

JOHNS HOPKINS UNIVERSITY
ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION

Bryanna A. Jenkins

Interviewed by Sophia Lola and Caroline Cerilli

April 10, 2022

Johns Hopkins University
Oral History Collection

Interviewee: Bryanna A. Jenkins (BAJ)

Interviewers: Sophia Lola (SL) and Caroline Cerilli (CC)

Subject: Life and activist work of Bryanna A. Jenkins

Date: April 10, 2022

SL: And we are recording. Would you mind—I mean, we know who you are, but would you mind just starting off telling us your name, like a one sentence description of who you are, and just today's date and time?

BAJ: My name is Bryanna A. Jenkins. I am 33 years old. I am from Baltimore. I currently live in Falls Church, Virginia outside of Washington DC. I'm an attorney, a trans activist slash advocate. And today's date is April the tenth, 2022, it's a Sunday. I don't know what time it is because I put my phone in my purse sorry, but it's probably-- it's afternoon, yeah it's afternoon.

SL: Yeah, and we are Sophia Lola and Caroline Cerilli. We are conducting this interview. And we are in our apartment right now sipping on some tea and ready to talk. Caroline, do you want to get us started with the questions?

CC: Sure, yeah. And again, thank you so much for being here and we're thrilled to talk to you.

SL: Really, truly we are.

CC: Both Sofia and I are from outside of Baltimore, Sofia is from New York, I'm from Michigan. I took too long but-- we're just kind of curious about your relationship with Baltimore and how that shifted from like childhood to adulthood. Like what that means to you?

BAJ: Yeah, so me and my mom, I was always raised primarily by my mom single parent, we moved to Baltimore when I was in the third grade in '97, and I've been in Baltimore ever since. Baltimore is home, I love Baltimore. I went to City, class of 2006, Baltimore

City College High School, I also went to Morgan for undergrad class of 2011, I also went to University of Baltimore.

I love Baltimore, I love where I'm from. I have so many good memories in Baltimore, so many not so good memories from Baltimore, but it's really the foundation of who I am. And I felt like there's no other people in the world, in the country, like people from Baltimore. We're just genuine, real people, real folks, hardworking folks. And I love it here, though I do not live here now, I never shy away from I'm telling people where I'm from.

And usually when I move somewhere else people can tell that I have an accent and that I'm from somewhere. But yeah, I'm not ashamed of Baltimore, it really made me the person that I am today. And I don't think I could-- technically, Baltimore is not the South. Well, technically Baltimore is the South, even though people don't consider it the South. But it's a very southern charm about Baltimore. And I couldn't have been raised anywhere else. I love Baltimore, I really love Baltimore.

CC: We're both honored to just be here, even from inside this bubble of our university.

SL: Yeah, and I feel so lucky to come to the city. Thank you for that. I guess as we told you, in our prior conversation, we want to focus on recent Baltimore history, and queer and trans resistance in the city. So, we're going to fast forward a little bit to more, probably your adult life or just when you were a little bit older and more independent and not focus so much on childhood.

We were wondering, prior to 2015, prior to like Freddie Gray and Mya Hall, could you tell us what your sense of the queer and trans communities in Baltimore were like, and what queer and trans resistance looked like to you and in the city?

BAJ: Well, queer and trans communities particularly Black queer and trans communities, they've always been in Baltimore. It's always been Black LGBT folks in Baltimore. And as far as resistance, I remember seeing, quote, unquote, people who were in activism or just using their identity to create awareness and to liberate others, mainly through like the HIV AIDS space, people who were LGBTQ folks who were health educators trying to fight back against HIV AIDS stigma.

Yeah, most of the people that I remember that were on that wave or had that radical politics were either working for the city and the

health department, or they were working for one of the nonprofits here in Baltimore City. And they were really using their positions to really create awareness around HIV and other STIs, because it's something that does affect the LGBTQ community in Baltimore, disproportionately.

So, that was my first taste of activism specifically from Black LGBTQ folks and how I came into contact with a lot of folks because I too, before Freddie Gray, my first really foray into community was through a position at a defunct organization now, Women Accepting Responsibility, where I was a health educator from 2011 to 2012. And I was able to directly interface with community and kind of resist in that way, providing community with education.

But there were also intersections where some folks needed maybe legal services or social work services, I remember us connecting specifically, trans and gender non-conforming folks that wanted to change their names, connected them to like Maryland Volunteer Legal Services to get their name changed. But primarily it was, for queer folks, it was through HIV and AIDS prevention education that I saw a lot of that political activism pre-Freddie Gray.

SL: And that was right after you left college, or?

BAJ: Yes, I finished Morgan in spring of 2011. And then I started my job at WAR in October of that year.

SL: Got you, and you said you stayed there for like a year or so?

BAJ: Yeah, I left in August of 2012.

SL: Were there any reasons that you left? Or how did that work feel to you?

BAJ: Well, I quote unquote left, but I was forced out of my position. There's something, and it's not even unique to that organization, where in my opinion, where I feel like people get grants and they get greedy, and they don't do what they originally said that they were going to do. And particularly at that time, being a Black trans woman speaking out, it was like the kiss of death.

Because it was easy to push me out of the organization and then blackball me from trying to get jobs to other organizations. And, that experience was not unique to me, there were so many Black trans women that came before me that had--, because there was a

lot of-- particularly this is before trans was like the hot thing and people were really inclusive of trans folks and leadership spaces.

Back then, if you were fortunate enough to work for a nonprofit, it was very likely that you are going to be tokenized and if you do not fall in line, you are going to be pushed out and blackballed. And that was definitely, it was like a cycle. When they did that to one trans woman, they will go find another trans woman, and give them the opportunity, but then they would set them on the same cycle.

And it will just create, at least in the trans community, it would create conflict amongst us and we weren't really able to join together. One, we weren't able to join together as friends because there's purposely being trusts put into our community by outsiders to keep us separate. But then we're not able to politically mobilize because there's a breakdown in relationship already.

