

Oral History Interview: Renee McCoy

Interviewee: Renee McCoy

Interviewer: Monique Moultrie

Date: October 29, 2017

Monique M. My name is Monique Moultrie, and today is October 29, 2017, and I'm here with Rev. Dr. Renee McCoy. We're conducting an oral history to supplement the biographical statement that you've already given to LGBT-RAN that's already up on their website. So we're going to provide the future with more details. We'll begin early in life and then hit milestones along the way. Feel free to skip questions. Feel free to answer what you want out of a question, however you want to elaborate. If you want to go back to a question, if you thought of something as we're talking, feel free to do that. And so because of that we're going to start at the beginning. So I'd like to hear about your early life. What type of neighborhood did you grow up in? Was it in the Midwest?

Renee M. Well, I grew up in Detroit, Michigan. And, you know, back then, I was born in '51, and back then Detroit was pretty limited in terms of where you could live, so all the folks, you know, everybody lived where they lived, you know. My folks were from the South, from Georgia, and came up because of the cars, you know, came up because of the factory. I mean, they were, my dad, worked for Ford Motor Company. My mom was a stay at home mom much of the time. She went to school to be a

cosmetologist, you know. That's what we did back then. You know, the black middle class was you worked in the factory, you either were a beautician or an undertaker or a preacher, you know, or a school teacher, a little bit. But my mom was...so she had a little shop at the house. She taught cosmetology at one of the schools there. And my dad—they invested pretty heavily in real estate. You know, that was what we had. They just bought houses and rented them out to folks.

So I went to private school. Never went to public school. Everything was religion based in my life. You know, everything was church. My folks were Baptist, and we were Catholic, first Lutheran, then Catholic, just because that's what the schools were. You could go to a private Lutheran school or you could go to a private Catholic school. And they were more concerned with education than anything else. But it was always this sense of, God as central and our faith as central, that that was what got us through.

Monique M. Did your parents remain Catholic after you all were done with school?

Renee M. Well, you know what? They were Baptist Catholic, you know what I'm saying? Because, you know, we were, my brother and I were steeped in Catholicism, but my mom...they still maintained that link to the Baptist church. The Baptist was, the church was my grandma and my aunts and uncles. They built the church, you know, and they still stayed focused in that base. But we were...that was like the next step for getting some

stability and putting your kids on a road to progress, something different from what they had.

So we went to Catholic schools and we were steeped in Catholicism, but that extended family was still, it was sort of like still surrounded us with the Baptists. We went to church with my grandma from time to time, went to everything that the Baptist church had. But it was clear that the Baptist church was our cultural roots and our cultural foundation, but the Catholic church was what was going to plummet us out of the oppression that came from their history.

Monique M. So did you grow up with your extended family around, cousins?

Renee M. Oh, yeah. Oh, absolutely, absolutely. We...my grandma—my mother didn't cook, so my grandma cooked for all of us.

Monique M. Did your dad cook?

Renee M. My dad cooked, but he had property, so he took care of the properties and he worked at the plant, and he spent a lot of time. You know, he always had some kind of other job, other entrepreneurial thing going on. But yeah, my grandma. We all lived within a block of each other. We could walk to each other's house. We all had, most of the time we had dinner. And my grandma took care of my aunts and uncles and everybody. My grandma's house was like the central spot. And our parents, they brought them, one after another, up to Detroit, and then everybody chipped in and took care of my grandma's house, bought the house for my grandma and

my aunts. And they lived a couple doors down. You know, we all lived together. It was like a little compound there. But still they took care of us as we were kids. There was always a presence of family there.

Monique M. So what kind of family values did you have growing up?

Renee M. Oh, hard work. Work hard, don't cheat, don't steal, don't lie, don't hurt nobody, you know. Be fair and tell the truth...tell the truth about... Even if it meant a ass whipping you tell the truth about what it was. And that God is always there, and God always loves you, God is always available, God is always accessible to who you are, you know. And that we were loved. That we were loved. They didn't like us a whole lot most of the time, but that we were loved, that family was important, and we take care of family. And family, no matter how crazy family is, it's still who we are, and still what we do.

Monique M. Is the bulk of the family still in Detroit?

Renee M. Yeah. Yeah, those, you know, those that are still alive. But there's still... I have two sisters who are younger. I have a brother who lives in—my brother and I sort of grew up together and then my father and mother had two more later, so there's like two—there's my sisters who grew up together and then my brother and I grew up together. So there's four of us, but there's some difference in years.

But yeah, everybody's still... My brother's in California, but Detroit is still the home place, you know. And they do the same thing. They all live,

in each other's armpits. But there's, I mean, there's... I'm like the matriarch of the family, so there's no... Everybody else is pretty much, you know, all the older people have died. My brother and I are probably the oldest people left. We've got a few stragglers somewhere around.

Monique M. What did you do for fun growing up?

Renee M. You know, I was pretty much, in the church. I was a smart overachiever, so I came out of high school at 15 or 16. I was in college at 16. So I was pretty much an overachiever. But the Catholic church had quite a hold on us, you know. We stayed in the church. My folks, our friends were kids we went to school with. And that was that. You know, that was...and the family. It was all family, you spent time with your... You know, I was the youngest kid, pretty much, for a long time, and the only girl, so read a lot, wrote.

But pretty much church, you know, involvement in the church. The Catholic church had a lot of stuff, after school stuff. You know, helped out with family stuff. But everything was pretty much the family, pretty much what we'd do. Trying to think.

