

NEW YORK CITY TRANS ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

<https://www.nyctransoralhistory.org/>
<http://oralhistory.nypl.org/neighborhoods/trans-history>

INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

MISS MAJOR GRIFFIN-GRACY

Interviewer: AJ Lewis

Date of Interview: December 16, 2017

Location of Interview: Radisson Hotel, Midtown Manhattan, New York

Interview Recording URL:

<http://oralhistory.nypl.org/interviews/miss-major-griffin-gracy-u29vbz>

Transcript URL:

<https://s3.amazonaws.com/oral-history/transcripts/NYC+TOHP+Transcript+054+Miss+Major+Griffin-Gracy.pdf>

Transcribed by Kirsten Adorian (volunteer)

NYC TOHP Interview Transcript #054

RIGHTS STATEMENT

The New York Public Library has dedicated this work to the public domain under the terms of a [Creative Commons CCo Dedication](#) by waiving all of its rights to the work worldwide under copyright law, including all related and neighboring rights, to the extent allowed by law. Though not required, if you want to credit us as the source, please use the following statement, "From The New York Public Library and the New York City Trans Oral History Project." Doing so helps us track how the work is used and helps justify freely releasing even more content in the future.

AJ Lewis: Okay, so ugh hello, my name is AJ Lewis and I will be having a conversation with Miss Major Griffin-Gracy for the New York Trans Oral History Project in collaboration with the New York Public Library's Oral History Project. This is an Oral History Project centered on the experience of trans-identifying people. It is December 16th, 2017 and this is being recorded in Midtown Manhattan at the Radisson, right? At the Radisson. Umn, hi!

Miss Major Griffin-Gracy: Hey baby.

Lewis: Hi, do you wanna just start by introducing yourself for the recorder? And tell us...

Griffin-Gracy: For the recorder-you just said it! M, I, S, S Major and I'm an elder transgender person of 70 or so years old and still alive, still kicking, still chasing boys and back in New York City for a moment.

Lewis: Well, we're very happy to have you telling your story this evening. Actually I should've said before I turn this on, I take notes just like to help me remember things...

Griffin-Gracy: Child, I'm in your hands you're not in mine...

Lewis: That's what I'm doing, just writing some things to follow up on.

Griffin-Gracy: If you were in my hands you'd be naked. That's okay.

Lewis: Could we start with, tell us where you were born, where you are from and what was growing up was like?

Griffin-Gracy: Born in Chicago, Illinois. And um, growing up was cool because both my parents; my father and mother for my entire life while there under their care. And ugh being a young, trying to figure what the fuck I was person at that time was interesting but hard and umn, helped me get my nerves together, to venture out from Chicago and do my own thing.

Lewis: Say a little bit more about trying to figure out what the fuck you were and what that was like?

Griffin-Gracy: Well just trying to sort out who I was. You know, you feel uncomfortable in your early ages as a trans person. You know...you don't have the words, you don't have the experience. You don't know what direction you are or are not going. You don't know where exactly you fit in. You don't know why you don't feel like you're compadres and cohorts feel. Ugh, you don't have the same points of views on stuff. And so it's a difficult time trying to figure out what all that means, how to pull it together and how to feel comfortable. So trying to feel comfortable and safe was the difficult part because once you realize that you're different, then you gotta figure out "well how different are you?" And then once that happens, someone would notice that you are different and then you are no longer safe. So it was, it was a rough time; personally and physically.

Lewis: Were there communities in Chicago that you found that you felt like you fit in with?

Griffin-Gracy: Not at that time, no. Gotta remember this was the '50s, you know? And umn, things were just very, I don't know...people felt comfortable and at ease. I was from an upper middle class black family. Where you knew your neighbors, you knew all the kids in the neighborhood, whatever number of blocks that comprised your area were, you knew a majority of the people within that group. Other adults knew who's child you were when they saw you, that kind of thing. And so, trying to be a part of it or what have you...there just wasn't a need for that sort of thing at that time. So people were either under the umbrella of their family auspice and the neighborhood or they weren't. So. It was comfortable, it was still kind of scary because as a trans person or a different person you know that you don't fit in. So you're constantly watching for some place to be that you can take a moment's breath and be okay. The sad thing is, it usually never comes. You go through this bullshit and LEAVE. Then you find it.

Lewis: How long did you live in Chicago for?

Griffin-Gracy: I was there till eighteen?

Lewis: Eighteen. And if you were sort of thinking of yourself at trans at the time, did you like, go out to bars? Or hang out with other folks?

Griffin-Gracy: No well I had graduated highschool and went to college at sixteen. And I got kicked out of college for wearing dresses. And went back to Chicago. Then I tried to go to another college and ugh, couldn't get along with anybody down there. And so it was a matter of there isn't, you don't look for matching people, you feel that you are alone. And then you may run into somebody and then "ooh wow" there's two of you. And then you might, they'll introduce you to a friend and there's three of us; "Us against the world!" But as that progresses you find out there's a group of you and you're part of another family. And that you can grow in that. And learn. So while there I met a young, a transwoman, an old trans woman at the time, who got me aware of who I was inside and the person that I was. And the little friends that I did meet, you know, girls stick together and they help each other dress. And go to little house parties because we couldn't go out to clubs some of the time. And it helps to shape you and help you define who you are. And this uh lady helped me to tune in as to who I was and what I could be! My friends, because I was tall, the friends that I had, when we would go out to a party or something, would put me into some Maryjane flats and uh a dress and stuff that made me look like a wall. Cause this shit was like wallpaper! At the time that's what big women were wearing. And mousy-brown hair that made me look like a magpie! So, Kitty of course, got me to understand that you know, I'm already tall so flats doesn't change my height, it doesn't alter my appearance. So she got me into three and a half inch heels and dresses that were up to the knee not to my damn ankles like my friends were doing. And blonde hair! And so it was like "Oh my god!", "oh that's some yummy shit! THIS BE ME!" And off I was! Ain't look back since so...

Lewis: And so you mostly hung out at like house gatherings and parties?

Griffin-Gracy: Yeah. Stuff like that, I went to a couple of balls. I could sneak out and go. They were, you know they were a fun time but they were also really dangerous place to be because straight people and guys would go there to watch the girls go in and out and what costumes they had on and stuff. And at the time, I didn't know this, but you were supposed to go to those kinds of things with a friend. Because if the crowd catches you by yourself, you're in trouble. But you know, it was a good experience to have. You know. I, you know, [inaudible] the walkway a couple of times and stuff and...not my forte but it was something that I could do and I was at ease with it.

Lewis: Did you do any categories?

Griffin-Gracy: Umn, no! The one that I did do was for "walk" cause at the time I had a hellacious walk! It was just...oh god! Cause there's music in my head that I just walk to so...yeah...there's a nice beat to it shall we say! Haha! At the time I had umn, bought a fur coat from Lord and Taylor that I dragged down the runway and then dry-cleaned it and got my money back [chuckles] the next day. Which we did a lot of that at the time.

Lewis: Do you remember where in Chicago? umn...

Griffin-Gracy: It was held? It was held on 22nd street, Cermak Road. At a club up there. I don't remember the name of the club.

Lewis: Were police a problem for the balls?

Griffin-Gracy: Police are always a problem. For everything. But yeah they sat outside, they didn't, they don't harass anybody in a major crowd like that because they didn't want anybody to see. You know. But catch you by yourself, honey, you're toast. But they were there, they were a presence. And you would think that their presence would be a calming thing but, like now, it isn't. Them being there takes things to a higher level of "Oh my god I've gotta really be careful".

Lewis: Did they have cross-dressing laws in Chicago at that time?

Griffin-Gracy: Uh, yeah, wearing a dress could get you sent to jail immediately. And not really jail; to the mental hospital. Cause they didn't put us in jail at that time. They felt that if you were a different gendered person in an attire that didn't suit your birth gender then you were a crazy person. And they would take you to jail...uh prison, uh mental hospital! I was [chuckles] taken there a couple of times! Here in New York I spent a lot of times in Bellevue. [chuckles]

Lewis: Uh may I ask, if you're comfortable, describing what it was like being institutionalized in Chicago or in New York.

Griffin-Gracy: Uh well in my youth it was a thing of "Oh I wanna get out of here"...it's not a big deal...but the interesting thing about it was that you learn how to manipulate the system. Keep yourself safe. You learn what things they want to hear in order to try to get them to help you. And so, a lot of the girls before this thing even happened to me, would sit and we would talk

together in groups about psychiatrist or doctors or nurses needed to hear from us to not berate and cast us aside. Well that you've always thought you were a girl, you've always sat down to pee...you know what I mean? And "I've always wanted to be a woman. It's so hard to deal with you know...it". Whether you could deal with "it" or not. And the thing was once you told people this there would be that sigh of sympathy "Oh you poor dear". You learned to do and say what you needed to say to keep yourself safe and get out of that situation.

Lewis: Do you remember, like, what the names of any of the places you were um, institutionalized were...

Griffin-Gracy: Oh gosh that was so long ago, I don't remember.

Lewis: Just curious.

Griffin-Gracy: I don't even know if the buildings are still standing!

Lewis: Sometimes I ask little follow up questions about facts, to sort of help locate but no problem...And was "girls" the language you used to talk about each other?

Griffin-Gracy: Uh huh yeah, well that's what we were. Though that wasn't in our mind G-I-R-L-S, it was G-U.

Lewis: And did that, those kinds of experiences happen to a lot of the girls you knew?

Griffin-Gracy: All of us! No one missed it! It happened to...well, not exactly ALL of us...there were a few that skated through, come from, you know money. So they do a lot, they do better than the rest of us. They actually get to be an older person without a record, or fingerprints or abuse from the police. And being handcuffed and having your wrists shoved behind your back and bumping your head as they put you into the back of a patrol car. Tripping you as you're walking to the thing and having you fall and scrape your knees, tear your dress and your stockings. But you know, it be what it be.

Lewis: About how long would you have to stay for if they like...

Griffin-Gracy: Well it would depend upon the judge, if they would hold us over and then they would decide how long you stayed. And how long you stayed at that time in whatever hospital that they had sent you to. And if you acted up too bad they'd put you in a 72 hour hold to reevaluate you as a person. And then you may never get out, you know. So that's why you learn what to say to get the "Oh she's just going through a difficult dysphoria and she'll be alright if... oh okay yeah".

Lewis: Um so you said you were in Chicago till you were eighteen? Is that right?

Griffin-Gracy: Mmhm.

Lewis: Did you move to New York City from Chicago?

Griffin-Gracy: Mmhm, yeah my mother had told me that Chicago was not big enough for the both of us. My uncles caught me downtown in The Loop hooking off of State Street. Called and told her “I saw your crazy-ass son, he’s wearing a dress”. My mother drove down, chased me down, threw me in the back of the car, took me back to their house on the South Side and let me know “you can’t be here doing this, cause we live here, Chicago is not big enough for the both of us”.

Lewis: Did you learn about hooking from your friend, your friend’s name was Kitty, is that right?