We're not able to warn the person that's going to come after us, that's to go through the same thing. But then we're not able to come together collectively and push back against all of these organizations and say, "Hey, if you're going to take this money to serve this population, then you can no longer just take the money and run," so to say, "you are saying that you're serving our community, here are our list of demands."

And I'm going to be honest, when I got my college degree in 2011, I thought that that privilege was going to shield me from the trajectory of what happens to Black trans women. And that didn't, because it happened to me. I was pushed out of that position. And I wasn't done with community per say, but I was done with just working in the community because of the trauma that I had and the fear that I had, that I will be taken advantage of again.

I went, and it took me a couple of months, but I got a job at Walgreens stocking shelves for \$7 an hour with a college degree. I had just bought a new car at the time, I had car payments and rent payments, so it was a scary time. But I needed to take a second job outside of the community just to show that I had value outside of my transness. And even though it wasn't an ideal job, it stabilized me.

And it allowed me to heal my wounds in some way to hold me over until I could rebuild my life and at a later point, refocus on serving the trans community again, but in a different way. And also, in a way where I was leading, we as a community were

leading, and we didn't really have any cis folks with their hands in the pot trying to tell us know what was best for us.

CC: That sounds like an incredibly painful experience, having to sort of rebuild yourself.

BAJ: Yeah, I mean, it was it was hard, it was embarrassing. Going from because when I was working for the Health Education position, that was the most money I had ever made at that point. So, to go from there, and I'm losing the job in the way that they push me out on a lie. And it's not just a regular job, it's a job facing community and just having false narratives and being blackballed and pushed out.

It was very hurtful. But like I said, it wasn't unique to me, because I think of Cydne Kimbrough who was an activist, and I was under her tutelage. And she trained me, and she went through the same thing. I think of Lauren Stokeling, Sybil Rose, there are so many other black trans woman who went through the same thing as me and ended up being jaded.

People that really had heart for community, but because of the experience that jades them to doing the work and being in community just because of the barriers that you will inevitably have to face trying to do the right thing.

SL: Is that what you were doing I guess, up until around the new...?

BAJ: Yeah, I was at Walgreens from like November of 2012 to... and at the time I was on Walgreens, that was when I was getting my masters at University of Baltimore. So, I was there from 2012 of November to about April 2014. And then, you know, Walgreens was great, but I knew I could do more. I know that there was more for me. So I took a job at Baltimore City Housing, like just working in one of their departments downtown in a building across from city hall.

And that's a better job. And I worked there from April of 2014 to August of 2016 when I left. When the Freddie Gray and Mya Hall stuff started happening, and when they had the tanks and the protest and everything was shutting down, I could literally see city hall like across the street from where I was working. And I was in the middle of all of that.

SL: Would you mind telling us just a little bit more of what it was like to experience the city, during the aftermath of Mya's and Freddie

Gray's deaths, and just during the uprising and with the military and the police, like all here.

BAJ:

Well, it was a lot of feelings. One, it was scary as hell because going to work-- well, I remember when the protests and stuff started happening and I remember we went home early and they were like, 'go home early.' And we had a small window to go home because they were shutting down bus service, train service so you only had a certain amount of time to go home.

And they were trying to shut it down so people wouldn't be able to travel from where they were to downtown to destroy anything. But it was scary, it was scary walking into work and it's like army tanks lined up the harbor, and you're downtown and seeing the military guys, and they had big-- it was scary. And then our leadership at the time, Mayor Rawlings, it was out of her hands at that point, she was just trying to save face.

We really didn't have any leadership from the people that were supposed to be leading so it was scary. But it was also kind of exciting, because it felt like this was our moment this was our moment to really inspire change. And even though it was scary, it was a little bit exciting. And also, in the back of my head just seeing the whole Black Lives Matter movement, how it has reoriented everything. On the back of my head, I was like, this is our time.

This is our time, as far as the trans community. As far as I was concerned, this was our time to really mobilize and come together and ask for what we need and to lean on each other. I just knew that even in the fear, even in the uncertainty that this was our time to strike, as a community. And, Mya Hall had just passed and we knew summer was coming.

And usually, summer is triggering for a trans folk, particularly black trans folk, because that's typically when the murders of Black trans women tend to spike, when it gets hot. We knew and Baltimore is no stranger to Black trans woman being murdered due to violence. It just felt like this was our time as a community to get in formation. And to figure out, when we look back on this time, which shift do we want to remember, what do we want to see happen?

It was a lot of emotions. But mainly I was inspired, to do my part to lay the groundwork so that now we can look back and we can

actually see the benefits of everything that have happened since that time.

CC: Was there like a moment where you felt that calling to this activism, or was it building over time?

BAJ: Well, I think it was building over time. Okay, also to keep this in context, I believe 2015 is also when Caitlyn Jenner first came out and made her announcement. What ended up happening—so, when I worked for the city, I wasn't like openly trans or anything but I'm the type of person if you know, you know. But I didn't really openly talk about my trans because one, I'm working with other Black cishet people.

And Baltimore is a small town. You just have to be careful, and I want to keep my job and there's just a whole lot of factors. Because I was in community and people know me, they were like, "Oh, do this interview with the news," they wanted real people on the ground's perspectives about the Caitlyn Jenner interview in the end. And when Caitlyn did that interview, revealing that she was trans, that was a big deal at the time.

I did the interview and I was part of the interview, thinking that it wasn't going to be nothing. I think the interview came out on Friday night after the 2015 interview. When I came back into work that Monday morning it was just like... because it came on TV, I didn't think people will be watching TV and then it was on a Friday night, but everybody and they mama watched that interview so I was just like, well they know it's out.

Because I had this visibility and I didn't want... The visibility, the Mya Hall thing, the Freddie Gray, I was like, "How can I use this to advocate for the things that I know we need in our community." Everything kind of happening together. And then I was already in community with Monica, with Ava Pipitone at the time and with Ken Jiretsu. I was already in community amongst them. I was like, okay yeah. And when the Baltimore Trans Alliance started, in spring of 2015 I was like, okay.