Civil rights was a big deal back then, so there was...we were involved in SNCC, you know, Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. Pretty much just raising money. We would stand outside, collect money for folks, and to fuel the Civil Rights Movement, send money to NAACP. I mean, Detroit was like the black Mecca when I was growing up, you

know. Black folks, you know, had more black homeowners than anywhere else. So it was the sense of stay close, stay close to the family, do your best in school. Do your best. Get a job. Help the family. Don't embarrass folks, you know, don't bring no shame. And, do what you do.

We did, you know, family things. We did picnics, cookouts and all the time. There was always something going on at my grandma's. It was always something. It was always about the family. And I was kind of...you know, I was a smart kid, so I didn't...I kind of stayed where I stayed.

And I was different. You know, I was a... I wasn't into boys and all that other stuff, but I was the youngest girl. I was the youngest kid for the longest, and everybody else was boys, so they didn't really care long as I didn't get in any trouble and didn't. But, we did things. We had, you know, dances at the school, dances at the whatever. My brother and I were kind of close.

Monique M. So what interests you in being willing to stand out on the street for SNCC or to raise money? What was the impetus behind why your parents thought that was a—

Renee M. You know what? They would tell us stories about growing up in the South. And my mom would never go back. Said she was never going back down there. And then my grandma would tell us stories. I remember one time—my grandma was a day worker, and it was commonplace—you

know, I was a girl, so when I reached a certain age it was my job to go with her, to help her out 'cause she was getting older, and day work was just... You know, my aunts, they worked in a hotel. They were housekeepers and stuff. So it was this rite of passage thing... But they would tell us the stories about how they would stand up and have to iron white people's clothes, and clean white people's houses, and cook white people's foods and all of that, and how they would be treated like garbage. And my grandma, sometimes they would give her these clothes to bring home to us. I mean, we didn't need those clothes, you know, we were... But they would give her these clothes.

So there was this one Saturday, and it was my time to go help my grandma, Mama T, go help her, clean these people's houses. We took a bus out as far as the bus would go and then the white folks would pick up 'cause the bus would only take us so far. And they picked us up. And my grandma went and did her thing. They called her Miss T. I was there to help, and I was supposed to be washing windows or something, cleaning this kid's room or whatever.

But they had monkeys. They had these two monkeys in a cage, right, in the garage. And my grandma said, well, you know, I got to clean the monkeys' cage. I said okay, that's no... You got to do what? And my grandma, you know, she was old at that time. I mean, old for that time. And I was livid. I was absolutely livid. I said, you know, I'll go along with this 'cause this is what you do, but I can't see you cleaning this monkey's

cage. They got a monkey? Let them clean their own monkey cage. And I was—*[laughs]*—I was rather vocal about it. My grandma said okay, okay, okay, okay. And she didn't clean the monkey's cage that day, and I don't know what went on with her and the people who owned the house, but I was obviously upset, and we got through the day. And that was the only day that I did that. *[Laughs.]* My rite of passage was rather brief.

Monique M. *[Laughs.]*

Renee M. But my grandma, she understood. And I said I can't do this, and you can't do this. And, we talked about it. But it was the height of indignity for me. And I think that it was important for them, but it was that kind of family, too. It was the kind of family where you could say this ain't right. And I think that because of that, I knew that there was something we had to do to make a difference.

I would come home from school, and we had one of the few TVs, one of the first TVs on the block. And I would come home from school and I would see kids like me, you know, people like my parents, and they were turning fuckin' hoses on them, you know. And that was in real time. You know, dogs. I love dogs, but there were dogs. They were sic'ing dogs on people. And that was what I saw at home, so what else could I—how could I not be involved in that? How could I not...?

And in the meantime I'm going to school every day. You know, we had religion every day. We went to church every day. And it just seemed

consistent with what I believed in, that this ain't right, and that we have a responsibility. You know, Jesus did it. Jesus said enough. And that in order to be a good Christian, that for me it meant saying enough. I see what's going on and enough. And God is involved in this, that, that God don't think it's right, enough.

And my parents were supportive of that. They were...you know, I look back and I really wanted them to be more involved, but they were busy. They were doing the best they could with what they had to make sure that we had everything that we wanted. I can't think of anything in my life that I wanted that I didn't have. Certainly nothing that I needed that I didn't have. Maybe a few things that I wanted. But I got most of what I wanted and everything I needed. And they were busy doing that, so they couldn't be there.

And the church was different then, too. The church was saying this is what you do, this is what Jesus did. So it just meant that's what we did. You know, I couldn't go down South and do the freedom marches. I was too young. But I could do, we could get together and collect stuff. We could do. And I was always do what you can, do what you can.

Monique M. You mentioned part of the work of SNCC, but in the biographical sketch it also talked about you working with Catholics in Action at the same time.

Renee M. Yeah.

Monique M. And you mentioned just now the church giving a vocal voice, that this is what Christ is calling. Can you talk a bit about how that moral grounding was useful, not useful, for who you became as an adult?

Renee M. Oh, it was everything, everything. It just, you know, when I was in—so you think like Black Catholics in Action and stuff like that, I was high school, first couple years of college, even though I was a little younger. But the bottom line is that liberation, freedom, is your right. And so again the church said, you know, real simple. Life changes when you feed the hungry, clothe the naked, house the homeless. When you take care of each other, life changes. And if God calls you into that, do that thing.

So about my senior year of high school—I never knew that there were people walking distance from the school where I went that didn't have food or that were living... And we did stuff. You know, we always collected food for the poor. I never knew who the poor were, right? So we collected food and all that stuff. And I graduated from high school in '67, so that year before my senior year was time for us to deliver the baskets. And I didn't know. My parents picked us up from school and brought us, you know, and always took us where... But we went for a walk to deliver the food, me and the nuns and us. And I saw people who just didn't have enough to eat, and kids that didn't have clothes, and all of that.

