

## **Oral History Interview: Rabbi Sandra Lawson**

Interviewee: Rabbi Sandra Lawson

Interviewer: Monique Moultrie

Date: October 17, 2018

Monique M. Okay, so to put us officially on record, my name is Monique Moultrie.

Today is October 17, 2018 and I'm here with Rabbi Sandra Lawson.

We're here to conduct an oral history for the LGBTran website and for my research project that currently is entitled "Hidden Mysteries: the Faith Activism of Black Lesbian Religious Leaders." So we'll begin early in your life and hit milestones along the way. Feel free to elaborate. Feel free to skip questions. Feel free to choose a different thing that you want to talk about other than what I've asked. The point of an oral history is you direct the narrative. So I'm going to offer some prompting questions and things like so how old were you then, or what year was that to help chart your trajectory for those who are going to read it, but largely this is you telling your story, so whatever you find relevant is what we'll talk about.

Sandra L. Okay.

Monique M. Generally speaking we take no more than two hours. People tend to get tired, even of talking about themselves, after that point, so we'll aim for the two hour mark. But if you are tired before then, that is perfectly fine. Okay, so from my own research I've seen that you grew up in a military

home and you moved a lot, so tell me about your early life. What do you think of as your childhood home? Where is that?

Sandra L. Wow, okay. So my earliest memory of being a child was we lived somewhere in Germany. And I'm in the militaries, and so when I think back to my earliest childhood, that's what I think of. I guess my childhood home would be...we lived in Berkeley, Missouri, which is a suburb of St. Louis, right on the border of Ferguson. Like I could throw a rock and hit Ferguson. I say that because of what's happened in Ferguson recently. And so that was like a fun, like I had friends that I hung out with. I remember staying outside until the street lights came on and then we had to run to the house, and so I think about that.

So I was in a weird military family. My dad worked in recruiting and career counseling, and he was not on military bases, so we were...except for the time we were in Germany, and before that Fort Carson, which I don't really remember. I didn't spend a lot of time with other military kids. I felt like the weird child, trying to explain my dad was in the military. So like today if you were military, that's a cool thing. Like you can board the airplane first, all kinds of things, but it was like, at that time period people were like the military? It was like my dad was drafted in the Vietnam War and he didn't come back to cheering crowds. It was just like this sort of...it's hard to explain. But we were just a weird family and my dad wore a uniform.

And so we left St. Louis and then we moved to West Des Moines, Iowa. And we lived in St. Louis from like the time that I was five or six till like I was 11 or 12, and so that was like a big chunk of time, and so I was really—when we moved to West Des Moines, Iowa I was not happy. And I went from a really diverse school to a school where I believe I was like one of only three black people, and I was not happy about that. And I was just like homesick and just miserable. I was like 12, 13.

And then we moved to Iowa City for a brief period of time, and then we moved to Waterloo, Iowa. And I remember my dad saying to me you're going to like this place a lot better. I was like, why, Dad? He said because there's more black people here. And I remember thinking like how did he know? Because I don't remember having a conversation about that. And so when I got to that school I was much happier because it was more diverse. I didn't feel like I stood out as much. And I liked that school.

And then we moved again. My dad was deployed to Panama and my mom didn't want to stay in Iowa, so we moved back to St. Louis. My mom, I think she thought this was a good thing. I mean, I think also she wanted to find employment, and it was really hard to find a job in Iowa. And her sister lives in St. Louis, her best friend lived in St. Louis, and so I think in her mind it was a good thing. She tried to say look, we're going back to St. Louis, you can see your friends Stacy and Jill, whatever.

And I just was like...I was not happy. And I wasn't going back to where we were. We went to another suburb of St. Louis, a little "bougie," I

think, than where I'd been before. It was big. It was huge. And I only had like two years—I was in the middle of my junior year, so I was just sort of trying to wait out until I could go to college. And so to answer your question, when I think of my childhood home I really think about those early years living in Berkeley, Missouri and living in Waterloo, Iowa.

Monique M. Okay. So you just talked about your aunt having a bit more extended family there in St. Louis. Can you speak more about your brother or your family unit? What did you all do for fun? What was down time?

Sandra L. Yeah. So I have a brother. He's like three years and eight months younger than me. We're very different, and we don't really have the closest relationship. And that was, you know, when I think about what we did for fun, I remember—this was like the time when we were...people were moving from three channels to cable, and so before we had cable we only had three channels, and everybody watched the same thing. You just can't do that anymore. We all sat down and watched "Roots," or we all sat down and watched "Gunsmoke" or whatever my parents wanted to watch. Then we got cable and now all of a sudden there's these choices.

So I remember my brother and I sort of fighting over what we were going to watch. And my mom, I think she gave us days or something. I'm not sure. She had some way to break up the fighting, like okay, Sandra gets to pick all these days and Junior, Charles, he gets to pick on the other days. I'm not sure if that was how she did it. But I was manipulative. I always

tried to talk—because my brother was younger—I always tried to talk him out of whatever he was trying to—

Monique M. [Everything.] [*Laughs.*]

Sandra L. Yeah. And I was just older. And then when he tried to do it, it never worked. He was not [about that].

Monique M. [*Laughs.*]

Sandra L. But I was really... We have a better understanding of what introvert means today, but I was a really introverted kid. I spent most of my time in books, in the library.

Monique M. [*Beeping.*] I'm sorry.

Sandra L. That's okay.

Monique M. It keeps beeping at me because it is telling me it's full, but it's not, so I'm trying to clear out space so it will stop beeping.

Sandra L. Okay.

Monique M. It's going to be two hours.

Sandra L. Actually, I'm going to go to the bathroom again. I went to the gym, so I'm really hydrated. [*Break.*] Is it still recording?

Monique M. At this point, [yeah]. But I think so. I know that one is. This one is being cantankerous because, of course, it can.

Sandra L. So what was the question again?

Monique M. So we were talking about family life. What you did for fun.

Sandra L. I just remember spending a lot of time in the library. I loved the library. I discovered interlibrary loan, and I could get any kind of book I wanted. And I remember my mother just dropped me off. I also have a memory of like book clubs in the summer, trying to read as many books as I possibly could. And I think because we were moving I didn't really feel like I had friends, so I think I spent a lot of time in the house with my books and watching TV, probably.

Monique M. No, that makes sense. So I've read that you talked about your earliest American descendent being an Ethiopian Jew. Can you speak to why that's an important part of your story?

Sandra L. Well, actually, it's not. I mean, it's sort of...it's kind of hard to explain. So my mom and her sister, or actually my mom has like eight siblings, maybe seven, and some of them have passed away, and I sadly can't keep track. My mother and I have a very strange relationship. So my mother told me once that her earliest ancestor who immigrated to this country, he was Ethiopian and was Jewish. And for her I think that was really important because for her it signified that her earliest ancestor was not a slave. And it was an oral history that she learned from an aunt or something. And I didn't think anything about it, really. And I remember my mom and I were talking about it once and I was like maybe you should go find a rabbi, and maybe you can learn more about what it means to be Jewish, and that was it.

And then flash forward several years, I become a personal trainer, and I have Jewish friends, and my best friend is a rabbi, and now I'm Jewish. And so the sort of back story, which I don't believe has anything to do with why I converted, but it is a story, and I've heard other stories of people sort of reclaiming their Jewish roots. And so yeah.

And when I went to Israel, I didn't spend a lot of time with the Ethiopian community, but when I would go to the market and see like some Ethiopian Jews, they would look at me funny. Funny not in a bad way, but like...I was like oh, you kind of look like my mom. I don't know if that's true or not. But they knew, like there was sort of this weird sort of...you know like I was walking down the street and they sort of did this head nod or whatever. Like there was a similarity, but I didn't look like them. Like I was clearly American, and didn't dress like a lot of... There's a lot of binary stuff in Israel when it comes to women and how women dress, and so I didn't look like any Jewish women, and so it was sort of this odd thing.

So the story's important in that it's just this story. And I don't know if it's true or not. I'll probably never know if it's true. It's just a story that I have in my family.

Monique M. So you spoke, in telling of your story on your web page, about not really growing up in a home that was religiously centered, and so you coming to Judaism is your own story, not something you were inheriting, but something you created for yourself. You also mentioned, though, at a

certain point your mother started attending a church that had a pastor that had homophobic tendencies.

Sandra L. Oh, yeah, Reverend Stewart. Uh-huh, yeah.

Monique M. At that moment what messages were you getting that you were receiving from that community or from your family about faith and sexuality?

Sandra L. Yeah, I mean, it's interesting because I remember this guy. I couldn't pick him out on the street, but like—and I hope his name is Reverend Stewart, because that's what I've been telling myself. But my parents were having a really hard time in their marriage. Like I don't really understand the details. They were fighting all the time. They weren't living together. And I think that from what I understand what my mother was saying.

So she found this community. I think a neighbor had invited us or maybe she just looked it up in the Yellow Pages, I'm not sure. And I think there was two things. I think that she wanted some guidance. I think she needed some grounding. I think she needed...if my parents did get divorced I think she wanted to sort of say I'm building this sort of spiritual community and I have a pastor. I'm not really sure. I know whenever this comes up it's sort of a...it's not a pleasant subject.

