

Interviewer: Okay. The date is April 4, 2022. It's currently 11:03 and we are here with Danielle, our interviewee. So, the first question we want to ask you is just about where you're from. So, are you from Baltimore?

Danielle Kepeden: No. So, I come from many places. I moved to the United States from Cameroon, West Africa, and then I lived in Arizona and I lived here in Maryland on the Montgomery County side. I lived in Ohio. And I live here now in Baltimore.

Interviewer: So, what was your childhood like?

Danielle Kepeden: It was cute, I guess. It was – I was living in Cameroon. *[Laughs]* My wife said that was funny. Yeah, it was cute, I think. It was nice and warm – like, the weather, I mean. Some places in Cameroon are a little cold. My childhood was – I'm an only child so I was by myself. Well, I have a lot of cousins, though, so they would come around a lot, but I was mostly just by myself, in my own thoughts. What else would I say? As a child how was it? I mean it was hard. I think I was depressed. I didn't know that it was depression. I just would cry a lot. Yeah. Yeah. I mean, it was what it was. I don't know what to add.

Interviewer: Yeah, no, that's fine. That's fine.

[Crosstalk]

Danielle Kepeden: Do I say things specifically about being queer or –?

Interviewer: Yeah, so really just anything. The follow-up question is just what was your upbringing like? So, really anything about your story. It doesn't just have to be about queer identity. Just anything that you think is relevant that you'd like to tell us.

Danielle Kepeden: I mean, I guess I can dive straight into the trauma. As a child – well, I always knew I was queer as a child in Cameroon. I always liked femmes and women and girls. But I remember pretty young kissing girls. And then, one of my best friends, whose name was also Danielle, she saw me kissing her sister and then she literally flipped out and went and told her mom, who told my mom, who told – it was a mess. And at the time my mom was doing a Ph.D. program so she was not living in Cameroon. She was, I think, in France at the time. So, my mom would travel a lot and I would live with my aunt.

Yeah, it was really messy. They were telling me I was going to go to hell. [sighs] It was a lot. So, that was kind of the tail end of my childhood, around 11 years old, in Cameroon. And then I moved to the US when I was 12. (My mom was in the US, I misremembered)

But before that it was – we moved around a lot. My parents were divorced and my mom always sought out – she was a professor and she was always – ever since I've known her – I guess ever since I was born she's always been into continuing her education. So, when I was born she was doing her master's, and she's always been doing – stepping up in academia. So, she's always been either away or traveling and I've lived with aunts, yeah, almost – half of the time with aunts and then half of the time with my mom.

Interviewer: Yeah. So, having that backstory, what – I guess what made you want to get into activism work?

Danielle Kepeden: I think what made me get into activism – I guess just – well, I don't think it was because of my – honestly, it was really – why did I...? I don't – honestly, I don't know. I just always felt like – maybe it was... I don't – I have no idea. I guess I can only think a defining moment was when – I don't know if it was either Mike Brown or if it was – oh, my God. I can't believe I forgot his name. The child who was killed in Ohio. I forgot his name, but it was a really obvious – obviously – most of these cases are obvious, but it was a super obvious case. And at the end I'm like "Yeah, he's – the person is totally going to get consequences and going to plead – there's going to be guilty, no questions asked." And they were not guilty. I was like "What?" I was completely shook. And I think maybe that got me to pay more attention and then got me to – I guess I naturally fell into activism. I didn't – yeah. It wasn't planned, I guess. I just kind of – my interests just kind of leaned towards that because, I mean – because it's me. I see myself; I'm like "Oh, my God. That could have been me. That could have been my friend." So, I guess it was just out of necessity. Yeah. (

Interviewer: Yeah. I totally get that. So, how did you get into activism? I guess where did you start with that?

Danielle Kepeden: I guess it was in – where did I get started with activism? Hmm... I'm not sure. I think – I guess the only thing, the only time I can think I was doing it maybe consistently was when I was living in Ohio. I went to Ohio because I was going – I got into Denison University, this super tiny, predominantly White institution in Granville, Ohio. And I think I went there – was I there 2015?

2016? I'm not quite sure. So, I had started college at Montgomery Community College and then transferred to Denison University. And I was coming in kind of as a sophomore and then I became – the following year I became president of the African student association. And I think it was – I mean, you obviously – doing association work and being in a predominantly White institution and being – you know every Black person on campus basically because it's so tiny. I felt like you just kind of naturally had to do – because the – I mean, it's one of those schools, like most institutions, where they just kind of bring in diverse people but don't accommodate the space to make it welcoming for the diverse people. So, it felt like we had to always push. And I think that's kind of where the activism naturally fell into place.

But even then, even now I still don't know if I call myself an activist. But I guess that would be the time where I was consistently advocating for underrepresented – for folks who had been marginalized and underrepresented and try to go to budget meetings and get them to understand that food is a very important part of African culture and they have to give us money for food in the budget. *[Laughs]* So funny. But yes, I think it was at Denison that I really became an organizer, took on that role. Yeah.

Interviewer: Yeah. I'm curious. At Denison and I guess Montgomery College what were kind of the queer spaces like?

Danielle Kepeden: I mean, at Montgomery College I was a different student there because I was living – I was – well, half of that time I was living with a friend. My mom was – got a job at Ohio – she actually got a job at Denison University first and then I transferred there because I got a tuition discount because she was faculty. She had been faculty for two years. But – so, I was living with a friend first, and then after that I was living by myself. So, I was always kind of working as I was going to school to help pay rent and stuff. So, as a student at Montgomery College I was not into student life. I was literally in class, to work, home.