I think Monica and Ken were also in that interview, and I was like, "Okay, this is our time to use this visibility, use the momentum to really kick things off." And then it was right before Pride was happening. I'm like, "Okay, now we can use this momentum to really get some things that we've been talking about for years that we wanted to see for our community, now's the time that we can actually do it, and most importantly, lead it ourselves."

Because so many times trans leadership is undermined by cis folks, even cis gay folks who are empowered, undermine us. It was a complex of confluence of those things together.

CC: What was it like to go from not being visible to suddenly so visible and an advocate, it sounds like such a major transition?

BAJ: I mean, it was scary, because again, the job that I had wasn't like LGBT, it was doing housing and interpreting Baltimore City Code. But I was always in fear, even though we live in Baltimore City, and we had protections and stuff. That was something that I was fearful of, are people going to treat me differently? But I also know that I wield a lot of privilege as somebody that has college degrees and has been able to sit in spaces.

I weild a lot of privilege, with that comes a responsibility to advocate for people who need the access, need the voice but can't get in all spaces. So, I take the responsibility for owning the discomfort, owning the fearfulness, but I'm doing what needs to be done so more of us can get into the spaces that we need to get the things that we need.

SL: How did you and Monica and Ava, and you said someone named Kendra?

BAJ: No, it's Ken Jiretsu.

SL: Got you. I guess how did you all and whoever else was involved, how did you conceptualize and make real the idea for the Trans Alliance? And what was that initial period after you guys came together? What was that like?

Bryanna Jenkin: I think we were meeting weekly or biweekly, and it was a community room in Chase Brexton. And this is when they first opened that new Chase Brexton building and then because it was so new, people weren't used—I don't know if it's changed now. But back then it was so new that people weren't really acclimated to it, so we were just informally meeting every week.

Then I think, Mya Hall being murdered and then the momentum from the Caitlyn Jenner interview, I think we got to a point it's like, well, we have to do something. Well, what can we do? And then also at the time, there was weird stuff going on with the overall Pride organization. I don't know if they were losing funding or something. But this was at the point when Pride, like the parade

stuff, was still in Mount Vernon, and I don't know. Because of the gentrification that's happening in Mount Vernon, they were trying to push it up here to Charles Village.

It was something going on, I can't remember clearly. And this is also the conversation of pushing back against Gay Inc. and getting back to the roots of what Pride really was, and I was like we have to do something at Pride to disrupt this like, "Oh, hey, glad we have fun." But Baltimore is still a majority black city, we have a very large Black trans population and gender nonconforming population here.

And we bear the brunt of every... So yeah we go to Pride, but we still have to live in a city. Where is like the strategic programming around advocating for us on a real level, and not just having the mayor walking during the Pride parade to show her allegiance. We need more than that. We need more than that. So we agreed that we would. And also, Ava was working at Red Emma's, which was at the corner of, I think that's Maryland and North Avenue?

And Red Emma's, there were a lot of radical people there. And they had connections to the Ynot lot, so we just settled on the idea. We were going to have a rally starting the Ynot lot, and then from there it would turn into a march. We will march to City Hall. I can't remember if we did the march, I can't remember so much because... I can't remember if we marched, I believe. We did march, because it was, it was hot as hell, we did march.

But we had our rally at the Ynot lot and I think it was, for it to be the first thing, a lot of people showed up and it was surprising. And we kind of had an event to really recenter what Pride should be about. And that was the first event that we had, it was the Friday of Pride to show people like "Hey, we're here, the movement is going to get bigger from here. And you're going to have to deal with us."

CC: That's so cool. Yeah, I guess I'm just curious about more about that, did you have another event like that, the following year or later on?

BAJ: From there, and just the success of that, and everybody using their connections, I think we had a community meeting at Chase Brexton, another community meeting. And then I think the big thing to show people that we were serious is that we had a meeting with State's Attorney Marilyn Mosby. I think in 2015 that's when she first was in office. The state's attorneys before, they weren't really amenable to the LGBTQ community at all.

They were fiercely anti-Black, but we also didn't have a relationship so it was very important. I think she'd promised that she would be more accessible. And she has a Black trans man who I was in community with that works in her office, Merrick Moses. And he was like, we're going to make this happen. Because there weren't any established procedures at the time at Chase Brexton, I didn't know that when somebody high profile like that comes to them, they want to know.

And at first, they were going to cancel our event. I'm like, do you really want to cancel this? And Marilyn Mosby was, because they wanted to be in on it. But I'm like, no, this is not about like capitalism. This was not about that, let her come in. She has her security. But I think that event was like in September or October of 2015. We had the event, we had the conversation, I think I led the conversation but it was packed, it was packed.

And that really began a relationship with her office, and she just has always been super accessible to the community. And then from there, that's when we had our Trans March of Resilience weekend. We organized, well I don't even think it was a weekend, but for Trans Day of Remembrance, it was part of a national strategy to have Trans Marches of Visibility across the country.

It was spearheaded by Milan Nicole Sherry out of New Orleans, Louisiana, who is currently part of the leadership team at House of Tulip. But there was a Trans March of Resilience in New Orleans, there was one in Ohio somewhere. Of course, there was ours in Baltimore. And I think there was one in Atlanta, they were in different cities. It was strategically in different cities across the country, led by trans folks of color.

But yeah, we had that event and it was exponentially more people, than the one we had in the summer, because people knew about us, and they wanted to support. And then I think, Tyler, that's when Tyler became a part of the second wave because Tyler was connected to Ava, because I think Tyler used to go to Red Emma's all the time. And Red Emma's was its own community.

And yeah, and then I remember we were getting so big that the Baltimore police got involved, which caused a lot of contention. Because even then it was very anti-police and the fact that they were reaching out, they didn't reach out to us to stop us, they wanted to help us to make sure that we were safe. We were starting

to gain more visibility. And that ended off our 2015 as far as activist events and visibility on the events that we were doing.