Gracy-Griffin: Not from Kitty but from the other girls. Yeah, because we have to teach one another. No one else you know...and how we gonna survive? You couldn’t get a job...and at the time I thought I couldn’t get it because I was young. But I couldn’t get a job because I was who I was. You know, didn’t matter how old I was. You know. I didn’t get a job till AIDs came along. [inaudible] [laughter] Oh taxes! What the fuck are those? [laughter]

Lewis: And was that like what most of the other girls you knew did they were like...

Griffin-Gracy: Mmhm.

Lewis: They also were working girls.

Griffin-Gracy: Honey that’s all we knew how to do, you had to learn how to hook, learn how to boost, learn how to steal, learn how to con. You learned how to suck a dick with the guys pants on the floor of the car, dip into his wallet with two fingers, roll out money without his wallet ever leaving his pants, send him on his merry way. You have his money, he came and you’re okay. So yeah. Definitely uh, school of hard knocks.

Lewis: If you’re comfortable talking about this, did you, when you were in Chicago or after you moved to New York City, were you like looking into ways of medically transitioning? I guess as we would call it now...

Griffin-Gracy: Well you know, after Christine Jorgensen came along in the late ‘50s, I wanted to get hormones! I didn’t think about changing anything...and due to the flavor of the time I think any of us girls thought “Oh” we wanted to be another Christine Jorgensen; be a real woman and be okay in the world. Forgetting that, we’re never going to be okay in the world. And that she wasn’t either, it was a good position but it wasn’t easy for her either. And so no, at the time, you don’t think about that. When I went to New York and met some of the girls there, I found out about the doctors they’d go to, things to take, that sort of stuff. Of course, I got on hormones and then found out what those do and started to live my life and figure out what I wanted to do. Getting a sex change was like, in the back of your head, you know. But what New York did for me was it um, woke me up and let me know I don’t really need to have a sex change if I use what I have with the right people, I can keep what I got! And still be the

prettiest thing in a pair of heels. [laughs] So they knocked my dick in the dirt, honey, I was the happiest bitch for a very long time. [chuckles]

Lewis: So what was it like going to New York?

Griffin-Gracy: Well it was exciting. And at the time...

Lewis: What, may I ask, like roughly what year was it that you first moved there?

Griffin-Gracy: Around '62...

Lewis: '62.

Griffin-Gracy: '61 or '62...[inaudible] well that's what I remember, it was around that time. And New York, ugh, New York was cooking! I mean, it was a really rough time as far as the United States went. Women were banning together, black were banning together, everybody was wanting a piece of the apple pie. Fighting to make sure that they got it. And so it was, uh, interesting and exciting and the air was tingling with change. You know? And people were protesting over the Vietnam War. You know? And guys were coming back from the armed, from over there, hooked on drugs. And coming to 42nd street and hanging out with the girls. Cause that was the best place to buy their drugs. You know. And then you got to know those guys. Spend time with them. And they were like guys that had been in prison; they didn't have a problem being with trans girls. They wouldn't walk down the street and hold your hand but you know, you take what you can get, you know, that's just stimulants of love, "ooh Daddy, love me baby!" So it was cool, I think the hard part at the time was being with the guys out of Vietnam because so many things the system never helped them get over. Uh, noises would bother them, they, most of them couldn't sleep through the night. They would have panic attacks and get upset if a cat would scream. They would think that they're in the middle of the war. [inaudible] jump out the bed, run to the corner and scare the absolute shit out of you because they think that you're the enemy. Or wake up in the middle of the night and they're choking you because they think that you snuck into their camp. So you learn how to talk them down from that and get them to calm down and relax so uh, they were still, it was still exciting. [inaudible]

Lewis: Did you hang out with vets were they like uh, mainly were they Johns?

Griffin-Gracy: They were just vets that came us, they were on the street. So you would see them and some of them, they were just as cute...so they were young people, they weren't older people at that time. These were kids that they sent off to war. And so when they came back they were like twenty-one, twenty-two years old. Still babies! And they'd just be walking 42nd street cause they didn't have any place to be. There was no where to be safe, you know what I mean? And there and in the Village you could just go and scoop them up, you know...and a lot of the time, some of the girls would go do that as a trade or just to help. You know. So it was an interesting position to be in, at the time.

Lewis: Where were you living when you first moved to New York?

Griffin-Gracy: When I first came to New York on I was on 83rd and Amsterdam.

Lewis: What was, what was the neighborhood like then?

Griffin-Gracy: It was cool, there was a school across the street. My apartment was on the third floor, it was a railroad apartment. It was four bedrooms. [phone rings]. I went from nothing to a four bedroom apartment in New York City.

Lewis: All to yourself?

Griffin-Gracy: Oh yeah, I was just a happy clam. I started meeting those guys and I had a couple of guys stay with me and you know, you do what you have to do to get the best sex that you can get and hang on and survive. And some of them was okay and some of it wasn't. It was kind of scary off and on but um that's how everything was going. And so if everything is happening like that you don't feel as if any of it's different or it's odd, or dangerous. It's just the way that it is.

Lewis: And what were the girls you hung out with like, how did you meet them there?

Griffin-Gracy: Well when I first got there I'd just go walk around at night. I'd get dressed, you know, get my shit on and just go walk down Amsterdam Avenue and met one or two girls; "I'm new in town, how you doing?" God, my name at that time was "Snow". [inaudible] what a terrible name. But uh, and they would talk to me and take me, introduce me to other girls. Maybe a couple of days later, I learned the good areas to hook in. And areas that weren't the area that *she* was working. [chuckles] Cause you know, being the new girl, you don't want to work somewhere there's an older girl cause the new girl's gonna get the Johns. So they told me where to go. You know, stuff like that. And so I hooked to survive, so I could keep my apartment. And it grew from there. I had a girl move in with me. And then the two of us were tearing it up for a while. And New York became home.

Lewis: Did you go like around 42nd street to work?

Griffin-Gracy: Who didn't go to 42nd street? And you don't go to 42nd street to work, you go to 42nd street for boys, for drugs, for parties and for theatres. Oh you can, the movie theatres; if you could time it right you could work during the week and, which would mean like Friday, Saturday, Sunday, go to the week on Tuesday or Wednesday and if you planned it by the schedule of showing movies you could hit all the theatres, hop in across the street and see every major movie that was out. In one day.

Lewis: Did you have a favorite movie, then?

Griffin-Gracy: Oh, I don't even remember there were just so many, at the time. Because um, mini-skirts were coming into fashion, the movies were talking about the war and there was some really funny things going on. The ugh, laughing was on tv and became really popular, so

um, anything in particular? No, I think a movie that always sticks out in my mind about New York is “A Funny Thing Happened To Me On The Way To The Forum”. That, so many things about that movie remind me of New York City at that time. So it was, ugh, New York was great.

Lewis: What other areas did you hang out in?

Griffin-Gracy: Uh, well I went just about everywhere cause you know with the subways y’all, there’s nowhere you can’t go! You know, everything is open and available to you, you know. And so I wound up hanging out in the village because I heard that’s where the young hippy kids were and stuff. So I went down there and that’s where I met Sylvia and uh Marsha. And the interesting thing with them was they were more aware of the politics of our existence than I was at the time, you know. And they were trying to help the community and help the younger girls, younger than even us, who were coming there to hang out and probably keep them safe, get them food. Let them know where to go to have shelter. To be safe, you know, not in harm’s way. And they started an organization to help us, that was really wonderful, called STAR. And you know, because of the lifestyle, most of us had, you had to get involved with drugs. Because you had to be out when a time when most people are sleeping. And you have to be out during the day because you can’t be where you are at night safely to sleep. And so, having to go through all of that, you have to have something to keep you going. And so a lot of the girls were either doing drugs or drinking, you know. And the community around, always berated it/us for doing that and how horrible we were and that made us addicts and junkies. No we were people that needed this shit to survive. We weren’t doing this shit for fun. It wasn’t something we did because “oh girl I don’t know what to do today, oh I’ll just shoot fuckin’ drugs”. And so through that premise about us they berated us and read us a lot. Especially those white fags down there. Those little arrogant chauvinist ass, preppy ass, white privilege mother fuckers gave us a whole bunch of shit on a regular basis. Which they still do. So.

Lewis: One would think that pretty much everybody was doing drugs at that time.

Griffin-Gracy: Oh they were doing it delicately. They weren’t doing drugs, they were doing things to enlighten their mind...yeah okay, take your mind, get on your knees and suck the dick like the rest of us and quit fucking bullshitting us.

Lewis: Did you all have preferred drugs?

Griffin-Gracy: Well I can’t say at the time...well...there was Quaaludes. [laughing]

Lewis: Those don’t really exist anymore.

Griffin-Gracy: Oh god there was Quaaludes! And there were these uppers called “Black Beauties”. [sighs] Oh god. They were...they’re kind of like the commercial you hear today where “Red Bull gives you wings”? [laughing] Fuck wings! Black Beauties put you in a jet airplane! [laughing] Away we go! And get there quickly!

Lewis: What were Sylvia Rivera and Marsha Johnson like when you met them?

Griffin-Gracy: Sweet. Really cool people, um, loud, argumentative. At the time you could see a girl a couple of streets up and yell at her “Hey Bitch!” [laughing] So yeah, loud, obnoxious, somewhat annoying to a lot of people but to us that just the way it was. You do what you needed to do to survive!

Lewis: Were they doing stuff with other queens, other girls, you know, trying to find places to live and stuff before STAR? Or did they get started in that...

Griffin-Gracy: No! Before STAR, I don’t know when they started doing all this but they were there helping each other and other girls for the long-before I even came to New York. And so, in meeting them they were already in full swing! They had- you know a lot of the girls knew and loved them! And you know, they had their drama like, trying to find a decent guy. Decent and guy doesn’t go together too much in reality but you know, trying to find one was a nice mission that never came to fruition. But um, we did try on a regular basis. You know and fall in love and do all the stupid shit that you do to try and keep them. Like have some guy with you who has a job, a bike messenger, let’s say and uh, you take him home and you all have a little affair, he comes by, he moves in with you and he has to get up at 5, to go biking, to do his job. So you get up at 3, shower, shave, paint, put your wig on, throw on a little baby doll outfit, get back in bed and lay by him and the alarm goes off and you wake up like “Oh” like you wake up like this every morning. Just for him. Child, that gets tiring.

Lewis: That sounds exhausting.

Griffin-Gracy: It’s fucking annoying. And the reason I never had anybody was because I wasn’t doing it! I’m sorry but you knew exactly who I was when we came here and YOU sucked MY DICK, bitch! What’s your problem? No! You the woman, mother fucker! [inaudible][laughs] No, I just wound up chasing every boy I could chase. And then, welp, time for you to go! [laughs] Which works well today! [laughs] Thank you Rentman.com, I’m a happy little cookie![laughs] Just call, pay him and send him home, child. No drawers, no cooking, no underwear, no playing, trying to pretend to be femme! So...[inaudible]

Lewis: What were the rest of your friends like and did you have people that were especially important in your life?

