NEW YORK CITY TRANS ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

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INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

TANYA ASAPANSA-JOHNSON WALKER

Interviewer: Lorenzo Van Ness

Date of Interview: April 2, 2017

Location of Interview: Tanya's House

Interview Recording URL:
http://oralhistory.nypl.org/interviews/tanya-asapansa-johnson-walker-mbaz3g

Transcript URL:
https://s3.amazonaws.com/oral-history/transcripts/NYC+TOHP+Transcript+005+Tanya+Asapansa+Johnson+Walker.pdf

Transcribed by Ric Tennenbaum (Intern)

NYC TOHP Interview Transcript #005

Lorenzo Van Ness: Hello, my name is Lorenzo Van Ness and I will be having a conversation with Tanya Asapansa-Johnson Walker 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. It is April 2nd, 2017, and this is being recorded at Tanya's home. So, Ms. Tanya. So can you tell me just your name, your pronoun?

Tanya Asapansa-Johnson Walker: I'm Tanya Asapansa-Johnson Walker. She and her are my gender pronouns.

Van Ness: Great. So can you tell us a little about where and when you were born?

Walker: I was born in Staten Island, New York. May 5th, 1963.

Van Ness: And what was it like? What do you remember about your childhood and growing up in Staten Island?

Walker: Well I didn't actually grow up in Staten Island. My parents moved us to New Jersey, I believe Linden, New Jersey, right from the—basically right from the hospital. I lived there for maybe a couple of days in Staten Island but then they moved us to New Jersey.

Van Ness: And what was it like then, growing up in New Jersey?

Walker: It was very, uh, it was very racist. Especially in Southampton, New Jersey. It was a lot of racism, and a lot of, uh, you know. It was just a lot of racism and a lot of, you know... Well they had good schools, I would say, at the time. But, that's about it. I mean, I remember when I used to walk across the overpass to get to Grant School, because I started out at Grant School, in 1968. The white kids used to roll across the bridge in their cars, older kids, and I was like five years old, and they would like pull their underpants down and put their behinds to the window and call me a nigger, scream nigger at me, as I was on my way to school. So I remember Southampton very well. Very prejudiced, very very racist.

Van Ness: Did you live in like a house, or...?

Walker: We lived in a house. We grew up in a house.

Van Ness: And was it—did you have siblings or anything?

Walker: I had brothers and sisters, I had like five other brothers and sisters in the house. Mother, father.

Van Ness: And what was your relationship with all of them?

Walker: My relationship with them? Well, siblings, you know and—we had to, you know—we managed. We had—went to church every Sunday in Staten Island, New York where my

grandfather had a church. A little church on Van Duzer [Street] In Staten Island. Which is co-named after my grandfather, Bishop Asapansa-Johnson Way. So we went to that church. As a kid I remember, every weekend, from South Plainfield we'd get on a bridge, the Verrazano bridge, across the Brooklyn bridge to Staten Island and go to church. So I remember that as a child, you know...

Van Ness: Did you like going to church?

Walker: No, I didn't like going to church.

Van Ness: [laughter] Tell me more about that.

Walker: I didn't like going to church. I really didn't understand what was going on, and I really didn't understand why I had to be there, you know, and why I had to be quiet. You know, I'm a kid! You know my grandfather had a heavy accent. You know, just from Africa, Freetown, Sierra Leone, and I couldn't understand what he was saying. You know, it was his—he didn't speak clear enough for me. Except the only thing I understood he said was No. [laughter] Everything else was like I don't know [laughter].

Van Ness: [laughter] So what were you like as a kid?

Walker: What was I like as a kid? Very effeminate. I liked to play with dolls and stuff. You know. I was very different. You know, an outcast from the other kids. You know. In my own world. You know. I could probably be a doctor today had someone taken me seriously but they didn't take gay kids seriously when I was growing up. When I was growing up and you were a gay kid or a trans kid you were going to hell. And that was it. And the Bible is right and there's no other thinking outside the Bible [laughter]. So just imagine living in a world like this. So.

Van Ness: How about as a teenager, were you still an outcast?

Walker: Of course. I was an outcast. I had to fight in school. You know: the girls didn't want me to play on their side when we played sports in the gym; the boys didn't want me to play on their side when we played sports in gym. Pretty much. It was pretty much. It was pretty much, you know, really screwed up. Looking back, at my life. It was in 19—I think it was 1976—we moved to North Carolina. And I was in the seventh grade. So the whole family moved down there. I hated the South. I just didn't like it. I didn't really—I wasn't happy with the North but I wasn't particularly happy with the South [phone rings]. Yes, so. Yeah, so we moved from, you know, we moved to North Carolina, Charlotte, North Carolina. And the schools were horrible down there. We were doing algebra in the third grade. When I got down to—in the third grade in Southampton, New Jersey. When I got down to Charlotte in the seventh grade they were still doing basic math, in the seventh grade. And so you know, the kids, you know, thought it was okay to call me faggot all the time, so I had a lot of fights, I got suspended from school a lot, I got in-school suspension, I got all kinds of stuff. I'm this bad kid, you know that because, you know I wasn't going to take bullying. If you're going to bully me I'm fighting back. Y'know, and they didn't want—I wasn't allowed to fight back. I was always the one that got in trouble and

the other person didn't get in trouble, because you're a fag you're supposed to be the one in trouble, you know. I don't—I'm not—I'm not going to believe you. You know. You don't have the right. You don't have the right to, you don't have the right to, you know, you don't have the right to fight back. You're supposed to be bullied. You know. And it was totally acceptable in school. They didn't talk about bullying when I was coming along like these, like they do with these kids today. They don't talk—they don't know what bullying is today. I know what bullying is. No I wasn't going home and committing suicide; no, I was kicking ass. You know what I'm saying? I—You know. And that's how I got down.

Van Ness: Well what about after [laughter] middle school, high school?

Walker: After middle school, high school?...

Van Ness: So, yes, how was, what was your life like as an older person? You mention that you were fighting a lot when you moved down South.

Walker: Yeah, in seventh grade, in junior high school yeah.

Van Ness: What about in high school?

Walker: What about in high school? In high school I was working a lot. I had, you know, a job. I pretty much stayed to myself, I really didn't have any friends from high school. You know. Except for one maybe. Maybe one friend. But I pretty much stayed to myself and with my family because I worked two jobs and went to high school. Because my father had like a janitorial service that, that I worked at after I got off my regular job, and this was right before school in the morning. So I worked two jobs and I went to high school.

Van Ness: What was your other job?

Walker: I worked at Hardee's. It was a fast food restaurant. I did fast food restaurant work.

Van Ness: And were you doing it to, like, support your family or?

