

NEW YORK CITY TRANS ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

KRISTEN P. LOVELL

Interviewer: Michelle Esther O'Brien

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Transcribed by Angel Baron

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Michelle Esther O'Brien: Hello, my name is Michelle O'Brien, and I will be having a conversation with Kristen Lovell 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 4th, 2019 and this has been recorded at the Midtown offices, of the New York Public Library. Hello Kristen.

Kristen Lovell: Hi, how are you doing?

O'Brien: I'm doing very well. I'm very excited to be talking with you. Could you start off and just introduce yourself however you'd like?

Lovell: My name is Kristin. Um, my whole, I don't even know where to begin. [laughter]

O'Brien: Are there any identities that are particularly important to you?

Lovell: Identities? Um, her, she, is woman, you know.

O'Brien: Excellent. Where did you grow up?

Lovell: I grew up in Yonkers, New York.

O'Brien: What was it like?

Lovell: Um, Yonkers? [laughter] It's right above the Bronx, so we were really close to New York City. Um, growing up there, was interesting. I am—all my family and friends are still there to this day. —I guess growing up was a little interesting for me also because it was evident that I was different. So, I would constantly get, you know, teased and harassed for sounding like a girl or something or I was too feminine. And, um, so I got in a lot of trouble in school. I was constantly fighting and getting suspended, protecting myself and my identity at the time. Um, yeah. And that was all the way up until high school. Then I left and I came to New York City.

O'Brien: What was your family like? What did your parents spend their time doing?

Lovell: Well, my family and how I was raised is different than your regular family model. Um, my mother—was, she had me as a teenager. She got pregnant and had me at 15. My father was a little older. He was a senior or something like that in school and then went off to the military. Um, so I was raised collectively between my mother and my grandmother, my godmother and my aunt and other family—extended family members.

O'Brien: Was your family from the South or from out of the country?

Lovell: I'm originally from the South. Um, my great grandmother moved up to New York City first and then migrated to Yonkers. Uh, so my grandmother and my great aunt were born here in

Brooklyn and some family members from my mother's side of the family are still Yaks. Her father's family also lives in Brooklyn. So technically we're New Yorkers, you know. But um, yeah, well.

O'Brien: And did your mom work at all?

Lovell: She did. Um, that was the, the—whole thing about my mother is that, you know, having the family come in and help take care of me while she was so young. She was able to graduate high school and you know, find work and support me and my—then my other two sisters came along, you know. But I give—if anything, that is one of the big things about my mother that I love was that, you know, she had the ability to care and provide for us despite her circumstances.

O'Brien: What sort of work did she end up doing?

Lovell: Well, she went to business school after, I remember like going to class or going to the school with her one time. Um, but when—then she ended up working for, um, Precision Valve Corporation, which is the company that produces aerosol cans. She was working there for a number of years. [bumps table]

O'Brien: Careful on the table. Um, and so you, you had some trouble as a kid?

Lovell: Yeah, I did. I was very rebellious, did not take to authority. Um, I think—and trying to understand myself, people were already putting labels on me because of how I was. Um, and I didn't necessarily—not that I didn't agree with the labels, it was the fact that you were trying to tell me who I am before I can even define for myself, you know? And so, I was very rebellious in that aspect of like, you know, people teasing me and calling me names and I just, I wasn't the type to be bullied. [laughter]

O'Brien: Do any particular stories stand out from you—for you, from that time?

Lovell: Oh my god, I remember them all. [laughter] I think all of them and the reasons why, you know. For me, no one was exempt from, you know, being attacked by me in terms of if you're bullying me. So, um, I remember one time, you know, this one boy, he was, you know, teasing and bothering me and I spent the whole year dealing with his mess. And then it was like the last few weeks of school and I just snapped. I like turned over the desk and threw chairs and threw paints, and you know. And there were a few times I'd have those outbursts in the classroom or in the school where I got pulled into the principal's office or I had to, you know, get suspended and my mother had to come to school, you know. Um, it was a constant thing and I—I have just been processing this now as to like the times that my mother had to come up to school because of my behavior. And in those times teachers and, you know, they didn't really know how to classify or define us. So, they put us in special classrooms for, you know—which I've noticed like speaking to other people that I grew up with that I went—was in school with or whatever. That when we are grappling with these things that we are the problem, you know? And so, they put me in a classroom for emotionally disturbed children. But then it was just like, I'm not really emotionally disturbed. I'm disturbed by the fact that I am constantly being harassed on a daily

basis, you know what I mean? And then I have no choice but to lash out. So, it was difficult in school maneuvering because then like if I excelled in a certain study or something, it was like, okay, well she's in this classroom but we're going to put her there and you know, so I took jumbled courses. It was really weird, you know, and then when I got to junior high school and high school or I just didn't go. Or, you know, I was busy having fun with friends. And then one time we got caught, um, cutting school in this park, not too far from the school. And it was a bunch of deans and the deans collected us and lined us all up in front of the front of the school, but we had an amazing teacher—I'll never forget him Mr. R. And um, he came into the social worker's office and was like, "Look, I'm going to make a deal with you." And probably my mother wouldn't—our parents never knew this, but you know. We got caught cutting and he was like, "This is the deal. We won't tell your parents that you're cutting, but you have to join this program." Right? And so, it was like, "Oh, you're not going to tell and if I join this program." So, I did. And it was an alternative program. So, what they had us do was we went to school, for our core subjects, right? In the morning, and then after lunch or during like when lunch starts, we would go to the hospital and we volunteered. So, we were getting like, you know—which is so funny because one of the people that I had did it with, she still works in that hospital, so to this day. It's so funny. But that's how we were able to pass and it was so much a better experience. Like cramming it in the morning session and then getting to do something else during the rest of the day really meant a lot. And it opened my eyes to like a lot of things working in the hospital for an entire school year, you know, that was a big deal. I got to see a lot of things.

O'Brien: How did it change you?

Lovell: Well, dealing with the people and like pushing the gurneys around and talking to the patients. The first time I've seen a dead body in a morgue, you know, it was the relationships that were built and the experience, you know?

O'Brien: What brought you joy? What was fun when you were growing up?

Lovell: Well, it gave me a sense of purpose that it wasn't just about the everyday of school life and dealing with harassment and other people's bullshit, you know? It was like, these people are sick, some people die. You know, it really woke me up and—to how like the world is, you know? It's beginning like there was bigger things and what was going on and you know, junior high school.

O'Brien: And did you ever encounter queer people or trans people in Yonkers?

Lovell: I did. I did actually, and some of it is not all good. I, I—You know, when I was 16, I had my first kiss. And I'll never forget—it was during these—we used to do the March of Dimes and it was like Walk America or something like that I mean like do this 10-mile thingy. And I had a crush on this guy in my school. We ended up having—I ended up having my first kiss and, and then—But, um, he started to hang out with some other queer folk and you know, there were rumors and stuff going around and it was just craziness. You know, like people were being outed and it was just a lot. Um, but my first encounter with a trans woman was one broad that they were

hanging out with, named Sheena. And I'll never forget her—she was just so over the top and like just—and we were all gagging at the fact that she was a transsexual. But, um, I started to go to Center Lane in Westchester and then I met a few other trans people.

O'Brien: What is Center Lane?

