NEW YORK CITY TRANS ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

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INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

JAY LONDON TOOLE

Interviewers: Ted Kerr and AJ Lewis

Date of Interview: June 15, 2016, October 20, 2016, November 24, 2017, and August 8, 2018

Location of Interview: New York Public Library Schwartzman Building (Parts 1 and 2), SoHo (Part 3), Jay's Apartment (Part 4)

Interview Recording URL: http://oralhistory.nypl.org/interviews/jay-toole-hqznqw

Transcript URL:
https://s3.amazonaws.com/oral-history/transcripts/NYC+TOHP+Transcript+003+Jay+London+Toole.pdf

Transcribed by Elliott Maya (intern), Colette Arrand (professional), and Jamie Magyar (volunteer)

NYC TOHP Interview Transcript #003

Ted Kerr: Today is June 15, 2016. My name is Theodore Kerr with the Trans Oral History Project New York City. I'm sitting with Jay Toole today in the New York Public Library on Fifth Avenue in New York. Ah, please state your name.

Jay Toole: My name is Jay Toole. Uh, well, now it's Jay London Toole. I'm married and we had our name changed. Uh, what—what did you want? [laughter] Sorry.

Kerr: You're doing great. Place of birth?

Toole: I was born in the South Bronx in 1948, which makes me 68. Uh, and I'm really glad to be doing this.

Kerr: Your preferred gender pronouns?

Toole: I go by him, her, he, she, them—I go by everything, except I won't answer to "Big Mama."

Kerr: How would you describe your race or your ethnicity?

Toole: Uh, I guess white. [laughter]

Kerr: And how would you describe your gender?

Toole: Very fluid. Uh, stone butch. Yeah, stone butch. [laughter]

Kerr: What's your earliest memory of New York City?

Toole: The earliest memory? Family-wise, or you know, do you wanna know, Village-wise, or…? My earliest memory of New York City is—I guess I was about six—or seven?—and the police were in my house dragging my mom away in a straitjacket. That's my earliest memory.

Kerr: What did the house look like?

Toole: It was a railroad apartment. You know, the South Bronx on 135th Street, they were all like, uh, maybe five story buildings? And they were all railroad apartments, so you'd walk—we had a front door. I lived on the second floor, we had a front door and a back door, and you'd walk through the apartment and the bedrooms would be off to the side and you'd just walk through the hall and go out the back door if you want. Or you could jump out the window, you know, which we did all the time, because even though it was the second floor it was very short. [laughter]

Kerr: How long did you live there for?

Toole: I lived there until I was 11. And uh, it wasn't a happy home, yeah, at all. You know, but we lived there until I was 11 and... My father and brother used to rape me all the time. My mom was put in institutions all the time, and when she was gone they would rape me. And, there was a—it's still there. [laughter] I passed by it, weeks, months— a couple of months ago. It was like a grassy hill across the street from my house where the FDR Drive goes by, and there's a tree there, a huge tree, and I used to hide in there, thinking that nobody could see me, you know? So, childhood was not good, you know, it was, uh, really really bad, and when they shipped me over to my uncles, my father's brothers, who, none of them had children—my father was the only one who that had children—they would also molest me. So as a young child I thought, you know, that everybody lived like that. [laughter] Thankfully not everybody lives like that, but, you know… Anyway. I was there until 11. [laughter] And then we moved—uh, we moved up to 184th Street and Park Avenue in—uh, still in the Bronx, and it was mostly Irish and Italian. I... ah, [laughter] it's hard going back to this part. So, like I said, my mom was in and out of hospitals, and this one time she—she grabbed one of the kids that I was friends with and she got put away again, for—she pulled her hair or something like that and got put away again, and the rapes continued on. So my mother hurting this child, this kid—ostracized me from the whole thing. Like, none of the kids could play with me, they couldn't talk to me, nothing. And then I met this girl and I was like—I just turned 13 or something like that, and she brought me—she became my best friend and she brought me home to her family and they lived, like, around the corner from my house, and she had a gazillion brothers, you know? "So, this is Frankie, this is John, this is Mickey, this is this is this," and we went past the bedroom and she said "And this is Florence," and I got halfway [laughter] to the doorjamb and stepped back and looked in and—you know, because this Florence, it's a girl's name, but it looked like a little boy in there [laughter]. And there was an attraction. [laughter] So I kept on going back to the house even though she wasn't home, and—you know, my friend there wasn't home. I just had to see this person, and I'd keep on going by the bedroom saying hello, hello until finally they went like that [laughter]. They waved me in and uh, I—I came out that night [laughter]. Now and I realized very—you know, I didn't like being on the bottom at all. It was like "naaaah." I would get—I want to be able to please a woman, you know [laughter]? So my friends—uh, the other lesbians that came up over to the house—they took me out, and they said, "What do you wanna be, a butch or a femme?" And they asked back then—I don't know if they, you know—and I said, "I wanna be a butch" and they brought me to the store, and they bought me pants and a shirt and a t-shirt, took me to the Village and got me a haircut—and that place is still there, also—uh, but not telling me that they had no money for this haircut. You know, everybody got their haircuts and they run out and it's like, what the fuck? [laughter] I'm 13, didn't know what was going on, and it was like—the guy grabbed me. He didn't call the cops or nothing, but, uh, it scared the shit out of me. So I went home and my father took a look at me, and I had a flat top—which they call a crew cut today—and told him that I liked girls because I didn't know the word lesbian yet, and he threw me out of the house, uh, and I ended up sleeping in Washington Square Park for a while—uh, went home periodically. The cops grabbed me for truancy—you know, because I wasn't going to school. I stopped school at the second week of the sixth grade, and they [laughter]—so I got shipped to this nunnery. The court sent me to a nunnery on, uh, 14th—15th—16th Street, and between First and Second Avenue, and *that's* still there too, those fucking nuns—excuse me

[laughter]. And I walked in and I still had my haircut and she said to me—this big nun there—and she's like, "Are you a lesbian?" and I said no, because I didn't know what the—[laughter] the word, you know? I thought it was maybe my nationality [laughter]. I had no—I knew I liked girls, I had the haircut, but did not know that word yet, you know? Uh, so [laughter] we're up on the roof and I was coming onto this girl and the nun could read lips, so, uh, she put me on cleaning the floors with a toothbrush, until the courts cut me loose. And I—my father picked me up, and I didn't—you know—I just cut, went back to the Village. So I lived in the Village in Washington Square Park on a bench for a couple of years. And back then there was a huge, uh, homeless population of kids back down there, as it is today. That has not changed. Kids are still being thrown out of their family units for coming out, and they're ending up in the West Village. So that hasn't changed. The—the West Village was really comforting to me. It's like, all of these kids—you know, you fall into a certain clique—so we all would try to make money, and we'd go to McDonald's—ha, McDonald's—MacDougal Street [laughter] and we'd try to wait tables or do anything to get some money. So, I ended up going into a pizza place run by the Mob back then, and me and my friend, uh, started working for them running numbers, you know? And this one time [laughter] we decided not to give the money to them [laughter]. We went and used it on heroin, because I was on heroin back then. And so we're sitting—we're all sitting in Washington Square Park and this guy comes in through the front entrance from Bleecker Street and we said, "Oh my god"—you know, we knew that was one of his guys. And we take off and he runs after us, and it's dark out, and you can hear the shot. It was like—if he wanted to kill us, he would've, you know? He was scaring us. And he did. And that next morning when the pizza shop opened up, we went in there, and I mean on our hands and knees, and said [laughter] we were sorry, we'll get the money back for you, tell us what to do, and they put us on selling heroin. Uh, okay, I'm out of breath [laughter].

Kerr: Your—the time of being in the park—that came after being with the nuns?

Toole: It was before the nuns, and then I went back home, and that's when they grabbed me. So, it was before the nuns and after the nuns. Right after the nuns it was like—I stayed there. I didn't go back to the house or nothing.

Kerr: Okay. We—um, you spoke of your earliest memory of New York and I wonder, what's your earliest memory of yourself?

Toole: Of myself? Wow, what a great question. [laughter] I guess the first memory of myself was sitting—sitting in that tree and realizing that I was by myself. That I was alone, and that no one was going to take care of me and that I had to do it myself. And I had to be like maybe 10, then—nine, 10. Realizing that no one's going to help me. I gotta fight myself and try to get out of this predicament. And wanted my mommy. [laughter] Yeah, I think that's—yeah, I think so.

Kerr: Do you remember what you were wearing? Or what your hands looked like?

Toole: Well, my hands were small [laughter]. You know, I was like—the tree, it was a huge tree, and there was like, a little seat in there, 'cause all the branches opened up, so it was like a little seat, and I was usually in shorts or long pants and a—my father's t-shirt or my brother's t-shirt, and when I wasn't in that I was in uniform because I went to an all-girls catholic school, uh, where I had a major crush on one of the nuns there, and I believe—I think I was in maybe the second grade, eight years old—somewhere around there—and I think she knew what was going on—you know, in my house—and she taught me how to box [laughter]. And she went away—she went to the Vatican—and I, uh, was heartbroken [laughter]. But I think she knew that there was something going on, you know? I was always raggedy tagged, wasn't cleaned, never really had home-cooked meals. My father was a brakeman on Grand Central, and, uh, him and his friends would break into the freight cars, you know? So for like, months and months, he brought us home boxes of marshmallow swirl, so that's all we ate, was that marshmallow [laughter]—stick a spoon in and eat marshmallow for months, because there was never any food. He was out drinking it, or gambling it, or whatever, but there was never any food in the house. It was crappy [laughter].

Kerr: That's a good segue to, um... Tell me about a meal from your youth that was good.

Toole: When my mom was home from the hospital, that was a good meal, you know? Because she would go shopping. She'd come home from the hospitals and knew who I was, and was pretty level, uh, on what she was doing. So I guess the best thing was pork chops—fried pork chops, mashed potatoes, creamed corn, and a big glass of milk [laughter]. That was—uh, that was good.

Kerr: You were talking about when you met women and they asked you if you wanted to be butch or femme.

Toole: [laughter] Yeah.

Kerr: How did you know—did you know what those words meant?

Toole: Not really—well. I must've somewhere because I was like right away saying butch. I wanted to be on top [laughter]. So, you know, I had—somewhere in my brain must've heard them talking about these things, but not—not the word "lesbian." That was like… [laughter] Her asking me that was, "No I'm not lesbian, I'm Irish!" [laughter]

Kerr: What do you think butch meant to you at that time?

Toole: It meant, for me, uh, that I had control, you know? And I'm sure femmes feel the same way, I dunno [laughter]. But for me back then, at that time, was that I had control of where I wanted to go, what I wanted to do, how I wanted to be. That it was alright to like girls, you know? And that queer family helped me realize that—that it was okay. That there was nothing really wrong with me [laughter]. Yeah.

Kerr: Can you say more about what you mean when you say "that queer family"?

Toole: Well, it was the—it was all the kids in the park. It was the butch that brought me out and her best friend. And they—they were much, much older. Like when I was 13, they were in their—maybe middle, late 20s, when she brought me out. And I thank you for that [laughter]. It was a family unit. And I found that through my whole life of homelessness there was always a family unit somewhere, you know? So there was all different—butches, femmes, and gay boys. And queens and—and we were all kids, you know? We were just trying to make it—survive—and we became a family. So that's what it was about. And I—I guess as I'm thinking now is that maybe that was helping them also, all of us talking together—you know, even though we were all on drugs, we were all alcoholics, and we were kids—but we would—you know, we were messed up. But all of us talking, I'm sure it helped them also.

Kerr: Do you remember any conversations from that time?

Toole: Ah. The only conversations I can remember are about pimping [laughter] and how to get money. You either had to rob somebody or, uh… Who we were gonna snatch, who was gonna be on what corner, [laughter] who's watching the sergeant, you know? Uh…

AJ Lewis: May I ask, do you remember what year or so you were living in the park, around?

Toole: That was 1963.

Lewis: '63?

Toole: '62, '63. Yeah. Because at the end of '63 I had stolen, uh, the cab. Or '64. [laughter] And went to California with it [laughter]. And I've just got my FBI—not just, Elana got me my FBI files, she said that—but—and I was like, "That's not everything in there!" They only gave me like, 15 things, [laughter] and I said, "That's not everything, where's the rest of the states?" [laughter] But the California one was in there, I'm sorry [laughter].

Kerr: How old are you in '62, if you were born in...?

Toole: Thirteen? Thirteen. Yeah.

Kerr: And you just saw—do you want to tell the story?

Toole: Well, [laughter] there was me and these two girls and they were sisters—were they sisters? No. They were cousins. And, uh, I was going with one of them, right, and then there was this fella, [laughter] right, and he took care of a church or something [laughter]? But anyway, we were stealing cars left and right and selling them, and this one time we were like, "Let's go to California!" And this is in '64, so we ended up—even though he worked in a church—we ended up stealing a New York taxi cab. And they weren't all yellow back then. So this cab was light blue with fuchsia doors, right? And it still had the taxicab thing up there and it still had the meter, right? And we were like, "Let's go to California," you know? So two girls jumped in, I jumped in, he jumped in, and we're

off. And we're trying to work our way through—through the states, and we got to Van Horn, Texas—miserable little place [laughter]—and we never opened up the trunk, right? So we get to Van Horn, Texas and this guy comes out and he's got his—takes a look at us—New York City plates, taxi cab, and these queers in [laughter] their car, right. And so he—they hit us with loitering and, uh—oh my god, I just looked at those papers—loitering and a few other charges, right? So, I never told them how old I was—and the girls did, they gave their right ages—but they popped the trunk [laughter], which we should've done [laughter]. Although we would've, you know, never thought anything of it—but in the back, in the trunk—back in the sixties, and—and maybe still today, I dunno I'm not sure—they put black or white or color photos in the front of the theatre of different parts of the movie you were going to go in and see, right? So, the movie was *Mondo Cane*. I don't know if you've ever heard of it. It's a cult film now. It's one of the first movies where they show bare-breasted women [laughter]. So, these photos were of that, right? So the Sherriff, you know—he was like the Sherriff, the judge—he was like everything. He was like one of those Andy Griffith movies. It was like, what the fuck, you know? Uh, so they hit me with white slavery, right, which is bringing a minor over the state line for the purpose of prostitution. Which I do, but I wasn't doing it then, so, shit catches up with you eventually. And the two girls gave their right ages and they were shipped back to New York—expedited back to New York. So me and the guy are in there, and it's—never seen him for 18 months, you know [laughter]? We could yell to each other back and forth. We couldn't smoke, but the Sherriff's wife would once in a while come and give me a cigarette, and they'd give us Vienna sausages [laughter]. I never want to see them again. It's like, oh my god, Vienna sausages, and big things of water. So they brought the townspeople through, [laughter] right, because it was like a—a steel door thing—they could look into you, and then two walls—three walls—but at the top of the back wall was a thing like that where you could see the street [laughter]. It's just like in the cowboy movies, [laughter] and people would come by and stare and stare at us [laughter]. Right, the New York City freaks, you know? And they held us for 18 months, and on—they finally let us go—and they gave us back the cab, right—idiots—they gave us some of our money back, and the—the Sherriff was like, "Get out now." And we're starving, so we didn't get out right then. We went to the nearest little diner there [laughter] and ordered all of this food, and we're sitting there and see all of these big cats come in [laughter] through the front door, and it's him and his deputies, "Didn't I"—just like in the movies. "Didn't I tell you to get out…" [laughter] And we told him we'd take the food to go [laughter] and got the fuck out of there, and then got the cab as far as California. We made a wrong turn on a red light and they busted us again, right, and this time I—I was tired. I gave them my right age. Uh, first they had me in the women's prison, and then I—when I told them my right age, they put me in the juveniles side, and they gave me what they call a floater—and all the states do this—and a floater means that, you know, they send you back to wherever you came from with the stipulation that you can't go back to that state for 10, 15, 20 years. I was back a couple months later but, you know… [laughter] Uh, yeah. That was my taxi cab adventure [laughter]. But we used to steal cars all the time and go for a state, dropping them off in different places and getting money.

Kerr: Um, what do you think the townspeople saw when they came to see you and your—your fellow inmate?

Toole: [laughter] Well they seen two girls that look like girls, and then they saw me [laughter]. And back then it was ace bandages, you know? I'm so glad they made something different [laughter]. Uh, and I had a crew cut. I think they—you know, a lot of laughing, a lot of snickering. At night they'd be yelling at us.

Kerr: What would they yell?

Toole: That we were faggots, that we were—you know? Just a whole bunch of shit. And—yeah, I think they thought we were freaks, and that we weren't wanted in their town. And for us to get out [laughter]. Which we could not wait. I don't even know why they let us out. I got nothing. No paperwork, no nothing, they just let us go. [laughter] It's like... [laughter]

Kerr: Earlier you said the word queer family. We talked a little about that, but is queer the word you used back then?

Toole: No! If you called me a queer back then, we'd be in a fist fight, you know? If you said—called me a queer 17 years ago we'd be in a fist fight. I would knock you down and stomp on you. It was a bad word. We didn't like it. It wasn't until I sobered up and started thinking about things and hanging out with QEJ [Queers for Economic Justice] —uh, with them—when they—when we first decided to call us Queers for Economic Justice, it was like—I had to wrap my head around this. It was like, "queer," and I'm—I think I was one of the oldest ones on there, uh—oh, no, Amber [Hollibaugh] was—and I couldn't wrap my head around queer, and now I own it. Yeah. It's like, now... Yeah, those be—beginning years, uh, were hard for me [laughter].

Kerr: What were words you would've used in the late…?

Toole: Butch.

Kerr: Butch.

Toole: Femme. Drag queen. You know?

Kerr: And—was freaks a bad word?

Toole: Yes.

Kerr: Yeah.

Toole: Yeah. Still is [laughter]. I—you know? Don't call me that [laughter].

Kerr: I promise.

Toole: Okay [laughter].

Kerr: Um, you said rather quickly something about ace bandages. Was that something you used as a…?

Toole: Yeah. Ace bandages was the thing that all the butches used to bind themselves. And then it was like, spandex underwear—you know, that you would cut out and use that, but they'd roll up, also. It was like "Oh, god". But yeah, that was the thing. And almost every butch that I know back then, yeah, bound themselves.

Kerr: In the jail, did they let you keep your ace bandage?

Toole: Yes. Yes. But I didn't put it on.

Kerr: You didn't put it on?

Toole: No. I was in a cell by myself and it was like [laughter] what the fuck? [laughter] You know?

Kerr: I mean, did you…?

Toole: That shit hurts sometimes. [laughter] You know, putting that thing on. It's hard by yourself.

Kerr: I'm picturing, like, it's not a—it's not one piece of cloth that you wrap around your body.

Toole: Yes.

Kerr: It is?

Toole: Yes. They didn't have the real wide ones back then, now they do, but maybe about that wide—

Kerr: Is that about an inch?

Toole: Yeah. No, maybe two inches? And it was in a roll, and it's like, "RGGH! RGGH! RGGH!" trying to hold it in place and—you know, yeah.

Kerr: Where would you buy it?

Toole: In the drugstore. There was a Whelan's drugstore on Eighth Street and Sixth [Avenue]. They had a—you know, we'd buy our stuff in there.

Kerr: Would you, um, buy a few at a time or…?

Toole: No, just one.

Kerr: Just one.

Toole: Yeah. Just one.

Kerr: You said it was hard to do by yourself.

Toole: Yeah.

Kerr: So what was a normal—what was a nice ritual of it?

Toole: A nice ritual?

Kerr: Yeah. Like what's an example of it not sucking?

Toole: So a good night would be, uh, one of my good friends—and I won't say their name—we would bind each other. So, that would be perfect. Wasn't gonna let a femme do it.

Kerr: Uh huh.

Toole: That would be a no-no, you know? So it was someone—uh, the same—another butch would do it—you know, would help you.

Kerr: And would you let a cis man do it?

Toole: No. No. Hell no [laughter].

Kerr: What was your relationship to cis men at that time?

Toole: I had none. When I left my house I knew—well, I knew the Mafia. I knew those guys, but that was a different kind of relationship. I respected them and they eventually respected me. Other than that, cops. Yeah. So there was none. No interest, you know? Uh, but, that's not true. Johns, but not much interaction with them. It was like, get the money, let the girl go. So yeah, not so much interaction with straight guys [laughter]. Or women. Or—a couple [laughter].

Kerr: [laughter] Can you tell me—I wonder, do you have a very broad definition of what pimp means? It seems to me it covers a lot.

Toole: It does?

Kerr: Or how would you—how would you define it?

Toole: Well, back in—there's been different times in my life, and different parts of my life. Back then it was my job—it was to protect her, make sure she gets paid, and keep her safe. That was my job. And another time—it would have been in Washington, D.C.—it

was finding johns for her, which, I've gotten an arrest record there for procuring [laughter] for that. But also keeping them safe, making sure what hotels they were going to, what the room numbers were, you know, and keeping them happy in bed. You know, I—I never fought with any of my girls, and the only thing I can remember is like, if I was mad at them, and this and that, they couldn't get in my bed for a few days. And, uh, they would be very sad [laughter].

Kerr: How many girls did you have working with you at any one time?

Toole: At any one time. Uh, let's see. At 14th Street there was three. Village it was a number, I have no idea how many. Yeah—yeah, I don't know. It was a couple [laughter]. It was a couple [laughter].

Kerr: How did you get into helping girls?

Toole: "Helping girls"?

Kerr: [laughter] Well, I don't, I don't know [laughter]—how did you get into pimping, how about that? [laughter]

Toole: [laughter] You know, because it would be helping them and helping myself more. So, I must've been about 17? And there was always this guy standing around. Always. No matter what—you know. He'd always just be there dressed nice, and next to the newspaper stand on Eighth Street and Sixth Avenue—and that's still there—what it used to be, it used to be a—I want to say a [inaudible] or something like that. Some kind of cafeteria back then. And he'd always be standing at the newspaper stand, right? And this one day we were walking by, and he pulled me over, you know, and he was like "Do you wanna make some money?" I was like "What do I have to do?" And he brought me to this, uh, party, right? And talking to other people—uh, what they needed. So they needed young boys and girls, you know? And I am not going to say the name, ever, on—on this [laughter] but it ended up being a, uh, high-profile person, and so I ended up doing that. Finding younger kids—younger than me—for these parties that would be happening in different places in the West Village back then.

Kerr: For sex parties?

Toole: There was—it was—it was for everything, you know? But the young ones, uh, were for preferred customers that this person served. Or clients. So, uh—so I'm—and that's not the first time. But that, that's one story. How I got interested in wanting to do it in the first place was maybe a year before that. My friend brought me down to New Orleans, right, and introduced me to this young lady much older than me, who was one of the top madams in New Orleans at the time, right? We became lovers and, uh, after we broke up and I came back to New York, she'd come up to New York like twice a year. She loved young butches. I mean, loved them, [laughter] right? And she'd come up and get—we'd rent an apartment for a couple—you know, for a month or so, and she'd hire me—and I know this is going to sound ridiculous—but would hire me, and I would sit in

the living room on the couch, right, and there'd be lines of fucking young butches that wanted to be with this woman. It was insane, you know? "Oh my god, so-and-so is coming to New York!" [laughter] The word would spread like wildfire, and, uh, she—she was an insatiable [laughter] shall I say? So there'd be all of these young butches going in and out of the bedroom, right? So when I hear my name called—"Junior!" —and that's—because I was a baby butch back then, too, and they called me Junior—I would have to take this young person [laughter], and they'd maybe be my age or whatever, into the other bedroom and make love to them. And show them, this is how you please a woman. These are the questions that you ask. This is what you touch. This is... [laughter]. So I was a trainer [laughter] of butches to—to go into, into her. Satisfy her, you know?

