing was I'm doing big time. Fuck Queens; I'm out of here. So I loved it. It was great.

Then in 2001, between I think 2000 and – in that fall, I started seeing one of my sorority sisters from a chapter, across from Morgan, Coppin. The irony is in '94, when we went to the Greek Fest in – what was it, Atlanta? Yeah, it was Atlanta. No, it was in Philly. It was Philly Greek Fest. Atlanta is FreakNik. This was the Philly Greek Fest. They wanted to fight us because they didn't think we went through a correct process.

That being said, one of my line sister's name is Iron Mike for a reason. So as a spokesman for the group at the time, I had to tell the soros from Coppin that if I move, this girl is gonna swing on you and she'll beat everybody's ass. So they backed off. But it just was so weird for people to try – why you trying to fight other soros? But whatever. I mean it was 1995. Who actually knows how drunk or high anybody was at that time?

That being said, me and her, we started dating. Then I moved back to Baltimore. I wanted to be close to her, because New York rent was out of control. At that time, the turn of the century point, gentrification had hit Fort Greene, particularly Brooklyn real hard. So a lot of the Black places, especially that we used to go, they started to change.

There was a mosque on Fulton Street that used to have the call to prayer, whenever that was appropriate. Then one day we noticed there wasn't no call to prayer anymore. Simultaneously, the barber shop that me and my homeboys would go to, they were closing. The barber was like, "I can't afford it here. They just raised the rent exponentially."

Then the kicker was we were somewhat going towards downtown Brooklyn, and to our left they started building a Starbucks. It was like "It's over. Game is over."

Then the sign that we knew what it was really about was because we started seeing more white people getting on the train when we would go to work, and then we would see them coming home, but

we never saw them on the street. We would see them coming home. We would see them going to work. Sometimes you'd see people on weekends. Then we started seeing people every day. Then we started seeing people every day out on the street that wasn't Black. We were like – then the Senegalese place closed and it was like, "Oh my."

So my cousin, I moved in with my cousin because I had a dispute with my roommate in Brooklyn at the time around some money. His cousin stole some money from me. My cousin was not happy about it.

But anyway, I moved to these projects in Canarsie, which is the far end of Brooklyn. It's like the last stop. It literally is the last stop. So I was out there. It was some nice projects though. It wasn't really hood. It was a very nice projects. But she had some other stuff going on and it was dicey at times, and so I wanted to like have my own life. So my girlfriend convinced me to move back to Baltimore, because I would go to Baltimore to escape New York again. Like this is another pattern.

So long story short, I came back to Baltimore in May of '01. Then I had been planning to go back home because the relationship did not work out. Let's just say they had a lot of issues, particularly a drug issue I did not know about until I was in a space where, "Where is everybody at?" "In the bathroom doing coke." "What?" And I flipped out and that was the end of that.

Being in New York in the '80s and '90s, I'm not trying to replicate that down here. I mean, you know, it's a source of trauma. So we broke up. Then September 11 happened and I was like, "Oh, can't go home."

So I decided to make a life here in Baltimore, and in 2002 I met a woman at the Afro-American. We hit it off because we loved coffee. We were together for four years. I count her as my wife, although – my ex-wife, although marriage was not available at that time for same sex couples in Maryland, in addition to we had our relationship blessed.

So from there, we started volunteering at the Portal, which was Maryland's LGBTQ center. It was a Black LGBTQ center.

SL: Where was it?

MM: The Portal?

SL: Yeah, like where in the city was it?

MM: The first iteration of the Portal was on Greenmount and 25th. Then at one point we moved downtown to Calvert Street, 8 South Calvert Street. Then from there we ended up on St. Paul Street, and that's where the organization dissolved. But it was a beautiful time because I was hoping to run a support group, and as a Black community of queer and trans individuals we had a family vibe. I ended up mentoring a couple of kids from that time. So these kids were like from 16 to 20. Most of them – I would say all of them actually are successful today. I remember one of them saying to me, "You know, you're the only gay functioning adult I know." What? Like literally.

Also, me and my ex-wife also were involved in a parish community called St. Sebastian's, and under the direction of Father David. Father David is now Bishop David Flaherty, Bishop David. That was a remarkable change in my life too, because then at that point, when we joined that church I felt I could pursue my vocation there and I did. I did not know that this level of acceptance in Catholicism existed. I had no idea.

After 9/11, I was like I need to ditch Buddhism because if I die tomorrow I want to be in heaven. That was my mindset. I'll explain my Catholic guilt and my Catholicism to this. It is very hard to uproot a tree that has been planted for 200 years, very hard, especially if it's like a redwood. You can't fell a redwood in one fell swoop. You've got to take it in pieces. So that's how Catholicism has rooted itself in my life.

That being said, I started going to Catholic parishes here in Baltimore and they were really – I really could not bring my full self to the mass. I just was tired of it. So when we got together and we found out about this community –

SL: How did you find out about it?

MM: In the gay paper. I think was, yeah, *Baltimore Gay Paper*. I called Father David and he came by, and we formed a bond. In 2004, after a two-year preparation, I was ordained a deacon on September 19, 2004, a couple of months after my 30th birthday. At that time, I felt like the Holy Spirit had given my feet wings. I had not felt that good in ten years, since my mother died. I was just like, "Wow." The charisma, how it settled on me at that time was amazing.

So from there I started to do a lot of pastoral work around same sex marriage, counseling gay youth, queer youth, around their religious trauma, because I was meeting a lot of kids that were getting thrown out of their house and tricking on the meat rack. The meat rack is the male stroll. That's pretty much what it was at that time.

I helped a lot of people, started doing work with the Interfaith Fairness Coalition. Then we started doing work with Equality Maryland, which at that time was Maryland's queer and trans civil rights organization. Then in that same year I got a job with Equality Maryland as a field organizer. There were only two of us. There was Dan Furmanski and myself, and he was the executive director and I was the field organizer for 47 legislative districts in the state of Maryland. Yes.

SL: That is a lot of districts.

MM: That's a lot of districts, from Western Maryland to Appalachia to the Eastern Shore. So being at Morgan, I learned techniques around organization from my activism on campus, in addition to my cousin's organization in New York, CLIMB.