Walker: To support myself, family, and also he had a little business at night after the store closed that I worked in. We would clean the store, we would clean the oven, scrub the floors, scrub the walls, clean the, y'know, make it look brand new for when the people came in in the morning. And we had to do that all night and we'd get done about 5 o'clock—four, five o'clock in the morning—nd then we'd have to get up and be in school by about eight or nine or something.

Van Ness: Wow.

Walker: In class, sitting in the seat, so we didn't get very much sleep. We were working very hard.

Van Ness: So what about after high school then? What was life like, what did you do after school?

Walker: Well while I was in high school I joined the military when I was seventeen. I was sworn in. I put my hand up to a picture with Ronald—in front of Ronald Reagan—Ronald Reagan was president, in the '80s. And I was sworn into the United States Army. And July 7th, 1981 I went into the United States Army. I went to Fort Belvoir, Virginia for my basic training in AIT [Advanced Individual Training]. And after that I went to Fort Belvoir, Virginia. And then from Fort Belvoir, Virgina—I stayed there like a year or two, a year—and I went after that I went to Fort Leonard—I mean went to Wolfach in Germany. I went to Wolfach in Germany after that.

Van Ness: And what did you, what was your rank or what did you do?

Walker: My job was, I had a really low job because you know the ASVAB [Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery] test, I really didn't apply myself to the ASVAB test because I didn't seriously think they were going to let me in the military. You know I had been so abused and so harassed and so... for being a faggot, or a girl or whatever, so bad that I didn't think they were going to take me to the military anyway. And, so I just circled anything then on the test. So I ended up in the combat engineers. And life expectancy in the combat zone was ten seconds. It was a really stupid MOS [Military Occupational Specialty] looking back. But. It was alright.

Van Ness: I'm glad that you exceeded the ten seconds.

Walker: [laughter] Yeah.

Van Ness: Well, you're here to tell us your story.

Walker: Yeah.

Van Ness: What was life like in the military? Did you have friends, or...?

Walker: A lot of, it was a lot of closet cases. A lot of marriages of convenience. There were gay people married to each other. Lesbians married to gay men, a lot of closet case stuff going on. And if you looked or acted gay or whatever they would not be your friend, they would not talk to you, they wouldn't have anything to do with you. So I had a lot of—so my friends were usually straight in the military. The gay people and the closet people stayed away from me because they would be scared they'd be outed or whatever. You know because I didn't pass, I didn't pass the, I didn't pass the straight test [laughter]. I don't pass the straight smell test or whatever test it is [laughter]. So you know. Because you know you have to really be macho you know.

Van Ness: So would you say that you were still somewhat able to express your gender, or...?

Walker: No. I couldn't express my gender at all. It was too tight, you know, it was too tight

quarters. I lived in the barracks. You had to get married in order to move off base and nobody wanted to marry me. I couldn't get in a marriage of convenience. I was too effeminate. The lesbians were scared that I was going to get them outed, y'know, and so they married masculine gay men, and they lived off base in two bedroom apartments. Where then each other, each lived with their lover in their rooms. So they had lovers but they were married and that's the only way you could move off base so they did that.

Van Ness: Did you have relationships or did you meet folks when you were in the army?

Walker: I met folks, yeah, I met folks. I met folks in the military. It was a lot, it was a little bit of... You know sexual assaults and shit going on in there. A lot of, you know. There were a lot of things going on, a lot of drug use, a lot of things going on in there. In the military.

Van Ness: So how long were you in the military?

Walker: I was in there for three years. Three, almost four, maybe.

Van Ness: What prompted you to get out of the military? What happened that you left the military?

Walker: What happened I just wanted to—well, I really just wanted to go. I was really done with it. I was done. I could never be a straight person. I thought I was going to change and I never changed. I never changed who I was.

Van Ness: So you thought the military would, like, help you...

Walker: I thought it would make me straight and all that stuff because I believed in that straight lie, that, y'know, there's no such thing as, y'know, gay. Because they didn't have trans back then, so they called us all gays, queers, whatever. Y'know, they didn't have trans back then. Trans is new. You know it's a new term, you know, to me, and a lot of us older gay people don't really understand that term. They don't, they don't really dig it because we were all drag queens back in the days, and a lot of them don't accept the word trans, they don't accept that, because this is new, it was like forced upon, y'know, people who, saw life differently back in the days. We all had fun together. You know it seems like as soon as we became trans that it changed the community a lot. You know now we have to politically accept this new group of people into our, y'know, group, y'know, and it was like, y'know. I mean younger kids are more accepting and acceptable but the older, the older people, they're very resistant to trans people. The older. The old guard, I call them.

Van Ness: So what did you do after the army then?

Walker: After the army my dad had me driving a tractor trailer on his job for Winn Dixie. And. And, I got tired of that and I said, I just said one day, I just said "Look, I'm getting the hell out of here, I don't like the South, I'm leaving". I had about, maybe, three or four hundred dollars in my pocket. I had a car, I had an apartment fully furnished, nice stuff, my clothes, everything.

And I dashed.

Van Ness: Where'd you go?

Walker: With a suitcase. I came to New York and I lived with my, at my aunt's house for a little while.

Van Ness: Why New York?

Walker: This was where I was born at. This was where I was from. I was from this part of the country and I wanted to go back. I felt better up here. New York was more acceptable, you know, accepting of people who were different. You know. So I wanted to come here. I mean in the South they weren't really accepting, y'know. And it was too- everything was divided down there, you know what I'm saying. I mean what came first: the baby or the Bible? The baby came first right because somebody had to be born in order to create a Bible. So. The baby came first so, you know. How are you going to tell me how to live my life? You know. I mean, that's playing with my intelligence, telling me I have to live a certain way and I have to do things a certain way. Because of, a book tells you to. Yeah a book tells me, you know a book can tell me that, you know you know, that misgendering and all the stuff is wrong and harassment's wrong but people still do it. You know. They still do it you know. So...

Van Ness: What was it like when you came to New York and you were living with your aunt, you said?