Lovell: Center Lane is, um, it was an LGBT center. Center Lane was for The Loft, you know? And the Center Lane was for young people and I met a lot of queer folk there and LGBT folk and I stayed there for a while. I kind of miss everybody and wonder where everybody is. So that also helped with identifying and being close and comfortable with who I was as a person. But the journey to transitioning was still—you know, I was grappling with my levels of femininity and grappling with the fact that I was indeed a woman, but I was not transitioned. Um, it was obvious that I was a woman growing up, you know. Like people knew I was a woman before I did and that was the thing. [laughter] That was a thing. And so, when I left home, because I was just grappling with so much. I had a boyfriend at the time that I felt I was competing with other women for, or his attention for that matter. Um, and I just couldn't take it anymore. I needed to find myself. I needed to get out of there. I needed to explore the world. I knew that there was more to it than that. When I started working as a messenger, I started work—16 was a big year for me. [laughter] When I, I—started working, I was doing messaging work. And the messaging work required me to come to New York City. And I would go to all the businesses and stuff throughout Midtown or throughout Manhattan in general and pick up—I was working for this, this police associations then, right? And um, I would come and—I would come down and collect the checks and stuff and then bring them back to the office. And I fell in love with New York City. I was like, I want to live there. This is where I feel I need to be. And so, at 17 and a half, I ended up leaving home. I got into a big fight at my mother's husband, at the time, and it was really bad. It was really bloody, messy. Um, he disrespected me, he used the f-bomb on me. And everybody that knows me knows that the f-bomb is a really nasty trigger for me that, um, nice things don't happen, you know? And so, we got into a nasty fight and I ended up leaving home and I came to New York City and you know, I was still a young person. So, I stayed at the Covenant House. And the Covenant House changed everything for me. That is when I began to transition. I met lots of trans and LGBT folk when I went through there that pretty much guided me on the path to transition. But in those times, there was a lot different, you know, this is like the summer of 90—'97, '98, you know, well yeah. '98, the summer of '98, the winter of '97. I remember Covenant House corralling all of the LGBT youth together. Like, they were keeping a very close watch on us because usually their time frame is like 30 days. And I realized that I was there for like three months and it wasn't just me, you know. And at that time, a lot of young LGBT folks were put in a mental health wing, of Covenant House. [clinking] And I had came to New York, I started working, I got a job at Cole Cafe, which is now where the Reuters building is. And I'll never forget because when I used to see the awning there, I was just like, "I've made it, I live in New York, I work in New York City now," you know, but I was still in the shelter. It got a lot—because you know dealing with rowdy street youth, it was just always like, you know, something going on. And um, but I remember all the people that I had met there and some of them are—still friends to this day.

O'Brien: Could you say more about how—what Covenant House was overall and then how, how they related to queer and trans people there and then how queer and trans people dealt with it?

Lovell: Right, that is a lot. [laughter] So at the time, and I was going to get there, but um, at the time, Covenant House—there are a lot of LGBT people coming, but it wasn't necessarily LGBT friendly all of the time. I think at that time people were, you know, because the influx of LGBT youth coming in, were really trying to grapple with, you know, our presence and our culture. And you know, how we are, you know, as people like the, you know, flamboyance of, you know, all of us, you know. It was a lot, you know, and like I said, I met some really good friends that I'm still friends with to this day. I think like, you know, when I first encountered other trans people and—learning how we, our means of survival, you know? I felt like, at the time before I transitioned, that I was blessed that I was able to find work and, you know, and try to make ends meet even though I was in this situation. And, um, other young people struggling with how they were going to move forward and their lives, you know, it was hard, you know? I remember when I met my gay mother, so to speak, Cashmere. And there was, you know, there was a bunch of us, there was me, Cashmere, Sadie, um, Selia, there was a bunch of us. Like, I'll reveal more as I go along because some of them are still in my life. But, um, you know, I remember Cashmere, seeing me and she wanted to pluck my eyebrows. I remember Ms. Jackson, who used to always suck her thumb and get on my nerves, you know? It was just like so many people, you know, and um, but I let her pluck my eyebrows. But then, you know, we were only allotted there this certain amount of time and so it was trying to transition me out, so I was working and they tried to get me into another transitional living situation. And this was still right before I transitioned, like, like starts to actively transition, like maybe a few months [laughter] before I made the final decision and that's what I wanted to do, you know? And I remember there was like a good six-month period. Nah, it was like from—I left, there like in January and then I, between January and I'd say April, May-ish, of '97, well '98 now going into '98. I was staying at the James Street Hotel in Greenwich, in the Village. And it's so weird to me now that I look back is that I did not—I lived there for six months and did not even know half of the things that were going on in that area at the time. I guess like I stayed in the vicinity of the hotel. Like, if you—do you know anything about like the James Street and you know, the pod rooms and...?

O'Brien: Not everyone who's listening will know. So, tell us how it was.

Lovell: Well the James Street back in the day was a godsend. You know, it was just like \$135 for a week, for three weeks, you know, you could pay—and then you have to switch your room, you know? And there was—it was a hotel where, um, artists would be. Like, I remember when Michael Stipe was there one time. And then knowing the history of the place too. The James Street is where the Titanic survivors went to after the Titanic disaster. And I didn't know that history until one day I was looking on the walls. And then the other thing that makes the James Street so dear to me [laughter] is that the fact that at the time that I was staying at the James Street Hedwig and the Angry Inch was in the theater. And I have the—I have memories of John Cameron Mitchell coming down the stairs after getting dressed and then listening to the music as I would come in or you know. And, you know, out front or something and looking at the people

lined up to come in and see Hedwig and the Angry Inch. My life is just so weird. So, um, I stayed there for six months and I was working at Amy's Bread and Zendo's at the time.

O'Brien: What were you doing?

Lovell: Oh, I was a panini maker. A panini maker and I remember I couldn't take it anymore. Um, I needed assistance and I knew Covenant House had a transitional living program called Rites of Passage. Um, so I had to fight my way to get in there. I remember, you know, "Look, I've been living in this hotel for six months. All my money is going to that, and all I'm living off of is paninis and biscottis," you know, I need some assistance. And I had gotten it and it was close to my birthday, pretty close around this time of year. And I was super excited and you know, I got to move in and it was so much better because you get two years there and your rent goes into savings. And so, you can, you know, have a cushion to fall back on and stuff. And when I got there, who did I see? Cashmere and Sadie and I was like, oh, well you all made it here before me. And so, um, we continued our friendship and stuff and then that's how I met Elizabeth. And that's and Freebie connected with Selia and there were just so many people. Our room 924, I'll never forget, became like the Mecca of homeless LGBT youth [phone chimes] within Covenant House or in the ROP [Rites of Passage] program. Like that is where we all congregated and stuff. And I have so many fond memories. I had so much fun. You know, I think about it and I wouldn't take them back or anything. You know, it was like the catalyst to my independence, you know? And then there was Brandy and there were just so many people that I'm—I just will never forget, you know? Um, not to say that times were always easy either, you know? I think when I made the decision in the summer of 1998 to transition, things began to change and I began to really see how the world disenfranchises trans people, you know? Even though I was very feminine, the dynamic changed when I began to transition. I remember when I was still working at Zendo—that was supposedly gay friendly mind you, and they were looking for wait staff and Cashmere was sex working. And I kind of felt bad for her and she wanted something different, and so I advocated to get her a job. And I brought her in for an interview and stuff. And at the time Cashmere was very passable, but I think it was that she would look better than the other waitress that was there and that became the problem, you know? So, I noticed that after that interview, I had gotten taken off the schedule for like a week and I'm like, "What are you all doing?" you know, "Oh, we forgot to," you know, and I'm just like "What?" Then my hours started to dwindle and then I had no job. So, I was like, okay. So, then I did find another job. I was working at [inaudible], it was dead smack in the middle of the Meatpacking District. And so, at the time, you know, I was working there, I would wear like camisoles and, and like, you know, flare bottom jeans were becoming the style again. So, I would, wear camisoles and give the very Kevin Aviance type look with a bald head, makeup on or something, you know? And um, I think at the time, I started messing around with, uh, the hormones. This time it was Premarin, and we used to go down to Chi-Chi's to get it, you know? There was a person at the door and you give them some coin. They would take a list, you know, and then they would come back with the Premarin pills, you go back the next, you know, next few days and see if your prescription was ready. I'll never forget that. [laughter]

O'Brien: Where was Chi-Chi's?