So I organized voter education. I did a lot of citizen education with legislators around same sex marriage, queer and trans issues, particularly around marriage. At the time, that was central to the movement at that time, and not necessarily because people felt an overwhelming need, because while we were doing the work, the white gay and lesbian community, they were already onboard. It was the black folks that weren't onboard. There were even black gay and lesbian people saying that they didn't feel like marriage was appropriate for them.

So, again, those are cultural convictions. What we realized was, in terms of white gay and lesbian community, for a lot of these folks they were acting out of their trauma because when your partner died during the AIDS epidemic, the family had cast them out 20, 30 earlier it comes back to your ownership. Then the person, because there's no legal contract or marriage, and sometimes people didn't even have a will, everything would be taken.

So marriage literally for a lot of people was a form of asset protection. Also, it was a way to say that, "Y'all kicked me out of my house 25 years ago. Y'all don't get to pull the plug on me." So medical interventions and things of that nature.

For the Black gay and lesbians, there were people who were for marriage. There were people who were like, “This is not my issue.” There were people that were opposed to it in terms of in our community as well, particularly in the fact that the HIV issue never left the Black community.

But I did find out when I was working with Equality Maryland, there was a trans woman who was on the board. She told me – and at least two or three people on that board were mentors of mine in the work, and they taught me how to do the work, Kadija Trebo, Dana Beyer, Dan Furmanski, Cathy Connolly. It’s been a minute. Charge it to my head and not my heart.

They taught me how to organize. Dana came to me saying – well had this conversation about HIV, because I started doing HIV outreach for Equality Maryland, because I felt like we needed to advocate for all communities. This just can’t be about marriage, because there’s other stuff that’s going on that’s equally or even more important, honestly.

She said, “The board thinks that the AIDS crisis is over.” “What?” She said, “No. They don’t really want to put any resources into you pursuing that because we need to stick to marriage.” I was like, “That’s crazy. What?” Then she was like, “I know,” because Dana knew the truth. But the board, and mainly it was the white gay guys on the board that sunk that ship.

So we put all our eggs in one basket, and then I met a lot of legislators at the time. I learned a lot about Annapolis and the law. I said if people really knew how Annapolis worked they would be outraged, dismayed, and probably really, really disappointed, because a lot of what goes on is really not about the people, but about certain people’s pockets.

So in terms of opposition to marriage, we were facing people like Reverend Emmett Burns, who happened to be a Baptist preacher from Baltimore County, and another man named Don Dwyer, who was a staunch anti-gay legislator from Anne Arundel, I think Millersville. I’m not sure. When I say, when I talk about the beast, those two are in that box, and let me tell you why.

First of all, I made several appointments with Reverend Burns to see him, because he was one of our priority legislators to talk to. He already knew that he was not going to support marriage. He’d been a staunch opponent, so we already knew that, but I still had to say I talked to him. So it got so bad that his aide was like, “You

come here basically every other day to see this man. I'm going to get him on the phone with you."

So she called him and I talked to him. He was like, "Well you know I'm not gonna support marriage." I said, "I know, sir, but your constituents wanted me to talk to you." So we had a little conversation and he just was intractable, throwing all these Bible verses out.

Then Don Dwyer, when we started – because one of the things they wanted to do was they actually tried to amend the Maryland constitution to prohibit same sex marriage. They were in this camp. So during the hearing around those things, they had every loon from Western Maryland to the Eastern Shore, to Southern Maryland to Montgomery County. Wherever they could find a lunatic, they brought that.

And in addition, too, they actually brought in school children for the rally to protest against gay marriage. How craven and sick are you to actually have your child on a bus, to come down here to be mad at Tom and Jerry for their marriage? What type of sick shit is that? Like, mind your business.

But anyway, during this hearing that we had, it was a very contentious hearing. When I say weirdos, I mean people bringing big pulpit Bibles. Do you know what a pulpit Bible is? I'm not sure if you know what a pulpit Bible is. A pulpit Bible is the Bible that you use to read the gospel. It's usually big like this. It's huge. It weighs a couple of pounds. And people were showing up with pulpit Bibles.

Man, what are you going with your pulpit Bible? I mean really. I mean a pocket New Testament could have sufficed. You brought the whole pulpit Bible. Yeah, exactly, because that's how crazy they were.

So I remember there was testimony. Then when the person was testifying – we had put together a slate of speakers for this hearing. So after the hearing we went outside, because there was some tough questioning from Don Dwyer to this trans person that had got up there. It was about – this is what it was. He had been raped. So he was talking about it.

Oh, this is what it was. It was a hearing about adding sexual orientation and gender identity to the hate crimes statute. That's

what it was. But there were still people with big pulpit Bibles there.

The marriage thing and this protection, the hate crimes bill, they kind of went simultaneously, because what we were doing is we were taking an incremental approach. We're gonna approach you with this hate crime stuff first in tandem with marriage, because all of these things go to the quality of life of queer and trans people in the state of Maryland.

So he came outside and he was like, "I'm sorry what happened to you, but this is why I'm not supporting this bill." So we're outside comforting this individual who totally had just bared their whole soul in front of a group of strangers and kooks. And you're out here saying this? I don't know who said what. I feel like I might have said something. I don't remember, but we were just like "Please get away. This is so unnecessary."

Then about a week or two or three later, they brought – they bused all these people in, like I was saying. We ended up getting into an argument. When I say we, I mean I was there and the Equality Maryland board was there. Because while they were outside protesting, we were inside talking to legislators about why they should pass these bills.

So it was two black men. One was a minister and the other one was the minister's cousin. So let's call the minister Ron, so Ron and his cousin Jerry. Somehow we got into a back and forth, and I said, "You know, the Klan actually wants to ban – doesn't like same sex marriage and wants to ban same sex marriage. Would you ride with the Klan on this issue?" He said, "I would ride with the Klan on this issue, because on this issue they're biblically sound." You're a whole black man from Prince George's County. Okay.

