NEW YORK CITY TRANS ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

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INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

KIARA ST. JAMES

Interviewer: Michelle Esther O'Brien

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Transcribed by Matthew Dicken (volunteer)

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**Michelle O'Brien:** Hello, my name is Michelle O'Brien and I will be having a conversation with Kiara St. James 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 March 6th, 2017, and this is being recorded at the Housing Works office in downtown Brooklyn. Hello.

**Kiara St. James:** Hey, how you doing?

**O'Brien:** Excellent.

**St. James:** Good, good.

**O'Brien:** Tell me about your growing up. Where are you from and what was your childhood like?

**St. James:** Hmm, where to begin? So I grew up in Beaumont, Texas. My childhood was a very complicated childhood simply because there was a lot of gender policing at a very young age, and I also grew up in a COGIC background. COGIC, for folks who don't know me, is an acronym for Church of God In Christ so I grew up in a very fundamentally Christian, condemning background and it was very condemning, you know to where I did not—even as a child—I felt like I, something was wrong with me.

**O'Brien:** So Church of God In Christ, is that an evangelical church?

**St. James:** Evangelical, yes, absolutely and they are primarily southern, but there is quite a few up north, but yeah.

**O'Brien:** And what was your family like?

**St. James:** My family was not really affirming of me, you know, so it's by trial and error, you know, I am a product of, as I said before, a lot of gender policing, a lot of, "don't cross your legs, boy's don't cross their legs," you know the way I spoke, the games I play, I was made—you know—I always wanted to play with the girls and boys don't play with girls. I used to fight with my female neighborhood kids, as well as my sisters and female cousins about who will play Wonder Woman, and I always wanted to be Wonder Woman as a child so I would be the one—and then like I remember one time I was, they let me be Wonder Woman and my father saw me, and he was so like angry to where he like smacked me in front of other neighborhood kids. Yeah, and so I had a very traumatic childhood, and it's funny I speak a lot about—we speak a lot about trauma, and a lot of times, you know, if you grew up in communities where there is abuse, in like a lot of African-American families you know we talk about, and Richard Pryor kind of made a joke of it, about being made to go get a switch and to get a beating with that switch. And we can laugh about it now, right, but at the same time because it was so common in our neighborhoods, we saw it as being normal, and it wasn't until many, many, many years later that I realized like, that that was trauma, that was abuse. But at the time if you grew up in neighborhoods where everybody's family does that to them you think, “oh, this is just normal,
this is what they do, this is what our community—this is part of our culture,” you know? And so yeah, I grew up seeing a lot of, normalizing a lot of behaviors that were not necessarily, would not be condoned today.

**O’Brien:** What kind of work did your parents do?

**St. James:** So my father did a lot of construction work and a lot of landscaping work, things of that nature. My mother was—is a registered nurse, so I grew up in like a very stable middle income community you know we had a house, we had a front and back yard, we had a swing set, you know we had like one of those blow up swimming pools. So you know, it was, you know, from the outside, it looked like the vision that a lot of folks have for their families.

**O’Brien:** Are there other particular things around your childhood that you would like to share?

**St. James:** I’m sorry, say that again?

**O’Brien:** Are there other things around your childhood that you would like to share?

**St. James:** Mmmmm, no I’m good, [laughter].

**O’Brien:** Okay, so how did you get out of Beaumont?

**St. James:** Well, I got out of Beaumont due to, as I said, you know beatings and switches and all that, that was a normal. But what happened also is, my family being COGIC, my family being very anti-LGBT, saw behaviors in me that was—they did not want. So I always tell people, like, I’ve always had an affinity to Janet Jackson's character in Good Times—Penny—because like I always up my sleeve—cause right here is an arm burn, you know, that my mother inflicted upon me. Also, a grease burn here, have some other scars, all over my body and the purpose of those was to kind of like, was to get those demon spirits out of me as they said, and so I also recall going to church and having everybody in the church pray over me and pray to get the, what they call homosexual spirit out of me.

**O’Brien:** What did you think about that at the time, did you agree with them, or did you have some space from that in your own heart?

**St. James:** I started to internalize a lot of self-hatred, a lot of, “I didn't want to be,” you know, and back then we didn't have a term called trans. Trans is really new, you know, so when I was growing up there was no trans identity but all I knew from my family, and the church community, and even in the school system, was anything that was LGBT was wrong and you did not want to be that.

**O’Brien:** When, how did you leave there?

**St. James:** So I left there, as I was saying, so I had a teacher who saw that I was coming to school every other day, every other week, with some type of bruise on my body so they put me in
foster care. So through foster care I was able to be removed from my biological family and get to leave the country. I actually grew up in Heidelberg, Germany you know and so from the ages of 11 'till I graduated from high school I went to school in Heidelberg, Germany.

O'Brien: Were they an army family, or why were they in Germany?

St. James: They were not an army family but they were civilians. They worked for DoD, Department of Defense, and so I was one of several foster kids that they took in.

O'Brien: Tell me about your foster family.

St James: My foster family were—are very—were very different than my biological family in that they allowed me to kind of find my way. You know one thing I find funny, also my foster parents are of Jewish background and so they kind of was like, didn't want me to be disconnected from my African-American experience, so one way they got—felt I could stay connected was making sure I went to church on Sundays. And so, and when I was younger it was fun because I love listening to gospel music so that was my favorite part of church, just listening to the gospel choir and I always knew when it was going to perform, but other than that I tended to not like being in church. And a lot of churches, unfortunately, it has changed but it hasn't changed as much, there was a lot of focus on people's sexuality, you know, and so I always find churches, especially a lot of African-American churches, problematic because there's a lot of focus on homosexual spirit. You know, but other than that, other than like listening to the Gospel Choir, I did not enjoy church other than just you know, for those ten minutes of singing. My foster parents also had—my family, my foster family is very multicultural so I had a lot of foster brothers and sisters who were from different ethnicity—ethnic backgrounds and I was—there was another child who was of African-American background but they were much older than me at the time and there was no connection.

O'Brien: How old were you when you moved to Germany?

St. James: I was eleven years old.

O'Brien: And how much time did you spend there?

St. James: I spent from 11 'till I was 17 years old.

O'Brien: Did you have any positive experiences around trying to relate to your gender or sexuality when you were there?

St. James: Not really, that came much later. I had experiences like being in school and I just remember having a health-ed teacher who was always harping on romance, and one thing I remember that stood out was that she made sure to let us know, romance can only be between a man and woman, and that you could not—there could never be—there was no such thing as romance between a man and a man, or a woman and a woman. It has to be male-female only. And I remember like even then, I'm like, and I don't know why I was emboldened because
nobody else really asked a question, I'm like, "well why not?" and she just really, "cause it just can't be, it's impossible." You know, and I just kind of let it go and that kind of stuck with me too, like you know, "okay, so romance can only be between a male and a female."

**O'Brien:** It sounds like you were very isolated.

**St. James:** Yeah, it was a lot of isolation, and then also because I grew up in Germany and I grew up in a predominantly white environment. There were some stereotypes in play, you know, of what it was to be Black, and what folks perceived to be male, and I didn't fit those stereotypes so it was very awkward for me as well.

**O'Brien:** And where did you go next?

**St. James:** So, when I graduated from high school—I had early graduation because I was just wanting to get away from, because you know hindsight is 20-20, as they say. Now I'm appreciative of like, wow, I had that experience. If I knew then what I know now I would have stayed over there and made it work, you know, but as a 17-year-old I didn't—and there was no internet back then—so as a 17-year-old I always felt like I was missing out on so much in the States. So, I basically went back to, and try to make a reconnection with my family. It did not go so well, you know, they welcomed me but at the same time I didn't feel connection. So what I did after I graduated from high school is I joined up to—well the first thing I did was I went to this business school, bad decision. Somebody told me you should've went straight to college. It would've saved you student loans and all that good stuff, you know. I would have done that but I didn't really have anyone in my life to direct me. So I completed, I got a license as a security guard—armed security guard—I always gotta stress that 'armed security guards', that hierarchy, you know. So from there I realized, like, I didn't really want to be a security guard so I found out about the job training program at Gary Job Corps located in San Marcos, Texas, so I spent a good sixteen months learning how to be a nurse assistant you know and it was also where I first started seeing gender nonconforming folks of color and people really very foreign to me as far as like what I was used to.

**O'Brien:** Alright, give me a picture of what you were like, how did you spend your free times in these years?

**St. James:** My free time was really a lot of fantasizing about guys that I know I can never—I would never be in relationships with. And I spent a lot of time in the library reading, you know I've always been a lover of history so my, even to this day I get off on like going, like, to the book store, like The Strand bookstore in, near Union Square. If I see a bunch of books on the corner because you know every now and then people discard books, it's like, "ooh books," you know, so books was my great escape, you know it made me visualize other possibilities and just like escapism, so I escaped through books and that is how I spent a lot of my first couple years back in the States, just reading.

**O'Brien:** Do you remember any of the books that you enjoyed?
St. James: So I read a lot—I love history books, so mainly a lot of history books, a lot of books on like the Byzantine empire and Abyssinian, the Abyssinian empire which, you know, is where I discovered, like Christianity was, the genesis of it was in Ethiopia—what we call Ethiopia. I did—I had a love of geography. So back then I knew by a shape of a country on a map what country it was you know and yes, so I spent a lot of time like reading geography, studying geography, a lot of National Geographics, a lot of just books that a lot of folks today would find boring but I found very interesting. And I also did a lot of researching the Bible and being able to, because I discovered things that they didn't teach us in school or in Sunday school, like there was like the Council of Nicaea that I learned about.

O'Brien: What is that?

