NEW YORK CITY TRANS ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

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INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

BRENDA HOLDER

Interviewer: Anna Keyes

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Anna Keyes: Hello, my name is Anna Keyes, and I will be having a conversation with Brenda Holder for the New York City Trans Oral History Project in collaboration with the New York Public Library's Community Oral History Project. This is an oral history project centered on the experiences of trans-identifying people. It is March...

Brenda Holder: Fourth. Mm-hmm.

Keyes: ...the 4th. April 4th. It's April 4th.


Keyes: April 4th, 2018, and this is being recorded in Crown Heights. Okay. That's all in order. Now let's get to the good stuff.

Holder: [laughter]

Keyes: [laughter] Okay. So can you tell me your name and age?

Holder: Brenda Holder, 51.

Keyes: And what are your gender pronouns?

Holder: She and her.

Keyes: How would you describe your gender?

Holder: Woman.

Keyes: Mm-hmm. Um, when and where were you born?

Holder: Um, South America, Guyana.

Keyes: Guyana?

Holder: Georgetown, Guyana.

Keyes: What year were you born in?


Keyes: Mm-hmm. Um, tell me—can you tell me a bit about your childhood and family background?

Holder: Hmm. Um, I came to New York when I was at a young age, from Guyana, and New York was home. I grew up here till I joined the military, basically.
Keyes: Yeah.

Holder: Mm-hmm.

Keyes: You were mentioning—you told me earlier that you were raised by the community.

Holder: Yeah. Mm-hmm.

Keyes: Can you tell me a bit more about that?

Holder: Um, because I was homeless, and—I met a lot of nice people from the LGBT community. And whereas, you know—Paris Dupree, one in particular, who was my gay mother. And she took me in and guided me and helped me and kept me out of trouble.

Keyes: Yeah.

Holder: And someone that I went to for guidance and someone I looked up to. And like Dorian Corey and Pepper LaBeija and—just to name a few. Mm-hmm.

Keyes: So, um, can you tell me about, like, your earliest memory of encountering a trans person?

Holder: Oh, that was like—hmm. I think I was about 10, 11, in—going shopping in New York with my mother, and passed by two trans women. And they were shopping, and, you know, by their—the way they were talking, um, you know. Which was Duchess LaWong—you wouldn’t know—and her girlfriend. And I met them years later.

Keyes: Oh, really?

Holder: I had the opportunity to meet them, yeah, mm-hmm.

Keyes: Can you tell me more about that?

Holder: We were—they were—I guess they were buying fur coats. And we were just—I don’t know if we were going to an appointment or just out shopping.

Keyes: Do you remember where?

Holder: In Manhattan.

Keyes: Somewhere in Manhattan.

Holder: Mm, somewhere in Manhattan.
**Keyes:** Mm-hmm.

**Holder:** Mm-hmm.

**Keyes:** And then—can you tell me more about what it was like talking—meeting with them years later? Or is that when they were buying fur coats, was years later?

**Holder:** No.

**Keyes:** Oh, okay.

**Holder:** It, um—when I actually met them, through the ballroom scene, and I remember—and I was like, “I know you from somewhere.” And then, [clicks tongue] you know, the memories came back, and it was like—when I told Duchess where I remembered her from, she was like, “Wow! Really?” Yeah.

**Keyes:** Mm-hmm.

**Holder:** It was kind of—it was like—it was like meeting a star.

**Keyes:** Yeah.

**Holder:** Like somebody famous. Yeah.

**Keyes:** Mm-hmm. Did it—do you feel like it really stayed with you?

**Holder:** Yeah, mm-hmm. It did.

**Keyes:** So, um, can you tell me, when was the first time you heard the term “trans”?

**Holder:** Years later. [coughs] Excuse me.

**Keyes:** It’s okay.

**Holder:** Years later. Um, but it wasn’t “trans”; it was “transsexual” or “transvestite” in the ’80s, you know. And later on then there was “transgender” and “trans,” you know.

**Keyes:** Did you find—was “femme queen” used sometimes?

**Holder:** Yeah, from the ballroom scene. “Femme queen,” yeah. Mm.

**Keyes:** Um, I’d like to hear more about your memories from kind of the first time you entered the ballroom scene, and—yeah.
**Holder:** Well, I entered the ballroom scene in 1981. And I walked femme queen performance in one. But it was a magical—it was like, wow. It was someplace you could showcase your talent. You could be anyone you want to be. Your creativity, your passion, you know, how you felt being yourself, who you—your true, authentic self. Who you wanted to—who you saw yourself as, basically. Mm.