Walker: Yeah. I had to keep my—I started my transitioning, so I had to keep my clothes in a bag. And I had to, I had to get dressed on the bus to go hang out with my friends, you know, because my aunt was just, she just was not having it. "Just don't let anybody know! Keep it in the closet! Don't let anybody know! Da da da da da!" Already calling me all these names. "Don't let anybody know!" But they already knew. And I didn't care if they knew or not. By that time I didn't care. I was twenty-three years old, thirty-one years ago, when I came up to New York, twenty three. This is 1986. I came back up to New York in 1986. You know, so, when I was twenty-three I was young, young, young, young, very young. And I've seen a lot. You know. Being in the world, traveling and all that stuff, you know, because I wanted to travel as well. You know I didn't want to flip burgers the rest of my life and all that stuff, blah blah blah, you know, so finally after I, you know, I began to live my truth more and more, like in the 1990s. Like at the end of... like 1989, '90. When I started to live my truth I, I wanted to work, I wanted to find a job, but there was no work. So, you know, I was forced into survival sex work. You know because after I left my aunt's house I had to pay rent, I had to buy clothes, I had to buy hormones, I had to buy this, buy that. The insurance didn't pay for anything in those days. They didn't pay for anything. There was no transgender kids at school. There was none of this... but all the stuff going on there was no, there was no transgender celebrities. There was no trans elite, there was no trans anything. It was all, it was a very... It was a very sad life. It's a lot of homelessness. A lot of people dying from AIDS. A lot of, you know, trans and gay people dying from AIDS. People you see one week the next week they were gone, they were dead. It was like AIDS was the bodysnatcher. It snatched a lot of bodies out of here. Quickly. And these kids

today don't realize seriousness of AIDS but they need to watch a documentary on it from 19- the 1994 or 1995 called Mirror Mirror where this girl, trans woman Consuela Cosmetic were dying from AIDS, and see how, what AIDS wasting looks like, what this stuff looks like. I mean. It's these systems of oppression that are causing the rates of AIDS to go up in the people, the communities of color today. I mean. You can't even go to the doctor's office without being harassed. "You're not a woman, you're a man, you're blah blah blah, I don't have to call you she, blah blah blah, I don't have to correct your gender identity, what gender identity, I call it what I see." And this is by licensed social workers talking to me like this, so. With people like that, trans people specifically, black trans women, trans women of color, are going to resist healthcare. Like they did even back in the days. Because they're not going to be respected and they're going to be, they're going to be injured, you know. You can even be sexually assaulted going to the doctor. Or being in a hospital setting. You know, so. The systems are the reason for the, for the rate of AIDS in the people of color communities. It's the systems that keep us down and oppress us and keep us from growing, you know, in society. Like, to even get a college degree you got to pay a whole bunch of money to get a college degree. You know. It's unaffordable. School is unaffordable. Medical care is unaffordable. Everything's unaffordable to you. And how do they expect you to thrive in a world like that? And then, you know, we've got these big show offs up in Washington in the White House. They already got billions and trillions of dollars. I don't know why people vote for people like this. These people do not care about us. And they're a reason for our problems. Just like I learned it when I was going to college in the nineties before I got ran off the College of Staten Island campus I learned in soc—I was studying to be a social worker—and I think it was one of the psychologists, I don't know if it was a Emile Durkheim or one of those sociologists or whatever said, I don't know if it was Jacob Riis, one of the sociologists said that rich people are the reason for poor people's problems. And I learned that in sociology and it's the truth. Because, like, when I was coming along in the '80s we had Reaganomics, trickle down economics. Nothing trickled down! I saw—when I came to New York it was Homeless Hotel Hell! Everybody, just about everybody was homeless. You see that movie *Paris Is Burning*? All those kids, mostly all those kids that you saw walking up and down the runway in Paris is Burning were homeless. They were living in the salt mine in the Village. They would got trophies, they didn't have house keys. Those were homeless kids! But nobody really talks about that. But I saw those kids and I knew them. We were all homeless together. At one point. So you know. You know because of who we are and what we are and systems and you know colonization and the colonized minds of our parents and our relatives. You know they're so colonized and so conservative that they can't see the forest for the trees. [laughter] You know. So you know I'm all about decolonization of the mind. The heart, soul, mind, spirit. And. Try to get back to, you know, our, to our indigenous ways. You know. What were we like before colonization? How did we think? How did we eat? How did we love? How did we live? You know. Those questions need to be answered. Because right now we see everything from a white man's point of view; patriarchal white male point of view. Everything. Beauty, our sense of beauty, our sense of color. Everything. Eye color. Hair color. Hair texture. This. That. As through the eyes of a white, cis, male. Everything you see on T.V. is through the eyes of a white, cis, male. You know. Who doesn't recognize his privilege. And so at the same, in the meanwhile, we all suffer as a result.

Van Ness: And when did you start coming to these, like... to this like knowledge, and this like

awareness of you know colonization and all these other issues and systems that are broken. Like what—how did you come to, I know you said you were involved in activism in social work school, but how, yeah, how did you come into the world? You're a big activist, right? So how did you commit to the world of activism?

Walker: I always wanted to be an activist. I've been an activist all my life. I was an activist by myself because I resisted. I resisted those systems that told me that I couldn't be, that I wasn't a woman, that I couldn't be trans, I couldn't be this, I couldn't do that, I couldn't get a job, I couldn't do that; I broke down all that. You know. I was really forced into activism because I was the president of the LGBT, or LGB, organization on the college of Staten Island. Because nobody else would take the job. Everybody was in the closet. They were afraid. They were afraid they'd be killed. Everybody wasn't out to their parents. They were afraid they were going to cut off their school money. It was, it was like that and it was, you know. Y'know it was a very conservative school. You know, and. There was somebody coming to the school that was representing the borough president, Guy V Molinari. But I can't remember who it was. And so we organized and said that we were going to make some noise and let them know that this person was not welcomed on the campus and that we did—that the words of the borough president were unacceptable. We were gonna let them know, we're going to make signs, we're going to get out there. Only about three, four, five of us got out there because we had no police protection. We could've been shot right on campus. People would have turned their backs and just said "we didn't see anything". That's how conservative this college is, and was, or was at the time. So we went out there. We organized. And when the person came, you know, they put up a little barricade and we stood behind the barricade and we held up signs and we chanted everything when a person was walking by and *Staten Island Advance* was there and you know, it was Guy V Molinari's remarks that Judge Karen Burstein, a judge, could not be attorney general of New York City because she was an out lesbian. That was the whole reason, you know, thing around the protest and there was a whole lot of homophobic things, or you know homophobia was ripe at that time, in the air and you know. Gay issues, lesbian issues, were becoming more and more and more conscious at that time. You know. In conservative circles, you know, they were rejecting anything LG. Lesbian, gay. At that time. And there was no trans, there was no bi, but it was just LG. Lesbian, gay. So. You know, I protested, I held up a sign that said, you know I made a sign that said "Gays and Lesbians Live in Your Borough Too, Shame on You." Which made the front page of the damn *Staten Island Advance!* After that, as a result of that, I was run off the college campus. By car loads of students. They were black, white. I think black, white and Spanish, they were mixed. They called me all kinds of names. They told me they'd threaten my life and told me tell me that I cannot come back to Staten Island College. When I told the administration about it they told me they couldn't do nothing, anything. The police said they couldn't do anything. You know. We had no rights. This was before, you know gender protections in New York City and blah blah blah so, you know, I've been resisting. You know. I've been resisting, fighting, for lesbians, gays. Fighting for, you know, trans. Fighting. You know, so. That really steered me into real serious activism, in 1994. Was, at Staten Island College. You know, was just too conservative. I mean... Nobody was out. I mean, I used to hold class, I used to hold meetings, lesbian-gay meetings, and people used to come to the room, I mean, would, you know, but sit like back and they'd be inside that room right there and you could see- I would keep the door open some people could come in- and they would peek to see