So I looked up at Kadija, Kadija looked at me. We looked at his cousin, Pastor Ron, and we were like – he said, "Wait. My cousin can be out of _____ sometimes, whatever, whatever." I was like, "Do you know how many of our ancestors these people killed?" He was like, "It doesn't matter. They are biblically sound on this issue." So I was like, "Wow." Like I said, kooks and loons. So that happened.

Me and Pastor Ron actually ended up developing a friendship. I remember talking to him one day. We were debating scripture. Now most people know that Catholics really don't proof text scripture. We're not ones that go out and quote scripture ad

nauseum like Protestants, particularly evangelicals. I mean they can scrape scripture off the top of their head. We as Catholics are very good at praying prayers, supplications, litanies and liturgy. We're very good at those things.

So I said, "Well, Jesus said nothing about same-sex marriage. He never mentioned anything about adultery. He literally just talked about – he said something about adultery, but he has nothing to say in regard to gay marriage." Then he starts to quote Paul. I'm like, "Well Paul and Jesus are not the same people. In fact, Paul never met Jesus in the flesh. He had a, quote/unquote, vision of Jesus." He said, "It doesn't matter. God said it, so I believe it," and that was the end. His mind closed like a Venus flytrap trapped on a bug. So we agreed to disagree.

Then I got him to do a panel about the tongue-in-cheek of homophobia in the Black community of Morgan State. It was the first time in the history of Morgan that that conversation had ever been had.

SL: What year was that panel, and also what year were these hearings in Annapolis?

MM: These hearings in Annapolis took place between 2003 and 2006 and 2007. It continued after 2007 in regard to marriage, because we ended up passing the bill in 2012. I'm sorry. The timeline looks like 2003, 2004 to 2012. So in 2012 the general assembly passed same sex marriage with the governor's signature.

O'Malley had to be sold on same sex marriage. He was not an early supporter. In fact, when Judge Murdock in Baltimore City, when the case started in circuit court, she gave an affirmative to the ruling in terms of same-sex couples should be permitted to marry in the state of Maryland. The Court of Special Appeals, which is the highest court in the state of Maryland, they are the ones that kicked it back to the legislature. They said only the legislature has purview into determining this situation.

So at that time, Martin O'Malley says, "Well, I'm glad the court chose not to rewrite the sacraments." Sir, this is not about the sacraments. This is about civil marriage. Mind your business.

The thing about it was I was in the meeting with Martin O'Malley and his team, Dan Furmanski, me, and some people. We literally gave them talking points on the affirmative side if the court said yes, and for the other side if the court said no. He chose to just

randomly say some shit that didn't have nothing to do with nothing. A lot of that had also to do with his Catholicism and his, I guess, being in with the Catholic hierarchy of this town. So we went back and forth on that.

The case itself, *Polyak and Deane v. Conway*, I think it is, was about they went to apply for a marriage license and was denied. So that's how the suit kicked off. The ACLU got involved. It was a very coordinated campaign. He had I think it was seven or eight couples and one widower, and each of them told their stories as to why they wanted to make this happen. It was a core section of Marylanders, so there was racial diversity and gender diversity. We had women and we had men.

So when that happened, we started to make an all-star push. But this is when I realized in that, that while we were throwing our anger on this marriage stuff, that we were neglecting basic quality of life issues for LGBTQ Marylanders. But what I also learned in that period was that money determines the passion of the nonprofit. So if you get all this money on marriage, you're gonna do marriage.

So at one point I was charged with talking to clergy about marriage, and I did and I formed friendships. I remember sitting with Dr. Heber Brown, who was at Mount Pleasant Baptist. I should say Bishop Heber Brown. Is he a bishop now? I'm not sure. Charge it to my head and not my heart. Dr. Heber Brown.

We were talking about that and he said, "I can't support this biblically, but as a matter of civil rights I can support it, but this is what we need help in." I was like, "These are good ideas." So he was willing to say this is a civil issue, but he had some agenda items that he wanted help with for the community, and I'm a community person, always was. So I was down with it.

When I went back to HQ, they told me it was mission-driven. Now you see I started from a holistic perspective. This person has given me a holistic idea, because marriage is not just a singular thing. It comes in community. This is ultimately about people in community determining how they want to live their lives.

Within that community, it's not just marriage. There's a whole bunch of other stuff, too, particularly around lesbians and we know women earn less money than men. So lesbian families are affected by quality-of-life issues as well. So when I pitched it to Equality Maryland, they said it was mission-driven. So I'm like, "Okay."

Then I started hanging out – at that time I also started hanging out and learning from older Black gay and lesbian activists, particularly in D. C. They had all the tea. I mean they had been around from before Stonewall. So this was the caliber of people that I was hanging around with and it was such a blessing. I learned so much from them.

They were like, “I need to tell you something. This community is filled with racists. You should just know that.” And I’m thinking – as a young organizer I’m very idealistic, so I’m thinking that race didn’t really have to factor into so much, but it did. So when that happened with me and Heber Brown in the organization, I realized it was not really about improving nobody’s life like that. This is about a campaign, a sustained effort. But I’m like, “Okay.”

So in 2006, I ended up going to – was it 2006, 2007 – I ended up going to the National Black Justice Coalition as their organizer for constituency affairs in the developing religious constituencies that were working toward marriage. Remember, at this time everything is marriage.

What I learned from that experience is, one, there are people in the church that will support Black same-gender-loving and trans people, but they may not be out about it, and that’s okay. Two, that we must forge our own agenda as a singular community, because racism within the LGBT nonprofit complex is real and is deadly and it hurts people, particularly around this idea of “We’ll just throw money at a problem” when the director or the directors are incompetent and you know they’re incompetent.

That’s another way that people destroy our ability as Black people to organize and to move forward, because these poison pills, which is incompetent Black leadership, they’re funded by these people. They don’t fund people that’s really out here doing the work. They don’t, unless you’ve got mega-skills. Other than that, it’s crazy. So I started seeing a lot of that.

Also, there was another groundbreaking time because we did the first Black church summit. It was in Georgia. I remember Al Sharpton. I saw Al Sharpton. I met Al Sharpton. Then there was another bishop named Bishop Harry Jackson, one of the most homophobic people you’ll ever want to meet on the planet. I would look at him and be like, “Where are you getting this?” His homophobia is insane.