**Keyes:** And what did that mean to you in the context of the rest of your life?

**Holder:** Um, well, I was still finding myself. I didn't know who I was, you know. But I guess it guided me, because it was the outlook, because I learn—taught me how to respect myself and carry myself with respect and not let anyone put me down, you know, for anything, and not to degrade me, and walk with my head held high.

**Keyes:** Yes, it's so important.

**Holder:** Yeah. Mm-hmm.

**Keyes:** And do you feel like you've carried that with you since?

**Holder:** Yeah. Mm-hmm.

**Keyes:** So can you tell me about the circumstance—more about the circumstances of your life, maybe when you—around the time you were a teenager?

**Holder:** There wasn't much to tell about.

**Keyes:** Okay.

**Holder:** Not really.

**Keyes:** So, um, what was your—did you have like a religious background at all growing up?

**Holder:** I'm Catholic.

**Keyes:** You're Catholic. Okay.

**Holder:** Yeah. I did—I do believe in God, and I do go to church. And as you know, for Catholics, you can go to church Monday to Sunday, anytime, 9 to 5. And so times when I was feeling any way, I would go—that was my safe haven. I would go sit in church. And one church in particular was the church on 42nd Street across the street from Port Authority. Or the one—the Actors' Theatre Church on 49th Street, yeah. Mm-hmm.

**Keyes:** So, um, I'd like to hear a little bit more about what locations was the ball scene happening in, and where did—you said you won in '81, is that right?
**Holder:** Mm-hmm.

**Keyes:** Um, do you remember where that was or...

**Holder:** In Manhattan. If—I think it was on—uptown, if I'm not mis—yeah. It was uptown. It was so long ago. [hums tune] Decades ago.

**Keyes:** Yeah. [laughter]

**Holder:** [laughter]

**Keyes:** And I just—I want to know, because I think, um—

**Holder:** It was different back then, because, see, ball started about 4 or 5 o'clock in the morning, when people were going to church on Sunday, you know, so—and they happened uptown. And it was like, one side of the street you see church people, and the other side of the street you see the ballroom people, and then it was like—be cautious. Because back then, you know, there were a lot of hate and—bigotry and those words that don't define a person and can degrade a person and make a person feel bad. You know, but then you go inside the balls and it's like a whole different world, a whole just different atmosphere, and you come alive and you feel the thrill of competition. And to—you're competing against your friends, and it's like, “Yeah, come on,” you know, “we're going to do this.” And when you hit the ballroom floor, it's all about competition. And afterward, whoever wins, you win. There was no fighting—there were a few fights, but there was no fighting, basically. And you know, for—true friends can compete against each other without taking it to that next level. So that's how it went. And like I said, my gay mother was Paris Dupree, my grandmother was Dorian Corey. I knew Pepper LaBeija, Junior [LaBeija], Avis [Pendavis], everybody, basically. They were my family, more or less.

**Keyes:** I would like to hear more about those relationships and what they meant to you.

**Holder:** Well, Paris, my gay mother, she—well, he. I'm not going to—because I say “she,” but he protected me and, you know, kept me from danger. Like “Don't do this; do this. Don't go there; go here,” you know. And someone I could turn to and ask for guidance, or if I needed someone to confide in, or even structure, you know, to build me. Because before I transitioned I talked to Paris, and Paris says, “Are you sure this is what you want?” Mm-hmm. I said, “Yeah.” And Paris took me to get my first hormone shot.

**Keyes:** Can you tell me more about that?

**Holder:** I got that from my grandmother, Dorian. She gave me first—very first hormone shot. And there was the Electrifying Grace, who worked at Sally's [Hideaway] and Blue's in—back in the '80s and '90s, and she was my aunt and... They were just good people, kindhearted people, people who wanted the best for you. And I miss them. I miss talking to—I miss talking to them. Because it's not the same, and it's lonely. Because at times when you need that sympathetic ear or compassionate ear or empathetic ear, they're not there, and a lot of people aren't
genuine like they used to be. Mm. I miss them. Still think about them. Because we were a family. Because, see, back then, they—the trans community didn't have outreaches like—there was the LGBT Center, but that was it. And that wasn't for us. It was for others. And we had the pier [Christopher Street Pier], the streets, you know, Washington Square Park. The original pier, not this new one. The original one, when it was cars on one side and, you know, the warehouses and stuff like that.