who was in the room and dash past and the door real quick so you couldn't see who they were. That's how scary it was to be out at that time. Even after the gay rights movement and the Stonewall riots and all that shit it was still, it was still, people were still not out about being lesbian or gay. They were still in the closet and some people are still in the closet to this day. They're not out. If you know it's gay, lesbian, trans or whatever. Because of the same stigma and the same, you know, same thing that's going on. You know. You know, the same reasons.

Van Ness: You know, what was it like in New York to be gay? I mean aside from on the college campus, apparently, it seemed like it was very conservative there. What about in the rest of the city? Did you come to Manhattan, or did you—how did you, where did you go to hang out, you know, to be with the...

Walker: I used to go to The [LGBT] Center. The old Center, the center on 13th street before they remodeled it. I used to go there and hang out sometimes. I used to hang out on the- I used to go to the, to the stroll. I mean, well, to the Paradise Garage, and I used to hang out at the, sometimes I went to the Tunnel. I went to the Palladium. I used to hang out at the clubs and stuff. A lot. Strutting it at the club. I went to The Eagle's Nest on the west side highway, Sneakers, all those bars that used to be up and down Christopher Street that they shut down. I don't know, that's not the Village anymore. I don't know what that place is called, but I remember the Village. Where the Village back in the days, in 1986 I used to hang out in Calabar. They used to be right there near the highway around the corner on to the left when you get down to the west side highway 'til you get down to the last corner and it would be right there, it was right there on the corner. I used to go to Calabar. It was this little bar that used to get packed with all these black gays and stuff. I used to hang out there, you know, and it was all black people and you couldn't even get to the bathroom. They had pool, big pool tables in the middle of the room and it was just jam packed and it would be crowded all on the sidewalk and you know. Black people hung out there and the black people also hung out at and the people of color hung out at Two Potatoes. They got rid of, closed all those bars down, all those historical spots, shut us down, erased us, from history again. And. You know. It's just, it's just been horrible, you know? The same systems keep erasing us, destroying us over and over again. You know I used to... In New York back in the days... You know, I noticed a lot of, there was still, you know there's a lot of hatred, a lot of violence, a lot of homo—I mean transphobia—a lot of homophobia and stuff going on but people mainly got along and had fun together. More. People had fun together more. You know when I went to the clubs and everything like that you didn't care who was what; you just went and you know you had fun. You know people were less judgmental around—at that time. And people dressed better in those days.

Van Ness: How did people dress? Just give me some examples.

Walker: [laughter] How did people dress? They dressed, they just dressed better. Y'know? The girls wore wrap skirts with Danskins crisscross in the back. And. And they used to wear Candies.

Van Ness: What's that?

Walker: Candie's were like a slip-on shoe with a little heel. With a little heel. They were like

brownish and they had a little heel like a little platform on the top in the front, and they used to wear the skirts that flared out like the '50s, sometimes, with the collar up and stuff like that, and their hair in a bun, y'know, the hair in the bun and all that. I used to love those styles back then. God. And everybody was doing the New York hustle and all that. Those are such fabulous times. I miss those days. I mean. But everybody was poor. AIDS was killing everybody. People—there was so much homelessness. All the youth were homeless. They had no programs. They had no Ali Forney. They had none of this Street Works. They didn't have anything for homeless kids hardly. I think they had Harvey Milk. School I think was around or H.M.I., Hetrick-Martin Institute was starting to come around in the nineties. But in the eighties none of that stuff was there. That I recall.

Van Ness: So what did young folks do generally?

Walker: Well the kids would hang out on the piers! Prostituting. You didn't get food stamps and stuff. You had to prostitute to eat. You had to do survival sex work. I don't care if you were ten. I saw little kids out there prostituting and I saw men dating them knowing they were dating children. And knew it. And paid it no mind. Act like it was normal. So you know I've seen, I've seen, you know, stuff going on right here in this country. You know. You know we're always looking to third world, you know, so-called third world countries or developing countries for stuff like that but no, that, this occurs here in this country. Child sex work and everything is right here. It's right here. Right in front of our face. It's just, it's not somewhere in some distant country or far land. It's right here. It's ignored but it's going on. Kids are doing survival sex work because they're gay, trans or whatever. They're being thrown into the streets. Put into foster care. Thrown out of foster care systems. They have to, they're raped and abused in there so they run away to the streets, you know, and then they have to survive on the streets, and survival on the street entails survival sex work. That's just comes with the program. And you also get abused on the streets. You get robbed, you get beat up. You know. You end up abusing drugs, you know, it's the same story over and over again, the same vicious cycle, same story over and over and over again just a whirlwind of pain, agony, stress, you know, because the system's designed to keep people down. Systems that need to change. That we need to change as a people.

Van Ness: I guess, can you tell me a little bit more about what was like community like, you know, in the, in the eighties and the nineties, like what did that look like for you? As opposed to what it looks like now.

Walker: Community. Community would be one of the girls, a transgirl that had an apartment, she would let like five other transgirls stay with her. That's community. And they were homeless. That was community. Or she would have a dinner and she'd invite girls over to eat or something like that you know. Basically, sharing and caring. You see a girl on the streets, she's cracked out, she doesn't have any money, she just got beat up by the trick car, eye swollen, you know she's got cut wounds on her. You give her five dollars, take her out to dinner. You know, buy her a dress, buy her some heels, give her a wig, that's community. You know, tell her where that soup kitchen is where she can get some food or something like that or where she can get a coat, you know, that's community, the girls, you know, helping other girls in the

streets and other people. You know. Knowing where the resources are and leading other community members to those resources that existed was community.

Van Ness: And did you have anyone like that in your life or were you that person for other folks at all?