But when we did go to this guy's church, my memory of this guy, you know, like I don't remember exactly what he was saying. And I had to be 13, somewhere in that time frame. And I didn't like his messages about women, I didn't like what he would say about gay people. And my mother

was like this '70s black feminist who had a afro before I was born. I remember seeing the pictures, just like the big Angela Davis, this 'fro. And I was really confused. And I just didn't like church, in general. And I remember asking her like, you know, what's the deal? And no, just taking the good stuff and the bad, I don't know, like that saying that people have. And I'm still confused to this day about why we went to that church. And it could have been the only option, too. We were sort of isolated somewhere in Iowa, maybe Iowa City. She didn't have a lot of friends, I didn't have a lot of friends, and I think for her it was sort of this is something that I can do to sort of feel better. I don't know anything about my mother's upbringing as a child when it comes to her religious background. My mother has suffered a trauma. I don't know what that trauma is. And I hope one day we will talk about it, but it's sort of this...it's locked in there somewhere. And so I don't really know that much about my mother's childhood.

Monique M. So then in general, you said the messages about women didn't really fit, the messages about LGBT community members didn't really fit. Where did that come from, the sense that it didn't fit?

Sandra L. Well, I think lot a lot of people, like I don't think I knew that I was queer, or gay, or lesbian at 13. And maybe some people do. I'm not sure I did. I think my mother did. I think my mother knew very early on that I was going to grow up to be a gay child, or gay adult. My mother was raising me to love everybody and to not have prejudices and biases, and I just had

this...it was counter to what I was learning at home, and it didn't sit. And I don't even know if I understood the gay messages, but I didn't...whatever he was saying didn't sit right with me. It might have been more his views on women, but there was something about things that he was saying that didn't sit well with me. And I never liked him. And I felt that he was creepy. And maybe he was creepy, I don't know.

Monique M. So you mentioned you didn't know or didn't have a sense of your same sex attraction then. Can you talk about when you did begin to notice? Because if your mother picked up on something, what do you think she was picking up on?

Sandra L. I remember—and life is funny—so remember I told you I spent a lot of time at the library, and I have this memory of going to the card catalogue or whatever they used then, and seeing a book on lesbian nuns or something like that, and it sort of piqued my interest. I was like what's that? You know, like what is that? Or I knew what it was. Or I remember my mom and her sister, my mom and her best friend were using the term bulldagger to describe someone, which is, you know, black lesbians, whatever. And there were things like that, and I was just sort of curious about it.

And I remember I asked my mother one time about why. I think she thought one of her friends was a lesbian. I was like what is that? I don't think I asked what is that, I just was like...I was curious and wanted to have this conversation.

I also didn't like dresses. To me, like the thing—I think how I was behaving as a child today would be normal. Like not normal, but it would be like okay. And I would fight with my mother every time she wanted me to be in a dress. And I don't think that's what makes somebody gay, but I think my mother had this internal sense that my daughter's going to be a lesbian, or whatever she thought. I really don't know.

But around the time that I was 16—15, 16, 17, somewhere like that, my mother and I got in this big fight, and I think... She said something about believing that I was a lesbian or something like that. I don't know if she used that term. And I was dating boys. Like not a lot of boys, but I was dating boys. And I remember being angry, and I got in my car and I—yeah, I had to be 16 or 17—I got in the car and I drove and I picked up my friend Stacy, and I said my mom thinks I'm a lesbian or something like that. And she's like really, why would she think that? And I'm like I don't know. I may have even had a boyfriend at the time, I don't know.

And then I go—I might be getting off your question—but then I went to go to college and my first year at college I had all these great friends. I went to college with one of my grade school friends, Jill, and we shared a room, and then once we got to college we had nothing in common because we had totally different friends. And I had these, which I thought were cool, and she thought they were weird. And I thought her friends looked just like the same friends we had in high school and usual.

And then when I came back for my sophomore year all those friends that I loved and thought were great, they were all gay. And I knew there was some inside joke that I wasn't getting. Like they weren't telling me, but they let me in the club. And I sort of imagine they had all these conversations like when is she going to figure it out? And there were things that I would say that they thought—and they were all coupled up, but I didn't know. And I think when I finally started to see, all of a sudden all of these things I was missing made sense.

And so when I was...my sophomore year of college, between sophomore and my freshman year I started to think like maybe I'm bisexual or maybe I'm gay. And then I was like, well, what does that mean? What do I do? I don't know any gay people. Like I don't know what to do about it. I was just sort of like... And I remember, you know, going to sleep at night and waking up in the morning, and I had a dream that I was making out with a woman, which sort of freaked me out a little bit.

And then I go back to college, and my friend Terry, who I'm still in contact with today, she asked me where my friend Jill was. And I said oh, she decided to drop out and she went back home. And I asked her where her friend was. And she was like oh, well let me tell you something. We weren't just friends, we were a couple, and we were dating, and we broke up. And she was clearly upset about it when she was telling me about the breakup. And I was like thank God I have somebody to talk to. *[Laughs.]*

And I was just waiting for her to finish her story. And I'm like I feel bad for you, but I need help.

Monique M. [*Laughs.*]

Sandra L. I don't think I ever told her that. And then I just was like so happy, and I'm thinking I hope she doesn't think I'm happy because she broke up. And I was like I think I'm gay. And so I thought she was going to—I didn't really—I think I thought, in my 19-year-old brain, that she would solve my problem. And she's just like, okay. Well, what do I do? You'll figure it out. [*Laughs.*] And it's interesting. She was only a year ahead of me, but at the time it was like, you know, the time frame between 19 and 20 was so big. And then I found out that all of these people that I had grown to love and like and hang out with, most of them were gay.

Monique M. So you did know gay people.

Sandra L. Yeah. And it was weird. And so yeah. And it was just sort of this sort of fun kind of thing. And then, just like I said, all the weird things that I was missing. I will tell you a funny story. So I was the board dorm president or something like that when I was in college, and we had a new RA, and her name was Leah, and I wanted to go visit her because she was going to move up to our floor. And I remember going to the door, and her roommate answered the door, and her roommate had just gotten out of the shower. And then I was like I'm here to see Leah. And she's like hold on. And apparently behind the door there was like this big fight. Like you

can't answer the door, we both just got out of the shower, we're both going to have wet hair.

And then Leah came to the door and I was like hey, I just want to introduce myself, I'm Sandra, looking forward to hanging out with you when you move up to our floor. And she said she thought I said something that indicated that I knew, and maybe I did subconsciously or whatever, but I had no clue. And then when I, like I said, when I finally started to figure it out, I was like oh my gosh. Like it just completely went over my head. Like they clearly both just came out of the shower. *[Laughs.]*

Monique M. The one shower.

Sandra L. Yeah.

Monique M. Okay. So in your...we jumped to college. I want to fill in the gap for high school and then have you talk to me about how you chose college. So you mentioned in high school sort of moving and then just biding your time until you got to college. So what activities, what did you do to occupy your time between moves?

Sandra L. Between high school and college or...?

Monique M. Between the different types of high schools.

Sandra L. Oh. I wrote. I mean, yeah, it was weird. We usually moved during the summer or during a break, like a winter break or something. And sort of like in my memory they just all sort of blur together. I would make friends, and often... Because I didn't like goodbyes, and so I wouldn't

often tell people we were moving until the day before or the week before, by the way, we're moving. I just remember my parents trying very hard to find things to make me happy, but I was just not happy. I was not a happy child. And I didn't like the places that we lived. I liked the things that I— like I liked the books that I was reading. At the time I was into a lot of novels about rock stars or whatever, which is probably why I've never actually done any drugs, because I read about how they all died.

Monique M. [*Laughs.*] The intellectual scared straight.

Sandra L. Yeah, basically. And I liked...I listened to a lot of Led Zeppelin and anything from that '60s, '70s era. And I also played sports. Not very good, but I played basketball, ran track for a little bit. I was in the drama club in one of my high schools. But not like the acting, but I was like the back stage people. I was the sound person for one play or musical and helped build sets, things like that. High school was just, I knew that high school, I was just waiting to get to college because I figured college was like...that was going to fix everything.

Monique M. So let's talk about college. How did you decide where you wanted to go?

Sandra L. Well, that's the funny thing. So I wanted to go to college. I really wanted to go to college, but mostly, I think, because I wanted to get out of my house and wanted to be on my own. And I didn't... I think because we moved around so much I didn't develop the relationships with counselors, and I didn't have a strategy, and I didn't have a plan. And neither one of

my parents had gone to college at the time. They both have degrees now, but... And I didn't really know what to do, how to navigate any of that.

And there was a college that reached out to me. It was a Catholic girls school in Nebraska. And I liked everything on paper, but I didn't...I felt like they were reaching out to me because they needed more brown people, because none of their literature had brown people, and it cost a lot of money. My mother thought that was a better choice. My sixth grade teacher who I stayed in contact with over the years also thought it was a good choice. I didn't know anybody there. I didn't like the idea of going to Nebraska.

My friend Jill had already decided where she was going to go, which was Northeast Missouri State. And I looked at it and I was like okay, I'll just... That's how I picked. It was not...I really... I would not make those choices today. But the people that I became friends with during that time period I am still really good friends with. Not—like I know how to find them if I need something or I want to see them. I know where they are. And those are those people, like I can't tell you where any of my high school friends live or are today, but the friends that I developed while I was at Northeast Missouri State, which is now Truman State University, I still have those contacts and those connections, so in that way that was really good. My education sucked, though.

Monique M. Is that what led you to Florida?