And I realized that it wasn't the South, that Detroit was just up South, you know, that it wasn't this other foreign land that my parents had escaped

from to come, but that it was right here, it was right there with us. And so that moral grounding that was philosophical became very real. And, you know, that coming North didn't set us free. That wasn't when we got free. It wasn't that the black folks in the South were... So it was that. I think that that...and it just made sense, that if I believed in God and if I loved God, and if my faith was real, then I had to do something more.

And then the riots happened in 1967, right after I graduated from high school. And that was, phew, everything, you know. That was—everything exploded. My parents were the kind of people that said if you go to school, do your best in school, learn to read, learn to write, learn to talk better, you know, all of that, then the world was going to open up, and it didn't. It was... And you don't lie to my family, you know? But that was that, you know. That was...the start of that, this whole sense of civil rights and civil justice and human rights. And you do what you can do to make things change. Martin Luther King was doing, you know. It was like we were all going to do. We were going to do. We were going to survive this thing. It wasn't about changing racism, it was about surviving and thriving in the midst of it.

Monique M. So to chart for the reader and audio listener post this point, you mentioned you started college at 16. Where did you go?

Renee M. Wayne State in Detroit. Wayne State University.

Monique M. That's also where you ended back up at.

Renee M. Yeah. They let me back in. Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Monique M. Okay. And what was that experience like at Wayne State?

Renee M. Whew. It was...I mean, I came from a small private school into a huge university. I was younger than everybody. But I was, again, the Newman Club, you know, the Catholic club on...Catholic university club. That was that. It was '67, the riots, everything. It was exploding. And I was also, it was that time of make love, not war kind of thing. Sex was alive. And I wasn't that much into, you know, into being sexually active as I was trying to figure out a sexual label. And lesbian wasn't one of them, but it was... Also, you know, I knew I was... I dated guys, but I was a good Catholic girl, and they said don't sleep with men. Not a problem.

Monique M. [*Laughs.*]

Renee M. Don't give it up. Not a problem. Worked for me. Long as they paid for the, you know, paid for the movie it was fine. And so it wasn't that big a deal. Until I got in college, and everybody was doing everybody else, and they're talking about sex, and abortion, and you know. But they weren't talking about sexuality, but they were talking about stuff.

But I knew at that point—at that point I was beginning to, you know, I had a few crushes on women. I snuck into a few gay bars downtown, and seen men and women with each other, doing stuff. But I just thought I was just a freak, just something was wrong, but that it would work itself out later on.

Monique M. And how did that, at that time, gel with your Catholic indoctrination?

Renee M. Well, I think the first time I kissed a woman and sort of made out it was conflicting. The thing was the church—in the black community everybody...it wasn't like you had the gay kids that found out they were gay and went to New York. If you were gay you were there. And the only people that we knew, that I knew that was really funny—we didn't use the word gay, but we'd call everybody was "funny." You know, so-and-so is funny. And my mom had a shop, so the funny folks came there, and everybody was... And the only thing I ever heard was my dad say don't mess with sissies, 'cause they'll hurt you. That was to my brother. My brother and them were harassing some gay guys, you know, some drag queens, and my father stopped them and said they will cut you. So that was my education on gay sexuality.

There was a neighbor who—but they were all men—that was arrested for molesting boys, that kind of stuff. So it was never anything positive. But in the black community it wasn't like you could move, so everything was there. We had the really effeminate men. My aunt worked at...she had a friend named Bertha who was funny. And, they talked about her. But it wasn't a bad kind of thing, it was just...they just talked about everybody. You know, they talked about Johnny next door who got drunk, and so-and-so down the street who beat his wife. But it wasn't...it was just that...

And my sense was that if you...what they talked about were the bad things. But if they did anything good, like Bertha, she was cool 'cause she worked with my Aunt Millie and they, you know. But they knew she was funny, so... But that wasn't...that didn't...it wasn't that big a deal. It wasn't that much a part of... Then there were the queens in the choir, you know, the gay men in the choir, and they talked about them. But they were just part of the community. That was...they're part of the community. They didn't want to throw them out or nothing. I didn't grow up with that bad thing.

The Catholic church wasn't really talking about anything. They were, Black Catholics in Action, they were trying to figure out, how to deal with race, and sexuality wasn't on the table back then at all. That was just not something that they talked about. Abortion—

Monique M. So where did the conflict come from, then, when you first kissed a girl?

Renee M. You know, I don't know. It felt good, but there wasn't...I didn't have any role models. I didn't have any systems in place. I didn't know what to do then. I was... And I didn't, you know, there was no conversation. After the riots started up, I was in college at the time, and I got some friends of mine together from the Newman Center and we approached our church. And they had a building on the property that they weren't using. It used to be our credit union building. And so my friends from the Newman Center and I, I asked the church if we could have the building.

We had talked to kids in the neighborhood and found that one of the reasons was that they didn't have any outlets, so we raised some money, and they gave us a building, and we raised some money, and we got the building fixed to turn into a youth center for kids in the neighborhood. And part of the youth center was...one of the churches had a RV that they would... The riots set off some made a lot of church people accountable, Catholic church folks, held them accountable. So they would go around and they would do health things, provide health services on this RV that was set up like a clinic. This was like 1968, '69.

And I was sitting on this thing, and down the alley there, there was this woman dressed like a man with another woman, and they were like a couple. And they came to the center. And they were just kids like I was, I guess. Well, not much younger than I was. But they were in high school or they had quit school. And that was the first time I had ever seen what they call bulldaggers, you know. And I didn't know what to do. I was terrified because I didn't want to be either one of them, you know what I mean? I wasn't going to. This girl was, I mean, like bad ass—clothes, too, everything, you know. But I knew I didn't want to be a guy.