Griffin-Gracy: There was a lot of people different sorts and stripes, you know, there’s one thing about my community is there are so many different factions of us. We’re like a multi faceted diamond, you know. There’s the girls who do, um who do heroin and worked 9th Avenue. There’s the girls who drank and worked 8th Avenue. The girls who pass and have a sex change and tried to work on Broadway and 7th, you know. Then there’s the girls who were butch-ing-up to work with the boys over on 5th Avenue. And so I had different girls from each group that I knew and got to know and be friends with. The hard thing at that time was, I could never take one of the girls I knew that worked on 8th Avenue over to a friend who worked over on 7th. They were not, no. And then they would ask me “the fuck you hanging out with that bitch for?” So, yeah. They were separate groups. And I was more of a, I don’t know, what did they used to call um? A lone wolf. You know, didn’t have best friends or Judy-Judy’s to hang out with and run

around all over the city because, coming from Chicago, the subway system was really cool here but I had to have a car! I was used to driving myself everywhere I needed to go, and the subway was really cute but no. I just wasn't doing it. A couple of times I was on the subway, in a dress, going from 85th, catching the subway all the way over on Central Park West, got on the train and I'm standing there riding down- and this was in August- riding downtown so I could go to 42nd Street, meet one of my girlfriends. And the fan at the top of the subway car caught a hair on my wig and snatched my wig off.

Lewis: Oh no.

Griffin-Gracy: Through it down the elevator, the subway car. Did anyone get my hair? NO. I had to walk down there, pick my hair up. And I said you know? Fuck this shit! Put it in my purse and walked off there anyway. Then ran upstairs and put my hair back on.

Lewis: The subway sucks.

Griffin-Gracy: Yeah the fuckers, yeah, people! Yeah but it was...after my car got STOLEN by some boy I was sleeping with. And I had to take the train till I made enough money to get one. The train has so many different people on it. I eventually had the fortune to get on it during rush hour where you had to fight your way on and you hoped you could get off, ha, at your stop. Because those people are trying to get on. So. Many a morning I missed my stop because the crowd was heavier than I was at the time. But uh, it's a fun thing. And just knowing that it still exists and that there are so many millions of people traverse around this entire-all the boroughs, on them. It's just amazing. It's just simply amazing.

Lewis: They've had a lot of problems with delays lately.

Griffin-Gracy: Well uh, yeah! And rats running everything! My god, it's like "oh no honey!" Cause the rats here in New York- people don't understand- those rats are big as cats! And they're not afraid of us. You know...girl you could yell at them or one of them will smack your hand and and they'll turn and look at you like "the fuck you smackin' at me? I will damn bite you." and walk toward you "You know what baby? Come here." [laughs]

Lewis: I read an article this summer about rats on the Upper West Side jumping into baby strollers. [inaudible]

Griffin-Gracy: Yeah and you know if you live in one of them tenement apartments, [laughs] this is not funny but there was an incident when I was here of this rat chewing the lips off of this baby and the mother came to get the baby and what she picked up was the rat [laughs]. She didn't pick up the baby. [cracking up]. [laughs] I know that's terrible. [laughs]

Lewis: Yikes.

Griffin-Gracy: I know it's terrible, [laughs] but it's New York.

Lewis: Um what kinds of things did you do for fun back in the '60's?

Griffin-Gracy: Hit 42nd Street, are you kiddin? Oh god! Chased boys, sucked dick in between buildings, you know, go to all the movie theatres, tease the guys who were in the theatres, reaching, jacking off and stuff in the back of the theatre.

Lewis: You went to the porn theatres as well?

Griffin-Gracy: Porn? They do that at regular theatres! Who had time to go into a porn theatre?! [laughs] You could do that shit to Clark Gable! Porn theatre! Yeah, once my girlfriend turned me onto them, it was a whole new world! Oh lord, cause you never get satisfied sexually with Johns. Unless you're lucky enough to pick a John you want to be with. Which usually you can't because it's not the John it's the money. Gotta get the money first. So in order to pick people that you wanted to have sex with, you'd go to the theatre on 42nd Street and get in that last, second to the last row and just unzip your pants and these guys just come, crawl on their knees, going through and just suckin' dicks as they go along. "Oh god, don't get no cum on my pants!" [laughs] So, if we were going out sometimes we'd go there first so we wouldn't get too turned on while we were turning tricks on 8th Avenue. So we'd pull in there, go get a couple of blowjobs and hold your skirt up over your breasts and then go to 8th Avenue and just walk down the block either go towards the bus station or go up towards 59th street. Then there was a couple of clubs over there that you could go into. As a respite. You know, when you got tired of walking the block and waiting. And the city, in the city it was just fun hooking, especially in the summer. You know cause there were fruit stands outside the bus depot so you could go there and like buy a bag of grapes or get a hot dog from one of the vendors and stand on the corner eating or rubbing it on your body and having Johns just slowly cruise by. And dancing in the middle of the street to Diana Ross and shit. Uh, God. It was fun.

Lewis: What kinds of bars or clubs did you go to?

Griffin-Gracy: I went to the bars that did the shows. Because I would do shows and stuff if I had the inclination to. The most funnest one was a club called The Gilded Grape, on 8th Avenue. And they were different because they tried to do Broadway theatre kind of shows, not just individual girls running up and badly miming some fucking record. They put together little routines, with four or five girls and stuff. Kind of like in the Torch Song Trilogy, that Harvey Fierstein did. You ever see that movie?

Lewis: No, I haven't.

Griffin-Gracy: WHAT? You need to make a note about THAT!

Lewis: Tell me the name again.

Griffin-Gracy: Torch Song Trilogy. Harvey Fierstein wrote and directed it. It was a play and then they made it a movie. He was in it, Matthew Broderick was in it. Cute movie! And it really touched a lot on what our lives were like back then, you know. But the shows were kind of like

that. Or the 82 Club that was downtown. You know, where there was sex change girls; trans girls down there. Not drag queens and not girls who worked the streets.

Lewis: How interesting.

Griffin-Gracy: These girls were all “done”. All breasted, hips, snatched, eyebrows, hair, nails. Uh, yeah they looked like porcelain dolls. You couldn’t touch.

Lewis: So it was essentially a bar for girls who had work done.

Griffin-Gracy: Yeah, that’s where they could work. They couldn’t work in the regular or in the gay, any of the gay bars that weren’t doing shows. They spent a lot of money on this work they had done. They were places where the Johns could come, they could get good Johns. Whereas I could turn a trick for \$50, theirs is \$250. So differences in social networking, I guess.

Lewis: Interesting. Do you have any idea of where on 8th Avenue the Gilded Grape was? What neighborhood?

Griffin-Gracy: Oh I don’t remember all that! No, mm mm. All I know is you got off at 42nd Street, walked over the 8th and walked in the street.

Lewis: So somewhere around there...

Griffin-Gracy: So somewhere on the street, yeah three or four blocks. Downtown.

Lewis: And what about the 82 Club?

Griffin-Gracy: That was downtown on West 4th Street.

Lewis: Interesting.

Griffin-Gracy: East. East 4th Street.

Lewis: Um were you performing?

Griffin-Gracy: No not at the 82 Club. I was nowhere near as beautiful and done as those girls were. But I performed at the Gilded Grape and a couple of other clubs, up on 59th Street. Up on 72nd there was, just around the subway station, that used to do shows. Because I lived up there. And I could just run over and run back home.

Lewis: And what was that one called?

Griffin-Gracy: I don’t remember the name of that club. I don’t know if it was “Dominos” or not. Because up the street was the bathhouse. Where I saw Bette Midler and Barry Manilow. And whole bunch of other people perform and sing. And the cute thing was they sang down by the

pool. And these beautiful guys are getting in and out of the water, walking around in towels. And then there's these tables in the back for people just coming off the street to hear the performer and then just leave. Like, what a mixture. Ooh, shuffle your deck of cards.

Lewis: What was it like seeing Bette Midler at the bathhouses?

Griffin-Gracy: Well it was interesting. Oh, she was wonderful. She shook it up and tore it down. And she was nasty and vulgar and just fucking out there! She was like the fag had from Heaven. You know, at the time. Great person. Freda Payne was there, that I remember. God, Dinah Washington came to another club that was up in Harlem, near Count Basie's restaurant on Lenox. So you wound up going wherever you needed to because it was easy to get to and it was okay and comfortable to be out, you know. The lunacy didn't start till the '70's because I think the '60's were so, tried to be so free and open that the '70's ended up being a generation that, where they only cared about themselves.

Lewis: I'm sorry the '70's, you said were that generation?

Griffin-Gracy: Yeah, so that's when I think the harm and danger and maniacal murdering of us took a step up. So...

Lewis: Hm. And you mentioned that you started taking hormones when you were in New York City also or at least you were-

Griffin-Gracy: I started in Chicago.

Lewis: Chicago. How did you find like doctors and...

Griffin-Gracy: Well there's, there's a black market. Hah! Anything you need and you want and have the money, you can get it. And in Chicago there used to be this amusement park on the Northside. Near Northwestern. Called Riverview Park. And anybody knew who lived there knew Riverview was the best amusement park ever. But it was laced with criminal activity from the time you paid your little 25 cents to get in till you ran to your car to go home 'cause they're chasing you. So yeah, we went up there. One of the girls I knew, knew a doc-knew a person who knew a person then they knew this person who could get us hormones. And so we went up there and you could give them like \$100 dollars and get enough pills to take care of two girls for a month.

Lewis: For a month.

Griffin-Gracy: Yeah for a month.

Lewis: Wow that's pretty pricey.

Griffin-Gracy: Yeah it's pri-well of course! That's what they doin' it for. Even legitimacy, I mean even coming to New York and meeting Dr. Benjamin and Dr. Reish and stuff like that. They were doing great work there and if I remember correctly it was Benjamin that coined the term

“transgender” as a phrase. And how at the time people just thought he was such a wonderful, caring person for our community. And such was not the case. Personally, he only did girls he thought would pass. He only did white girls. He only did girls who were between, no one taller than 5’6”. Would help those girls. So taller girls like myself had to find other places. The black girls had to go to other places. Stuff like that. So to me he was an obnoxious old asshole. Who, like this thing that’s going on now, molested and had who ever he needed to, you know, at the time. And his fellowship of fellow doctors, of course, they don’t know what’s going on in that office. He got a bunch of praise and okay was a good doctor...yay he coined the phrase, I guess that’s really cute but what about him as a person, you know? What about the folks that he did damage as he was doing his good? That kind of thing. And that’s the kind of thing that nobody—they don’t talk about it. Nobody really wants to hear about it. Yay for what he did and boo for who he was.

Lewis: So you knew people who were going to him that you and your friends...