Sandra L. So actually, I think I was...I think I would have probably benefited from a gap year, which we now have, which people didn't do then, or if they did, I don't know. I liked the idea of college, but I wasn't ready to go to college and I should have waited. And I knew that. I remember thinking I am not ready to go to college and I should wait, but what am I going to do? I don't have any skills for a job. I've never worked in a fast food place. I just didn't know what to do. And my parents were like you're going to college. Not in a mean way, but like if you're not going to go to college, then what is your other plan?

And so I just went to college. But I wasn't thriving, and I was flighty. I couldn't make up my mind of what I wanted to do. I just liked to hang out with my friends, and I couldn't focus when I studied. I'd made good grades in high school, but I couldn't get into that rhythm in college, so I dropped out. And I joined the military, which was great for me. And then while I was in the military I finished my degree, which came from Florida. But I've never been to that school. The military has a lot of satellite campuses to help their soldiers and airmen or Navy cadets—not cadets—whatever the Navy calls themselves get their degrees. And so the military has built relationships with the University of Maryland, St. Leo and [tons of others].

Monique M. Okay. So the military. I read that you found yourself, that you had a particular interest in detective work and investigative work, and so is that what led you to the military? Was it your family? Your father's

background in the military? Why that as an option as opposed to [working]?

Sandra L. Initially when I dropped out I was going to transfer. And that didn't work out and I ran out of time. And so my dad came to pick me up. And I remember we were driving and he's like, you know, so what are you going to do? And I'm like I don't know. I'll just wait a semester. And apparently my parents had this conversation where I should take some time off, like not this bouncing back and forth and changing degrees. And so my mother was like she needs to go to work, she should stay here and go to school here or whatever, I don't know, something like—well, whatever... I just...my mother didn't want me sitting around the house doing nothing, which I can understand.

And I had no idea what I was going to do. At the time I had an idea that I wanted to work for a federal agency in law enforcement. I knew I needed a degree for that, and so that was sort of like the plan. And I think my dad, who's always sort of understood me in a way that my mother doesn't, or my dad had better communication skills, my dad never really spent a lot of time talking about the military to us. It was not like go to college or go to the military. He was not that kind of father. In fact I barely knew what he did. And I knew that he was in the military, I knew he went to work, I knew he came home. I had a description of what his job was, but I didn't really know what he did.

And so the three years that I was in college I was in college on loans and grants, and so the loan people wanted their money back, and I was just like I don't know what to do. So then my dad all of a sudden is like you know if you join the military they'll pay your college loans. I was like, what? And, since you want law enforcement experience, you can actually, if you join the Army you can pick your job and you can get that training, and maybe when you get out of the military you can use it. I was like oh.

So I go through the process and I find myself in the military. And everything that I wanted to do I was able to do in the military. And I got enough of the law enforcement experience to know that I didn't want to do that anymore. I had fun doing it, and I was just like this isn't...I'm glad I did this, and I had a lot of fun, and got to do a lot of police stuff that a lot of military police people don't get to do in the military. And then I had enough sense that for me that doing that in the real world might be a little more dangerous than I wanted it to be. *[Laughs.]* And when I say that, like I have a lot of friends who were in the military police and they are now police officers, but they didn't really do a lot of law enforcement stuff when they were in the military.

And the military police, like all jobs in the military, has a combat mission and a non-combat mission. And for military police the combat mission is POWs, taking...they're right behind the infantry as the infantry is going off doing what they're doing. And they get people, military police are sort of like taking those people and making them sort of POWs. They also

provide support for convoys. So if you have water that needs to get someplace or people, the military police provides security for that. That's the combat mission. So that's what most of the military police do, they're trained for that.

And I was in the garrison side of it, and so I got to do more law enforcement type stuff, where I got to do patrol in a police car and I was a police investigator. I got to go to school for child abuse investigations, domestic violence investigations, and so I sort of got all that, and I got all this training. And when I was done I was like I don't really want to try to work for local law enforcement. Police work is dangerous. And I was like... The worst thing that ever happened to me is some woman spat on me here and I got hit once, but nobody ever shot at me.

Monique M. So after leaving the military, what was next? What did you want to do, since that wasn't going to be the plan?

Sandra L. Yeah, so I was...it was 1990...wait, 1997, and I probably would have stayed in, but I had orders to go to Johnson Island, which is a little military atoll. I don't even know what atoll means. But it's a little military base in the Pacific water. It's an island. And it's like a great place because you get leave to Hawaii, and so I was like okay, I'll go there for a year, because it's a year assignment. It's one of the best kept secrets in the military, and I would be on this island that's like three miles.

Monique M. Oh.

Sandra L. But that didn't bother me. It was where they were going to send me to after that that I was trying to get out of. The military wanted to send me to this Johnson Atoll and then they wanted to send me to Fort Stewart. And Fort Stewart, at the time, was not a good place to be for military police because it's in the middle of nowhere. It's like 30 miles from Savannah, Georgia, but it's a military base where soldiers deploy all the time, and so I would be going off to deployments or combat stuff or whatever and coming back to a place that I didn't want to live in in the first place because there was nothing there. The town is completely dependent on the military bases there, and there was nothing. And I had friends who lived there, and I would visit them, and there was nothing in that town. And so I didn't mind being deployed, but when I came home I want to have something. And everybody I knew that ever lived there was miserable.

So I tried to get out of it. I talked to my career person who managed whatever, and I was like how do I get out of this. And she's like I'll work on it. And I said I don't mind going to Johnson Island. And then I was like I'll be a drill sergeant, send me to drill sergeant school, or send me to recruiting school. And she said—it was a little unusual because she couldn't get me out of it. She said the best I can do is you can go to Fort Stewart and then try to get out. I said oh, no-no-no. And also this meant reenlisting, too, and I'm like no, because if I reenlist and I don't have this in my contract, I'm screwed. I said nobody wants to go to Fort Stewart,

that's why you can't get me out of it. I said I'm happy to go to this island for a year.

And so then I was just like what do I do? And so I was also doing some soul searching. If I were to reenlist another time that would put me just at ten years or over ten years, and in my mind, if I'm going to stay in the military past ten years, then I might as well continue to stay in the military because I could—

Monique M. [Travel throughout] the country.

Sandra L. Yeah. And I really wanted to go to graduate school, and I had aspirations of getting a Ph.D. in sociology. It was the only field of study at the time that I could get my brain around. Like it fit all my things that I was interested in—history, literature, and the area of study was a way that I could...it was easy for me to want to learn and to want to do the work, where some other fields I was having a hard time. And so I was like... And honestly, I was like tired. Tired in an emotional way. Like I was really sort of wanting to settle down and really wanting to see what it's like to stay in one place. And if the military had been more...had been accepting, not more, just been accepting of gay people at the time I might have stayed. I was living in Atlanta, Georgia, where there was a lot of—like it was my first time living on a military base that was not dependent, the outer city was not dependent on the military base, and so I got to do things, and hang out with people, and be at gay clubs. It was kind of cool.

I liked it. So at the very last minute, like at almost the last point where I could decide yes or no, I was like oh, getting out. And so I got out.

Monique M. So then what sent you to Clark?

Sandra L. Oh, yeah.

Monique M. You were living in Atlanta.

Sandra L. So when I finished the military, I... So as I was transitioning out, I had been working with... When I was in Seoul some of my friends were on the U.S. Army Taekwondo team, and I had competed as a power lifter, and one of my friends was...she said that when they would fight Koreans, their upper body strength was really good, like they could punch the Koreans, but as soon as the Koreans kicked them, they were through, like we have no leg power. And I was like well, that's easy. I can show you how to get more strength in your legs. And so it was three members of the team. And we were just going to the gym and I was showing them some things. And then the coach came over and said whatever you're doing with them—I was like yeah?—keep doing it. Like I was worried. He's like whatever you're doing, keep doing it. I don't know what it is, but keep doing it. So I was like, oh.

So when I got to Atlanta I learned—I had met other personal trainers, and I didn't really want to work for anybody. And so I was like I'll be a personal trainer and then at some point I'll go to graduate school. And I kept telling people I'll do this until it's time to go to graduate school. And

then years went by and I was like, you know, I need to make that happen. I keep saying I'm going to do it, I need to do it. And then I applied...I looked at a lot of schools, initially with the idea of moving to go to school. And then in the end I decided that I needed to stay. And so I got into Clark Atlanta, and I also got into another school that was a little further away, but I decided to stay at Clark Atlanta. So that's how that happened.

Monique M. Okay. So after Clark, you are in a gay-friendly city, you are, I'm assuming, at this point, more out than your 19-year-old self was. What were your long-term goals, aspirations? What was the plan?

Sandra L. So here's the funny thing. I'm going to backtrack a little bit. So my 19-year-old self was really out because like all of my friends were out and I didn't really have an opportunity to be in the closet, because that wasn't...like they were all out. And so my only real experience in the closet was when I was in the military. My parents knew that I was gay. And when I joined the military my dad said you know you have to keep your mouth shut. I said I know, Dad. He's like you won't be alone, there's lots of gay people in the military, but just be careful. [*Laughs.*] So anyway, so then when I got out of the military I was like why is anybody in the closet? I just spent however many years risking going to jail. And I would argue with my friends who were still closeted or whatever. Wait, what was your original question?

Monique M. Aspirations, goals, plans.