And so I just went on a mission to find out who these people were, 'cause I was terrified. So I spent time with them. I was still going to school. I would spend my time with them, and I would hang out with them at the center. And they taught me how to play ping pong, and they taught me how to cuss, like the right way. Taught me how to say motherfucker.

Monique M. [Laughs.] Good...

Renee M. Yeah. Motherfucker, you know. Son of a bitch, you know. So I had, they honed my linguistic skills, and really, really taught me a lot. But I met, drag queens that I didn't know, I...I didn't even know. I couldn't tell the difference, so I was a mess. But that was my initiation into what was the gay community. But I didn't know... I knew I wasn't that. But I also knew that that was all right, that's who she was. And there was a bunch of them. And through that I found my first girlfriend. But, it was either butch or femme, or bulldagger or stud back then. Well, they still do. But I, I knew that wasn't me, but, that was what it was. And, I would...I always worked. I quit school and went to work and got in a relationship, all of that.

Monique M. So all of this is before moving to New York?

Renee M. Yeah, this was, you know, this was all before doing any kind of gay activism, The most I ever thought was, you know, certainly black stuff, but, you know, racial stuff, but... And even then, if you were coming out to—I had coming out to my parents and all of that stuff. 'Cause as soon as I found out I was gay, I was like alrighty then. You know, we're going to have to deal with this. My parents, they did their typical, oh, what did I do wrong? Oh, my! All of that.

But the activism piece was for me it was always about race. And the more I came out, the more I realized that as a black lesbian, I had another dimension of racial oppression, you know...but like just real berserk, you

know, like oh yeah, hell, you're not going to do this. This is another level of activism. But I think my faith journey was certainly grounded in race more than sexuality, but—

[*Unrelated interruption.*]

Renee M. See, white folks see two black folks together and they just feel they can walk in.

Monique M. I know.

Renee M. You know?

Monique M. Yes. That happened in the first interview as well.

Renee M. We just got the answers. You know, we certainly know where to find other white folks. You know what I mean?

Monique M. That would be...

Renee M. Yeah.

Monique M. We'll make sure we cut that out of this.

Renee M. Oh, no, leave that in.

Monique M. [*Laughs.*]

Renee M. Leave that in. Interrupted by white folks again.

Monique M. [*Laughs.*]

Renee M. Shit.

Monique M. That is the story of my life. I work at a predominantly black school that is run by a white administration, so...

Renee M. At any rate.

Monique M. We were talking... Let's move to the move to New York, and what shifted you in that direction. Why New York, of all places?

Renee M. Oh, well, I was, you know, once I started with MCC, and that was like '76, and I found MCC, and we started with... You know, MCC was...the bars were racist, and... But MCC gave me the kind of institutional grounding...We didn't know what to do about the stuff that black folks were facing in the bars. And then MCC. And then I realized that every...that it just made sense to organize from...a church foundation, that that was what I knew. The civil rights movement had come out of the church, so it just made sense that if we were going to do anything gay or lesbian, that it would be grounded in that faith. That just...it just flowed for me. New York—

Monique M. So let me ask, before you go there, then, so walk us through leaving the Catholic church and ending up in the MCC, because I assumed that happened in New York.

Renee M. Oh, no, no, no, no, no. I was still in Detroit. I didn't go to New York till '77, '78, around in there—'78. No. I stayed involved in the church, and

then I just stopped going anywhere. I stopped going to any church. I looked at...so there were a lot of gays in churches like Church of God in Christ, but the Holy Ghost scared me.

Monique M. *[Laughs.]*

Renee M. Shew.

Monique M. That will be the quote.

Renee M. The Holy Ghost, girl, no, hm-mmm. *[Laughs.]* You know, the Holy Spirit I was raised with, but the Holy Ghost got me. And all the gay folks was...they was in the Holy Ghost churches, you know. And my mom, she played piano for a Apostolic church at one point, you know, just to make a little extra money. But no. Baptist, the Holy Ghost didn't come to the Baptist church, either.

Monique M. *[Laughs.]*

Renee M. You know? So... But I couldn't... The Catholic church was beginning to say negative things about gay folks, so I figured that was just them, and they'd get over it, you know. It didn't have anything to do with God. It had to do with the church and that institution. And so I didn't go to church for a while.

This girl and I had hooked up in what was then one of the Church of God Pentecostal churches, and I tried to go to church with her a few times, but it meant you had to put on a dress, and I wasn't doing that. And I did that

one time and the Holy Ghost came and scared me...it was just too much. It was too much. So I would just pick her up at church.

And I was out in the bars one night hanging out, and MCC was doing a bar ministry. And I said okay, you know, I'll go see this church. And I lived in Pontiac, which is like, half an hour from Detroit. And I would go to my family's house every, my mom's every Sunday and wash my car. You know, that's what we'd do. You washed your car. You know, I'd go wash my car and stuff. And so I went, and washed my car, had some food and stuff, and church was at night. So I was on my way back and said I'll stop by, see what, you know, find me a good Christian woman. And that was pretty much my attitude, is they're gay folks, there must be girls.

So I went and it was real church, you know. They had gone on a—and MCC was this ecumenical vibe, you know, so it wasn't...a piece of it was familiar. And I realized that they were...they had this thing about inclusivity. And they liked the Catholic church...Said everybody's welcome. But I was, you know, I met this wall of racism there. So you meet a wall, if it's in your way, you knock it down. And that was what it was, that God was bigger than the wall....

And God was always bigger than whatever barrier came into my life. God was bigger than racism, God was bigger than sexism, God was bigger than homophobia. So I started out as a deacon there. And that's where I started doing stuff with the racism committee. They had a racism committee in

MCC that wasn't doing anything, so I said okay, I'll take this on. And then we just went from there.