Kerr: And did that lead…?

Toole: Because I was that good. [laughter] Still. Am. [laughter]

Kerr: [laughter] Does that come from confidence?

Toole: Yeah! [laughter] I knew how to please a woman. I—and this, this madam taught me a lot—you know, when we were lovers. Like, she taught me a fucking lot [laughter]. Uh, so yeah. I'm very confid—very comfortable and very confident when I'm in the bedroom—

Kerr: Did you think about…?

Toole: Or, um, bathroom stall. Or—[laughter] on a bus [laughter].

Kerr: Did you think about—when you were learning, and when you were teaching, were you thinking about gender? Were you thinking about who and how you were in your body?

Toole: I—I never liked my breasts, you know? And I knew that from a very early stage. Uh, but I liked the rest of me, and I—I pretty much knew me. I knew—you know, by then, I'm a lesbian, I'm a stone butch, and—and proud of it. And no one's going to take that away from me. Uh, I don't know if that answered your question [laughter].

Kerr: Um, you talked about how you went to California and then you came back to New York?

Toole: Mhm.

Kerr: How did you come back to New York?

Toole: Well when the state gives you a floater, they pay for you. [laughter] They pay it.

Kerr: Okay.

Toole: To get you out of their state [laughter].

Kerr: So how old were you when you came back to New York?

Toole: I was—when I got the floater, I was 14.

Kerr: Okay. And did—what did New York look like to you when you came back?

Toole: I—and I still do today—I love coming into—flying into New York and seeing the skyline. I remember the Twin Towers being built, you know? So, coming into New York and seeing them—back then I—we didn't fly into JFK. We flew into Idlewild Airport, which is now JFK. Uh. And it was—it was a lot different. Like, a couple of months ago I was on 42nd Street and I seen another—I came out of the train and I was lost [laughter]. It was like, "I—I don't know this place." And had to, like, look at the signs—the street signs—to see where the fuck I was, you know? It has changed so, so, so much. I think, uh, even the Village has changed a lot. All the people that protest the young guys, now, that are down there, are queers that were down there when I was down there, and hated that we were chased, and now they're doing the same fucking shit. I have this argument with this guy all the time that lives down there. It's like, "Man, you were out here with me. What are you doing?" [laughter] you know?

Kerr: You mean the people you were homeless with then are now the ones complaining about the people that are homeless now?

Toole: Yeah! Like, they were going to the bars. They might not have been homeless, but these queers that are living down there now were also down there in those days, drinking in the bars, hanging out, uh, and now some of them are like, "We don't want that. It's too noisy," [laughter] you know? It's like, we were noisy, too—you know, back then. Probably more.

Kerr: So we have a sense of like, your childhood and your teenage years. What were your 20s like [laughter]?

Toole: Twe—[laughter] twenties? Ha. Twenties I was so hooked on heroin. Uh. I guess—what year was that?

Kerr: If you were 20…

Toole: If I was 20...

Kerr: Like the late '60s, '70s, right?

Toole: Okay. So, the late 60s? So I got out of—selling heroin, right—so, uh… [laughter] There was this gay bar, like, kitty corner from Stonewall, and it was a lesbian bar—

Lewis: May I ask, when you were like, selling heroin in the sixties and also pimping, were you doing that with like, other butches or other queers?

Toole: Oh, yeah. Yeah, absolutely. You know, it was—maybe we'd get busted, you know, but we're not going to get beat up. People aren't gonna be chasing us, but if we were stealing, people gonna chase us [laughter]. Uh, if we were pickpocketing or mugging somebody, we might get hurt ourselves. So selling heroin was pretty safe to do, for them. [laughter] So, they chose that.

Kerr: Were you living communally?

Toole: Yeah. Like, we'd all get together and whatever money we had, we'd put it together and there'd be a—there's a hotel on St. Mark's and Eighth Street, and that's still there, too—uh, and I think it was seven dollars a night? Something like that. And we—they'd always give us this big front room and we'd—like, 20 of us would sleep. Just hang out there. Then the Marlton Hotel on Bleecker—Eighth Street? Seventh Street? You know, we'd rent out when we were pimping—we would rent out the penthouses up on the top floor for us, because the girls were making good money, and then uh, we'd rent out a smaller room for the girls to work out of, and we did that for a long time. Heroin would use up the money and then we'd end up back on the streets again.

Kerr: And so—then the heroin selling and the pimping were around the same time?

Toole: Yeah. Yeah, absolutely. So, in '67? '68? Uh, this bar that was across the street, the—wasn't selling, and this guy, Jimmy [Garofolo], who, mafia guy, and another guy—and I won't say his name, because his name is all over the place already—but uh, one was the bouncer and Jimmy was the overseer of the bar, right? It was a lesbian bar. And then [laughter] he must've seen, must've felt sorry for me or something [laughter], you know, and he made me the—one of the bouncers [laughter]. Because Chuck would go from one bar to the other bar, right, uh [laughter] and—so he, it, when you walked in this place, right, it looked like a regular bar, you know? Where patrons could drink and everything. But if you kept on walking straight there was this big door and when you opened up that door it was like walking into heaven [laughter]. It was painted black and there was like, bench—benches and tables and they were all black, right.

Kerr: Sorry, that's your phone.

Toole: Oh! It's me! [laughter]

Kerr: Yeah.

Toole: Ah, I don't know what she's laughing at. I have no idea what she's laughing at [laughter]. She's going, "Hahaha!" Uh, and so there was a stage there, right, and I'd sit up on the stage. And let me tell you, the best thing about that job? Was sitting on that stage, because you know how many girls wanted to be with me because they thought I had some power? [laughter] It was like—oh my god! Every night [laughter].

Lewis: Do you remember what the bar was?

Toole: Huh?

Lewis: Do you remember what the bar was?

Toole: It's the Bon—not the Bon Soir—the Club Bohemia [Café Bohemia]. Yeah. And I tried to Google that, and it's like it's lost in history.

Lewis: Yeah, I haven't heard of it.

Toole: I found one thing on it that's—another woman was writing about—and saying she couldn't find it either, you know? But it was open for years and I don't know why it, uh, got lost in history. It was a great place.

Kerr: Remember where it was again?

Toole: 57 Barrow Street![1] [laughter]

Kerr: What year is this?

Toole: This had to be like '67, '68. It was pre-Stonewall. And so, anyway, I'd sit on this stage, right, and when the cops would come in—uh, you know, because we were raided all the time, and sometimes we knew it, sometimes we didn't—Jimmy would have a button underneath the bar, right? So when the cops came in, he'd hit the button and a red light would go off back in the back room which meant I had to make sure that there was boy-girl, boy-girl, boy-girl if there was dancing. Everybody had to hide their—their alcohol, because it was bring your own, because we weren't allowed to be served, and hopefully that everybody had identification. But, uh, whether you had ID or not, they didn't like us and you'd be arrested and hauled off. It didn't matter. Uh, they were just nasty back then—I mean, really bad.

Kerr: So there were guys in the lesbian bar?

Toole: Yeah. Yeah. There'd be some gay boys in there. Just like, you know, the butches and femmes would go to Stonewall—we'd hang out over there, uh, and it was the same thing here. People would come in, you know? And I remembered Stormé, uh, DeLarverie, right? Val? You know Stormé, right?

Kerr: No.

Toole: Agh. She just passed away.

Kerr: I'm sorry.

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[1] The Café Bohemia was actually located at 15 Barrow Street. Source: http://lostwomynsspace.blogspot.com/2012/01/bohemian-cafe-bohemia.html

Toole: They—they just passed away. My elder. And they worked in the—uh, the, the club where everybody was—all the butches, all the—you know? People were female-bodied. I—I don't have the words for this. Why don't I have the words for this shit? [laughter] Where the, uh, waiters were the—the guys were the burlesque girls, and the chorus lines and everything else. It was Club 67 [Club 82], I think it was? But anyways, Stormé was—came through this door this one night and had these two beautiful girls on— on their arms—

Kerr: To the club that you worked at?

Toole: Yeah, yeah, yeah. Had the beautiful women on her, and it's like, "Oh my god. I want to grow up and just be like that," [laughter] you know? That's what I wanted. I mean, dressed to the nines. Cool suit, three piece, the tie—it was just—the cut. It was like, "Oh my god, I want this. So, they always sat in the corner booth, and I went over and talked to them, and they were telling me that I should come over and work for this club also, that I—you know, that I pass enough, that I should come work there. Which I never did. Uh, but yeah, Stormé was—Stormé was big. Really, really. You can Google Stormé and a lot of stuff will come up. A lot of stuff. Matter of fact, I think Stormé and Miss Major [Griffin-Gracy], uh, worked together at the club for a period of time. Yeah [laughter].

Kerr: Did you and Stormé become buddies?

Toole: No. Nah. No, it was just somebody that I looked up to. That like—you know, "I want that suit." [laughter]

Kerr: Did you get that suit?

Toole: I did, I did. I remember the store [laughter]—I can see it. So, working on 14th Street as a pimp, right? Got my suit—like, pimped out, you know? And we all get arrested. Cops come and they arrest all of us. And I can visualize—I mean, I can close my eyes and see it today for some reason, it just—here was all these butches in a bullpen, right—in a cell, all in our suits and our finery: bright green suits, hats with the feathers and—it was like, all of these butches—and I look back on that now and it's like, "Oh my god, [laughter] that was fun [laughter]." But, uh—but I don't even know what you asked me [laughter].

Kerr: Where did you get the suit?

Toole: Where—where did we buy our clothes? I know it was 125th Street but I can't remember the name of it. Uh, yeah, but it was uptown. 125th—

Kerr: Were they—were they tailored for you?

Toole: Uh, not all the time. Most of them, they weren't.

Kerr: Mhm.

Toole: The girls would fix it, but uh, yeah. I wore them well. [laughter]

Kerr: And how—considering sometimes you'd be on the street, sometimes you'd be in those hotels, like, did you have—where were your suits? How did you keep them so beautiful?

Toole: Yeah, so. Even though we'd be on the streets, we had places. We knew people, you know? So they'd be at, maybe—this woman—um, god—down on the Lower East Side where we'd keep a lot of stuff. You can Google—I'm not going to say her name, but uh, she—she had a child, a little baby, and it was a—you know, her apartment was like a shooting gallery, and uh, the husband beat the child to death, and they ended up throwing the baby off the Brooklyn Bridge. So *The New York Times*, and *Time Magazine*, and the cops would come down to 14th Street just ask so many questions, but—anyway, that's, uh—we keep our clothes in different places, you know? Hotels, sometimes—their desk clerk would be alright and we'd leave a bag there.

Kerr: Yeah.

Toole: [laughter] Yeah.

Kerr: Um, yeah. I think it's hard to talk about all these sad moments in your life but it also seems like, um, there's periods of lots of violence and death, and how did—did you all talk about the extreme stuff that y'all were witnessing?

Toole: Uh, you know, every weekend, the… We hung out on Eighth Street and Sixth Avenue. That was our corner—butch—that was the butch corner. That's where we met our girls. It was directly across the street from the House of D [laughter]. But, uh, there'd be these carloads of guys from Long Island and Jersey, and they'd come and beat the living shit out of us. Yeah, we'd talk about it—you know, in jail, because the cops would come and let them go and we'd go to jail [laughter]. We were the ones that were always going to jail. I think the—really the only conversation that stood out was that we all agreed that that's our corner. We weren't going to be chased off. We weren't going to be beat off. That we were going to hold it. And we did [laughter]. Yeah.

Kerr: How long was that your corner?

Toole: Huh?

Kerr: How long was that your corner?

Toole: Oh, phew, god. Twenty years?

Lewis: [laughter]

Kerr: What're the dates—what're the years?

Toole: From '63, up until we—well maybe not 20, maybe 15 years. Uh.

Kerr: So up until the mid to late 70s.

Toole: Yeah, you know? It was like, that was our corner.

Kerr: What changed?

Toole: Uh, I—I guess it was the heroin, and the pills, and ending up hanging out on 14th Street and Third Avenue. And didn't come to the Village that often anymore, you know?

Kerr: Mhm.

Toole: And staying over on that side because there was a ho stroll there.

Kerr: There was a what?

Toole: A ho stroll.

Kerr: Okay. Yeah.

Toole: And, you know, it wasn't like in the Village where you had to be careful of procuring guys and this and that. Even though you knew—you *knew* [laughter] when a guy wanted to—uh, was—is looking for someone. But it was much easier over there, because the girls could just walk the walks. And, uh, they'd pick up their johns. It was a seedier neighborhood, [laughter] you know? Uh, but the violence in the Village—I had a friend, we called her Only Mona—and I don't know why we called her that—and we were living—and they were building up the Twin Towers—and we were living on the West Side Highway when it was still a highway [laughter] up there. And, you know, people were killed, and beat up, and mangled all the time, but Mona stood out to me, was... She was a good friend, you know, and she went out one night tricking and ended up—they found her, uh, strung up in the East Village, in Bowery, in an abandoned building. She was hung and tortured pretty badly. So, you know, we all came together and panhandled and did what we could and then ended up burying her. Buried a few people.

Kerr: Mm. You would have services for them?

Toole: No.

Kerr: You'd just…

Toole: I don't remember any service [laughter].

Kerr: What does burying mean?

Toole: Uh, putting them in the ground, you know, making sure that they weren't going to go to Potter's Field. That somebody knew who they were, and remembered them, you know? Yeah.

Kerr: Yeah. And if girls had babies, did y'all take care of the babies together?

Toole: No [laughter].

Kerr: No. What happened?

Toole: I don't remember anybody having babies. Truthfully.

Kerr: Uh huh.

Toole: Or maybe I—

Kerr: Do you remember—

Toole: Oh, wait, I do! I—and this hit the front page of the *Daily Mirror*. It's like *The [New York] Post*, but it was the *Daily Mirror* back then. So my—my friend had a baby right? And he was about five, six. Between five and seven [laughter]. And she was a big dealer of smoke, right, [laughter] and for some reason she lost him in Washington Square Park and he went to a cop [laughter]. And the cop said, "Where do you live?" And he knew where he lived and he brought the cop—the cop brought him back home, [laughter] right, and into the house. So the kid was like offering him a—you know, drinks and this and that, and a cigarette, and they opened it up and it was all marijuana [laughter]. So it was all over the news, it hit the front page of the newspaper, that all of it—and I mean it was a *lot* of marijuana in there—uh, yeah, that's about the only time—kid that I know of. I don't know any of—I can't remember any of them having children. Why?

Kerr: Do you remember abortions?

Toole: No. Huh.

Kerr: Maybe they protected you from the information?

Toole: No, I would know.

Kerr: Mm.

Toole: Huh. That's a good question. I have to think on this. Like why, why weren't—well, you know, there were condoms.

Kerr: Were there always condoms?

Toole: No. [laughter] Uh. Yeah, I don't know. Now I don't know! See? [laughter]

Kerr: Um…

Toole: Maybe it was blowjobs, I don't know [laughter].

Kerr: Maybe. Yeah, exactly. So, I'm looking and we have—uh, we have 10, 15 minutes left.

Toole: Oh, I need to pee.

Kerr: Yeah, yeah, yeah, go.

Toole: Cool.

Kerr: Um, so in our last 10 minutes of our first interview, it might be nice to talk about that period of time around QEJ, which is Queers for Economic Justice.

Toole: Uh, yeah. So in 1998, uh, I couldn't walk anymore and my fellow homeless folks put me in a—brought me to a medical van and took me to the New York City shelter system, where I ended up in a place called New Providence Women's Shelter, which is here off 45th Street, uh, where I sobered up and started looking around at the world—you know, because I hadn't seen it in many years [laughter]. And this woman came in—Áine Duggan came into my shelter, and she was inspecting it and just seen something in me and invited me for coffee, and we started talking, and she said, "I want to bring you to the LGBT Center," and I said, "Fuck no. I'm not going to that place." I used to sleep outside of it in the front when it first opened and they chased me [laughter]. You know, and I thought it was a safe place, and it's a bunch of rich white guys, and—anyway I felt like I didn't want to be there. I didn't have the right clothes, maybe, and I didn't smell right—and that's the way homeless people think when you're invited to these kinds of things. So anyways, she dragged me—and it was—they were doing renovations at the LGB Center that was on 12th Street—West 12th Street—and it was these people talking about welfare made a difference. So it was Joseph DeFilippis, it was Amber Hollibaugh, it was Ignacio—Ignacio Rivera, it was, uh, Ricky Blum, Marty Duberman, uh, it was all of these people talking about homeless shit—not homeless stuff, but they were talking about welfare, and I said, "That's me." And they were talking about drugs and I was like, "That's me." And they were talking about homelessness and I said, "Oh my god, do they know I'm here in the audience?" [laughter] Like, "They're talking about my life." So, being homeless for over 25 years—and I think that this is true for most chronic homeless people, that we think we don't have a voice, and who the fuck wants to listen to a homeless person? Stop on the street and listen to us? So that night, after they were [done], they asked the audience, uh, did anybody want to say something? And I don't know how but the microphone ended up in my hand, you know? And I started—I got up and I started telling them what I thought they needed to do [laughter], coming from the shelter system, and that there's so many of us in there and no one knows about it. And I haven't fucking shut up yet and I—you know, I keep on telling people. So, anyway, they brought me into this fold, I started going to their meetings, and uh, 9/11 happened, uh, and at these meetings they were just talking, talking, talking, and then decided let's—it was Queers for Economic

Justice—uh, something else, because it was a bunch of organizations, network—and we decided to make—start our own organization, right, so I started going to all of these meetings where it was just QEJ people, and they were talking and talking, and I never said a word for almost two years, and finally they brought me—Amber and Ignacio brought me into another room, and Terry Boggis, and they were like "How come you don't talk?" and I was like, "I don't know what the fuck you're saying." I said, "I mean, you guys are using words that—you know, I try to memorize the words and then go home that night and look them up in the dictionary to see what the fuck they're talking about but too embarrassed to say that in front of a whole room full of people." So that's what I told them. I said, "I didn't know, you'd be saying homeless and this and that, so I knew these words and I knew you were trying to do something good." So, when I told them that I didn't understand what half the time they were talking about, the whole conversation came down a little bit, so that I could have a better understanding, which I appreciated. So QEJ was formed, and they wanted to start like, a program, and they were just talking about it, and I asked Joseph DeFilippis [laughter]—I said, "Can I give you my resume for this position?" I had no idea what a resume looked like. I knew the word. Never seen one, never tried to write one, had no idea, but knew the word and that that's how you get a job [laughter]. And he was like, "No, we're gonna make this position, we're building this for you." You know, "You will be the director of this." And I was like, are they kidding? So, you know, QEJ was my family. They were—kept me sober, because I was very, very new into the world of sober [laughter]—being sober, when I met them. So it was something for me to keep doing and to be involved in and learning, uh, where I learned the word queer [laughter]. It was a safety net for me—like, I had all their phone numbers if I got nervous, to call them—uh, so they were—you know, they became my family, and I became the director of their shelter project. Now, it was the second week of sixth grade, right? I don't know how to handle people, I don't have the proper words to talk to people in an office [laughter] without saying "fuck you," and I had no idea of meetings or how to, as you know [laughter], how to bring people or have a conversation about what our next steps were because I never knew how to do that. No, I had no structure. I had no nothing, [laughter] you know, but they let me run wild and, uh, go into the shelter system. I had this—you know, shelter directors say I have a gift for making them bend to my will [laughter]. So we got into most of all the shelters to do this work, uh, for queers that are in there, and—you know QEJ—it was really sad when it closed. It was like… And I never realized how—how it affected me until a few years later. I think I was in denial and in depression because I came out of a shelter, I got a job as a director, now I had nothing, and I didn't know what to do, you know? I had no idea. Like, how do I go get a job? And, uh—and I still don't have one, so pssh this [laughter]. And also, you know, naming the building Miss Major-Jay Toole Building was like, "Are you fucking kidding me?" You can do a lot better with your money [laughter]. But, what an honor. What an honor. It's—it's one of the biggest highlights of my life—is that a community thought something of me. It was cool. So, even that's breaking a barrier. FIERCE is out of the building. ALP [Audre Lorde Project]'s not sure. SRLP [Sylvia Rivera Law Project]'s gonna stay. SAS [Streetwise & Safe] isn't sure—uh, but hopefully they'll all still work together and, you know, keep on doing the work that we've—we're all striving for. The building was like a one shout-shop? Stop? Have your lawyers, have your—your advocates—you know, you have me, if you're homeless. It just—it was good for people—people that were on the edge, that had no other place to

go—you know, and didn't feel comfortable going to the Center. Like, come to Jay [laughter]. Come to the building. Like, you can sit there and relax and nobody's going to chase you. Uh, yeah. [laughter] QEJ was good to me.

Kerr: Um, I guess our last question would be what's—um, you decide. Either what's your favorite memory of that time, or what do you think is the biggest success?

Toole: Of QEJ or me? [laughter]

Kerr: None of you, because we're going to get to that. But of QEJ.

Toole: Okay. Biggest—one of the biggest successes of QEJ—that we lasted that long without getting shut down. That we didn't bend. We kept to our ideas, you know, and didn't let go of them around marriage or Don't Ask Don't Tell—Kenny Farrow was great on that stuff. So I think that's our greatest success, that we didn't bend to the will of society [laughter]—of whoever didn't like us. Which, most of these organizations didn't. And I think that's why the funding dried up: they didn't like us talking about homelessness. They—some of the organizations [laughter] actually told us that there was no more homeless problem in the shelter system with queers. It's like, are you kidding me? They listen to DHS department phone services and not to us. So, I think that's one of the biggest successes, is that we held our own. We kept our word. We did what we said we were going to do. And, yeah—what was the other question?

Kerr: I mean, I like your question. What do you think your biggest success is?

Toole: Oh, mine! [laughter] Uh—I think that I'm alive, you know? That, uh—I don't believe in God or, you know—but I'm very thankful, I don't know to who or to what, but I am so thankful that I had the opportunity to meet all the wonderful people that I have, uh, throughout the years. That people heard me, that I did have a voice. I think that's my biggest—that I'm here. That I—as a kid, I didn't think I'd make it to 18, and here I am, 68. That's my biggest—and my life [laughter]. And my seven cats [laughter]. And [laughter] you know, we need a big house [laughter].

Kerr: Cool.

Toole: Ah…

Kerr: Do you have last words? It seems like you have more to say.