Griffin-Gracy: Girl, we tried, child, we tried. We went there and the receptionist was very polite and very sweet but very no. [laughs] Yeah, “he’s not seeing you”. And at the time, any girl that went to him, you had to go to him “done”. You couldn’t go to him in boy’s clothes because you were out running around during the day time. You had to be “done”. You had to be dressed. You had to have your shit together. So that means you got dressed at home, you jumped in a cab, cause you couldn’t go anywhere in public, we couldn’t take that chance. Directly to his office. Have the cab stop in front, run inside, have the cab meet you when you went to leave and then go home. So, yeah we had to find other doctores. Which we did, I mean, all of us- at that time they were popping up all over. It’s just a matter of finding a girl to tell you that she found one and was going to them. Because no doctor wanted it out that he was serving or taking care of *those* people. You know, at the time. Dr. Reish at the time was doing the breast implants and the surgery work and the facial reconstruction and that kind of stuff. And he was cool, he was really cool. The interesting thing about him was he would do everything to get his money. It had to be cash, it had to be a small denomination of bills and then there was this form that you had to sign before he saw you about the things that could go wrong and that you couldn’t sue him for them. And for me when I read that list, I took my cash and left the office. There was so much stuff on there. About scarring and melding together and one breast going to your knee and the other one staying in place. After the surgery; your skin is going to turn black forever. And bloods never gonna get here and oh wait a minute! No. So I never, I didn’t go. And some of the work he did was fine and it didn’t happen to everybody but just the fact that it could and that it was so prevalent that you had to sign a whole waiver? That was... scary.

Lewis: Did you know people that had bad experiences?

Griffin-Gracy: Yeah! I knew lots of people that did. I knew one girl, we used to call her “Pretty Linda”. And Pretty Linda went and got a facial surgery done and Pretty Linda wasn’t pretty after he was-after that surgery. He was a mess! She was scary. The funny thing was, she made more money than any of the rest of us, turnin’ tricks and stuff on Broadway. All the pretty girls would be out “Ah I can’t catch a trick!” Linda would be hoppin’ in and out of cars! Left and fuckin’ right! And you’d see Linda and Linda’s purse would be bulgin’ with money and stuff you know. And

we went all “uh knock them in the night”. [laughs] But that’s because guys that are Johns, they like pretty women but they’re not going to go talk to them. Even with us. You know if we’re too pretty, they’ll just look at us, jack off in the car and drive home! But Linda was easy! Oh, she could get in the car! Blow him, steal his money and he’ll go BACK to her again. He knows she took it but Linda didn’t do finesse. No, Linda- you know what, bam! Give me your fuckin’ wallet, you [inaudible]!” Throw his wallet at him and hop out the car! The rest of us? Oh, we were never! It was like, “no, Linda! Stop!” But she was a good kid with a good heart. Yeah, I got to know her. One of those things where you see her and “oh, no one wants to talk to her, oh I have to talk to her! I need to know what’s going on”. And she was a doll.

Lewis: How long did you know her for?

Griffin-Gracy: I knew her for five years before she died. She overdosed in her apartment. She was a cool gal, a really cool gal. I mean that’s the thing, you really have to give people the respect that they’re due. And we have to love each other, I don’t mean love them; take them home, suck their dick, play with their pussy, go home and just know the person. And appreciate them. That doesn’t mean you’re going to go dancing, doing the polka down Madison Avenue and stuff like that. You know, it just means understanding who that person is. Seeing them for who they are. And appreciating them for that. You know, and all of us aren’t going to be beautiful, all of us are not desirable. You know, we’re not all model material, and so everybody is not pretty. So chile, embrace the brick, honey! What the hell, you don’t lose anything by it! And then they feel better. What’s wrong with that?

Lewis: Were like, girls and queens that you know, did they sleep with each other or were they just looking for trades?

Griffin-Gracy: Well you gotta sleep with something, girl, you’re running around with blue balls! Yes they would sleep with each other, child they were [inaudible] that’s all they slept with! I knew a couple of sex change girls, who only got a sex change so they could get closer to women, because they couldn’t get the women in their male persona. Cause they were a mess! But painted? They were done! Beautiful, so you know, in order to get to women they went out and got a sex change and then hang out in the clubs with women, the little lesbian clubs, oh yeah [inaudible] that’s so cool and she’d be in there eatin’ em’ up. [laughs] Happy as a clam now that [inaudible], know what I mean? Different folks, different strokes, you know.

Lewis: Did you know a lot of queens or girls that hung out with lesbians or at lesbian bars?

Griffin-Gracy: Honey, are you kiddin’? You have to know them, the community is small. After I was here about six months, I’d met a lot of girls, there was a bunch of us. And there was a building on 84th Street. Between Amsterdam and Central Park West. Five story building, of course walk up. But that entire building was full of girls. From the basement apartment, up to the attic. And there were like, hm, sixteen apartments in that building? Studios and stuff? We all knew each other. And the boys knew, just stand out under that building and one of them bitches going to come down, snatch um inside. Once they inside, that boy wouldn’t see the daylight for a week! When apartment one was through with him, she’d throw him up to

apartment six, which was her girlfriend, she was through with him; “Barbara I’m through with him! Here’s his things!” [laughs] He’s up there, some of the time he be going through everybody. Then once they kicked him out: “don’t you come back here!”. [laughs] Send him on his merry fucking way; used, abused all up! [laughs] But, experienced, you know what I mean. Yeah, that was the way of the world. But the building, the building in my mind was what you’d see in one of those older cartoons, where the buildings are rocking? That building rocked. Aretha Franklin was singing out of every window, in that building, wanting their respect: R-E-S-P-E-C-T, you know? And we did fun things like in the summer we’d go to Central Park and play softball and we would challenge the boys playing softball and the winner would have to suck the loser’s dick. And for some reason...we always lost! [laughs] We could’ve kicked their fucking asses! [laughs] Yeah it was something, it was fun. It was a lot of fun.

Lewis: It sounds like the communities were kind of mixed up and kind of like hanging out with each other.

Griffin-Gracy: Well they were, because you know what, twelve miles long, eight miles wide, you gotta know what’s going on here. You know what I mean? And with the subway, everything is like right next door. You can jump on the train, up to 110th Street after leaving Harlem, you go up there to get some good ribs and good soul food, jump on the train, get off at 59th street, walk down 9th Avenue, turn a trick on your way. Get down to 42nd Street, go to the club, have a good time, then come out, go to the movies, then take the train downtown, go to Stonewall or one of the other bars where they accepted us, know what I mean, party with friends, make plans for tomorrow and go home!

Lewis: I wanted to work up to asking you about Stonewall. You hung out there a fair amount, right?

Griffin-Gracy: Well yeah, it was a good place to go to after working. Because all the guys were there. All the Johns were there. And the boys who hooked over on 5th Avenue, they all could’ve advertised in some model magazine. They were all simply lovely. Or you couldn’t be there. No average guy stood on no corner there long. Those boys would kick his ass and send him on his merry fucking way, so. But they were beauties and they would come there to spend their money, pick up one of the girls and stuff. Most of them were, I guess, bisexual guys...you know, so, it was kind of cool. They liked the girls, so they hung out with us a lot. Some drag queens and stuff would be there. And I think one of the things that was interesting is the way that the gay man treats us as transexual women, they were doing the same thing to the drag queens, when the queens were in their attire to be feminine. When they were in their male attire, that same kind of bullshit wouldn’t happen. Like grabbing your ass as you’re walking through the crowd to get to the stage or pulling your jockstrap or digging in your gap to pull your dick out, you know what I mean or reach into your bra and pinch your nipples or take your head and push it down like they’re going to make you suck their dick. When that drag queen is not in her female attire, they don’t do that shit to them. You know, so it’s this whole misogyny thing that they’re doing as guys that guys felt, even to this day, that they felt they could do as guys. With what’s happening in the world now with women are taking their power back, that shit ain’t gonna be happening anymore, you know. And yay! It took a long time to get to this, you know

what I mean. From Bill Cosby on down, you know? And it's a thing that everybody did this shit because they all turned their head, you know? When I listen to this stuff that the people who worked around it go "Oh, I never noticed!" Yeah, you did! You just knew not to say nothing. What are you going to do, say something, lose your job, your family is going to go hungry and stuff like that? So it's weird. [Speaking to someone in the background "Okay baby see you when you come back now"]

Lewis: But you found that Stonewall was pretty accepting?

Griffin-Gracy: Being at Stonewall was just a good place to be. Accepting? Like most of the clubs at the time, they were mafia-ran. So it was acceptable to them because of the money. In looking back and thinking about stuff, what people fail to realize is; my community is a cash-and-carry cow. Cause credit cards? The fuck are those to us? Checking account? No. You know, paycheck, tax return? None of that stuff meant anything to us. And we had to live and accept this and so being outside the law was the only way to be. And so having a place to go to, we're gonna spend cash. The doctors wanted our cash, to go to get work done, you had to pay cash. To get a hormone shot? you had to come with your cash. And it was like \$50 a shot. You need a shot a week unless you a greedy girl like some of my friends and I, then you went twice a week. And then you found different doctors cause the same doctor wouldn't give you a shot twice in a week. So we got together a list of doctors and you'd have to mark off which doctor you went to, what day you went, what name you went to that doctor as, so you'd have a little file cabinet with index cards that you'd go through: "Oh it's Thursday, I'll go see Dr. Barber. Uh what time? 3:30. Oh I'm Barbara. Okay where's Barbara's outfit?". [chuckles]

Lewis: Did you-this is kind of random but did you ever know a doctor who went by "Rotten Ralph"? A couple of people have floated that name to me, it might have been a little later though...

Griffin-Gracy: I've heard that name, when I came back to New York and I don't remember...

Lewis: He may have been later.

Griffin-Gracy: Um, one of the doctors that I do know was horrible to girls was in California, called Dr. Brown.

Lewis: Yeah, he's very notorious.

Griffin-Gracy: And the funny thing about him is, the girl that he did to use as his, I don't know, promotional act...she was absolutely perfect. Her skin was beautiful, she could pass wherever she went. She was about 5'6"-5'7", she had the most beautiful skin and hair to her shoulders. She was soft, her hands were small. She dressed appropriately, she had a great-she could wear a one-piece bathing suit and get by. She was absolutely the most beautiful little thing. And it was just her. Everybody else, he destroyed.

Lewis: Yeah they called him "Butcher Brown" or "Table Top Brown".

Griffin-Gracy: Everybody was destroyed. I had two girls who went to him and uh, were never the same. Alicia, she stayed uh-after she got better she never came out of her apartment. And had everything brought in, we had to shop for her and bring her food and stuff and never saw the light of day. Wouldn't open a blind.

Lewis: Yeah, that's horrible. He's in jail now.

Griffin-Gracy: Should be dead.

Lewis: I wanted to ask more about Stonewall and the other bars. Is there an example of a bar that was not accepting? What that would be like?

Griffin-Gracy: None of those fag bars were accepting! "Not accepting", you so cute! Those motha-fuckers didn't want us within ten feet of their place.

Lewis: They didn't let you in.