Lovell: Oh, it was, um, right next to the PATH train. That bar, which was a legendary black, LGBT bar in the center of Chris—you know, Christopher Street. Um, back in those days, those types of bars and things that were still open. Like I remember uh, Two Potato and Geller's around the corner, but nobody ever went, I never really went there and I was still kind of too young to get into those places but um, [laughter] I remember being outside and, in the vicinity, you know. I remember that. And then working at Coffee Grinds. Now Coffee Grinds was in the middle, like it's where Patsy's is now or where the Sephora is or something. But Covenant House ROP [Rites of Passage] at the time was on 17th street. And, um, so it was like right around the corner from home and I had full reign over the shop. But one of the things that concerned me because I had trans friends was that I was not to allow any of the trannys into the store. And I was pretty defiant and I didn't think that that was right to deny somebody access to a store because they were a tranny. It didn't make any sense to me. And if I'm the one managing the store and I'm here the majority of the time, I felt like I could let whoever I want in, you know? And I remember one of my favorite customers was Bawdy Audie Josie. We call her Bawdy Audie Josie, because Josie would come out with these, you know, with her gear on, she would have the heels on and she was like, "So I look real [inaudible]" and she would shake her boobies and you know? And she would come into the store all the time and she would order hot chocolate. She would have her little hot chocolate and she would have me play on the radio, Brandy's Never Say Never album and her favorite song was "Sitting on Top of the World." I'll never forget those days. Josie, sit and rest like girls walking in them heels all damn day. You know what I mean? And she's out here working. Why, why doesn't she deserve a hot chocolate? Why can't she sit down and rest for a little while? As long as she's paying. The rumor around that time was that trans people were utilizing the stores and the bathrooms to pull tricks. And of my time at Coffee Ground, I've never seen that. I just can't. I've never seen it. And girls weren't necessarily even running up into my store all the time either, you know? Um, but I was there for a number of months and then, it was during Pride, actually it was [inaudible] that week of Pride '98. And, you know, Cashmere and Elizabeth and Selia were my friends. So, you know, I was closing the shop, you know, I turned on some music as I'm able to do, but there was this one little queen who was jealous and she reported that I was throwing this big old shindig and closed the store. And, and, and then she ended up with my job, but she peeled up out of drag. You know, so I was a little upset about that because you sabotaged me miss honey. But, um, [laughter] then it was, you know, considering that I had already knew the beat, I was out there and people were making more money than me. [laughter] You know? It was becoming a little bit more lucrative, you know, I was like, okay, well I'm going to go out with them and I'm going to work the beat, you know? And I made that decision, you know, and I'll never forget, it was The Realness Girls at the time and Cashmere was included among them. It was Cashmere, Cheeklet, Cindy, and somebody else. And they—had a car rental or something they were driving around. And it was me and Elizabeth and we were riding with them and they were like, "Okay, so we're going to let you out here on the Stroll girl. You're going to come back and you're going to make all this money, miss things. Duh, duh, duh, duh," right? So, we get out of the car and when you get to work or whatever. And it was a fun night. Like, you know, I pulled a few dates, you know, and we came back. And you know, it was always the come back home. The mission is to come back home and like, what did you make? And then what we did afterwards, which was very next day we would wait for the stores to open. And then we'd go shopping. Like it was very "Girls Just Wanna Have Fun." So that was our "Girls



Just Wanna Have Fun" moment. So, then we were just living and we were making coins and we were all happy. And we would take trips to Central Park and rent a boat and smoke blunts and the—little lake or whatever. We would run into celebrities—like one time, me and Cashmere and Elizabeth, ran into Brad Pitt. It was crazy. [laughter] It was just so fun, you know?

O'Brien: How much money would you make in a night?

Lovell: In those days you would come home with a sufficient amount of money, you know? It was um, yeah, there was a sufficient amount of money and like I was able to have like, you know, clothes and feed myself and pay my rent without stressing, you know? Because, you know, we had to be rent at ROP [Rites of Passage], you know, and so, and knowing that it also was a cushion. So, what I was doing at the time was, I was saving that money. I was saving the money via the rent and I would save money in a little safe—in this little pink safe that I had. And it had a little combination lock on it and I would save my money. And that was my main goal was to make the money to save, to have a better life, you know. And for the things that I never had because I had suffered for x amount of time with not having any money and trying to make ends meet, you know? So, I was like, okay, you know, this is what I'm going to do, but life gets in the way again. And so, as we begin to dwindle off and I stayed in Covenant House for all like two and a half years. And those two and half years were wonderful. But now, well real world is about to set in again. I had to leave, I had started working at—I had a few jobs I worked at—and I'm skipping over a lot of stuff but I'm going to get there. But um, I was working at the New Neutral Zone and I was the youth leadership organizer. That was the last position I held there, and peer coordinator.

O'Brien: What was the New Neutral Zone?

Lovell: The New Neutral Zone was a space for young people. It was a drop-in center for LGBT youth. Now, there was a Neutral Zone before then that I'm hearing historically that people used to talk about. But that was a little before my time. The New Neutral Zone had gotten their new location on 16th street, which is right across the street from Covenant House ROP [Rites of Passage]. And in that building was um, also the New York Peer Aids Advocacy Coalition, which I was also a member of. Um, and in those times—I have to bring it back because that all correlates into the bigger picture. So, during this time, I've been sex working and you know, and doing those things I had worked for, in year periods, obviously Coalition, New Neutral Zone, Project Reach in China Town. And then we went from Project Reach, we had a group called Pro Radicals that ended up turning into FIERCE, which is Fabulous Independent Educated Radicals for Community Empowerment. But that's another story. [laughter] But um, so... The sex working part and leaving when I was working, I was like—just in Project Reach, my last year of Project Reach and I had to move out. And so, I moved to the Lower East Side. I was renting a room in the suburbs of the Lower East Side. But during my time at the New Neutral Zone and stuff. No, that was slightly after. So, I'm going to back it up. Okay, so yeah. There was that time when I—when I really had to work sex work full time because then I had turned 21 and at the time programs where, once you turn 21, that's a wrap. They extended the program to 24 later on. But um, yeah. So that kind of hit hard because now I had no access to youth programs. And I was renting this room and everything that I saved went into this room and then I started getting arrested and spending time

in jail and those realities hit. So, flashing forward I was thinking to myself, oh God, 2000. That was 2000, 2001, I was 22. It's scooped my age now, but um so that. 2000, 2001. Um, I was on the street hard-body. I started doing cocaine. Yeah, I lost my friends through cattiness and other things that would break people up, you know? Other people feeling, you know, better than or whenever the case may be. I became a loner. A lone wolf and I was on the streets. But I still had the Neutral Zone. They upped the age to 24. So, I was able to still come around and participate in certain things. I remember right after I had—with the youth leadership organizer and the shit hit the fan that um, we were to start a documentary. It was meaningful support laden and we were on the hunt for Stonewall veterans. And I remember I found like, I don't remember his name, but he used to drive the Stonewall—he was the owner of the Stonewall mobile. And I remember seeing him throughout the years, like he was in Yonkers I think he is from Yonkers and that was a crazy thing. But then when I left there very young people that were a part of FIERCE and Pro Rads, we were looking for the Stonewall veterans and then we stumbled upon Sylvia Rivera. And um, Sylvia Rivera used to be around us a lot in her final years. I remember coming into the Neutral Zone and seeing Sylvia there all the time. Her telling stories, her giving me looks and I was scared that she was on to me, you know? Like, "Oh my God, she knows that I'm sniffing coke she's on to me now." [laughter] I used to always run from her kind of and go into the bathroom, just sniff cocaine or get ready for the night. So, when I think back on it though, I kind of wish I paid attention a lot more. I knew who she was then, but um, you know, there was Transy House which was open, some girls were going to Transy House and the stories that we hear that come out of Transy House, you know, I wasn't ready for trans lesbians.[laughter] I'm not going there, you know, and I stayed on the streets. I didn't want to go to Transy House. And I missed the opportunity to know Sylvia better, you know, but we would see each other and we would acknowledge each other. I marched with Sylvia Rivera during the Amanda Milan incident. I remember walking and I was right next to Octavia St Laurent. She was singing like Shug Avery down 8th avenue up to 42nd street. I remember those days and [phone chimes] I didn't know that were stepping in to history, you know? And I had my own shit at the time that I was grappling with. And when I really look back on it though, I think that it was because she saw herself in me for the most part and knew what I was going to do. She did know what I was going to do. She knew what I was going to do, you know? And now that I look back on it all I'm like, oh, now I understand why she would look at me that way. And I just wish I paid a little bit more attention because I was so caught up in my life at the time that I kind of was dismissive in terms of this is what I need to do and nobody cares about me, you know? And, yeah. So, I didn't get to spend as much time and plus everybody was, you know, [phone chimes] needed or wanted attention from her at the time. So—yeah. But moving forward though I was on the streets and, in and out of jail. Still on drugs and I needed to get clean. Sylvia passed away and I remember Kate Barnhart, um, I got sentenced to Wards Island. Because I had no place to live and so they put me there so they could keep track of me, I guess or whatever.