Toole: May I—well, I was thinking, I don't feel it's a success? But I feel that I am a person that goes into the New York City shelter system for queers—and it's not a success yet because there's still so many of us in there. But if I touched one of them, that would be a success. I had this recurring dream ever—you know, maybe twice a year. It's the same dream over and over again. And I go to my old shelter, the Providence Women's Shelter, and there's a big sign there and it says "CLOSED, CLOSED DUE TO NO HOMELESSNESS". And it was—that would be a success. I know that that can never

happen but I can hope. I can wish. One queer at a time you know? That queer came into my shelter and put her hand out to me, and that's what I continue to do today. Today. Keep that hand out and hopefully somebody will fucking grab it, and I can help them in some way like Áine helped me that day. Cool.

Kerr: Cool. Thank you so much.

Toole: Thank you!

PART 3—NOVEMBER 24, 2017

AJ Lewis: Hello. My name is AJ Lewis, uh, and I will be having a conversation with Jay Toole for the New York City Trans Oral History Project, in collaboration with the New York Public Library's Community Oral History Project. Uh, this is an oral history project centered on the experiences of trans-identifying people. It is November 24, 2017, and this is being recorded at an NYU building in SoHo. Hi, Jay.

Jay Toole: Hey, how's it going, AJ?

Lewis: Good, thank you. And this is in fact part two of an interview that we started a couple of years ago.

Toole: Yeah, it has to be like almost two years now, you know?

Lewis: You're one of the very early contributors to the project, and I think you like, really kind of helped us snowball from there.

Toole: Awesome. Awesome.

Lewis: So I'm excited to talk to you. So we—I was reviewing the other interview and we left off somewhere in the mid-1960s, maybe we'll cover some ground again, totally fine. Um, but so you were, uh, living—your home base was mainly in the Village.

Toole: Correct. Correct.

Lewis: Is that right? Um, did you end up in Washington Square Park?

Toole: Yeah, it was—I guess I would say around '63, '64, around there. Uh, I was thrown out of my family unit for being—I came out as—I came home—I didn't know the words for lesbian and gay and all of that yet, but I did come home with a crew cut and my father threw me out of the house when I was 13, so I ended up in Washington Square Park only because the people that brought me out had taken me to Washington Square Park and the Village earlier, you know?

Lewis: What people was that?

Toole: Their names were Frankie and Ronnie [Angel], right?

Lewis: Uh-huh. Butches. Yeah.

Toole: They were both butches, and I met them in the Bronx as a 12 year old, and one of them brought me out, and uh, they started bringing me to the Village and showing me around, you know? So I knew where the Village was and it was like, oh my god, there's a lot of people that look like you, because I didn't look like them yet, you know? [laughter]. I still had like a Buster Brown haircut, because my father used to put a bowl on my head. Uh, so it was amazing to see a bunch of people that were—that I wanted to be. That I knew that was my soul, that was who I wanted to be, that's who I was, you know? So when uh, they took me for a haircut and got me all boys clothes and everything, and I went home and my dad threw me out. And uh—so I went to Washington Square Park. And back then—I don't see it too much today, and I talk to many people and they say the same thing, Washington Square Park is not the same as it was 50 years ago, 40 years ago. There's not that big queer presence anymore. Which is sad, you know? Because the park was very queer back then, when I was, uh, a young person. There was one—uh, in the central part of the park, along MacDougal Street, if you went down the center aisles of rows of benches, that's where all the queer young people would be. And there was many of us. I was never alone. There was always, oh, maybe 20, 20 to 30 young people. From different ages—from very young, my age, up into their 20s. You know, all homeless, all of us like trying to just survive in the park. It was—my first couple of nights down there were scary. I'd sleep in the bushes and the rats were like crazy—just as they are today, [laughter], you know—but I hid myself enough and covered myself enough so that I didn't get bit. It was just the noises that would scare me, until I fell into a group of young people that took me in and became like a family. So everybody had their own little cliques, I would say—you know, everybody had their own little families, but if something happened we would all come together. It wasn't that we were warring with each other or we were trying to hurt each other, it was just that certain people doing certain things—and I had different friendships, and uh…

Lewis: You can also take that if you want to pause it.

Toole: No, no. Uh, so I did meet these folks, you know, that started to take care of me, and it became like a family unit for that, and helped me survive and helped me to learn how to live on the streets, how to panhandle, how to boost, how to rob people [laughter]. Uh.

Lewis: And were, uh, you started describing that as like the queers.

Toole: Yeah.

Lewis: Which probably wasn't the language you were using at the time?

Toole: Yeah. Let me tell you, AJ. If you were to call me queer back then, I would have knocked you down and beat the shit out of you. Because queer word back then, where I

was brought up, was a very bad word, you know? You didn't call somebody queer without, you know, being offensive. It was a very offensive word, you know? Uh.

Lewis: This is a side question, but how did you learn how to fight?

Toole: [laughter] I learned how to fist fight—and this is going to sound very strange—but when I was about nine or 10, I was constantly being raped by my father and my brother, and I was brought up in the Catholic religion, went to Catholic church, went to all-girls Catholic school, you know? And there was a nun there, Sister Caroline. And, uh, I think she knew what was happening to me. And she taught me how to box, [laughter] you know, it was pretty amazing, and my mom was always put into, uh, mental institutions all my life. And at times my father would send me to the nuns and I'd live with them for long periods of time in the convent with them. And this nun was so great. I mean, she was tall—you know, not a beauty, but stunning to me, and she taught me how to fist fight. She taught me how to box, how to stand, how to hold myself, which was pretty amazing back then. And years—many years later when I think back on it, I said she knew. She was teaching me how to protect myself. She actually knew what was—that there was something wrong in my household. So that's where I learned to fight. I also learned to fight with my brother, who was always trying to, you know, either rape me or beat the shit out of me. So, I learned how to use my body in different ways, to fight back. Uh…

Lewis: I'm sorry, I got distracted. I wanted to ask you about, sort of what kinds of queers, to use that sort of anachronistic term, what kind of kids were hanging out in the park?

Toole: Uh, I don't know what that word is.

Lewis: Oh, to use an out of date—like, a sort of term from today to talk about then, which they wouldn't have used queers, but what kind of queers were hanging out in the park?

Toole: Uh, lots of butches. Lots of femmes. Lots of queens. Of course, transgender wasn't a word back then. Uh, I think it pretty much ran the spectrum of any kind of queer person that you know today. Only back then it was gay, femme, lesbian, you know? Butch, or as my mother once said to me—I went home once and she said oh, you're going out with your bulldozer friends. It was like, no, not bulldozers. [laughter] Close. But those were the terms back then. Uh, queer was not appropriate. The word was out there, but you read it in the dictionary it said somebody—I forget what it said in the dictionary, but it was very not a nice word for us to be used. And years later, when I joined Queers for Economic Justice—when I started—before it became an organization I started hearing everything—it was then that I embraced the word queer. It was like, “Oh, that's my word,” you know? I don't have to be scared of it anymore, or fight somebody for queer. I am—this is who I am and I embrace it, and that's, you know, how that happened. When—uh, also when I was a kid, I went home—oh, I must have been about 14—I went home to see if my mom was alright. I heard she had gotten out of the hospital so I went. And the truant officers came and grabbed me, [laughter] and they stuck me in this place and it's still there. Uh, it's right across the street from Beth Israel Hospital. It's a Catholic home for runaway girls [Good Shepherd Services], and I walked in—and this is before—I'm telling you, this is

how naïve I was back then. I didn't know the word lesbian, right? And here I am with a crew cut. Back then it was called a flat top. I walked in, and the nun at the door said to me, are you a lesbian? And I said no, because I didn't know what it was. And it was like—uh, they had me in, they made me put on this skirt and blouse and everything else, and they kept on asking me if I was, if I was, and I said, "No, I don't"—you know, because I… And I was up on the roof this one day of the place—I walked past it—a few times a year I walk past that place that I have to go by it. And I was up on the roof and I was talking to this girl and I was trying to, you know, pull her, right? And the nun was sitting there and she could read lips [laughter]. So they snatched me up and they made me scrub their whole gymnasium floor with a toothbrush. Scrub and scrub and scrub. Thankfully I got out of there. The courts let me go back into my fucking father's hands again and I took off. I couldn't be with him. But anyway, [laughter] Catholic organizations—I didn't like going to Church. They always said never to kneel down in front of idols and this and that, and they always wanted me to kneel down in front of these idols and I'd always catch a beating with the rulers for not doing it. Uh, most of the nuns were pretty fucking strict, and would smack you really fast, but that one nun—Sister Caroline, man, she—she was pretty cool. She kept me together [laughter].

Lewis: Uh, what were the—you said that the kids would sort of organize into cliques or families—what were the cliques or families like?

Toole: Yeah. We were—I think it was like, eight of us. I hope that some of them are still alive. But there was like eight of us that would—we'd eat together, sleep together, you know? We'd go down MacDougal Street over near Bleecker and go into the different res—Cafe Wha?—I can't think of the other ones. They're all pretty famous now for being around so long. But we'd go in there and ask them if we could bus tables or wash dishes and get some food or get some change, get some money that way, or panhandle out in front. But we always moved usually together. Maybe not all eight, but maybe two, three, and then go across and then come back again together and either have food, definitely have alcohol, definitely have drugs. Uh, and at night, protect each other at night. Uh, it was a family that I never knew. Like, these other kids were my family. It was a feeling that I didn't have before. It was a feeling of belonging. We didn't have a kitchen table, but we had benches. We didn't have knives and forks, but we pooled our bread together, pulled it apart, ate together, it didn't matter. It was us, you know? And we knew that nobody else was going to take care of us. And that's how I felt with my biological family, that there was no one there to take care of me. There was no sitting around a kitchen table and eating together. There was none of that feeling stuff. When I met these kids, that was a feeling of family, you know? That was like, "I belong here." It's like, I accepted them, they accepted me. It was a pretty good feeling, you know? I even have a little tear—a little welled up here [laughter].

Lewis: Was your crew mostly other butches and femmes?

Toole: Yeah, yeah, yeah. Uh, we had a few gay men, you know? Well, gay boys, not men. And one in particular. And his sister was a lesbian, a femme, and her brother was a drag queen, right? And I'm using these terms because I'm talking about this time in my

life. Terms have changed immensely since then. And, uh, across the street from that women's house of detention was the ho stroll, right? And so her brother got busted and got sent to—I don't even know if Rikers—yeah, Rikers was there still. Before they put women over there. And spent a few years over there. And I'll never forget—she had a tattoo of a big rose, right? So his sister, Theresa—it was illegal to get tattoos in New York back then. Yeah [laughter], it was illegal. You couldn't get them. But this guy used to come around with a machine, and she got a big rose on her arm. So when her brother got out of jail and they met, she was like—pulled off his shirt, I'll never forget, it was like, so—it was such a sign of love, that she missed her brother so badly—and I'm using these terms because that's the terms of the day. She missed him so much, and the love that she showed, that she could not wait to show that she had one, too. That she remembered him, that she loved him, you know? It was like—it was amazing. I can see it. [laughter] It was very, very cool. I don't know what question you asked [laughter].

Lewis: I was asking about the clique that you ran in.

Toole: It was—uh, like I said, I'd say the oldest that was in ours was about 19, and maybe down to the age of 12. I was 13. Maybe going on 14. And it was mostly women. Uh, and like I said, it was a different family. Even though it was different parts, it was all still a family of community, you know? Like if, say, another part of the family was in trouble, we wouldn't turn our backs. Nobody would. We would all be there. And that's the way it was. Uh, we just didn't turn our backs—and today I feel like our community turns our backs on a lot of less fortunate, you know? That's sad. But many of the less fortunate will never turn their backs on the less fortunate. It's like, we know what suffering is, we know what getting beat down is, being arrested, being raped. And people who think they have all the power don't feel that, you know? They don't know what it is to be in those situations, so they can't relate. And I don't know, what do I know?

Lewis: Were they mostly, um, also kids who'd gotten thrown out of their homes, or left, or whatever?

Toole: Yeah, most all of them were thrown out. Uh, I can't think of her name. Frenchie. Frenchie was a woman of color, and she came up from south—north of my neighborhood? No, no, from Harlem. And she wasn't thrown out of her home, but she left and kept on leaving because she wasn't comfortable with all the harassment, and over the years—because I knew her many years, as we all grew up—over the years she would go home and see how things were, and they'd snatch her and put her in the institutions and give her shock treatment. And she'd come back and, you know, she wasn't right anymore sometimes. Always loving, always embraced—would embrace her, but you knew something terrible had happened to her, you know? I hope she made it, too.

Lewis: Did that happen to a lot of people? Did they have experiences being institutionalized?

Toole: Yeah, a lot. As a matter of fact, I got it changed, but this was a Dee, and her name was Debroah, you know? Debroah Weiss, and I met her at Club Bohemia. She'd seen

me up on stage. I was a baby bouncer. You know, clicking the lights on and off and making sure it's possible nobody got hurt. But anyway, we got together, and she came from a Jewish family that lived in the Stuyvesant Houses on West 23rd Street and First Avenue, and back then the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company owned all of that, right? So you couldn't even get in if you weren't Jewish or worked for that company. She brought me out there to her home once, and we were kids. I don't know, maybe I was 19 then. And her father had a heart attack when he'd seen me, and he ended up putting her away, you know? She had shock treatment and everything else. She came back home, came back to me, and then her father—uh, she told her father about my gun, right? [laughter] And so her father went to the police and—all this big uproar and everything, they was always trying to catch me with it, which never happened—but he thought by saving her—because we were both hooked on heroin by then—he had her arrested and had her put into the Rockefeller Drug Program. And I think it's the women's center now that they're opening up? Yeah, the prison, the old prison [Bayview Correctional Facility] for the Rockefeller drug laws is now, uh, the Women's Center of New York [The Women's Building] or something like that.

Lewis: Where is that?

Toole: It's on 10th or 11th Avenue, in the 20s. I can't remember where exactly, but yeah. But anyway, she spent a number of years in there. Because back then it was mandatory, you know? You can do five years or you can do life. So she ended up getting five years. I think she did four and ended up coming out. Those laws were pretty fucking bad back then, you know? And still today. I don't think everybody is let out still from being on that. But he thought he was saving her by that. When she came back out, we ended up going our separate ways. We stayed together for a few months, you know, then we moved in different directions, but I heard, not too long ago, maybe three years ago that she passed away from HIV/AIDS. She had a child that she sent down to her parents down in Florida where they moved to retirement. But, uh, yeah—I'm surprised I never—we all used the same needles. We never cleaned anything. I don't know how I never caught anything. The doctor said I might have that blood that they talk about—that I heal so fast that it, you know—I died in April and I'm back [laughter]. They said there's something with your blood in your system, that you never catch anything, you know?

Lewis: Tiger blood.

Toole: Tiger blood. [Roars, laughter]. The eye of the tiger [laughter]. And I'm sorry, I jump a lot over the place, but that's where my brain goes.

Lewis: That's the nice thing about these interviews is that they can go in any direction. I wanted to also ask though, so your families in the park, they were also mixed in terms of race and ethnicity, or…?

Toole: Oh yeah, it was everybody. It was everybody. We had Frenchie, we had—oh, what was her name? Dolores, African American girl, me, white Irish, uh, there was a Latina butch, I can't think of her name. And somebody that I ran into about six years ago

that remembered me. She was like, “Oh, Harry, you were crazy back then.” And I said “Yeah, [laughter] I was,” you know? And they were Native American—yeah, Navaho. I can't think of the tribal, uh, ancestries that they came from. But Native American. But it was—the park was mixed. The bars that I went to were mostly white. A few, uh, African Americans, a few Latinos, Latinas, but mostly white. And I don't know whether it was because of our class, that they knew we were homeless kids that they stuck up their noses to. Or they knew—they gave me respect because I worked for the Mafia and they gave me that job and they knew that. But I've seen other people where it wasn't so nice, you know? It wasn't so friendly. Like, white people, and not kids. We'd go into these places as young people, but the majority were adults already, in their 20s and 30s, and weren't treated kindly. Uh, and I'm not sure whether it was prejudice or class or both probably. But there was another place besides the Bohemia that I used to love to go to. I used to go to Stonewall also, but—not my cup of tea. It was a gay place, you know? It's always welcoming for me. But there was a place up in Harlem called The Hilltop. And that was mostly for African American chicks, and I loved it up there. Oh my god. I was always welcome with open arms, and I was up there, and I don't know whether it was during the riots in the 60s or when Martin Luther King was killed, or Malcolm [X]—I'm not sure because I was in The Hilltop for one of those and I was in jail for one of those, and I don't know which one is which. But I do remember at the club—and it was a huge fucking club, I've never seen a club like this in my life—it was huge, upstairs and downstairs, it was great for back then. And they came over the loudspeakers saying, “If you're white, stay here until things calm down and everything. There's a lot of stuff going on.” And me and my friends decided to leave, and we walked out the doors, trying to get to Lexington and 125th Street, and we could see the burnings, you know? We ran like hell. But yeah, I'm never sure what the dates were, which one was I at at which time.

Lewis: Later 60s, '66 or '68?

Toole: Yeah, it's one of those [laughter].

Lewis: So the bar was on the east side, near Lexington?

Toole: Yeah, yeah. It was a great bar. Really great. Very few white people went there, but boy, it was fantastic. And they gave great house parties back then, because there was a lot of house parties, because there wasn't that many queer spaces that we could go to. It’s not like today where we can congregate and go have coffee together. Back then we couldn't go have coffee together without being picked on or something going on, being said.

Lewis: You know, I also have to ask about—your families in the park, were you guys also hooking up with each other, or was that…?

Toole: Oh hell yeah, well yeah, what are you kidding?

Lewis: Maybe it was strictly platonic [laughter].

Toole: [laughter] No, everybody had their girls. And all the girls had their guys—the butches. And was there infighting and jealousy? Yeah, all the time. But, and I remember this—a couple of years ago while I was doing my tours, it hit me as like, we never, ever, ever had a fight inside the park. Ever. [laughter] It was like okay, let's go outside. It was like, don't shit where you eat, you know? That was our home, we weren't going to have a fistfight there. Let's go outside the park. Which, when it hit me it was like, how amazing was that, that we had a sense that this was our home [laughter].

Lewis: I'm curious to hear a little bit more about like what the rest of the Washington Square Park scene was like because there were a number of famous people coming through there in those years, right?

Toole: Absolutely. There was, uh, Bob Dylan. There was Joan Baez, and they—not at the circle but off to the side of the circle on the right hand side, they'd sit there and they'd play, you know, and sing. There was—that's before she became famous—the Mamas and the Papas. Mm, what's her name?

Lewis: I know Mama Cass, I don't know everyone's name.

Toole: Yeah, her. Mama Cass worked in—it was the Duchess and the Bon Soir.

Lewis: Mama Cass worked in the Duchess?

Toole: Yeah. As a—it might have been the Bon Soir. But do you remember the Duchess?

Lewis: I remember that it was a bar [laughter]. I don’t personally remember it.

Toole: Oh, yeah, okay. I was going to say wait a minute, I'm getting my years completely mixed up [laughter].

Lewis: Before my time.

Toole: Yeah, unfortunately not mine [laughter]. You know, I'm going to be 70 soon? Holy shit! Who the fuck would have thought of this? Uh, but anyways, she was a hat coat—

Lewis: Coat check.

Toole: Thank you. Down there. Don't know whether she was queer or any stories about her, but, you know? Barbara Streisand, she sang a lot at the Bon Soir. That was on Eighth Street. And she sang a lot down there. Tiny Tim, was he a riot? [laughter] Tiptoe through the [laughter]—yeah, he was something else.

Lewis: Did they interact with you guys when they, like, came by to play, or…?

Toole: They were super, super friendly. But they always had their managers. Now, Dylan and Baez didn't have managers around them at those times. Of course they had them,

but they weren't—they were more people-people, people person people [laughter]. And so there was no people to keep—stay back, get away. But as I recall, we didn't even know who they were. They just sounded good, their music was great. They'd give us some change and some money. It was like—we had no sense that they were—I'm not even sure if they were that big back then. I'm sure Bob was. Uh, famous people. Yeah. Somebody else, but I can't remember who they are. And there's somebody else that I can't talk about [laughter].

Lewis: And were you still, um, mostly in Washington Square Park by 1969? I'm sort of walking us up to the Stonewall Riot.

Toole: Yeah, in '69 I was 20? 21, something like that—and still, I was in-between Washington Square Park and uh, the Piers. And also in the little park across the street from Stonewall—a lot of us would stay in that park also. Excuse me. So, uh, with Stonewall, it was—most of us were still in the parks drinking, drugging, stoned out of my mind, so Stonewall had happened, and probably going on for an hour or so more, before word got down that—because people were coming in and out, and by the time word came up to us, I don't know how long the riot was going on—and, you know, riot, rebellion. By the time we got up there, I can remember the cops pushing everybody down towards Greenwich Avenue. Not Greenwich Street, Greenwich Avenue. Past the infirmary, that rectangular building, and how people were coming up around. I could see the garbage cans on fire, and I could see thousands of people, just—you know, I think back on it now, and it took me 50 years to realize, wow, that happened! I had not a clue. Every—being homeless, a lot of times you're cut off from everything. Especially from where I came from and where I ended up, it was a complete not knowing anything about what was going on anymore, because my drug addiction took me to other levels. So, you know, sobering up and meeting all the people from QEJ, and them talking about the uprising at Stonewall, and I never told anybody that I was there. Never. And then Reina Gossett [Tourmaline] and Ola [Osifo Osaze] said, “You need to say that.” Because I heard about these people called the Stonewall Veterans, and I was like, “No, I'm not a Stonewall Veteran.” And it was like “No, you need to say what you'd seen then”—and that's when I—and it took me 50-something years to start talking about that. Uh, I was there that night. I don't remember much of it, but I was part of it. And I got into this argument with one of the Stonewall Veterans—I was talking about the TDOA a few years ago, and one of the Veterans was there because he heard me, that I was going to speak. Him and another fellow that was a veteran, but ended up now being a friend of mine. So after I gave my speech, he came over to me and he said, “What did you do that night? Were you arrested? Were you beaten?” I was like—he was like, “Oh, you were on the sidelines.” And I know my temper and I know my anger, and over these years I've learned how to control it and not to get into any altercations because I know where I'd go with it, so my friend Tierney [Gleason] jumped in and started screaming at him—you know, Tierney [laughter]. But anyway, I started talking about that night. Those seven or eight people that were arrested did not make that riot, did not make that rebellion, did not make that uproar. It was every fucking person that showed up in the thousands that made it. If it was only—we were arrested all the time, you know? We'd be put in paddy wagons constantly and beaten up constantly. It wasn't those seven or eight people that made it. It was everybody as a community

coming together and saying, “That's enough.” And that's what I believe, and I feel it in my heart. I know they don't like hearing it [laughter], because they like being in that front car, the convertible, [laughter] but it's the people that showed up that night. And I try to tell people, especially young folks—it's like, I'd seen everybody there—don't let it be whitewashed that it was only these white people that did this, because I'd seen every shade, every color, every body image there that night. It was all of us together, you know? And don't let any history book tell you different, any movie, screenplay, it's them just telling it, what they see. And it took me a long time to figure that out. There we go—is this back on?