Walker: Sometimes I was. Sometimes I was, yes, I was, I had different kinds of people, lesbians, gays, trans people living in my apartment in Staten Island. I had finally got an apartment in Staten Island. And I had, I had you know different people living in my apartment. They could come to my house to get food, to eat, to change clothes, take a bath, rest for a couple of days before they go back to the streets to live again. We had to look out for each other. We didn't have anything. I didn't have. And I had to, I had to do sex work to feed people. To clothe people. To house people. To pay light bills. To pay, y'know, rent and all that I did sex work to take care of people. I didn't have any funding from anywhere. No foundations. No there was no foundations, there was no no grassroots fundraising, it was none of this stuff. But we did do grassroots fundraising a little. We had to fund raise to get things, but. You know. There was no, you know, nobody, we had no help. And today we have organizations that claim that they helpin' people of color but they're really not, they're just taking all the money for their selves you know. I won't mention those organizations.

Van Ness: Do you remember, when do you feel like you were most able to express your identity, or like when did you come into Ms Tanya?

Walker: When, when? Well I was actually, when I was on Staten Island, I ran into this girl named Melanie. She called herself Madonna.

Van Ness: Okay.

Walker: And she was a, she, she looked like a flamboyant gay boy. She, they gave her a boy's haircut, and she had this little thing but she was, you know, she loved gender nonconforming, she had this little- her hands would go like this with this little ponytail on top and she was dressed, you know, a little bit up top like Madonna, you know, 'cause she loved Madonna so she called herself Madonna at that time. I thought. She was homeless at the ferry terminal. Tunisia was homeless. There was a few other people that were homeless, you know, at the ferry terminal in which I ended up homeless at the ferry terminal with all of them because I wanted to keep living my truth. So that's basically when I really started, you know, being me was when I ended up homeless at the ferry terminal and left my aunt's house. And I stayed with Tunisia in an abandoned building. Outside the ferry terminal. They used to have empty train cars you know you could stay in and they had abandoned buildings with no electricity, no windows, no nothing. In the wintertime below zero weather, we'd stay in there. Because we didn't want to go to the shelter because in the shelter at that time you couldn't, you couldn't wear your clothes. It was like ' you have to use the men's shelter, you have to wear men's clothes, you have to wear men's underwear, you have to wear men's this, you have to, this is a men's shelter, you have to be a man, you cannot be a woman here. And so we lived in abandoned buildings. And anyway I used to run into Melanie and them when I was on my way into the city looking

for jobs, this, that, and the other, you know coming from my aunt's house 'cause I'd be looking for jobs all the time. This is, you know. So you know I ended up hanging out with them and staying with them one night and stuff and then. They said 'You know what you?' And I used to wear all these real feminine hairstyles at the time, and they used to be like 'You know what?' I was like, 'What?' And they said 'You look like a Tanya'. I said 'Really?' They said 'Yeah, you look like a Tanya.' I said, 'Wow'. And Tanya became my name. I was named by homeless, trans and gender-nonconforming people.

Van Ness: And when was that?

Walker: And this was in, this was in 1990? '89, 90?

Van Ness: Wow.

Walker: That's how I got my name Tanya. I didn't make the name myself; I was named.

Van Ness: But did it feel right?

Walker: It felt right! It felt right.

Van Ness: Okay.

Walker: Yeah, I was named. Yeah, but. In those days, so you know we had to basically, we had to survive on our own. It was do or die. You know, it was do or die and a lot of people died. There was no HIV medication, it was no nothing back in those days, they had nothing really. You know and when they had AZT [azidothymidine], AZT was killing people. So people couldn't take that. You know they couldn't AZT, it was too strong, it was killing people so you know. At that time people were dropping like flies. Young, beautiful, talented, artists. I mean people were artists, singers, fashion designers, hair stylists, you know, makeup artists. You know. All these talented dancers. Talented, beautiful, people of color, and people just erased from planet Earth. At the snap of a finger. Beautiful, talented and there was no organization for them to go to to express their talents. Nothing. Nowhere. Nobody cared about them. Especially the people of color. Nobody cared. Nobody cared. You just died on the streets, they don't care. They didn't care. Nobody cared. You just had to keep going through the motions of doing what you needed to do to survive. And that's it. Basically that. Everybody was survival. Nobody was thriving. Everybody was just surviving. There was a girl every now and then that met a rich doctor and she went to live with him. In his home. In New Jersey, somewhere in his mansion or whatever, but very few. Very few, you know, got a chance to live that life. Most of us, you know, continued to struggle, you know, and the first job that I got, as a trans woman was at, was a friend of mine told me one time, I forgot his name, I think his name was John F, you know I think his name was John, I forgot his name, he told me anyway, this black guy, real dark skinned, you know, 'cause he was dark skinned because of I think dialysis or something. He was telling me that they had- because I said, 'Damn I would love to work' when we were sitting there having cocktails and drinking in his room one night, I said 'Damn I would love to have a job, I'm tired of this shit, I can't do sex work, I hate it, I hate it'. And so he said '! Well you know over at Housing Works

they hire girls like you'? I said 'Really'? He said 'Yeah, they do. You know what? When my case manager comes I'm going to get the information from her and I will give it to you'. And so I went to Housing Works. And I found out, you know, that they had a job training program and I said 'I've got to get into this job training program!' and it's supposed to be there for like clients, you know, you're supposed to be there for like three months and I said 'No'. I was there for like, a month and a half and I was in the job training program. And Sheila Spivey, you know, let me, you know, let me in, into Housing Works. She was there to greet me, you know, and talk to me and everything and so I got in there like a month and a half into the job training program. And I was in the job training program for a year, which consisted of—this was after college—which consisted of—after I got thrown out of Staten Island College—which consisted of, you know, language arts, mathematics, different things like that. Critical Thinking. We did a lot of different things, you know, in job training program. We had a weaving project where we created a rug. We developed a rug with a loom, a real rug. You know. We were learning to work together and learn to grow together you know on the weaving project, you know, even if we didn't like each other. If two people didn't like each other then that was the person you have to work with. You know what I'm saying. So it was really a strict, rigorous course, you know but I'm really grateful for it, for Charles King, Charles King and... What's his name? Keith Cylar. They were the bosses when I was there. They were the big bosses. They were the co-founders and the bosses of Housing Works when I got there and I still have respect for Charles today. Keith died. A few years ago. And you know I had a, it was a good experience working there, you know. The people at Housing Works at the time were, you know, the culture of competence is something you have to constantly work on and it's not just ' it's just a training you run to one day and now you're culturally competent'. Cultural, cultural competence comes in when it's ongoing, and at Housing Works at that time there was no cultural competence. There was no cultural competency training, nothing, so people were like forced to work with trans people all of a sudden. I have to call a person she or he that wasn't assigned that gender at birth. And a lot of people didn't want to do that and they still don't want to do that. You know because they feel like they have the right to self-determine our gender for us you know, so. You know it was kind of hard working at Housing Works and people didn't get the gender pronouns right and stuff like that because they didn't, they didn't like in the class like say ' well, what is your gender pronoun?' They didn't do that. We had to keep fighting with the people to call them their gender pronoun that we were. We had to keep fighting with them. You know it's not chosen. I don't have a chosen pronoun. It's my pronoun. To you: did you choose to be called a he or she? You know, to a cis person? You know, ask that question! OK then; neither did I. I happen to be, I like, you know, I happen to be, you know, I'm binary. Some people are non-binary but I'm kind of binary and I prefer she. Sometimes you could mix it the hell up if you want to [laughter]. Depends on what mood I'm in. But you know 'cause that's what makes life exciting. You know, good, cool. You know.