So he was on the dais with Dr. Sylvia Rhue, who is the first Black Ph.D. in human sexuality in America, a brilliant woman. She also has numerous degrees in theology as well.

What the debate was about, Dr. Harry Jackson, Bishop Jackson wanted to focus on the seediness in his obsession with the sexual part. He was very obsessed with that. So Dr. Rhue, I can't remember exactly what she said, but she said something like this, "How as a pastor are you serving your community without having basic knowledge of sexual orientation and gender identity?" He said, "That's above my pay grade." So you're telling me everybody in that church is in danger because you don't know anything about this topic. I'm not even sure if you know who to refer people to, because if you have to take care of the whole person, part of that person is their sexuality and gender identity. That is a thing.

Then Al Sharpton, he came up and gave the keynote. He was wonderful. And at that time, the ruling had come down from Judge Murdock. So we had a long haul.

Then fast-forward a couple years. I left that work for a couple years because I was just too in it. My father had died in 2008 and I just checked out. It was hard because he had Alzheimer's and there was a lot of unresolved stuff between us. It's very hard to see the first brilliant man you ever met with just mind gone. It really broke my heart. It really did.

So I took a break and I started teaching again in schools for special needs kids. So I did that for a while. There were a whole lot of queer kids in that space too. I wasn't out on the job, but I had to defend queer kids from homophobic staff. I remember there was one person, one girl who was caught kissing another girl. The staff was just going, "You shouldn't be kissing another girl, blah, blah, blah." I said, "If we're gonna really talk about this, it's not appropriate for anybody to be kissing anybody in here, regardless of their gender. That's clearly in the regs. So none of that needs to go on and it has nothing to do with her kissing another girl. It's about kissing period." So the person got shut down. They was mad, but I was like, "You're not gonna abuse this child."

Actually, at that same placement, I think it was Good Shepherd – was it Good Shepherd? – I met a young person who was in a female body, but swore she was a boy. At that time I had very – I as navigating my own gender journey. So I gave her the best advice I could because I wanted her to be safe in there, but she was

determined. Then there was a small cadre of girls that were expressing a gender identity other than feminine. So that was interesting.

Then in 2012, I did a little marriage work. Then I ended up going into environmental work, talking about the renewable portfolio standard pushing through, the green energy. That was also a very interesting place to be, because what I realized was how racist that was too. Oh my god. It's so racist, and capitalistic in that I really felt like there were people who in order to do certain measures, to be super-green, most of the people I knew, including myself, could not afford it.

But they would really champion and laud this stuff, "Oh, it's only \$500.00." Like, "Bitch, what?" You see what I'm saying. Also, I was specifically hired to do African American outreach, and I did and it was great, but the problem was that because these organizations, particularly these white-led environmental organizations really don't engage Black people. It's really hard to get people where you want them to be if you have never engaged with them.

Like really consciousness around these issues are developed over time, like years, right. What I also realized too is I had to remind the Black folks we were environmentally conscious before a whole bunch of other people. "Well, what do you mean?" "Didn't your grandmother have a garden?" "Yes, she did." "Didn't grandpa know how to can stuff?" "Yes." "You drank out of those mason jars, didn't you?" "Yes." That's all recycling and repurposing.

That was where we came from anyway, and remind people of that. Then we can start to connect the dots on other things. But because of the nonprofit industrial complex, you only have a certain window to do that.

So it was hard, but we ended up – and this was another blessing – we ended up being able to pass clean energy legislation in the terms of raising the renewable portfolio standard, which would increase the amount of green energy that the state of Maryland would use and buy, sell or whatever. I can't remember the details, but it was a whole lot of numbers, which me and numbers are not friends. I have second-grade math phobia induced by nuns. We are not friends at all. So then that happened.

Then after that, I did some environmental work with a group called Groundswell. Then that is when – after that it was 2015. I got laid

off from that job. Then August of 2015 is when I joined the Baltimore City State's Attorney's Office.

SL: You joined after Freddie Gray?

MM: I joined a couple of months after, yeah, because Freddie Gray happened in April.

SL: In April of that year.

MM: Yeah. So when that happened, I was actually on a business trip in Dallas. The same day that riot happened was the same morning that Loretta Lynch was sworn in as Attorney General. So when I got to Dallas, the swearing in was happening on TV in front of me. So I'm all happy, like, "Oh my god. This is so great. I love seeing history."

So this is my first trip to Dallas in many years, since like '99. It was for the Black Trans Advocacy Conference. It was started by Carter Brown. I forgot when the organization was started. I think it was 2011. Was it 2011? Probably 2010, 2011, I can't remember. But anyway, he had this idea of bringing Black trans men together, and the organization just took off from there. It started from a Facebook and now it's like a full-fledged organization.

Then they founded Black Trans Women, Inc., and now they have something for nonbinary people. So the organization started growing.

In 2014 is when I decided to transition. So I had been going through an anti-trans phase at one point, kind of influenced by what people would call – I hate the word TERF, but people would call them TERFs, trans-exclusionary radical feminist. A lot of that, from my understanding and being with these women, it's born out of their own sexual trauma. I understand that, but the vitriol is a lot. It's really a lot. And there are some components of racism in that too.

But at any rate, I took up with their philosophy. At some point in time, it just – it was a bridge too far. It was a bridge too far for me. Then also really knowing how I felt inside.

So I started going to therapy in 2011. At that time, I decided to identify as gender nonconforming, because nobody was using nonbinary back then. Nonbinary is a recent thing in terms of being mainstream. So that happened.

Then in 2014, I decided that I needed another therapist. So the therapist at first who I was with, he suggested another therapist in terms of I was thinking about taking hormones. So I started doing a lot of research. I would be up at 3:00 and 4:00 in the morning looking at videos of trans guys, like, “Is this really possible? Is it really possible?”

I felt like I was a kid again watching *Yentl*. So *Yentl* I watched it many times because it was about a what? A girl who lived life as a boy and got to do what she wanted to do. That was me. I was like this is my movie. I remember the songs and everything. So in 2014, I was like that’s exactly what I want.