Sandra L. So yeah, I think my only goal was sort of like to get to a graduate program, and when I finally did it... During this time I was dating people, and I also met my former partner. Like I had two and a half significant, strong relationships, and when I met my former partner [Tonya], I was...I think I had just gotten into grad school, and also was making the decision to convert. And my plan at the time was to convert, go to Clark Atlanta, get a master's and then go somewhere and get a Ph.D. in sociology. Still might do that sometime, but not anytime soon.

And then when I was done, I really wanted to learn more about this Jewish side of myself, and I sort of didn't want to spend four years doing research on something when I had this big other question, which was go to rabbinical school. And so I decided not to apply—actually, I did apply. I applied to Clark Atlanta's Ph.D. program because I could... So I was doing a lot of work in environmental justice at the time and I could, my advisor, I could work with him and create my own program and he would work with me on that. And it was easy because I was already in their system and whatever. And then I decided to wait and defer. And then I just decided not to go. And the next thing I needed was how am I going to get into rabbinical school, so the focus completely shifted from getting a Ph.D. in sociology to how am I going to be a black queer rabbi.

Monique M. So let's speak some about that. So you haven't talked about spiritual practices that you were maintaining in college or that you were

maintaining in the military and then you suddenly have this desire to be a black queer Jewish rabbi. So walk us through how that became possible.

Sandra L. Yeah, I had no spiritual practices in the military. Well, in basic training I could get out of work if I went to church, so I would go to church during basic training. They'd march us over there and I'd sit in this church and it would keep me from working. And then at the next level of training, when I had more freedom, I stopped going to church. But I had no spiritual practice, had no spirituality, no spiritual grounding, no nothing. I had friends that would invite me to MCC, which is like the Christian queer church, and I was just like it did nothing for me, and I didn't really like it. And then at some point I was like why am I even trying? Like I don't even... I wasn't searching, but I sort of felt like maybe I should go to this church and support them because they're gay, but I had no...nothing.

When I was working as a personal trainer I had a Jewish girlfriend, I had Jewish friends, a lot of Jewish clients. And it was sort of, I think, just because of where the gym was located. And that was fine. That was not what made me convert. But one of my clients who's now a good friend of mine, Josh Lesser, is also a rabbi, and I met him right around the time I started dating my Jewish girlfriend. So there was just things I just didn't understand about her that she was saying or doing or whatever, and he would sort of answer those questions. He says at some point my questions started shifting from her over to like general Jewish questions, to more like internal questions, you know, what does this mean, what does that

mean, I'm not really sure. And he said he noticed that it was a shift, that my questions were more about my own interests, and not necessarily trying to understand her or understand my friends.

And he...you know, we became really good friends, and he was unlike any spiritual leader I'd ever met before, not that I had met a lot, but I had my own sort of biases around clergy. And he was just like this cool guy. But I had never been around a white dude who understood or got people of color and at the time understood his white privilege. Like now it's a little more normal, but he really got it in a way that other people didn't. I didn't know anything about Judaism. And also he also was a feminist, too, so he understood how racism works. I remember him saying to somebody wait, I'm white—yes, I'm racist. I'm racist because of this and this is what I'm doing to combat that, and I was just like [that is] so great.

And we traveled in the same circles, too. A lot of my queer people of color friends, when we'd do stuff, he was there, and often the only white dude. And I used to tease him because we were sometimes in meetings around social justice issues, and I'd be talking to him, and I'd leave the room to go to the bathroom or something and I'd come back and he'd be surrounded by black women. [*Laughs.*] Like I don't know, would just like hang...this sort of weird, just a...like he had this like magnet or whatever, I don't know.

And so he invited me to his synagogue, and I went to his synagogue. And there is just something about that space where I felt like I could be my

whole self. And at the time I'm not sure I really got the Jewish part of it, but I liked being there. And also I think just from, like, you know, hanging out with my Jewish friends, I was often invited—so my Jewish girlfriend, her sister would invite me to Shabbat dinner, and I just love that sort of family atmosphere, even though I didn't understand any blessing they were doing. And being invited to their house for Shabbat and Passover and celebrating other holidays with them. And then I went to the synagogue.

And it's interesting because I think if I would have tried it, if I had been more, like...I'm sort of...it was, I think it was, I was just sort of going with the feeling and not necessarily trying to explain it. I was like I like this place. I like hanging out at the synagogue. It was a congregation, but it didn't have a [*unintelligible*] 00:51:08, House of friends.

And, you know, there was—I tell the story a lot, but I go to the synagogue. It was Hanukkah, it was a potluck. I'm worried that people are going to treat me differently because I'm black, but people sort of just would ask me questions about the space, like how to find things. They treated me like I belonged. And I go to the service and like I'm an introvert, and so like the person who invited me is busy, so I can't like lean on him, and so I'm just there awkwardly. And I remember just watching kids during the service just sort of like play and have fun, not being rude or disruptive, just being children. And I had never experienced that in a religious space. Usually children were sort of like had to be still. And there was this dog who was a helper dog, and he was sort of...he was old at the time, and

now he's passed away, but he was helping himself to crumbs leftover from the potluck and people were just sort of adjusting themselves and still participating in the service.

And so there's kids running around, and this dog, and I realized that the kids can run around and be themselves so the parents could then get what they need from the service and not have to worry about their children.

Like when I was in church my mother would like poke me because I was just like—she's like be still, be quiet. And I was just like...I didn't want to sit there for that long. And in this space children were sort of free.

And then, at the end of the service, they have this prayer that they say. It's the prayer for the end of hiding, to get all Jews, queer Jews, to come out of hiding. And I think it begins with "we as gay and lesbian Jews" and then there's a whole bunch of stuff. And I was just like... And this was like a synagogue with half gay people, half straight people, and everybody was saying this prayer. And I was just like wow. And I just kept going back.

And then at some point... Like some of my friends had already thought that I had converted because they just assumed that I was Jewish because I was going to this place all the time. And then I think at some point I knew that if I...to have full membership of this community I needed to convert, and so I did.

Monique M. Okay. So can you talk about your role in that community? So after you convert, you seem pretty hands-on for [one] participant.

Sandra L. Yeah, so actually, I really just wanted, like I initially, when I converted I was like oh, I converted and I'll just be a Jew in the pew singing the songs, trying to learn the songs, trying to understand what they're saying. Because I didn't understand any of it. I just liked the people. And that was fine. I don't even know how long that lasted, but I was...just that would have been fine. Then I get a call from someone who asked me to participate on the board or something, like to be a representative at large, so I would represent several constituents from the community, and I would be their representative whenever they had questions at the board. And I don't think I understood at the time that that's how Judaism operates. It's not a passive religion, it's an active religion, like you have to participate. And so when I was invited, I was like okay.

So now I'm on the board and I'm part of the leadership of the community. And then at some point I become the executive vice president or the first vice president, which gives me more authority. Which is kind of weird because I never saw it that way. But other people did. And so like I'm now signing checks and have keys to things. It's sort of like... Like I never saw, like I remember when I brought a question up about something that was a little problematic during the service, and I didn't realize how much weight my voice had because I was now one of the leadership, part of the leadership of the synagogue. And then I think that's when it sort of started to register that I'm now not just a member, I'm actually a leader in this community.

Monique M. Cool. So why then the move from lay leadership to the call to a rabbi?

Sandra L. I'm going to go to the bathroom again.

[*Break.*]

Sandra L. I think the bathroom breaks are good because it does give me a chance to like take a break from talking about myself. [*Laughs.*] Do you need any water?

Monique M. I brought water for you.

Sandra L. Thank you. We also have water, I think. We had to clean out our fridge, so I don't know what's in the fridge anymore. Thank you.

Monique M. Mm-hmm.

Sandra L. All right.

Monique M. So I was asking about the shift from more formalized lay leadership to taking on the full roles of a rabbi.

Sandra L. My synagogue in Atlanta is unusual in a lot of ways, and normal in other ways. But they were a lay led community for a long time, so they had no rabbi. And when they hired their first rabbi, which was not Josh, but they hired their first part-time rabbi, the lay leadership part is in their DNA, and so they like that. They don't necessarily just want to be led. They want to be guided, but not led from the top down.

And so when Josh became the rabbi, he wanted to help with that, and I think continue that tradition. And he's not a top down rabbi, either. And

neither am I. That's part of our training. Like a lot of schools will train the rabbi is the decision-maker, whatever, and we're more pluralistic and bring in other voices. So he, and that synagogue board, I guess, worked with people who wanted to take on roles of leadership during the service. So whenever he was off or out of town, the service would be led by a layperson. And at some point I led a service with 200 people. And we had like CDs. You could listen to the CD and get training from him or someone else on this is how you say this, and you can do this option, and so...and it was like a learning CD, and we studied on how to do that, and we did the service together, the three of us. And I loved it.

And I don't know how many times I led services like that, but there was another time I think they needed someone to lead services. And there wasn't a lot of people trying to do it. Like I was one of the people that liked it, and it was like usually, like if Josh wasn't there, it was like the go-to people. Like my friend Kelly liked to do it a lot, and I had another friend who liked to do it. In fact all those people wound up going to rabbinical school.

But somehow it turned into the service that I was going to lead and I was like yeah, sure. It's a weird Shabbat, nobody's going to be there, Josh was out of town. It was one of those days like we really didn't expect anybody to be there. Well, my friend Dan and his husband were celebrating like the first birthday of their twins, or their two baby girls or whatever, so their

whole family showed up to the service, and I was like who are these people?