Van Ness: So did you, after the job training program did you get hired at Housing Works?

Walker: Yes. After a year I got hired. I wanted to be a residential aide. But they said 'No, you've got a little bit too much brains for that'. You know I really thought I was always dumb. You know I always thought I was dumb. I was taught it. I was going to be no good. I was just going to Hell because that's what I was always told. You know they said, 'No you have a little bit too much

brains. We're going to move you over here. You're going to be a case manager. And I said NO! No no, see, you're going to work in case management, and you're going to be a CFW, which is a Community Follow-up Worker. So I worked under the case manager. And, you know, doing home visits, working with single adults and families, HIV/AIDS, substance abuse or substance use. And you had to document everything. Basically, you know, home visits. We had to coordinate services in the client's life whether it be legal, education, substance use, child welfare issues. I did work with all those issues with, with my clients. I had to do escorts. I had to escort trans women to appointments and to, you know to HASA. To the doctor's office. I had to case conference with their doctors, their case manager, their case worker, all the stuff. You wouldn't believe the stuff I had to do. Nobody would believe it. For the little money that I was making it was a lot of work. It was real social work. You know. I'm sitting there with a client and, you know, I'm working for Housing Works, I got my badge on, and I'm in the office with the worker. The worker's continuously misgendering my client. And so I'm trying to tell her, you know, that isn't polite to, you know, misgender a client. She prefers to be called she. Blah blah blah. And she of course should be called Gina, not John Doe. Okay? So let's keep it clear right now. She likes to be called she or her or whatever and the worker would be like "Look I don't know who you are or why you come in here with your friend thinkin' ya'll are going to get over on me and having me calling you by something that you're not. You know. I'mma call you, you know, I'mma call you what I see. And I have the right to do that." And I'm like, you know, so I'm sitting there, we're not getting anything done because we're sitting there arguing. Not arguing but discussing gender and different things like that you know. So we're not getting any work done. The client's case is closed. The client has no food stamps, no cash, no assistance, you know; plus the client has a warrant. That she has, that she's afraid to clear up because she's being harassed and abused by the police. So, you know, it was a very difficult job. It's very difficult. Nobody, nobody really knows the work that I had to do in that position. You know I had to go to, you know, some of the girls, you know, and I would have to, after that. You know, I had a family. I worked with a family who had incest. The brother, the older brother, was sleeping with the younger sister, underage sister. And so we had to work with ACS [Administration for Children's Services]. And we had to, you know, we had to figure out what to do with the brother, how to keep the brother away from the sister. So they kept the brother out of the house for like a couple of months. They couldn't hold him out any longer so they had to bring the brother back into the home and for the abuse to continue. And that's child welfare. That's how it goes. That's how it goes, you know especially when it's incest in the family you know, so. I see how the system works. See the systems keep us down. Because they're systems we didn't create and we have no input into. We can't rely on people who've never... who aren't transgender, who've never been harassed, who have never been misgendered or who have never walked in our shoes, to make laws and rules and things for us without our input. We must be, trans people, we must be at that table. Trans men, trans women non-binary people, gender nonconforming: we need to be at the table when laws are made for and about us. You know. Because we're not fully protected. You know if I can in a hospital and a social worker sit there and tell me what she just did at this hospital. 'I don't have to call you anything. I'll call you what I see.' And rock like, you know, and with the attitude and eye-rolling and, you know, things like that, and she's at my bedside. I just had lung cancer surgery. They just took another piece of my lung out. This is my second time with cancer. I'm in pain. I'm on painkillers. I'm going through it and this lady visits me every day in my room and harasses me. Calling me out of my

gender. I don't know. Maybe she wanted to learn. That's why she kept coming around me. But I mean, but she was harassing me. You know. There was no culture of competence there. I mean, you know. One lady kept coming in my room to check my catheter. One nurse, she kept looking under the sheets. And she, you know, kept touching me under the sheets. One lady was touching me through the sheets. She put all the medical supplies on my groin and then she would be messing with the, you know, picking up the medical supplies, touching my genitals as, you know, she's taking stuff off of my genitals, you know, and stuff like that and looking into my eyes. And then she started following me around, all everywhere I went in the hospital she kept following me around. Smiling at me. You know. So trans people are not—are sexually assaulted, harassed, everything in these medical facilities, misgendered. And these people are defiant. So we're not covered in medical facilities. No wonder so many trans women die from AIDS. No wonder why they don't seek care. You know, no matter what, no wonder why they are not adherent to their medical appointments because, because of cultural incompetence and the conservative, and, and how conservative our hospitals are. And medical facilities. They're too conservative. And they really, they haven't changed at all. They haven't changed at all. They didn't, they didn't change with everyone else. They're stuck in, they're stuck in Rome somewhere. You know. But they're not, they're not, they're not up with the times at all. I mean because misgendering is violence. It's violence. And somebody, if somebody outs you in a store or somewhere you could be attacked. A trans person could be attacked. Right now, today, in front of cameras, police, everything, just for being, just for being who you are. By being outed in a store. In accommodations. In a restaurant. In facility. Anywhere. Our life's in jeopardy. You know. We have to always be ready to fight, fight back, fight, you know, for survival. And when we win- we're not supposed to fight back- when we win they lock trans people up, you know, when we decide to fight back. You know we're not allowed like cis people to defend ourselves in society. When we fight back they usually give a trans person or LGBT person, they give you a lot of time. And they start making up stories that you did this and you did that, you know. Like they did those lesbians in, over down there in the Village when they fought back against this guy, they ended up doing all this prison time, you know. That documentary? That they made recently. I forgot what it's called.