St. James: The Council of Nicaea is where the early Christian bishops, they all gather in Nicaea which was located in North Africa and they decided what was going to be in the book, in the Bible, and what they was going to keep out of the Bible. I also discovered the hidden life of Jesus and like he was married, allegedly married to Mary Magdalene. I learnt about a lot of the miracles that he performed that they didn't put in the Bible, like for instance he had a childhood friend and they was playing on a roof one day and his childhood friend fell off the roof and died. And so everybody was like, when they witnessed it, they ran to the child and when Jesus came down, he touched the child and the child came back to life, you know and I'm like, mm yeah I don't read about that in the Bible. You know and just things like, he saw a clay, like, a statue of a pigeon or of a bird, he touched it and the bird came to life and things of that nature, so like things like, yeah, that a lot of folks may not know that they kept out.

O'Brien: What was the meaning for you in studying these stories that got left out of the Bible, like, why did they resonate with you or why were you interested in them?

St. James: Cause I, as I said earlier like I grew up in a Church of God In Christ background so there was interest, and there was still like a connection to my family through the church, and also in the south the, you know, that's a big, you know, being attached to a church, a church community was very big and I had interest in that. You know, and there was a part of me that thought like I could be delivered from the feelings I was feeling, so part of that was kind of trying to find a way of how I could redeem myself.

O'Brien: So looking for a way of relating to the religion, but these left out stories, like there might be more to it than what you were told?

St. James: Absolutely, absolutely, you know and then I came across more LGBT-affirming scriptures that made me look at things differently, and like even to this day I'm not a religious person, I'm very spiritual. There is a difference between being spiritual and religious. You know, I always tell folks like, religion, you have to remove any type of critical analysis and just believe without questioning why you believe. As a spiritual person I can question why I believe or why people believe what they believe.

O'Brien: Where did you come across LGBT-affirming scripture?
St. James: There was, surprisingly enough, there were libraries that had queer, like, queer-specific books and from time to time there would have stuff about queer—and about—like—people who are gay in a Bible. Like for instance I was fixated with the alleged romance between David and Jonathan in the Old Testament, you know, or like how John—what did John mean when he said that he was the beloved of Jesus and the alleged, you know, connotations behind all of that. So there's part of me that was fixated on like finding, like queerness in the Bible as well and it really helped to affirm me.

O'Brien: And have you met queer people at this time?

St. James: I started to meet queer people, but at the same time they were very scary to me and a lot of times—and I get it now—but like they were very aggressive and very like offensive, and you know like I remember seeing some drag queens and they were—this is when I moved to Atlanta after I graduated from Job Corps—and I remember being on the MARTA, the train in Atlanta, and I saw these, these drag queens and I just started like, you know I was young, you know started like, "those are, those are guys," you know because I didn't really understand and I didn't have that connection yet to the—you know to trans and gender nonconforming community, and so there was still a lot of immaturity in me at that time.

O'Brien: What brought you to Atlanta?

St. James: I went to Atlanta to get away from folks who knew me in Beaumont, Texas, and Atlanta was always a place that I heard people talk about of like the Mecca for African-Americans and I wanted to go and explore it. I was also with my partner at the time and so that was where we moved to.

O'Brien: Can you tell me about your partner?

St. James: My partner was also from the South. He's from Louisiana, he was from Louisiana. His name was Kevin, and so we had a nice relationship, like as far—at least back then I thought we did, like hindsight now was there was a lot of problems, you know, at the same time because I grew up not knowing a lot of LGBT folks I always said when I met someone who was in the life that was gonna be my partner and that's all I needed, was that would be him.

O'Brien: How did you two meet?

St. James: We actually met at Job Corps, yeah, we met at Job Corps.

O'Brien: So you were students together?

St. James: Yeah.

O'Brien: At school. And what was Atlanta like, what was your life like there?
**St. James:** Atlanta was very different than Beaumont, Texas or even the bigger cities like Houston, Texas and Dallas that I spent time in simply because I saw the visibility of, like, the affluent African-American class, I saw a lot of LGB folks in positions of authority and being unapologetic, you know, and so that made me a lot more feel like I was part of a community, you know. And the biggest club at that time for the African-American SGL community was a club called Loretta's, and so going there I just saw all these, like, men, women, and trans, and drag queens of color, and I'm like wow this is—just blew my mind.

**O’Brien:** Do you remember a good night at Loretta's?

**St. James:** There's quite a few good nights, I always loved the drag shows, Monday Night Madness, Tuesday was talent night, I forgot what I was Wednesday was, but they always had a day of the week for folks who loved, like, drag shows and things of that nature. Then they had a great MC. He was African-American, he's since passed away, named Emanuel, and Emanuel is African-American, but he did a lot of Bette Davis, [laughter], type of performances.

**O’Brien:** And what years were you in Atlanta?

**St. James:** I was in Atlanta like '90--'91 through like '95, yeah, so.

**O’Brien:** And how—did you live with Kevin most of that time or part of it?

**St. James:** Yeah, we lived together. It was very easy for us to find jobs, you know the cost of living was cheap, you know we had a car, so yeah it was.

**O’Brien:** What kind of jobs did you two do?

**St. James:** So just, I had a job as a nurse because I graduated, I was a nurse, and then I also had another job at which I learned even more so I quit being a nurse just to be a server at the Olive Garden because I discovered, like, I could leave each night with at least $100 in tips. Plus I was salaried, and we broke—because Kevin worked there at the time same time as well, and even though we were servers, you know because these people they wanted the more—how do I explain it—like the positions of hostess or host because, you know that, it's more like you could dress a certain way and you greet people, you take them to the table, you know you sit them down, but they didn't realize those people who were hired in those positions, that their hourly wages was only like $2.50 an hour, as opposed to a server who got paid like $5.50 an hour plus, you know, tips, so a lot of people who went in as hostess and as host they wanted to change to be a server because they realized they could make more money as a server, so just because a position looks cute doesn't mean you get paid more money in that position.

**O’Brien:** Right, right. Words of wisdom.

**St. James:** Yes.
O'Brien: And did you feel a part of a community through Loretta's or through other LGBT people?

St. James: I did, I felt connection, you know but at the same time we were still in the South and my partner, more so than me, dealt with a lot of issues with his family so just to make that distance between our families and us he made the decision that we was coming to New York and I never really wanted to come to New York, you know, but at the same time I want to be with him so I mean, you know, so I went along with him.

O'Brien: His family was in Atlanta?

St. James: No, his family was in Louisiana, yeah, so we didn't really have any family in Atlanta.

O'Brien: But he wanted to get farther away?

St. James: Yeah because he knew—there was people—cause one thing about the South is, like, people do travel, so people who know you from your hometown in Texas, they travel to Atlanta and back and forth and so from time to time there would be cousins or people who he knew who would see him and that kind of triggered him.

O'Brien: When did you move to New York? What was that like?

St. James: When I moved to New York, that was '95, late '95. It was exciting, it was scary, and just, I didn't really know what to expect.

O'Brien: Where did you two live?

St. James: So we stayed—at that time there was a hotel called Hotel Carter, I think it's still there, but it's much different than when we first stayed there because, and I believe it was like $40 a night or something like that, now you couldn't get out we wouldn't be able to stay there. And it was a hotel—I didn't know this until like six months later—later that it was a hotel that was a known prostitute spot, so a lot of the girls, as well as the male johns, took their dates there and all that. But they also had floors where you could stay. They had weekly rates, so you could stay there for like weeks at a time and I actually had a nice relationship with—whatcha call it—the concierge at the downstairs and all that. He wasn't really a concierge because—the person at the front desk, and, but he was very helpful and he let us stay there far longer than we could have stayed if we did not get on—if we were not on good terms with him.

O'Brien: Did you two find an apartment?

St. James: That took a minute to find an apartment, yeah.

O'Brien: So you were in hotels for a while.
**St. James:** Yeah, hotels, or sometimes we stayed with folks, you know, but primarily in hotels and you know we tended to not like being in other people's spaces, and one thing about unfortunately, it hasn't really changed that much, but sometimes when you're in relationships there's people who try to do things to separate you from those relationships, you know.

**O'Brien:** So people that you would stay with would mess with you two?

**St. James:** Yeah, yeah, try to break us up, things of that nature.

**O'Brien:** How were you paying for the hotels?

**St. James:** So primarily doing like odd jobs. He was primarily good at getting like jobs and all that, so I was kind of like dependent on him more so, you know, but I did have jobs such as where you work for a day or two like selling newspapers and things of that nature so I sold a lot of New York Post, Daily News, by World Trade Center, so at the end of the day I could keep my tips, different things like that, so that's how I made a living, you know.

**O'Brien:** When did you first start connecting to being trans or being a woman in a, in a conscious way, in a way that you could really like start talking about?