CC: Wow. Yeah, what was it like to have the police be part of that?

BAJ: Yeah, it was very hard. I remember we, Monica, myself, and I think Ken had come, they wanted us to come down to the main police station that's off Fayette Street to meet with them to just tell them about, and I just remember being very like antagonistic towards them, because it still felt like they were taking us as a joke in my opinion, but it was just weird contention because I wanted my people to be safe.

I don't want nobody to get hit by the car. But we're still resisting and we're resisting how the police treat the trans people when they're in custody, arresting people, basically abusing their power in many ways to keep their foot on our neck. That was interesting to navigate that. Ultimately, we had a very successful event. And we ended up marching to City Hall, where we had a rally.

And then from City Hall, we ended up marching to a church on where were we once we had our cause of action, it was still important to recognize the people that we had lost and it was very emotional. Well, no, I was sick that day, I didn't think I was going to make the march because I was having bad stomach issues. And I had went to the ER the night before. But the following month after the Trans March of Visibility, it turned out, I had to have my gallbladder taken out.

I was physically sick, planning the event. And I remember I almost didn't go, I had Ava and Monica and the rest because we had planned so much that I trusted them to lead it. But the fight in me, I was like, "No, I need to be a part of this." I got out of my bed in pain and all and we did what we had to do. And that set the tone. Even if we don't do the march or do something, we have to do something on Trans Day of Visibility. We need to do something collectively as a community.

SL: Was that all around sort of the first year that the Trans Alliance was, in 2015?

BAJ: Yes, in 2015.

SL: I guess in that beginning period, that first year of it, what were you hoping to accomplish? And how did that change? And how do you feel about things that happened?

BAJ: What I was hoping to accomplish at that point, which was to create a foundation. What I really wanted to do is I wanted to find somebody that was young and had more, because even though I did that, I was still traumatized for the other thing, and I was burnt out. I was hoping to identify somebody that could carry the torch throughout that first year and a half. Even when Monica and Ken helped me, and Monica is an elder in our community and she has other interests.

Ken has a family, Ken has children, so he has stuff going on. I wanted it to really connect with the trans youth, to find somebody that was fiery, that had the passion that just needed a little bit of direction. And the fine tuning that I had to take the mantle, because I did know that even though what I was doing was right, I didn't want to do it forever. And I also didn't want to obligate myself to do it forever.

Because I was connected to other trans women that have done it, and I'm connected with Black trans women nationally that do this work, I didn't want this to be all that I was, I still wanted to be able to step away and do other things and trust that somebody would be able to carry the torch. And I also knew I was going to law school, that was the next logical step for me. It was important for me to really organize and get to know folks because I knew that I was going to step down.

And I knew I needed to find somebody that could continue the work. And its enough work for all of us to continue. And ultimately, I did find that person, Ava, who became my successor. I think ran Baltimore Trans Alliance for an additional year or two. And then she stepped down and passed the torch to someone else.

SL: Okay, it sounds like you started this thing and you knew from the get go that this wasn't for forever. When did you I guess step away, when did you more formally or officially leave?

BAJ: I formally stepped away in the end of July of 2016. But leading up to that time, my goal shifted to, three of my goals, trying to find us a fiscal sponsor, where we can have a relationship where we can use them, until we got to the point where we could do the 501(c)(3) stuff ourselves. Raising money to have a little nest egg to give to the ED and the new team so we could do other events.

Because by 2016, we were starting to get money. And I just wanted to save as much money because the events are not free.

The permits and stuff are not free to have these events. Some of this stuff cost, so I wanted to leave them with enough money so that they could use it and build off of that. And then identifying somebody to take over so those were the months preceding July 2016.

That was my time to really set up a transition process so that when I stepped away, it wasn't this abrupt thing and that I really had somebody that could take the organization to its next level.

CC: Got you, I guess just comparing the long-term goals that you've had when you began, I'm curious just how you've seen the development of it. And what you think of about where it's at today?

BAJ: Well, from what I know today, the Baltimore Trans Alliance is inactive. I guess there were some internal struggles within the organization. Because it had been two or three iterations, people knew of me, but I didn't have answers, because by that time I was living in Chicago. And I wasn't coming back and forth to really build it.

And I also heard complaints primarily from the Black trans woman that I was in community with that the organization really wasn't serving or catering to Black LGBTQ folks, because it wasn't reflected in the leadership and it was that racial disconnect. And by the time I remember my last year in law school, or my last semester, they had an event like a trans visibility weekend convention and they had it at a hotel in downtown Baltimore.

And I got a recognition from the city and I was able to meet the then exec ED or leader of Baltimore Trans Alliance, and they were telling me about some of the stuff but I also met some Black trans women that are leading their own organizations here. When I was here, I didn't know what popped up, after I left or after I stepped down, but I am aware of Baltimore Safe Haven.

And I think that's a great thing. And I saw the publicity that they got when Gabrielle Union shared it, and she went viral. But even though the Baltimore Trans Alliance is not around, or it's not active how it used to be. And it makes me sad because I did hope that it would still be around and it will just be evolved. And just in a different form, still with the same heart that I started it with, with the same central mission, but just even elevated.

Though that I'm still sad, I am happy to see that, through organizations like Baltimore Safe Haven, and other things that the work that I did, the work that Monica did, the work that Ken did, the work that Ava did, and how the community came together during that time, paved the way to have places like that, because I remember trying to have a house that specifically serves like Black trans women, even in 2015, you couldn't, that wasn't a possibility.

It's been so many years where leaders that preceded me wanted to do something like that, but it was so many obstacles and not even the red tape. But just the politics of keeping Black trans people in their place in a city, that would have never happened and the fact that Baltimore Safe Haven, they've had two locations, and they have relationships with local city government.

And Mayor Scott, because I follow their Instagram too, and to see her have access to email, London de Richelieu, who just got appointed to the mayor's cabinet for LGBTQ affairs. I think that is directly impacted by the groundwork that was laid in 2015, to get folks to take our community seriously here in Baltimore City. Though I'm sad that Baltimore Trans Alliance has not evolved, or not where I would have liked it to be.