Van Ness: *The Jersey Four?*

Walker: Yeah, *The Jersey Four*. You know what I'm saying? So just like that our lives are in danger and we have to be ready to fight back, you know, we can't let these people, you know, get the best of us. You know? You know so right now I'm recovering from lung cancer surgery for the second time. I'm on, you know, a few painkillers and stuff and I'm sick and I'm sick of painkillers. But you know, I have to do what I have to do right now. 'Til, you know, 'til I heal. I'm really sore. Really, really sore but, you know, I'm going to have to walk around today and get some air, but. You know a lot of trans people deal with cancer. There's no studies made on, you know, what all these medications are doing to our bodies, or how does it effect, how does cancer and hormones, you know, affect the body at the same time? Does hormones cause cancer or what? What is going on here? Tell us, you know, tell me what's going on. You know why, you know why is there so much cancer in the LGBT community. You know. You know because first I was a LGBT activist and then I became a trans activist but I'm still a trans, I'm still a LGBT activist, I'm still, I got the right to carry that rainbow flag around me. And I'll show

it off too. You know I'm saying, I'll wave it in their face, you know what I'm saying? So. And I like the, you know, the trans flag is a little...it's all right, but I'll show the trans flag off as well. But you know. It is what it is. I didn't invent either one of them. I guess, you know, I'll just have to carry them. You know.

Van Ness: Could you talk a little bit more about some of the, some of like the health care things that you've overcome? I know you've been dealing with lung cancer and other stuff. Like you mentioned some of the like, you know the health care system is stuck in like Rome, like or what have you ...?

Walker: Ancient Rome, yeah.

Van Ness: How, I mean, how have you struggled through all this and how do you like keep yourself strong and keep fighting?

Walker: How do I keep myself strong and keep fighting? Because I've been fighting for so long! I've been fighting since I was a little kid! I've been resisting. You know, that I'm, I'm not going to be a, you know, cis person and I'm not going to, I'm not going to be that, I'm not going to get married and have a wife and kids, I'm not! That's not going to happen in my life! That's resisting! You know I'm going to be, I'm going to be me. And I'm going to resist people telling me that I couldn't be and shouldn't exist and shouldn't be me. You know I've been resisting and that kind of gives me and keeps me, gives me the strength, you know, because you know they want you to kill yourself. They don't care. You know they want you to mess up. And you know they'd love to see you in jail. They'd love to see you on drugs. They'd love to see you out of it, you know, and basically destroy yourself. You know and I know that's what they want and that's what I refuse to do. Because I know that's what they want, you know, they want to live good lives and they want you to live in the gutter. They feel like you shouldn't exist because of who and what you are. Because I'm a trans woman, a black trans woman. You know. You know many trans women are killed each day by, you know by, by mainly black men. Unfortunately. Who probably belong to churches that say that it's okay to do that. You know, that homophobia, I mean that homosexuality and lesbianism, transgenderism and all that stuff is, it's illegal it's against the Bible, it's against the law. And then we've got one hundred websites out there against trans people which is radicalizing some of these fruitcakes that sit behind these computer screens and look at this garbage and these garbage websites like Breitbart and now we got the guy from Breitbart, Steve Bannon, serving right in the White House. A racist homophobic transphobic website, and then creating the violence around us. They manufacture hate and manufacture violence. Now he's in the White House next to this guy they call Trump. President Trump. And people couldn't see this, was gonna, that Trump could've got in? I can't believe it. And none of these people up here care about us. They do not care about us. They will never let me walk into Key Largo. They'll make sure I'll never have enough money at one time to be able to afford the fees, which is two hundred thousand dollars, at Key Largo. And then you gonna let this guy get in the White House? They're totally against us, but why do poor people think that because the guy is racist like they are, like some of them are, is going to, really, is going to really help them, he's out to help them. He's only out to help himself. Why do they think he's going to help them? I don't know. You tried to act, you know, they played the role, they tried

to act like they were one of these poor people in the midwest that worked—or in West Virginia—in the coal mine. Yeah, I'm just like you, on the microphone. I'm just like you. Yes I believe that, that we're going to start that cold again, you know, I'm just like you. Now hear this: I got, I got thousands of hotels all over the world, billions of dollars stashed in secret accounts, I got, you know, I have all these court cases you know. And still I'm president, you know, but I'm going to help you because I got to be a billionaire helping you. You know, so, you know. It's, you know, these systems and things that, you know, this last election that's, you know, keeping people down. And it's gonna even push them further down. We have a—we're gonna lose a lot under this administration.

Van Ness: What are some of the things that you're doing currently and that you've done to, you know, to fight for trans rights, to fight for, to advocate for folks for the different communities you've talked about? Like maybe NYTAG [New York Transgender Advocacy Group] and other stuff.

Walker: Well I'm a co-founder of NYTAG. Kiara St James, myself, and Armani Taylor created NYTAG. And NYTAG, in 2013 I had lung cancer the first time and so we had a hard time getting NYTAG off the ground so Kiara finally took her money and got the 501c3 for NYTAG.

Van Ness: What is NYTAG?

Walker: NYTAG is New York Transgender Advocacy Group. I created the name. And. I think Armani screamed out the acronym [laughter], so that's how we got NYTAG, so, you know. And you know we just meeting one day. We'll go in, we'll go into groups at different organizations and stuff and. We just thought about it one day. We said, damn, all's we get is a Metrocard and a meal. That's all we're getting. And we started looking around like, well what else is there? We need more. We need something. We need to be able to do things for ourselves. We're too, you know we're too, you know we're to... I wouldn't, I don't know if the word is smart or too, we're too knowledgeable to be just having a Metrocard and a meal. I mean and we really need to help our community. Our community is suffering. Everybody is not going to be an activist. Everybody is not going to go to, you know, ten groups and try to organize together, you know, so we need to work for the people who can't organize or who can't be there for whatever reason. Whether that, you know, be sex work. Whether they're just mental illness. Whatever. We're going to be there for them and we have to find a way to show up and be present for our community. And so we created NYTAG. You know we had several meetings and several things and I was getting sicker and sicker and sicker in 2013 so I got pushed out of NYTAG and I just got pulled back into NYTAG recently in 2017 after the 501(c)(3) and after they got some funding. They're funded now, you know so you know and I stand behind Kiara St James. Or beside her. And with her or whatever, you know, in, in, you know, the goals and dreams of NYTAG.

Van Ness: What other stuff are you involved with in the community?

Walker: I'm a board member of the Audre Lorde Project. And the Audre Lorde Project is good. It's a very good organization that's very supportive to the LGBT poc, people of color communities here in New York City. They do a lot of organizing around the issues that effect

the community. They did a lot of stuff for trans issues with healthcare and different things in coordination with other organizations. And did a lot of work, you know, to try to get our community healthy again. You know psychologically healthy and at least, you know, give us, you know, let us have more rights you know, give us more rights and also to live. You know. To try to help us, you know, to learn how to work together, especially the LGBT community. The T, the LGB's to work with the T's, they've, you know, they definitely have good trainings at Audre Lorde you know on how to work together in the same room. You know, she tried to see the intersectionality of our issues. And, you know, how to move forward together you know so. Basically, you know Audre Lorde Project is very good in their area. And they do a lot of security for a lot of organizations and you know a lot of protesting, a lot of activism. You know they're helping to solve the issues and keep the, keep our issues in the forefront you know. Lot of community organizing.