**St. James:** I mean, I've, as I said earlier I've always connected to being, to female energy. But like for the longest time, because I was trying to prove to my father, to male relatives, that I could be masculine and I did a lot of things to like contain that part of me, and I think coming to New York really helped me to get back in touch with who I always felt myself to be, you know, and I met a lot of folks, a lot of trans women, or what we called back then 'femme queens,' and I always tell people even to this day I love the term femme queen. Femme queens were folks we would call trans today, but the femme queens were the icons and they were the goddesses of New York City back then, and when I first came to New York City, it was at the height of the HIV/AIDS epidemic so the city had like a gray tone to it where you could tell there was disease that was taking people out. And I remember still like seeing femme queens primarily just looking like goddesses, you know, like done to the, to the, you know, just done up and like just looking like a, movie stars and glamour queens, and that really helped inspire me, you know. And I remember just following girls around like, you know, and like—one of them is a famous girl. She's since passed away, but I remember being so fixated with her and like just, you know wanting to know like, how is that possible, how? Because I didn't know anything about hormones and things of that nature and I remember just being mesmerized by her, and it happened to be on a night when she was drunk and she threw a bottle at me, and it hit my, yeah, so I got nicked on my ankle by her, and her calling me a nasty faggot [laughter]. And so years later I'm like, "I don't know if you remember this, but you used to hang out in front of Sally's [Hideaway], I used to hang out in front of Sally's and I used to see you and be so mesmerized by you, and you was drunk, and so I'm not going to hold it against you, but you threw a bottle and you called me a nasty faggot," and I remember like we had a good laugh, you know because she turned out to be a real good friend. Her name is Portia, she's since passed away, you know, and but she was like, if you look her up, Portia LaBeija—gorgeous African-American trans woman, and she was like everything.
O'Brien: I have so many questions here. So first, femme queen, tell me about femme queens and the history of the identity and how that, yeah?

St. James: The history of femme queen goes back a long ways and I know some girls in the community today, they get upset and they find they don't like the term femme queen, but as I said, that's all I ever, like when people say, did you ever aspire to be female, I'm like, no, I aspire to be a femme queen. You know, that was everything to be a femme queen. A femme queen was higher up than a drag queen because a drag queen was really just a man who did—who got who dressed up in drag, but at the end of the day they went home where they live their everyday life as a boy and to me that was boring. You know but a femme queen, a femme queen had a style to them. They exuded, like, grace, and they commanded attention, you know I remember like just being, like going either like, it can be in a restaurant, it could be in a welfare center, when femme queens came through—everybody stopped what they were doing just to be in awe of them, you know, and I'm like, it just made me so excited. You know, and I remember having a girlfriend at the time who hated femme queens, she's like, "why you so fixated with him, why you like them so much?" And you know I'm like, "it's just so beautiful," you know, and so it took a long time for her to—my girlfriend at the time—to understand and the ironic thing is, is that my girlfriend back then is also of trans experience today. So it's kind of funny how, there's irony in that, you know, like people who felt disgust at trans or femme queens and then you see them today, and they're the very thing that they say that they find disgusting, you know.

O'Brien: Tell me about some particular femme queens from that era that inspired you.

St. James: Wow. So there was, that then, it's—

O'Brien: It's our history.

St James: No absolutely, and I'm going to say this: hormones back then were real hormones, you know, we called it the Purple Candy. You pop the Purple Candy and within a week you knew somebody was transitioning because that's how potent the estrogen was back then, and so, like, there was the beautiful Amanda Milan, you know she was a girl who hung out on 42nd Street—and we all did at that time—you know because one thing we did as a as a hobby was we would—if you go to Times Square now in that area, things are very different, it's very gentrified and you know "classy," some what, and I'm doing quotations. But there was a—I'm trying to think of the name of it—it wasn't Sally's, it was like a showgirl club and it's right across the street from Port Authority, but in that area there were always these big billboards and they always featured another amazing femme queen of that time, Danielle Revlon, she's always featured on their billboard in this beautiful red fish net, and so every day I just got my life just looking at her on a billboard, and I just remember one day when I finally got to meet her, I was like scared of her because she had this energy, like, if you look at her like she's gonna [laughter]—you know, that like you didn't want to look at her because you didn't want her to come for you, as they say, and it wasn't until many—like a year or two to passed—to where she really accepted me as part of the community and it was kind of funny because I remember I was
hanging out with Amanda Milan, Krystal—I forget Krystal's last name—there was a group of us: Amanda, Krystal, quite a few girls, Brandi, so like a crew because there was a place where we all converged—outside, it wasn't inside, it was outside, and we just found any car that was parked in front of the club, we claimed it, and we would lean on, we would sit on it, we would like, that was where we did our business, and so when we saw cute guys, “hey”—you know we sittin' on somebody else's car, we're like calling them to come over and you know, and so it was a time that was really scary but exciting at the same time. And I remember like saying, having a conversation about this one guy, how he saw the girls, and I remember Danielle Revlon gave me this funny look and then she asked me if I was a femme queen and I'm like, “what else would I be?” And then she—and anybody who know Danielle Revlon know that she could be very dramatic, and so she did very like Color Purple, like Oprah, just, "all this time I never knew" [laughter]. And then she had her hair like this you know like just going up and down like, "I thought you were one of those fag hags," she thought I was a fag hag, and so I'm like, really? You know which really was a compliment in a way, but at the same time like how did you not know that I'm what—can't you tell by my voice, hello—you know but since then I know a lot of cis women have graspy sexy voices like mine. But yeah, but I remember like just kind of like feeling honored, and she's like, "and you can tell people Danielle Revlon never knew," you know and I'm like wow. And then also during that time, that was a time of Octavia St. Laurent, and Octavia was like one of the icons in the community. I got to know. She had days when she was a sweetheart, and she had days when not so much, you know, and I remember like hanging out with her. I remember like just being in awe. You know I remember how the guys, the guys from the different sex shops, when they would see her they would rush out to ask for her autograph. This is in the mid-90's and all that, and there was no glory—you know so they really revered, you know the fact that she—you know the femme queens, and I think also because they were South Asian, and in South Asian culture there is a place for third gender, so they were like in awe of the fact of like femme queens and things of that nature. So I always like remember that as well, like just how every time the guys, the South Asian guys, saw her they would like rush out to get her autograph and things like give her a hug, you know so I was like always fixated with that.

O'Brien: Tell me about some of the bars, or clubs, or other spaces where you all were.

St. James: So when I—during the time that I came to New York all the popular, like gay bars, LGBT bars were closing up. The only one that was still pretty much relevant was Two Potato, so Two Potato was where we conversed in the Village. They had drag shows, people hung out in front of the bar—anybody that is familiar with New York City and Two Potato knows it's this really like, small, like hole in the wall, you know, but at the same time, like looking back I can see it as that but like when I first came to New York I saw it as like a big space, you know and like it was always packed, and there was always like new faces, like every other day, you know that you got to meet in a bar. And, but the main place that I hung out was on the pier. You know in the summertime primarily. The pier looks nothing like it does now, you know it was very rundown. All the activities, everything that you wanted you could find out on the pier. That was a time when there was no internet, so guys who loved the girls they did not have the convenience of like being on the internet and putting—you know, they had to come and find us, they had to come to where we were at, and because a lot of us were on the pier we got—
you know there was a lot of trans amorous men, you know who flocked down to the pier. You know so I remember that time as well, just every day, every other day, there was always new people. I always tell people, and my contemporaries who remember that time can also vouch, that you always had fun, there was always a new face like, you know, because there was not the convenience of having the internet, so when people was looking for the girls they had to physically come where the girls were at, you know, as opposed to today where they have options of where they can stay at home and go on Craigslist, Backpage, when they were still up, you know and really choose that way today, but back then it was like, it was better because you—you know somebody can post a picture online and with a six pack and when you see them you're like, "ahh you do not look like the picture." You know and they're like, "yeah, that's an old picture." And you're like, "yeah, like 20 years old?" [laughter]. You know but what I like about back then is you got to have authentic conversations, relationships with people as opposed to them sending you a Photoshopped picture of them.

O'Brien: And were some of these relationships financial and some not financial, how did that?

St. James: A lot of those relationships form like—when I finally, when I came on my own, a lot of those relationships were financial you know. Unfortunately, within the trans community there was a lot—there was an initiation that we went through and a lot of the older girls put us through of like, if you're really real, let's see if you can pull this thing, let's see if you can pull this guy, and so that's how a lot of us got initiated into sex work, you know and also that was a time when we didn't have any protection so there was no local laws to protect us, so the only thing we could do as far as economically making a living for ourselves was, you know, sex work.

O'Brien: Were there things that women did, the femme queens did, to stay safe or take care of each other, or to like watch out for each other?

St. James: Yeah we did things such as like take down the driver's license—I mean the license plates—of the dates and let them know that we're taking down their license plates: “Girl well wait a minute, let me see what he you look like, okay, okay good ya'll can go, go!” You know so we let the guys know that we're watching them, so you better bring her back, she better be back here in an hour, if not—you know, and so there were communities like that, and I'm not going to romanticize, cause I feel that a lot of times older trans women tend to romanticize and say, "back in the day we looked out for one another," and yes, that did happen, but there was still the infighting, you know. I remember also when starting—which I transitioned, having girls who saw me as competition, who would, you know, would get me jumped, you know, try to disfigure me. So, same things that happened back then, it still happens today, and I find it problematic when older girls tell younger girls, like, “oh, we were a much more cohesive community that look out for one another,” because, no, there was a lot of trauma, a lot of pain, and when you're traumatized and you grew up in pain, you don't necessarily have the wherewithal to think about being compassionate and looking out for your girlfriends. If you were fortunate enough to have girls who had kind hearts, then you were truly blessed to have that connection.
O'Brien: And was your community almost all Black or was there a mix of like Latina or Latino?