And then I decided that, you know, once again, the church, about that same time a group of people in Baltimore and D.C. were talking about a national coalition for—at the time it was National Coalition of Black Lesbians and Gays. It was the Third World Coalition of Lesbians and Gays, I guess. And so they were doing some organizing. They were looking to be national, so I joined their board and became one of the founding members of what eventually became National Coalition for Black Lesbians and Gays. And started a little group in Detroit. And at the time they had a group in Detroit, and Baltimore, and D.C.

Nancy Wilson was a pastor at that time and she was leaving. And I was student clergy. I decided that I was going to be clergy. And I wanted to learn more about life. You know, Detroit was, it was just...my life had been just really not, you know. I didn't know nothing. So that's why I went to Detroit [CORRECTION: New York]. The pastor there, Karen Zeigler was the pastor at the time. And I needed a pastor that was going to sort of help me learn more about doing ministry. And that's how I ended up in New York. And I was credentialed out of the church in New York. But I left Detroit because I needed a little more direction, and I wanted to learn more. I needed to get out of Detroit.

Monique M. Okay. So what year or time frame did you heed the call to ministry?

Renee M. Probably '76. So I started out as a deacon, and then went into student clergy. And then I was credentialed, I became licensed in New York and started Harlem MCC in 1981.

Monique M. So let's talk a bit about the Harlem MCC. That was your first church and the first church plant. Were you bivocational at that point or were you in full-time ministry?

Renee M. I'm black. *[Laughs.]*

Monique M. *[Laughs.]* Well...

Renee M. I had a job!

Monique M. *[Laughs.]* For the record, can you tell us what your job was in addition to—

Renee M. For the record, I didn't have...I hadn't finished college, so I did...I worked for Planned Parenthood in the—no, no—in a thrift shop and did whatever I could do to get money so I could...I did some rehab work up in Harlem. I did some odd jobs. I did some writing for some old rich lady out in, up in—but I did whatever I could to pay the rent, you know. And start the church. But I didn't have... I had moved from Detroit so I didn't have a lot of... And I didn't have a college degree, so I didn't have a lot to work with. But I did whatever I could to survive. And that was, I mean, that's what we did.

People, you know, we all lived in a, shared a brownstone... Then I was in relationships. We all, everybody pitched in to get the rent done, the rent taken. But Harlem MCC was because we needed something that was governed by black people, by black LGBT people, and that reflected our culture and our lifestyle. And MCC didn't have anything like that. So we started Harlem MCC.

Eventually, when I started the church, I was working as a—which, the job I had until I—I worked with homeless women. I worked with homeless mentally ill women in midtown Manhattan. And that was full-time with benefits. That was the job that paid the rent for real. And I worked there for seven years with the chronically mentally ill. I had a small case load of chronically mentally ill homeless women. And I worked to get them to a point where they could be housed, at a 24 hour shelter. I was there. And I worked in the community to try and locate housing that they could...people that would take them.

And then I did the on the streets ministry with substance abusers and folks in Harlem and with the church. The same time that we started the church, HIV hit, so it was a street ministry for real. I was at MCC New York and Harlem MCC grew out of MCC New York. But also had started a black gay group in New York. It was actually third world. It was called the New York Coalition of Third World Lesbians and Gays 'cause it was black and Hispanic. So we did that. And we were a chapter of NCBLG. So I still

kept the activism stuff going on. And then started the church. Just kind of grew out of all of that work. And did HIV stuff.

Monique M. So that was one of my next questions, was sort of the move you made career-wise from working on the ground from the church perspective to doing that as a career path, working with those persons living and unfortunately dying with AIDS. How did you balance the social justice cause? Was it your faith pushed you into that direction or it was a job?

Renee M. No, it was never a job. It was, you know, it was what you do. People were dying. This strange disease hit, and my friends were dying. You know, it wasn't, it was, NCBLG was national at that point. We had groups around the country. We had the Detroit Coalition. People were dying out of there. We had the New York Coalition, and people were dying. And my job as a pastor has always been to protect life. So there was no inconsistency. I was working with homeless women, and HIV was there as well.

Before I started the church, and I guess it all kind of mashes together, 'cause I was doing the church, I was doing the Coalition, and I was working at the shelter, you know. We were...the Olivieri Center was right like two blocks from Madison Square Garden, so that was what my life was. What else do you do when people are dying? And people in my church were getting this disease. We were the only black church really that was dealing with gay stuff. So I look out—I mean, we never got really big, you know. But folks knew that that was what I did. And so when folks

were dying, and I lived in Harlem, and I could see people dying, I did a lot of work with substance abusers on the streets of Harlem.

And whether they came to the church or not, they knew what I did, so they would call and I would do what I needed to do... So it was never—I mean, it wasn't a career path. It was just ministry... Yeah, I mean, I worked at the center for homeless women. That was what paid the rent. But HIV stuff, people were dying.

Monique M. To tag onto that, HOPES, the organization.

Renee M. Oh, that was Detroit.

Monique M. That you spawned as a secular organization. My interest is how you were balancing religious activism, social activism and what was the moral grounding or the impetus for you to do the work here in this arena, but the work there in the religious arena, or the work here with the Department of Health?

Renee M. There were no differences. There was no... I didn't...I was who I was. When I went back to Detroit after I went to D.C. and did NCBLG, and then I got really sick and I couldn't, so I needed to be home. So NCBLG moved their headquarters to Detroit. And that's when I started Full Truth Fellowship Church. HIV was, at that point AIDS was *phshew*. You know, we're talking 1988. So in 1988, AIDS was just taking over everything, you know, everybody's life. And I had been able to do some stuff in New York and in D.C., but I always felt that I didn't do anything at home.