Monique M. [*Laughs.*]

Sandra L. Where did they come from and what am I going to do? And so I joked about that, like oh, you guys, you're here, I'm not the rabbi. And I was really comfortable in that space. And they were great. So now I'm a lay board member, I'm trying to learn more about the services. I don't understand anything that I'm doing. I can't remember, are you Jewish?

Monique M. No.

Sandra L. Okay.

Monique M. I teach it, generally roll with it. I just covered Judaism last week and this week, so that's my whole total knowledge, what I can pack into a 45 minute lecture.

Sandra L. So we pray, and the language is not the common language of where we live, and so I didn't really understand any of that. I liked the melodies, I liked the structure of it, and I wanted to learn more. So my friend Charlie and I decided to create an adult bar mitzvah class. And I did that in my own selfishness because I wanted to learn this. And two people from that class actually did go on to have their own adult bat mitzvah. I think it was two—maybe one woman and one guy. But even when I was working with Charlie on how to structure this class, he knew stuff that I just didn't know

because of his upbringing. And I would ask him questions like what is this? And I just wanted to learn.

So I tried to...I talked to Josh about taking adult ed courses at the Jewish Community Center, and he said yes, I think you should, but you'll be bored. I was like what do you mean? He's like you already know more than most people taking that class. I'm like, well, I don't understand the connections of what I know. Oh, hi sweetie. Hi. Thank you. I told her to get like some pears and fruit. That's a lot. But anyways.

Monique M. Power for you.

Sandra L. Yes. Yeah, so anyway, so I wanted to learn more, and so doing traditional adult education stuff wasn't going to work either. And the only option really if you live in this country is to go to yeshiva, which is like a traditional Jewish study place, but those places are usually, in this country, reserved for men, so men have access to those things, and the only option for someone like me is to go to rabbinical school and to become... That's where I'm going to get the learning. In fact a lot of people go to rabbinical school to get the learning that they didn't get because they don't have access to this traditional yeshiva education. So there's that piece.

The other piece was that... So this was, I don't know, right after the Supreme Court said it was no longer illegal for my wife and I have to have sex. And so we were celebrating as a community this change in our status as gay people and that we were no longer breaking the law, and were happy about that. But then the Georgia state legislature and a lot of other

states was trying to pass laws banning same sex marriage. And I remember talking to my friends, like we don't care about marriage, like can't we just celebrate that this is removed in our society?

And so immediately the gay activists, which I'm now one of them—and I still didn't see myself that way, like I never really, at the time, saw myself as a leader in the queer community in Georgia—is now on like alert, and people are making phone calls, and the state legislature is going to try to ban same sex marriage, but it's already illegal, why are we fighting this, why are we being attacked, all this stuff. And so I was one of several hundred people, probably, in the community of activists trying to figure out how to combat this. And we created an organization and we lost, and it was added to the state's constitutional amendment. And it's so weird when I talk about this because we are so far from that, even though it wasn't that long ago.

Monique M. It wasn't that long ago.

Sandra L. And I just remember doing this—and I like politics. Politics for me is like football. I don't like this toxic political environment now, but I liked the history of politics, I liked the debating, I liked all that. And I sort of like went back and forth about studying political science. But working in this political atmosphere made me realize how toxic political environments can be, and I didn't like it. One of the things that came out of this organizing was like probably one of the first times, or maybe the first time that all of these gay organizations came together. But they came together

without working on any of their issues. So you have a bunch of white men who have an organization who have all the money, who, they need people of color to buy in, but they still want the power, so it was just sort of this whole thing. And then you have black queer people hanging out with white queer people, and it was like all this stuff together, but nobody had ever done the work of coalition building. And that's what we realized we needed to do.

And when that was over I get a call from—I think the first call was from a guy named Paul, Reverend Paul. I think that's his name. Great guy. I think his church at the time was called The Church Without Walls. And he called me—or maybe it was Josh, I'm not sure. He called me to... They were trying to put together this team of clergy to do some of that coalition building.

And I think one of the reasons I was on the list is that during the time when we were trying to combat the state marriage amendment, I was...there was a lot of clergy who were in this group, and I remember I was on a panel with a guy named Reverend Love. He was a radio evangelist at the time. I don't know what his name is, but that's what I remember. And I'm sure Reverend Love thought I was going to go to hell because I'm gay, and he wasn't, he's a straight man. And go to hell because I'm not a Christian. But we did agree on the state had no business in our bedroom. And that's what we talked about.

And I liked that, like trying to find what is it that we agree on, let's move to that. And I liked working with clergy because at the time even if we disagreed on theology or philosophy, what is it that we agree on? I felt like, at the time, that the clergy is sort of wired to find common ground, when you put them in a room and sort of try to figure out what we have in common. And I found myself in more conversations with clergy. And also because if you're trying to build an interfaith movement, you need interfaith people, and you can't just have Christians. And the only Jew usually in the room was my friend Joshua Lesser.

And I say this, and I think it's because it's true, and people may disagree, but social justice in Georgia at that time was not cool in the Jewish community because the Jewish community was absent from—except for my synagogue—was absent from a lot of the discussions around, the larger discussions on social justice issues that were affecting the larger community. And that may have a lot to do with the fact that Bet Haverim was in the city of Atlanta, and the other synagogues were in the suburbs. And also our synagogue had people of color in it. Like some of the synagogues, that wasn't necessarily the case.

So if you're trying to have interfaith dialogue, you need to reach out to other people. And often the only two Jews that were available were myself and Josh. And so I wasn't—and I was clear I'm not clergy, but thank you for letting me participate. And then at some point I realized that if I really wanted to be able to create or effect the changes I wanted in the larger

Jewish world and in religious spaces in general, then I needed to have the title rabbi.

Monique M. Okay.

Sandra L. So there's this hunger, this desire to learn, and also to be able to have a voice in how the Jewish community operates.

Monique M. Okay. So I'm going to take us back to some of this activism, social justice work that you're doing that you're in the space, both, you were saying, you're being invited, but also you were working on environmental justice, you were working on these issues before the invitations come. What's the motivation behind that?

Sandra L. Behind?

Monique M. Behind being interested in social justice topics at all.

Sandra L. And this is could just be the world that I lived in, but I felt like every black queer person I knew in Atlanta was in the social justice area, and I don't feel like we had the privilege to not be, because whether it be employment, or housing, or quality of life, or the airport, there was always some issue affecting the larger black community in Atlanta. And then also if you're queer on top of that, I just felt like I was in those spaces because that's what black queer people did. And I'm sure that's not true for all people, but... And I felt like I didn't have the luxury to not participate in these conversations, or to not use my voice when these things would happen.

Monique M. So how did you choose to prioritize what were causes near and dear that you'd get out of bed to go do this, but maybe send someone to do that?

Sandra L. I think when then state tried to pass a constitutional amendment, that sort of forced me to...like I don't feel like I had...I didn't have a choice. I felt personally attacked by the state, and I needed to do something about it.

And I remember Josh calling me and saying if you want to get more politically involved, there is this meeting. Or if you want to get more involved, there is this meeting, you should come. And then I did.

And the sad thing, though, is that I left that stuff to go study. I left activism to study. And part of the challenge for me was what am I going to do when I come out of this bubble after six, seven years? Am I still going to care about these issues? Am I still going to have the same voice? Or have I been sheltered for long—because I left. And it's sort of like I want to stay in this stuff, but I need to leave so that I can learn more so that I can do a better job.

Monique M. It's interesting, because when I look at your resume, your C.V. and charting for my own purposes the moves you made, your internships seem to be social justice oriented. So it's interesting to hear the distance that you were imagining or feeling.

Sandra L. I chose to go to a school that is the most progressive rabbinical school, but also one of the most isolating ones because you study in a mansion in the suburbs in Pennsylvania, probably the whitest suburb—maybe not the whitest. And it's hard to do... So you've got all these students who are

social justice minded, but we're in this mansion, and so that means we had to actively go out and seek social justice internships.

One of my teachers, Nancy Fuchs-Kramer, Dr. Rabbi Nancy Fuchs-Kramer, she still teaches at the school. And the school used to be part of Temple University, so it was in the city of Philadelphia. And she said when they made the move she thought it wouldn't change the school, and then she's like but it has because there's a big difference when you have to walk over homeless people to go to class versus driving into a mansion. And she talked about one day when they didn't go to class because they were trying to help a homeless man. And that's the work that I want to do. I don't want to be the person that steps over the homeless man and keeps going.

Monique M. So speak to the greater sense of calling. You said you didn't feel you didn't have the luxury not to use your voice. How do you feel your faith intertwined with the work you were doing? Did it animate it? Did it provide you support?

Sandra L. Judaism gave me language and a value system that I didn't have before. So to go back to the homeless metaphor, whatever. Like I would know intellectually that it's wrong to step over a homeless person and not help them, but I would probably have no qualms about continuing to go. Today I have this whole understanding in my tradition about what are you supposed to do when this happens, and modeling what you're supposed to do. I've inherited a tradition that tells me how to talk about gay people in a

religious context and explain to people that there is absolutely nothing wrong religiously with being someone married to someone of the same sex or in a relationship with someone of the same sex. And so the faith part sort of married with the social justice part gave me tools I didn't have access to before.