So I told my therapist at the time, I said, okay – because I did the research about testosterone. The anti-trans lesbians were like, “It’ll make you not feel like yourself. It’ll ruin you, it ruins lives, blah, blah, blah.” I said, “I’ll try it for 90 days. Now in that 90-day window, if I don’t like it I can stop taking it, right?” He said yes, because by that time there won’t be any effects that – any critical effects that I couldn’t reverse.

I took my first shot on May 6, 2014 and I have not looked back. After that 90-day period, I said I feel 19 again, and I turned 40 that year.

I had a really rocky relationship. It was quite abusive. My ex did not like that I transitioned. The way she found out was jacked up. There was a friend of mine who was trying to split us apart. So I had confided in this person who was my friend way back and she told her, and then she got all mad. It was ugly, trying to have her ex-boyfriend beat me up and her mother running into the house. It was a mess. It was a mess. It was like Baltimore drama mess.

I got out of that situation and I started doing more activism. My plan to transition was just chill for a year and just be regular. I’m just gonna be regular. I’m not gonna do no work. I’m gonna concentrate on the state’s attorney’s office. In the state’s attorney’s office I am the LGBT liaison. So I was focusing on that work, but other than that, that was gonna be it. It didn’t work out that way.

So I ended up helping my brother, Van Michael. I’ve known Van since I was 18. We went to Morgan together. So I ended up working with him on a lot of these projects. He was president of the chapter in this area for Black trans men. So we started doing a

lot of that. My activism around trans issues started to blossom from there and it's brought me to this place.

I will say that one of the best decisions I've ever made – I'll say I have a couple of best decisions. One was to come to Morgan State University. It totally changed the trajectory of my life. That's why I'm still in Baltimore, because I feel like I own a debt to not just Morgan State, but to the city of Baltimore for that scholarship and a place of refuge when I had none.

Two, becoming a Buddhist, because although I'm ordained in the Old Catholic tradition, things of that nature, for me, Buddhism and traditional African religion, particularly the religion of Ufile or what they call [inaudible] with its derivatives of Santeria, [inaudible] hoodoo, voodoo, things of that nature has really kept me centered and grounded, particularly around the ancestors, becoming close to the ancestors, and not just my own personal ancestors, but to community ancestors that we don't lift up enough, particularly lesbian women and trans men.

So I got into the work and it has sustained me to this day. I am now the board chair of the Pride Center of Maryland, which is the third oldest center in Maryland. Then from the Pride Center of Maryland came Chase Brexton Health Systems and Equality Maryland, which is now FreeState Justice, which was its name back in the day. It's called Chase Brexton because it was literally on the corner of Chase Street and Brexton. I find that a really cute incident of Baltimore history there.

I have a lot of hope for our community, but we have a lot of work to do. So much work to do, particularly around homelessness. Sometimes we're our own worst enemy, because there are a lot of hucksters and con artists in our community as well that often take advantage of people who are poor and desperate.

So what I try to do is help people meet their needs wherever they are. I feel that's my vocation and is my life's mission, and it's my life's purpose. I'm very clear about that. Everything else is commentary.

SL:

[Inaudible, reaction to all that was just said]. Wow, you really just moved that all along so nicely. Everything and more that I could've possibly thought of. I would love to ask you a little more about sort of 2015 and the State's Attorney's office and just kind of the aftermath of Freddie Gray, and particularly like the relationship you remember having with the Baltimore Trans

Alliance. So we can talk about that for a bit, and then if there's anything else that you want to add before we end, you can do that.

MM: Yeah, let's chat about it.

SL: So you said you started working for—who was the State's Attorney when you came in, was it Mosby?

MM: Yes. She had just gotten elected the past in and was sworn in in January of that year.

SL: January of 2015? Okay. And then you said you were away in Dallas for the conference when the Freddie Gray protests were happening. What did the city feel like when you came back?

MM: Let's start from the beginning. I didn't know what was going on until I got to my hotel. They were fixing my room, and so I went to the bar to get a gin and tonic. I look up at that TV and I'm like, "That's North Avenue. What's going on?"

Then all hell was breaking loose and the guy next to me was like, "They sure looking like they having problems up there." I said, "Man, that's where I live." So I spent the whole week worrying, calling my girlfriend, back and forth. Everybody's worried.

When I came back, the city was still in curfew mode. It was very solemn. You could feel a heaviness. I felt like ever since that happened, a dark cloud came over Baltimore. Now I'm not saying it wasn't cloudy before, but there's a specific pall that has come over this city since that time and it has never been right since.

There was so much outpouring of pent-up emotion. Then simultaneously, you had trans women being killed. It was a lot of – when I say it was Black Lives Matter – I don't know. I guess it was Black Lives Matter before Black Lives Matter. Sometimes I get the timelines confused, but people were really keyed up.

Then a lot of people started to take their focus and look to Black men and focus on that, but in that we don't recognize the trauma that was happening to Black women at the time, and also to children particularly. It was a very dark time, and the cloud has yet to lift.

Also, what I noticed was this. During the riot, they raided a whole bunch of pharmacies, and as a result of that a super drug war – these are my words – broke out. A lot of these killings – remember

the murder rate has skyrocketed since 2015. A lot of it has to do with people settling scores about their drugs.

Then you see the acceleration of County addicts coming into West Baltimore. I'm saying County addicts because they're coming in from the trains, and they get off at places like Upton and North Avenue and Penn North, and they are taking drugs. People are – it's like an open air a drug market in different places in the city.

Now I will concede that Penn North always had an open air drug market, but it from, I don't know, Eddie's to the Super Walmart. It was insane. It was insane.

There was a fund that was created called One Baltimore. To this day nobody knows where that money is. I mean it's in the tradition of Baltimore though. Money comes up missing all the time and then nobody knows where the money is at, which is terrible, but it's a thing.

It's really bad, particularly around the school system. One year in the school system \$12 million ended up missing. They blamed it on a janitor. No, ma'am. That's not the janitor for sure, but he was the fall guy.

So from 2015 things had gotten worse. Things had gotten worse for the Black trans community. There were a couple of girls that were murdered. Mia Henderson is the one that sticks out in my mind because I was the victim advocate on that case. I worked with a great attorney, Mr. Fitzpatrick. Oh my god. He's such a diligent man.