But when I went to Denison it was different because it was a residential school and everybody was there. I wasn't really – I was doing student jobs, but it wasn't really that – I was just a TA for a film professor. It wasn't a big deal. But I didn't have to pay for my living like I did when I was at Montgomery College, so I was able to be more with the other groups.

And then, queer life at Denison was – it was interesting. I think it was where I – that was where I officially was – so, after the

incident in Cameroon I had always thought – I had kind of repressed my queerness because I'm pan, so it was just easier to have crushes on boys. And... But then I was – as I was growing up I was kind of playing with ideas, thoughts of queerness and blah, blah. And then, when I got to college, when I got to Denison I think I was more – I was – I don't know what – I guess I could say I was more – being in queer spaces more. I had always been in queer spaces, though. I was always going to clubs in DC and doing that when I was in... But I think trying to build a community not just around alcohol, I guess, that was at Denison.

And I mean, it was okay. It was diverse-ish. It was – queer spaces at Denison were small. I mean, we had parties where – frat parties where people would be like "No gays." They would harass visibly femme queer folks, femme gay men at parties. I remember there was this dude Hayoung who had kind of made a whole protest, this Korean femme-presenting gay man and he had been kicked out of parties and stuff. It was like a hostile space. But queer people created their own pockets and we would have our own fun. But you could tell when you would go to BSU meetings, the Black Student Union meetings, you could – homophobia and transphobia obviously reigned supreme. And then you would be at – we tried to make ASA more open and queer-friendly but it's still an African space, which is not the most welcoming to queer folks. It made it easier that I was there but I don't think that it was that much easier. I think we carved our own pockets but it was still hostility obviously and hard to navigate if you're not straight – hetero-presenting.

Interviewer: Do you happen to know how big Montgomery College was, the size approximately?

Danielle Kepeden: I'm not sure. No, I have no idea. I'm not sure.

Interviewer: I'm sure that's something we can look up, so that's fine.

Danielle Kepeden: Yeah. Because it was only 2013, 2014 that I went.

Interviewer: Okay. Great. Thanks. So, you talked a little bit about the African and queer, and so I'm wondering what it was like having those intersecting identities and also being queer in African or Black spaces, or Black in queer spaces.

Danielle Kepeden: Yeah. Oh, my gosh. I mean, being African and queer, to me, it's the most natural thing. Since I was young that's always been – I mean, it's innate to me. But I've had African people question my

African-ness, which is hilarious. Like, okay. I mean, I think being African and queer, how has it been...? I think I've been – because of the way that I was raised, and my mom has always been – she divorced in the early 2000s – I think it was 2001 that the divorce was finalized, which was a big deal. Not a lot of women around that time in Cameroon was out here divorcing. And she's always been – and then her pursuing her studies and pushing for her studies, not that women don't do that at that time, weren't doing that at that time in Cameroon, but it was still – it was kind of a big deal.

And even the – even just to give you the context that the university was built in the '70s, a national university in Cameroon was built in the '70s around, yeah, when my mom was born. So, having a woman pushing and pursuing her studies like that and caring so much and going abroad to new places she's never been and pushing through and still being successful, that was a little – kind of a big deal, now that I look back and think about it. So, I feel like seeing my mom, my mom has always – while she can be conservative, she's always pushed through. So, I feel like for me, being queer and African, I just kind of took that. So, when people was telling me – were telling that it was not okay – I mean, after the incident, after – when I was 11, 10 and found out by my best friend and stuff, after I had some maturity and I was in college and people would – I feel like because of her, how I saw her live, I always kind of pushed through in the same way.

So, even with my mom – we had a huge rift and it was so messy. She had kicked me out. I was in college; she had kicked me out. And this was not about me being queer. I had not come out with – to her at the time. But I guess – what was I trying – I think I just sidetracked a little bit. Anyway. I'm sorry. *[Laughs]* I'll try to organize my thoughts.

I guess what I was trying to say – being – because I saw my mom push through, and even though – it just kind of gave me that encouragement to just try to be myself as much as possible. But also, another thing is I'm very stubborn. I never felt the need – I – when I came out to myself officially, I think at Denison, like 2016, 2017, I would say – and I didn't feel scared. I guess I did feel a little scared to say it because I am more straight-presenting and also I'm attracted to – I'm not visibly queer and I'm also attracted to men, so it was easier for me to navigate in those spaces. So, I was worried by saying, actively saying that I'm queer I felt like maybe I was calling violence onto me. But that – whatever.

But I didn't feel like – but I still did it because I felt like I had kind of – I had – not hidden it, because I always had those conversations with my friends about me being queer, thinking about queerness in middle school and high school, so it wasn't hidden. But once I fully revealed it I didn't feel scared to admit it, and I think it was because of maybe how my mom lived. But then, I never felt the need to also come out to my mom because I didn't feel like I needed her to validate – I didn't need her acceptance or – I really didn't care. I genuinely didn't. So, my friends, and I could be on campus – literally, my advisors, who were my mom's colleagues knew I was queer and she didn't. But I just felt like she knew because one time she literally asked me – I was dating somebody and she was like "Oh, are you dating a new person?" She didn't say a gender. Which, I was like "Hmm, I know she..."