Griffin-Gracy: Child! They had no time for us. To them, we're like the scourge of the Earth. You know, I might as well be the black plague, you know, as a black bitch. Simply because they just weren't having it. And the few, the one or two black guys that they would tolerate were just, either super built or super fine. And into the leather scene. And it's like, when you see one of them dressed from afar, you've seen them all: the work boots, the jeans, rolled up at the cuff, plaid shirt. Oh makes me sick, have you no style of your own? Have you thought about moccasins? You know, you get to know them "My first name is Robert". Get them home, "My know my close friends call me Barbara." What?! What's with you? You're not going to lead me on these false pretenses! The thing is though, I don't know why it is, it's just that it's always been. And this division within the alphabet soup thing, has been there, from what I can tell, from time immemorial. Lesbians don't wanna deal with fags, fags don't wanna deal with the lesbians, bisexual guys don't want to deal with d's, butch lesbians don't want to be bothered with trans man and it's just a big mess instead of...once AIDs came along and the government came up with this umbrella that they stuck everybody under, everybody under that umbrella didn't necessarily belong there. But that's what they did and and it helped with funding, yeah, yeah, yeah. But you can't help transgender women and label them men, MSM; men who sleep with men. Really? No. My having a dick ain't got nothing to do with my womanhood! Bitch, get over it! Know what I mean, but there's no room for that because their brain can't conceive of this. I was doing a speech somewhere, lately and was talking about the kind of shit fags were putting us through and some gay guy in the audience was like "you can't call us fags anymore, we're gay". I said "sit your little faggoty gay ass down, let me tell you something, you all have been giving my community shit for so long, I'm telling you you are a fag. Now if that ain't enough for you, go to England, buy one and smoke it and then bring your fag-ass back over here." [chuckles]

Lewis: So the experience was generally bad?

Griffin-Gracy: Yes, pretty much. [chuckles] Pretty, pretty much you know. There's only so much you can do, to change it, you know, it's people being all hopped up and happy over Stonewall, yeah that's okay, that's really nice. But having been there and getting my ass knocked out, why wasn't it better for my community afterwards? Why all of a sudden were we still like rugs to the rest of the community? Why was everybody steppin' on our shoulders and our backs and going "we're the ones that did this"? Really? Where's the respect? And I'm not asking for people to jump up and idolize and adore us, I'm just asking you to see the reality, here. Who went to this club? The fags aren't going in and out of it, they had what? 90 million clubs all over the village. You know you could just stop for a minute and open up a bottle of beer and there was a gay club, what is this? We didn't have that liberty. There were only a few places we could go to and don't want to go to a dance club, oh god! With the snortin' of the whatever that shit was in, uh, tubes for asthma and stuff and dancin' around off of meth! We weren't allowed in there. And if you went in there and they found you? They would ask you to leave. You know, and not all gay guys are horrible gay guys. I have one or two gay guys that I know, have known for years and they are decent people, decent people. And they'll, you know, "Come with me to my bar" when I come to visit them. And I've been in that bar with them, we may be sitting at the bar talking and having a drink and the bartender will come over and tell me "we have to ask you to leave the bar because a couple of the patrons in the back are complaining about your perfume". "Well that's really nice, honey, but I'm not wearing any." So they didn't complain about that guy sitting next to him in his Polo shit and leave me alone. Oh and then they call the bouncer. And my friend and I have to leave. That's accepting? No. And agencies do the same thing, "oh, we do transgender services". Oh yeah, a transgender girl could come in there, slap them in the face, they still wouldn't know what she was. Or tell her "sit down over there and somebody will be with you". It's ten o'clock in the morning, 5:30, "ope, gotta go, you should come back tomorrow. The person that you needed to see didn't come in today." That's transgender services. That's fair and honest and caring treatment? No. No. So I do my best to fight and bitch about that shit and there's no pleasant way to go about doing that. They just don't see, they don't feel, they don't care.

Lewis: I'd like to ask you more about transgender services, more recently. But I was wondering if you could talk a little bit about the Stonewall Riots and what that was like.

Griffin-Gracy: You know what? It was scary, it was something that happened all the time, where the police come in and are shutting down bars. And it happened all across the United States, not just New York, everywhere. They come, take that night stick, hit the door down, the lights come on and you're streamed out. That's the routine, that's what they did, everybody knew it. Uh, they checked for ID to see if minors were in the bar. And the routine started but nobody would budge, everyone would just look at each other. And when we got our nerves together and everybody decide "Okay, we're going to go out", a fight ensued and all this crap that I've been hearing through the years, "Oh someone threw a shoe, someone threw a molotov cocktail, someone did something else, someone slugged a cop." I don't know what happened! All I know is, a fight ensued. And we were kickin' their ass. So much so, they backed into the bar for protection. And then the next thing you knew, the riot squad was there and then it was on. And I had learned from some friends in Chicago, if you're ever in a situation with a cop, do something to piss him off enough to knock you out. Cause if they don't knock you out, they will

continue to beat your ass till they break bones in your body. Hit a rib, if they puncture your lung, you die. So I spit in his-snatched this cops mask, spit in his face, he knocked my black ass out. And he dragged me to the fucking truck and threw my ass in there. But I'm still here. It was a mess. And the interesting thing was it went on for days, wasn't just one night, "Oh Stonewall, that one"- it went on for three or four days. It, it went on. And the funny thing was I remember hearing in my head people yelling from their apartments "The girls are kicking the cops asses over at Stonewall!" Well yall weren't down there fighting! You were yelling from the fucking safety of your window, while we were getting brutalized, you know, down there. But when a parade came, couldn't find us anywhere! And I forget the name of that child that had the blue Cadillac, you know some little right white boy that buys the blue Cadillac, that was always by Stonewall. But um, in his car, in the parade, was a couple of the drag queens that he used to like, that performed. None of my girls! You know, Sylvia wasn't- I didn't see Sylvia there, in the front, where she should've been. And it's not about me, I don't give a shit whether they acknowledge or know about me, I mean, it has to do with, Sylvia and Marsha were trying to take care of the community before we really knew that we needed to be taken care of. They had a vision, they saw what was coming. And they did their best to protect us. To make us aware of it. And so, my involvement with them was always occasional. Because of the era and the times- I was an uptown girl. I lived up in the 80's off of Amsterdam. They were Village girls. And the girls in the West or East Village were the East Village girls. And there were Harlem girls. And so, even though we all had some interconnection through somebody, they really fought to stabilize us. And so it behind that it became a matter of what do we do to keep this going. You know, to maintain it. I didn't know a thing about that fucking parade till I saw it on TV. Someone should've told us, or made us aware of what was going on. You know and it was just, it was a hard pill to swallow. And one of the things, as a black person I learned that history is one big lie. It has to do with the person that's writing it, not the facts that went on. And perception plays 90% part in what that asshole puts down on paper. So, why believe it...or get involved? One of the things I think about is if you were to take a history book and pull the bullshit out of it, find the truth, snatch out all the bullshit that's in there, then you're going to wind up with two or three pages. All that 475,376 pages is crap. It's smoke that they're blowing up people's ass. And the sad thing is, people are buying it. If they don't buy it then that shit doesn't get [inaudible]. So it's a thing of making sure that you know, I'm not gonna lie to my girls [inaudible]. If you ask me something I'm gonna tell you the truth, you know. And it has to do with my perception of things, not theirs or what someone else has said. They aren't me. They weren't in my skin at that time. They didn't perceive anything that I perceived. And yeah, I'm older and yeah memory adds stuff or takes away stuff. Well that's just what it fuckin' does. I'm still here and fuck you.

Lewis: Do you remember what it was like in the months and years after Stonewall Riots? Or what kinds of stuff, for instance like Sylvia and Marsha and others were doing or trying to take care of each other?

Griffin-Gracy: I would like to say I have a clue but I haven't. I got busted and went to Sing Sing for five years. So I missed all of what was going on in the city. Umn, one of the interesting things about going to Sing Sing is that Sing Sing was like a little New York. You had the pimps and the

Johns and your little hustler, your con artist. It was like this little 42nd Street, in this prison system and stuff.

Lewis: Can I ask what you got busted for?

Griffin-Gracy: Attacking a John and knocking out a cop. It was New Years Eve and I had gone to this party over on 6th Avenue and I was chasing some boy, who I wanted really badly at the time. Being a tall girl, I thought "oh I want to go tall". And Tex was like 6'4". So I go over to this party hoping to run into him and of course, I wasn't his cup of tea. He liked short girls, the girl he was dating was like 5'3". I wanted to kill her. But I had bought this special dress to wear, it was orange and cream silk organza dress, with like scarfy, billowy kind of effect. I found these perfect shoes and shit and I'm leavin' there and I popped into the doorway at this hotel and talked to some John for a minute. He gave me a card, to come back later, which I was going to do, I was going to run over to Times Square for a minute to bring in the New Year and I'll be back. As I was walking down 43rd Street to go over to Times Square, this cop taps me on the shoulder and tells me "You're under arrest for prostitution." And when I didn't turn around quick enough, he grabbed at me and tore my dress. Uh! Bam! Turned around, knocked him out! Then I thought "Oh my god, he's a cop! Shit!". Pew, went out running and...they caught me. [chuckles] Of course did the crowd protect me? No. I ran threw and they stepped away from me like I had razor-blades growing out of my sides! The police just came right in between, right after me and got me and took me to jail. And I got five years.

Lewis: In Sing Sing?

Griffin-Gracy: Well, five years. You go to Sing Sing first, they figure out what prison they're going to send you to. First they sent me to Comstock, they they sent me to Green Haven, then they sent me to Attica, then they sent me to Dannemora...it was a mess.

Lewis: You were saying Sing Sing was sort of an interesting crowd.

Griffin-Gracy: Well it was! It was a thing of, being a person that lives outside the law, you know that you have to adapt to being there and eventually you're going to go. So the funny thing was that there were people in there that I used to run into on 42nd Street. People that I met up in Harlem that were doing their business there, some of them knew the system well enough not to stay in Sing Sing and for you to do the time and not have the time do you. And so that part of it was cool. I tried to work hook with this guy to try to stay but the pull that he told me he had, he didn't have. And so they shipped my black ass out.

Lewis: Were there other girls also in there that you knew?

Griffin-Gracy: There were lot's of other girls there. Oh yeah, lot's of girls I knew. We know that we're on the outside of law and eventually, sooner or later, you're going to get caught. You know, and when you do, you just do your time and go back.

Lewis: Was there-like at Rikers there was a gay tank- did they have that at Sing Sing also?

Griffin-Gracy: No. Sing Sing was old. The difference between Rikers, which is a jail and Sing Sing, which is a prison...there's a little more liberty and lax-attitude in the prison system. Even in some of the major prisons they might have a building that's just for the girls but in that building because of space, they would have somebody else. Like one of the spaces that they had at Dannemora, they had one of the buildings was us and on the other side were the murderers. If you killed more than two people, you were on that side. And so, that was the gathering all together and we socialized together and you got to learn that yeah, he killed somebody, maybe they deserved it. And so there was a sense of temperance that you you learn and you take up because we didn't have and don't have the luxury to be so, I don't know, attitudey or outrageous about who we are or snooty, because we didn't have that luxury. So it's, you know, adapting to and doing what you need to do and accepting people for who they are, at their base level. And everybody's not a crazy, insane, made person. And sometimes situations and circumstances change, so you, just you know. The hard thing was meeting guys in there who had killed children, cause there's nothing you could think to say that a child would do to upset an adult enough to kill them. Until you have a child and they're screaming fucking bloody murder and you want them to shut up and you think for a minute, you know if I could just grab that little neck. You just want a moment's peace. If they could just stop for just a moment. In my mind, after raising my sons and stuff, it's like, there were moments where it was like "okay, I love you but God damnit, if you don't shut the fuck up". Because in my mind, I think children are born with this one tone, that God gives them that is made just for their parents. That will send them to West Hell inside their mind and that doesn't happen right away but something will be going on and the kid will reach that note [laughs] and the hairs on your neck stand up, it's like there could be a crowd of babies and you know when your baby is the one screaming. You know, it's just stuff to think about.