So he called me into his office and we talked about trans-related issues. I was giving the spiel about the pronouns and things of that nature. He was very keen on humanizing this woman, very keen.

So in the state of Maryland, if you get arrested as a trans person, if your name is not changed they're gonna use your government name, and your government name might not match what you look like. So I don't think she had a name change, not to my recollection. So he had to enter her birth name into the record, and then he told the court he was going to use the name that she used in life.

The defense attorney, whose name I will not mention, was a scumbag. She was an absolute scumbag. It was so bad – like I said, I was a victim advocate, so I was working with the family and the

community. I'll never forget. I was with the family. Jamie Grace Alexander was there. I think Monica Yorkman was there. And there was somebody else there.

This was during final days of closing. So the defense attorney had asked her witness – this is her witness, was a hostile witness too. She had asked the witness what was the last time that you saw “him” alive. She kept saying “him,” too. Then she would go back and forth, he/she. “Did he look like a boy or a girl?” Mr. Fitzpatrick was like “Objection.” The witness was confused and angry like, “She was always a girl.”

Then here comes closing. I'll never forget this. The defense attorney in that case – I think the defendant's name was Shawn Oliver. I can't remember. I think it might be Shawn Oliver. Anyway, she said – her basic assertion was the defendant said that he didn't know she was trans, and that this was the first time he had sex with a transgender woman.

And on his confess – he didn't confess. He just said he didn't have anything to do with it, but they investigated him anyway because there was DNA evidence around it. So he pretended like this was his first time. But if you're going where he went to pick up that sister, that's not your first time. It's not the beginning stroke. It's not the beginning stroke. You have to know where that is to even go.

So the defense attorney says, “As you can see in the video, how was he supposed to know she hadn't even had sex reassignment surgery? He hadn't even had sex reassignment surgery yet.”

So Monica starts crying. I'm not sure Jamie Grace was crying. I was trying not to cry. I'm trying to keep my professional game face on, but I'm pissed off at this point, and the family is furious. He was not guilty.

I believe that is because – and it was a hard case. It was a hard case to try, so I had to manage expectations. But what she did to defame that woman was disgusting. For real at this point, I don't even think she needs to practice law. It's one thing to zealously defend your client. Defense attorneys are supposed to do that. But when you dehumanize a dead woman – she didn't kill herself. The fact that she even had to bring up her genitals, what the fuck is that about? It was about transphobia and that was my concern.

I told Mr. Fitzpatrick, I said, “This is my concern about that, the rampant transphobia that people have.” We talked about it and he was like, “She’s gonna do that.” That was the man’s expectation, but nonetheless it was hard to hear.

He was found not guilty, but he was gonna do ten years anyway up Washington County, up in Hagerstown I think it was or Cumberland for selling dope up there. So that’s how that happened.

But that made me determined to pass, to help to pass the Gay and Trans Panic Defense ban here in Maryland, because no one should be able to do that. You can zealously defend your client without being a scumbag. So that happened.

Then there were other people, Alphonza Watson. I’m not sure if they ever caught anybody for her. There was another sister that I remember that they found over by the post office, 21218. I remember that because I remember going by the post office and praying, because they had a little makeshift memorial for her. I remember those things. It was a very hard time.

I made it my point to make sure to have it. Eventually – what is this, 2022? – I think it was last year we passed a ban on the Gay and Trans Panic Defense here in Maryland. I’m the one who suggested it to the legislative team at the State’s Attorney’s Office. There were already people working on it, so it was just about plugging in to the right circuit and the light came on. So that was my mission and it was accomplished. I said they’re not gonna do nobody else like that.

SL: That’s horrific.

MM: That is horrific. The other battles now also include housing for prisoners. So right now in Maryland you are housed with the people that share your same birth sex. So what ends up happening is you get trans women in men’s prisons, and we know that that’s a disaster.

Recently there was a case. This is a civil matter now from what I understand. There of a woman who was recently literally dropped on her face, I believe, by a correction’s officer in the city of Baltimore. So I think that’s still in civil litigation, but it was pretty horrific and stuff like that goes on all the time.

Also, when trans women get locked up, they also make them take off any nails they have, wigs, everything. I mean part of I guess the American carceral state is to dehumanize the person, and they do that very well. So that's the next battle. It's just not safe. So there's questions on how to house gender-variant and transgender, transsexual people, about that.

I will say that in terms of the Baltimore Trans Alliance – do you have some questions about that Trans Alliance?

SL: Yeah so I originally heard your name when I was interviewing Bryanna Jenkins, who you know cofounded it with Monica and a few other people. And I guess I was just curious about, and as you said, around the time Freddie Gray died, was murdered, and the protests happened in the city, that was also lining up with a lot of murders of trans people, and particularly trans women in the city. And, you know, there was a huge activist wave that kicked off sort of after that. I would love to hear more about what you remember of like, from your position in the State's Attorney's Office, like what your relationship was like with the Baltimore Trans Alliance and other non-governmental activist workers in the city, particularly as it related to trans advocacy. How do you remember working with them, meeting them?

MM: I remember having lunch with Bryanna. She told me about her idea and I was like, "Go for it," and that we would work closely together. She was very on top of it, no nonsense. She was not playing games.

One of the things we had to broker though was the Baltimore Trans Alliance no longer wanted this just to be about the Transgender Day of Remembrance. So she had an idea of Transgender Day of Resilience. I remember they wanted to march.

So there's a trans man in town named Jean-Michele Claiborne. He's kind of like the grandfather of the community or godfather he would prefer, godfather of the community. There was an issue around she wanted to do the march on the same day as TDOR. So folks were concerned, particularly older folks were concerned that this would stop people from coming to TDOR, and people would just go to the march.

But we brokered a deal in which they would march to the church, the Unitarian church on Franklin and Cathedral, something like that. So they would march to that church. So they did that. I don't

remember how many years. I feel like it was two or three years. Then COVID hit and so nothing happened.

But in that time, Bryanna and Monica and Ken Jiretsu he was the trans man in that.