St. James: There was a mixture of Black, Latino, white. Race always played a part, you know, cause even a lot of my Black girlfriends who were light-skinned played into, like if people—so like down south I grew up—I come from a multiracial family right, so down south I grew up with light-skinned Black, dark-skinned Blacks, pecan brown, pecan brown, you know, so like coming to New York I saw like there was a lot of colorism you know within a Black community, within a Latin community, so what I saw is like a lot of light-skinned African-American femme queens would play up on either being mixed-race or pass them off as being Latina, you know and so there was a lot of like internalized racial self-hatred, you know where Black folks didn't want to say—or even just telling me—"you should play up the fact that you have this background cause you'll make more money," and so even I played into that, like you know there's a lot of times dates would asked me, "you look unique, what is your background?" and because people told me to play up a part of my ethnicity that is not African-American, I would do that, you know and it wasn't until I started really, like critical analysis, you'll hear me say that a lot. So, critical analysis came later on, of like, why do I have to say that I'm multiracial just to be seen as more attractive? You know, and so like even to this day when people ask me my background I just tell them, I'm Black. You know sometimes, you know when they annoy me enough I'll say, I'm Black mixed with a little bit of pickaninny and cool. You know, and people really get mad, and I'm like no because you're trying to say, "oh, that's why you look the way you do," and I'm like, if I tell you I'm Black—it's like, if I tell you I'm trans, I identify as female, respect that. And it's the same thing with race, you know because it goes hand in hand. I just remember going to different balls in the mid-90's and it was very problematic because they had categories "light-skinned versus dark and lovely," and I'm like, okay, why are we doing this, you know and just having conversation with people in the community who were really involved in the ballroom scene and they're not seeing it as a problem, you know so the 90's was really about just surviving, but also at the same time there was a lot of anti-Blackness that folks participated in—even Black folks—you know. And you know, to my Latina trans girlfriends, a lot of them we had the same complexion and same hair texture cause they were Afro-Latino, Latina, and coming from Puerto Rico and Dominican Republic, but when you—when I would tell them or say, "well you're Black like," "no I'm Indio, no I'm—" you know I'm like, “ummm go down south, they'll tell you what you are." You know and just really, just that's the main thing I really hated about New York in the 90's, it wasn't even trans or femme queen stuff. It was like race stuff where there was a lot of very blatant anti-Blackness going on and the more you played up being multiracial or mixed or something other than Black, the more people elevated you, you know, so love-hate of the 90's.

O'Brien: What were the balls like in those years, the ballroom scene?

St. James: The ballroom scene—very traumatic as far as I was concerned, you know, I've never really—I've participated more so as an observer. I did back in 1998 at The Clubhouse, Miss Brittany Dillanger, if you're listening, yes, I'm calling you out, she had me walk a category for the House of Ebony and it was called—and they have these categories—so the name of the category was "Butch Queen, Femme Queen Realness As A Couple." Can you walk through the
pink houses without getting spooked, you know? And so she paired me up with a butch queen, a butch queen is a MSM, a "gay" as you say, MSM, look it up cause I don't want to say "gay man." But they paired me up with this, this butch queen. It got down to me and this other couple, and I remember like the last judge, he asked me if I was a femme queen, and femme queen is trans. I'm like, “yes, I'm a femme queen, and he's like, "work, bitch," and then he gave it to the other couple.

And, so they won, so I'm like OK, so why ask me and tell me “work”—but I felt validated because people were booing. You know, they told me, “y'all should have got that.” So, it was a lot of politics in ballroom scene. There still is. I don't mind going to balls from time to time, but I'm not really a fan of the ballroom scene. I feel that they have an opportunity to do, to get involved in activism, to do a better job of promoting the issues in our community, and quite a few of them are getting involved, but for the most part the ballroom scene has a lot of problems still, you know, and unfortunately, as a community leader, I see a lot of ballroom people who are in positions, who are in positions where they're recognized as leaders incorporate a lot of that ballroom politics into community activism and that is a problem because it's not about—“it's because of me that we have this. I got an award from the from the mayor, da da da da da”—because at the end of the day our community is still struggling, so when you make it about you, you're not really helping the community that you are, that you say you're representing, you know. So the ballroom scene, has—how they say—pros and deltas, you know, and so there's a lot of work that has to happen and I must say that I was only fixated in a bar room as long as I knew like, Octavia, St. Laurent, Danielle Revlon was going to be there. My favorite category in a ballroom was any category that had to do with femme queen face, femme queen body, you know, and that was it, so as long as you told me around this time is when you, when these categories were going to be, you know, on display, I didn't really care about who was on the floor.

O'Brien: Where would balls be held?

St. James: So they held balls in the various locations, you know, like primarily club house, sometimes they would rent out spaces. And the spaces were not fancy at all. A lot of times they would be in gyms, you know, like, so they were just spaces where—a lot of escapism, where people they fix it up to make you forget you're actually in a gym or, you know, a moldy old building somewhere, you know, in a back alley.

O'Brien: And besides sex work, how did femme queens you knew make ends meet?

St. James: Well, there are many ways that femme queens did that. Like, one of the main ways was, they would say that they—there was a category in, um, in the psychiatric books called gender dysphoria, so a lot of girls they'd use that as a way, like a safety net, so that they didn't have to sell their bodies, so they went around as saying, “Oh, I'm gender dysphoric,” so therefore, they got a check from the government, you know. There was also this schism that happened where white trans women would say, “Oh, we're going to actively fight to get gender dysphoria taken off the books 'cause there's nothing wrong with us, and da da da.” And, I remember like, the Black and Latina girls, we're like, “Um, ‘scuse you?” You know, “Um, this is our safety net, and we don't have any problem saying that we are gender dysphoric if it's gonna
give us housing, if it's going to keep us off the streets, so check your privilege." You know, so it was like back and forth of, of those—

O'Brien: Was this like public assistance, or—I mean, in late 90s a lot was—

St. James: Um so, late 90s, it wasn’t public assistance, it was more social security.

O'Brien: Oh, okay.

St. James: So, you got a SSD check ‘cause it was considered like a disability, and so, it saved a lot of girls ‘cause a lot of girls were not made to be sex workers, you know. That's just not—they were not inclined to be sex workers, and so I can say that it saved a lot of girls, you know? And, a lot of girls when they were thrown into sex work, they didn't survive it, you know, and they were traumatized, beaten, and a lot of traumatic things happened to them, so I can say having gender dysphoria as a way for them to get housing, and not be in that world, it really saved a lot of them.

O'Brien: How did you get into activism?

St. James: So, activism for me happened by accident. I've always been an activist, but at the same time—‘cause like I said, COGIC, Church of God In Christ—I had this condemning, I felt condemned in my spirit. I wasn't meant to have good things in my life. Other folks could have good things in their life, not me. I remember, like, we have this term called ‘breaking sunset,’ where girls who are on the stroll, we stayed out until the sun, the sun's coming up, and I remember—this was on 13th Street—where is now like the Meat Market area, that is all posh. Gansevoort Hotel, the High Line, let me tell you, none of that existed back then. It was nasty, but it was fun. A lot of money was made back there, but... Leaving, I remember somebody, I remember hearing somebody called my name—and I happened to look, it was like a group of folks getting on a bus, and during that time, I found myself like, like homeless, and I was going towards [SHELTER NAME?] Shelter, and so I went over to see who called me. And they were like, “Girl, come on, you better get on this bus.” I'm like, “Um, where y'all going?” And they told me it was going to D.C. to fight for Ryan White funding, and I didn't know anything about Ryan White funding or anything like that. “Alright, um, how long is it from D.C. to here? To, um, New York to D.C.” And when they told me it was like four hours, give or take, the only thing that I was thinking about is, that’s four hours for me to get some sleep, and not be disturbed. And so, I got on the bus, 'cause there was room for me to get on the bus. Like halfway through New Jersey, someone tapped on my shoulder and woke—'cause I was asleep, ‘cause I was mad tired—woke me up, and they told me I needed to sign for a stipend. I'm like, “A stipend?” Like, “Yeah, you get a stipend for the day, and da da da.” At that time, the stipend was $25. I'm like, “Ooo, you get a stipend, okay.” You know? And so I signed, I went back to sleep, and then I was trying to think of, like, okay, when I get to D.C., where can I go to get some more sleep, and I remember like once I got to D.C., there were all these other organizations from around the nation there. And, I remember like I saw a lot of gender non-conforming people, a lot of trans people, people of color, people who just had this energy and this passion, and I’m like, wow, where I forgot about what I was going to do, to where I just got in a mix of like holding signs.
They asked people to volunteer to hold banners, and different—'I'm like, okay, you know, 'cause I was meeting all these amazing people. And so, it really inspired me, like, to like—oh, I want to do this more, this is, you know, it was fun listening to people talk about the rights of people living with HIV, for housing, and you know, there's a lot of, like, speakers and folks who did not treat me like I had like a third eye somewhere, you know like I had a—they treated me like a human being, you know, they didn't look at me like, “oh, what is this Black queer person who has like...” And I looked a mess. If you see pictures of me back then, thank god there was no internet, but—yeah, so I was a mess, but at the same time, people embraced me and let me know that I had worth, you know, so that really got me involved back in activism, and I just remember, like, coming back to the city, and I was still engaging in sex work, but at the same time, when I heard girls going through different things, I'm like, “oh no, where? Who did this? You know what, you need to go to Housing Works. You need to go to so and so. Oh, you don't have to put up with this shit.” You know, and I'm just letting them know, like, there are things they can do to. There's recourse for them, you know, and at the same time, I'm going through a lot of crazy, I was going through a lot of crap myself, but I felt like I'm into, the pastor told me that, yeah, there's nothing good comes from this life, so this is my lot. I'm supposed to be suffering and struggling, and so, I was always that girl. When we went to clubs or people's homes, or people wanted to go out for the night, they knew to leave their stuff with me, 'cause I was, I did not—I'm blessed that I didn't have an addictive personality, so they didn't have to worry about leaving their stuff with me and then it would be gone the next day. So, I spent a lot of time doing activism, and I call it the girl on the corner complex. So, I was always that girl on the corner who, you know, was soliciting the dates, you know, in broad daylight, 12 o'clock in the afternoon, me and Brandi, god bless her, you know, and the other girls, but at the same time, I'm telling girls where they can go and get services and clean needles and, “oh, they having a protest against the mayor,” you know, and da da da. And like, you know, so activism went hand-in-hand—and I tell people this all the time, that's why, like, one of our, our motto is: building bridges and dismantling stereotypes, you know, because, I always tell my folks, you can be that girl on the corner, but you also can be someone meeting with legislators. You can be someone, you know, helping to change policies, you know, and I feel that it's very important for girls to understand that, like, yeah, you can be a sex worker, and people like, “oh, you talking about the sex worker?” Yeah, but you can be a sex worker at night, but in the daytime, you're getting business done. And, I spent a lot of time in that realm to where, like, I was a peer educator for a long time, like at Harlem United. I worked at FROSTED, called From Our Streets on the Caravan, so, I always, like, even though I was struggling myself, I also was like giving back, and I was also able to get folks into referrals and get them connected to what they needed, you know?