O'Brien: The men's shelter of Wards Island.

Lovell: And so, I remember it was the day of Sylvia's funeral and Kate went with me to check in to Wards Island after the court theater or whatever the case may be. And it was like around February. I know going to Wards Island and I would never stay there. I would go sign in and then

I would go right back to 14th street. I would even like walk over the bridge thingy, take the subway and I got in trouble and the judge found out and she's all like, "You weren't sleeping there. And I recall you saying that you would never get caught with drugs." Because she overheard a conversation that I've never been caught with drugs. Right? But I was high, I wasn't high. I thought I had enough window period for cocaine, but I ended up then testing positive and then I ended up having to go to jail for a few months and, um... —In jail, I mean it was what it was. I mean, Rikers island, six pill thing, lots of queens come in and out of there anyway. So, it wasn't really as bad as I thought it was going to be or the stories of—I mean, I've had a few fights and, you know? But the experience wasn't as horrific as I thought it would have been. Or it depends on how you carry yourself or to that matter. And I've always been kind of a fighter anyway. I remember getting out. I remember getting acclimated into the community again. It's been picking up and grappling again with drugs. Um, when I had the epiphany that I really need to give it up. I really need to stop and I need to clean up my act. I didn't want to be the age I am now as a sex worker. When I used to run into the older girls that used to tell me of the old days and it was like, this can't be our life. There were a few girls that were murdered. I remember, or the guy that I used to talk to, he was an older queen. He ended up murdered. Or when we lost Sugar Bear and we found her body parts and then what's his name? And I always—the fear begins to cripple me of, if something happens to me will I just end up in Potter's field? I really needed to reassess my self-worth at the time. So, I needed to get clean. I remember talking. I had went home for a while and I stayed with my godmother and it was three years. Her last three years on earth. And dealing with family and my transitioning and you know, sex working and making ends meet and people's disapproval of that. My addiction getting worse. It was when she got really, really sick and I knew she wasn't coming home and a violent incident took place in the house that I needed to pull it together. I remember a friend of mine from FIERCE called me and told me about Sylvia's Place. And um, that Kate was there and now five years have passed since I've seen anybody.

O'Brien: So, this is in the late 2000s now?

Lovell: This is about, right, because I was back and forth home and in and out of Rikers Island and that lasted about five years. So, from like 2000, two, three, four, five like I popped up at Sylvia's Place in 2005. And um, I stayed with my godmother for like three years, so about 2003, four, five until she got sick and passed away. I visited Sylvia's Place to see Kate because I hadn't seen her in going on five years. Um, and reconnected with Kate, you know, um, connected me to services like rehab. I needed to get clean, I want to get clean. I couldn't take it anymore. And I did, but then I got in trouble in rehab and then couldn't go to the halfway house so I was still homeless and still grappling with street life. But the young people, it was the young people that—Now that I really said it, I think about this. It was the young people that lifted me up and... They lifted me up when I didn't think I had anybody else left. I would go work the Stroll at night, and go to Sylvia's Place in the morning and get breakfast. And then I would [inaudible] until some of the young people that I was friends with, or that I was building relationship with. We would spend the day together and I would use my food stamps and feed everybody. And after a while people are like, "Oh, you should work here, we really want you to work here." And I'm like, "I can't work here. I can't work here." And then, one night, one of the counselors didn't show up. She was really stressing that she needed somebody to work there for the night. And I was about to go to the

Stroll and then she was like, "You could do it." And I did. And then it was one night, became two nights and then three nights and then I became a full-time employee. And I did that for 10 years. And it was some of my most rewarding times in my life, you know? That is where I met your friend, Scout.

O'Brien: What was Sylvia's Place like?

Lovell: Huh?

O'Brien: What was Sylvia's Place like?

Lovell: A safe space for young people to go to. Especially those that couldn't make it in a regular shelter setting. Usually it's the most disenfranchised, those that are the most discarded and nobody wants to deal with. But I was so happy that it was there and I'm so happy for all of the experiences that I got to go through there and I'm so happy to work there and try to make Sylvia proud. So many changes. I'm just going to leave it—that it was just a good thing. I don't want to talk about politics within, or if anybody who knows me knows the story, so I'm not even going to go there. But I did my best, you know, um, I had to deal with a lot and making sure that the—space was safe. That the young people's needs were met in terms of—because people forget, you know, that our young people are out here struggling. That we don't have like spaces and things that we could truly be ourselves or thrive in. I always felt or made it a point and what was so important was that there were opportunities. And that even though that this is the situation that you can thrive. You can be somebody. Just like how, if I was a nobody and I was able to work or find work or to elevate myself through my darkest hours that you can do it too. And that was the point. That was the whole point. And I didn't want anybody to, to feel like they didn't or couldn't. So, I centered my work around making sure that there were plenty of opportunities of enrichment and following in the work of what Sylvia wanted and the things that I learned from being under Kate Barnhart, you know? But it was 10 years, 10 beautiful years.

O'Brien: What block was it on?

Lovell: Oh, it's on 36th street. In Hell's Kitchen.

O'Brien: Is it still there?

Lovell: Thankfully, it's still there. It's still there, but not to the capacity in which I would like to see it. But it's still there. Um, I swear I feel I'm skipping over a lot, but I mean, yeah. It's funny how time flies for one, and for two, how things change. I never thought that my life would lead me—lead me to the path that I'm on now or the things that I'm doing now. I was that girl in the Village. You know, when I learned about Marsha P. Johnson and I—I'm just able to relate to her struggle, you know? And all the information now that we get about her, so much of her life is so similar to mine. Like during the times of being on the streets, like... Part of the ways in which I was able to survive with sleeping in the movie theater, going to 14th street to making coins and then using some of that money to eat and to sleep in a movie theater. Everybody just [inaudible] or go to