Van Ness: Who would you say has been a really influential person for you in your life, or influential people I guess.

Walker: That's a hard question. Who's been influential to me? There is one lady. Arlene Hoffmann was kinda influential to me. Arlene Hoffmann, she used to work in Housing Works, she was like a no nobody, no name, she was a social worker, licensed social worker that nobody ever talks about anymore and she loved the community, she loved the girls, she did a lot of work for Housing Works. With the day treatment and everything and I looked up to her a lot. She was a black trans woman, you know, with a college degree; struggled from, you know, crawling on gravel struggling, no money, no nothing, no anything and she got a degree sick with AIDS, she got her degree. You know. Her degrees. And. She worked for a few years and then she caught, you know I guess her cancer came back or something and she ended up in the hospital and she died. She died. She worked to the day she died almost. You know she had, she was in the hospital like a week or two and then she just. Passed. She couldn't breathe. She died right up here in, I think it was Columbia [Hospital], the hospital just up here. Behind us. She died. She was pretty much influential. People like, you know, Sylvia Rivera, you know, Marsha P Johnson. The women Audre Lorde... You know, Judge Burstein, because Judge Karen Burstein because she fought you know, she fought, you know she was going to break the glass ceiling and she was going to take it to the top, Judge Burstein know. You know I kind of like some of the philosophies of Malcolm X and stuff like that. I think my grandfather was a little influential you know.

Van Ness: Can you tell us some more about him?

Walker: He was the first—He was from Freetown, Sierra Leone. He was the first black fire chaplain in New York City. He was good friends with the Rockefellers, David Rockefeller and Nelson Rockefeller. And President Truman. And we have photos of him with them. He helped to get President Truman re-elected here in Harlem. He presented him with the Franklin Delano Roosevelt award after a speech in front of 75,000 people here in Harlem. In 19—I think it was 1952. Well '54 or '52 I'm not sure. It was in Jet magazine. My grandfather was always getting invitations to the White House Spent a lot of time in Waldorf Astoria and all these different places. Here in New York City back then when black people couldn't even get in places like that

so you know. And my grandfather did work on civil rights so my grandfather was a civil rights leader before Martin Luther King, you know, he wasn't recognized because he was an African and he wasn't a citizen. So. You know. I look up to my grandfather because you know. And he wasn't a citizen so you know I'm for all immigrants. I fight for all immigrants. I don't give a dog gone. I mean. What's documented? What's undocumented? Give the people papers. You know. And get rid of the word undocumented. I mean the people that are in control should look at their own history and see how they took this country from the natives who were already here, you know what I'm saying. I mean these immigrants are not coming to take the country. They just want a better life for their children because in their countries their lives were destroyed by globalism. And they can't even live or eat off the land or grow food on the land and sell it and make a living. You know, anymore. So they come here for a better life for their children and their families basically. You know the better education, better nutrition, you know, better everything, better, you know, better medical care you know and I believe that all immigrants belong and belong in America. I believe they belong here. Contrary to whatever laws they have. I think that we should we get rid of the immigration laws that we currently have and create ones that bring more immigrants into the country and make it safe for them and where they can become stable, educated, educate their children, you know and be able to reap the benefits of this land.

Van Ness: Did you have a close relationship with your grandfather? I know you talked a lot about his achievements.

Walker: Yeah but I didn't know about his achievements until I got older.

Van Ness: But when you were younger did you meet him or spend time with him?

Walker: I couldn't spend a lot of time with him. He was too busy. He was busy all around. He used to wear his priest outfit. It's, you know, the priest uniform with the white collar up and he'd be so, standing there, and I remember the smell of his perfume, I mean his cologne or whatever, and he had this big gold ring on and I remember him standing there, you know. I would see him at the top of the stairs and we'd be downstairs making noise 'cause we were little kids. So you know basically he died in 1972. And you know the fire department was at the, his funeral 'cause he worked, he was the fire chaplain of New York City, so the fire, you know the, you know the fire department was at his funeral and stuff. I remember as a kid you couldn't, you couldn't even, it was standing room only in the church because the fire department had to get in. There was fire trucks all around the whole church, you know it was really crowded and I didn't know everybody who was there. I don't know if the Rockefellers came or not but there was a lot of police. There was a lot of police and a lot of fire department, a lot of people that looked weird. You know, with suits on and stuff.

Van Ness: If you wanted folks to hear one thing from you like what would it be? What do people need to know to know who Tanya is?

Walker: People need to know that I've never, that I've always fought for my community and I've never stopped fighting for my community and you know and I'll continue fighting for my

community, you know even, even for those who cannot fight for themselves, you know I'm going to speak up and I'm going to speak out, you know, on the issues. And that, you know, that I love my community and I care about them and that I think that all I want, I want, I think that all, right now specifically, that all LGBT immigrants should be, should, should, should have asylum, automatic asylum and they should be able to remain in this country. Until they die. And they deserve healthcare, they deserve education, they deserve housing, they deserve everything this country has to offer. And I will continue fighting for that.

Van Ness: I guess is there anything else that you want to add about your history or anything about your life you would want us to know?

Walker: Yeah. Well I've been fighting, you know I've been fighting for probably, I've been fighting for really, I would say twenty five years, but I've been resisting all my life. So what people told me what I should, who I should be but...Well. Something else about me. Well I like the New York hustle. I like to dance. I like house music. I like stuff like that. I like balls. I like vogueing. I like to watch people vogue and all that stuff. I love all that.

Van Ness: Were you ever part of the ball scene?

Walker: No. I was never part of the ballroom scene. I only went to one ball in the nineties and it was cute and everything but I never got a chance to go to any other ones. But I like, I like the ballroom scene in the nineties. The girls are so pretty and the, you know. And I love the, I love the balls, I love to see people get dressed up and live a dream. You know even though most of the people at the balls were homeless. And some of them still are homeless. So you know nothing's really changed. You know nothing's really changed a whole lot. The kids, the children are still homeless, still struggling, still surviving, and that I feel like we need to really start changing these systems that oppress us. And we need to really pay attention to what's going on and stay alert. You know, we have a lot to lose. As a community. And the people that are in power right now are the ones that can really make life miserable for us. And, you know, we have to keep fighting and keep resisting.

Van Ness: Well thank you so much for having this conversation with me and I hope folks who listen are excited to hear your story. You've lived a long, exciting life. Thank you.