So people came to me and they said, well we really want a church here. MCC was still there. It was still white, and it was in the suburbs, and folks said, well, let's do... So I, okay, let's do this. But we couldn't get any money...so they weren't funding religious organizations to provide services for HIV and AIDS. So what I did was started a separate nonprofit within the church, so there was no difference. You know, there was no barriers, no boundaries there. Well, I guess there were theoretically, but I was still...I never said I wasn't who I was. I never said..

The people from the church started HOPES. It was a way to get some resources into the community by having a... And so we had a separate office...We had separate books. We had separate, you know, everything was separate but the people... And I worked for the health department at the time. I still didn't have an education, though. I didn't have a degree. But I had experience. So I worked at...interestingly, the job that I had when I left Detroit was running the program with where I started, at HIV. I was director of the program. When I started out I was a health educator.

But it just...I mean, God just put the right people in my path as well, folks who took a chance on me, who said well, you know, if you're willing to be this out and this open, and this much in our faces... And this is Detroit. It's my family. It was my home... And I think I was able to do that because it was my family, it was my home. And I could always say this is us, these are our people, these are your children. And there's something about Detroit that does that. But I was always out, always out.

And the health department didn't want to deal with HIV and AIDS at all. Nobody did back then. But because I was a minister, I could do—and we had the church, then I was on call at hospice, and I was on call. You know, I could go where other ministers didn't want to go. So they could call me and they're off the hook, 'cause they done took it to the Lord...

But the administrators of the health department, some people in political power in Detroit were just...they were just magnificent. They gave me the kind of support that I needed. I mean, they even let me go back to school on their dime, pretty much. I had to pay for it, but my classes, you know, they considered that, my boss at the time said, well, this is part of your job. So I was able to go back and finish undergraduate and get a master's, and get a Ph.D. But it was because of that.

I think that so often we get so afraid to take that risk. But God was always faithful to me through it all. Through it all. God's faithfulness never let me down, that no matter how out I was, God always said I got you, and always demonstrated that. Always. Always demonstrated that. And people trusted me, and worked with me, and gave me a lot of support not because of who I was, but because of whose I was, because God used me to demonstrate faithfulness. And that has been consistent throughout, throughout this thing of God's faithfulness, that no matter what, God said I got you. And that church is 28 years old now.

Monique M. I saw.

Renee M. It's a mess, but we're working it out.

Monique M. I read an article about you going back for the anniversary.

Renee M. Yeah, a little messy. It's a little messy now, you know, black folks—

Monique M. What black church isn't? [*Laughs.*]

Renee M. Mmm. But we're getting it fixed, you know.

Monique M. I noticed that the church at some point aligned with Unity. I did one of my very first interviews for LGBT-RAN was with Dr. Zachary Jones, and I'm always curious, specifically for those who have done work and who align with MCC when they've gone over to Unity, when they've gone back, I'm always curious about the dynamics there, what people get out of it.

Because certainly I know MCC's structure historically has been very white, and culture-wise has been very white, so Unity offers an alternative to that, but it also, MCC is much more resource rich, and sometimes—

Renee M. No, MCC—I mean, yeah, you're right. Originally, Unity was Carl's church. Then Full Truth was already in existence, so we came on as part of Unity. And then New York. So Unity was me, Carl, and Zach. That was, you know, we were...it was the two elders and the bishop. And that was when Unity became national, was when Detroit joined Unity. The reason that Full Truth became with Unity was that the black folks in MCC weren't really supportive of it. They felt like we were rocking the boat and that I should have made the church MCC. I said, well now, we don't know

who we want to be. At the time it was just an independent work, and it started as a Bible study.

And MCC didn't have a way to bring a church like that in. MCC had a bad reputation in the black community in Detroit, and they didn't want to do it. And MCC said, well, either we're going to fight this out or not. And I didn't get the support—well, it's not like I didn't get support from blacks. I got chastised by some of the blacks that were in power and...that didn't make no sense to me. So I said, well, okay, we, you know, here's Carl over here trying to build a national movement, so let's hook up there and do that. So at that point it was Detroit, New York was just started, but Detroit was established, L.A., and then... So Full Truth was key to starting Unity.

I left. I was just tired of burying the dead. I couldn't do it anymore, you know. And I would stand up every Sunday and tell people to follow your dream..and embrace the vision you have for yourself. I always wanted to be a college professor. And so I was... My last year there I was primary caregiver for like 52 people. I was on call at the AIDS hospital. These were 52 people nobody wanted, nobody would care for, and our church sort of stood in the gap for them. And I just couldn't do it anymore. And I had just finished a master's program. So I said well, this is something I want to do. So I called myself resigning, I mean, retiring from ministry. And then okay, tell me you can't do that, but you can't.

And I took a...my mother had Alzheimer's. It was the beginning stages of Alzheimer's. And I left, and I retired. The church was still Unity. But something happens when we don't demand quality...I think one of the things that happened with Full Truth was...God calls you, and we so come out of that tradition of God called me to preach, God should also call you to go to seminary, you know what I mean?

Monique M. Yes. Preparation.

Renee M. Yeah.

Monique M. Comes at the same time.

Renee M. Right, you know. And MCC did the group, you know, and there was...and made the stipulation that this is what it takes. We should have been...I always thought that church should have gone to the seminaries and got the young brothers and sisters who, you know, who were in seminary, but it was God called me and the Holy Ghost again, and the Holy Ghost. And the Holy Ghost told me. But the Holy Ghost should have sent you to seminary, you know, so...so they left. But after...but I think it was about the lack of preparation, the lack of an education.