Monique M. Okay. I can see that. So when you are in seminary and you are studying, you're studying so that you can go back and do the work, what led you to the particular types of internships you took, and what skills were you trying to gain from that work?

Sandra L. So before I answer that, the first two years of school suck. *[Laughs.]* Maybe three years. Because it's sort of like—for rabbinical school. I can't speak for any other kind of religious training. You have to get this grounding in this language first, because if you don't understand the language you can't do anything else. So I was really frustrated. I didn't have an understanding of the language, which means that I felt like I couldn't do some of the cool jobs that I wanted to do. I couldn't take the cool classes I wanted to take because I had to get this language thing out of the way.

So the good thing for me, which probably kept me in school, was that I did have the opportunity to apply for my first social justice internship, which was with T'ruah, the Rabbinical Voice for Social Justice—I can't remember. They used to be called Rabbis for Human Rights. And I'm still a member of T'ruah. I'm trying to remember when they changed the name

what they added so that people would understand, because T'ruah is a shofar glass. When you blow the shofar on Rosh Hashanah it's one of the glasses. It's basically a call to social justice. And so I'm studying this language, I'm not happy in rabbinical school, and I get this internship that's to teach me how to be a social justice rabbi.

And I go to New York for a summer and I'm interning in a—it's called Community Voices Heard. I think that was what it was called. And it was an organization created by and primarily for women of color. It was also mayoral election season, so they went from this really small organization that nobody cared about to all of a sudden having politicians going in and out of their office all the time. And I'm just there, and my role was a little unclear because they were making some shifts or whatever. But now I'm the rabbinic resident in this non-Jewish space, or the clergy presence in the non-Jewish space surrounded by people of color, and people see me as a clergyperson, which was kind of cool. I go there like three times a week. It was in Spanish Harlem. I'm there like three times a week and then I go to Manhattan and I study with rabbinical students and people they've brought in, and so it was a very different atmosphere.

So a lot of my colleagues in that program needed the education on social justice, like why it was important, what do you do. And I already had that grounding. Like I know why it's important. But what that fellowship did for me was give me the Jewish language on how do I tell people you need to care about this because it's important and it's a Jewish problem or it's a

Jewish issue, and it's a Jewish issue because of this. And so I'm there that summer and I'm learning, and I'm studying. And I come back to rabbinical school ready to go back to my boring classes in Hebrew, but I have a better understanding. It gave me more energy to go back and do that.

Then I applied for another... So yeah, I was at Rabbis Without Borders. I'm trying to think if there was something else. So Rabbis Without Borders. And I'm an out of the box thinker. I'm benefiting from the education that I have, but I want to move outside of that and bring it with me and not stay in that box. And so I asked for that fellowship so that I could have the tools and language and like when I step out, how does that work.

And then at some point I said okay, I'm not getting any more out of the social justice part of the rabbi training, I need more work in chaplaincy, I need more training in how to be a congregational rabbi, and so I stopped. Actually, I just, you know, last year I had someone ask me if I wanted to apply for another social justice and I said no, I'm only here for so many years, I need to do more things.

Monique M. That makes sense. So you just talked about Jewish values, sort of learning through rabbinical school Jewish values being in you and closely related to your social justice work and passions. Where else do you find support for the work you do every day?

Sandra L. So what I've learned, and one of the things I didn't realize how great it is, that I'm in a club now of rabbis. We're growing, but it is still a small elitist club. And within that network I have my own network. Because there's very few people that understand what it's like to be a rabbi. There's very few people that understand the excitement of when you succeed and the trauma when you fail, which, you will fail at some point, you will fall. And without that rabbinic network, I wouldn't have that help.

And so when I moved here a lot of the rabbis in the area reached out to me. And I know that they are reaching out because they know what it's like to be new. It's kind of like the same feeling I used to get when I finally found myself in queer spaces. And no, most of the rabbis aren't queer, but it's this kinship that we all sort of share because... Someone asked me on my Instagram account the other day what is one thing that I wish people knew about rabbis, and I said that we're people. [*Unrelated interruption.*] Where were we?

Monique M. The club of rabbis, so you had that support. And then on Instagram someone asked you.

Sandra L. Yeah, that rabbis are just people. Like, you know, we...sometimes I know things, sometimes I don't, and that's okay. And don't expect me to be any different. Susan and I, I went to the [Oak House] the other day to—I wanted to check my email and I just wanted to get out of the office, so I take my laptop and I go to the Oak House and I'm sitting and drinking

coffee and checking emails. And then it's like 4:45, and I call Susan and I'm like, hey, you want to get a beer? And she's like yeah, where at? I'm at the Oak House. And so she comes and one of my students comes, and he's just like so you've been like drinking coffee, and you're working, and now you're just going to have a beer? I said yeah. He's like that's so cool.

Monique M. *[Laughs.]*

Sandra L. Like he just...I don't know what was going—I have no idea what was going through his mind, but in that moment, like I was normal. *[Laughs.]*

Monique M. Yeah. Like everyone else.

Sandra L. Right, yeah.

Monique M. Okay, I can see that. So talk a bit, because I haven't heard yet you talk about the various identities that you have and making space and peace with all of them, and how you do that in rural North Carolina.

Sandra L. In a very, very blue bubble. This place is as blue as the sky. *[Laughs.]*  
Yeah. So...and I'm sure this is in one of my bios or whatever, but it's true. I was in synagogue one day, and... So I was like... Atlanta, Georgia is about as diverse as you could possibly get, and you can easily hide in that diversity. So I'd be with black lesbians and be a black lesbian, or I'd be with queer people and be gay or whatever. A lot of my clients were white men, and I'd hang out with them, and they were gay or whatever. So I had all these spaces that I could navigate. Or Jewish spaces. I'd hang out with Jews, whatever.

And never did I think about the importance of making all those connections and building all those bridges, like what would it be like to really discuss poverty with some of my white male clients who had a lot of money. And I did when I would talk to them one-on-one, but using this...by sitting on the periphery of all of these connections—well, not on the periphery, but like these sort of intersections, I think I would just inhabit whatever the identity I was in that space and never really thinking about being black and queer and Jewish at the same time, even though I was all those things. And it just, I don't know, maybe it didn't really sink in.

So I was in synagogue one day, and Josh was leading the service, and he talked about Magnus Hirschfeld. And the only reason I remember the man's name is because I had studied him when I was in graduate school. And so Magnus Hirschfeld lived—I hope that's his name—lived right at the beginning of the rise of Hitler, and he had a sex institute where they studied sexual behavior and probably queerness too and whatever, and he was also Jewish. And Josh doing the sermon proposing “what if.” So Magnus is gay, and he's Jewish. The gay community in Germany is being attacked and the Jewish community is being attacked, and he just said like what if Magnus had used his Jewish identity and his queer identity to bring those two communities together; might things have been different? Probably not, but still. Like the gay community at that time, from what I understand of history, was not at all connected with the [Jewish]

community. And in that moment I was like huh. It just sort of stuck in my head.

Then... So like Coretta Scott King, who was a dear friend to the larger LGBT community in Atlanta, passed away, and her assistant for 20 some odd years was also gay, or is gay. So Josh was asked to give one of the prayers, like the benediction at her LGBTQ memorial. He couldn't. He wrote it, but something came up and he's like, you know, I'd like for you to do it. And I was like eh, but, I don't know. You want me to what?

Monique M. At least it was written.

Sandra L. Yeah, right. I'm not someone...it's hard for me to read other people's words. But that was my first experience with trying that. But, so like I remember having this concern that now I'm going to be in a room full of predominantly black queer people, that I imagine being predominantly queer black people, even though her assistant is a white dude, and I knew there would be some white people there, too. But this would be my first outing, outing myself as a Jew of color, or a black queer person who's also Jewish. I'm not standing here as a Christian, I'm standing here as a Jew. Yes, all my friends knew that I was Jewish, but I never made that kind of public statement.

And I read his words. And it was also my first real opportunity to do any public speaking, so it was kind of nerve-wracking. And I remember calling him. I'm like, I'm having a hard time saying your words. And he's like you'll be fine. And when it was over, a woman who's a friend of mine

comes up to me and she's like—her name is Donna—and she's like I'm going to convert to Judaism. I'm like okay, can I ask why? And she's like because I don't believe in Jesus, or whatever she said. I was like okay, well, if you should come to...we have [a reading], and I'll make an appointment to see Joshua Lesser. And I'm thinking I can't help you, but this is cool that you're coming up to me, and what do I do.

And she did. Because I've had people... I know that Josh has said people will come up and say they want to convert and they don't do any follow through. And we're not a proselytizing tradition, so we're not going to go seek you out because you asked a question. And so when I said that to her I didn't really expect her to do it. And she did. She called and she made an appointment, and she came to services.

About a year later I'm sitting at her beit din, which is her conversion ceremony, and Josh says that he—because we met at that. I mean, I'd seen her around, but I didn't know her, and we met at this, for lack of a better word, funeral. And he said, you know, I really, he's like I, you know, something about how much he respected and loved Coretta Scott King and really wanted to be there, but his scheduling did not allow it. And he was sort of heartbroken. And then he realized that maybe in this instance it was good that he wasn't there, that the face of the synagogue was another black queer woman. So the woman who had just converted is also black and queer. And then he talked more about the importance of the face of the synagogue and presenting another viewpoint that's not always white

and male or whatever. And so those three things sort of like, from that moment on, like sort of shifting to use all of me when I talk with people or work with people.