Lewis: I don't want to skip over the other prisons you were transferred to if you want to talk about them but I am curious to hear about Attica.

Griffin-Gracy: Well I wasn't in Attica for the riots, I was sent there after the riots. The thing about the riots in Attica was, those guys had a- all people in there should riot over stuff...I mean the abuses and stuff that you suffer, it's more than just the daily abuse, it's such degradation. And the outcome of it is, prisons, people are worried "oh prisons are doing or not doing their jobs", the sad thing is, yes they are. They weren't made for rehabilitation. And to teach you a lesson and send you back out into the world to do better. They were made to hold, separate you and contain your ass. And torture, beat and abuse you to where by you didn't have enough sense to go out and commit anymore crimes. Because they've taken your mind and your thought processes and your sense of will from you. That's what they were made for and that is still what they are doing.

Lewis: Okay, here we go, we're rolling again. Um, so anyway, you said your friends treated you like a hot potato?

Griffin-Gracy: Oh yeah, I said they dropped me like a hot potato. They just didn't understand what I was doing. And for me, it was an interesting chain of events, so I'm a dad, what's the big

deal? I have tits, so? That doesn't change how the child is going to see me. And um, my son accepts me for who I am, as do the other boys that I raised and they don't have an issue with me. Three of them calling me mom and the other three call me dad. Well that's on them. You know, they need to be comfortable with how they refer to me. I'm never gonna not answer or respond...those are my children. So yeah and so in the world with all my trans girls who call me mom and stuff, I'm not going to say no to them either. You know, it's a matter of, we're a small community and we need to love one and support each other. And know that there's somebody out there that cares whether we live or die. That knows who we are. That isn't going to question us or berate us, or disbelief who we feel that we are. Yeah it was pretty interesting and at the time that Debbie wound up having Christopher, I had a male lover, uh, Billy. And I had Debbie and we all lived in this house I was renting in Yonkers. Cause I had to get us out of the city. The girls were just so upset about stuff. I moved.

Lewis: And then you left the city entirely after...

Griffin-Gracy: After Christopher was born, I was gonna stay in New York after my son was born but I remembered, was reading in the New York Times, about this thirteen year old boy, that O.D.ed in school, in the boy's bathroom. Off of heroin. And I checked with friends and at that time you could get a bag of heroin for five bucks. Or crack or whatever. So drugs was that cheap and that available...you can't be with your children twenty four hours a day. They've got to handle those times for themselves and so I worried, I said "Oh God, I don't want to be home and they call and tell me this happened to my son". Cause you can't always know when somebody is on drugs. Some people are really good at hiding that shit and everybody's routine on it isn't the same. You know, so I got scared, I can't raise him here, so I talked with Debbie and we decided, I had a grandmother who lived in California. And I always heard that California was full of fruits, flakes and nuts. Oh I'd fit, oh I could do all three of those! So I moved to California. And went to my grandmother's.

Lewis: To San Diego?

Griffin-Gracy: No, to Mendel Park, on the Peninsula.

Lewis: Where is it?

Griffin-Gracy: It's forty-five miles south of San Francisco. It's now Silicon Valley.

Lewis: And what was it like there?

Griffin-Gracy: It was a nice, it was a lovely little mixed neighborhood that my grandmother lived in. She moved down there in 1964 and had been living there ever since. She owned a couple of houses in that little area, that she lived in and I moved in with her. She freaked the fuck out, kicking me in my room with Christopher, naked and so I had breath and went to West hell, she ran at me in the hallway with the knife. I was like "oh God, is it ever gonna change?". So after that confrontation, my parents came down to California from Chicago and explained to her what was going on, packed her shit up, took her with them, back to Chicago. And then Debbie came out and Debbie and I tried to make it together as a couple, with Christopher there.

That didn't work out so she wound up going back to New York. But the amazing and wonderful thing was she left Christopher with me. And that was such a blessing.

Lewis: So what was it like living there, did you have a community of people?

Griffin-Gracy: No, it was just me and my son. I couldn't take the chance of being out or you know, or letting somebody in. What are they gonna do with this transgender woman raising a male son? You know, I know how people think and I know how fearful they are and how stupid they think. Later as he got older as a teenager, I had people tell me "what, are you raising your own lover?" "No, Charlie is my son you asshole! And you need to think about this, pedophiles are straight guys! Punk!" I'm so far from straight, you could bend me around a "U"! [chuckles] Where's that come from? And you know, did they get it? No. They don't get it. And so after, I had other boys, they would always just watch us. You know, out the corner of their eye. "I don't know what that is with those children but we need to watch that". [chuckles] And the interesting thing is, I was so concerned with my kids being in school and what the other children would do to them, once they found out who their dad was and the funny thing was, the kids were always cool. And my sons always took good care of me, in a sense of, they wouldn't discuss me with anybody and if they had a really close friend, they would test them to see whether or not they could bring them home with them to meet me. And so the few kids that they did manage to bring home were really chill kids. The problem came up when the kids would be at home with their parents going "Christopher's dad is a woman, she is so cool!" "What honey?" So they ran to the school to complain and all the school could tell them was "She/he whatever you want to call him, Major's a good parent. Major takes good care of his son and your child is safe and fine there." "But I don't want y'all playin' with that child" "Well that's on you" is what you'd have to tell them. So they would tell their child not to come play with my son but they'd come over to play anyway and they'd use the back door, hop some fences and still come over.

Lewis: So you were living in a sort of suburban area? Like if it was a house?

Griffin-Gracy: It was a house, I wound up having to move into an apartment after my parents moved out to California. Cause they came out there to [chuckles] raise my son and what they told me was "well we'll pay for you to get an apartment in San Francisco and you go there and do your little fag thing and we'll raise your son for you". Well you know what? If I was a fag that would be really an interesting proposition but as a woman? I'm not leaving my baby with you crazy people! You know, look what you did to me! [laughs] And right in my mother's face, come together! And after that, trying to tell them "I'm fine, this is not your fault. This is a blessing behind the bullshit that you did." They never got it. It was like "oh it's a phase, maybe he's going through, he'll grow out of it, okay". When she died, I was sixty, she was still waiting for it; "next year, next year". You're right baby, next year, you'll be dead and I'll want to be a man. I was like "okay gotta keep a sense of humor, chile".

Lewis: What were you doing for money while you were raising kids?

Griffin-Gracy: I drove a rig, part time on weekends. I made deliveries up and down California, for this real estate business who, every week sent new listings and stuff in this book, this

magazine with the house and the description and the realtor to call and stuff. And um, every Friday I was drive over to Pleasanton, pick up my truck and drive my truck down to San Diego, dropping off these magazines. And then come back. And sometimes I took Christopher with me. And once they gave me my own truck to use, I put his toys, hung um off the dashboard, I blocked off the seat of the passenger seat, took it out so he had room to play and move around. And took him with me sometimes.

Lewis: Did you know other trans women who drove trucks? I feel like this has cropped up for me.

Griffin-Gracy: I met, I met one sex change trans person and she was driving the truck and nobody knew she was a sex change. But everybody thought she was this big, bull-dyke. And she had, nice hair cut, nice little wavy short hair-cut, tapered at the neck and she just, she looked like a weight-lifter with muscles. She looked like the women that you see on those wrestling shows and stuff like that? Not the ones where they're pretty but the big brute ones, know what I mean. And she looked like that and everybody just assumed that she was a dyke. And when she saw me, she came over she came up to me when I was in my truck and she said "Well, they hired you kinda people!" "The fuck you mean 'you people?'" She said "Oh you're lippy too!" and she started laughing. I said "Lady, you know what? I have no problem fighting some woman." And she said "Well if I were a woman, you definitely wouldn't have a problem with it." And then we both fell out! "NOO!" [laughs] So every now and then I'd see her pass or see her truck or something. Yeah she was really, really cool. But she's the only one I ever met. And the funny thing is the thing she told me she really missed about driving the truck, before her change was glory holes. I said "Oh girl, yeah. What would I do without the holes?"

Lewis: What was her name?

Griffin-Gracy: I can't remember, I can't remember. But I could see her face, uh, she was really cool. Talk about a brick shit house, that bitch was built!

Lewis: So how long were you living there and driving a truck, how long was your life like that for?

Griffin-Gracy: Umn let's see, when I moved out there Christopher was a baby. When my parents moved out there, Christopher was four. We moved because my parents wanted to raise Christopher and take over. So I just packed my son up and moved. And so my theory my whole life has been, if it doesn't fit in my car, it could stay. So I put Christopher in first, then loaded up his stuff. And whatever stuff of mine I could get in. And I only buy big cars, I don't buy none of this new shit. I don't buy nothing newer than '78. That's as high as I go. Uh, except for now in Little Rock I have a 2005 Chevy Tahoe. Which isn't little, so it's cool. And it's not one of those ones where you need a jungle gym to climb up into it. You know, it's a regular sized SUV. It's cool and I'm happy with it, it does all the new whistle and blowing and beating things, so that's cool. But after we did that I wound up moving to an apartment, well some friends got it for me. And then Christopher and I moved all over, when he was six, a friend of mine found a job and a place for me up in San Francisco. And I moved up there and that's when I wound up with my

second son. One of the hookers in the building, I was the night manager, left her son with me, said she was going to be going down South, I think it was for Thanksgiving and they didn't know she had any children. So she didn't want to take her son with her. But she got down there and she called and told me that she met some guy and fell in love, he doesn't know that she has children. Could I keep Darryl till she comes back? I said, yeah of course, no big deal, if you found love, go for it. And she never came back. So when I moved with Christopher to Santa Cruz, he moved with us. So in Santa Cruz I met another hooker, wound up with her kid and the four of us, in a couple of years moved to San Diego. So, I've been all over.

Lewis: So you ended up in San Francisco in the mid-eighties? Is that right?

Griffin-Gracy: I...yes...cause I was in San Francisco when they turned out City Hall over the verdict of Dan White.

Lewis: Okay so like in the late 80's...

Griffin-Gracy: Yeah, yeah I was there for that. And I took my sons up there with me so they could see what injustice can do, what is has the possibilities of. And if there was just a way to harness that and change those fags' point of view about my girls and help us fight for who we were, that would've been a good thing. But of course, there wasn't, they were concerned about their little Castro area. And that was it. And it was kind of sad.

Lewis: So you were there for how long?

Griffin-Gracy: Oh God, I don't even remember. I know Christopher got to seven, I was still living there and every year since he was two, I sent him to New York to Debbie for his birthday, which is in August. She had him for two weeks and then send him back, cause she had her vacation at that time. So this one year, she didn't send him back. I drove to the airport to pick him up and he didn't get off the plane. And uh, I snatched the stewardess, I thought she lost my son but she told me that he was never put on the plane, that she didn't put him on the plane. And so I went crazy for a while and that's when I moved back down to Santa Cruz. And took the kids I had with me there. Then I met-I found out from my parents that a lady I knew years ago told me that she had a son by me and she was living in Utah. And so I went there to see him, I never knew whether or not he was my natural born son or not. But he took to me and I him, so I adopted him. And we went back to California cause I couldn't stand Utah, they burnt my cadillac up in Utah, wrote "Nigger" on the house I was renting and stuff, so let me get the fuck out of here! It was more horrible there than it's been in the South. [phone ringing] Oh shit!