Lewis: Yeah, it's on.

Toole: Okay.

Lewis: Can you tell me a little bit—so what was Stonewall, the bar, like?

Toole: Uh, smelly. Dark. Uh, I tried not to drink there at all because you never knew what you were fucking drinking, you know? So I'd always bring a bottle in my hip pocket or something to drink. Uh, it was mostly gay men, drag queens—and very noisy [laughter]. But it was a friendly atmosphere, the door was usually—the guy on the door was usually, uh, Chuck, who was a friend of mine—he married one of my friends—and, you know, it was a cool place. It was—I always felt comfortable, but not comfortable that I wanted to go there every night. It would be like, in a pinch I'd go over to there, but it wasn't a place that I usually hung out in. Uh, it was pretty stinky in there [laughter], and you know it ran—now it's a nail salon, but back then it was, from where it is now, up into the nail salon. That was part of Stonewall, so it was deeper, wider—and at times, the Bohemia, Stonewall—a lot of the gay bars back then, every once in a while the mafia would I guess try to make a little bit more money from us, so they'd come up with this idea that you'd have a card [laughter].

Lewis: Specific to the bar? Or to get into the club?

Toole: Yeah, [laughter] yeah. So, you know, I had this little blue card, and I think it was like $5 for the card and you'd flash the card to get in, and you'd have to pay monthly dues. They wouldn't do it for long, just enough to get some money back into the place. And at one time, Stonewall had even a peekaboo hole, like a regular speakeasy. “Who's there?” You know? [laughter]

Lewis: I'm curious—you know, all this activism happened after the riots that summer.

Toole: Right.

Lewis: Did that cross-pollinate into your guys' lives? Like, did it affect your lives or was that sort of off the radar for you guys?

Toole: It was pretty much off the radar. I do remember the Mattachine Society, uh, coming into the park and asking us if we'd go to different places with them to protest and this and that. And I didn't even know if they were a part of the Mattachine Society, but that's what they said they were—but the girls had to put women's clothes on and these guys—and it was like, we weren't doing that, you know? We lost everything because we wanted to be who we were, so we weren't going to go through that. Uh, I went to the Firehouse once.

Lewis: For the Gay Activists Alliance Firehouse?

Toole: Yeah, yeah, yeah. I went there once when I got out of jail. And I think I stayed a couple of hours and I left and I didn't go back. I can't remember why, but I remember going there. You know, white people. Most of my friends were people of color—the ones I hung out with.

Lewis: Were you around for any of the early, like, Christopher Street Liberation Day marches? Didn't that go to Washington Square Park?

Toole: I don't know. I don't remember it at all. I do remember—and I don't even know what year this is, but me and this girl I was with, Emily, [knocks table] who is gone now, were on 25th Street and Madison, and all these gay people were coming down, [laughter] and they were telling us to join them, you know? But I was robbing cars. [laughter] I was breaking into cars, and it was like I had no idea what they were, but looking back on things I can remember that, but I don't know what year—I had no—I was trying to survive, you know? Whether I was on heroin or amphetamines—I did crack, you know? So I was pretty much left out of all news and all queerness except for the queers that I was with, and they had the same knowledge as I did—nothing, except trying to survive.

Lewis: Can you tell us a little bit about the Women's House of Detention?

Toole: Ah, the playground. The House of D. That's right, the playground. It's located—well, it was located at right off Eighth Street and uh, Greenwich Avenue and Sixth Avenue, right? It's now a garden. It's next to—what do you call that library? The Jefferson Street Library, which, before it was a library it was the courthouse. It was about, I don't know, maybe an 11 story building around there. Nine, 11 stories. And it took up—uh, where the garden is now, it was bigger than that, the space. It had what I call a moat around it, only without water. It was a deep alleyway that ran around, right? So if you'd jump down maybe eight feet, nine feet. It was a steep drop, and that ran all the way around up until the—on, uh, I don't know the name of that street. Is that eight, nine—10th Street or 11th Street, on the side of the House of D. And the gate is still there and the driveway is still there. So when you would come from court or from the precincts, when you were busted, you'd come in the paddy wagon, right? I know that's not what you call them now, [laughter] I don't know what you call them. The police wagons [laughter]. Back then it was the paddy wagon, you know, named after the great paddies of America, the fucking Irish paddies [laughter]—so you know, beep, beep, beep, beep, beep. The paddy wagon would pull up, a little bit, and then back up—down, and it was an incline. Is it still the incline? The incline is still there. And it would go down, and they'd open up the back doors and they'd pull us

out in handcuffs or leg shackles—it depends on what you were arrested for sometimes. And it was, uh, a crazy place. A lot of us called it the playground. And a lot of us called it a prison. And I called it both—it depends on what I was arrested for and how much I got. But you go down this alleyway and into these two doors, right, and the first thing you'd see is these matrons and the CO—corrections officer—usually a male. And you'd strip, get into these fucking showers to be deloused, and you'd have to bend down, pull your cheeks apart, go up there and see if there's any contraband in your mouth, in your nose, in your ears, almost every hole that you had they would check to see if you were bringing anything in, you know? Uh, you'd come out and they'd give you these, uh, prison clothes, which was usually a skirt and a blouse. And if you were a butch—[laughter] they had a donation room there, and if you were a butch and you knew the person in the donation room, you could get—I hate these things, kulaks [laughter]. Oh my god, you know? Uh, so you'd get a pair of that, and then it was time—before you get up to your cells or your tier or your floor, you had to go see the doc, right? It was a male doctor, that absolutely in my heart I believe he hated women, but most of all he hated butch women. And he would give the most horrendous body searches—cavity searches that could be imagined, you know? And I don't even—you know, I've been in the House of D many, many, many, many, many times—was arrested many times—uh, and always had to go through this. And it's always that one that sticks out in my mind when I do my tours and I go through there. It's only that one specific time, and that was getting on the table in the stirrups, and him going inside of me with such force that it was—I can't even imagine—I don't even want to imagine the pain that I was going through back then. And when he came out, and—and into your rectum also—and when he came out, he was like, “Hurry up, get off the table. We've got to get the next person in,” you know, because there was always a line of women that had to get this done. And I couldn't fucking move. I mean, I absolutely could not move, you know? It was—yeah, I can't ever forget that. That's how bad it was, that I could not move and get off the table. Had some blood—I could see my knees, weak, trying to get up and stand on my feet, and it was just really, really bad. And there's stories written about it and books written about it, and I can't remember the two women that did it, and the one that went in front of Congress and finally, you know, [knocks table] thank god, had those things changed. Because so many women complained, but wouldn't go in front of the medical people—I forget what they're called. Of the country. Uh, they always said, “No, no, it's fine what you're doing. There's nothing wrong with it,” until she went in front of Congress and told her story. That things thankfully changed. I hope they changed. I haven't been in jail in 18 years, I've been free. Yes! [laughter] Maybe 17 [laughter].

Lewis: Can you talk a little bit about why you called the House of D a playground?

Toole: Well, in some parts—like, if you got a good CO on your floor—the correction officer—like, there was four corridors, right? An A block, a B block—

Lewis: So, capacity-wise, how many women could they house there?

Toole: On a floor?

Lewis: The whole thing, if you know?

Toole: The whole thing? Oh, I don't know. I don't know.

Lewis: How many on a floor?

Toole: Two to a cell, right? And maybe some corridors were smaller than the others, maybe 15, 20 women to a corridor, to a block, times four, times 10. Yeah.

Lewis: You were saying, if you had a good CO…?

Toole: Yeah, uh, a good CO means you're amazing. They don't want to do that much work, so they sit at the desk in-between all four blocks, right? Cell blocks. And so you could have—go in and out of each other's cells, you could make love, you could move around freely. Uh, back then you could smoke in jail, so we'd buy filtered cigarettes, and back then it wasn't where you'd push a lever and all the doors closed at once. So the CO would come and manually make sure the door was closed, right? So we'd smoke filtered cigarettes, break off the filter, bend it, stick it in the notch, so when the door slammed it sounded like it locked, but it didn't. So at night, when lights would go out, everybody would switch cells and, you know, have a party. You'd go up and down in the elevators, with not too much security on your back. Once in a while a guard would get on with you, but it was—I felt safe there sometimes, you know? I got arrested once on purpose, just to get off the streets and get in there. Was there fights and physical abuse and everything else? Hell yeah. All the time. You've got that many women, uh, and everybody is jockeying for position, everybody wants to be the lead, you know? A butch is hitting on this girl, but she already has a butch? [laughter] Which would be a no-no—that's a definite fight. You never want to get the kitchen staff—the cafeteria people that made the food or served you—mad at you, because you didn't know what was going to be in your food, or if you'd even get food [laughter]. So, up on the roof they had I think ping pong, but it was completely covered with bars and everything else. They had something up there, I can't remember—I think it was ping pong. So you'd go up there, and it was once a month or once a week—I can't remember—uh, every block would get a chance to go up. So you couldn't go up every day because there was so many blocks—cell blocks. So this woman I was talking about earlier, Emily, right? So I was at—she was the one I said I was with when I was robbing the cars when the march was going by. So I think I was about 19. And I forget what I was arrested for, but I was on her floor. I had to be younger because I was in a young person's block. I had to be like 18, 17. And she called me over—they let you out of the blocks one at a time. Nobody all together—one block, A block, B block. So I came out and I was going back into my block and she called me over to her gate and she was at the gate, right? She says, I'm going to wait for you to grow up, and you're going to be my butch. Fast forward 27 years later, right? I'm in—yeah, no, maybe more. I'm sitting in a donut shop on 14th Street and Third Avenue and my girls are working a house show, and I'm reading *Papillon* [by Henri Charrière], right? The book. And she comes up to me, and she's working for Nicky Barnes—she was his bottom woman—and, uh, she recognized me. I had no idea who she was. But we ended up hooking up, and staying together for a very long time, and she said, "You remember [laughter] what it was," and then it was like

I'd seen her face and it was like, holy shit. She said, “I told you, I was going to wait for you to grow up,” [laughter].

Lewis: You were also—you were in the House of D for at least a couple of historically momentous…

Toole: I was in the House of D when Jimi Hendrix died. I don't know what year it was, but I know I was there. You know, this is how I encapsulate my life, was with certain events that happened in my life, and then I try to look up what year was that. So I was there for Jimi Hendrix, I was there for Janis Joplin, I was there for, uh, [knocks table], and I don't know whether it was Malcolm or Martin, I'm not sure, but I was in there for those. I was in there for when—what's the name of the crew that blew up the building?

Lewis: Weather Underground.

Toole: Yeah, the Weather Underground blew up the building [inaudible]—

Lewis: Did you hear it?

Toole: Oh, we felt it [laughter].

Lewis: It was a townhouse, right?

Toole: It was the townhouse. The whole thing fucking came down, man. The whole thing came down. Yeah, we felt that shit though, like, we thought our building was coming down, you know? It was like, crazy. I was in there when, uh, Cummings, [Alice Crimmins] killed all the children, and she got life. I was there when the woman—I can't think of her name [Jean S. Harris]—killed the diet doctor [Herman Tarnower]. The diet doctor, she murdered—shot him. Yeah. He had a lot of books out—diet guru back then. So I was there for that. Uh, yeah [laughter]. And that's how I piece my history together.

Lewis: Do you know around when they shut down the House of D? I'm sure I could look it up, but I don't know.

Toole: Yeah, it had—I got out of there about two weeks before they shipped the last women to Rikers. So is it early 70s? I'd say 73, around there. 73 or 74. I'm not particularly sure, but I know I made it out just in time. Whatever year that was, it was a couple of weeks I got out of there. And I think I was there for—I think tapping the phones—jiggling phones.

Lewis: Like taking the change out of them?

Toole: Yeah, oh man, made a fortune out of that. Made a lot of money [laughter]. Sorry, guys who couldn't make your phone calls, but [laughter].

Lewis: Do you want to—we're sort of moving into the 70s, do you want to talk a little bit about what the scene on 14th Street and Third Avenue was? You were pimping there, is that right?

Toole: Yes. When I hit 14th Street and Third Avenue—and I was with Debbie [Weiss] when we went up there. It's not a really happy time in my life, and I was there for years, but I'm hard pressed to remember anything that—where I laughed or did anything fun, you know? It was pure desperation and survival. It was kill or be killed. Cut somebody's throat. Uh, Debbie worked the ho stroll, then I got another girl, Princess, and they both worked. It was 14th street and Third Avenue. Uh, I don't know what's there now, but back then it was a little coffee, donut shop on the corner, on the right hand side, the downtown side. Downtown east side, and on the uptown east side was a drug store and above that was a hotel, right? Where all the girls would bring their johns. And in the middle of the block, on the east side between 13th and 14th, was a place called the Dugout. It was down a couple of stairs, and it was a dive for derelicts and, uh, you could find me there [laughter], drinking, because it was cheap. So that's on the floor, and next door to that was the Salvation Army. These motherfuckers, you know? They were not really nice. They'd promise you food, but only if you'd listen to hours and hours and hours and hours of their sermons. So, uh, they weren't the nicest, though they said they'd help the poor, they'd help the homeless, they'd help this, but it's not helping somebody when you're demanding that they have to do something to get something to eat, you know? Around the corner, on 13th Street between Broadway and Third Avenue was another hotel. Some of the girls brought tricks there, but it was mostly for the guys using men of color, or straight—you know, where they'd have their rooms for either selling guns, selling drugs, or mixing it up. I had a friend there, Cleo, and she was a madam, and she had a room there, and we used to shoot up together—heroin—and she got this huge abscess on her hand. And I kept on trying to get her to the hospital, and she wouldn't go, she wouldn't go. And it was like, a couple of days we didn't see her, we went up to her room, and we opened up the door, and there was nothing but maggots all over her hand. She ended up getting most of her fingers cut off and everything. Completely dead, you know? Uh, I sold a few guns there, too—I don't know if that should be in there, if it's still a federal offense [laughter].

Lewis: Were you working for the mafia?

Toole: No, freelancing. Street. Street. There was a bar on the corner and I'd make the connections there, go to a friend of mine who was a bank robber—he was out of jail. He'd get the pieces, I'd make the connections and get the money. Brown bag it all the way [laughter]. There was another hotel across the street from there and now—it's still a hotel, but now it's like, high class. And an Army and Navy store underneath, and I still think it's there, and usually that's where we got our rooms, uh, to sleep in and get off in, and from 15th Street and Third Avenue to Eighth Street and Third Avenue was the place—it was mostly the ho stroll—morning, noon, night, didn't matter what time. It was always something going on illegal, you know? Uh, straight people—and I don't mean straight by gender, I mean straight people that are not accustomed to street life—would not step foot there. It wasn't a good neighborhood. A lot of the tricks were Hasidic men. They were big,

big tricks, they'd pay good money. And you'd see people die—you know, people killed. It was women endlessly walking up and down the blocks. Everybody was hooked on heroin. All of us. Every one of us, you know? My friend Kim, who was another pimp on the street, she got caught by the guys, because they hated us. I mean, these guys hated us, especially the [inaudible] men, they hated the butches having girls out there. So they grabbed her in the park across the street from Beth Israel Hospital and they cut open her pants, and threw acid on her face and her genitals, and—months of recovery. And then she hung herself because she couldn't stand it anymore. And they went up to the Bronx and told her mom. Beatings for days. People getting hotshots left and right. Oh my god.

Lewis: Hotshots?

Toole: A hotshot. So if someone thought you were ratting to the cops, right? They'd give you a hotshot. What is a hotshot? The battery acid, the green stuff around your engine, that crystal, shoot—mix it up with your heroin, give it to you. Crushed glass. It was so fine that you didn't know it from heroin, you know? And these kids would be shooting that shit up. Terrible deaths. Terrible. Agonizing. But if you had thought that you were going to somebody you know, you would get out of dodge or you're going to be dead. You're going to be hurt or they're going to make you work for them, which was worse. It was really a hostile environment, you know? And I was there for many years.

Lewis: How many—so like, what years were you around there?

Toole: I would say, 74, 75 up until the 80s, early 90s maybe? No, it had to be up until the late 80s. The late 80s.

Lewis: How many of the pimps were butches?

Toole: Vicious?

Lewis: Were butches.

Toole: Oh, butches. Three.

Lewis: How many pimps were—how big of a scene was it, do you think? So not like, that many butches were—

Toole: Right, that's why they hated us. We were cutting in on their profits, and they didn't like that.

Lewis: And mostly, all the femmes that you knew who worked or who were just hanging out, did they mostly do sex work also to get by?

Toole: Yeah, yeah. Even the girls that worked in the halls—as strippers, pole dancers, you know—were mostly all queer women.

Lewis: Yeah, I was going to ask if all the girls were gay.

Toole: Yeah, most everybody was, but it was a way where you weren't on the corner, you know, and you had some kind of safety and could still make money. But, uh, yeah. People are surprised when they hear that most of them are lesbian, queer women. It's like, you know, we survive. And we do what we have to do to survive and keep our loved ones safe. Yeah.

Lewis: Do you want to talk a little bit about Nicky Barnes?

Toole: Nicky Barnes.

Lewis: Tell us about who Nicky Barnes was.

Toole: He's still alive. He's still alive. He's still a danger. So, Nicky Barnes was one of the biggest drug kingpins in New York City, up in Harlem. Uh, let me backtrack. So, this woman Emily, right? She was his bottom woman. And a bottom woman means that she took care of all the other women. She made sure that they went out on time, that they were clean, that they brought back the right amount of money. So instead of calling them the top—that she was the leader of, you know—they called them bottom women, right? She held them up, made sure—so, she was his bottom woman for many years. And he had houses here in New York and Queens and Boston, right? In the red light district, the one that blew up. Yeah, that was way before [laughter]—the whole fucking blocks blew up [laughter]. So anyway, she worked for him and was very trusted. So when she found me in that donut shop that day and said—and we hooked up, she was still with him and decided to leave, right? So she had this plan, and she never told me, and she never told me that she was with Nicky, but we knew who he was, and—

Lewis: Was this in the 80s?

Toole: This was late 80s, in the 90s? No, late 80s. I can't remember when he finally got arrested. But knew him from reputation, you know? Knew that he owned Harlem, the east side of Harlem, right? The Lenox Hill Club, all of these places. And if you watch the movie [*American*] *Gangster,* when Denzel Washington, right, it tells you a little bit about Nicky—not the whole story, but it tells you a little bit about him. Some fictitious stuff, but totally true about them bringing the heroin in the caskets of the dead from Vietnam. That was totally true, from what I hear. So anyway, she goes back to Boston, and she steals a lot of his heroin and comes to me, right? Back to New York. And you know, we're partying, having all this heroin and this and that, got a good hotel, and she was walking down Third Avenue and his henchmen grab her, right? I don't see her for months, and when I do see her again, she has these ulcerated sores on her legs from where he put out his cigars on her. On her breasts, on her legs. But she's back working for him again, right? And we hook up again. Now she's telling me who the fuck he is. So we're together maybe another six, seven months, and she goes back to Boston—she goes back and forth to New York and Boston all the time. And she goes back to Boston and takes more of his shit and comes back, right? So we're sitting in this restaurant on 12th Street and Third Avenue,

where we used to meet Telly Savalas. You know, I don't know if you've ever heard of him—Who loves you baby? The lollypop. *Kojak*, right? We used to meet with him there all the time. Nice guy. And I'm sitting there, and I can see—I never sit with my—that's why I'm sitting—I never sit with my back to a door stoop to this day, [laughter]. I can see him coming in to the front doors of this restaurant, him and his entourage, and I said, "I'm dead. He's going to kill me." And her. And she's sitting next to me. And he sits down next to us, on the other side of the table. And he says to her, "Are you happy now?" And she said yes. And he said, "Okay," and he got up and left. Got up and left, you know? And this is a man that I know has killed women. That I know. This is a man that I don't know how many people he killed in a year. Maybe this shouldn't be said until he's dead. He's back—anyway, he was arrested for a couple of murders eventually, and he turned state's evidence and gave everybody up. Everybody in the trade he gave up, and he's out now and I talked to Emily, who is gone now, about, I don't know, 10 or 11 years ago. She called me up and she said, "You want to know where Nicky is?" I was like, "No, I don't want to know where he is. I don't want to know parts of him." She said, "You know, I know where he is." And it's like, "No, I can live without this," you know? The man put a fear in my heart. So when the movie [*American*] *Gangster* came out, I'm sitting in a restaurant in Brooklyn, in a White Castle, and this guy comes in and he's yelling out, "Nicky Barnes!" and I almost got under the table until I realized that the guy was selling the DVDs of *Gangster*. And that he was just yelling out these gangsters' names [laughter]. Like, I almost was underneath the table.

Lewis: Why do you think he walked away from you guys?

Toole: I don't know. Maybe he had some kind of love for her, I don't know. Because she took his drugs, and she took some of his money. There had to be some kind of fondness for her, uh, for him to walk away, because that doesn't happen, you know? You don't let one of your girls walk away. You just don't. And she was good. She was really good. This was a woman who could walk into a department store, put a TV between her legs, and walk out. This is a woman who could turn a trick, right? Put her toes out, pick the man's pocket with her toes. This is how good she was. I was with her for—

Lewis: Very talented.

Toole: Yeah. Oh, yeah. Very, very, very, very talented. I'm still in contact with her sister, you know? She was a really cool person. I was with her a long time.

Lewis: What was it like in the—we're stepping around a little bit, which is fine, but I was curious about what it was like in the 80s, and I guess one of the questions is, you know, what was it like when crack happened in New York City?

Toole: Yeah. Crack was bad, man [laughter]. Crack—I've done some shitty stuff—I never really did really shitty stuff on crack, but I witnessed, oh my god, some terrible things that I would never talking about and don't even like thinking. But, I got introduced into crack—I was—where the fuck was I? 123rd Street, right off Lennox, and I'm walking up the block and a friend of mine is like, walking past me and says, "Hey, I've got something new, you

want to try it?" And it was crack. And I tried it and I liked it. It was a euphoria that was so immediate and so intense, it was like, "Holy shit, this is great." So I used it a little bit. The neighborhood in Harlem wasn't bad yet, with the crack. I went into the New York City shelter system, the BWS, which stands for—used to stand for Brooklyn Women's Shelter, but all of us called it Bitches with Stems because everybody smoked crack. And that's where I really, really started getting involved with crack. I used to buy it right from the case managers, from the security guards. All through that neighborhood was decimated with crack. Abandoned buildings. Children with their—babies with—mothers with their babies. Uh, you know…

Lewis: Was that the shelter that's out in sort of Brownsville, East New York?