SL: *I'm speaking with him actually next Wednesday.*

MM: He's a phenomenal guy. He is phenomenal. Really did a lot to push the envelope forward, because at that time the level of trans activism in Baltimore had died out. So before that, there was a woman named Sandy Voles who was a firebrand. Oh my god.

One time I actually stopped her from getting arrested. We had crashed this Equality Maryland meeting. She was basically pissed off because she was like, "Y'all not doing nothing for trans people." At that time, my knowledge of trans issues was very, very small. When I was with Sandy, I wasn't trans at the time. I didn't identify as trans at that time.

So I remember I was going to this meeting, and she just started cussing everybody out about what they're not doing for the kids on the street, because she would literally give the clothes off her back to the kids on the stroll, boys and trans women. They were so mad. Also too, this is a black Jamaican trans woman—in a room full of white people, and one Indian person.

I said, "Sandy, we need to leave. We need to leave. We need to leave." So I finally got out. So I get a call a day later like, "It was lucky you had to leave." I was like, "Why?" "Because we were gonna have her arrested." I was like, "That would not have been good at all."

She was doing street-based work. She was the one going to the stroll, giving out condoms, making sure the sisters were getting fed. She also helped people get their name changes too, way before other people started doing it.

Then like many an activist – *[inaudible]* – she just got beat up too bad. When you are the one crying in the wilderness, the people that love the wilderness don't want to hear that. So they will shut your ass down. So eventually she left and she went back to New York. Now I heard she transitioned, but I'm not sure. I'm sorry, I heard she de-transitioned, but I'm not sure. But she was pre the Trans Alliance. So a lot of their spirit they get from her.

So when I saw the Trans Alliance, they did really good work. I really like the fact that they did do the Trans Day of Resilience. I thought that that was a good idea. One of the concerns that I had though is they were very intentional around the names and remembering people, but also saying, “I’m resilient.”

The second iteration of the Baltimore Trans Alliance did not do that. I remember I took a – we decided to – for the Trans Day of Remembrance, we decided to create some type of placard of different people in Maryland that were killed, trans people. What ended up happening was I took the placard to there. They didn’t even use it. They didn’t even acknowledge it, and there were people there that were upset about that. What it told me was that some of our youth don’t understand where they came from, because if you did you would honor that memory, but they didn’t.

SL: What year was that?

MM: I can’t remember.

SL: I know that the Alliance changed leadership like a year in, like I know Bryanna left to go to law school and someone else took over in like 2016 and only lasted another year or two after that..

MM: Yes. Ava Pipitone, who has de-transitioned, was the person at the time.

SL: And it just felt like the Trans Alliance, under that second wave of leadership, just wasn’t taking history and the past as seriously as—that’s what I’m hearing.

MM: Yes, and it became a cult of one. I don’t honestly know how it happened, but I do think whiteness had something to do with it. But she became like the all-star kids of – she became the face of trans people in Baltimore.

SL: How did that feel? Did other people –

MM: Oh, they were over it. They were over it. They were done, because how is this –? I’m gonna just keep it real. How is this white girl from Baltimore County running everything? That’s how people saw it.

It was interesting because there were a number of people around that could have given visibility to the whole community. I don’t necessarily think it was her fault, but I think that her presence was

so charismatic that people gravitated to her. Now you're a white woman. So it really – for that intention she's very well educated. So for them, in their minds, that was just a natural progression. But for Black trans people, a lot of people did not like that. They were over it.

I admire her brilliance, but then I started to question, and I'm going to tell you why I started questioning. Because there was a panel at Maryland Historical Society on trans Baltimore, and all the trans people on the panel were women, trans women. I said, "So nobody thought to call anybody? Nobody thought to call me or whatever," and I'm not trying to sound like an egomaniac, but how are you going to have this conversation and there's no trans men at the table? So the person was like, "It'll be acknowledged."

SL: What does that even mean?

MM: Exactly. Exactly. Which is why people were like, "This ain't right." Then there were other people in there, a person named Dre, who was very disrespectful to me personally, knowing that I was the board chair of the Pride Center, he – well they – oh, I was blasted because I called them he instead of they. I didn't not know their program, but they knew that I was board chair of the Pride Center because I told them weeks ago, weeks prior to this incident.

We were on a phone call and they said something to the effect of the Pride – at the time it was the GLCCB. We went through a name change. At the time Gay and Lesbian Community Center of Baltimore. "The GLCCB is white boy run and led." What? I took that as a racial slur. I'm like what the fuck are you saying here? Then that became a big thing.

Then at one point somebody was – I had blocked him from my page on Facebook. Also, a lot of bullshit in the trans community starts on Facebook. It was like – what did he say? He blocked my page. I can't pray for his bitch ass anymore. Then he was trying to get other people to cancel me. I was like, "I can't be cancelled." He literally just got here. I'd been working in this mission field at that time for over 15 years. So what are you talking about?

Then other people started to see it, too. It got to the point where people were hollering at me on my DMs, like, "You need to take care of something right now. You need to take care of this." Because I actually saw him in public one time, and I was like, "If somebody got something to say, they need to say it now." They didn't say nothing, but they had all this crap on Facebook.

See, what people forget is I'm from New York and in New York – listen, I'm not one of those southern lemonade, southern hospitality shit. That's not what's gonna come out of me. I've learned how to finesse it when I need to, but that's not me. So if you're saying this, then what's good. We have an opportunity right here to speak about it. I'm right next to you. Nothing, crickets.

My thing is you're gonna either put up or shut up. I wasn't trying to fight him, but I was like if you're gonna say something to my face, let's say it now. They didn't want to do that.

So at that point I realized this organization is really a country club of people who, one, ignore their elders. At one point in time they didn't even want to deal with Monica.

SL: I remember hearing about that in a previous interview I did.

MM: Yeah. First of all, I know Monica way before either of us transitioned. We met at the Portal. See, Baltimore is very six degrees of separation. There are people that you may meet, and then you'll see them again and end up working with them. It's a big small town.

So they didn't want to deal with her. So I was like, "That's disrespectful." It became a narcissistic youthful pursuit. You see what I'm saying? Then around that time, when you had the whole Donald Trump thing and all those things going on, people – it's cool to be advocates, but do you even really know what that means? Because the best way to be an activist is to learn from older activists.