clothing swaps and stuff, you know? Or just being in the Village, in the Meatpacking District and knowing that like during her times in like the 70s, 80s and 90s and for me during the late 90s early 2000s that nothing had changed. It was still the same thing. And even to this day, being a black trans woman is still difficult. Gender just passed the other day. And now that I haven't been out of work now for going about like eight months, like an official job, an official job is what I'm talking about. It's still hard to find work. Education and opportunities for Trans people are still very limited, you know? And so, these are things that I still grapple with today. And now that I'm the age of that I am, you know, but luckily, I've had opportunities and things. So right now, I may not be in any of the organizations, you know, but I'm—I got into acting and I don't know if it's safe to say I'm a film and television actress now. And now I'm a producer and I produced a film called The Garden—I co-produced a film called The Garden Left Behind, which is about a trans woman named Tina. She's an immigrant and she's navigating life in New York City with her grandmother. And it touches on things that are important. When I was working at Sylvia's Place and I, you know, wanted to reemerge STAR, [Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries] I felt it would have been appropriate. There were some clashes. Not to say clashes because I, you know, I still speak to my sister anyway regardless of differences of opinions. But because utilizing the STAR name was an issue, I then began to create Trans In Action. And so, you know, we started, it was just the Trans Empowerment Group and I got it from the rest of the street girls that were on the street that what we should name the Trans Empowerment Group and we wanted to name it STAR. And we weren't too sure if the name was taken or if even STAR existed. You know, so I did some research and it didn't, but somebody came to tell me otherwise. I knew the person. So that made it unpleasant. Which is Mariah, she's in care. [laughter] But you know, I mean the point of STAR to me is, though, is to spread the message of what, you know, being trans and free is all about. And so, you know, when I started Trans in Action, you know, when we were struggling to find a name and Mariah had to come and let me know that she had STAR. Ok, you can use that and, you know, I'll take Trans in Action. But when I started doing Trans in Action and we would have the weekly groups and stuff, you know. We would learn the history. That was one of the main components of Trans in Action was to know the history of STAR [Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries] and who Sylvia Rivera is. Because a lot of young people coming from different parts of the country didn't know, you know what I mean? So, it was part of my duty to inform them who Sylvia Rivera and Marsha P. Johnson was. And at the time, coming up, I didn't really know or hear much information about Marsha, but as time progressed and I started to dig and really pay attention to like these are the people, you know what I mean? It was just like, wow, there is just so much that we're missing. We were in a documentary; it was called Queer Streets and it highlighted myself and a few young people at the time from Sylvia's Place. And after watching the final product and came when it appeared, it was all over logo. I was not satisfied with the final product. I think what was so troubling for me was that I get that it was supposed to be a hip and gritty look at the lives of LGBT youth on the streets of New York. But what it failed to do was to uplift and highlight the positive stuff that was going on at the time. You wanted, the hip and gritty look but you didn't experience the joy that through all that grittiness and shit that we had to endure. How we managed to stay afloat. Quick to find me, you know, talking to John's but not my struggle in getting clean or finding meaningful work. Quick to show one of our trans sisters who's no longer here, injecting and then eventually overdosing. That drew the line in the sand for me. And I was disgusted at media because you started to see more of these trans stories pop up. And so,

I knew the Trans Health Conference was coming up and Scout, your friend, introduced me to the Trans Health Conference years ago. I had wrote a proposal for a workshop about trans in media and um, I'm sitting there, I was struggling. "Well, what am I going to present? What am I going to present?" I started to make a little PowerPoint collecting—you know, I don't want a PowerPoint. This is not going to be enough. A PowerPoint is not going to be enough. And so, my friend JD [Melendez], who worked on Fenced Out, um, documentary, I was like, you make documentaries, I want to make a documentary. You know, I want to make a documentary about trans in media. Like I need to show people what it is, not in a PowerPoint presentation, but you know? So, we got to work. He gave me a camera, I did some interviews, I researched some girls that were on Jerry Springer, you know, got them to do some interviews. And then I was like, okay, I want to work with this number or this number or this and I'm going to come on, I want to see like, you know, if we were flipping through the television. So, I sat there and we were going through the thing and we created Trans In Media. And so, I was so nervous and I didn't think or know how people were going to respond to it because I spoke to Vanessa. Was there any, I remember talking to her, she came up one time, it was during a Pride and uh, she's from Texas. And she said one of the ways, is like you have to get the community riled up, right? That's the only way to get their attention about anything. Right? So, I was like, okay, I'm going to do that. So, when I put all this together and we were sitting here, and I was like, okay, showing the violence, showing how that violence perpetuates. You know, like when you are in Jerry Springer or Maury Povich and people that shouting and yelling. "Look at that man!" [makes a noise] Yeah, that really used to get under my skin because it happens to us when, you know, that perpetuates violence. So, we did it in a way, which it segues into news footage of trans women that had been murdered. This is what happens. This is, you know, all of this turns into this because it's transphobia and then you all never highlight any of the good stuff that we do. So, I put in images of me in the community, you know, and like celebrities or like at the time Laverne Cox had just come out and you know, so like, you know, or leaders within the community that are doing good. And so many people, like I was so surprised, I was so shocked that when I get to the room, it was one of the biggest rooms in this—in the conference and the room was almost filled. And so that was another big moment for me. I didn't think that it would, be so impactful. And so, I stayed on the course of changing this narrative of how trans people are perceived in media and I was able to cope with just the film. And acting has always been a passion of mine that I thought that I would never be able to achieve because I was trans and now I'm doing it. So, I'm happy for the time in which we live. And I'm also happy for the, the things that, that we have been through and experienced. And I got to see the old way and helping pave the way for the new, and I'm proud of that now. I think now when I sit back and think about it and I'm at this particular age [laughter] that it was all worth it.

O'Brien: Yeah. So, you've shared a lot and you rushed through lots of different phases of your life. We have some time. Do you want to go back and explore more of some of these pieces?

Lovell: Um. Like does anything stand out?

O'Brien: Well, tell me about the, uh, how girls related to each other, working the Stroll in the Meatpacking. You both talked about friendships but also cattiness tearing people apart and yeah.

Tell me some about what the, what the community was like, what the struggles were, what the connections were.

Lovell: Well, in the Meatpacking District in those days I think, we had some cohesion and we had a code. You know, I think a lot of the time like you know, when we would stand on the corner and we would have conversations and [inaudible] at one another, I would see that more than fighting and all this other stuff. We were very aware of what was going on. We looked out for each other then. I think when the time started to change, you know, and it was, there was the Giuliani era, for me. The Giuliani era and then there was the Bloomberg era and they were two different things. I think, you know, Giuliani had started the quality of life laws and stuff. When we were on, when we started, we had to deal with protestors and such, you know, some that would follow us and taxis with signs to get to the Johns point or whatever the case may be. And the police whoop-whooping through the thing and we would all be running and hiding under the cars or letting us like letting each other know when Mag was out. Mag is like 6th precinct cops. That's what we used to call them back then. Mag.

O'Brien: Do you know where the name comes from?

Lovell: Probably Magnum P.I. or something like that, you know, and it was different. It was a different time. And like, you know, the NYPD patrol cars were out there, they would just whoop-whoop around and scare us and we run around and next thing you know, we're back at it again. You know? And sometimes you'll get pinched but not as severely as when the Bloomberg era hit. And I was just responding to a post about The High Line park and I was like, you know, a lot of trans woman suffered for them to build that High Line park, you know, and we've seen the effects of it. And as I told you when we first started, a girl could come out—you could go out, I could leave the house at say 11 o'clock. I was back safe and sound home by like 1:00 AM, you know. But as time progressed and the quality of life laws started to sink in and Bloomberg and his initiatives, you know, you started to see those things take its toll and it wasn't for the better. I think also, you know, after September 11th, I'll never forget that night, I'll never forget that day. I'll never get—it was me and Maria and we were on Christopher and Greenwich Avenue and we were looking at the smoke coming up out of the, what's his name? And I was like, "Girl, you know, this is a wrap. Right? Like it's done like. No dates." I'll start there.

O'Brien: What was Maria's last name?

Lovell: I don't remember. We just knew her as Maria.

O'Brien: Yeah.

Lovell: A lot of girls, I don't know their last name, but um, I'll never forget that night. And we were sitting there and we were just, it was me and her out there just looking. The weeks that followed... The week that followed, I had an ID from 16th Street, well, my street address was, well because I lived there and there. So, I kind of lived in the area. And so, it was hard to make money. I still don't know how I made it through after the September 11th attacks. I remember

sleeping in alleyways and vestibules every night trying. And how I survived the dates. A lot of them were from coming up from the wreckage or he needs some stress relief or sometimes even the officers. That's how I survived. I think like it took a while for the Stroll to recover after that. I mean everybody at the time was struggling, trying to, and then they wouldn't let people beyond the point if you didn't have an ID and it was a really, really hard time to struggle through. Especially where the place of work is compromised and they're not letting anybody through.

O'Brien: Was the Meatpacking District in the part of the zone that was restricted to access?