But anyway. But other Africans, how they receive me, I mean, they've either said they don't feel like I'm African because of some of the things that I've been – how openly queer I am. Also, I guess maybe I used to have gauges. There was also that. But I feel like those are super African things. Like, when you go to museums those are what African statues look like. They have gauges and septums and they were gay as fuck. I am the most African. But yeah. So...

But then I ended up coming out to my mom, though, when I moved to Baltimore because I met – who is now my wife – I met an awesome woman. And I think I just wanted to talk to my mom about her. And I just was like "Yeah, so I've started dating someone. This girl." And that's kind of how I came out to her. And she was just upset that she was the last to know. I was like "Girl, you've never made it comfortable for me to share this with you. Yeah, you're the last to know." But yeah. That's always kind of been my attitude about coming out for myself. I've just kind of been like... And I still haven't come out to my family in Cameroon because honestly... That's all they get from me.

Interviewer: Yeah. Yeah.

Danielle Kepeden: Yeah. Did I answer the question?

Interviewer: Yes, you definitely did. It was great.

Danielle Kepeden: I had so many tangents.

Interviewer: You're definitely a good storyteller. It's very enjoyable.

Danielle Kepeden: Oh, thank you.

Interviewer: Yeah. So, I know that you said you came to Baltimore and you met your current wife here? Or – yeah, maybe just what led you to Baltimore initially?

Danielle Kepeden: Yeah. So, when I was at Denison I had a – I was in a depressive – another depressive episode and it was really bad and I was feeling very suicidal. So, I just decided to drop out of school. I was about to be a senior, so that really sucked. And I was on full scholarship, so just imagine the heartbreak.

But then, I started working at a restaurant in town, which was also awful because I was literally serving my classmates. Bad to worse. But anyway, so then I found out about a program through another friend from Denison who also dropped out because of depression. Literally, that place was just a breeding ground for – if you had any type of trauma, mental illness, it would just get so much worse there. I mean, I think it's true for most institutions. [Interviewer], you relate! [laughing]

Anyway. So, my friend Jo moved back to Boston and he started doing this program called "Year Up." And then I – he told me "This could be interesting. Look into it." I looked into it. The closest city that had a Year Up program that was affordable was Baltimore. And I was like "You know what? I miss Maryland." I hated, hated, hated Ohio. I hated Granville so much because I don't drive. I'm a gay who doesn't drive, still – and it's like you have to drive everywhere to get around in Ohio because it's so big. So, I was just always stuck in Granville most of the time. So, I was ready to leave and go back to Maryland.

And I applied for this program and it was – they had – basically, it was like an adult – it was basically like if you can't go to college or if you couldn't finish college, it's like a business professional track. And then they put you – the first six months they teach you either – you either choose IT, computer science, or business. And I chose business. And in the first six months you take classes and in the next six months they place you in an internship.

So, I got in. And then, I literally moved all my stuff and I found a place on Craigslist here in Baltimore. And this was in December 2018. I found this small room on Craigslist by Mondawmin Mall. And yeah, I lived right by BCCC, which is where I would take the classes for the program. And I met Justist, my wife – I met her

literally in that program that first day and we've been best friends since. Yeah.

Interviewer: That's great. Yeah. So, with Queer Crisis Response Unit, how did you get started with that?

Danielle Kepeden: Yeah. So, with the Queer Crisis Response Unit, that actually came from my job, my current job. So, when I graduated from the Year Up program I was looking for work and then ended up applying to the University of Maryland. So, I work as an administrative assistant at the ROAR Center and we provide services for survivors of crimes in Baltimore City. And through that, E.V. Yost was – had interned there before, and then when they became – so, they were still student, they were going to the University of Maryland, they interned at ROAR. And then, after they graduated they ended up passing the bar and they became an OSI fellow. And then, it was that fellowship – parts of the contract of the fellowship was then to come back to ROAR and practice law and get started with the Queer Crisis Response Unit. That was what they – that was the project that gave them that fellowship.

So, that's where we met. And – or, I heard one of my bosses talking about it before E.V. had already joined. I was so excited to hear about this project. And when they came – we're both Geminis. I don't know. Maybe that's what – we both clicked. And I was just so excited. And yeah, and then we started working – they talked to me about this project. It sounded amazing. It sounded exactly like what I wanted to get involved with. At the time I was also doing volunteer coordinating for the Black Femme Film – Black Femme Supremacy Film Festival, so kind of dropped that a little bit, and then I did the – and then – to pick up Queer Crisis Response Unit. That's how I started.

Interviewer 1: so –

Interviewer 2: So, actually, can you tell us a bit more about the Black Femme Supremacy Film Festival?

Interviewer 1: Yeah.

Danielle Kepeden: Yeah. It's called Black Femme Supremacy Film Fest and it was created – I'm not sure – actually, I think it may be four or five years now. So, I had – the first event I had gone to was when I had first come to Baltimore and I was just looking on Eventbrite. And at Patterson Park – and they put together films for – they basically – it's a platform for folks who create films if you are a Black

Femme or if you center Black Femmes in your films. And they – yeah, they just show your films. And it's super dope. It's catered by a Black queer person here in Baltimore, Nia Hampton. And she's a writer too. She's so dope. Y'all definitely need to seek her out. Yeah, they recently had a taste test and they're taking new submissions currently for films. And their theme this year is nourishment. Yeah.

Interviewer 1: Cool. That's very interesting.

[Crosstalk]

Interviewer 2: What was – yeah, what was volunteering there like, I guess? Kind of why did you want to get involved in that?