Toole: Yeah, it's in East New York, yeah. It's on Liberty. Yeah. Yeah. They say it's better now. I've been there a few times since then, years later. It still looks like the same place, but different people. I don't know if it's changed for real, but back then it was the—you know, security threw me down the stairs, security jacked me up in the bathroom, gave me a beating. When I first walked into—the first time I ever went into a shelter, they said, "Oh, another fucking dyke," you know? And it was like "Oh no, this is why queer people don't go to the shelters," but I was dying and I was like 93 pounds. So I left the shelter and went uptown, and way before that—before crack became really big, right?—I had a friend that used to keep on telling me about this cocaine that you put it in liquid and you swish it around, it turns into a rock and you smoke it. And I was like, what do you mean you put powder cocaine into liquid and it turns into a rock? Are you crazy? Little did I know, years later, that that would be the thing. Uh, and—so I went up into Harlem, and Harlem—I'd seen parts of Harlem that were beautiful. Even though I was hooked on this shit. Parts of it were beautiful, and I could see it change, block by block by block. On Sugar Hill, I don't know if you know where Sugar Hill is, around the corner from Sugar Hill on 144th Street, 143rd Street, 147th Street, decimated. I don't know how I fucking survived. I was the only white person I'd ever seen up there, going into these buildings, buying crack, smoking crack dens. Uh, the mothers and children were the worst, you know? You couldn't go into hallways, babies crying. It was—it was sad, but I couldn't stop. I just could not stop smoking.

Lewis: What else did you do in the 80s? Where were you living?

Toole: I was living on 144th Street between—what was that, Lennox? Malcolm—right down the block from the Hill. I can't think of that avenue. Two blocks below Broadway, uh, down the hill, and I was living there, and the girl I was with, Sheila [King]—which reminds me that I've got to call her tonight. She said she needs help [laughter]. She had this friend, they were on the methadone program, we were still smoking crack, and this guy friend of hers had an apartment, so we moved in with him—uh, into a ramshackle of—just nastiness. It was one of the first times where I had a knife in my pants, right? I was getting ready to cut somebody's throat—that I actually shook. Usually I don't shake, [laughter] you know? But I actually shook, because—I don't know why. Maybe because I knew what was coming. It didn't happen—he relinquished—but I shook that time, yeah. Anyway, we're living up there in his place, and then she robbed him. So we had to get out

of there and I talked to the landlord, the superintendent, this butch, and, uh, she gave us the apartment next door. So, I paid rent for that, and then Sheila didn't pay the rent and they wanted us out, and it was just a terrible altercation. Uh, I remember going to the church that I told you I used to go for lunch, and it was so fucked up. They gave me—these guys gave me a beating, AJ, and my head was cracked open, my face was fucked up, and I tried to make it back up to Harlem, and Sheila got me to the Harlem Hospital. They stitched me up. They couldn't do anything for the broken ribs—but, went out the door, down the cubbyhole, smoked some more crack. It was like—it was endless. It was like I could not stop smoking, you know? And I couldn't stop drinking either, but the 80s were mostly a blur to me.

Lewis: What were you doing for money?

Toole: Oh, robbing people. Definitely robbing people. I wasn't stealing cars because I was not good to drive, you know? And it's funny, the one good quality I had back then was that I knew I couldn't be high and drive [laughter]. So I knew I couldn't do that, and for some reason that stuck in my head, up until this day, do not drink, drug, or do anything to get high and drive [laughter].

Lewis: Did you still have a queer community in the 80s?

Toole: I had Sheila and that was it. That was it.

Lewis: You didn't go to bars or anything?

Toole: I hadn't been to bars since the 70s, you know? Maybe—yeah, late 60s, early 70s. That was the last time that I had community where there was a whole bunch of us. Up in Harlem, I ran into this kid—this girl that I knew a long time—and she is on methadone program, too—and she's walking towards me, and I said, “Wait a minute, you're dead.” So, here was a woman who was married into the Mafia, and fell in love with an African American man. And her husband—you'd see these movies about the Mafia and how if their wives or anything goes wrong, how they take everything from you? This is what happened to her. Everything was taken from her. Her children, money, status, everything. And she got caught up in the crack epidemic then too, you know? So when her boyfriend died, this African American guy, uh, we all chipped in to bury him, and it was at that church over near Washington Square Park. I can't even name it. But it was the first time—I guess they thought I was a guy, and they let me help carry the coffin as a pallbearer [laughter]. I said, “Oh man, the Pope would be turning in his grave right now [laughter].” Yeah, all those stories about Mafia women that differ away from that life, they take everything, and they're lucky they don't kill them.

Lewis: Do you want to—um, we can take a break or we can maybe tackle the 90s if you feel like [inaudible]?

Toole: Yeah. It's a quarter until 7:00.

Lewis: Um, I think we can probably wrap up in the next half hour, if that's okay with you. Um, can I ask you about the 90s?

Toole: Mhm.

Lewis: We can take a break, also, if you want.

Toole: The 90s. In—and I can check this with my records—in 1991, how old was I then? 48, 58, 68, 78, 88, close to 50, you know? I had my career—I was back on the farm, [laughter] and pretty much off of crack. Still smoking here periodically or going to the peep shows on 42nd Street and smoking there. Uh, not very much. But came back down and was living on 34th Street, 33rd Street, down the block from the old QEJ office. That was my corner. I lived there, which—you see how things come around full circle? It's amazing, my life is like, oh my god, I can't get away from anything [laughter]. So this was—so, I didn't lose queer community because coming back downtown, I found queer community again. Not too many kids—my age, maybe a little younger, you know? And uh, we lived—kind of we were living on 32nd Street down the subway station where the barbershop is. Yeah.

Lewis: Yeah, which line is that?

Toole: That's the NRF, so, we lived down those stairs, you know? Uh, and especially in the winter time, to stay warm and everything. So, the passageway that leads from 32nd Street up to 38th Street—that long passageway. So, if you go up that little inclination—that little hill—if you look down, you'll see a red line, or maybe it's blue now, but the line is still there. It's a thick line, right? So sleeping down there, on the lower half of the line, the cops would come, hit you with their sticks, wake you up, and you had to go over to the other side of the line, right? About an hour later, the cops on 34th Street would come down, wake you up, go back to the other side. And this would go on constantly, you know? Because it was two different precincts, so they were constantly moving you around and everything. But it was warm down there, and it was a sense of community. A lot of beatings. I got beat up a lot by other homeless people. Straight guys beat us up a lot, raped us a lot. Uh, oh man, I don't know how long I was down there. A couple of years, I guess. And there was these two guys, right, Danny and John. White guys, Vietnam vets, they were snipers in Vietnam, and they said—they came up to us one day and they were like, we've been watching you for weeks, watching you guys get beat up, with everything that's going on, we want to become your protectors. It was like, [laughter] you know? And that's what they did. Uh they sat up all night, protected us while we slept. They'd sleep during the day and we'd protect them. They'd make sure we had alcohol when we woke up, we made sure they had the alcohol and—so it went on like that for many, many, many—I don't know, maybe two years down there. And then we went down to Madison Square Park, right—and during the summer time, and we'd sleep there. And it was the same thing, you know? We'd take care of each other. And then it became very mixed. It was queers and straight people together, right? And, uh, it became obvious, sleeping outside underneath the trees, that these two fellows were getting post-traumatic stress.

They kept on seeing the enemy up in the trees, behind the trees, and they were becoming super dangerous. They totally understood, and we parted ways. Uh, the 90s.

Lewis: I'm asking—the other, um, queers that you were living with around then, did they have experiences like you where they didn't want to go into the shelter system?

Toole: Nobody wanted to go into the shelter. We heard the stories. Beaten, raped, killed. We all heard the stories, you know? Every one of us. The—also, in the 90s, I said I was almost completely off of crack, but then I wasn't, right? I went into a place on, uh, 30th Street and Eighth Avenue, between Seventh and Eighth Avenue. It's a men's shelter now—back then it was for women—and it's not a shelter, it's uh, an overnight, so that you could only sleep sitting up—you could never lay down, and that's why people with swollen legs and feet and everything, because they never had a chance to put their feet up, legs up. Uh, I stayed there, and I went out one night and started smoking crack again. Met this insane person that was also smoking crack, and I mean insane, you know? And he brought me into Penn Station and was telling me he lived there. And we got separated, right? So in my craziness of crack I was like, “He lives here.” So I ended up going down on the platform—and to this day, if you go down to where the trains pull in—it's covered up now with metal sheeting—but they were all like rooms, and I went down in these rooms with the rats—they're garbage rooms where they sweep the tracks and they push all the garbage into these fucking places, and that's where I lived. I have no idea how long I was there, or how I survived or how I wasn't bitten and killed by these rats. Uh, I do know when I came back out, I was so [inaudible]—you know, I looked into the store windows and was like, holy shit. It didn't stop me, but I was on the right track of stopping crack then, because I knew—I didn't know how long I was there, I didn't know, I couldn't remember anything except smoking crack and being down in there with the eyes of those rats. And that was one of my last turns with crack. So, with this queer group of people—we went back up to 32nd Street, and I used to go into all of those Chinese restaurants and Korean restaurants and Thai restaurants, and ask for food. Every one of them. And I'd get food and bring it back to the family, you know, and everybody would eat, and I hardly never ate, and I was down to like, 90 pounds, 92 pounds, and I was dying, and my family literally picked me up and carried me over to that church with the steeple that I told you where I ate lunch, and brought me over there because there was a van, a Project Renewal van there with medical facilities, and they snatched me up inside and said, “You're dying.” You know, “You don't have any strength, your heartbeat is”—everything was bad. Uh, and they got me into BWS, and from there I went into the Providence Women's Shelter, which used to be an old convent.

Lewis: It's in Midtown.

Toole: Yeah, 45th Street. Uh, I went there, and—lot of queers in there, you know? And the director of the facility was queer, and I used to stay a couple of days, then leave, then come back in a couple of days and leave, back and forth, right? Because I couldn't get used to staying inside. It was hard being able to stay inside in a bed, for me. And this one time I went out, and I ran into these kids in front of Madison Square Garden, and they said something nasty to me, and I said something back, and they had these little lead

pipes, and beat me up terribly. I mean, phew, my head was like an orange that was squashed. And I'm trying to get back to my shelter, and I'm walking up 34th Street looking at all the shop windows, and I'm covered—I mean, blood is pouring out of me, my clothes are drenched in blood, and nobody said anything. “Are you alright”—like, who wants to stop and—I looked homeless, I guess, too. Until I got to Grand Central Station and this little rookie cop—instead of taking me to the hospital he says, “Where do you want to go?” [laughter] And I said, “Oh, I want to go up the block to my shelter,” you know? So he brought me to the shelter, and I remember sitting on the—when you walk in there, there's a little step, and I'm sitting there, and the director coming down—Rosanne, she's a butch, and—who is now a friend—and my case manager Nina who is also my good friend now, and they got me cleaned up and everything else—be in your bed, and a couple of days later I started getting real sick because I was picking everything, and they sent me up to the hospital to—you know, Presbyterian, which they have no idea about detox, or about helping somebody detox. First time in my life, AJ, I swear, I had to tell somebody, “You're giving me too much. You have to stop.” I couldn't, I mean, I was constantly fucked up. I was so high all the time that I had to tell them, “You're giving me too much. [laughter] You have to stop.” So, uh, I ended up detoxing. This was in '99.

Lewis: Is that when you then decided to get sober?

Toole: Yeah, yeah. That was in '99, and I called up my case manager and said, I don't want to use anymore, can you send somebody up to get me? And they couldn't, and it was in June and I had to walk all the way back over—it was 2000—and I had to walk all the way back to the shelter from up in the 90s to the 40s, and I had a few dollars and it was like, I can buy a couple of vials of crack, I can buy a six pack of beer, and I didn't do either. And, uh, that was the start of me never using crack again in my life. Or heroin, you know? I stopped heroin in the 70s. I was one of the first women on the methadone program in New York City. Uh, and yeah, I stopped that with the methadone program.

Lewis: Was there anything in particular that made you want to get cleaned up or get sober at that moment?

Toole: You know, I went to school to become a CASAC [Credentialed Alcoholism and Substance Abuse Counselor]. And got honors, got money, you know? All these accolades, and one of the professors there said that she believed that I aged out, that my body was too beat up, that I was tired, and I knew it. A lot of people ask me that question—like, you know, “Did God come into your life, epiphany?” Like, no. [laughter] It's just like, I'm tired [laughter]. I'm tired, I give up, I surrender. It's like, eh, I'm going to try something different. And, uh, and that's when Áine came into my shelter, and she was part of the uh, QEJ network—because it wasn’t an organization—and snatched me up—something in me, you know? And just snatched me.

Lewis: And then you started getting involved in homelessness organizing?

Toole: Yeah, uh, you know, when I was still in the shelter, I started volunteering. I started something in the shelter system that no one ever did before. Uh, for Pride, I brought in

Pet the Pussy, although I didn't tell the shelter directors or case managers that was their real name. I said it was, uh, PTP. It was the first time any shelter had any queer festivities in a shelter before, or that they recognized it. So I had all the queers in the shelter, I took them all up to the Sony Building, because you could get free pictures. Got all their pictures, put them all up over the bulletin board, put the colors up, this and that, you know? And then I brought in these people, PTP, and I said well, they're going to be talking about organizing and this and that, so they got up in front of everybody, in front of all the staff and said, “Yeah, we're, uh, Pet the Pussy,” [laughter] and it was like, oh my god. [laughter] But it was good. It was so much enjoyable. I brought in someone that, uh, was an impersonator for Cher that everybody enjoyed. It was the first time they'd ever seen—which, I had a lot of static, I wanted to show some queer movies, you know? And it was like okay, like, uh—I can't think of the name of it. The trans kid that was killed?

Lewis: Brandon Teena? Was that *Boys Don't Cry*?

Toole: Yeah, yeah. Yeah. Yeah. There was a few different things, you know, that I wanted to show that I had static with, but uh, they got over it. The doctor was a lesbian, the director was a butch—they pretty much let me do a lot of stuff. I started the first thing—I used to collect all the cans of soda, washed them out, bring them to the store, get the money, and I started the first program that—homelessness helping other homeless that were sent to hospitals, that were in jail, that were coming in for the first time and had no toiletries, so the funds was going to go towards that. So, I didn't know that I was organizing or that I was doing all of this, but, you know, I wanted to do something that was good. I was tired of doing terrible things, and it was time to do something good, you know?

Lewis: It's interesting that there was also, like, it sounds like a fair amount of LGBT staff and other folks tied up and working in the system, but that there wasn't any LGBT or queer programming.

Toole: Yeah, there was none in New York until QEJ. There was none. Well, I started way before QEJ. Uh, the day I left the shelter, which took me a long time to get out of there because they had abandonment issues, [laughter] with me, and I told them that. Every time, you know, I had an apartment for almost a month and they wouldn't let me go. Every time I wanted to go they'd say, “Well, can you run this group, can you pick up this person from the hospital?” And I said, “You have some kind of anxiety about me leaving, but you've got to let me go, you know? If you keep on asking me to do things, you know I'm going to do it because I want to help, but I've got to go.” [laughter] So the day I left, I told the director—I told Rosanne—I said, “A year from today, I'm going to come back here and I'm going to work for you.” She said, “No, you can't work, we've never hired anybody throughout all of our shelters and all the shelter systems, a graduate has never come back and worked.” So a year to the day, I came back to that shelter and they hired me—and, uh, the—as an RA, a residential aide—and I told them that I wanted to do support groups, you know, for queers. Had no idea about running a support group, or—I'd never even been to one [laughter]. But I knew from being homeless and being not heard that women needed to be able to talk in privacy about whatever they wanted to. So the director gave me permission and I started running groups then, and then I stayed maybe about

five months, four months, and I went back up to her and I said, I've got to go. I can't work here [laughter]. It's like, I could not get used to sitting on the other side of the desk and telling women that they wanted Kotex and I had to tell them no, you had to wait another hour. It was like—I just couldn't do it, you know, I didn't like it and I just couldn't do it. I did start doing ADL in there, Adult Daily Living, because it was part—half of the house was for, uh, alcohol and substance abuse. The other half of the house was for the mentally ill. And a lot of them wouldn't take showers or wash their clothes, so I started doing ADL with them, gaining their confidence, showing them how to wash—you know, how to do their laundry—and when I left I was so glad that they kept on doing this programming. It was very cool. Very rewarding to me, although I had not a clue what I was doing. You know, when I was hired for QEJ, I didn't know—it was like, they made me a director and I had—well, *you* know, I didn't know anything. It was like, I'm just like, feeling my way around, man. It was like, I didn't know how to talk to people. I didn't know how to talk to you. I remember the day in that restaurant, that we sat down and talked—do you remember that? [laughter]

Lewis: Were we in the Village? The West Village? Chelsea maybe?

Toole: Yeah, somewhere around there, and we were sitting and we were talking, and I had not a clue about, you know, how to be a supervisor or do… [laughter]

Lewis: Yeah, I think I remember that. I must have been 18 or 19. Yeah.

Toole: Yeah, yeah. Like, I had not a clue.

Lewis: You were a good supervisor. I remember you let me tag along on some of the QEJ shelter groups that you were running. Those were great.

Toole: Yeah, well I was a big believer in that, you know? That if you're going to come in and want to do anything with QEJ—except, damn it, I could not get the fucking board or anybody else to come into shelters with me for years. Could not get them. But yeah, I was a big believer that, you know, come in, see, smell it, feel it, if you're going to do this work.

Lewis: Yeah. Um, I want to be mindful of time. You talked a little bit—you did talk some about your work with QEJ in the last interview. I was wondering if you could talk a little bit about Jay's House or some of the stuff that you've been up to, um, in the years since QEJ shuttered?

Toole: When QEJ closed, I was kind of lost, you know? Even though I had started up Jay's House, like, pretty fast, I was still lost in my own self.

Lewis: Can you explain what Jay's House is for the—

Toole: So Jay's House is an organization, a non-profit that does work in the New York City shelter system—uh, that runs support groups for queers, and just gives a space for queer men and women to be in a space where there's no staff, you know? Where they

can talk about what they want, what they need, uh, and whatever help we can give, you know? It's just a space that they can hold for themselves. These groups usually run themselves, we just sit there and bring snacks. And they usually run by themselves and they know what they need better than we do. And the best people that have the information are the ones sitting at that table, because if there's 10 people there, two of them are going through—went through already what you're going through now, and they can help. To rely on other homeless people that are in the shelter with you also. Uh, so, we did groups up until I guess two years ago. Uh, and I started pulling back. And the board also was like—we didn't have enough money. We had no money—most of it came out of my own pocket a lot of times. Uh, the grant money had run out, and I still have checks that I never cashed, because I wasn't going to take money from an organization to pay myself when I need to pay these homeless people. So we pulled back a little bit and started talking about maybe doing groups once a month instead of every week, cutting back on the money, and then I decided that I needed to stop for a while. Uh, and we're still stopped, only because I got terribly sick, and I moved upstate and a whole lot of things were happening with me, you know? Uh, the organization is still in its name, it's still incorporated as a non-profit. We just got a small grant, and I'm seeing within the next month, two months at best, uh, to get a better sense of where we're going and what to do with that little bit of money. I know money is owed to Danny [Schaffer], you know? For all the money he's put out, and paying off legal fees for Jay's House. Uh, so anyway, I'm trying to figure this out. I don't want to go into it again like I did the last time. Like, I love QEJ and I jumped into this not knowing what the fuck I was doing, where I was going. So, I don't ever want to do something like that again, and not just letting down the board or the outside people, but to get something started in the shelter and then stop. I don't ever want to have to do that again. So the next time, if we all agree on it, it will be a lifetime of going into the shelters, and it's something we're in the process, you know, of trying to figure out. Do I have enough energy? Is my health good enough to be going into shelters, even? I catch everything so fast now—uh, I'm not a kid. So it's something I'll try to work at. You know, I'm almost 70 and I'm still not grown up [laughter]. All of my professors say that you stop growing when you first start using—that you're learning, and you stop learning and you stop growing, right, when you start using drugs and alcohol. So I figure I'm about 13 now. Uh, I started using when I was eight, nine—drinking, you know? So I'm about 13 now in mind. So I'm still, like—I jump into things sometimes. Like, I want to do it. I don't want to talk about it, I want to do it. Instead of Jay, [laughter] think about how you want to do it, not just don't go and do it, because sometimes it's not right. Think about how you're going to do it, where you're going to do it, who you're going to do it with, you know? I'm still growing up, in a sense.

Lewis: I have to say, you don't seem like a 13 year old to me.

Toole: [laughter]

Lewis: I mean that as a compliment.

Toole: Thank you [laughter].

Lewis: I have just a couple more questions to wrap us up.

Toole: Yeah.

Lewis: Um, I guess I'm curious just to hear your thoughts as someone who still works with LGBT homeless people, sort of what your thoughts are on the conditions that LGBT homeless people face today versus in the years where when you were on the streets—if they're the same, or different, or what.

Toole: I don't think it's changed much, you know? Even though the proclamations and the rules have changed on paper, in reality I still think the homophobia there, the transphobia, the hostile environment, the religious aspect of case managers. I still see it played out. When I was in the system, if you got a case manager that didn't like you or was religious, or you walk into their little cubbyhole and you're seeing all the crucifixes and mother and this and that, you knew you were going to the bottom of the list if you told them you were queer. So inside the shelter system when I was there, femmes or people that didn't look butch would never admit who they were. They'd come to my group and talk about things, which is why no staff was allowed, even though they wanted me to take names and give it to them. Yeah, we never did that. Yeah, just never did that. I don't think it's changed that much. Two years ago, three years ago, trans women were being beaten up in shelters in Brooklyn. Being ostracized because—I used to get these fucking phone calls from directors of shelters, right? Or case managers. Whoever was on duty at the time. Saying, “We need some help. We have a trans woman that had a fight with so-and-so, and it's because they're on all of these steroids, and it's because they're trans,” and the conversations—the most ridiculous conversations to try to make them understand, it has nothing to do with being trans. It's being 350 women in one small space. You're not allowed to go into somebody's room, you can't sit on a bed, you can't touch this. Go on into a bathroom, you're taking a shower too long, laundries, you know? It's like, all of these things. This is why people get into arguments, in fact it has nothing to do with being trans. “Well, we have to transfer them because they're not suitable and they cause stuff.” These fucking—it's like hitting a brick wall. And it's always the trans women that are transferred. Always. So, unfortunately, no, I don't see very much difference from three years ago when I was in the system talking to people. I was up at, uh, Fordham University about two years ago with Elana, and they were opening up the first transgender shelter [Marsha’s House], right? And all of these amazing people on the panel, and the audience that was there to listen—you know, the panel was amazing—and when it got to me, I'm looking at the director, right? And they know me, because they said, “Oh, Jay Toole.” Because, backtracking, I was, uh, one of the ones that tried to get trans into Providence Women's Shelter for the first time—way before anything was written up by the city. So, they knew me, and they know—so I asked one question when it was my turn, and I asked one question, and I said, “How many people here are case managers or work inside the shelter system?” Not one fucking hand. And I said, “That's the problem,” you know? “That's the problem. I'm speaking to all queer people. I'm speaking to my community. It's like, we all know it already. It's your people that needed to be here to hear these things. Where's the ones that are going to work in the shelter? Or in any of your shelters?” Anyway [laughter]. I'm sorry.

Lewis: No, thank you. I want to wrap this up. Unfortunately, there's one more thing I need to ask you about. I wonder, you know—I think that Ted may have asked you a question like this at the end of the first round of the interview that we did. Um, I don't remember what you said. Maybe you'll say the same thing or something different, that's okay. I was wondering if we could close with—you could tell us about, um, something you've done with your organizing work in recent years that you're especially proud of or especially want to be remembered for.