And people will criticize me, but I went back to school because I had done everything I could with what I had. I had done a lot. But I realized that what an education does in the trenches is that it enables you to crawl out of the trenches and begin to throw those tools back into those trenches so other people can crawl out. If you don't get that basic education, you are

unable to throw back the tools that will keep people from...they can grab hold, but the tools won't grab hold, you know? And so for me going back to school was my way of getting the—I did everything I knew to do, and I was...but I needed to be able to throw those tools back into the trenches.

And if we're serious about ministry, that's what we do. We get the tools and we help people not so that they can just say hallelujah and, you know, on Sunday, but so that they can have better lives, fuller lives, richer lives, so that they can raise families, so that they can have quality lives. It's not just about finding out you're all right 'cause you're gay. Shit, you knew that. Now what?

Monique M. Now what?

Renee M. You know, do you have a retirement plan? You know what I'm saying? Are you paying Social Security? You know, those are the kinds of questions we needed to be asking. Do you have a 401K, 401, what is it, B3, whatever the hell the preachers have, you know? You're out here—you know, we're getting married. Can you buy a house? You know? Anyway.

Monique M. So why a degree in medical anthropology, though?

Renee M. Oh, man, I love—well, I love anthropology. Anthropology is about meaning. It's about meaning. So for me culture is...it's messy, and it's orderly at the same time. So if we understand what things mean within

certain cultural contexts, then we can design the kinds of tools that people need to improve the human condition, right?

Medical anthropology is because I was in HIV and AIDS. I mean, it wasn't so much... But medical anthropology looks at the role of culture in human suffering, and so for me it was HIV and AIDS, but it actually started out with death and dying. I was burying the dead and trying to understand what death meant, and what...but there was no money in it. There was more money—

Monique M. There is now.

Renee M. Yeah.

Monique M. You were before the curve.

Renee M. I know. I wish. I wish I was, you know, still out there. But I could...I got a little fellowship, and I got money to do HIV and AIDS. And it was HIV and AIDS. I didn't want to do HIV and AIDS. I really wanted to do death and dying. But it's all medical anthropology, and it's all about what does it mean. You know, anthropology is meaning. What does this thing mean to you, and how can we take this thing, what it means, and shape a better future. What does God mean? And if we can understand what God means, then we can shape a better relationship...

Monique M. So the last set of questions I want to ask are sort of overview questions, so you can choose to answer from—

Renee M. Are we through yet?

Monique M. We're almost through.

Renee M. All right. Because we just said six, seven. How long have I been talking?

Monique M. Hour and ten minutes.

Renee M. All right, you got a few more. All right.

Monique M. Got a few more questions. They're overview questions. You can pick and choose. So looking through your bio what struck me was your religious eclectic nature.

Renee M. What is that?

Monique M. So from the last bio I saw, you were at a UCC church. You started out at a Catholic church. You were in Unity at some point. You were in—

Renee M. I'm trying to get them all together. I'm trying to bring them all, you know what I'm saying? I'm trying to...let them know. The same God, you know, the same God, different songs.

Monique M. Yes. So that's actually the answer to my question then. I was curious if there was a...

Renee M. No. It was...the reason is I'm in Seattle and there was no MCC. There was only one MCC. So God is bigger than denomination for me. But the MCC church that I found when I went to Seattle was both MCC and UCC. They were dually aligned. So that's where the UCC came in.

Monique M. Okay.

Renee M. So it was a small church in Tacoma. I went to the MCC in Seattle, me and a little white guy. Our relationship didn't work, 'cause he was a little racist son of a bitch, and he didn't like it when I told him that. He just didn't. He just couldn't get it.

Monique M. [*Laughs.*]

Renee M. So...but then the only other church—Washington is not a well churched state—but the only other church was in Tacoma, and it was dually aligned. And then I visited another church that was the independent church and met a pastor that was UCC of the church, the East Gate, where I go now, and she was a dyke, you know, and I was just... They were collecting toilet paper. So it made sense to me. And she needed some support, so I started going there. And it was such a warm and welcoming church, small, and I just stayed.

You know, the Tacoma church was struggling, and it closed, so I needed a church home. And that's how I ended up UCC. I don't know what the UCC people do... They needed a pastor. The pastor left and they needed an interim pastor, so they asked me if I would serve. But it's really that simple... But it's all God, you know. All God all the time.

Monique M. So I wanted to ask about your wife. She hadn't come up in the conversation yet, so...

Renee M. Yeah, I don't try to talk about her.

Monique M. That's perfectly okay.

Renee M. No, I'm just kidding. Well, what do you want to know?

Monique M. Whatever you want to share.

Renee M. Oh, it's so wonderful—

Monique M. You found a woman in Washington, of all places?

Renee M. Oh, yeah, yeah. Oh, no. We've got a great story. We've got a great story. I was...oh, she's going to kill me. Oh no, she's not. I don't care. Because I ain't going nowhere. We were...when I was in New York, I was much cuter than I am now, but I was...I was doing a workshop at a women in ministries conference. So we're talking maybe 30 years ago, right? Probably 30. Yeah, probably 30, 20, yeah. And I was doing a workshop on sexuality, and it was MCC...do that. And she was there at this workshop. And she's a Baptist minister, right, so she was struggling with some issues of faith. And she talked to me about them and she says..this is what's going on. I said, well, let me help you with that. So we ended up in a relationship. I was in New York, she was in Seattle. She was assistant pastor at Mount Zion Baptist Church at the time. And so we had this long distance relationship. So I was like her first, but I was cute, and...well, I was active. And it didn't work 'cause I was—

Monique M. Faithful as your options, yes.