Danielle Kepeden: Yeah. So, when I first found out about the film festival I was so excited. I had seen – it was just really beautiful stories about Black people, femmes, nuance, varying – and it was international too. There were some Brazilian Black femmes, Brazilian skateboarders, or South Africans. It was queer, it was trans, it was just such a cool-ass experience. And I was just like "I want to be involved."

So, I was following them on Instagram and then one day they had "Work with us," a volunteer coordinator. And I had done volunteer coordinating. When I lived in Montgomery County I used to do volunteer coordinating for an art gallery. So, I was like "Yeah, I'll do that." And I applied and they accepted. And yeah, it was nice. I mean, it was – well, I mean nice – it was nice to be part of these, of this group of people, but it's still volunteer coordinating. It was a little tough because you were doing it virtually and it's hard to – when you're not doing face-to-face. I had never done virtual volunteer coordinating, so it was a little messy. But it was a really great experience just to be around international Black creatives who are just doing the damn thing, creating stories they want to see.

Interviewer: So, you said that the film fest, there were a lot of Black trans, queer people involved. Would you say that was your gateway to the Baltimore queer scene or – kind of talk a bit more about that.

Danielle Kepeden: Yeah, I meant the films that I saw were about different types. But my gateway into the Baltimore queer scene, I think, honestly, was my wife, I think. And I don't know if I even have – yeah, I think it was my wife. It was just us being around. She had tons of queer friends and I remember just – I remember one time going – this is when I first moved to Baltimore and I was going out with Justist.

And we went to this place and it was not an – it was not a queer bar or anything but there were literally four dark-skinned lesbians making out, four sets of couples. And I was like "Oh, my God, that would literally never happen in Ohio." Nothing in this bar said "Black –" it was not explicitly Black, it was not explicitly queer, but it was just so cool that you could just walk anywhere and still find queer people. Amazing. I was like "Oh, I love Baltimore."

But yeah, I think it was – my kind of gateway was through Justist. And then, I had – through Year Up I also met other queer folks who were doing internships and I ended up meeting other queer folks through them. So, I think it was Year Up and then Justist that really got me in. But I still am learning. I'm still very new to Baltimore. I was in the house most of last year, so I haven't talked to many people. So, I'm still trying to discover the queer community here in Baltimore and, yeah, and make it my home.

Interviewer: Yeah. So, going back to Queer Crisis Response Unit a bit, could you maybe explain the purpose of the organization?

Danielle Kepeden: So, the Queer Crisis Response Unit – so, our overall purpose is to build a network of queer folks – TLGBQIA+ folks – and community members and also allies and service providers. We're trying to have a robust network of people who are invested in noncarceral alternatives to crisis response. So, maybe IPV de-escalation. Maybe mental health crises. Or just a series of crises. We'd like to be able to train community members to be able to regulate themselves first and then increasing their capacity to be able to regulate their friends, their neighbors who might be in crisis, and we're hoping that through this skill-building we're able to have a mobile crisis – a team that could – or multiple teams in multiple neighborhoods of skilled neighbors who would be able to tend to crises in their neighborhoods so that we're building community trust and we're even removing – lessening the amount of times that we even need to call the police in our communities.

Interviewer: And what sort of work have you guys done so far?

Danielle Kepeden: Yeah. So, so far we've done some – we've had some queer joy meetings, meetups, and we've had a lot of virtual meetings, specifically around queer joy. So, just joyful chitchats. Right now it's just been – and then we've had admin team meetings just to do a lot of planning and organizing. We had some curriculum development meetings to build some trainings. But so far, right now it's been pretty – a slow build, especially because of the pandemic. And what we've seen obviously is that – I mean, the

problem that we all know is that the folks who are building this are the folks who also need it, and they're also the folks who are the most tired and the most burnt out. So, it's been really at a – we've been building it at a very slow pace and we haven't been able to really push the program that we wanted to do because right now it's – on the most part it's me and E.V. doing a lot of the work. There had been other folks who were helping us with the planning, but some folks stepped back depending on capacity and stuff. So, yeah.

But right now we are planning – I'm so excited – we have some May programming coming up. We're doing a training series and we're having meetings with different folks because we want every week – we're hoping it's going to be every Saturday of May and every week there will be a theme. So, maybe "Intro to mental health crisis response" would be maybe week one, and then maybe week two we'll be doing some breath work and learning about mapping our triggers, stuff like that. Just – we'll do trainings every week and we're trying to collaborate with folks here or – folks here in Baltimore or other folks who are doing trainings nationally. There's this one organization called Secure the Bag, and they do self-defense trainings, and maybe we can – we're thinking about bringing them on for one of the trainings. But yeah.

So, trainings are coming. And some queer joy events that I'll be planning are coming. I want to do some maybe partnerships with Black Femme Film Fest and do some queer film and discussion, because I feel like Americans don't really be watching international films, so I want to show some queer African films. I really – oh, my gosh. There's a queer African film that was literally created by this straight man in the '90s. A West African. And it's so good. And it's – the first scene is two men kissing each other, and I cannot believe this was made and produced and released in Guinea in the '90s.

But yeah, there's so many cool queer films, queer African films that I feel like queer Americans don't know about. The ideas of what queer and African is, it's like – people don't even think about that. So, I want to maybe bring some of that in a queer joy programming. So, stay tuned.