O'Brien: What year did you get on that bus to D.C.?


O'Brien: And it was Housing Works?

St. James: Housing Works, it was a Housing Works bus, yes. 13th—that's when Housing Works had a 13th Street site, and the cobblestone streets, down it, yeah. I miss that site. But, yeah, it
was, I would say Housing Works helped to refine me and to, to an end—I’m going to say this, as well. During that time, there was a lot of people living with HIV—impacted by HIV—that worked at Housing Works, so it was a place where you saw case managers, that case manager was living with HIV. You know, it was a place that for a good—up until like 2002, Housing Works really did employ a lot of trans women, a lot of gender non-conforming people of color… ‘cause I believe like back around, up until like 2002, the academic world didn’t want to touch HIV and AIDS. So, you didn’t really see a lot of, so a lot of folks who were in these spaces were gay, white men, Black MSMs, Black trans women, Latina, you know, drug, active drug users, who were really—not only were they case managers and CEOs, and things of that nature, but they were living with the virus. Like, today’s very different. Like, there’s a lot of academic folks involved in, you know, a lot of these CBOs [community-based organizations], and I think, like, that helped me as well. It helped that a lot of the people at Housing Works at that time were also living with the virus, so I didn’t feel like it was like they were up here talking down to me. They were like, “you know what? I been HIV for such and such amount of time, da da da. You can do it, da da. We’re in this together.” And I remember that message of being in this together. There is a disconnect now. But, like, back then, there was really that sense of like, “okay, oh, she's HIV, okay,” you know? And people in that community would look at, and like, “I didn't know you was HIV.” “Oh, am I supposed to tell you? How does someone with HIV look?” You know, and so, it was like really fascinating back then to really be in spaces where people who look healthy on the outside were dealing with HIV. And so, I didn't feel like there was judgment being passed on me, you know.

O'Brien: And you mentioned that you were sleeping at the Wards Island shelter?

St. James: Yes.

O'Brien: How was, how—tell me some about living in the shelters.

St. James: Living in the shelter was an interesting experience. Wards Island—I also remember, that was another place where there was a lot of activism in place, because I had just, I was transitioning. I had already transitioned to where I looked feminine on the outside. Did not have my gender marker changed, or my name changed. For the most part, a lot of times people are always surprised when I tell them this, the guys loved the girls. And when I say they loved us, it wasn't like ‘cause they wanted to sleep with us, it was, like, also they looked out for us. [phone vibrating] I hear a phone, I think it’s my phone. But, there was a lot of guys looking out for us, and the girls, we always made any place we were—feminine energy is very strong. And so, the guys just loved being, like, around us, and ‘cause we always made spaces a lot more welcoming and safe, and so, from time to time, there would be folks who were transphobic coming in, but a lot of the transphobia came from the staff, and not from the clients themselves. So a lot of the problems that me and a lot of other girls, and gender non-conforming folks faced were from the staff. Primarily cis female women of color, yeah. And I remember, one time, like, it was lunch time—no, it was dinner time, and I remember, like, the guys, like, “ladies, come on, ladies, y'all can come up here.” It would be like three or four of us. And we was like, “Oh, okay.” And we would go to the front of the line. Mind you, the line is snaking around, you know, like, going all the way back to like dorm one, and there was this African-American woman, Wanda,
[laughter] who, who, she's watching all of this going on, 'cause you know, they're observing, and making sure people are not cutting the line, which I get, and I understand, but I remember, like, she made it a point to say, “Gentlemen, this is a men's shelter. The only females in here are the staff.” [Laughter.] And you know, I'm like, “Ooo, shade, ooo.” Yeah, you know, so it was always, like, from cis females, where they just got in their feelings because the guys were looking out for us, and also, a lot of those cis females—and there was quite a few gay men staff who weren't so nice to the girls, but part of that was because they were sleeping with a lot of the guys in the shelter, you know. All those guys would go home, and like, from time-to-time, guys would be gone for a week to two weeks, and then later on we'd find out, like, this staff member, or that staff member, took them home, and then, until they stole something from the house—you know, all the other crap that goes along with dealing with folks who have various addiction problems, and so, what we realized is that, the staff saw us as competition to get the guys that they wanted. And, I'm like, “Um, what's these guys...” And they were nice guys—not everybody, not all—I think this is another stereotype. There's a lot of guys in the housing shelter that were working, but they were just priced out of apartments, you know, so, I remember having different guys take me and my girlfriends out to dinner, or take us to the movies, spend money on a hotel for the weekend. So, these were working guys, but at the same time, you know, they were trying to—it was hard to find housing, and so, a lot of them were saving, saving money just to get an apartment.

O'Brien: How many trans women were living at Wards?

St. James: I would say, give or take, and you have to also understand, like, maybe not, at, eleven trans women, but for every trans woman, there's at least five or six gender non-conforming folks.

O'Brien: Yeah, yep.

St. James: So, it was a larger population of gender non-conforming folks who were at the shelter, so from time-to-time we merged and looked out for one another.

O'Brien: Were there identities or names, gender non-conforming people they used to describe their own genders, or the way they were in the world?

St. James: Well, 'cause, I come from an era where we called everybody by feminine gender.

O'Brien: Yeah.

St. James: You know, like, when we got to, like, if there was a guy who came in and he was, like, had issues, we were like, “Look at her, she's carrying,” you know? So, we call it, so, we used to do that with guys, so we, female gender is what we used for everyone. If a guy tried it, he's like, “What'd she say?” [Laughter.] You know? Kind of get them more irked and all that, and like, most of the gender non-conforming people, like, if you asked them, they're like, “oh, at the end of the day, I know I'm a man,” you know? So, but it was confusing for me 'cause I saw some of them, what, like, they had their nails manicured, you know, they looked like, you know, they
did their face, did their hair. Every now and then, they had feminine garments on. So, it was like a crossroads of the gender non-conforming community there. And you know, I remember this one, she's still around, her name is—we called her Ms. Cookie—and Ms. Cookie, I remember when they told me, “Oh, Ms. Cookie's back. Ms. Cookie's back.” I'm like, “Okay. Who's this Ms. Cookie?” and I'm looking for this, like, a femme queen or, so, this, this person who—I went to the bathroom—she had these massive hands, and, just, you know, did not look like what I thought, you know? But she turned out to be a sweetheart, and I remember, like, she had this raspy voice, and she'd be like, “Mama, you have any problems let me know,” you know? Like, “oh, okay.” [Laughter.] You know? And I remember witnessing her—it was a guy, 'cause she served in the kitchen—it's a program called P.B.T., Project Breakthrough—and it was a way that you could make a little bit of money while you was in the shelter. Save up to find an apartment. And, I remember, like, this guy had made the mistake of calling her a faggot, and I remember her, just, and people like, “Cookie, don't. Cookie!”—where she picked, she literally picked him up and threw him across the cafeteria, [laughter], you know, and everbody's just like, “ohhh,” you know? And the guy's on the ground, and she's over there like pounding him and, you know, so, next thing you know the police came, and locked her up. And, yeah, but it was, there was a lot of interesting people, you know. Cookie's one of them. I remember, just like, her just being such a sweetheart, though, you know.

**O'Brien:** Did you, did a lot of friends get locked up during that time?

**St. James:** People were being locked up—yeah, and I would say that, a lot of it was intentional, you know, because they felt safer in, in a jail, than they did in a shelter. It was a cry for attention, if they felt lost in the system. So, going to jail was like a step up to them, 'cause at least, you know, they would be in a system, and they would be, you know. So, a lot of people got, got caught up in the system. You know, and, it was—like I said—like, the '90s—and, I'm always coming across contemporaries who's like, “girl, remember? Don't you miss the '90s?” I'm like, “mmm, no.” But at the same time, I understand. There was like, it was, it was fun, but at the same time it was scary, you know. And so, would I want to go back to that time? No. No. I think now is a perfect time.

**O'Brien:** So, you mentioned getting involved in FROSTED and Harlem United. Tell me about the activism.

**St. James:** So, activism just came naturally to me, where I, I loved meeting people. I loved, like, letting people know about services, know about legislations that could help them, if they—so we needed folks to show up, to go to Albany, go to City Hall. I remember, like, one of my proudest moments is getting girls to go to City Hall when they signed the local law, like, in 2002, where we could use the bathroom of our choice. So, a lot of people don't realize that has been in existence since 2002. It's not a recent law, you know. Yes, it got reinforced recently by the mayor, but that law has been on the books since 2002, and a lot of times people are not aware of that. But I also remember, like, just people—especially people of color—like, when I started getting them connected, they like, I saw how they became empowered. So, that made me feel good, too.
O'Brien: So, Housing Works was pretty active in 2003 around trying to get trans rights included in a state bill. The SONDA-

St. James: The SONDA.

O'Brien: Yeah, the SONDA.