Renee M. Yes. I was doing what I could to help them out. And so we broke up. We were together about a year, you know, but going back and forth, Seattle and New York. A few years ago, when Obama was running for... We stayed in touch, just barely over the years. Her pastor did an op-ed when all the Jeremiah Wright stuff was going on. And at that point I was director of HIV and AIDS programs for the whole Detroit metropolitan area, and I was out. But it's hard to be out. Certainly, man, oh man, because the...you know, the church goes for you. They come at you... And I wasn't in a relationship, and I didn't have a whole lot of support. And you do this stuff and then you go home, and you're like...I don't know. And someone sent me a copy of this article. It was Easter and I had just done this thing on HIV to this mass of preachers, and, you know, I call them like I see them. I told them what I thought of them, Mark 8, and I said, you know, you do all this stuff, and, you know, Matthew 28, 25 says, you know, in the last days, you know, that bit about the sheep on the right and the sheep on the left—did you feed them, did you clothe them. And I said nowhere...I said God says...Jesus was really careful, and nowhere have I been able to find an exception clause so that you're not going to be able to say, well I didn't because they were gay or because they had HIV, that God's not going to sit there and believe that. Anyway, I decided to do this whole piece on that.

And the little preacher that's church it was in, Baptist church, I had to go get my coat. It was in his office. And he came in to help me get my coat.

He was an old guy. I mean, he'd been at this church like 40, 50 years, an old guy. And he just broke down crying. He said I'm so sorry. He said you're right. He said we have failed you. And to see this old guy cry... And I went home alone. You know, I didn't know what to do with that... I didn't have anyplace to put it. 'Cause I didn't have that kind of support. You know, I had a lot of support, but I didn't have any kind of personal support.

So I sat down and I wrote Patricia an email, and I sent it to the church. I said I don't know where you are and stuff, but I just needed a prayer partner. I needed a prayer partner, you know. And I reached out to her that night...and said... I figured she was still in a relationship because she's a good girl. She's one of the good ones, you know. She'll stay with you forever, right? So I figured, you know, she was still in this relationship. But I said... I didn't hear from her for a month, right? Because she didn't check her emails. Went to the church, she didn't check her emails. She doesn't do that anymore. She's a financial planner. So she called me. And she was single. And I said, well, let me show you what I done learned over the years. Let me show you what I can do now.

Monique M. *[Laughs.]*

Renee M. You thought I was good back then.

Monique M. I love it.

Renee M. We've been together ever since. So that was nine years. It'll be eight years. And I just, but really, I just needed, I just really wanted a prayer partner. And that's how it started out... I needed somebody that I could pray with, somebody that I could talk about what God was doing in my life, and that would pray with me in moments like that... And so I was still at the health department. I went back and forth for about a year. That's expensive. It was real expensive going back to Seattle. And I decided I would just give, you know, it was time. It was time. So...

Monique M. So the second retirement.

Renee M. Well, no, I... Show you how God works... When I said I was going to come out there, I got a call from University of Washington. They said would you teach for us. So I went and taught in anthropology for a couple years... I was like Mikey. Whatever they needed to teach, you know, I taught. But they asked me to teach in the department. Then I still did HIV stuff...still did HIV stuff. I still kept consulting stuff in Detroit, so I worked with the Michigan Department of Community Health. I would go back for them. I did their ethnographic stuff for them in Detroit from..just went back and did it. It's not [*unintelligible*] doing for this project that I worked for. But yeah.

Monique M. My retirement, slash, question that may not be a retirement question, because it sounds like you're not really retired.

Renee M. No, no.

Monique M. Is I'm trying to understand and wrap my brain around what the mission of the Global Justice Institute is for MCC. What do you see in your retirement years that being a part—how is that a part of your legacy?

Renee M. You know, I don't. I don't know yet... I don't know how I fit in that. You know, what I would...initially, when I approached them about being part of that it was to bring a sense of consciousness about global health issues and how we can use faith, how we can use faith to tie into that. And then I got pancreatic cancer, so that kind of put a wrench in all of that... It kind of fucks with you, don't it?

Monique M. Yeah.

Renee M. But I'm still, you know, I'm still trying to figure that out. But for me, I think that Global Justice would...there has to be a way for us to situate the United States as part of that whole globalization. And we've got to change the consciousness about what global health is. So my goal with that was... And that's sort of what I want to do when I get back. But I'm just getting my health back. I'm just...spent two years fighting pancreatic cancer. But that's that.

Monique M. So the final question I ask everyone.

Renee M. Right.

Monique M. Is what are you most proud of and where do you find joy?

Renee M. Where do I find joy? Oh. You know what I'm most proud of? Believe it or not, I'm most proud of Full Truth. And it's a piece of shit right now. But you know what? What it is is that I'm most proud of the fact that there are people who know that God loves them, that God's not mad at them, and that God is faithful...and that... I mean, I'm about to, in the past, you know, since I've been well I've gotten back to working with Full Truth to try and reorganize it and get it back on its feet. But that something in my life empowered other people to believe in God's faithfulness, and that through my life God demonstrated love and compassion and caring. And in those times that I was obedient, that's what happened. And that's the most—that because I was obedient, other people know that God cares. And what was the other one, about joy?

Monique M. Yeah.

Renee M. Oh, man, there's so many things. Man, there's so many.

Monique M. I know pottery is one.

Renee M. Yeah, yeah, yeah. Pottery. I'm just getting my hands back, so I'm back in my studio now. I'm making pots. My relationship. Boy, oh boy, you know. I'm still married, and Patricia doesn't...she puts up with me, and she lets me do what I need to do, and gives me the resources and the support that it takes. My dog...Baxter. My dog Baxter. I have really good friends. I have friends who pray for me, friends who bring me bourbon, you know, friends who, who love me through all of my illness...and every

day it gives me joy that every day God decided that it's cool, she can stay,
you know?

Monique M. All right.

Renee M. Yeah, yeah.

Monique M. Well, I'm going to stop our recording and say thank you for...

[End of recording.]