Interviewer: Do you remember the name of the movie actually

Danielle Kepeden: I can look it up right now. There's a cute little list if you would like. It's called Dakan. D-A-K-A-N. And it was in 1997.

Interviewer: Perfect. I also wanted to ask kind of – can you talk bit more about kind of what's the stuff that's been happening at the queer joy meetings? What is it like meeting other queer folk and being able to celebrate that – a celebration almost?

Danielle Kepeden: Yeah. I mean, at the queer joy meetings so far, what we've been doing is just checking in, chitchatting about our day, just – literally just connecting with people, with our neighbors. So far, it seems the response has been – folks have been – it seems like this is something that folks really need. And for me specifically, I want us to have more spaces that we can convene, maybe not around alcohol and stuff that doesn't necessarily have to do around nightlife. It seems like folks really appreciate that. And people want more, like we haven't been doing enough. There's a demand for – people want a sewing circle or a cooking circle or whatever. But it's felt – even on Zoom it's felt really warm to be able to see queer folks and just chitchat about our day and just being in community because it's hard. It's lonely. Yeah, it's felt good. And it's felt like we need more. There needs to be a ton more. Yeah.

Interviewer: I guess in your event programming, kind of what were – were there any other organizations that inspired you? I guess just in – and I feel like you also get a lot of community feedback in regards to kind of what events they want, like the knitting circles. So, I guess if you can talk about that?

Danielle Kepeden: I'm sorry, can you repeat the question? I'm sorry. Can you repeat the question?

Interviewer:: Yeah, I think I just went a lot – everywhere. I guess the question is just like were there any other organizations that inspired y'all at the Queer Crisis Response Unit? Yeah.

Danielle Kepeden: Yeah. I mean, we always – as far as – I think CAT-911, it was one of the biggest inspirations, I guess for E.V. specifically when they were creating this. CAT-911, they do a lot of programming around training. Do y'all know about CAT-911? I'm just checking?

Interviewer: You can talk a bit more about it actually for context in the recording.

Danielle Kepeden: Yeah, CAT-911, it's – I'm pretty sure they're in California, in the Bay Area. Well, it's Community Action Teams and they're just about abolitionists, building communities, and they have resources, abolitionist resources, and they focus on peace-building, police violence, domestic violence, sexual violence, mental health crisis

and stuff. But yeah, they do – they have a robust training and resources thing, tab on their website. And it's really well done. So, that's been kind of the inspiration for how we would like to model our trainings, because ultimately, the beginning thought of Queer Crisis Response Unit was a place where we can train and skill-build.

But then, with the programming and queer joy, when I'm thinking about what – I'm just kind of thinking about what folks – you said what organizations – okay, let me backtrack.

I guess organizations that are inspiring me – I just scroll through. I mean, I follow a lot of the – Joy's Free Store, Solidarity Skateboards, all the organizations that are here in Baltimore. I just kind of see – Underground Rainbow is a new one, a new collective of queer folks here in Baltimore. And I went to one of their events and then that kind of inspired me, maybe for June to have a fun talent show type event. They had a talent show kind of thing, like a showcase where you can – it was actually really cute. They were like – it was at the Crown, and they were at the Crown, and they said, "Show one thing that you're comfortable with and something that you're uncomfortable with." So, you had a bunch of artists, and of course all these people were artists and they're so amazing in everything they do, so the thing they were even uncomfortable with was beautiful and amazing.

But I guess just scrolling through my Instagram feed and following local organizations, other queer folks who are doing things in Baltimore, that's what's been inspiring the programming. And also, yeah, we haven't done the knitting circle yet just because there haven't been enough people. And also because burned out and all of that. But we're definitely hoping to partner more with other organizations and lift up local organizations. That's the goal. Did I answer the question correctly – I mean, well?

Interviewer:

Yes, you did. I guess you were on the – you were about to say something and then you went back to the organization bit. Do you remember what you were going to say? Was it about community feedback and response to the unit? I'm not so sure.

Danielle Kepeden:

I mean, I can't really say – I mean, community feedback... it's just been more, I guess. It's just been more of this. So, I'm trying to think – I mean, we also don't have a lot of people who are coming to meetings too because Zoom fatigue, burned out, all the things. But yeah, but the feedback that we've gotten, it's just been more...

- Interviewer:* Yeah. So, I guess focusing more on the mutual aid aspects now, just wondering how you personally define ____.
- Danielle Kepeden:* Mutual aid. I guess I define it by – it's just community members – it's just, yeah, community members supporting each other in moments. It doesn't have to be moments of crises, just day-to-day life. Working as a community to just provide resources and looking out for each other, stuff like that. That's what I would consider mutual aid. It's like in the actions and words of everyday neighbors. Yeah.
- Interviewer:* Yeah. It sounds like you guys are definitely doing a lot of that there.
- Danielle Kepeden:* Well, we're also working on – with our – since we did get some grant money recently, we're working on guidelines so we can come out and provide some micro grants soon. And we're trying to just think about ways to – screening – like on our end, admin end, how do we screen in a fair way? But there will be a posting out soon about that, so we can provide money for community members who need it. And then, I think with our training series too – oh, no, I think we scrapped that. We were going to try to pay also folks to come to the training series, but I think we're going to put all that money – most of that money towards mutual aid instead, towards micro grants. So, that's also coming soon. We just have been trying to think about how to fairly – what questions to ask on the signup form. It's so hard. It seems really easy, but I don't know, it still felt so hard to come up with really good criteria that are not rooted in capitalism, but how do we weed out – how do we make sure that you're actually queer and needing this money? But then it's like, oh, if you need this money anyway – like, if you're trying to scam, you probably really need the money anyway. But yeah. So, we're working on that.
- Interviewer:* Yeah, it sounds like there's a lot of stuff going on.
- Danielle Kepeden:* There's a lot. And all these things were supposed to come a little bit earlier, but we're burned out. But it's coming.
- Interviewer:* So, I guess, yeah, we've talked a bit about being burned out kind of issues, things like that. Are there any other issues you guys have faced?
- Danielle Kepeden:* What do you mean, "you guys"? Do you mean the organization as a whole? Or just me or –?