O'Brien: Yeah. Were you involved in any of-

St. James: I was there. I was there from the beginning.

O'Brien: Yeah.

St. James: SONDA—it was Ms. Cookie, another Cookie. You'll find there's a lot of folks named Cookie, you know, in our community. Ms. Cookie, Bali White, Melissa Sklarz, Mariah Lopez. She was very young at that time. It's a group of us, and it's actually a picture in this, on this floor around the corner from Charles King's office of us taking the, a group picture with our SONDA badges and all that. And so, yeah, Arlene Hoffman—I can't believe, I can't forget Ms. Arlene Hoffman—rest in peace. Ms. Madison St. Claire. Just trying to make sure, 'cause a lot of these folks are still alive, so I wanna give a shout-out, [laughs], and so, yes, so SONDA was an exciting time, you know, and as you may be aware, it was also disappointing because what happened was cis, white gay lesbians decided they could go a lot further by throwing the trans and gender non-conforming folks under the bus. So, they were able to get protections and trans and gender non-conforming people were not. So, Charles King was, along with some other folks, came up with a new bill called GENDA, Gender Expression and Non-Discrimination Act, and that was another 16 years of fighting and, to get protection and public accommodations and getting legislators to support the trans community, so it's an ongoing thing. Yep.

O'Brien: Do you remember anything, do you have a story about the bill being passed in New York City, the Transgender Civil Rights Act?

St. James: When it first was passed in 2002?

O'Brien: Yeah.

St. James: I just remember we were very excited. We felt like we had recourse and just the fact that we purposely would go into places and, and dare them to kick us out the bathroom 'cause we have rights now.

O'Brien: [Laughs]

St. James: “You can't kick us out. We're protected,” you know, and so it was a lot of that, where—I had a girlfriend who, she's still around, I'm not gonna say her name 'cause she'll get
mad once I tell this story—but we was in a McDonald's, and this is right before that bill got passed. It was at the McDonald's on Broadway, and we went to go use the bathroom. And, mind you, like, I have a deep, raspy voice, but her voice has bass in it, and I remember, like, this girl, this woman who was in one of the stalls, cis woman, female, she rushed out and she goes, “Is there a man in here?” I'm like, “No.” [Laughs]

O'Brien: [Laughs]

St. James: And then she rushed out. And then, I'm like, “Girl, you better hurry up. She gonna get, go get the management.” And then, my girlfriend like, “Let her go get the management,” you know, I'm not gonna imitate 'cause, [laughter], but anyway, I'm like, “Let's just hurry up.” And she's taking her time, being nonchalant about, like, the entire situation. Like, 10, 15 minutes later, management comes in with all like, the, the staff of the McDonald's, and they're like going to the stall, like, knocking on it, and like, and she's like, “What's the problem?” And he's like, “'Scuse me, sir. You're in, you're in the women's bathroom, da da da.” And, you know, so it was a lot of trauma and misgendering. And I just remember, like, I was telling her, “But don't forget what you did.” And, so, I'm trying to explain to them, like, she, she's, she has a right to be in her bathroom, but she threw me under the bus. [Laughs] She's like, “You didn't say anything to my girl.” I'm like, doing her voice, 'cause her voice is, is recognizable, and I do her voice very well. [Laughter] So, I'm not going to do it, but she's like, “Well, how come you didn't say anything to my girlfriend? She's trans like I am,” you know? And then they like, stopped, and looked at me, looking up and down, it's like, “Well, the problem is, you didn't, can you come out, sir.” You know? And then I remember, like, it's like back and forth between her and them, and then finally, they was like—I'm like, “Come on, girl, let's go.” So, I finally convinced her, like, we don't have to fight everyone, you know, but like, also being in my feelings that like, she wanted, she outed me number one. 'Cause, outing someone is a form of violence, okay? If, it doesn't matter if it's your girlfriend, if you out someone, it's an act of violence. And, but we can laugh about it now, right? But, just, you know what I mean? Telling her, “why did you have to out me to them, just because you were, were”—we use a term called 'spooked' 'cause they spooked you, and now you upset, you feel like you have to out me. But, I can say, like, that happened a lot before local law. People didn't even have to hear you speak. They just looked you up and down, like, “I think that's a man,” and would go get—you know, I, I can tell you, like, in the '90s, there was many times we would go in McDonald's. McDonald's at the time was the main place we would go and eat. Wendy's, Wendy's wasn't as, where—but it seemed like every time we went to McDonald's, especially on the West 4th, that's still there. We always say it has some type of spirit 'cause they always had fights there even to this day, but it seemed like they always wanted to kick us out, even if we ordered a meal, and we were sitting down, you know, but, yeah, like, local law really helped to empower a lot of us, you know? Just making sure, like, I remember going to each welfare center, HASA [HIV/AIDS Services Administration] office, and letting folks know that they could use the bathroom that they, their, that matches their gender, and that they feel represents who they are, and just having, making sure I had like the, you know, the law to pass out to them, and like, from time-to-time, people would try it with us. I'm like, “Do you see this? You're violating the law,” you know? And people would back off. You know, so I really love activism because it's a way of getting our communities connected. You know 'cause a lot of times people who are fighting in, in, in, by themselves and they don't have
to. You know, there's resources. There's organizations out there that can assist them, you know, and that's one of the main reasons, like, NYTAG, New York Transgender Advocacy Group came along is because we wanted to also let them know, like, we are an organization that we want to amplify your concerns. We want to make sure that whatever issues that you are dealing with, that we can put it in a larger platform, you know?

O'Brien: I wanna ask you about NYTAG, but before that, the, when the local law passed, how much concrete difference did that actually make for people? You were describing bathrooms.

St. James: Yeah.

O'Brien: How, I mean, I, I, I've been trying to figure out or understand. So, the law bans discrimination in employment, but like, girls still have a really hard time getting jobs these days.

St. James: Yeah, yeah.

O'Brien: You know, so where did it make a difference? Where did it not make a difference?

St. James: So, that's a good question to ask, and I, I feel like, I tell—okay, let me bring it back. I, I tell folks all the time—this is a conversation I have with, with them, it's like, it's not enough to just talk about equality-

O'Brien: Right.

St. James: And we demand equality under the law. We also demand equity. We ask for investment in our communities because the fact that we could use the bathroom of our choice did not negate the fact that we were still homeless, that we were still making a living, etching out a living like on the stroll, and, and just doing things that put our lives at greater risk. You know, so, having protections, it does, it, it is a start, but that's not the end, the end all to our, our situation. There needs to be an, an investment in our community that only comes through understanding equity, inequity, building in marginalized communities, and getting folks to understand, yes, secure our rights, but also make sure you're investing in our future by making sure that there's training programs to where we have competitive skill sets, to where we can find a job. But, you know, if you have been removed from the economic play field, then it's very hard for you to, all of a sudden 'cause we have rights, we still don't have the trainings. We don't have the, the—we don't have the skill set needed to be competent. I mean, to be competitive. You know, and I talk a lot about transferable skills, in that we have a lot of transferable skills, and how do we start transferring those skills into where we can make a living and have choices, and not to, not to bash sex workers because there are community members who, they feel validated. Sex work validates them, so, it's not to negate, it's not to bash them and say, “Oh, you shouldn't do sex work because you have options now.” It's to let them know, like, “You have options now, so if you decide that you want to do something different than sex work, fine.” ‘Cause I feel that it plays into shaming community members who still engage in sex work, you know, but I feel like what we need to be addressing is, is equity, like investments in our
community, but also getting those folks who feel validated by sex work, not to shame them, but let 'em know they have choices.

**O'Brien:** So, when did NYTAG come about?

**St. James:** So, NYTAG came about in 2014, October 2014. Yeah.

**O'Brien:** And, so, there—between when you first got involved in activism and starting NYTAG, did the activism change much? Did the scene change, I mean, those were a lot of years, so—