I am happy to see the strides to other Black trans folks in the city. I'm also happy to see how the Black gay men and women who've been in power have been stepping aside and letting us do our thing and not trying to thwart our efforts and undermine us because it's just really the trans community. I'm not sure about the white trans community and how collective that they are. [43:45]

Or I'm just not really sure about that. I'm sure there's community, but the people that I see are mainly the black trans women and men that I know that I'm in community with that are kind of, you know, making moves, they're making strides, and I'm really proud of them.

CC: Yeah, sounds you're work inspired incredible generations of activism.

SL: Yeah, even if not in the way that you originally planned or in the same kind of organization. Wow.

CC: I guess I'm just curious, just because of our topic, you mentioned that white trans communities here and black trans community are really just separate, have they come into like clash at points? Or has it just been really isolated?

BAJ: I don't think the communities have per se come into a clash. What I have seen, especially when I was working—and this is even before Baltimore Trans Alliance—if it was a program specifically targeted towards servicing the trans community or LGBTQ community, you could have a trans person like me that's college educated that could do the job, or you have a lot of trans women who don't necessarily have college education, but have life experience, that could do the job.

And what I've seen is they'll go get the white trans woman from Montana or Utah and fly them in and give them all the perks and the benefits to run a program where they're directly interfacing with black trans people and the white savior helping black trans people, and black trans folks who are qualified get, you know, passed up. There's not necessarily a clash where their communities are clashing.

But there is racism, and racism, not even white folks doing the racism, it's black people in power also contributing to making these decisions because they don't value black trans leadership because they don't believe in us. Since I moved from Baltimore, I don't know if it's the same now. But it was definitely a barrier to us being taken seriously and feeling like we didn't have the opportunities to advance like white trans folks are able to.

And particularly, you see a lot of white trans masculine folks like being the oppressor, being gatekeepers in conflict with a lot of black trans folks when it comes to getting access to resources and using their privilege to micromanage or not really create opportunities. So you do see a lot of institutional and systemic racism when it comes to that, but as far as interpersonal clashes, because Baltimore is so segregated in itself, you don't really see places that, like, you will see black trans people congregating, you don't really see white trans folks congregating. Though I'm pretty sure the white trans people that exist in the city stay within their own areas. But from what I've seen, it's just a lot of institutional discrimination and bias and really not giving black trans—in which [it] kind of precipitated why the Baltimore Trans Alliance in this original iteration, it was important for me to lead it, it was important for me to be the face of it, I knew that I could do the work but I knew nobody else was going to really give me the chance to lead in a way that I know we needed to be led.

CC: Sounds like a really uphill battle with ordinary.

SL: Caroline, do you want to keep going down this path still for a bit or do we want to transition to?

CC: Either way.

SL: I guess, before we transition a little bit is there anything else about your time really with BTA and in these more grassroots activist circles, like is there anything else that you want to tell us about that before we move into law and law school?

BAJ: Yeah, what I will say is while we were able to organize on the trans front, part of something that didn't work out, which I wanted to work out, but I don't necessarily think it was my fault. I wanted us to be more connected to the overall anti-blackness movement that was happening, I feel like I was able to connect with some people on an individual level that were leading that work but systemically—and we have to remember during that first iteration of the Black Lives Matter movement, especially at that time, it was very black man centered and we weren't having the nuanced conversations like how we are now. Like how we need to include all black people or like, protect black women. At that particular time, we were really on our own because for instance, like leaders of A Beautiful Struggle, they would extend the olive branch for us to come to their events.

But they would never come to our events, it was never reciprocated. And I was really trying to work hard to build that bridge, because we needed their support. We needed them just as much as they needed me to show up in those spaces to build those bridges. I don't know if things are better now just because the language and the awareness in the black liberation movement, it's popular to include black feminist discourse, and really acknowledge that black men are getting murdered, but what about black women and Me Too, wasn't a thing yet, so we weren't talking about the experiences of black women and femmes inside of these movements, and just inside of black culture generally. I would like to think that it shifted, but in 2015, I still felt like I was dealing with the transphobia, and just subtle anti queer, which was also just another barrier. I mean, we still push through, and they were individual people.

But as far as the collective, getting folks overall to see that they should have showed up for Mya Hall in the way that they showed up for Freddie Gray. It was very hard during that time, it really became trans folks organizing amongst each other and really pushing back, being radical. And I would make appearances, I'm

not doing trans 101 stuff. We're not here to talk about that a trans woman is dying, I'm not here to give you a conversation about when I knew I was trans. And we're having a rally on trans march, it was inappropriate, it's irrelevant. And you're proving my point. Yeah, it was it was hard. I'm pretty sure that there was awareness and sensitivity now, but in 2015, it wasn't there.

CC: Got you, that make sense.

SL: Yeah, that sounds just frustrating and disappointing to not get that solidarity in return.

BAJ: Right. And I would imagine that it's better now. But then it was, we were really starting from square one. When we started, we were really starting from square one. The fact that we were able to do what we did with just the lack of not only financial resources, but social resources. It was hard but we did what we needed to do.

CC: Absolutely. I'm curious, just where you guys met? Because you mentioned, just a really core meeting starting. Where did you guys get together?

BAJ: Physically, we would meet whole court at Chase Brexton, but how I met, so Monica, one of my ex-friends who was a black trans woman from Baltimore. Monica was like her trans mother so I would informally hear about who Monica was, and then the first time I saw Monica, it was 2010 or 2009. They had like this Cydne Kimbrough—no, it wasn't her conversation.

Somebody had organized a trans conversation at Coppin State University. And that's when I first saw Monica and then how me and Monica intimately became friends and she became like an elder guide for me. We both worked at WAR together. We were both working on the same grant together, and then she also got pushed out of the organization the same time I did.