Monique M. What's that like in your day-to-day here on campus, using all of you?

Sandra L. So one of my strategies around...so at the beginning of rabbinical school I was worried that I was going to be un-hirable because I was constantly having to explain to people that I work with how I was Jewish. And that's a problem in the Jewish community. Like you don't look like me, like how are you Jewish? Like go over this again. And when I'd go on interviews for jobs as a student, there were several interviews where I was never asked questions about my skills, I was asked very invasive, intrusive questions about my identity, because the people interviewing me were uncomfortable. And they didn't say that, so it comes out in other ways. And I found that very frustrating.

And so what I decided at that point was to control my narrative so that if I'm going on a job interview, okay, here's a link to my website. You can learn all these things about me. So I put my bio up there. So if I'm going on this interview and you're asking these questions, you obviously didn't do your homework. So by putting all that stuff out there, today, as a rabbi on this campus, I don't really deal with a lot of those kinds of challenges with the students I work with. The faculty and staff, they all know. And so it's allowed me, I think, to be more present, and I'm not constantly worried about what question you're going to ask. I put it all out there.

When I interviewed for this job, when I applied for this job, I didn't know anything about this place. And I see why they hired me. Like really, yeah, I'm a good fit for this campus compared to the other candidates. But I did my resume and I sent here's a link to my website, and here's a link to my Facebook page, so that when they would, whatever that interviewer was doing, they would have all that stuff, they wouldn't have to ask me. And then we could just get down to like okay, why are you a good fit here?

That was the decision I decided to make [of who I am]. I made other decisions, but I feel like by doing all that work, which my white male colleagues don't have to do—like a lot of my male colleagues have told me that they understand their privilege better now because they don't have to share their personal life. They think it's invasive if somebody asks them if they're dating someone or their sexual orientation, whatever. And I get those questions all the—well, I used to get those questions all the time. Because I don't have the luxury of hiding, saying that's personal, you don't get to ask me that.

So anyway, so today, because of all that work that I did, which was a lot, it's made it easier for me to work as a rabbi and not have to deal with whatever I would have had to deal with if I didn't do that.

Monique M. I read somewhere on a bio—and so I want to connect that to your particularity here at Elon—that you had a goal or a vision of building a more inclusive Jewish community. So how does this role serving here with

the Jewish students that are here on this campus, how does that fit into the larger vision? What do you hope comes from your time here?

Sandra L. So when I...as a student I didn't have any experience working on a college campus as a rabbinical student. I worked on a college campus as an adjunct. And one of the things that I think is cool, and not even 90 days I did this job—well, 90 days I did a job on campus. Like I started in July, but I started remotely, but I started physically here August 1<sup>st</sup>. I'm getting students at, you know, they've left their house. They can create any kind of identity they want. I've had students who've changed their names since I've been here. Well, excuse me, you know, someone's called you this, someone's called you this, just what do you want me to call you? Wow, okay. Or they're changing their pronouns. Or they're deciding to enter Judaism or to exit Judaism.

And I am not the rabbi...I don't look anything like their parents' rabbi or grandparents' rabbi because I'm black and I'm queer and I'm vegan or whatever, the other identities that I have. For some, let me check this out, like this is a different kind of rabbi. Maybe this is a rabbi I can relate to because I've had brown Jews who've said that to me who said they haven't come to Hillel because they don't feel comfortable or they didn't feel comfortable in their synagogue, and here I am. Or queer students. There's a vegan here who now feels more excited about being a vegan in this space because the rabbi is a vegan and I'm someone who can advocate for her. And I can do all—and she needs to step up, too. But she now is

probably, I would hope, more outspoken about that. Or maybe not, I don't know.

But I've had a student, when I first got here a student came up to me and she's like I'm so glad you're here. Last year I was the only student of color who was in Hillel. So as far as like I'm creating in their minds, at least, the idea that the rabbi doesn't have to be a white male, or the rabbi doesn't have to be straight, or the rabbi doesn't have to be white. And whether or not—because they're not spending a lot of time thinking about it. They just think that it's cool. But they're not like, you know, we're not having a lot of conversations like I do with their parents. You know, like so did you convert?

Like I can tell the parents who read my bio and the ones who have not read my bio. The ones who have not, who knew nothing about me when they saw me, they're like...there's this, like, stumped look on their face. Or they knew that I was at least black, but they don't know how to talk to me because they can't get over the fact, like, I'm not supposed to ask if she converted, but I don't know what else to say. Then it just sort of comes out this weird thing. The ones who have read my bio, they're like there's no other...they also, they're like, oh my god, you're so cool. Or we read about you, you're black, you're gay, wow. And that's another issue, but... [*Laughs.*] But basically, just by my mere presence I am showing the students here at Elon, the religious community of Elon, and the larger

Jewish world of this area that Judaism is inclusive. Like I'm proud to be Jewish and I'm all these other things.

Monique M. So I've got a few more questions that may come full circle, but they may take us somewhere else. I read your Mourner's Kaddish and I read your prayers for Ferguson, which seems to speak to a deep concern for not only the black community but sort of justice repairing work, really living out that vision. Do you feel you've made inroads in these predominantly white spaces for conversations that are largely dealt with by people of color? And conversely, do you feel in black spaces that you're making inroads in having conversations that address traditionally queer concerns?

Sandra L. Hm. So when I wrote the prayer for Ferguson, I was a student. So one of the things that I found, like being in that sort of isolating bubble, being a student, I could write and put stuff out there, or send things to people, and then I would still be able to use my voice, even if I can't physically use my body because I can't be in a certain space. So T'ruah asked me to write something, and I wrote it.

And the Ferguson prayer is in a... The way it's written, it's in the frame of a prayer that's called Hashkiveinu prayer. Hashkiveinu prayer is a prayer that is only said at night, and it was written when the night was scary, and it asks for God to protect us. Spread over us your canopy of peace. And when people realize, when they read this prayer, that this is a prayer asking God to protect us from the scariness of night, and that I wrote my prayer for Ferguson within that box, Jews who understood that, when they

saw it, they were like oh my gosh, like they got it. And I didn't have to do a lot of explaining. I didn't have to articulate you as Jews need to care about this. They could see where the prayer was written and they could add it into their liturgy.

And I had people that I didn't physically know but had found me on Facebook or whatever, and they were sharing pictures with me of them reading the prayer during their service. And some of the Reconstructing Judaism community took out an ad in the St. Louis Jewish paper, *St. Louis Post Dispatch* or something, and put the prayer in the ad, and people were sharing pictures of reading it.

And then my friend Josh told me that—and also Deborah Waxman, who is the president of our denomination—that that prayer was the first time for many that they understood why it was an important issue, why they should care. Because I put my own narrative in it. And so I think that was like, you know. And T'ruah has said to me that they still get donations from it or they still get people asking about it even to this day, even though it's been several years later.

So that was like really I think the first time that I was able to use my rabbinic voice, even though I was still a student, to get the larger Jewish community to understand why this is an important issue. Because I was thinking about the protesters at night. And actually, one of my friends who was a protester is now at rabbinical school right now. You know, at night. And then you think about the pepper spray, or the tear gas, or the

weapons, like all these night images of Ferguson. And I...when I wrote it, I kind of wrote it out and I'm like I've got to...like something's not right, I need like something. And I already, in my mind, was thinking about that prayer when I wrote it and a friend of mine was like just put it in the prayer. That's what you have to do, just put it in the prayer. I was like oh, okay. And so yeah.

I think today I don't feel like I'm doing the work—and largely it has to do with where I'm located within the black community around queer issues. I'm in conversations with the center here around—like there's a...I can't think of...it's like a black network for employees of Elon, and then CREDE is the Center for Religious Ethnic Diversity at Elon. And as a new employee I'm starting those conversations. But I don't feel like I'm where I want to be when it comes to working with the larger black community on issues of queerness. I hope to move that way. I just haven't found the time and the space.

But I think when I do, when I got this job, at different points in time a lot of people of color who work here have come up to me, like we're so glad you're here. I'm not Jewish, but I'm so glad one of us is a chaplain. And so that means a lot to me. But I want to do more. Like I just recently got a call, and I think it was an afterthought for them, like an organization realized they weren't that diverse and they wanted more racial and ethnic diverse voices, and they wanted me to come to Greensboro next week and I'm like I can't. And I said please keep me in mind for other things. So I

hope to do more, to use my presence, my body, my voice in more spaces of color, but I think I just...it's not happening right now.

Monique M. Gotcha. I realize—I made a note to myself—I didn't ask you a question about your work with the Anti-Defamation League. I want to get that on the record. What led you to that? And then I'm going to go somewhere totally different. It was just a random like I just read.

Sandra L. Yeah. I love my work with the Anti-Defamation League. I understand there's some challenges now with ADL when it comes to communities of color. When I finished my graduate degree, I was still working as a personal trainer, but I was done, I was wanting to do something else. Like I have this degree. I want to use my research degree for something. And I was like on a list and this job came up. And a friend of mine who's at the synagogue worked at the ADL and I asked if she could send my resume because I didn't want it to get lost in a pile. And they called me.

And it was a cool job because I was doing research. I could use my social media skills, my research skills, my better public speaking all into one thing. And so I was like the go-to person for law enforcement when they had questions about extremist groups in the South. And I got to travel throughout the South talking, and I would answer questions from law enforcement. I also got to use my law enforcement background, too, which is really cool.