**St. James:** Yeah, yeah.

**O'Brien:** What happened during that time?

**St. James:** Quite a bit happened as far as funding out there that is trans-specific. Also, trans women were realizing, like, “Um, hello, we, we're here, and we're not being invested in. We're here and people are still ignoring us.” And so, what happened was there, there was a mobilization of trans organizations, like—there's quite a few out, trans-led organizations in New York City. I believe there's, like, seven that I know of, you know? And that is a beautiful thing. And I always tell people, like, it's good to have, have options, you know, and it's good that there is a, there's a need that's being met, you know? And, so, like NYTAG, we're one of many trans-led organizations, but what I feel makes us different is that we're one of the, the few organizations that's trans-led by trans women of color. We understand it's not just about addressing homelessness, it's about addressing policies. It's about creating policies, impacting policies that—'cause there're structures that we have to address, and there's reasons why there's outcomes that put us at greater risk of violence, and HIV infection rate, that providing housing can't address, you know, and so, like, so, one of the things we do is making sure that we have legislative visits, that we meet with City Council folks, that work on our own policies. We do our own trainings. One thing that we are going to be doing in, we're doing collaborations right now is co-ops to get trans—transgender and gender non-conforming people to understand, as I was saying earlier about transferable skills, a lot of talented, gifted trans women, gender non-conforming people, they know how to, like, create lace-front wigs. They know how to do make-up. They know how to create beautiful jewelry pieces, so we're in the process of helping get a space where they can make a living to sell their goods in a, in like, like a one-stop shop. So, like, on this side of the building would be, a beauty shop, like, on the other side, if you are interested in, like, jewelry, or—there's someone selling—you know, so it would be a space where folks who say that trans lives matter can actually start investing in trans lives, you know, because 'trans lives matter' should not just be a, a verbal, just like a, a verbal slogan we use. It should be seen in folks' actions, and how people prove to trans folks that our lives matter is by investing in us, and not just saying, “yes, yes, trans lives matter, absolutely! You guys rock!” and keep on moving. And, you know, currently, like, what's going on, and you may, may or may not be aware, like, we had eight trans murder, murders this year, you know, so, seven trans women and one trans man, all of African-American descent. And that speaks to structures that we have to address, you know, and communities that—you know, one of the things that we're, we're in the process of doing, and part of this is collaborations with other
community partners from the ballroom scenes, but also meeting with City Council folks, so that we can have ongoing conversations about how to address, you know, the violence waged against, you know, Black trans women and men. You know, primarily by other people of color, you know, and part of that is, like, addressing structures, and how these structures have existed in a way that kinda sends the signal that it's okay, it's okay to target us cause we're, we're not protected, or, you know, if you don't see any type of inclusion in your policies, or like, the pastor is condemning LGBT folks, then it kind of gives people the idea, like, “Oh, okay, yeah. Pastor said it’s okay, so let's go and stone them,” you know, and to like, we do a lot of interfaith type workshops with the Black, with the African-American church, and as well as with, ‘cause Karim is of, I'm sorry, so she's of Muslim faith, and so, she does a lot of workshops, too, to let folks know why, how, why it’s important to incorporate us and to respect our existence, and not see us as, oh, those folks, ‘cause at the end of the day, when most people see us, they don't know we're trans—unless we reveal that to them, but the first thing they do see is skin, you know, and, and so, getting our community to understand ‘case we do—I've done a lot of workshops where, like, I, I've actually had, like—I did a workshop at Long Island University, LIU, about two years ago, and there's a large—the students population was primarily people of color, South Asian, African-American, and I remember this African-American girl, she was, like, after I finished and I had, like, a question and answer period—she's like, “As an African-American woman, I'm outraged that you trans folks are going through what you're going through because I feel that you trans folks should have the same rights”—and it sounded beautiful. But I had to remind her, like, “um, I'm African-American, just like you're African-American,” so, there shouldn't be this disconnect of like, “oh, you're trans,” so therefore it negates your Blackness. You know? And I feel like it goes hand and hand, you know, because that's a conversation that happens a lot with our community members who are not trans is they kinda see us as, like, no longer being Black. We're trans only. And that is not the case.

O'Brien: Do you remember any early conversations where your thinking about NYTAG, or forming it, the need to bring it together?

St. James: Yeah. ‘Cause it was a group of seven of us, and the name was, like, a vote, like, people were like, “oh, what should we call ourselves,” and somebody—one of the co-founders said, “New York Transgender Advocacy Group,” so we had to look and see if there was a group in existence called NYTAG, so we went online, we saw a NYTAG, but it was not a group, it was a saying: Not Your Average—

O'Brien: Asian Girl.

St. James: Asian—yeah. Not Your Typical Asian Girl, and so, I'm like, “okay, well, okay.” And it was just funny ‘cause we do have some members who are of Asian backgrounds, so I'm like, “well, we do have Asian people in our organization,” so I thought that that was cute, that, ‘cause we'd never heard that saying before, Not Your Typical Asian Girl. And, one thing I've been a big proponent of, as folks in New York can witness to, you know, and I kind of said this earlier, I grew up Church of God In Christ. There's a saying, it's called the Seven Sons of Sceva, and it's about how these brothers Saul, Paul, casting out demons, and they were like, “Come, let us do the same thing that he's doing.” And so, they came across someone who was demon possessed,
and they laid hands on the person, and the demon said, “Jesus, I know. Paul, I know. Who are you?” And they came out of the possession and to their brothers, and their brothers ran into the sea naked because they didn't have any authority. They didn't know about whose name demons were being cast out of, and so like, I used that because I told people, like, by whose name are we doing these things? Like, we’re NYTAG, so, that means we need to be incorporated. That means we need to be a non-profit, because people are not going to respect the fact that we’re just a group of trans women of color, who, we have meetings, you know, weekly meetings, but we’re not incorporated, you know, we’re not a 501(c)3. And so, people were on board with that, but also what happens a lot of times is, the idea sounds great, but when you put it into action, people—it’s like, “(sigh), girl. Oh, why we gotta sign these papers? Oh, why we gotta—how much? Oh, girl, I’m on a fixed income, da da da.” So, a lot of the, the heavy-lifting, you know, I just went, came out of my own pocket to, like, just really make sure it was getting done because I truly felt like this was the best way to show folks that we were serious about what we are setting out to do, as opposed to people just sitting around a table, lip service, and, like, “yeah, let’s do that, yeah,” and then when I say, “well, it costs such and such, so if we all give $20,” and then it’s like, “‘Scuse me? ‘Scuse you? You know I’m on a fixed income, right?” [Laughs] And so to alleviate a lot of that, like, I just come out of my own pocket, so that we can be incorporated, and that, that’s how the process started.

O’Brien: You mentioned that over the years there’s been a little more funding for trans services.

St. James: Yes.

O’Brien: Do you, why do you, why is that?

St. James: And I have to say, it’s, it’s a good thing, but it's also a bad thing when most of the funding is coming from funders who see, who understand and recognize disparities, health disparities, and so, a lot of the funding comes from, like, Ryan White Funding, CDC [Center for Disease Control], so, it, it's primarily because they see us as a health risk, a public health risk. So, therefore, it’s like, well, let's get them funded, and so, I think it’s great that there's funding opportunities like that out there, but one thing that we are pushing to do, as well, is to make sure that we get Fortune 500 companies to understand the importance of investing in trans-led organizations, especially of color, because as I said before, equality with the lack of equity is like, is still, you know, it still creates this discord in to where—I have all of these rights, but I'm homeless. Or, you know, I'm being pushed out of my, my neighborhood 'cause I can't afford to, to pay my rent. And, you know, so, I feel that we have to spend as much time talking about equity as we do equality.

O’Brien: What were some of the first things that you worked on in NYTAG?

St. James: So, like, some of the first things that we did was, we had community members, like, there was a case where a community member was assaulted in the Stonewall Club, which is ironic, right? Stonewall. And, we did a major protest—and, let me get it right, it wasn't Stonewall, it was The Muster, at The Muster, and so, we did a mobilization to where we had a
good, like, 60 community members come out. We also had media there, you know, to address the fact that this LGB club in the Village assaulted a trans woman. You know, and so, that was one of the major things that we did. Then, we did various workshops throughout our, since 2014. In 2015, I was able to have my folks go to Syracuse to kick of the, the blueprint. And the blueprint is tied into the Governor's Five Pillars of how to end the epidemic in New York state. And so, I was able to make connections with folks from The AIDS Institute, like, to get us to Troy to talk about and do trainings that addressed the needs of the trans community, so, some of the things we have been able to do is really just do a lot of the more, like, trainings, like, we trained—upstate, we trained, like, the Sheriff's Department up there. So, it was like a two day training, and that was an amazing experience where we, I had all of these law officials not understanding, like, the different structures that create—you know, ‘cause a lot of times people say, “oh, Black trans women, yeah, they, they’re prostitutes.” And, you know, like, getting them to understand, “Yeah, Black trans women may be prostitutes, but understand the reasons behind that.” It wasn’t because they woke up one day and said, “you know what, I’m gonna be a prostitute.” It was because circumstances where if you don’t address the fact that there’s discrimination, if you’re not talking about—if you’re not getting your legislators to push and support GENDA, you’re going to continue to see people of color, trans women, as prostitutes because, yeah, the, where else are we going to make a living? You know, so I was able to get them to understand, like, yeah, there’s a reason why you have Black and Latina trans women who were prostitutes. And so, I really liked the feedback I got from that workshop, you know, in getting folks to, who are not trans to do their part of, like, being in solidarity with us, and, and like getting everyone at the table to commit. You know, ‘cause, like, I’m good, that’s what I’m—something I like doing is making sure, like, “Before we leave today, I wanna hear from folks around this table how they are going to commit to, to, to supporting the trans community.” You know, and so, one by one, people would go around and say, you know, tell us like what they would do, what they’re willing to do to make sure that trans folks are, have equal rights, but are also invested in. So, I like those type of workshops, and those are the ones that I really feel are more impactful because it’s not, you know—trans community as you may know, we’re not like this large, like, like, like when you say African-American or Hispanic, these are sizable populations. The trans community is, is not that large, but we get so much negative media attention, and the media attention about, “Oh, there's trans women using the, the women's bathroom,” like, “yeah, ‘cause we’re women, and we’re gonna use the women's bathroom. Yes, get over it.” But, I feel that when we educate cis folks and get them to understand, “this is how you can be in solidarity with us, is by letting folks know that as a trans woman, I have the right to, for, to work. I have the right to go to school, wherever—I have all the rights that you have, or I should have all the rights that you have. And this is how you do your part.” And so, I like doing workshops and trainings because it’s a way that we can be, we can, like, create these armies to go out there and, and help us do battle and change laws and, and policies, and probably change the, like, a lot of the business owners’ ideas of, like, “oh yeah, you know what? I did this amazing workshop, and I’m interested on trans women as, as interns.” You know, and I feel like that’s where we can be the most impactful right now, you know, as well as addressing, like, other, like, policies and things of that nature.