Lewis: Um, so you eventually ended up in San Diego?

Griffin-Gracy: Yeah, yeah, I wound up down there.

Lewis: And how long were you in San Diego for?

Griffin-Gracy: I was in San Diego till '95-'96?

Lewis: Okay.

Griffin-Gracy: Because my lover from San Francisco moved down there with me, his family was from there, that's why I moved down there. And he was dying of AIDs and he wanted to see his family before he died and so we went down there. And of course, he was thirty years younger than me, um, because it's hard to find someone older than me [giggles] and I ain't datin' nobody my age! So while we were there we got to meet his family, they were not happy that I was his partner, he was a vet, he died at the V.A. And I got the V.A. hospital to start an AIDs card. Which they were really reticent to do. But I kept pushing and they kept getting more and more vets with AIDs. That they wound up having to start a unit. And so rather than call it the AIDs unit, they called it "the Special Disease Unit". And never told nobody that that's what the disease was. But I got to know a lot of vets at this time, again, me and veterans who had AIDs. And started socializing and stuff with them and trying to help their families deal with what was going on with them. And I thought that there needs to be some kind of memorial for the families to have because the families, they won't tell their friends that their son died of AIDs. And they don't want anybody to know and I thought that maybe...there was a garden at the V.A. where the families would know that that's will know that that's what the garden was for and nobody else would know. It took me a year but I convinced them to do it. So they started a garden there and last time I checked it's still there. Except now it's full of, they had to spread it out because so many, so many people died...

Lewis: Yeah I wanted to ask, like, those years in the early and mid 80's, what your awareness was and what it looked like when AIDs started talking hold...

Griffin-Gracy: Well you know what it looked like was, being as I am now, a 70 year old person whose friends started dying off, you know. I mean, I think about the regular community other than my own, where like my parents and their parents get to this age and they usually know people from grammar school, you know? And so as a trans person, I don't have that connection but I know that pain that they went through when their friends started dying off. Like say, for my grandmother and she felt alone, like why is she still here and all of her close friends are dead. So you know, that period of time is what it felt like in New York for all us gay people and stuff like that. Cause you could meet somebody on Monday and they'd be dead by Thursday. So why meet anybody? Why get to know them if they're going to die? You know? And they didn't care, know what I mean, guys are in the hallways on gurneys in the hospital here dying and stuff and when they'd die someone would walk down and the hall, cover their head up with a sheet and keep on walkin'. I don't know when they would move them but you know, and so it was a frightening, frightening time, you know. And oddly enough, being here and seeing what was going on and everybody jumpin' up and down and claiming that this just started in the '80s, it started way before that because I remember getting out of prison here and in 1976 I met a guy who had KC Sarcoma on the bottom of his feet and in the palm of his hand, nowhere else and they didn't know what it was, couldn't figure out how he had gotten it or where it came from. And from my thinking and what I saw happening, that was the start of this AIDs thing. Now, do they want to go back to 1976 and work it out, no of course not. These educational-ass motherfuckers well that's when we say it started and that's true and all that other stuff doesn't

matter. Yeah, it matters when you think about the incubation was considered to be at the time, 15 to 20 years, well if you take it from '76 back 15 or 20 years, that's World War II. So with all the shit that Hitler was doing and experimenting, that doctor escaped and got away; we don't know where this got started, began! And so we ended up paying for it, you know, now.

Lewis: Yeah, that's interesting. I've read reports about studies in the last couple of years or so that now folks think that it may have started in New York City around the early 1970's, of course it may have well gone back further than that.

Griffin-Gracy: Yeah, me too and it's just from living here and being around it and that kind of stuff...

Lewis: And did you notice if other people or did other people notice folks with KS or other symptoms...

Griffin-Gracy: You know what, at the time, they noticed it but they were more interested in sucking dick and drinking and getting high. None of that other stuff mattered. And the only reason, for me personally, that I noticed stuff like that because, at the time, it's totally like what your cup of tea is and how you like to cruise. First there were red heads, then it was blondes, then it was guys with blue eyes and then I got to a point of "oh chile, just be breathing!". And now as I've gotten older; just be warm. [chuckles] You know. So I would notice it because the white guys I was chasing at that time, some of them had it and some of them didn't. And being the hedonist that I am, when I'm with a person-a male person or a female, as I learned I can do, I am interested in- it's the person I'm making love to not their genitalia. So whether they have a different pussy doesn't matter to me, it's who the person is and what body contains them. So I'm going to rub and touch and be a part of them, from the bottom of their feet to the top of their heads. Well by doing that kind of exploratory thing, by touching and holding them- an intimacy that I feel is our connection to other people. So in doing that I got to notice that some people had those. Whether it would just be in the center of their palm or just in the arch of their foot, versus somebody who had it and it was their entire foot and not in their hands. And then paying attention to how they moved and took care of themselves. Because my thing with people is, like, I like to watch guys walk. And you know, there's a certain attitude, a carriage there that I find intriguing and turns me on. I pay attention to how people talk to me or one another. How engaged they are in that, you know and so noticing those things you get a sense of something's not right or their kind of off. Cause you know, I would see them in their stride, hittin' it and then see them again and just doesn't feel the same, something's missing, they may not be standing up as straight or their gait might not be as strong and as confident as it was when I saw them before. And so in my mind I just pay attention to that and set it aside and then the next thing I knew they're sick and in the hospital. In my head I put that together "oh, it has something to do with this". That's how I got there.

Lewis: So in the 80's did you or rather people you know get involved in service work-

Griffin-Gracy: My son was born, I didn't have time. I left here because of all the drama. And when I came back here I noticed all this and when I came back here, Debbie had gotten

pregnant by some guy she was seeing and wanted to have an abortion. And she was afraid to go alone so I came back and I brought Christopher and we stayed here for a couple of years. And I started paying attention to everything that was going on and stuff. Yeah, it was a weird thing. And of course, no one wanted to touch these guys, so I wound up doing home health care, cooking them and stuff. Cause as a hooker and a prostitute I know that you're not gonna get it from touching them. And I'm not gonna be turning a trick with them, they don't want me. So it was safe for me to clean their clothes, cook for them and watch their families go "oh don't touch that glass, don't drink behind them" And the ones that tried to care would come around until it got to that count down phase, where it was obvious that they had it and they were ten, nine, eight...well by eight, the families, they were full. And so they would hire somebody to come in and be with that person. And so that's what I wound up doing and a lot of the girls ended up doing that. Because oddly enough it was our first job-job, legitimate job. We had to pay taxes on that money and who knew, taxes what? You know, but um, it changed our life as far as what side of the law we were on, with this thing happening. And from there a lot of us ended up learning jobs and being able to understand what a job was and that we could do something else, because of the flavor at the time. So we wound up stepping up and being home health care persons to outreach workers and then people who talk to other people about AIDs and safe sex and getting legitimate pay for that from some non-profit and stuff like that which changed where we were. All of a sudden getting an opportunity to step up and be a cofounder of whatever. And so it changed our economic security and it changed the perception of us but only to us.

Lewis: Yeah, that's really interesting. Yeah I didn't know that so many trans women got into employment through home health care.

Griffin-Gracy: That's how it started.

Lewis: So what did your, sort of, career trajectory look like from there?

Griffin-Gracy: Well from there, uh after- I went back to California, I wound up working for the San Diego AIDs foundation and at first I became the patient liaison, then I did searching for funding to get companies and businesses to pay for tickets to get the guys to a movie premiere or take them out to dinner somewhere, at a restaurant that they would've never been able to afford, you know what I mean and talk the restaurant into letting them come there and that for those who come there they're not going to infect the whole restaurant and I'm gonna have to shut down. So I wound up doing that for a while. And then I wound up starting my own organization down there called "Angels for Care". Where I hired people to take care of guys in their final phases and so Angels for Care, their goal was calm down the family, so we'd help the family calm down till they pass away. The sad thing about that was, watching these guys die and what their partners went through and then have the guy-that-died's family come in and threw that partner out. And take everything, greedy mother fuckers. These guys lived together ten to fifteen years, bought this stuff together, they're a family unit. And the family would just "Well, I'm his mom and I want all this stuff, it's in his name and fuck you".

Lewis: Wow.

Griffin-Gracy: Time and time again. What I wound up [inaudible] when I worked with ANY trans girls, I made them give me power of attorney so if the family came in “Oh I’m taking all her stuff”. “No, she left it to me and you can’t have it, now if you want I can have somebody put it all in the street and set it on fire”. So they left me alone. So then I’d sell all that shit that I would get and then give it to an agency that was trying to help people get along and stuff like that. And I got sued a couple of times by a couple of their parents because this boy left me his BMW and they let me know that niggers shouldn’t be driving around in BMWs.

Lewis: Wow. Really?

Griffin-Gracy: Well the funny thing is, I don’t need this little tiny-ass BMW. Because my cadillac is sitting over there, oh and looking at it, it’s bigger than your Lincoln. Hmm...[chuckles] Rough world, rough.

Lewis: How long did you do that for?

Griffin-Gracy: Oh God, about six years. And then I had to leave San Diego ‘cause my parents got sick. And I went down there to end up taking care of them. Yup.

Lewis: Um, were your parents in Chicago?

Griffin-Gracy: They were in Menlo Park. My grandmother’s house.

Lewis: So you moved up there. So that was in the ‘90’s at this point?

Griffin-Gracy: Yeah.

Lewis: Did you just take care of your parents or...

Griffin-Gracy: No, I came up there and got a job in San Jose with the San Francisco AIDs corporation, as an outreach worker. And then I went up to San Francisco and started working for TARP; Tenderloin Aids Resource Project. I wound up doing all that.

Lewis: Um, what was that like?

Griffin-Gracy: It was cool cause it was in the heart of the Tenderloin, San Francisco. And it was an agency that catered to the transgender community, which was so new and so wonderful. I got to know hundreds of girls up there! And wound up going from [chuckles] an outreach worker to a transgender consultant. Because they had a psychiatrist that talked to the girls after they would get a positive diagnosis. This child didn’t, no longer know how to talk to us than the man in the fucking moon. And so a couple of the girls told him that when they came here to see him they’d say “well I’m going to wait till Major comes and I’m going to talk to her.”. And he’d say “Well why you gonna wait till Major comes?” “Cause I can talk to Major, I’m not talking to that idiot.”. “Oh okay”. So because of funding what he was seeing clients, they fired

him and they hired me. And so from there it was just one step after another taking care of my girls and making sure they were okay.

Lewis: You did mostly counseling stuff?

Griffin-Gracy: Yeah in the beginning I did more counseling and then I opened the building next door to TARP, it became available, they rented that building, I took it over for my community and had a transgender center there. And when they saw how well that was doing they fired me and took it over and turned it into a cafe for the fags that were coming in there. Yeah, it was a big mess and the girls ranted and raved, they were going to stop going but you can't do that, you need the services that they had to provide to keep them safe. So I wound up working for another non profit down there and brought them over to that facility, not for counseling but for group meetings and stuff like that. Support groups.