Lovell: From 14th street down.

O'Brien: Yeah.

Lovell: And it was a really dark time. Like I can still remember the smell. I can still like, hear the sirens and remember like—at that time when I was—like, there was Safe Space which was another place for street youth. And I would go there in the mornings to shower and stuff or sometimes get a bed. It depended, like, it was an emergency place. And then, um, that's how I was able to eat and shower and get clothes and stuff. But going back to West Lane to try and make a coin was just increasingly difficult. And sometimes I'm like, if I couldn't afford the movie theater, I would, you know, go into the buildings in Midtown and find a rooftop or something or a stairwell where I could keep warm. But it was really hard after 2001 and then when we started to see an influx, I'd say about the Stroll recovered. And about like 2000 and I, um, I did, I spent about eight months in Rikers Island, so I missed a lot [laughter] of the street after that. And then, um, when I got out it was like 2000. While I was dealing with the crap from the, the court process. 2002 had already come, so 2002, eight months. 2003. Yeah. I'm trying to remember all the timeline, but so it recovered about, I'd say about 2003, 2004, but it wasn't the same. The Stroll never truly recovered the same way after that. It was the girls, like I said, we used to come out and we can be out for three hours and we made, you know, enough money to go back home early. And those times were like 2003, four, five and beyond until it just, there was no more Stroll with like girls would be out there until like eight o'clock in the morning, 10 o'clock in the morning and still not catch a date. You know.

O'Brien: What was the end of that time? Like you said in 2005 there really wasn't a Stroll anymore?

Lovell: Well it was the intensity. There was Operation Spotlight. Where if you get, you know, three arrests for prostitution, they can charge you with a felony. And then with a felony charge, that's anything over a year. So, they can, um, send you way for over a year. You know, we call them bullets. So, if you get a bullet for a year for prostitution then—no, a bullet is the eight months that is what I did. Anything over a bullet, over the 12 months. So, like if you got a year and a day, you're going to go up north and thankfully I only got a bullet. So, you know, to stay on Rikers, even though people are like, "Oh, it's so much better on, um, up north in," and no. I don't want to go there. I'll stay here and deal with this shit. So, you can just get out and go home or back to the streets or whatever. But um, but yeah, and that's what they were doing. We would—



the change in policing happened too, you know, and then they were starting, or were looking at building that High Line shit, excuse my language. And so, you know what it was, is that like the police became more aggressive. It was no longer the squad cars. It was now deception and detectives and you know? Like it got crazier. Like, you know, they were in cabs and sometimes they may be the bum down the block and sometimes they would arrest us like for stupid shit. And it's not even like... When we learned how to fight, because you know, I remember... A girl would take a plea to get out of jail or to get whatever time and be done with it, as opposed to pleading not guilty on a case and then don't have bail money or support and now you're just wasting away in jail and, and you don't know what is happening, you know? And so, that's how they would do it, you know, and loitering with the intent to prostitute isn't necessarily a crime. And when, you know, as I've got assistance along the way and knowing that that is more like a violation than a crime. But because of the quality of life, so a lot of, so they would try to pin anything they could on us to get us off to get us off the streets. Whether it be, I just got off the subway station and now I'm being bagged for loitering with the intent to prostitute or because I spoke to three individuals, I'm now prostituting. But then it depends on what type of zone you're in. So, if it's dubbed a prostitution zone, but there's a major transportation hub over there, I'm good in a major transportation hub. But if the major transportation hub and the prostitution zone, it's a whole jumbled mess. So, you can get, you know, they would pin anything they could on me. Trespassing, which I think I most likely was trespassing. But that too is still only a violation and not a crime.

O'Brien: So, this was an escalation of policing under Bloomberg? That was trying to clear out the Stroll?

Lovell: Like, there was the quality of life laws under Giuliani but under Bloomberg and what, how he dealt with sex workers in general was Operation Spotlight.

O'Brien: And you mentioned, The High Line, which was a part of the whole real state redevelopment.

Lovell: Gentrification of the Meatpacking District.

O'Brien: When, did you have a sense of those things being connected?

Lovell: Yes. Yes, I did. Because they had just started to like, develop some—The High Line, like they were looking into it. The High Line opened officially in like, like the bottom part. Like they were slowly building it throughout the years until what it is now, you know. But that was the plan from the get go. You know, when they do development and stuff, you know, that's what they do. The whole gentrification of the Meatpacking District was on schedule, you know what I mean? Get the hookers out and you know, let's build our shit. So that, that is why, you know, that man's a businessman and I'm sure he made his little deals or whatever the case may be. So, you know, it's get rid of all the prostitutes now. They were trying for years to get rid of us, you know, with the protesters with the signs and stuff. But this was active, like this was an ongoing onslaught.

Like I could go to jail for like 90 days, come home, have no means, besides the Stroll. Next thing it's whoop, and then you're in for another 45 days.

O'Brien: So, tell me about Rikers Island, what was it like for you?

Lovell: It depends. It depends. You know, like sometimes you, you have a choice. Either you can sign into special housing unit where they house LGBT people. You know. Or, um, when, that time they called it Homo House, or you can do general population. And sometimes I was on the fence on what I should be doing. Should I go to special housing or should I go to, you know, general population, you know. It was like a roll your dice and see what you get, you know? And so, when you go to special housing it was, you know, you know, trans girls were there and guys who would sign in or whatever. And I saw, nothing I want to touch on. There was a time where like gangs were infiltrating the homo housing unit and you know, saying that they were gay so that they can get preferential treatment. Like you know, they don't have to go to the, you know, the main mess hall, food is brought to them. They can find a lover for that matter and just, it was different, you know, and the girls would sometimes fight over guys and this is nothing new. Like, you know, that's usually why the girls started fighting and why we don't have unity with one another is because we started fighting over a trade. Trade is always in the middle of why the girls would fight, you know. And um, there was a time where it got really, really bad where a particular gang was just, took over and yeah. And some incidences happened and, excuse me, I remember all of that. But, um, so then I was conflicted. Do I deal with the drama of the housing, you know, the special housing or do I go in to general population? And sometimes general population would be a better situation, you know. But the eight months that I spent there, I mean, you know, I was with some girls, one of them I still know, um, to this day. For the most part it was peaceful, you know, they give you a little job or something, you know? I was talking to a CO, he would bring me Newports and oils and then, um, but yeah. I survived.

O'Brien: And you mentioned buying meals for people with food stamps. What was your interface with HRA [Human Resources Administration] and the sort of welfare system like?

Lovell: I mean, I really, you know, I'm homeless, I need food stamps. Um, and that's it. Like I never needed that much from them. You're not in terms of like, I always considered myself to be a worker bee. So, the coins I did make sufficed. Having the food stamps was a crucial part of survival, you know. And so, when young people were hungry or they didn't have access to things cause their identification or something, you know, I was just like, well let's go have a picnic. And I, you know, we would have picnics and stuff. And then my home girl, Deidre, she was work—she started working there a few months before me. And so, she would make breakfast in the morning. And um, so I would go in the mornings to go get breakfast.

O'Brien: This is at Sylvia's Place?

Lovell: At Sylvia's Place, yeah. And so when I got there though, it was, you know, when I walked through the door and seeing Kate after so many—so much time, you know, and then being

reintroduced to JD [Melendez] and you know, seeing JD—and JD was a major part of my cleanup process.

O'Brien: What was their last name?