You can't recreate this wheel. That's just not how it works. And every generation of activists has to learn from other generations. That's how we move the baton forward. But they didn't want to listen. They wanted to do what they wanted to do. Then it became super-white.

I remember there was another person, another Black-bodied person there. I'm not really sure how they identify, but it was clear to some people that some people thought that that person had been coopted, because it just because very not what it was intended to be.

Then there was people in town like, "What does Bryanna thing about it?" Bryanna is getting on with her life, and she should. We

need trans lawyers. We need somebody like that in the courtroom. She planted her seed and it did what it was supposed to do, but we need her in the courtroom because she's a zealous advocate for us and for human rights period.

So I thought that that was the sad part about the Trans Alliance. Had they been humble enough to listen and not have alienated so many people, it could have succeeded.

But the landscape right now in this city, you've got the Pride Center, which is doing very well, and for the first time in damn near 25 years we will have our own building. We do have our own building. It's being renovated right now, and it should be open by the end of this summer. It is on St. Paul, right around the corner from the Safeway.

You have Hearts and Ears. Ken is running Hearts and Ears, and they do a lot of good work for a population that's ignored. Not only are you queer/trans, but their mental health issues. Mental health problems and challenges run rampant in this community, and unfortunately for some people they think hormones will solve their problems. Hormones do not solve the problem, and they may even make them worse if you are not doing what you need to take care of your mental health, because these are mind-altering chemicals.

I tell cis people this all the time. I know that testosterone is a mind-altering chemical because I do not think the same way I used to when I was in a female body. I'm very clear about that. I transitioned when I was 40. So I lived a good half of my life as female, so I know how that works.

Then there is another organization in town that I won't name that is purporting to do the work, but is really not and – how can I say it? – is acting as a cancer on this community. It is sad again that Baltimore has a history of funding dysfunctional black leadership in order that the people do not progress. But when you have leadership that is strong and silent and centered on the liberation of people, those people they shit on.

What we have in this situation is entities that are – and then we have no track record of service. It just got here. When I say just got here, within the last five years maybe. It has definitely manipulated white guilt to the point where they are getting a significant amount of dollars from state entities, and they're probably not qualified to do that based on the lack of credentialing, based on literacy

questions around their leadership, and we know that their leadership is getting favors from state departments that they probably should not.

It's sad because those resources really should go to places that are really helping people, that have a certified track record. You could look and see what they're doing, their taxes and things of that nature. But it's sad because sometimes the squeaky wheel that gets the oil is not the one you should be oiling. Sometimes it just needs to rust out.

I am not a fan of hustlers in our community. I'm not a fan of people who use nonprofits to craft, to – they use their nonprofits as their personal slush funds and surgery funds. When these children are out here selling their bodies, I'm not with that, but that's what's happening now.

I pray that a light is shown on those who are hurting our children. I also chant that those who are helping our community are really helping our community. They come to the fore, and they are coming to the fore to really make sure that everybody is treated as a human being in this town. That is a problem for us as trans people. Sometimes we're not treated as human beings in this town.

So I pray that there are more organization like the Pride Center, like Hearts and Ears that raise up and truly have a heart for the people and not a heart for themselves. So I am hopeful, but I am very clear-eyed about the obstacles that our community faces, but I have faith that we will win. It is inevitable.

What did Martin Luther King say? The arc of justice is long, but it bends towards justice. That's the principle on which I stand.

SL: *Last question, I promise.* Because we are really close to the two-hour mark.

MM: Oh my god, are we?

SL: Yeah, we're at like one and fifty-six. That's fine, I think that's totally alright. My last question is really just, is there anything else that we have not talked about yet that you would like to mention or just briefly acknowledge before we end?

MM: My church, working within my work in the church of creating affirming communities and welcome congregations, that's a whole other subject for a different time. But it is a value – part of my

mission field – my mission field is the LGBTQ community and marginalized communities. That is my mission. They are very sure that that is my vocation.

That being said, the work that really needs to be done, particularly in Black communities is work in the church, because the percentage of Black unchurched people is rising. However, they are still influenced by church because the ideas that come from church are still at home. It's part of our cultural matrix.

So part of that is shunning people who are queer or trans from bad theology in the pulpit. I know pastors like Harry Jackson, like Jamal Bryant, like Eddie Long, that use homophobia and transphobia to make money. They don't realize the – they don't care about the collateral damage.

So my work within the church and working particularly with pastors around issues, pastor education, just because somebody is Pastor X doesn't mean they know what they need to know to serve their congregation. There's always a learning curve. There are pastors that will not admit that because they are prideful, but there is always a learning curve at any parish or congregation that you either start or are invited to minister to.

That being said, the mission now is to have these churches actually stand for what Jesus was talking about, caring for the stranger, caring for you neighbor. These homophobic sermons are antithetical to the gospel, because what they do is promote, firstly, division within the body of Christ. Second of all, they promote a theology that is not even based on the gospels at all. Jesus said nothing about same-gender-loving people, trans people. He said nothing about that.

So they have created this genre to make up money and also to come for their own discretions, because Eddie Long didn't lose weight like that because he was working out. He had a lot going on, and he created a boys' school to basically poach boys from to molest. But you want to kick out Melissa because Melissa, who used to be Marvin, is in your house? No.

So that is the work that needs to be done in the church today. I say specifically the church, because the church, particularly in Black communities, is the go-to place. There are a number of Black Muslims. Yes, they are also homophobic, but that's a whole other thing, and I know an imam doing that work too and it's beautiful work. But for me and mine, because I'm ordained in this tradition,

my mission field is the church, particularly the Black church and sacramental communities. We have to create a welcoming environment.

If he said, “The truth shall set you free,” and then Paul says, “Who the son has freed is free indeed,” who are you to say this person can’t love another person of the same gender? That’s not your business. Let God sort that out.

So that is the work to be done right now, because even though the number of non-affiliated persons are growing in terms of being not religious, the values still come from that system, and if it’s not corrected at the root, the tree will be crooked.

SL: Okay, I think that is a good place to end.

[End of Audio]