I remember when I was at that point where I was like, "I can't work in community, I never want to experience this again." She was the person encouraging me during the downtime like, "You have this in you, you have to do this and whatever you need, I'm going to be by your side." And she just had a lot of wisdom and she's able to approach stuff from a different way.

She was just somebody that was encouraging me and during that time we were going to do some type of different activism, organization, with my other friend. But we kind of stopped talking

to each other. So Monica was just somebody that was always around who said that if I needed her to reach out, and me and Monica would meet, we would informally meet actually. It was some building on top of this LGBT bookstore on Chase Street.

And I remember us having a meeting there at one time. But yeah, and Monica is somebody I just knew with community, same with Ken. I can't remember exactly where I met Ken. But I just remember when we had community events, he would be there. And it was important enough to have a trans masculine perspective energy. I wanted the leadership team just to be a diverse representation just to make sure that we were including all different types of perspective. And then Ava, I think I met Ava—

SL: Alrighty, we are recording again. Before this recorder so rudely cut us off and died, you were telling us about how you knew Ava, who was also one of the people who was there as the Trans Alliance was starting.

BAJ: Yeah. Ava was going. I didn't have a personal relationship with [her] before the idea for the Baltimore Trans Alliance started. But Ava was just somebody that would just come to the meetings and always wanted to be a part of the meetings. And also, Ava worked at Red Emma's and was a manager and when I would have meetings at Red Emma's I would see Ava there all the time.

Our relationship formed and gelled just from us working together, and Ava was the connection to the white community of people that she knew and the activist community, and because those people came through Red Emma's, Ava was able to spread the word and get the word out. But yeah, our relationship was Ava was just dependable and reliable and just gave advice. Now since then, Ava has de-transitioned.

I don't know if they're non-binary now, they go by Kodah now. But back then, they were Ava, and Ava was just always there, always offering an idea. It just became as we get closer to events just became my right hand. And that's why I felt comfortable passing the organization—and I also felt like Ava had room to grow, because at that point, Ava was still new into her transition at the time.

I just felt like her being in leadership and also, she had a familiarity with the black trans woman, she was able and it was genuine. It wasn't a savior type of way, she was really connected with black trans folks in community because they too came through Red

Emma's, so she was really able to be in community with them and really listen and hear them so I trusted her to lead the organization, and to have the sensitive and awareness that you need to run an organization like BTA was in a city like Baltimore is.

CC: Yeah, that makes a lot of sense. And it's really just nice hearing about how you actually met people and also just physically where you met. Absolutely. I guess we're also curious just how with all this experience and activism, and even just as you said, your first experiences at WAR. Just how you made the decision to go into law and how that felt right?

BAJ: I always felt like law was the next logical step for me, I knew I could use it as a tool to take my activism to the next level. And also, working at Baltimore Housing and just interpreting code and just advising people, it made me curious or it made me think that okay, I could—on a very basic level I could understand statutes, and I can advise people. Now, granted law school is more complex than that.

But I just felt like I could use this tool to advocate for a community that nobody is thinking about. I kind of toyed with the idea that I want to go to law school, and then my master's in legal and ethical studies, it helped prepare me for law school, but I didn't really need to get the degree. And now there's even more student loans that I have to pay back. But I got to the point where it's like, okay, if I'm going to do this, I'm gonna go all out.

And also, I think I was ready to move away from Baltimore, because at that point, I think I left Baltimore when I was 26 or 25, some mid-20s. And people were just telling me like, "You know, Baltimore is great, but you need to move away and see the world. And then if you want to come back to Baltimore later in life, come and do that." But I also felt like I was outgrowing Baltimore.

So law school gave me the reason or the opportunity to go to a new place, a new city for a couple of years so I could really focus on myself, because if I would have gone to law school in Baltimore, I don't think I would have been able to really zone in and focus the way that I needed to so I could commit myself to my studies and making new relationships. But yeah, law school was the next step for me, as far as my advocacy work.

SL: Yeah, so what was law school like, what was Chicago like?

BAJ: It was horrible. Moving to Chicago, even though I had to incur a lot of debt—and hopefully student loans will be canceled for everybody—but it was one of the best decisions that I ever made. Now, law school is hard, I'm just not going to lie to you. Law school is hard, it's like learning a new language. But the beautiful thing about law school is how it forces you to rely on people.

And for me, undergrad, I didn't live on campus, I lived at home. I didn't really get to have the real college experience where you're making lifelong friends and at law school, I have made friends that I will have them for life because we just struggled together. Like you win together, you go through failures together, you're trying to figure it out. And it just going into law, I thought I was grown before I moved to Chicago, but it really grew me up.

And though Chicago is a flawed city, it really gives you the opportunity. As far as law, there's so many different types of law that you can get into and I got to really try a lot and do a lot and stretch. And I really got to explore, and Chicago was a great city to do that because there's so many types of law, many law schools in the Chicagoland area. And I don't regret it.

And I know I didn't want to stay in Chicago, once I finished school, but I'm just very grateful for the years and my ups and downs that I had in Chicago, because it was really, it was like a finishing school for me. And just not in the law, but just how to deal with people and my own personal self-confidence, just being able to go into rooms where you know people are going to be against you, but just being able to hold your own and advocate for yourself and just hold your own.

I hated the process but I love the fact that I don't ever have to think about law school anymore. But yeah, it was grueling, but you really have to have a good team around you, and it really shows you who your friends are and the people that really support you and cheer you on.

CC: Were you able to find any—I mean, it's law school—but were you able to find any trans people of color also invested or was it really kind of a?

BAJ: Oh, that was the sucky part. When I came to law school, there was actually another Latinx trans woman that was in my class, but she was stealth. We knew each other existed, but I don't know, she didn't want to be sister-sister with me, which hurt my feelings, because like, what are the odds that there's two trans folks in this

thing. And in law school, they split you up into different sections. She wasn't in my section, but we knew of each other.