Interviewer: Yeah. I mean, I guess both if you have anything to say for both.

Danielle Kepeden: Yeah, I mean, one of – I mean, okay, so recently, I'm on DACA too. That's also another thing. And recently, I was applying for my paperwork as I usually do, and then the Post Office was like – they decided to not send my paperwork. And yeah, so I was out of work for five months because the United States didn't feel like they wanted to expedite my renewal, even though they were the ones who didn't deliver my paperwork. It was a hard time. Gosh, it was so hard. I just recently got back to work a month ago.

But I mean, working with, I would say, specifically with Queer Crisis Response Unit the person that I work close the most with is E.V. And it had been – while it had been such a difficult time, and especially around that time too Justist's grandma was passing and she was living with us, so we were taking care of her at that time. And that, with not having money and Immigration asking for more and more fees, and I was like "How am I supposed to pay for these fees with no money?" But I think working with E.V., we had – that's definitely somebody who is trying to embody the values of – that we're trying to do with Queer Crisis Response Unit. So, flexibility with deadlines, flexibility with mental health in front of mind when we're doing work, being able to talk about the personal as we're doing the professional, because this work is professional and personal and all of that.

So, that was a really hard time. And that was – it was just really helpful to be – have such a great working relationship with somebody who is – who's just like "Yeah, you're a human being. You're a human being; I'm a human being. Let's treat each other with the kindness that we would like." And that's – and I mean, working with other folks who have been part of the Queer Crisis Response Unit, they've also had some difficult times. I can't speak to – I didn't work closely with them because I think they were checking in with E.V. But I know that they had had to kind of drop out because of personal reasons. But these are folks that we still reach out to and we hope come back.

I feel like I went on a tangent. What was the question? What was the question?

Interviewer: Yeah, it was just issues that you face personally and then also the response unit, that they face, other than the burnout and stuff that we discussed with that.

Danielle Kepeden: Yeah. Other issues too that we've faced. I guess, yeah, it's been consistency too. But it's kind of tied to the burnout as well. It's also been making sure that – trying, connecting meaningfully through Zoom. That's also been a little bit hard. And yeah, and not wanting to get people contaminated but wanting to see them in person as well. It's just – yeah, I think just the pandemic, and we've all been feeling – and for me personally, watching the news – and I had just been feeling really, really sensitive lately, especially because – I don't – well, especially because of seeing – me being an immigrant and what I've had to do as an immigrant to stay legal in this country, and then I see Cameroonians – so, currently in Cameroon we have a crisis going on and part – some part – in Cameroon we speak both French and English because we're colonized by the English and the French. And then, the part of Cameroon that speaks English, they want to separate and become their own state. So, there's been a lot of conflict because the French part doesn't want them to leave.

And then, folks who come here, a lot of Cameroonians have been asking for – the Department of Homeland Security has been asking Biden to give them – grant them temporary protection status so that they don't get deported and go back to Cameroon and get killed. But that's like – they've been asking for years. They literally were protesting in front of ICE Baltimore – I think it was last year and – at the end of last year and then at the beginning of this year, and even a month ago they were protesting at the White House. And obviously, nothing has happened. But it's just been so jarring to see how quickly Ukrainians were granted temporary protection status. It's like, yeah, we're all in a war. We're all in the trenches. We should all be getting this.

And then, I – and then, also the USCIS, which is the United States Immigration Services, they also were like "Yeah, if you're Ukrainian and your paperwork is expiring, don't worry about it," basically. And I was over here for five months with no money, unable to work. And I literally said – I called them so many times and explained to them how this was their error, that it was – it wasn't the United States Immigration Services' error but it was the United States Postal Service's error that – and they wouldn't even fathom the possibility of me being able to work with – and then, the University of Maryland just swiftly kicked me off. I'm like "Take off the Black Lives Matter that y'all have on..." Because – yeah. I mean, they were worrying about being audited and stuff but it's like this is clearly...

So, this is what I've had to do. This is what I think about. These are some of the issues, the additional obstacles that have come up with the – with working, because it affects my job when I'm crying about immigration and not being able to work. I can't focus on putting together cute events if I'm burned out. Making a poster about rest as resistance, it feels silly. But it's been – but I have felt a lot of support from E.V. and some of my coworkers. And it's been a little bit easier.

But I feel like as far as the Queer Crisis Response Unit, I think we just need to keep moving slowly, unfortunately. We have to move slowly, and that's just how we're going to build trust and how we're going to get people to stay and people invested in the process. Yeah.

Interviewer: Yeah. That's –

[Crosstalk]

Danielle Kepeden: I hope that answers that.

Interviewer: Yeah, no, it definitely does. That's insane, what you're going through. I'm so sorry you have to deal with that. I can't imagine.