**Keyes**: Um, I'd like to hear more about the piers and what, if any, specific maybe positives memories you have of them?

**Holder**: Oh, those were the good old days. You know, the cars used to be able to drive up on the pier. Yeah. Park right there, the music be blasting. There was a parking lot that had empty warehouses. You had to be careful where you stepped. Where the—where they built the, um, the walking piers at? Those used to be empty warehouses, not abandoned, but, you know. And—but that was fun. That was—you know, you could hang out all night long on the pier. All—not get bothered by anyone. The police didn't bother you. And you met a lot of wonderful, interesting people from all walks of life. And you became—that's how you became a family. Yeah.

**Keyes**: [chuckling] I honestly wish it was still here.

**Holder**: I do too. Strangely enough, I do too. Because those were the good old days, you know? They had a lot of clubs and—you know, Peter Rabbit's and Keller's and different—Two Potatoes and... Just, uh, it's nostalgic. But I got—I was there to experience it. I take that with me in my heart, and I can smile and say, “Yeah. Yeah, I been there. Yeah, I was there. I lived. Yeah.”

**Keyes**: [chuckles]

**Holder**: Mm-hmm.

**Keyes**: So, um, you know, you were saying that there was a lot of hate and bigotry then, and you were talking about how, also, it was such a family.

**Holder**: Mm-hmm.

**Keyes**: So in—can you tell me in what ways you all would, like, have each other's back and...

**Holder**: Because, okay, you could walk down the street, and you know, heterosexual people were mean. You know, throw bottles. If you didn't look the part or you weren't feminine enough or—you were—picked on or they threw bottles and, you know, or wanted to pick fights. And you know, as a group, we stuck together. You know, one fight, we all fight. We all had each other's back, you know, and protect—not like jumping against each other or running away from—you know, you pick and choose your battles, basically. Yeah. Mm-hmm.

**Keyes**: So, um, were there any negative experiences you had on the pier that you remember?
Holder: No. Not really. Because when I first went out there in 1980, I just sat back and observed everything, and it was like, [sighs] “I feel good. I feel like I belong somewhere.” And it was like, “Okay.” And then, you know, I kept going back and going back, and then I met people. People started introducing themselves, and I met people. That’s how it was. And it was nice for me.

Keyes: And you were saying that it wasn’t until later in life that you came to understand yourself as trans?

Holder: Yeah, mm-hmm.

Keyes: Um, but there always—you always felt that there was something...

Holder: I was always—I knew I was always different, but I didn’t know how. And I always looked like a woman, so... Let’s see, I joined the military in 1984. I came out in ’88. Finished it—my tour was over in 1988. I came home. I transitioned in 1991. And the rest is the story of my life. I’m an entertainer; I’m an actor; um, I help my community. I—I’m here to guide like people—I try to be here to guide like people guided me. You know, for anyone who wants to listen. And I’m not perfect. I’ve made mistakes. I’ve done things and... But I’m only human. So that’s it. You know, I’ve been in documentaries. I was in *Paris Is Burning*; um, *Mirror, Mirror*; a short film, *Walk for Me*. I just did a scene with *Pose*, the new TV series that’s coming out in June on FX. Um—I’m—like I said, I’m an entertainer. I love entertaining because it’s the art, to have somebody—they know you’re not singing live but you’re pantomiming or lip-synching, but you can attract their attention. And I’ve had people cry. I’ve—you know, it’s like, it’s the most exhilarating feeling that you could get, that audience. I love an audience. I love to be me. And, yeah. I can only be the best me today than I was yesterday. That’s all I can be.

Keyes: So how is your—I’d like to hear about your evolution as an artist and as an entertainer.

Holder: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm.

Keyes: Would you—I guess you could say it maybe started in the ball scene? Or maybe did it come before...

Holder: No, I started, um, entertaining first.

Keyes: Oh, first. Oh, I see. Mm-hmm.

Holder: Yeah. Then I went into the ballroom scene, and then the military, then transitioned, but then entertaining, and still entertaining up to this day.

Keyes: Mm-hmm.

Holder: Mm-hmm.
Keyes: And do you feel it’s very central to your sense of self?

Holder: Yes. Mm-hmm. Because—I believe in myself. And I’m proud of myself, proud of who I am. You know, nobody can take that away from me. Good, bad, or indifferent, I’m me.