Toole: You know, when I sobered up and, you know, started looking around and seeing all of the crap that was happening to us, and humanity at large, it was always my mantra to do no harm, right? I—and I believe in that, you know? Do no harm. So, I think—I don't know what I want to be remembered for. I'm hoping somebody does remember me, period, never mind what I'm remembered for.

Lewis: You've got a building named after you.

Toole: [laughter] What I—is that, uh, I tried to help, you know? I am happy that trans are allowed into the shelter system. Uh, not the way I wanted to, but in some form now. And I'm proud of QEJ. Deeply proud. I'm proud of you, you know? We've both come very far. And I don't know, I don't know.

Lewis: You've done a lot of work over the years. I think it would be hard to pick out [laughter]…

Toole: Yeah, yeah. I don't know how much longer I have, you know? I'm going to have to do something big again. [laughter]

Lewis: Yeah, well, I won't be surprised when you do that [laughter].

Toole: [laughter]

Lewis: Is there anything else you want to add before we…?

Toole: Nah. Nah. You know, I love my community.

Lewis: Okay. But Jay, thank you so much for your time.

Toole: Absolutely.

PART 4—AUGUST 8, 2018

Lewis: Hello. My name is AJ Lewis and I will be having a conversation with Jay Toole for the New York City Trans Oral History Project, in collaboration with the New York Public Library's Community Oral History Project. This is an oral history project centered

on the experiences of trans-identifying people. Um, it's August 8th, 2018, and this is being recorded in Jay's apartment in—is this Murray Hill? Where are we?

Toole: Kips Bay.

Lewis: Kips—in Kips Bay. Uh, and we're also being joined by Sebastián Castro Niculescu, who may be jumping in at some point. Hey, Jay.

Toole: Hey. How's it going?

Lewis: Pretty good. How's your summer?

Toole: Hot.

Lewis: Hot, yeah. It's been—

Toole: It's been—yeah, these last couple of months have been brutal, you know? It's like—thankful for air conditioning.

Lewis: Yeah, which we're not experiencing right now, because it makes too much noise, unfortunately [laughter].

Toole: Yeah.

Lewis: So, this is our—I guess—third interview conducted over, like, a few years, and I think we kind of wanted to, like, pick up on some of the stuff that we kind of glossed over because we ran out of time with previous interviews, and basically talk about sort of the kind of changing shape of New York City in the 1990s, um, under [Rudy] Giuliani, with changes to policing in the 90s, and especially your experiences with homelessness and later organizing around homelessness issues. So, I think—why don't we just kind of start with, like, generally what your life looked like, starting in the early 90s. Can you tell us what—like, where you were living, what that was like?

Toole: [pause] I guess—let me start in '88. Let me backtrack just a little, because this was the progression of it. So, crack was—crack was in New York City, uh, and I was homeless and ended up going to a shelter in Brooklyn on Liberty Avenue called BWS—Brooklyn Women's Shelter—but we all called it BWS, which stood for "Bitches with Stems," uh, and that's because we bought our crack from case managers and the security guards that were there. So, I was there for maybe about a year, year and a half, and fast-forward to 1990, I was back on the streets. The shelter system in the late 80s was horrendous towards queers. My first—when I first walked into a shelter, the first thing the security said was, "Oh god, another fucking dyke," you know? And I was beat up by the security, jacked up in the bathrooms, thrown down stairs [phone vibrating loudly]. And so in 1990, I was—where the hell was I? I think in 1990 I was in Madison

Square Park, living there, which is—it's ironic. Forty years later and I'm still in the same neighborhood again [laughter].

Lewis: May I ask, were your experiences in the shelter system, like, actually getting worse by the 1980s, or was it mainly—like, was that a sort of consistent thing?

Toole: It was the norm.

Lewis: Okay.

Toole: It was totally the norm. No one blinked an eye. And, you know, the shelter system is fucked up for everybody, but for queers, it's a little worse, especially if you get a homophobic case manager, because then, you're at the bottom of the list. They're just not going to help you, and that's what happened to me. I had a male case manager, and he just wouldn't do anything for me, you know? I had—I got myself a little job, and he called the job, because that was his job to do, and he told my job that I was homeless and living in a shelter, and I lost my job because of it. That's how they were. They didn't care. They just didn't care. They'd see you for three minutes, and you're out the door, and they'd see you in another couple of months. So, the shelter system was bad. And the reason I stayed on the streets for like, 27 years is because the whole news for homeless queers on the streets was, "Don't go in the shelter system. You're going to get beat up, you're going to get harassed, and it's not safe for us." And they were right, you know? All those stories that I heard, they were fucking right. It was not safe for us in the shelter system.

Lewis: Did you have other kinds of memorable, like, bad experiences with case managers messing with employment or with public assistance, or things like that?

Toole: They just—you know, I got to speak for me. There was a few other butches in that shelter, but we were constantly fist-fighting each other over stupid stuff, because when you're oppressed, you never take it to the top people that are doing the oppressing. We ended up taking it out on each other and getting into fistfights. Now, for myself, it was him calling my job, him not giving me car fare when I needed to go to medical appointments or any kind of an appointment—which, they're legally obliged to give you car fare, but he would never leave car fare for me—and he had all this religious stuff on his desk and everything. It's like, yeah, you know? He was from Trinidad, he said—going back in memory. But yeah, he was atrocious to me. So, I don't know how the other queers in there handled their things. The security guards were really, really bad, like I said. I went into the bathroom in the middle of the night, and they came in the bathroom and fucked me up. And then one of the male guards kicked me—they had a winding staircase—and kicked me down the stairs, you know, calling me every name in the book. So, it was bad. It was bad, and I just couldn't handle it anymore, and I went back to the streets.

Lewis: Security and case workers were also how crack was getting into the shelter system, right?

Toole: Yeah, yeah. It was well-known that, you know, these guys and girls were dealing crack, yeah, and I don't know what else, because I was smoking crack then [coughing]. But, one of them—one of them that they actually brought up on charges… The shelter system never fires anybody. They rotate them. So, they took this guy and they put him in another shelter, that I met him here on 25th Street and Lexington [Avenue]—the [69th Regiment] Armory. So, uh, he wasn't ever fired. He just got moved around. And that's what the shelter system has a tendency of doing. I've seen a director of a shelter kick a client—you know, because the kid was sleeping—and she kicked her, and she didn't get fired. She became a director at another shelter. They just moved her around. It's like—it's what the city does [laughter]. Hopefully that's not what they still do, but I don't trust the city.

Lewis: Uh, so you left around 1990?

Toole: Yeah. I entered in '88, because I was so—I was dying, and I had to go in and build myself up a little bit, and they finally—I got some strength and was like, "I have to get out of here," and went back to the streets, and stayed in Madison Square Park for a very long time. It was—yeah, it was 1990, 91—and it was me and—I think I told you the story of the Vietnam guys, you know?

Lewis: Yeah, you did.

Toole: Yeah, that was the 90s also.

Lewis: Where exactly in Madison Square Park?

Toole: On the—23rd, 24th—26th Street side? I was there—the woman that brought me back into the community—that found me in the shelter system—I was with her the other day, and we were sitting in Madison Square Park, and I said, "That's—that was my bed. See that patch of grass? That's me [laughter]." And they have it all fenced off and everything now, but it was me, three other queer women, and the two Vietnamese—Vietnam veterans, that were snipers. And, you know, we'd sleep there in the day. Us queers would be awake, and the guys would sleep, right—because they were our protectors at night, so we wouldn't get raped or beat up or anything like that. And we stayed there for a while, and there was a guy across the street that was a doorman, and so we'd take our blankets and everything, put it in—we had a little basket—and he'd keep the basket for us during the day. Didn't have to give him any money. He'd throw us change, you know? He was a nice guy. Uh, driving past there these last couple of weeks, I see the guys are still on the outside of the park—lot of veterans that are homeless—and I still see them out there, uh, and nobody's reaching out to them.

Lewis: And how did you—

Toole: I know I got sidetracked somewhere along this [laughter].

Lewis: No, that wasn't—that wasn't a sidetrack. How did you end up meeting up with the other—the three queer women you were staying with?

Toole: There is a lot of queers that are homeless. I mean, there's a lot of us [laughter], you know? All identities, all shades, all sizes. There's a lot of us out there, uh, and unfortunately a lot of them are still kids that are being thrown out of their homes, still. Uh, but I met them—we talk, you know? Homeless people talk. "Oh, I know this gay guy. He lives up on 34th in the train station." So, you wander up that way and try to hook up with different people and form families, and that's what we did. We formed little clans, little fam—clans? I don't like that word—little families [laughter]. So, you know, you just—you just need them. You start talking to them and you realize—like, they can tell I'm queer, and a lot of them, I can't tell that they're queer. A lot of trans women out there. I know they used to be in that little park over near the Center [Jackson Square], and they moved up towards 34th Street, and that's where I found them. And, yeah—you just hang, you know, and you're going to find your own little niche. You're going to find people that you feel safe with. Like, I didn't feel safe with a bunch of straight guys. It was like—I was always, like—always on guard. It's like, "What the fuck?" So, you try to be with women, and definitely queers. Yeah.

Lewis: Was there a particular reason why you decided to go to Madison Square Park?

Toole: Uh, no. I think we were just walking around, and we were collecting bottles and cans to get our alcohol, or whatever we were doing, and came across the park. Well, I knew there was a park there for years—I had buried a couple of my pets there [laughter]. So, I knew there was a park there, and it looked safe, and it had a bathroom—but, you know, you'd have to bring an armored guard with you to go to that bathroom down there—but, there was a lot of bushes [laughter], so that was good. And the guy would let us use his bathroom. But yeah, I think we just stumbled upon it, and it was—it looked alright, and we were like, "Let's try to stay here for a little while." And then it was the week of the Indian Parade [India Day Parade], and unbeknownst to us is that, in their religion, on that day—that religious holiday—that they can't say no to giving money. We made a fortune [laughter]. We made a fortune. God bless their hearts. We were alright for a week [laughter]. It was like, "Didn't I just give you money [laughter]?"

Lewis: By the way—this actually is a tangent—but, about pets: did you have a squirrel at one point?

Toole: I did. I did.

Lewis: But that was earlier, right?

Toole: That was in—no, that was the 90s, also.

Lewis: Oh, so—okay, so it's not a tangent.

Toole: Yeah, that was when I was going up to 40th Street. Yes, I had a box on 40th Street between 10th and 11th Avenue, I think it was? Yeah. Port Authority. And I came out of the box this one morning, and there's this little thing—you know, maybe about that—what is that, three inches? Four inches? And it had no hair, and it had a tail with no hair. And I said, "It's either a rat—which is alright [laughter]—or a squirrel," which was fine, you know? So, I took it in the box with me, and then I ran around trying to get it some food. And I didn't know what it was, so I'm trying to… Bought a little doll's baby bottle [laughter]. I was feeding it and everything, and it stayed—it stayed with me, you know? I named it Nuts. It ended up being a squirrel. It got bigger and bigger, and got bushy, and I named her Nuts. And I'd go out in the day, and she'd go out wherever she went—or he. I don't even know what it was. And I'd come back at night, and she'd come in at night. I'd have to go get a new box because, you know, they take your box and get rid of it—get a new box, go in, and she'd come in and sleep under my armpit every night. It was like—and for years I used to say how I saved this fucking little thing—this little creature—and it wasn't until recently that—maybe the last two years—it dawned on me. I said, "Wait a minute, Nuts saved me!" because I had a purpose. I had to stay alive because I had to go back and take care of this little creature. It was like, "Wow!" It was like, ding ding ding ding! Uh, yeah, and then I guess it was mating season this one year—because she stayed with me, like—wow, my god, must be like, two years. Every night. It was really great. And I'd get these big walnuts, you know—steal them. Go into the grocery stores, open up a bag, steal all these walnuts [laughter], and feed her. And then this one time, she didn't come home. It's like, "Ohhh." Started her own family, I guess—hopefully, you know? Every squirrel I see that, it's like, "That's…" [laughter] I love creatures, and I love humanity. I love—it's like, I've always…

Lewis: Did you have other creatures during that time? We don't have to talk about it that long, but I'm curious [laughter].

Toole: Not—yeah, I did not, in the 90s. I did not. Nuts was the only one I had. I was in contact with a lot of rats [laughter], but no—nothing of mine. No—I don't want to call them pets—family members.

Lewis: Companions.

Toole: Yes. Yeah. No other companions that came. But in the 70s I had the monkeys, you know?

Lewis: That's right, I remember the monkey [laughter]. Uh, so when you were in—what was it?—28th Street, you said? 26th Street?

Toole: 26th Street.

Lewis: 26th Street. Did you say you were sleeping mostly during the day?

Toole: No, we'd be up during the day. I said it backward.

Lewis: Oh, the vets would sleep during the day.

Toole: I let the guys sleep, because they'd sit up at night taking care of us. And we stayed there for a long time. We just kept on going back there. It was a safe place. And then, across the street from there, where the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company was, they were doing construction, and so we decided to take everything and go underneath the construction over there—you know, because we'd be a lot safer, we'd be out from the elements. And so we stayed there for a while, and—it's so funny. I don't know whether they were Asian or Pacific Islander, or—I'm not sure where they came from, but in the middle of the night they came, and—with rolled up money, and were sticking it—you know the fence that's around the construction sites?—were sticking money in the holes of the fence for us. It was—people are great, you know? Some people are really, really great.

Lewis: Uh, and what were you doing with yourself, mostly, during the day?

Toole: Uh, panhandling. Bottles, cans. If I'd seen something I could rob.

Lewis: Anything in particular [laughter]?

Toole: [laughter]

Lewis: Didn't discriminate?

Toole: No, no. Don't have your wallet out around me, that's all [laughter]. Yeah, I wasn't—no, I wasn't doing any armed robberies then. And boosting out of stores, you know? Mostly begging, panhandling. Then after that, we moved back uptown to 32nd Street. And that was early '94—around there. And when we were down around this neighborhood, we weren't really getting any tickets or being harassed by the cops, but when we got up there—I guess it's because it's a tourist spot—it was Macy's, and blah blah blah, all this—the Empire State Building wasn't far [cough]—the cops were really, really, really bad. And we'd get a ticket for everything—either having an open container, which I can understand… Then we got smart. We'd buy—you know, put our beer in something else [laughter], so that it didn't look like alcohol. Uh, sleeping was a big thing. They were constantly harassing us for sleeping in the subways. They don't have them anymore, but in the 70s and—60s, 70s, and 80s, they had batons with the—it was, I guess, metal in the tip of it—and they'd just whack our feet, you know? Didn't kill us, but it was hurtful. But we used—in the 34th Street train station—the N and the R, and the—what other train is there? The F, I think?

Lewis: Yeah.

Toole: That long passageway from 32nd Street up to 35th Street. There's a long passageway, right? So, if you walk that passageway, there's a—you go up a little hill. There's like, a little bitty, little bitty hill. And there's a line maybe about that long, that wide that runs from one wall to the other wall. And I think it was blue—blue or red, can't

remember. But we'd sleep on that little hill, right, all of us. I mean, there was a lot of us, you know? And if you slept on the bottom part of it, the transit cops would come and shake you and wake you up and scream at you and give you tickets for loitering or whatever it was, and we'd just go up on the upper part, go across the line, and go to sleep up there. And the city cops would come down, and the whole process, we'd go through it again. We would just keep moving, you know?

Lewis: So it was kind of like—the transit cops and city cops were basically kind of doing the same thing to get—

Toole: Doing the same exact thing, but at that—I imagine—the only thing—I think about this a lot over the years—is like, it must be something with that line [laughter].

Lewis: Oh, yeah. It's like the border—

Toole: Yeah, yeah. It's like, this is the border of Transit and City, you know [laughter]?

Lewis: And you were mostly sleeping in the subway station when you moved up to 32nd Street?

Toole: In bad weather, sleep down there. There—also on, uh, 31st Street, we had boxes lined—it's a very short block—and we'd have our boxes lined up there, and sleep in the boxes when it was cool out. And the liquor store was right on the corner. And on Sundays, we'd go to the drugstore and rob the mouthwash [laughter] to get the alcohol out of there, you know? My friend used to cook it up, and you'd be surprised, just that little bit of alcohol, how fucked up you can get from that shit. Oh, my god. And nasty—killed my liver. Uh, but there was also a guy that would come around—very well-dressed with his briefcase and everything—come down the train station, and he'd have wine and vodka for sale on Sundays.

Lewis: On Sundays.

Toole: Yeah, and we'd get it from him.

Lewis: And were you living—staying with the same women when you moved up to 32nd Street?

Toole: Yes, yes. It was always the same. One of them passed away. She had terrible—we called it elephantitis. I don't know the real name of it [elephantiasis]. It's when—you know, you see homeless people today where their legs and feet are so swollen, and it's because there's—they never have a chance to raise their legs and feet. And that's what she had. And don't know what she died from. She died in her sleep in the train station. I imagine maybe a blood clot or something—a heart attack. But there was a lot of violence in that train station, also. Uh, and not the general public—it was homeless against homeless. A lot of the straight homeless guys down there didn't like us, thought we were making more money than them, or whatever the reason was, all because we

were queer. But, you know, they raped a few of the girls. I ended up in the hospital twice, uh, really fucked up—caught a beating from them. It was hard. It was hard being homeless. Yeah, it's brutal out there. Let me tell you a little bit about the—the buildings in the Bronx. So, I guess it started in the 80s? Not sure—80s into the 90s? But, the Bronx looked like it was bombed. It looked like Western Europe during World War II. It was burned-out buildings, demolished… Heroin was rampant. And I was going somewhere—somebody was driving me somewhere—and we always passed the building where I was born, right? And I looked around, and they had—we knew nobody lived in these buildings, you know, because we'd go there to shoot up our heroin, things like that. So, the city got a bright idea to like, "Let's make it look pretty," right? I guess for the tourists coming in for anything else. God forbid they see the real Bronx. So, they—in all the windows, right, they painted. It wasn't even real shit. They painted curtains and flowers—vases of flowers in almost every… It was, like—it was ridiculous, but it was the city trying to show that, you know, New York City—the borough of the Bronx—is not a bad place, it's a good place to start a business, it's good to visit there… But it was the most ridiculous shit, you know? And I kept on going back just to look at that. It was so—it was incredi… We have to try to find some pictures of this shit [laughter]. And now they're—now it's all projects there. They knocked down my building. Everything is projects, but boy, it was the most ridiculous shit you had… Because you could tell, you know? Maybe if you were flying real far away, you would think it was, you know, "Oh, wow, people are really nice, got nice places, flowers in the windows, boxes [laughter]."

Lewis: Did they—were they all the same flowers in every window [laughter]?

Toole: Just about. Just about. It was ridic—I'm telling you, AJ, you've never seen anything like this shit. It was ridiculous. We have to look this up.

Lewis: You don't know, like, what—like, who specifically just put—decided to paint the buildings—what part of the city?

Toole: I don't know. It didn't matter to me back then. It's something I'd like to know now, but back then I wasn't interested in, you know, whose bright idea that was. It was just like [laughter], I'm a homeless junkie, and I thought it was ridiculous [laughter].

Lewis: Did you notice any other efforts like that to kind of like, fancify or make the city look prettier for tourists around the same time?

Toole: Well, definitely 42nd Street, when they started making it into Disneyland and just pushed everybody I knew out of there. Me and Miss Major talk about this a lot, how they just closed down all the peep shows—and if you think queer women don't go to those peep shows, you're [scoff] so mistaken.

Lewis: I was going to ask if you went to the peep shows.

Toole: Yeah. Of course, because most of the girls are lesbians, you know? The majority of pole-dancers, peep show girls, they were all from our community—everybody trying to make it, one way or the other. Uh, and there was a lot of them. It was like—42nd Street was like a big adult playland where you get anything you ever wanted and have some fun.

Lewis: Sounds kind of like how Major described it [laughter].

Toole: [laughter] We were talking about—you used to go into the theaters, right, and you'd see—you know, just go through there, because people stay in there all fucking day. And we're talking about sex in the theaters, and it was like, "Hell yeah!" It's like, that's why we went in there [laughter] with our girls.

Lewis: You know, that's such a—and this is me revealing myself as kind of a nerdy academic, but Samuel Delany has a book about the peep shows [*Times Square Red, Times Square Blue*], and one of the things that he kind of comes down very strong on was that there were no women in—at least in the porn theaters, he said that there were no women. Uh, maybe it was different for like, strip clubs and—was that not your experience?

Toole: Well, I went—I went to a couple of the porn movies—you know, *The Devil and*—what was it, *The Devil in Miss Jones,* or something like that. *Deep Throat.* But my friend owned a porn movie theater on Third Avenue and 12th Street—between 11th and 12th—and a lot of women used to go in there. Straight women wanted—you know, nothing wrong with it. I would say maybe he's right on the porn theaters itself, but the clubs and going to—I can't even think of their names—Eighth Avenue and between 41st and 43rd, it was nothing but strip clubs. And there was a lot of women in there. Even my straight friends that I had back then, they wanted to go, and they'd get up and dance. It was like, "Oh my god [laughter]." But there was a lot of women in there. So, that's my experience, but maybe not so many going into the theaters, unless it was to have sex—unless she was working the streets and that was a safe place to go in and do business.

Lewis: But in your experience, like, the peep shows were a place where, like, lesbians in particular congregated?

Toole: A lot of us went there, you know, for many different reasons. I went there just to smoke my crack—go in the little booth and close it and smoke—gone in there with women to have sex. Uh, I've always seen women, no matter where.

Lewis: And, by the way, you yourself had been involved in the sex industry—like, pimping and stuff—in the past.

Toole: Yes.

Lewis: Were you still doing that in the 80s and 90s, or…?

Toole: I was doing it mostly in the 70s—late 60s, all through the 70s—uh, started out in the West Village and eventually ended up on Third Avenue and 14th Street, which was the ho stroll—completely different from what it is today. And at—I think I had three women working for me then, and there was two other butches that they had girls out there, and then the guys had their girls out there, and there was always infighting. There was a hotel on the corner of 14th Street and Third Avenue—it's not there anymore—but, like, it was seven dollars, and then there was a place on 13th Street right off Third Avenue, was another one, and that's where I used to buy and sell my guns [laughter]. And that was—that was notorious. Those blocks were notorious, you know? I mean, you had to really know what the fuck you were doing. Like, this one butch—a friend of mine, and she got caught out there sleeping in the park on 13th Street, and she was high, and they took acid and threw it on her genitals and on her face, and she was in bad shape, and she ended up hanging herself because she just couldn't deal with it anymore. But, it was rough. A lot of pawn shops—pawn brokers. My friend had the porn house there. Uh, there was always somebody getting hurt. One way or the other, there was always somebody getting hurt or somebody getting arrested.