So, I guess just with everything that's going on, maybe how you juggle your multiple roles and how you deal with those things in your day-to-day life?

Danielle Kepeden: I don't know. I mean, I'm clearly doing a slightly below average job because I missed our meeting last time. *[Laughs]*

I've been – but I mean, I've been – how am I able to juggle all of it? I don't know. If I didn't have – like I said, if I didn't – at my own job at the ROAR center... I mean, it's a nonprofit, so just imagine how that is. While it's a better – it's been better than what I've heard other people say about nonprofits – this is the first time I'm working at a nonprofit – I do feel like I've been – I'm encouraged to take time off. But when I do take time off it's like, oh my gosh, I'm the only one who does what I do. I'm the only one who's doing what I do. So, when I take the time off it's still there and more things have piled up on top. So, it never feels like time off.

So – but I'm able to juggle all three – I guess when I say all three, I guess my life, QCRU, and ROAR. I think because of my – well, E.V., who is always encouraging, asking me specifically, "What are you doing for rest?" and we try to put in a calendar times that

you don't want me to talk to you, like some days that you feel like you don't want me to talk to you about QCRU stuff. So, being intentional about naming your availability and capacity, I think, has been what's been kind of helping me attempt to juggle all of this. And then, my wife is so good at resting. She's so good at resting and relaxing, sleeping in. That's – she's so good at it.

So, honestly, it's so funny because I've felt a little jealous because my – I'm more – I get up – if I get up early, I'm not able to go back to sleep. I wake up pretty early, like at 6:00 AM, 7:00 and I'm not able to just go back to sleep. But I think Justist is so good at rest, me feeling jealous of her being so good at rest has forced me to also rest. So, I think that's what helped me balance all of it, forcing myself to rest through jealousy. And naming my capacity and remembering that I'm a human being, and if I drop something, it happened. I'm a human being. Yeah, I'm trying. Once I get it, once I do it successfully, I'll get back to you. Yeah.

Interviewer: Yeah. I mean, sometimes you just have to take it one day at a time, so I totally feel that. So, I guess with the response unit what is – what resources do you guys need to help alleviate some of those issues that you're facing?

Danielle Kepeden: I think, yeah, it would be having folks, community members, invested community members who are able to name their capacity and commit to some admin tasks. That would be super helpful if we had more admin team members who were a little bit more – able to be a little bit more consistent. That would be great. I mean, money too, of course. But I feel like I would – money would be awesome, but people – queer folks who want to join in and little by little we can chip at it and move this forward. Yeah, I think people is the biggest resource.

Interviewer: Yeah, I'm curious. Has your work or kind of the involvement within the Queer Crisis Response Unit, has it been intergenerational? Who are the kinds of people that you see? Is it young queer people or are there old community elders, et cetera, et cetera?

Danielle Kepeden: Right. Yeah. Oh, my gosh. Such a good question. So far it's only been folks around – I'm [*phone rings*] – oops, I'm sorry. I'm turning 28 this year and so far I feel like it's been around the 21 to maybe 35 age range. And that's something that I was definitely thinking about too with programming. I was thinking about how do we bring – having intergenerational conversations with queer folks

so we can learn from our elders? Yeah, so far it's really been just folks around our age. We haven't had a lot of different ages.

Interviewer: I guess, have you seen – I'm not so sure where I'm going with this question. It's like have you participated – I know I haven't really communicated a lot with the older generation in terms of their queer experiences – well, besides our last interviewer. But have you been part of events like that, kind of like – what do you see as differences? I'm trying to frame it. But the value in programming, I guess, for each kind of demographic? Sure.

Danielle Kepeden: You're going to have to repeat that for me.

Interviewer: Yeah. I'm trying to process it too. I guess I'm just interested in a bit more about kind of the kinds of programming, or even just the kind of importance in having that kind of intergenerational connection between – yeah.

Danielle Kepeden: Yeah. I mean, I think especially because of the pandemic and we've had to do more virtual stuff, I think that's also been what's been a big barrier with intergenerational conversations, because of the digital divide. But I mean, I – my dream, yes, specifically I would want, I would want us to be specifically learning more from Black and Brown and indigenous queer folks, older queer folks from their experiences, because I just feel like there's such a wealth of knowledge that we don't even tap into because we don't speak to older folks. And in addition, because we're so removed, I think what made me feel so bold in – I mean, I don't really feel like I'm that bold but I feel like people feel like I'm bold. But I think it's because of me having learned about history, our queer history, and what our elders have done, and seeing what they've been able to do, and being like "Oh, yeah, this is in me. I'm not going to look outside of myself because this is in me. Other queer people have done this, and they can do this." So, I think that's the biggest value of...

But also, it's having them learn from us too because then there's a lot of things that – I mean, I think – I just have this theory that a lot of – that some – not a lot – that some masc lesbians are actually – haven't had enough time to really deconstruct gender. I think some of them – yeah, I feel like some of them may – if they had the time to deconstruct gender, they may not identify the way that they identify. And I think we should have intergenerational conversations so that they can know them or see how some of their experiences are actually – the experience that they had when they were young, the feelings that they had that they had to kind of

stifle, it might be okay for you to explore those now because we have language and we have resources around those things that you might have felt back in the day that you didn't have language to talk about. So, I think it's a mutually beneficial – it's mutually beneficial for us to do that. And I really, really want to do that. Yeah.

Interviewer: So, just wrapping up a bit here, what do you think – or, I guess, what do you see the future of the Queer Crisis Response Unit as being?