But she kinda just did her thing, and I did my thing. But as far as other, other black trans women, no, and that was the sucky part. And no, that's the sucky part in my career because there's only one other black trans woman that I know that's practicing—not to say there aren't more out there. But as far as out and visible, I haven't seen a lot, and it can be isolating because you have a lot of people try to give you career advice or information.

And a lot of that stuff is great, but a lot of it is not applicable to me in the paths that I have to walk and the things that I have to stand for. You going to have a lot of people give you advice that while it's well-intentioned, you're not going to be able to apply it because nobody has really done what I'm trying to do. And it's going to be hard. And there was, there was another trans woman.

When I came in my first year, there was a white trans woman who was a 3L and she was leaving out and I was happy to have her there. She was a support, Amara (?) is her name. And she was just inspiring because she was first in her class. And she was just freakishly great at law school, and I knew I was never going to be smart like her. But it was just inspiring to see that there was a trans woman there.

And she not only did law school, she is mastering law school, and she just moved out of the country. She doesn't even practice law anymore. She found a job in Mexico, and is living somewhere in Mexico. But it's more trans masculine folks that are going through law school. But as far as trans women, especially trans black women. I'm hoping there's more after me, I guess. There's a black trans woman that I mentor who's in law school right now, but it's hard.

And you really have to, and I tell that to anybody that's coming to me for law school, and they're trans and it's like are you really ready to deal with that? Do you have access to mental health services? Because it's going to get to you, it's going to get to you and you have to figure out positive ways for you to deal with it so you can do your best in law school.

Because you still want to try to get the best grades that you can, so it can be that easier for you to find a job and be competitive. But yeah, it's hard because law school is designed for white straight men. And the closer you are for that, the easier it's going to be,

even if you were a sucky student. That's just the name of the game. And I just try to be realistic.

I'm not saying don't do it, but you really have to be prepared, and I walked in green, I thought we were all going to be friends and everybody was genuine, and after that first week, I was like, "Okay, we're really doing this, what did I do? If I leave now how much money will I owe or do I have to pay back?" Because yeah, law school is hard and it's slow to become more diverse, very slow.

Black Lives Matter has really sped stuff up with diversity, equity and inclusion, but it's a whole lot of progress that can be made, a lot

CC: Yeah, that makes sense. In your current practice, how does it feel just carving out a queer space in a field that doesn't have it really?

BAJ: Well, I just started a new job on Monday. Yeah, I'm a staff attorney at Transgender Legal Defense and Education Fund. Now I don't really have to carve out a space, I work at a trans organization, where my passion is my work. Basically, I'm helping people getting name changes, and [in] states that have barriers, strategize on people how to sue these states, so we can remove these barriers.

In a sense, mostly everybody on the staff is a trans-identified person. I've been wanting to be open with people, people are, "How are you doing, I want to meet with you, I want to talk with you." And one of the reasons that I left my firm, while I was making the most money that I've ever made, I wasn't happy with the work. And it was isolating, I was the only black person working in my department. I was the only out trans person as far as I knew of, and there wasn't really a lot of space for me to be me.

And I remember Black History Month came and we didn't even get an email acknowledging Black History Month. And I'm like "Okay, it's time for me to go," because I need to be somewhere where I can be all parts of myself, and I can get to know people. And I just didn't feel like it was a space for me to do that. And the beautiful part about being a lawyer is that people hop from job to job all the time, it comes with the profession.

I gave myself permission to look and to be at an organization where I can be myself and follow my pursuits, and just marry them together. And I really believe in the organization, I believe in the

work that we're doing. And it's just great to come to work and to be myself. And again, that's the great part about being a lawyer is that it's at will, so if I don't like it, I could sit there and make the place more diverse.

But all this money, these people, y'all should already be doing it, you'll should already be taking the time to invest, to make sure that your place is diverse so you don't have to lose money by having these people that you're training just up and quit, because they're not happy. Just because you pay somebody a lot of money that's not enough to keep somebody at a job if they're miserable.

CC: Yeah, you have a high enough skill set, and they have enough money that you don't need to be tokenized.

SL: Well, it sounds like you've moved on to something better, and I hope it only continues to get better. [To Caroline} Do you have any other questions about the law stuff, because there's something else that I feel like has come up a few times that I would love to ask about to?

CC: Go for it yeah.

SL: Yeah, I guess as you've been talking a little bit about Monica and your relationship with her, and how she guided you and how you said that you hoped that there would be other black trans women who would also go to law school and follow what you did. Did you say that there was someone who you know who is currently in law school? Yeah, it sounds there's this idea of mentorship and almost generations of support and guidance and passing down community.

And I guess I was wondering if you could just speak more about that, and what that's been like for you, and how you may try to be a mentor to people.

BAJ: Well, as far as it comes to black trans women, I'm just in community with black trans women period. Most of my close friends are other black trans woman. I'm just always in [community]. Now, that doesn't mean that I'm friends with everybody. But most of the people that I'm close to are black trans women, and it's just something that I'm very intentional.

And it kind of has to be that way because, not only for love and building community, but for safety, just for us to check on each other. I need to be talking to folks on a regular basis, they need to hear from me, especially with our elders just checking on, because

trans woman we tend to, especially black trans women, we tend to live single lives, and it's very easy to be isolated and not in community because you might be in a situation where people are disowned from their families.

They don't necessarily have the strongest family connections. We might not necessarily have the strongest romantic situation, so a lot of times, and especially as you age, it's likely that you might be on your own. For me, it's been important to just foster those connections and just to be in constant communication with people and to just be checking in on folks, just for love and for safety. It's something that I always do.

I have had people in community reach out to me about law school. I'm somebody if you're serious about it, I'm very open about. I'm very generous with my time. And I'm talking to people and giving people tips and giving people advice. I make myself available, I'm not a person that believes in hiding the ball, I'm going to give you the information, it's up to you to take it or to utilize it.

But yeah, I have my trans daughter, who lived here for a period of time, and she's back in Georgia, and we're rebuilding, we weren't talking for a while, but we are rebuilding our relationship. I'm just a community person, I'm just somebody that I have my ear to community, I know what's going on. Because if I'm in a position where I'm advocating or—I can't speak and not be a part of the community, because then that could easily turn into me being an opportunist, or exploiting people.