Lewis: [sneezing]

Toole: God bless you. We had this big heroin dealer, and she lived on 12th Street between Second and Third [Avenues], right? So, I'm going down to buy the heroin. This is in the summertime, so I had short sleeves on. So I buy the heroin and I stuff it, and I walk—start to walk up the block, and—"Hey, Karen!" You know, man, fucking cops. Uh, and they stopped me, searched me, and they didn't find it. Brought me back down to the dealer, and I told them—I said, "No, I was asking her if she was still going to go to the movies with me," and she went through the whole thing and agreed with it, but man, I had a tag put on me that I was a rat in that neighborhood. I mean, I really got fucking harassed. Like, how come I didn't get arrested? Why didn't they find the dope? It was like, oh man, you know? It was like, fucked up.

Lewis: And you're describing—this was a little bit earlier, is that right? Like, in the 70s or 80s, or is…?

Toole: Yeah, this is—this is all through the 70s. I digress [laughter]. The 90s, the 90s, the 90s. So—

Lewis: May I ask—so, it just—so, it sounds like when you moved up to 32nd Street, your experiences with police changed kind of dramatically.

Toole: Yeah. I think Giuliani was…?

Lewis: Yeah, '94.

Toole: Yeah. His "quality of life" shit, you know, was… I don't think he ever considered homeless people to have any lives [laughter], so everything was against us, from my friends doing squeegees in front of Port Authority being arrested, being jacked up by the

cops, having their stuff taken, to panhandling, to even just walking down the street and they didn't like you. They'd just stop you and give you a ticket. I ended up with at least—oh my god, at least 50 tickets in a very small period of time.

Lewis: For those kinds of things, like panhandling?

Toole: For those kinds of things, yeah. It was just ridiculous. I'd just throw the tickets away. How am I going to pay for it [laughter]? Giving a homeless person a ticket!

Lewis: Did they not—did you have ID? Did they not have to book you when they gave you a summons?

Toole: Right, right. They don't have to pull you in, and very rarely did they run you—which means they get on the computer—and I don't think they had that back then, anyway, to be able to run everybody immediately to see if they had warrants or any other arrests linked. I don't think they had those—that stuff yet. So all I got was tickets, you know? Uh, in '95 I was with a guy—one of the Vietnam vets—and we were going through—was it '95? Had to be '95—'95 or '96, because this was my—I think it was my last arrest. And we were tapping the phones, which means you get a very thin wire, and you put the wire up through the—where the money-change thing is, and there's three little grooves there, so, put it up the certain groove, all the money comes down. So we would make a lot like that, man. So, we went from 34th Street and Park Avenue, right, up to 29th Street and Park Avenue, pulled a right up to 29th and Madison [Avenue], bought big forties of beer, right, and we're drinking, and all of a sudden this guy and girl run up on us, man, you know? "You're under arrest. We've been following you all down Park Avenue." So, this is one of the—I don't know if I ever told you this one—one of the most stupidest arrests I've ever had. I've had a few of them, but this is the most ridiculous one, right? So, we're under arrest. "Put your forties down. Put your hands behind your backs," right? So, the guy—male cop has Danny, puts his hands behind his back, female cop, "I forgot my handcuffs. Can you put your hands behind your back?" [laughter]

Lewis: To act like you were in handcuffs [laughter].

Toole: Yeah, exactly! So I said, "Can we finish our forties and then we'll do that?" So they uncuffed him, and we drank our forties. So, they were following us on Park Avenue in a cab, because they were good at that. They love doing surveillance in cabs. And I think there's a certain number on the cab that you can tell whether they're cops or not, if they ever do it right now. So we drank our forties, make believe—you know, put my hands behind my back, and I'm walking on Madison Avenue [laughter], and they forgot where they parked the fucking cab, right? So, we're walking around in circles looking for their goddamn cab. We get—finally find it. They get on their phones and they're talking to the precincts, and the precincts are telling them, "We have no room." We must've been—they must've been arresting everybody that night, and all the precincts were full, so they drove us around for a couple of hours, bought us coffee and donuts, and just took us down to Centre Street, you know? They actually indicted him down to Florida,

because he had warrants, and they cut me loose a couple of days later. But, that was the most ridiculous shit in the world! It was like, “Can you make believe—put your hands behind your back?” It’s like, oh my god [laughter]! I’m glad I had enough sense to say, “Can we drink first? Then I’ll do whatever you want.”

Lewis: Do you remember, like, if you had conversations with your friends who were also homeless and stuff—like, when suddenly everyone started getting harassed by the police more, did you guys have thoughts or responses to it at the time, or…?

Toole: We’d talk about it, but everybody—if you were homeless, there wasn’t no set of, you know, “We’re going to get this one. We’re going to get that one,” unless the cops knew that there was somebody that was extremely violent and they knew when they were coming out of the hospitals, and things like that—or jail—and they’d give them more shit than they would us. But I think we all got it equally. The bumping, they were really good at that. They’d stand next to you and give you a hard bump. They were really good at that. And, you know, being homeless, some of us are really frail, and I was really frail [laughter]. Bump me and I’m going to fall down. Uh, yeah, the quality of life was just so bad, and I don’t know, did it actually really help people? Was society made better because a bunch of homeless people were put in jail or got tickets, or…? I never saw the reasoning—you know, why they called it a “quality of life.” I imagine it was like, a number of politicians or people with money that, “I don’t like them washing my windshields,” or, “Every corner I go to, somebody’s asking for money,” and they came up with this shit. I don’t think it—I don’t think it helped society that much. Me getting 50 tickets, it didn’t—I don’t think it helped society. It definitely didn’t help me. Like, if somebody would’ve said, “I have a place for you to stay. It’s a room. There’s some food,” that would’ve helped. Giving me a paper ticket just made—makes you feel less than you are. Uh, and I know his tactics went across country—throughout the States. I know—I think LA was one of the hard-hit ones, with their “quality of life.” I’ve been to LA a number of times, because even though I was homeless, I used to travel [laughter]. I’d steal a car and go. So, I knew Los Angeles had a lot of homeless people out there, and word was that they were getting hit with that shit, too—constantly harassed, constantly, “Move on, move on, move on,” you know, until there’s no place else to move. You’re in the river. And then they wanted to put us on barges [laughter].

Lewis: And did you notice—like, did it—because that’s how folks talk about it, is to sort of basically “clean,” like, homeless and poor people out of the central neighborhoods. Like, did you notice—did folks move to different parts of the city?

Toole: Abso—[laughter] AJ, it was like an avalanche. When they decide that they’re going to do a neighborhood and gentrify it, you’re going to move, because you’re going to go to jail, you’re going to go to the hospital, you’re going to go somewhere unless you go down the next block, you know? Like 42nd Street when they did Disney World. Everybody—almost everybody went to the West Village—into Chelsea, the lower 20s, and the West Village. And 34th Street, when they did the convention, they came and just swooped up everybody. Everybody was going [scoff], you know? If you weren’t moving, you were going to go to jail, because it had to be pristine for the democrats to come in—

I think it was the Democratic [National] Convention [at Madison Square Garden in 1992]. One of them. Yeah, everybody was—you had to go. And I know in—where the hell was it? I think it was the Republican [National] Convention in California when they had one, like, four years ago—had to be, like, 10 years ago[2]—the township were giving the homeless tickets—movie tickets to go to the movies on the day that they were coming in for the convention [laughter]. It's like, does anybody ever think that maybe we should help people? Now, that would be quality of life, to actually do some work around that! Yeah, Giuliani was a motherfucker, you know? He was absolutely… And then Bloomberg right after him. It was like, oh my god [laughter]. Went from bad to bad to bad.

Lewis: Were you and your friends getting—like, also getting arrested more during that period, or was it mostly just tickets?

Toole: Mostly all tickets. I got arrested for the phones—

Lewis: For the phone thing, yeah.

Toole: —and then they gave me a desk appearance. I was supposed to go back to court a couple of weeks later, and I was living by—I was off the streets, and in 1998 I was in New Providence Women's Shelter, living there, staying there, and the cops came and got me. And all these big warrant officers—huge guys—"Jay Toole, could you come down, [mumbling]," and I come downstairs, and they looked at me and they all started laughing. They said, "They sent all of us to get you?" It was like [laughter]…

Lewis: And what did they pick you up for?

Toole: They got—because I didn't show up to court for the phones, you know?

Lewis: Oh, [inaudible]. That's what you were saying, right.

Toole: But they said, "But you have felony gun charges against you for armed robbery, and that's why they sent six of us." They ended up being cool cops, though. They didn't handcuff me—again, coffee and donuts—so all that stuff about them eating donuts is true, man [laughter]! It's so true. And they cut me loose. I went down and it was, "Eh, go." [laughter]

Lewis: I'm curious—you know, you'd mentioned that, like, the folks you hung out with when you were living in Midtown was like, a very mixed, diverse group of people, and I'm curious if you observed the role that, like, race was kind of playing at the time with changing relationships between homeless people and the cops in the city? Or also maybe I guess I'm curious about your experiences as a white butch dealing with cops?

Toole: Yeah. Uh, if you were a person of color—if you were an African American male, you were going to get the shoe. It's just the way it was. There was no segregation in

[2] In 1996, actually – the Republican National Convention in San Diego.

homelessness. I imagine there is some—you know, a bunch of white people and then people of color. I didn't experience that, but I—for a fact, I know that if you were male and you were African American, and the cops—you were drinking or anything, you were going to be—something was going to happen, and it wasn't going to be done nicely. It's like, when giving me a ticket, you stand there and they write up the ticket. African American guy, you're going to be thrown up against the wall, patted down, empty your pockets, and get a ticket. Yeah, it was very noticeable. Even to me, as drunk or as high or as crazy as I was, it's noticeable. And when I first noticed about those kind of things happening was years and years and years ago. I was like 16 and I was in the Bronx, and I'd just copped heroin, and the cops ran up on us. And they had me, this other white dude, and two African American gentlemen, one African American girl, in three separate squad cars, right? They took my heroin and put it on the African American girl. I get cut loose. She's going to go for one to three [years], you know? And that shit hasn't changed. They say the police department has gotten better. I don't think that has changed that much. I think today, if I had something on me and they could, they'd take it off me and put it onto somebody else, only because I'm white—and maybe because I'm Irish, because it was Irish cops back then, all of them [laughter].

Lewis: You'd mentioned, like, getting bumped and harassed and hit by batons and stuff. I was wondering if you witnessed or experienced other kinds of harassment or violence from the police around that time.

Toole: I've seen, in front of Port Authority mainly—and that's where most of this shit usually happens—those cops and the PA cops are brutal, you know? They will hit you. They will knock you to the ground. And yeah, have I seen it? Yes, numerous times, for using the bathrooms down there. I've gotten arrested for using the bathrooms down there—telling me I was in the wrong bathroom. Yeah, the Port Authority c—I don't know. Do they still have the Port Authority cops? I don't even know.

Lewis: I think they do.

Toole: Yeah, I think they do, too. They were—you know, they had that little police thing inside Port Authority, and they'd drag you the fuck there. You were just [scoff]—they were not easy cops, man. They were—they'd hit you for no reason, just to show you that they had the power and that you have to listen to them. You were going to be brought into that little room.

Lewis: Uh, and you had also mentioned—and I'm hopping around a little—

Toole: Yeah, and it's fine. My brain is getting a little [laughter]…

Lewis: Don't let me brush you along if I'm, like—

Toole: It might be time for a smoke [laughter].

Lewis: Actually, you know, I have to use the restroom, and I would like a cigarette, also. Also, then we can turn the air conditioning back on [recording stops and resumes]. And this one's working. Alright, we're back.

Toole: So, AJ, I'd like to get back and touch base on the shelter system again. So, I spent a number of years in different shelters and ended up in New Providence Women's Shelter and, you know, they had queer staff in high places, and the security and residential aides, case managers, but what I found—and this is… I had sobered up. I started to think, and I started looking around and saying, "This is really fucked up [laughter]."

Lewis: And this is later in the 90s, right?

Toole: Yes, this was the late 90s and—you know, like, I knew it was bad years before, but sobering up and looking around and stop me here, is like, "Woah." So I wanted to make my community more visible and get things—that we'd get the same kind of rights and the same kind of services that everybody else was getting, and that some of us weren't, and I wanted to bring some Pride into it. So I got it in my little pea brain—Pride was coming up, right—and this was, I think, '99—and this Irish woman came into my shelter. Her name was Áine Duggan, and she took me out and said, "You have to come to the LGBT Center." And this—I didn't want to go, because I'd had bad experiences at the Center over the years. I thought, "Oh, this would be a safe place to sleep." So not so [laughter]. They'd chase me away in the mornings when they were ready to open it up. But it was "Welfare Made a Difference" by the Queers for Economic Justice network, and this was a bunch of organizations that did—bunch of queer organizations that did work around homelessness and justice, and then there was a bunch of straight organizations that were doing stuff around the same thing.

Lewis: And was this, like, partly in response to welfare reform in like, '96 or whatever?

Toole: I think so, yeah. And so it was Joseph DeFilippis, Terry Boggis, Amber Hollibaugh, and I brought a contingent of queers with me. And they were talking about homelessness and drug addiction, and things that I'd never heard anybody else talk about in the community. And at the end of it, everybody's talking—Ricky Blum was there, also. He's a great lawyer doing work on homelessness with Legal Aid. And so they asked if anybody wanted to talk, and the microphone got in my hand—and you've heard me say this many times—I started talking about, "[The] homeless shelter system, queers, drug addiction, alcoholism, that's where you need to be!" and I couldn't shut up, and I haven't stopped talking about this shit forever. That's my goal these days forever now. Uh, so I went back to my shelter and decided, "Pride." So I brought in a—at first I took all the girls out to the Sony Building—all the queer girls to the Sony Building on 57th Street and Madison [Avenue], because there they take free photos of you. So I have all these amazing photos of the girls kissing and hugging their loved ones—that you can't do in the shelter system, right? You can't hold hands, you can't kiss, and you can't hug. And so I got all these amazing, amazing, amazing photographs and built a bulletin board in the lobby of the shelter, and pasted all of this—all of their photos, and all Pride

colors, and this and that. Now, I've never been to Pride. I knew nothing about what was going on in society with queers. Not a thing. I didn't know we had rights. I didn't know that there was a march every year [laughter], and I was at Stonewall, and never knew. It wasn't until Reina [Tourmaline] and Ola started talking about it and said, "Jay, you got to tell us stories." I was like—I had no idea because of drug addiction and alcoholism and, you know, homelessness. It takes you away from everything. So I started doing that in the—in Providence Women's Shelter, and you could see the women walking around, that they had pride, they had in step. They were like… Then I did a fashion show with all the butches, got donations of suits, and the girls… And it was just lucky that the director of the shelter was queer also, and she just let me run wild [laughter]. She just let me go. So when I got out of the shelter system, I started going to the Queers for Economic Justice network, to these meetings, right? And it was like, "Oh, man, we would like these guys." They were talking about stuff that I believe in. And I kept on going, I kept on going, I kept on going, and then they decided to make QEJ an organization. So, Joseph DeFilippis, who, QEJ is his baby—he's the one that thought of it, he's the one that brought us all together—Ignacio Rivera, Terry, Ricky, Amber, Richard Kim… I can't think of everybody's names, but there was a whole group of us. And so we formed this organization, and they said, "Well, we have to hire people to do some work, you know, in the homeless sector." Man, this might be me, you know? So I never did the resume. I didn't know what a resume looked like. I didn't know how to write one. And I was in a cab with Joseph, and I said, "Can I put my name in to maybe help do this for some money?" [laughter] and he said, "We made this job specifically for you to be the director." It was like, "Oh, okay." So, I went from drug addict, crack addict, alcoholism, shelter, homelessness, to a director. It was like—I don't even know how that happened, but these guys were amazing. And I kept on having these board meetings and board meetings, and finally, Amber Hollibaugh and Terry Boggis and Ignacio pulled me into a room and said, "How come you don't talk?" "I don't know what the fuck you're talking about," and that's just what I said to them. I said, "You're all academics. You're using words that I have to remember and go home and look it up. I stopped—you know, my schooling stopped in the first couple of weeks of sixth grade." So, after I said that, then they brought the meetings down and they talked English [laughter]. I understood what they were talking about. So the first shelter that we went into was New Providence Women's Shelter, and—

Lewis: And this is when you started doing the shelter groups?

Toole: Shelter groups, yeah, and it was just me for a long time [laughter].

Lewis: Can you explain, just briefly, what the shelter groups were and how that came to be?

Toole: Well, being homeless and living in the shelters, I knew that there was never a safe space for any queer to talk about what was going on in their lives, whether it was to a case manager or anybody of staff, right? And I wanted to make—I didn't want people to have to go through what I went through—like, always on the outside, isolated, can't talk about the women. It just wasn't safe, you know? So, that's when I decided, the work

I want to do with QEJ is to go into the shelter system, make space and time for these folks to come into a group where there's no staff allowed, which I made mandatory when I started groups in any shelter. I told the directors right away, "Your staff isn't allowed in these," so that they can come in here and they can hold hands, they can kiss, they can talk about whatever they want—about how bad the shelter is, who's picking on them, what staff is doing what, you know? And I would always say my story, also. And I really believe this—and it's not because a lot of people told me, although that's probably why I believe it now [laughter], because everybody's told me—is that I wanted them to know this is not a place where they're going to die. You weren't going to die in the shelter. You were going to go out and you're going to be part of the community. You're going to get your own place. You're going to be alright, and I'm here telling you because I've been here. I've done it. And by then it was like, almost 30 years of me being homeless and drug addicted. And that's what I did. That's what I wanted to do. I wanted to make my community safe. A lot of the shelters were closed groups—you know, no straight people were allowed—and some of the groups in shelters were open, because the queers wanted their friends to come in and learn, right? So I had this elderly woman sitting in on our group, and she's—she was coming in every week, every week, every week, and then she says to me—and she says to the group—that she hadn't talked to her sister in over 20 years because she was a lesbian, and she called her up that week and they made friends, and they met, you know? She says, "It's because I understood what you were saying in the groups, and that it was alright for her to be queer," or be a lesbian, okay, whatever she said. And that's what I wanted to do. I just wanted to make us visible. I wanted to make us safe. Now, going to the men's shelters—and again, you know, I didn't have any volunteers in the very beginning, for a long time—and I used to do the men's groups on Wards Island, here in Bellevue. Now that was another—that's another animal. That's—you think queers have it bad in the women's shelters? It's horrendous in the male shelters. I went to Wards Islands once, and there was a trans woman there that was hit with a machete. And then I started hearing the stories, how the trans girls would be in the dorm—because they're huge dormitories. Wards Island holds, I think, 1700 guys, and the name of the building is Charles H. Gay [laughter]. But the security guards would stand outside the dormitories while these kids were getting gang-raped. Uh, and so I'd bring them outside to do the groups, especially at Bellevue. I started the groups over there, and the director decided to put us not in the shelter itself, but right next door to it, and put a big sign up there, "Gay Meeting." So I'm sitting in there, and no one came. No one came. I left and I'm crossing over First Avenue, and there's these guys come—first they came from behind me, and I got scared, and they passed me and turned and came towards me, and I said, "Oh shit." And they came up to me and went, "We're gay. We just can't go there." So there's a restaurant on the corner over here on 30th Street and First [Avenue], and every week I'd take a whole group out there [laughter]. Go to the restaurant and we'd all have coffee and toast and talk. It's scary to be queer on any spectrum in the men's shelters. Uh, it's just horrendous. But anyway, I'd go to all the shelters, and then I'd start—I got volunteers, and we branched out and did a whole bunch of different shelters, uh, and then on Pride we'd take everybody out in a contingent. I had an 80-year-old woman walking down Pride, and I said, "Don't you want to get in the car?" and she said, "No, this is the first

time in my life that I'm walking with pride," and she walked all fucking day. Better than me, you know? She walked that whole thing. She had pride that day.

Lewis: What were the responses of the shelter directors like when you started asking folks if you could do queer programming in the shelter [laughter]?

Toole: Well, I'll tell you. New Providence was fine, because that was my home shelter, and before I brought groups in there, I told the director—I said, "Listen, one year from today, I'm going to come back and work here," because you had to be out a year—some stupid regulation. One year to the day I went back and they hired me. First time that's ever happened, and the last time [laughter]. And I stayed there for about three months working as a residential aide and had to quit, because I could not get used to sitting behind the other side of the desk and telling these women, "No, you can't have Kotex right now. You can't have Tampax right now. You got to wait until blah blah time. You can't wash your clothes, you can't do this…" It was like, breaking into people's lockers. It's like, "Hell no, I can't do this shit," you know? Thankfully, QEJ came along. Uh, so New Providence was easy. The other women's shelters were pretty good. None of them really gave me that much static. The men's shelters—to get into Bellevue motherfucking Shelter was a nightmare. I'm in this meeting, big, long motherfucking ta—excuse me, I curse a lot—a big, long table, and all of these case managers and directors are sitting there, and this fucking bitch turns around and she says, "I'm tired of giving MetroCards to these bums that just come in to just get a MetroCard," you know? And I said, "Who are you talking about?" I don't think she knew who I was, and I had her written up and was like, "Are you kidding me? That's how you—you've been here so many years, and that's how you feel about your clients, your people, that they're a bunch of bums and you don't want to give them MetroCards anymore?" The other guy turns to me and he says, "Well, are you going to talk about the phallus?" [laughter] It was a nightmare meeting. It was a nightmare. And I looked at him, and I said—

Lewis: [laughter] What did you say?

Toole: "Want to talk about yours?" you know? It's like, where did that—what the [laughter]…? "Well, trans women have…" It was like, "Oh, man, we're going to go here, instead of going here," and just took it to a whole another level. But I talked them into it, and it was fine. But men's shelters were always the harder—Bed-Atlantic, one of the biggest shelters in New York, would never let me in, because they said they had no queers in there. They had no gay men. Meanwhile—

Lewis: Oh, yeah, [inaudible] said they said that, yeah.

Toole: —you have guys walking around looking like women. "Oh, yeah, we have ten of those." Wouldn't let me in. Could not get into that place.

Lewis: Atlantic—that's the Armory?

Toole: Yeah, big old armory on Atlantic [Avenue] and Pacific [Street] [and Bedford Avenue]. Could never get in there.

Lewis: But you couldn't get in? You never got in there at all? Oh, wow.

Toole: I had meetings with them. Wouldn't let me in. Even told them that—I forget her name—the Director of Homeless Services—gave me her blessing, "She wants me in here," they refused. They just flat-out, "Nope, we don't have any. We don't have a problem." What problem? [laughter] It's like—I said—

Lewis: [laughter] But you'd both have different conceptions of what the problem was?

Toole: Yeah, I know. It's like, oh my god! Please help me! But I think we did about 10 men's shelters.

Lewis: Yeah, I was going to ask. You did Bellevue and Wards Island, and…

Toole: Bellevue, Wards Island, a place on Broadway in East New York—I can't remember the name of it…

Lewis: Men's?

Toole: Yeah, men's shelter. Uh, did groups there a little while, and I had to stop them only because of concerns for the volunteers. It was getting pretty dicey, and everybody smoking, uh, K2—KY. KY, right? K2? [It's "K2"]

Lewis: I forget. That's the synthetic, yeah?