Lovell: Melendez. Yeah. And he was a major part in my cleanup process and I didn't skip over him. I mentioned him about Trans In Media but I didn't skip over JD. But this is going to make me cry again. [laughter] But yeah, when JD was of the younger group of young people after I left. Like they were at that time, they were all like 16, 17 years old and I was just turning 21 and aging out. Five years had passed since I'd seen everybody and stuff. And JD was working, but at the time Sylvia's Place had extensions too. There was Sylvia's Place and there was Carmen's Place and JD was working over at Carmen's Place. And you know, JD picking me up and my first few years of working as Sylvia's Place, like if it wasn't for JD I wouldn't of had my first apartment. And if it wasn't for JD, I would have still been in the street. JD, before I started working there, like when I had this date up in Harlem, JD would drive me to the date and wait for me to get out of the date and then drive me back down to Sylvia's place, you know? And JD has been a major part and like getting my shit together. And sometimes we fight and sometimes we argue, but you know, it is what it is, you know? And he, he was, you know, and um, yeah. He helped pick me up in the times where I needed someone the most. And it's just so funny how life happens that way. Because I remember he always calls me out like, when I was at Project Reach and he was one of—and I was like the facilitator and he was the, he was contemplating transitioning. And I had said something that was problematic but keeping space for trans folk. And I didn't know at the time that JD [Melendez] was identifying as trans. So, when he said, I was dismissive and he never lets me live it down to this day, but you know. [laughter] But um, yeah.

O'Brien: So, you've talked about the number of different service centers that you spent time in. The New Neutral Zone, and the Covenant House, and the Covenant House, what was it, the ROP?

Lovell: Rites of Passage.

O'Brien: Rites of Passage, yeah. And Sylvia's Place where you spent a lot of time. What were some of the ways that the culture and policies and community at those places were varied? Like how are they different from each other?

Lovell: Well, um, Neutral Zone was run by GV- GVYC, Greenwich Village Youth Council and... I guess it was like fine. Like, I mean the counselors in there were members of the community, like Jenny, she had worked at NIAPEC beforehand. I remember Sheera. Some young people who were there, that went onto positions. We were probably young people that had utilized services. There was a lot of youth run organizing going on, you know, the same model was implemented at Project Reach. Or so we believed, which was a youth led or youth flight organization, that's what FIERCE became also was youth led organizing. So, we had a lot of say so on things and matters like, who gets hired, who gets fired, you know, things like that. Like if they were adult staff or whatever the case may be. As for Rites of Passage that was, and Covenant House that was a Catholic organization and we had to deal and grapple with a lot of politics stuff in there. You

know, like I remember like, you know, Elizabeth going off because you know, of how they would treat trans people. And I remember she was so vocal that eventually they started to consider having trans people or trans women in particular on the women's floor. You know, that became an option for some, you know? Um, and just advocating because like, you know [thud] we're not, you know, I was more of the girl like, just tell them you're working cause that's how I got by. Because now they're like looking at us like, "Oh you're sex working. You're not supposed to be doing that, you can't stay here." This was a little bit more vocal in terms of what exactly the situation was. Whereas I was more "Sweep it under the rug girl, be quiet or we'll get kicked out," and I'm just going to give them money to shut them up until they get out my business. You know what I mean? So, I was more that type of person as opposed to, you know, what I'm advocating for, you know, I just didn't want, you know, because we are sex working and we're not supposed to. That we all end up getting thrown out, but it ended up working to our advantage anyway. You know what I mean? So, you know, raising that and I'm sure Covenant House has grappled with, you know, sex work before, you know what I mean? In terms of like young people in sex work and those issues, you know?

O'Brien: And you haven't mentioned race very much. I imagine most of the people in your story were black and Latina. Do you want to talk a little bit about the racial demographics and how racism shaped people's lives and what that, how the community, what, were there white people in the story?

Lovell: There are white people in the story, Kate Barnhart is white and she's Jewish, you know?

O'Brien: But there's a lot about this community that was really shaped by black and Latina women.

Lovell: Right. I think like, like the old way I can think about like the—it was still there was, you know—I remember we used to laugh because we were on 17th street and this is when, Chelsea became the new budding gay neighborhood. And seeing the muscle queens and stuff. And it was like a culture shock for us because here we are like slender, young, and trans and then we have these—we would [inaudible] that the, that these gay men sound more womanly than we do and they got more muscles. We were like, really sounds more womanly than we do. Like what is going on? You know? And that was like being exposed to that culture so deeply because we were in Chelsea. But, um... Dynamics, I remember one time around the corner from Coffee Grind and I stopped working there because I got canned, because I told you that white child said I was having a party and got me fired and she ended up in my job. You know what I mean? And they weren't, they weren't even trans. They were just drag queen at the time. I don't, I don't know what she identifies as now. Right. Yeah. But one of the issues that I had, and I remember that, you know, staff in the Neutral Zone was helping me in this process was cap—Florent around the corner. You know on Gansevoort. Florent, and it was owned by a gay man, and I went in there one night and I was a sex worker, but I don't even think I was really sex working that night. Sometimes I'd be on the Stroll to be on it because that's, we all know the Village it wasn't that unusual for LGBT young people to congregate, period. You know what I mean? So, it's just to hit the scene and see what happens. Whatever happens, happens, you know? So, it was kind of cool that night and I wanted

French onion soup. I liked French onion soup. I had ordered French onion soup from there before. So, it's like, well, I like their French onion soup, cheap meal, you know. I like the cheese and stuff in it, you know, and it tastes, really good, I'm going to go there and go get me some French onion soup. Now mind you, I'm in jeans and a bowl jacket and just regular. I go in there to ask for soup and the guy's like, "Oh, I'm not going to serve you." Man, I'm sitting here and I'm like, "What do you mean you're not going to serve me?" Like I was taken aback. I was like, okay. And I get heated pretty quickly, not quickly, but if it doesn't make absolute sense to me, then I'm going to be a little agitated. And so, I'm just like, okay, but why are you not going to serve me soup? And I was like, oh, I could take this one or two ways, you know, like, and I hope, you know, I'm like, "What is your reason for not serving me soup?"

O'Brien: Wait, what's the other, I mean, why wouldn't you be offended? Like that's outrageous.

Lovell: Right?

O'Brien: Right.

Lovell: But I wanted to hear his rationale as to why he's not going to serve me.

O'Brien: "I'm out of onions."

Lovell: I was hoping that was why, but it wasn't. And so, like he's all like, "Well, we're told not to serve you," and you know, knowing that, I had already worked in the area I pretty much had a broad idea of what the fuck he meant. Excuse my French but like, you know, so I'm [inaudible] so you're not going to know and now I'm all activated and stuff now because, you know, I know people at this point. And so, I'm like, "So I'm going to take this one or two ways. You're not going to serve me because I'm black or you're not going to serve me because I'm trans. Which one is it? Pick one." So, he's like, "I'm not gonna, we don't serve your kind." "Okay, you don't serve my kind? What is my kind, sweetie, what is my kind?" And he's like, "You know, you girls, you come in here and, you know, you're pulling tricks in my bathroom." I was like, "Did I pull a trick in your bathroom? Did you see me come in here fool? I just asked you for some French onion soup. Do you see me with anybody else other than myself? Have you seen me personally come in here to pull a trick? So why the fuck can't you serve me soup?" "Oh, get outta here, you bitch!" "Okay, okay, I'll be back for your ass." So, I went and told people, at the Neutral Zone at GVMC. [Greenwich Village Youth Council] And I remember Jenny, she went and we, we call them out and held them accountable. We went to a whole legal proceeding and everything you know about litigating against them. Or to change your policies against, you know, allowing trans people. So, and then the policy, was to like to have trans people work in your store. I needed a job, but if that was your policy, you know, I don't want to work for you, you know? And, you know, I seen this little thing on him now, like I think he opened The Frying Pan, which I love. I love The Frying Pan. You know, everybody loved Florent but your policy was problematic as fuck. You know. And so, dealing with those things like, you know, just Chelsea in general, like, you know, looking down on us, because we were trans, you know, kids of color, you know what I mean? Like not wanting us in the bar, not to serve us but—another incident where Elizabeth—we were at Tiffany's. You see,