And that's just not what I'm about. But I'm all about building community, on an activism level, but eventually your politics should leak into your personal life by who you're choosing to surround yourself with and share your love with. And I'm saying, I love my community, because I love myself. And yeah, and again, if somebody wants to mentorship, I'm at the point where I don't have kids yet, so you're not my child, I'm going to give you the information. It's your life to live, you do what you want to do, and do what you need to do. But I'm going to tell you what I did. I'm going to tell you what was successful, I'm going to tell you what I failed at, and do what you need to do with the information that I gave you. But I just believe sharing information, it just keeps us informed and it keeps us safe. And the utmost importance, I'm all about black trans folks leading long, healthy and productive lives, that's what I want for us.

SL: Thank you, that sounds just a really nice, strong, beautiful sense of relationships and maybe even family, so thank you. That was just very touching. {To Caroline] Where do you want to go from here?

CC: I guess I think you said a lot about that just now. But I'm curious, as you're moving forward, what brings you hope in your work and for the future?

BAJ: I think the one thing that brings me hope is there is a shift happening. Again, just seeing how now people respond to trans-ness and topics on trans-ness. I think it shows that the work that—and not just me that I've done, not even keeping this to Baltimore City. But the work that we've done as a community across the world and the country, that is starting to shift.

People know the language now, people know what's offensive now, for the most part people know what not to say, or they know to have that pause or that question of themselves. And I think a lot of that has to do with social media and just the way that we're able to disseminate information faster and how everybody is getting the information at the same time.

That gives me hope. Seeing more trans folks in leadership and just doing more, that gives me hope, because not that long ago it was hard to just get opportunities to lead our own movements, to be taken seriously. Things like seeing a child being loved and embraced by their family for being trans, that lets me know that the conversations that we're having, just the awareness that we're creating, that everything has not been in vain.

And also, that we have so much farther to go when we're able to. It's not when the celebrities are doing it, which is a powerful thing, and I don't want to discount that. But when people are able to replicate that in their own homes and their own families. The fact that we have folks, cis people questioning their gender, and exploring their identities and feeling free to openly talk about these things, I think that's great.

I think for me on a personal level, I'm excited about aging and living longer. Like when I was young, just in my transition, I didn't think I was going to live a long time, because just like most of the trans black trans women I know, they just died young, they were either murdered, or they died from health reasons. Well, if the future came, it was nice. I didn't really want to plan for my future because, or I didn't know if my depression was going to take me out.

Just because I didn't have access to mental health and to medication, all of that. I thought one of three things were going to take me out. But just as I've been able to personally ascend, and just have a better quality of life, I just wanna be here, I want to live longer, I just want to be open to really living life, doing things, just doing new things. Being here, trying to be a beacon of light and support, just for my family, and friends, and just the lust for life that I didn't have because I just thought that as a black trans woman, there were only certain things that I could do, and I couldn't do anything else. And I just think that the times that we're living in, and just the slight advancements that we made and the freedoms that we have, I want to live long, I don't just, don't want to do activism for the generations that come after me.

I'm fighting so hard so I can experience some of those benefits now. Because I feel like we, and I got that quote from somewhere, I didn't come up with that. But I want to be able to experience some of that stuff. And I don't want to have to die. And not to shade the younger generation, but I deserve to feel some of that love too.

I'm really just trying to prepare for the future and take in the moment and just to be here. And also to one day step away from this work and to do something else that I want to do. And that comes from just training leaders and then letting them lead their own way even if your organization just folds. You know, I could have, with Baltimore Trans Alliance, I could have stepped back into the reins, and let it just serve my own ego, but my heart wasn't in it.

And you just have to let the chips fall where they may. And just know that what is for you, what you're being called to do, it is going to take you ultimately to where you need to be.

CC: That's beautiful, I love that . I love that there are so many things to be hopeful for in so many directions. Yeah, and even in our class, obviously, as queer people, we've been talking a lot about joy and yeah. It's just really wonderful to hear that.

SL: Yeah. It's definitely something that we wanted to, I think joy is something that we wanted to be able to bring in as much as possible, because I feel like it's so easy for people to look at, particularly Baltimore, and the Baltimore community, and just see struggle or pain or whatever.

BAJ: Right.

SL: And that's not true.

BAJ: Right. Even before, I feel sorry, even though it's easier to be queer or to be trans now, and it's great because it's a testament to all of the work and the sacrifices we made. When I was coming up being trans, being queer, it was fun. Now there are no social spaces for us to go to because they closed everything. That's why I don't think I could move back to Baltimore now because everything that is near to me that I loved about Baltimore is gone.

They've closed it, it's not here. And it was fun being queer here and this was we still had internet in my time clearly, we didn't have smartphones, but we had websites. But even the internet, the way we used the internet in the 2000s, it's a nostalgia about certain sites that we went to and just how we had to create community amongst each other when we weren't supposed to be doing that.

But we still found each other and we still have these memories, so even back then when it was the worst of times, we still had joy, we had community. Maybe we weren't organized but we still knew who we were. We still knew that we existed. So yeah, even though things are better now and I'm thankful for that, there are times where I miss old Baltimore and just how carefree. And then I didn't have as many responsibilities, I was just carefree, running around but yeah, we had joy then too. We, you know, we made the best of it, we really did.

CC: I love that just confidence, and love, and youth.

SL: And just here's hoping that there's only more joy to come.

CC: I guess is there anything in here that we haven't captured yet or that you wanted us to ask about?

BAJ: No, I think y'all got everything, I think y'all got everything.

SL: Awesome, well, we came in to this I think already with high hopes and high expectations because just what we had heard about you, we were like "We're going to get some good stuff we think" and this has just surpassed even those high hopes, thank you. And I guess with that we will end our recording.

BAJ: Okay.

[End of Audio]