Danielle Kepeden: Yeah. I mean, the big dream would be that maybe in ten years or something we have – in every neighborhood of Baltimore there's a team of folks who are trained in multiple crises de-escalation. And that within those neighborhoods there are networks of queer folks who have maybe – who are getting better at having conflict with folks, having more conflict that doesn't escalate to – talking about their boundaries. They're better at – they have safety plans that they've created and they've talked about it with their community members. And they've done that work within their little pods, but also we have folks in the community that are willing to respond if something got escalated. That's the biggest dream that we would push – oh, my gosh – *[side conversation about charger]*.

Sorry about that. I don't want it to die as we're talking. But – *[side conversation]* But yeah, so that would be the biggest dream.

But even a smaller dream for me would be that people know each other more, like neighbors know each other more, and that we're able to name our capacities, able to be in better conflict, and we're able to name our boundaries. And I feel like if people knew each other more, we could even have less – and if they knew how to, if they had those skills, we would have less instances that would escalate to having to call – *[side conversation]* – instances to call the police. *[Side conversation]* It's going to die, y'all. I'm sorry.

Interviewer: It's okay. Sorry.

Danielle Kepeden: But yeah. Yeah. So, that was the big dream and then the little dream. Which is still a very big dream. Yeah. So, I guess I just want people to realize that, oh, you actually don't need to call – when you're calling the police you actually don't need to do that, because they're not going to – they're going to come and write it down and leave. The people that we already call in moments of crisis are our friends. When my friends are feeling suicidal, they

call me. They don't call 911. So, why wouldn't we want to just build our skills and be better at that?

Interviewer 2: Yeah. I guess –

Interviewer 1: Yeah.

Interviewer 2: No, you can – I think we were going to ask literally the same question, so go ahead.

Interviewer 1: Okay. Cool. So, this question probably is pretty similar maybe in the answer that you give, but it's just what you see as the future of queer community care.

Danielle Kepeden: I think – I hope that the future of queer community care is more – is pushing more towards abolition, more towards deconstructing a lot of these structures that are limiting us in so many ways. I hope that the future of queer community care is anti-racist. And yeah, and is – it's not Western-centric. Yeah. And anti-carceral.

Interviewer 1: Okay. Yeah. I think those are all the questions that we had.

Interviewer 2: Yeah, do you have anything else that you wanted to add? Or are there any things that you wanted to talk about that we didn't really include in our conversation?

Danielle Kepeden: *[Volume drops drastically]* Oh, I guess one last thing that I wanted

Interviewer: Oh, wait. You're – I think we can't really hear you that well. Is the audio –?

Danielle Kepeden: Can you hear me?

Interviewer 2: Is the – I guess we can. Yeah, I guess – for some reason it's really muted my end, but I think it might just be my computer issue.

Interviewer 1: Yeah, it sounds sort of like you're far away a little bit, if that makes sense.

Danielle Kepeden: *[Volume is restored]* Really?

Interviewer 2: Okay. Now it's perfect.

Interviewer 1: Okay. That's perfect now.

Danielle Kepeden: Okay. Was it like that the whole time?

Interviewer: No, it literally was just those couple seconds, and I was like "Why does this sound so weird?" Okay. It's all good.

Danielle Kepeden: I guess, oh, another thing that I wanted to – one issue that I'm trying to work with is trying to make the Queer Crisis Response team also a little bit more diverse because I feel like Black folks are – have – well, this is my assumption, that Black folks have a harder time – like, we'll suss it out first, suss out something new first and see how it's going. But it's like right now the people that are – that seem to be coming more actively are White queer folks. And I feel like I don't want then other POCs to think that this is just a White space. But it's like "It's not going to be a White space if y'all show up, but you're not going to show up because you think it's a White space." So, it's like a catch-22 thing that I'm trying to work with too because this is for everyone. We don't want – this is for everyone in Baltimore and we want to center Black, indigenous, and other people of color – we don't – so, that's one thing that I'm also trying to think through. And I think it has to come with that community trust, building a good reputation.

What's another thing...?

Yeah. Thank you for this space and the time. This was fun. I hope I wasn't too all over the place.

Interviewer: No, no. You definitely weren't. This was – yeah, I think I speak for both of us when I say this was great. This was a great conversation, great story. Yeah, I personally really enjoyed it.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Danielle Kepeden: Yeah. Oh, also another thing I just remember too, another point of entrance in the queer community in Baltimore was also I used to go to these poetry parties. And while it wasn't explicitly queer I know there was a lot of Black queer people there, and that always felt like home. It felt cool. And these were hosted by Truth – her name is Truth Da Poet. It's like Da Truth Da Poet. Da Truth. She's cool. You should check her out. Yeah.

Interviewer: Yeah. I think we definitely have a lot of local events and media stuff to check out, so that's exciting. Yeah, I'd love to go to a film festival. It sounds fun.

Danielle Kepeden: Yes. It's mostly – we're going to have a 4/20 park hangout with queer joy, so – and we're going to be talking about rest, so please come.

Interviewer: Yes. I will definitely look into it. That sounds great. Very interesting. So, yeah, I think those are all the questions. Like we said before, we will send you the transcript when we're finished with it. And if there's anything you don't want to include, that's fine. Just make a note. Any corrections, we'll kind of highlight it in red or something so that you know where we're unsure in the transcript. The only other thing I can think of is just the consent form, whenever you –

[End of Audio]