I don't know if the owner was gay or not or whatever, but I asked for a—we were transitioning and I had asked for an application and he started acting funny style and then him and Elizabeth got into this big old fight in the middle of Tiffany's about him being discriminatory. And I remember Wilson Cruz from My So-Called Life. Stopped the fight. Like I'm just gagging, they're fighting, I'm trying to like—and then he comes, he was sitting across and everything, he jumps over and he breaks up the fight and stuff and it was just crazy. I remember seeing Anderson Cooper running around in Chelsea area at that time too. I remember I—we went to see this movie with me and my homegirl Brandy and we went to the 19th street theater and Anderson Cooper was there with his then boo or something. And then, um, afterwards getting his autograph and he wrote on a piece of paper, "We have to stop meeting like this." Chelsea was cute, but like there was, there was not really like, unless we know it was becoming like the, the new gayber hood and stuff and everybody there that has money or whatever the case may be. But we never really felt like we fit in and to that like, you know, we had 14th street, we had the Meatpacking District, that was our area and stuff. And people knew that at the time. Like you know back then, you know you would just see hundreds of girls out there. That is where all you would see all the transsexuals back then was on 14th street. Between 14th Street and Christopher Street going on down. That was just, and you know, and then as the years you would see that it begin to dwindle. You would only see a handful of girls and it would be here there or somewhere else. But like when I was coming up, you know, like the first time I saw the Stroll was the winter of '97. The first time like, and then when I started with, what's his name, I never went to that part of 14th Street. I would walk down James Street, but there weren't really that many girls for some reason. Or I was just so in front of the hotel that I never paid attention to it until I was actually like, you know, in it, in it, you know. But like, oh god, the Meatpacking District, when I think about it now, it's just, I remember that episode was being filmed with Samantha throwing the water on the girls and how I used to think about, I want, you know, I didn't want to be the girl, to get the water thrown on her, but I wanted to be in the episode, you know what I mean? And I sat there and I watched them film, that whole thing.

O'Brien: What was this?

Lovell: Sex and the City. I remember, uh, Rosie Perez and the girls were getting at her one night. She had parked her car and she was on Horatio Street. And um, she comes out or whatever and as she's walking and the girls start saying something about her and they were talking smack about her. And I was like, "Don't be, talking about Rosie like that. You know what I'm saying? [meows] And that's Rosie Perez," and I started dancing and we were kind of like dancing and stuff and you know the girls are like, "Whatever girl." But you know when the area started to gentrify, it turned into a little celebrity thing, became a little hot spot and stuff. And you'd see them all running around drunk or stuff through the cobblestones and of course there were no room for us. They were pushing us out of our area and a lot of us were ending up in jail and then you seen the effects of that. You really seen the effects of all of that. And I'm sitting here and I'm replaying it in my mind like with Bawdy Audie Josie for example, she was healthy, beautiful. Then when, you know, the onslaught war against us, you know, was—I ended up seeing her in a box at a corner. A lot of girls had built up this, this box castle, and they were living out of that. Trying to make ends meet because the money was just not there no more. And every body's struggling for the

same damn John. Some girls didn't make it through because they couldn't, you know, make ends meet or had to do other things or were killed. It was really terrible. And I think like, you know, from the time when I had first started to the time, of like the, the end of mine at the Stroll, there was a big difference of how it related to us too. Like I tell you when we started, we were happy were making coins and stuff. Now I'm strung out on drugs. I looked crazy, you know, barely eating and surviving, you know? And it's funny how the tables can turn just like that. Just like that. And it was like, I just can't like live—I remember Pantyhose. I wonder what happened to her. Pantyhose is an old queen. She's from, she from the back in the day, back in the days and at that time she had already been like 50 something years old. So, I know she was from the old days, you know, and just when, and standing out there talking to Pantyhose and stuff and you know, that was the one of the things is getting the insight or getting the that the news, the street news from the girls. Like, what's going on here tonight? Is Mag out, you know? Or like what they saw downtown or something, you know, and relay the message and you got sort of like a word of mouth, news source, you know? And I'm looking at Pantyhose and I'm just sitting there thinking like girl you're like 50 something years old. And you've been doing this a very long time. And it just wasn't in me, I'm like, and this is our life. Like I didn't want this, I didn't—this is not, this is not going to make me happy. And this is where they put us. You know what I mean? It's not like, you know, we want to live this lifestyle like this. It's where they put us because they don't give us any other options or choices to be who we are or to grow. And at the time I was god, at that time, I'd already been 28 years old and I was like, you know what, I can't do this anymore. I don't want to be out here like Pantyhose at this age, you know?

O'Brien: So, tell me about your life these days.

Lovell: It's still a struggle. It's still a struggle. It has been officially what, two and a half years since I left Sylvia's Place. Um, I lost my job. I was working for Iris House last year, but um, contract struggles and my dream getting in the way to be honest. I have—did the film already, I was starting to book a little bit more gigs and stuff and maybe getting a little excitable and considering my passions and my dreams and, you know, so I kind of been trying to take on those things. Just some [inaudible], could be better. Studying a part time job or something. [laughter]

O'Brien: I hear acting is hard to make a living.

Lovell: Yeah. Yeah.

O'Brien: Any particular gigs that you've done that you want to share about?

Lovell: Which one can I talk about? Let's see, um, well there's the Garden Left Behind and I touched on that already. I have a small role as an activist but I'm also the co producer. I did this one thing called Sets. It was a pilot episode for a YouTube series with Peter Green. That was cute. Um, and he's like, he plays the villain in like everything when I was growing up and like The Mask and like a few other movies. Hm. I'm trying to think of what I can talk about right now. Um... I can't talk about them right now. [laughter]

O'Brien: And what's your living situation these days?

Lovell: My living situation these days is I live at a collective house. With uh, Keto who I mentioned earlier and Elizabeth who I mentioned earlier and um, a few other folks. I think it's a bit challenging for me. In terms of, um, somewhat being somewhat codependent. I was living—here's one thing I did skip over. I was living in the Bronx with my dog and my boyfriend. And that we were there for five going on six years. Um, and this is during the time I was working at Sylvia's Place. So, I had learned to be very independent, you know, so being in a collective house for me is a little bit jarring because I don't have as much privacy and things or things that I would like. Plus, I'm not in the financial situation to complain and these people took me in, you know what I mean? However, I do dream of living alone with my dog again, you know? Like the Bronx was a tragedy for me. I'm not going to get into too many details, but it was a bad breakup. Um, my dog ended up missing and I had to get out of the Bronx, you know. And so over the past year of like trying to forge a career, pick up the pieces of all of that, you know, because when you live with somebody for a long period of time, you're accustomed to certain things, especially when you're in a relationship with someone. And this year has been a whole process of healing. But in that process, you know, like of healing and learning myself and learning to live with myself and stuff, you know, other things happen, you know? And then you have to deal and process that, you know? I think as I'm moving forward though, I think like, you know, yes, I'm where I'm at and I'm somewhat stable but not comfortable. I am working towards being comfortable and being able to, I like being independent. I want to continue to be independent. Um, and so I'm trying to figure out ways now to regain my sovereignty. [laughter]

O'Brien: Was there anything else that you wanted to share about that, you haven't had a chance to talk about?

Lovell: No, I'm hungry. My stomach is growling. [laughter]

O'Brien: Let's wrap up then. On a—maybe we could close out with, where do you hope your life will go in the next couple of years?

Lovell: In the next couple of years, I just want to be comfortable. I just want to do the things that I want to do. And I'm starting to sound like a, like a record because, you know, I said this 10, 12 years ago now on Chris streets about how, you know, I want to do the things that I want to do and I've been doing them, still not satisfied yet. I think I just want to get to a place where I can eventually find bliss. That everything isn't a crisis situation where everything isn't, you know, I just want to be centered and not always be on alert. I want to have the ability to rest and relax without feeling bad about doing so. You know, I want to, I want to live life to the fullest, you know? And not have things weigh on me and impede on that happiness.

O'Brien: That's what everyone deserves.

Lovell: Yep.



O'Brien: Thank you, Kristen.

Lovell: Thank you.

O'Brien: This has been very moving. Really appreciated it very much.

Lovell: Thank you.