Toole: The pure—popular. Yeah, people were absolutely insane—absolutely insane in these groups, you know? And I had to keep on going with the volunteers, and it was finally—I could tell that they were scared, and I knew it was unsafe. It was like, "Oh, we've got to cut this loose, come back at another time, maybe. I'll give them coffee if they want to come out." Did the—168th Street is also a big one—uh, Project Renewal [Fort Washington] Men's Shelter. It's for mentally—mental health issues. Every time I did that group, either the cops were coming in, and I couldn't get in, or I was locked in with all these guys and couldn't get out, because of the cops [laughter]. But it was fine. The guys were great. They were great. And women's shelters… I guess about 30 shelters altogether.

Lewis: Yeah, I didn't realize there were quite so many. That's sort of… You did New Providence and BWS, and…

Toole: Broadway House, and… Oh my god. Broadway House, Park Slope Women's Shelter… I can't recall their names. Saratoga, which is for alcohol and substance abuse. I love it when they—when I can get into those shelters.

Lewis: Could you just talk a little bit about what the groups were like and what kinds of things folks wanted to talk about and share?

Toole: Sex.

Lewis: Yeah [laughter].

Toole: [laughter]

Lewis: Did you bring that to them or was that, like, a broad interest to them?

Toole: No, I never brought sex to them [laughter]!

Lewis: [laughter] No, I mean, did you bring it up?

Toole: No, no, no. But, you know, it's frowned upon in the shelter system, around sex, and sometimes it happens. I always tell them, like, "If it's going to happen, you know exactly what time those security guards are hitting the floors. Do it in-between [laughter]." You know, because they come as clockwork. You know. And then I'd give them short-term hotels where you can go, a little bit of money for a couple of hours, where to get vibrators. That was another thing, was trying to get vibrators in the shelter system [laughter]. But I won!

Lewis: Wait, oh, you got them approved in the sys—?

Toole: Yeah.

Lewis: Oh, wow [laughter].

Toole: Yeah. Oh, man. Yeah, it was cool. It was very, very cool. QEJ was an amazing fucking organization, you know? Saved my ass. Took me out of homelessness, made me a director, and did amazing work. It was like… I did a—I got the Commissioner of Human Rights, Carmelyn Malalis, and the director of the social services for LGBT, Elana—I had them go out to Far Rockaway, because the homophobia is terrible, oh my god. It's just so bad in the Rockaways. And they went out and talked, and let the people know that the city officials are here, and that they are part of our community. And the biggest thing that Carmelyn was talking about was QEJ. The commissioner's getting up, and, "Jay Toole. If you want to know anything, there she is right there. Queers for Economic Justice changed the outlook in queer," whatever, blah blah, I forget the words she used. That she was honored to be on the board of directors. And then Elana got up, and she started talking about QEJ, and it was like, [laughter] "There is no more QEJ." I understand it's taught in colleges now, some of it?

Lewis: Oh, yeah, I think so.

Toole: Yeah, that's—how crazy is that shit, you know? And I was part of that. It's like—it's fucking amazing. That's amazing. It's amazing that I'm sitting here and I'm still here. That's what's amazing. Been shot at, been knifed, been—fell off the church, all this other shit, but QEJ, the door was always open where other queer organizations were like, homelessness—maybe you didn't look right, or you smelled funny, and things like that—wouldn't let you in to use bathrooms, or to sit down in air conditioning, or feel—let the person feel safe a little bit in community. QEJ was known for that. God forbid anybody told me that somebody couldn't come in [laughter], you know? It's like, that door was open. That's what we were there—that's what I was there for. That's what QEJ was there for. Uh, like Joseph, and Kenyon, and Monroe France—Kenyon Farrow, Amber Hollibaugh—they wrote fantastic stuff, you know? On welfare reform, on marriage—*Beyond Marriage*, and the military that Kenyon wrote was just phenomenal. And I can't write, because I can't spell, but I can talk and I know how to get into places [laughter], so that was my job. And just to be part of that—of that history… And I don't hear of any other organizations that, like, jumped up and said, "Let's keep on moving this forward," and that's a shame. It's sad that more organizations are not helping other queers that are facing homelessness, getting old, drug addiction, alcoholism, trauma. Where is the other organizations that are working on that? I know they have a lot of big parties [laughter]. I'm never invited, but—well, sometimes, but I don't go. I went to a meeting years ago—oh my, seven years ago—when they were talking—I got this invitation saying, "Come to this house, right, in the East Village," and a lot of community members were going to be there, so I asked around. I said, "What community members? My community members?" [laughter] And they said, "Oh, yeah, definitely, the Center invited them." And I get to this place with a winding staircase from floor to floor, and I'm sitting there, and it was all white people—*all* white people—and they were talking about how much money can they raise to get votes for politicians that would push gay marriage through. That was the whole thing. And it was like, "Oh, I am so not supposed to be here in this meeting." "You're not for gay marriage?" I said, "I'm for people to get out of homelessness. I'm for people to stop drug addiction and alcoholism. I couldn't give two shits about gay marriage right now." Uh, and two elder gay guys were there, and they said, "Yeah, but how am I going to leave my estate to my partner?" and it was like, "Oh, shit," you know? It's like, "They don't hear me. I hear what they're saying, but they don't hear me." It was so bad.

Lewis: I wanted to ask you also about the thing you guys did with the domestic partnership policy in the shelter system, also. Can you explain kind of what happened with that?

Toole: Yeah, sure. So, I was making runs to different shelters just to see if everybody was okay, and this and that, and I decided to go Bellevue's domestic partnership shelter—the family shelter.

Lewis: And this is like, early 2000s?

Toole: Yeah, yeah. Maybe 2005 or '04. So I went in there—which I got banned for afterwards—but I was in that one day, and there was a very young lesbian couple in

there, and they were—this case manager or some kind of worker came out, and I'm standing there with this couple, and they told the couple that they needed to go back to the conductor of that train and get a written statement saying that they lived on the train. And it was like, "Holy shit! You're kidding me, right?" And they wouldn't help these kids, right?

Lewis: And this was so they could stay together in the system.

Toole: Right, right, because families on the domestic partnership side, you're not supposed to sleep there. They're not supposed to keep you overnight there at all. It's against the law. They do it, but it's illegal. They're supposed to get you into a hotel room until you get all your paperwork and things done, right? So I went back to QEJ and I told them, "This is what I heard over there around domestic partnership stuff." So QEJ got behind this immediately, of course, and pulled in the Center, AVP [Anti-Violence Project], a whole bunch of different organizations to work on this, to make it so that a same-sex couple could go into the family side of the shelter system and not be discriminated against, because that's what was happening. And so when you go in there, if you get put in a hotel room, they give you this sheet of paper with all of these things you got to do. So, you got to get your electric bill, you got to get a letter from whoever you lived with or the rental apartment, and your bank account, and…

Lewis: Proof that you're cohabitating? Living together?

Toole: Yeah. Like, homeless people don't have these things, you know, and it's a way for the city to bring—keep the numbers down. You know, if they keep on doing… So, anyway, got the whole network together—pulled them all together, and it was during Christmastime, and we did this postcard thing, and the Center took the lead—bless their hearts—and took the lead on this and got thousands and thousands and thousands of postcards, and we had these gift boxes, so they packed all the postcards in gift boxes, right, and then went down to Beaver Street, where the Department of Homeless Services headquarters are, and they had a Christmas tree in their lobby. They wouldn't let them up with the boxes, so they all put the boxes with all these things underneath their Christmas tree as gifts [laughter]. And finally, the city [cough] got behind it and decided same-sex couples… It was in the newspapers. It was really cool. And again, QEJ took the—and I don't know if you should even put that in, because QEJ aren't around anymore—QEJ took the backseat, because the city had a tendency of getting mad, and might not let me into their shelters to do groups, right? So we took the backseat on it, and it went through, and domestic partners were put into hotels together for the first time, and it was great, you know? Some of those couples came to QEJ with their new keys [laughter]. It was like, awesome, man. It was like, "Oh, god, we're doing something right here." And it was put into policy that everybody should be served the same, but they still had that long list, but now I got different organizations—not organizations, different friends of mine [laughter] that I knew in high places, and they would write letters [laughter]. It's all a bunch of stupid stuff, to make sure that they got into hotels and into permanent housing. That was—yeah, that was really cool for QEJ to

do. And then on the transgender policy was also the highlight of my life, to get this passed. It was me, Carrie—did we just talk about this earlier, though?

Lewis: I think not on tape, no. Can you explain briefly what the policy was originally?

Toole: The policy was that birth certificate, born a certain gender, you go to that specific gender's shelter, right? Born male, doesn't matter what, you're going to the male shelters. Born female, you go to the female shelters. No in-between, right? And the city was adamant on this. I mean, there was no crossover, because one of their biggest peeves was that women were going to get raped, you know? So again, it was Carrie Davis from the Center, Dean Spade from SRLP, Sylvia Rivera Law Project. I don't know why I'm saying the whole name. You know it [laughter].

Lewis: It's good to get it on the record [laughter].

Toole: And so we met with the different assistant directors of the Department of Homeless Services trying to hash out what was going on in the men's shelters, putting trans women or female-identified persons in the men's shelters. And they were like, "Yeah, but they're men." It was like, "No." And the deputy commissioner always—she always wanted me to sit next to her, right, and we'd known each other for years. And she'd hit me, you know, "We take care of our trans. We send them to specific shelters that are safe. Isn't that right, Jay?" and she'd be—"No! [laughter] No, you send them to Wards Island. It seems like every trans woman in New York got sent to Wards Island. It's terrible out there. It's on a fucking island!" So we met with them every—almost every month, every couple of months for, I don't know, two years, about? For a long time [laughter], and finally they decided to bring three directors from female shelters and three directors from male shelters into this group and see how they felt about this. So the women's shelters, their directors were like, "Yes, we'll take them. It's fine." The men's shelters—and I know the city must have blew their minds—the men's shelters said, "Yes, they belong in women's shelters." Now I'm thinking, "I know why they're saying this, because it's not their headache anymore that they perceive it to have been. They don't have to deal with it anymore," and that's my—and I didn't give a fuck. I don't care why they're agreeing with the three of us. It's like, "Yes!" And I'll tell you this story, but you can't put that in the—in the public library part, because—

Lewis: I'll pause it.

Toole: —there was a promise that I would— [recording stops and resumes] I think it's a great story, though [laughter]. It was a promise I made. So, after all of the rehashing and meetings with them, and these six directors saying yes, which must've floored the DHS [laughter], they decided to put it into policy. And there was a three-page document for people to self-identify which shelter system they wanted to go into, that no one would force them into either one. My—as much as I loved that happening… And they promised that they would do sensitivity trainings around the issues, which never really happened. The director of one of the shelters—matter of fact, she's the director at Bellevue right now. She's my old case manager from New Providence. She called up

and she said, “Can you come to New Providence and do trainings for us?” and I said, “Didn’t you just have a training with the city?” “Worst training we ever had, Jay. They told us about stuff that we learned in college. We know the terminology. We need to know where you get hormonal shots, where are the doctors, where do we send people? That’s what we want to know.” They didn’t get any of that, you know? They wanted the necessities of helping people, not the terminologies. They knew that. So they did the three trainings out of—I think it was 52 shelters back then, and they did three—uh, and trans women were going to New Providence, Broadway House—they were just going into the women’s shelters, and it was fine. Trans men, on the other hand, was a little harder. The Red Cross called me up twice, and I asked, “How did you get my number?” They said, “There’s a little bitty piece of paper stuck on our wall that if we have a problem with trans, call Jay,” with my cell number. Are you kidding me? So they called me twice. These trans guys two different times got burnt out of their apartments and they wanted to go into the men’s shelters. I was like, “Oh man, they have no idea. They really don’t, but that’s what they want. I can’t make them go into the female shelters. That’s not how they identify. Is it safer? Yes [laughter].” I called up the commissioner and said, “Listen, I’m putting a trans man over in Bellevue Men’s Shelter. I want to make sure he’s safe at all times.” Hours later—not even a day—hours later, both of these guys at different times called up Red Cross, Red Cross calls me, they need to get out of there. It was like, “Yeah,” because you don’t know. The bathrooms are—it’s like 30 guys. Where are you going to undress? Where are you going to shower? How are you going to move through this stuff, you know? If they ever found out, you know… I just—it scared me every time. It was like, on the phone with the commissioner constantly, “Keep these people safe.”

Lewis: Do you know how that’s been handled since the policy change? Like, how trans men have been placed, or is there a whole new system for…?

Toole: Not many trans men end up in the shelter system, period, first of all. Maybe, all these years, five I’ve come across, you know? And I don’t know why. I don’t know whether it’s they pass easier, they get jobs faster. I’m not sure the economics of why that happens. Just recently, two years ago, they opened up Marsha’s House in the Bronx for trans women, and I think the ages are—it’s weird ages—I think it’s 19 to 24?[3] Just a weird—it’s just weird [laughter]. But my biggest regret on the trans policy—my biggest regret, and it still kicks me in the fucking ass when I think about it, is that I didn’t make the stipulation that they had to have flyers up in every lobby of every male shelter to make trans girls aware that they did not have to be there. They can go. And it never happened, you know? I myself went to—had little flyers and brought them to the men’s shelters, and in front of my eyes they’d take them and dump them in the garbage can. It was like… That’s my biggest regret, that I could’ve done more.

Lewis: Did you have a sense that trans women were still ending up in the men’s side after the policy change?

[3] Marsha’s House serves individuals of all LGBTQ identities (not just trans women) ages 18 to 30. See Project Renewal press release here: http://www.projectrenewal.org/blog/2017/8/16/45xz02t901el34bcp6dflhlnynyihr

Toole: Yes, yes. Because nobody was telling them, first of all, and then there's trans women that want to be there, and that's fine, too, but they should have the option, you know, like, "You have a choice." So, yeah. But having the policy is good. It's not written in stone. It's off the website—came off the website years ago, before Trump, so I can't find it. I got copies, of course, but you can't find it anywhere on the homeless services website, that there's a policy that can let them in.

Lewis: I'm curious. I myself don't know: had other cities implemented similar policies before New York City, or were you aware that…? I know New York's one of the first, right?

Toole: Yeah, and we're the only city in this country that has the right to shelter. It's crazy that we're the only ones, that everybody should have the right to shelter, but every couple of years they try to take that away, too.

Lewis: Were there other things—I want to be mindful of time, so we don't drag on forever, but were there other things you worked on with QEJ that you were especially pleased of or thought were especially important?

Toole: It was my shelter groups.

Lewis: Shelter groups, yeah.

Toole: Yeah.

Lewis: How long did you run the shelter groups for?

Toole: Eleven years?

Lewis: Oh, wow. Huh.

Toole: Yeah. The one and only director [laughter], and, I don't know, hundreds of interns and volunteers, and…

Lewis: Yeah, lot of interns and volunteers [laughter].

Toole: Yeah, yeah.

Lewis: Did folks from the shelter groups get involved with QEJ?

Toole: Uh, a few of them have. A few of them have but, you know, here's my belief: you're in the shelter system, then you get out, right, and you have your own place. And yeah, you call me up a few times, and come to the office and want to do some stuff, and then you disappear. That's fine, because I'm not hearing from you. You're getting on with your life. You're moving on, you know, and that's great. Another thing that QEJ did, yes, is we did the Homeless March from Union Square—I don't know where we went.

Down to DHS, I guess? Oh, no, we went to Washington Square Park, to a big luncheon that we had for them. But yeah, all the shelters came out—staff from the shelters came out, brought their people, you know? It's like, it was really, really good, and me and Ola made a video of it, and we have—what's the singer that I'm getting honored with?

Lewis: I don't know. You mentioned it. At CLAGS [Center for Lesbian and Gay Studies]?

Toole: Yeah. Toshi. Toshi Reagon put her music to it, because homeless people were just coming from the streets and joining us, and they were dancing down Broadway. It was fucking amazing, man. It was great. It's still on—it's still up, the video. Yeah, QEJ did so many things, and like, we had our fingers—if you needed help and we didn't know what to do, we'd find out what to do, you know?

Lewis: I'm curious, like, what do you think made QEJ work in the way you're describing? How did they manage to succeed, especially around these issues of…?

Toole: They let me do whatever I want [laughter].

Lewis: [laughter]

Toole: No, I think it was a bunch of great minds that knew that there was a need in our community and actually—not talk about it, not up here in the clouds, but actually fucking did something about it. That's what made it work. No one just sat around. It's like, homeless folks would come into the office and people would pull out their lunches. It's like, "Eat after they're gone. You don't know—either that or share." And it was like—it was fine. Everybody had—everybody knew that there's a bunch of people out there that needed us, and yeah, it just worked. It was like, a lot of times I didn't understand what the fuck they were saying to me in the supervisors' meeting. It's like, "What?" "What are you doing, Jay?" "I'm doing [laughter]—like, I'm going to shelters. What are you doing?" "I'm writing the…" you know? But the door was never fucking closed, ever. We had a homeless guy come in one of those big motorized chairs—

Lewis: This was when the office was on 32nd Street?

Toole: Yeah, and were you there that day?

Lewis: I don't think so, no.

Toole: Yeah, it was like, we were having one of our "Know Your Rights" trainings, and everybody—because it was hundreds and hundreds of pounds, I mean, and the guy couldn't get out of it, but they're super heavy—you know, 500-600 pounds—and a bunch of guys came running down, picked up the fucking machine, picked the guy up, over… That's the work we did. Somebody needed something. Somebody couldn't get somewhere. We'll find a way to do that. The "Know Your Rights" trainings were important to QEJ, also. Once a month we'd have these "Know Your Rights" trainings

and I'd bring in somebody from—Ricky Blum. I'd bring him in, and I'd talk about housing and homelessness, right—a lawyer. I'd bring in somebody that does nothing but social security, right, and fill out applications right then and there, and help them—give them phone numbers. We'd have anti-violence work. We'd have—oh, every month just bring somebody else in and just help these guys, you know? It was ama… Then we'd have a big brunch—you know, big dinner, because we always—I never took anybody out anywhere unless—and QEJ was very aware that I was very adamant on it—they had to eat, and they had to have coffee, and they had to have water. I don't care what yous talk about, but you can't take people out, because they're not going to hold dinner for people at the shelters, so we have to make sure. So I'd go to the Chinese restaurants, tell them what I was doing, and I'd get like, 50 dinners for like, $5 [laughter]. They were really good. Yeah, QEJ, man. Queers for Economic Justice.

Lewis: We should probably, like, wrap up, but I want to make sure: is there anything else you want to comment on about QEJ?

Toole: No… Let's see. I am saddened that it's not here anymore. I am saddened that no one else has picked up the banner. Maybe we need to start it up again.

Lewis: You've been doing work with Jay's House.

Toole: I'm not doing anything with Jay's House. I've closed the organization and we're just starting to talk about doing shelter groups but only voluntary, and it might be something in the near future, but as far as Jay's House as an organization, I've come to understand myself. I'm not a fucking good person when it comes to that shit—filling out papers and reading all of this shit from the state and the city, and it's like, "I don't even…" So, if it ever became an organization again, they can use my name. I don't need the money as long as you do the work. Use my name, but filling out paperwork, that is not my… My thing is being out in the shelters, being out in the streets. I cannot sit at a desk filling out papers. It's like, "This is not me." I fucked up the whole shit, and I admit that, you know? Not any money or anything, because I still have money in Jay's House account. Never been touched. God forbid, I would never. But I was just not good with paperwork, you know? For me—I was just not good. When I first started, I should have gotten somebody that knew about how to do this stuff. But, oh no, "You can do it, Jay. You know how to do it. You can do it. You can do it." It was like, no, I couldn't do it.

Lewis: I have to do a tiny bit of that for this oral history stuff and I mess it up constantly, truthfully [laughter].

Toole: Yeah, oh my god, you know? But yeah, we're talking about going back in and doing the work again on an all-volunteer basis. We got a couple of thousand in the bank under Jay's House, so we have enough for snacks and things like that to start it up, and coffee. So, we'll see. We'll see.

Lewis: It sounds like QEJ also produced a cool community of people, a lot of whom are still in touch.

Toole: Oh my god. It's like, every single intern still gets a hold of me, and there's like, hundreds of yous [laughter]! And it's like, often that I miss something, you know? And I have—you know, I had a wall in QEJ, in the new offices. I had a whole wall with nothing but pictures and little writings, and just like, people—I'd be out and somebody would come in from a shelter and write on a piece of paper, "Love you, Jay." And I have, still, everything. I have boxes of shit that I can't get rid of. That's my memories. I don't want to remember the crack—I remember, but I want to remember all these folks that are out of the system, that are moving on with their lives, that have families, that have jobs—or no jobs—but, you know, they're living. They're living their lives, and not in a box on a street. Still today, I cannot go past a homeless person without saying something and giving something. I can't. I keep five dollars in quarters [change jingling] in my pocket at all times. Has to be five dollars in quarters. I used to give out dollars. Can't do that anymore [laughter]. Now it's quarters, but I can't go past. I just can't. It's like, I was there. Somebody put their hand out to me. Áine Duggan that day put her hand out to me. She'd seen something, and here I am today. It's so funny. And that's what I want to do. That's what I'd tell all the volunteers of QEJ when we went to the shelters: "Put your hand out. Fucking hope somebody grabs it," because when Áine put her hand out, I grabbed it. I still hold onto it, you know? The first time she took me out, she put me in a cab, and she says—because she's from Ireland, and I could hardly understand her when I first met her—she says, "Jay, we're going to go have some good crack," and my eyes were like, "We're going to have some good crack?" It's like, what? I said, "You know I'm a crack addict, right?" and she said, "Oh, in Ireland, 'crack' means 'good time,' 'fun.'" It's like, oh my god! It's like, "You scared the hell out of me." [laughter] She's a card. I was just with her the other day, man. Still, all these days later, we're still friends. Yeah, I love running into all of you old interns. I seen Terry Boggis not too long ago. Ricky I talk to all the time. Joseph's coming in in December. Áine said to me the other day—you know, because I was so pissed at Pride this year. Fuck Pride.

Lewis: Moving it?

Toole: Huh?

Lewis: Like, moving it?

Toole: Yeah, moving it and the way they treated people. It was—I will protest next year. I'm going to get a t-shirt…

Lewis: Next year's going to be a nightmare.

Toole: They said they did this because they're expecting millions next year. If they expect—if they think that route is going to hold millions of people, they're so fucking stupid. But I'm going to get a t-shirt, and it's going to say, "I was in front of Stonewall in '69, and here I am again, [laughter] 50 years,"—50 years, holy shit.

Lewis: Hmm?

Toole: Fifty years. Boy, that went by fast [laughter]. Blink of an eye, man. So many women, so many girls, so many stories…

Lewis: [laughter] Well then, thank you so much, Jay. Thank you for sharing.

Toole: Yeah, I hope we touched on everything that we were supposed to. Uh, I know I wanted to—I don't know if we ever talked about—yeah, we did. Fourteenth Street and Third Avenue. Yeah, we did all that. Alright.

Lewis: Anyway, we can always—there's always the option to do it again.

Toole: Yeah.