O'Brien: What, in activism, has been most challenging for you?
**St. James:** The most challenging thing in activism is getting the girls to come to the table. Trans women of color, we spend so much time seeing each other as competition and that comes from the stroll, right? Because we, we're, we're in competition on the stroll to get a date. We sometimes bring that to the work we do. You know, so that's one of the major problems that I have come across, is getting folks to understand, when we come into a space, we come in sisterhood. We come to build. You're not my enemy. You're my sister. I'm here to uplift you. You're here to uplift us. You know, and getting them to understand like being in these spaces is part of the healing process, you know, we talk a lot about trauma, but how we get beyond trauma is to address the trauma, but also get to a point of healing. You know 'cause I'm not interested in just being about talking about trauma. I'm interested in healing, and so like, we have to make sure that—“oh, I can't be in that space with so and so because you know what she did to me fifteen years ago? You know what you did to me fifteen years ago, girl.” I'm like, “OK, that was fifteen years ago. So you going to hold on to that today?” You know, and so, like, getting folks to just heal from past traumas that we have inflicted upon one another, you know.

**O'Brien:** What, what do you think drives that competition?

**St. James:** Part of it is, we don't create affirming spaces for trans women, as well as trans men, but trans women because we—the data's out there that shows the disparities that we deal with. I've I speak a lot about trans women of color, but there's not a lot of affirming spaces for trans women, and I want to say this: CBOs, businesses, the school system, and to a degree in New York City, they're understanding about creating inclusive policies, but you can have inclusive policies, but there's a difference between being inclusive and affirming, and so, we need to make sure that businesses, organizations, are not just inclusive, they are affirming of our experience.

**O'Brien:** Have you seen any progress in dealing with businesses around employment?

**St. James:** Yeah, there is. I mean, there, there's still a lot of work to be done, but for the most part, there's I feel—I see traction where businesses are willing to invest, you know. I see scholarships that are out there for trans women to go back to school, things of that—and that's something that was not thought of, or not known to exist, on the scale that it does like ten years ago, So, there has been a lot of, of progress, you know, and we still have a long ways to go, but there is progress being made, you know, and I just feel like it's up to everyone who truly believe in making sure that everyone has access to education and housing, just, you know, I feel it's everybody's responsibility—not just trans women, not just trans men—but everyone's responsibility to make sure when they're creating job opportunities, scholarships, that it's inclusive. When you're creating, healing spaces for women, make sure that it's inclusive of trans women, you know? And that's really important, you know, that folks understand that. That we all can play a part. You don't have to be trans to get involved in trans issues. You know, respect trans leadership, allow us to say what it, what we need, but also do your part in life, you know, ‘cause we're not able to be in any spaces is meeting with business folks and Fortune 500 companies like a lot of cis folks are, so it's a responsibility of our cis brothers and sisters to do that for us.
O’Brien: And for bringing trans women to NYTAG, to the table—how do you go about doing that? What is the outreach like? What is engagement like? How do you convince people to be a part?

St. James: It varies. It varies. You know, we do outreach, but at the same time you know, it’s—I speak of my own experience of, like, when I have flyers and, like, I see girls, and trans, we pretty much know other trans, and you know—especially with younger girls, it’s kind of funny. I get it though, but, like, I’m like, “Hey. My name is Kiara St. James, and I want to let you know about a great organization that I feel like it could really be, be beneficial to you and I just want to give you some some literature so information and so I like it and I just wanna give you some literature, some information, and so they’re like, (sucks teeth), and then when I give them the literature, I can see them like, (facial expression), and they hand me the literature back because part of the problem that we come across is, like, a lot of trans folks don’t identify as trans, you know, and so, like, when you have literature that is just, that says New York Transgender Advocacy Group—it can be problematic to some folks. So, what I tend to tell my folks to do is, like, pass it out to everyone, so it’s not like, “oh, you’re just targeting me because I’m trans. Oh, you spooked me? How’d you spook me? I’m real.” You know? And so, and I get that, you know, ego is part of what we all have. You know, and so, especially for trans youth, like, if you see their— I’m using terms that folks can understand and relate to—so if you see their butch queen friend, you can like pass it out to them, as well. Like, pass one out to the MSM, pass one out to the gender non-conforming, pass one out to the trans.

O’Brien: Right.

St. James: And because—it’s something else we tell folks is like, just ‘cause we said New York Transgender Advocacy Group, doesn’t mean we’re just for trans people, you know? There’s a lot of organizations in existence today that have more than just what they are setting out, you know, so, so NBLCA, National Black Leaders Commission on AIDS, they don’t just have, have Black folks in their organization. We’re the same way. Just because we’re trans, we have—we’re getting ready, we’re expanding to have a MSM program. We have a Youth for Change program, and a lot of those folks—we just had a symposium Saturday, and we had almost 40 young folks go to that symposium, and I would say 80% of them were not trans. But that’s fine because I believe in intersectionality, and making sure that we need to also learn how to be in spaces where we’re not just segregated, and just, “Oh no, why is that person here? They, why? They’re not trans. Why they at the table?” Because in the real world, as I said earlier, we make up such a small portion of, of, of the general population. We have to be in spaces where we have MSMs, we have folks who—and the main thing we ask, we ask, I ask, is that people respect the leadership of trans, when you’re in the trans space, you know. So, having conversations about someone’s genitalia and things like that, we’re not having. You know, and so, but, it’s, it’s a process that we’re learning, you know. Trial and error. We’re not—we’re working out the kinks still, you know, but that is how I tend to tell my folks, is like make sure that when you do outreach, you’re, you’re engaging everyone, and you treat everybody with respect, you know, because I find a lot of times, people tend to look at someone like, “ooo, I just saw her, she was digging out the trash can. I don’t want her to—“ It doesn’t matter. Doesn’t matter. So, just
getting folks to understand that we are creating spaces that are safer, and we are, we are committing to creating safer spaces that are inclusive of all of our concerns, you know.

**O'Brien:** Tell me a little bit about yourself and your life outside of the activism. Do you wanna—

**St. James:** I'm trying to get a life outside of activism.

**O'Brien:** Yeah.

**St. James:** Yeah. (laughs) Well, I mean, one thing I did, and I started it last year, ‘cause—it's funny, ‘cause I have a lot of girlfriends who's always saying like, “oh, let's go on a trip. Oh, let's go here, let's go there.” I'm like, “yeah,” and I'm always ready to do it, but then at the end of the day, they're like, “Girl, my coins ain't right.” And so, but one thing I did last year, I'm like, you know what, I'm tired of waiting on other people to get their coins right. So, I did do some self-care time in—as I said earlier, I lived, I grew up in Heidelberg, Germany. So, last year, I went to, I went back to Germany. I went to Berlin, and I visited my, my childhood town, where I grew up in Germany, but I also travelled, like, to Copenhagen, Prague, Vienna, day trips, and Paris, you know. And, like, one thing I discovered, like, ‘cause I haven't been there in a while, was like, “wow,” I saw a Megabus, “Oh, they got a Megabus over here.” And my friend’s like, “Oh, well, actually the Megabus was created here.”

**O'Brien:** It's British, yeah.

**St. James:** Yeah. I'm like, “I didn't know. I just thought it was an American thing, the Megabus.”

**O'Brien:** Right.

**St. James:** You know, so, that really inspired me to where, I'm like, “You know what? I would love to do this every year.” So, one thing that I said I'm going to be doing is, like, every year, just get away. So, I, I'll do this, where I focus, focus, focus, but I make sure I have a good two weeks where I can, like, just, if I wanna be ratchet (laughs), you know, I can be ratchet, you know? But, but, in—how they say?—in moderation. You know, and I feel like the biggest problem, or obstacle, that folks in leadership positions deal with is, people wanna paint us in a corner, like, oh, we're all about activism, so, therefore, we need to, to maintain a certain decorum. You know, but we're human beings, you know, and there's gonna be days when, when we're not feeling well about something. We had a fight with our partner, or we're just not engaging. Just because we're human beings, you know, and I feel like a lot of times people, like, “and you're supposed to be the executive director, and I saw you, and you didn't speak to me. You didn't acknowledge me.” I'm like, “Well, maybe, if you spoke to me.” “Cause, maybe I didn't see you. You know, a lot of times we're heavy in thought, so a lot of times, I'm crossing people, I pass people, I see people, or I should say, I see through, I'm seeing—like, I'm walking. I see you, but I don't see you. So, until you say, “Kiara!” I'm like, “Oh, hey.” You know? But I feel that a lot of times, folks expect trans leaders to always be, like, on, and we're not always going to be on, you know, we deal with our own personal issues that, that, you know, we have to deal with, you know, like, relationship issues, or housing, or whatever—health issues, you know, I deal
with a lot of health issues, so it's important that people respect that I'm human, so I'm going to be prone to human faults.

O'Brien: Yep. Yeah. Absolutely. Is there more that you'd like to include, or share?

St. James: I think I pretty much covered everything. I just really would ask of people that they understand that the trans community is a community that is in need of, of more, as I said earlier, support, as far as investments. We're in need of more spaces that are inclusive of us. Just getting folks to understand, like, we're human beings like any other human beings. We're not gonna be perfect. I, I think it's dangerous to have a narrative of, of, of trans folk as victims all the time, you know, but getting folks to understand, like, we're not perfect, so ya, we have faults, and if we're doing something messed up, hold us accountable. You know, but at the same time, understand we're, we are just like, we're part of humanity. So, why should we not be invited to the table? You know, so make sure that when they have any event, any type of discussion, trans folks should be at that table.

O'Brien: Yeah.

St. James: Being part of that discussion. About any policies, you're creating a policy about trans folks—who at the table is trans? Make sure that you have trans folks at the table, you know? I mean, that's why—that's one of the ways we can eradicate some of these, these messed up policies that are happening.

O'Brien: Absolutely.

St. James: Yeah. So that's about it. Sorry, I'm kinda drained now.

O'Brien: No.

St. James: (laughs)

O'Brien: Not at all. This has been such an honor.

St. James: Oh, it's been an honor for me, as well. Thank you.