Lewis: What was the a non-profit?

Griffin-Gracy: It was the Arc of Refuge, City of Refuge Church and started working for them and got to know their pastor Yvette Flunder and through he I got to do other stuff, then I ran their AIDs project for a while. Then my folks got sicker so I instead of being there four days a week I wound up being there three. But it worked out okay.

Lewis: I have so many thing I wanted to ask you but I also wanted to be mindful of time since we've been talking for a little while. I have more questions that I'd like to ask about this period. Was there any particular work you did around AIDs and service providing, like working with other girls that you were especially proud of or felt like it was especially important work?

Griffin-Gracy: All of it was to me, nothing stood out more than the other, I mean, this thing was so devastating and not only did gay guys not want us around but hospitals didn't want to take care of us. Colored girls got sick and collapsed in stores and the paramedics would come and go "oh, it's one of them". They drove off! I mean, not just in San Francisco but all over! The girl in Texas died! You know, so, it was just a mess. To me, everything I did for them was important for them, I don't give a shit what it meant to anybody else because I didn't have time to worry about that. It's the needs of my community that are important and I'll hop over twenty mother fuckers to make sure one of my girls is safe. Because we have suffered so long, so hard, so often and so intently that if we get the chance to get some moments break... if I can provide that, I'm going to give it to them. You know and yeah I'm older and travelling my ass off, it's exhausting, I really should be just resting, taking care of my black ass but I can't because everybody- my girls aren't safe. The trans guys have it a little bit easier. It's not great for them either. Especially the black trans guys cause one of the things that winds up happening is that after they transition and they become black men, there's that whole stigma that they never knew about as their persona in growing up as a female that they were not the man that they were going to be. And so once they make that transition, they become *that black man*. You know, changes their entire focus, all of a sudden things that you thought were going to be available to you as a man are taken from you because you're a black man. And so then there's that drama to deal with. So for me it was a matter of making sure they had the strength and

wherewithal and the courage to face that shit and to go forward. And one of the things, one of the important things I feel my life has for my community negotiating through this world, not anonymously but safely. Because just who we are, we've never anonymous. You know a trans couple, a person can walk into a room full of people and just are walkin' in the door changes the aura of the entire event whether we see it or if anybody ever says something, somebody is going to look and notice and it's going to alter, cosmically everything.

Lewis: And you, at some point later, started getting involved in prison work?

Griffin-Gracy: Mhm. In San Francisco. I got involved with that because, I was calling myself "gonna retire" around that time and the guy Alex Lee who was running CHIP at the time was trying to vocalize, he was a lawyer, who was trying to help trans people who were getting these enormous sentences. They were giving a girl a sentence of five years if she had more than four bags of condoms in her purse. Really? How stupid is that? Know what I mean, especially in San Francisco! The hell? So justice and fair play, that shit doesn't exist. You want fair? Here's a quarter go jump on a bus! Cause any other kind of fair don't exist in this world. And so, getting involved with that, it was good to work with somebody who was interested in saving my girls from the prison system, helping them get out of it if they could and if they came out, helping them get a direction and purpose, which I was already good at, cause everything in my life already lead me to that. And so through him I got to be a legal surrogate and could go into the prisons and talk to them privately. Not in a waiting room where people would heckle them and point at them and berate them. Privately in a little office, just her and me and talk to her. And through that I wound up helping so many girls get their sentences cut. Getting stays on different stuff, helping them through the parole board. And then when they come out, helping them find lodging and some kind of employment, scarce as that was. But something. And sometimes that was a success and sometimes it wasn't. You have to help people that want to be helped and you can't save everybody. But you can save the girls that want to be saved.

Lewis: And are you still doing that kind of work?

Griffin-Gracy: No, when I retired and left San Francisco I turned the agency over to one of my daughters, who I raised and trained and taught what to do and she's carrying it forward.

Lewis: And so how long were you working the uh, I'm sorry I'm forgetting what it's now called...the, um, it's the Transge-

Griffin-Gracy: TGIJP; Transgender, Gender Variant and Intersex Justice Project.

Lewis: How long were you working with them?

Griffin-Gracy: I don't remember, over five years, five or six years?

Lewis: What's your life look like in the years since?

Griffin-Gracy: Well now that I'm in Little Rock, I'm trying to get another organization- retiring too- I'm trying to get another agency started to, for the girls that live in the South. To help them stabilize, to know what their history is, for younger girls to realize who's shoulders that they're standing on, for things to be as comfortable as they feel that it is now. Now that they can run and jump on planes with their ID and dress up in the attire that they choose. And shop and live and work and negotiate this society with some relative safety. That there are girls who died, got beat up and murdered and killed for them to be able to do that now. And I know that a lot of these young girls feel that for them it's always been like that. Well yeah, Miss Thing, you're twenty-something fuckin' years old, it wasn't like this thirty years ago. Somebody suffered for you to get here and these are the people that did it. So I want them to know just what their history is. So with the organization that I'm starting, I'm starting this so they can see what that is and can get a sense of pride about who they are. That they're way more than footin' around right now, being cutesy, running into bars or whatever the hell it is that they're doing, enjoy their youth. There's a history here. There's a culture of who we are. There's things about your history to be proud of; that we're not these random things running around like maniacs with nowhere to go, nothing to do. So I have someone working on building a library for me, for GG's in order to show what our history is and then show them. And the child has found transgender people all the way back to 1670. You know and for me, how wonderful to see what a girl had to go through back then. Because at the time women were wearing clothes up to their chin and dresses down to the floor. What an easy way to be a trans woman. So all you had to do was learn how to apply make up and to move softly and delicately and not be a guy and brutally tear up the world as you walk from one corner to another. And so, what that must have been like and what they must have been through and to see them, she's found pictures and stuff to see them. So I think that would be a sense of encouragement because it's way more than color. That's been a problem with all kinds of things but the thing is for us it's way more than color, you know, because with black trans girls and white trans girls, most black trans girls transition early. Cause we have to tune to tune to ourselves and our family and what's going on, so we know at ten, eleven or twelve what's going on and trying to figure what to do to do this and not destroy our family unit. And a lot of the white trans women don't transition till 30 or 40. I met a lady in San Francisco who transitioned at 65 years old and it was just so wonderful talking with her and helping her through it because she'd been a trans person her entire life. And what she ended up doing was, when she would go on job interviews or things for her work, she'd get in drag in the hotel where she would go to and find transvestite groups and run to a meeting at night in the cover of darkness. Well because nobody could know. Then what they do, they do that then they get back before they go home, they burn that stuff or give it away or throw it out a window. Next year they go to another town and they have to buy all that stuff all over again! They never get that opportunity to get something you like and keep it with you back and forth. I've had trans women, older white trans women, who had a suitcase they'd take with them everywhere and one day the wife goes "why you take this with you?" and open it up. And say "You're never doing this again Harold". So with that difference, those needed to be taken into consideration and you can't judge them with "well my life is harder than yours"; it doesn't matter how hard it matters that it's hard at all. And that's what it shouldn't be, it shouldn't be hard.

Lewis: How did you end up in Little Rock, specifically?

Griffin-Gracy: I went there for a viewing of the documentary and it is something about the aura of the city that simply made me feel comfortable and accepted and it had nothing to do with the people or the venue or seeing the documentary. It simply had to do with being in Little Rock. Having been an ex convict and stuff like that, I'm very cautious about my space and as a trans person I don't want anybody sneaking up on me. So whenever I go to any public spaces or venues I sit with my back against the wall and I face the door so I see everyone who comes in, to feel who's a threat to me and I do this everywhere since I got out of prison. And Little Rock, after the viewing, the group took me to some little bar they had an after party thing and they told me to have a seat and they would go get me a soda or something. And I sat down in the middle of the restaurant with my back to the door and when they brought me the soda, I looked at them and the person looked up to say hi to someone who came in the door and I turned to look at this person walking in and realized I was sitting in the middle of the room and the door was behind me and what made me sit here? They didn't issue me to this spot, I walked right in first, looked around and sat there and it fucked my shit up. When I got back to the hotel, I was pacing all night long: "what the fuck happened? Why did I sit there? What's going on with me? What's happening here? Why do I feel like this?" Okay, the next day I flew back to San Francisco, I'm in San Francisco and I'm talking to my lover going "I don't know what the fuck happened back there, that city was really fuckin' weird and it's not even the goddamn people, I need to go there and see what's going on. We're going to go there for a week, test it out". Then talking with him a couple of days later, "wait a minute, I don't ever test out anything, I just leap off the bridge. So fuck it, I'ma move there!" And have been happy as shit ever since. Bought a house, I couldn't have bought a house in San Francisco. The house has a barn, the barn is going to be my organization. We're working on turning that into a comfortable socializing space. I've got my 501c3. Sharon is helping me right grants for funding and I'm going to create a living final place for transgender and non-conforming people all over. I'm going to start with the girls in the South.

Lewis: I don't remember if you said, does the organization have a name?

Griffin-Gracy: Yes, the Griffin-Gracy Historical Retreat and Resource Center. We have a website, it's House of GG's.com. Not G-I or G-E, fuck all that mamby-pamby bullshit. Just G-G.

Lewis: That's wonderful. We could probably wrap up 'cause we've been going for a while.

Griffin-Gracy: Okay I'm good, whatever you want to do..

Lewis: Is there anything we haven't talked about that you'd wanna be able to get on the recording?

Griffin-Gracy: No whatever you asked is fine, the documentary thing- it doesn't delve into interpersonal stuff that you might've asked me but the documentary is a good caption of how I've survived and made it. And who I was and my contribution to my community. And it's a very comfortable and interesting thing, it's got a lot of good reviews. I made it for my community to have so they can realize that they can do this too. I'm not some, I'm no special angel, I'm just

one of the girls trying to make it better for other girls. And to keep my community and gender nonconforming people safe. They may not be trans people but they're fighting the status quo. And things are hard for them and they're fighting this pronoun usage you know, "they, us, we, they, ze". That's just so cool. It's hard sometimes for me to remember but it's hard for people in their families to remember to call their trans son Greta. That doesn't mean I won't get it or that I don't appreciate them for who they are and the struggles that they have. So uh, no I can't think of anything- I think the thing is, if they do see the documentary, to keep in mind what happened to me in my life to me to get that phrase to come out of my face now. Because everything I've said or I'm talking about, there is a history to all of that, which is the part that can't be in a documentary, you know. When they meet me or talk to me or see me or interview me like you did, if they think of something they can always ask me. Because when I see it and I've seen it like 19 times and I go to different places, I watch it every time because something always pops up that I didn't catch before. And knowing that it's me it really wasn't important to me, what's important to me is "Oh why did I say that? Oh God, I remember when so and so did this." and in my head I go on and on and miss half the movie and have to see it again and something else will stick.

Lewis: Well thank you so much for your time, this was really wonderful. Thank you for sharing, this was really amazing.

Griffin-Gracy: God, I don't know child.

Lewis: Thank you, let's turn it off...let's see...