And I learned a lot about how ADL operates and functions. It's a bureaucratic, small but large organization with a lot of different divisions,

and they don't...they're better at it now, but at the time they didn't do a lot of like this is what we do and this is why we're the experts. They would just put out stuff, but people didn't really understand. They understood they were like a civil rights organization for Jews, but not really understanding what they did. Now they have a much stronger social media presence and I hope people understand them more.

Monique M. Cool. I did, I wanted as many of the pieces of the timeline present. You brought up your social media skills. And so I watched your Snapchat for the first time.

Sandra L. [*Laughs.*]

Monique M. In fact I had to get my stepdaughter to help me watch your Snapchat. I was like I don't know what I'm doing, what is this? So it was really interesting because yesterday when I taught my class right afterwards we had a... My department is having colloquy over applied religious studies, what it means to be able to train students to work on the ground with their degrees and not be going into ministry in a particular way. But we found that the majority of our students are going into nonprofits, are going into business law, places that don't look like us. But how do we prepare for that.

And so social media was one of the ways in which... It was a mixed panel of student alums and university administrators. They were saying this is a new way to break into new ground, is the use of social media. It's very effective in its ability to talk about what's actually happening in the moment and be responsive. And so you do it very well. It was cool to

come from that training yesterday to then talking with my stepdaughter, going like now what do I do next? It helped me realize the translation skills between those of us who were saying just yesterday yeah, we're going to do it, and then realizing we don't know [how]. So can you talk a bit about those who find you through your social media and how you're enlarging the base of Judaism through that?

Sandra L. Yeah. I mean, I've had... There's a student somewhere in the state, so I don't know where she is, but I was telling my director Betsy that—I think it was...anyway, I can't remember if it was male or female. He was thinking about transferring. He wanted to transfer to Elon because I was here. [*Laughs.*] This was just like, I think it was somebody on Instagram who was like I'm thinking about, I wish I could transfer. But I've had a lot of, like I'm having a lunch date next week with a student at Chapel Hill who's struggling with not...like wanting to be more actively Jewish, but struggling with trying to fit in, or being accepted, or whatever.

The Jewish community has a lot of work to do when it comes to acceptance of Jews of color. Jews of color make up about 20% of the American Jewish population, but if you would ask your average white Jew, they would think the number is much smaller or nonexistent. And the change is happening really fast. It's happening fast because of intermarriage, conversion, adoption, parents are adopting kids from other countries and then quickly realizing how the lack of diversity within their own communities, so there's parents who want more diversity in their own

communities. Or communities when they do have a person of color think that's some kind of weird, un-normal thing, and so when they see another person of color they think it's unusual. Because I've had these conversations, like you have people of color in your synagogue, why are you treating me differently, or why do you think it's so unusual that I'm Jewish.

Anyway, so social media gives access for a lot of people that I run into who are, like I said earlier, are excited that there's somebody that looks like them. Like I know two male couples, initially they couldn't—they live on the other side of the country—but they really thought long and hard about me doing their wedding because they're both black, and one's Jewish, one's not. And they wanted a rabbi to represent them. And I said to them all you have to do is get me there. You don't have to pay me anything, just get me there. And that didn't work in their budget. Another person I know is planning to marry his partner and they've also talked to me about marrying them. We haven't gotten anywhere, any of that.

But I'm saying all this because, because of social media, like people, when they're planning some of their life cycle things, whether it be a bar mitzvah or wedding or whatever, where they might have just picked whomever, now they can like oh, we're black, we can find a black rabbi. I just think that... And it helped me. When I converted to Judaism, if it wasn't for social media, I knew there were other Jews of color, but social

media gave me access to this network of Jews of color, many of whom I've actually met now in real life.

And there's this thing. Like I will often get a friend request and the only friends we have in common are these same Jews of color, so I'll accept their friendship request. And I think that's important because if it wasn't for social media, people would still, white Jews would still think there's not a lot of Jews of color. But because of social media people see more now of the racial and ethnic diversity that exists within the Jewish community and within the leadership of the Jewish community.

I mean, there's Jews of color running organizations. One of the vice presidents for the reformed movement is April Baskin, who's a black Jewish woman. She has a lot of power in the reform movement. Stosh Cotler runs a very large Jewish social justice organization, also a Jew of color. I have a friend Jerry who is a founder and runs a nonprofit Jewish organization. And then there's like, you know, rabbis from a variety of racial and ethnic backgrounds in the United States. And social media gives people access.

Monique M. Cool. So I'm down to my final two. As a religious leader, how do you unplug? What practices sustain you outside of being on for the various communities?

Sandra L. I work out almost every morning. And I'm not giving that up. I even had another—because my days are so weird, and I do have control over my schedule, and I scheduled a meeting with someone, and I thought we were

going to meet later, and she wanted to meet at 8:00 in the morning, and I was like, no. I said I apologize I didn't understand, but that time is really important for me. That block of time allows me to get to work around 9:00. Everything before then is my time, and that's when I work out. Working out in the evening doesn't work so well for me. I'll do it if I have to, but I'd rather have it be first thing in the morning. I have a meditative practice that I started last year. And so I wake up, I meditate, make my wife coffee. That's my job in the morning is to make coffee. Susan won't get out of bed until there's coffee. *[Laughs.]*

Monique M. Understandable.

Sandra L. So there's that. I'm trying to get better at playing the guitar and singing, and get better at that. So I just hired a guitar teacher. Really excited.  
*[Laughs.]*

Monique M. Cool.

Sandra L. He's a Elon grad. And after Yom Kippur Susan—oh, so there's open mike here. Not here, but in the city. And we were sort of thinking about going. So after Yom Kippur I was like oh, thank goodness this is done. And Susan's like, you know, we need to go. We need to get out. You need to get, you know. So we go to this open—so I bring my guitar to the open mike, and then I see this kid. He's not a kid, he's a young man. But he's just rocking it out, and I'm just like I am not going to get up there. There's just no way because of my own assumptions about him. Because he sounded great and I was enjoying listening.

And then he sees me and he's like I see you brought your guitar. And he's this, like, beautiful, warm man, and he's talking to me, and he's playing backup to whatever I'm playing, and he said you're like a rock star.

[Laughs.] And, you know, all because Susan made me go up there and do that. It was so great.

But there was something, like I hadn't played that guitar since we moved and there was something wrong with one of the strings and I just couldn't figure it out. And he's like, well, I know what's wrong with it. So he gave me his guitar and he's like I can fix this for you, it's not hard. And so I gave him my guitar to fix and then over the next few weeks we... I said, well, do you teach? And he's like yeah, you know, I teach. So I had my first lesson Sunday, and so that's going to be something else that I do.

Because I'm not a student anymore, so I can like learn, really try and learn the things that I want to learn. So working out, music, meditating, yeah, self-care.

Monique M. My final question I ask everyone, and I'd like to sort of hopefully leave on a happy note. The question is what brings you joy, what brings you fulfillment?

Sandra L. Wow. Hm. So my wife. I love my wife. My wife is like the best gift to me ever. Like I really don't understand how I got lucky. Like she really takes care of me, and she puts up with me. I don't think I'm the easiest person sometimes.

I like...as I'm getting older, I really like performing, but I'm scared of it. I like playing my guitar during services. Like leading service is fine. That's fine. Like I can lead services. I'm trained to do that. Getting up there with my guitar and leading services, that's another thing.

I love learning new things. Like a few weeks ago—well, a few months ago—I was like how do I get my—I just want to see if I could put stuff on Spotify, like how does that work. And so I did it. I put like four songs on Spotify. And I wanted to learn how to do a podcast, so I did that. And Susan often teases me. She's like what's next? [*Laughs.*] And she's like I don't think I want to be around you when you don't have something else to learn. Yeah. And I have three little fur babies, doggies that are crazy and fun. Yeah.

Monique M. Awesome. Well, I always use that as the last question, and also because it gives me joy to do these interviews, and so it's a moment to be reflective and to thank you for everything you've shared and for your openness and willingness to say yes to a random stranger. I had people on a dream board. When I said I'd return the project in 2014 I did—in New York Auburn Theological Seminary and Union have a summer seminar called CrossCurrents. And I did a CrossCurrents seminar. It was based on social justice. And so I put up... So you come to New York for the month and basically do whatever you say you're going to do and then every night you met as a colloquium and everybody presents, and one person presents a

night. And I put up my dream board of people. So you've been on my dream board since 10/14.

Sandra L. Oh, my gosh. Wow.

Monique M. With me trying to figure out someone who knew you who could do the intro.

Sandra L. Oh, I remember, yeah, the email that you had. The email. Oh my gosh.

Monique M. Yes, so I found [Samira]—

Sandra L. Yeah.

Monique M. —once she moved to Allegheny. She's like well, I think I know her. It was like but she's on my dream board.

Sandra L. [*Laughs.*] Oh my gosh.

Monique M. So I'm thrilled to have been able to work my way to your sphere—

Sandra L. Oh, my—thank you.

Monique M. —your spirit. So thank you so much for this time.

Sandra L. Oh, my gosh. Yeah, I'm on somebody's dream board. That's so cool.

[*Laughs.*]

Monique M. Yes, you totally were.

Sandra L. Wow.

[*End of recording.*]