Keyes: Um, and you were mentioning that you would now like to be a guide for younger trans people?

Holder: Yeah. Mm-hmm.

Keyes: Um, what does that—how has that looked like recently, and how does that make you feel?

Holder: Not everyone is—as far as the younger generation, not everyone—they think—I’ve seen where they think everything started with them, or they’re the first, or they’re this. But you don’t understand, somebody came before you to make it possible for you to do and walk and be who you are, and somebody came before them to make it possible—you understand? Somebody paved the—the road was paved by different people. So in a sense, it’s like, I can’t knock anyone for who they are or who they want to be, and if you choose to ask me and I know I can help you, I will help you, but I would never tell you anything wrong or detrimental to you, you know, and basically... So they won’t have to go through the struggles that I’ve been through.

Keyes: Um, is there anything specifically that you would not want younger trans people to go through that you went through?

Holder: Um, I can’t say offhand, but—because to each his own. What may be good for me is not good for you, and what may be good for them is not good for me, and everything that looks like gold is not necessarily gold. So everyone has to make their own decision, so you have to know what you want in life and—which is where you see yourself and where you see yourself going—and basically try to find your dream, who you want to be. Because it’s not an easy road, you know. There’s a lot of bumps and turns and headaches and heartaches, and it’s just a lot.

Keyes: And so you were saying that it’s not what it used to be.

Holder: No, it’s not.

Keyes: And what—how has it felt over time to see that change?

Holder: Because—it hurts, because back then, you know, the—I was—I call “the gir”—I say “the girls.” The girls stuck together. They weren’t about “Oh, I’m better than you” or, you know, “I’m going to attack you” or this, that, or the other. You know, they were more a family. You know, we had Show World, Show Center, Sally’s; you know, there was 14th Street; there was Edelweiss; there was, um, the pier again. You know, there were different things where it wouldn’t be norm to anyone else, but it was normal to us. So now these days, I see a lot of young
kids fighting and jumping each other. But if you fight against each other—society's already fighting against you, so now you're fighting against yourself too? Where does that leave you? Nowhere. Nothing from nothing is nothing. Be something.

**Keyes:** Mm-hmm.

**Holder:** Mm-hmm.

**Keyes:** Um, do you have any memories from Sally's?

**Holder:** Yeah. I was Miss Sally's 1992. Mm-hmm, sure was. I was crowned Woman of the Year '91. Was it '91 or '92? One of those years, yeah. But Sally's was where we entertained. It was on 43rd Street. It was the lower club, which was Blue's. Then they had a fire, so they moved to the Carter Hotel. And then—it was a big stage, and you know, people came from all over the world to see the best entertain—female impersonators, the best entertainers, and that was us. And it was really, really nice on 43rd Street. And you know, you got to hang out—this was before—what was his name?—Giuliani. Then he took over and everything got shut down, and you know, they rebuilt 42nd Street and the Port Authority and stuff like that, and took away everything, at least for us. But now it's for tourists. Mm-hmm.

**Keyes:** Um, so who else did you entertain with at Sally's?

**Holder:** Let's see. Um, there was a lot of different people. Paris Dupree, Electrifying Grace, Dorian Corey. Um, just to name a few, there was Myra; she was the hostess. There was Jesse [Torres]; she was the manager. There was, like, Hawaiian Angie. There was Gina Germaine. There was Christie Black. A lot of different—people. A lot of wonderful people, wonderful. Consuela Cosmetic, um... It was—you just had to be there, [chuckles] honestly. Mm-hmm.

**Keyes:** Um, so your shows and your performances—like, what was your approach to putting those together, and what would it look like, where...

**Holder:** My thing was, um, what I feel. Like, I'd get a song—if I—depending on what I—how I feel, what my mood is, was what I presented to you. You know, if I wanted to dance, I'd dance. If I wanted to strip, I'd strip, you know. I wanted the song to be glamorous, I was glamorous, you know. Um, my objective was to be able to stand still and captivate an audience and make you believe everything that I'm lip-synching is actually coming out of my mouth. And then with me, it was like, “I know that’s supposed to be, but no, it’s not. It can’t be. No, that’s, uh—but...” You know.

**Keyes:** What were your romantic relationships like in this time?

**Holder:** I didn't have many.

**Keyes:** Mm-hmm.
**Holder:** I was—relationships were different. Because—[sighs]. You love who you love, and you’re faithful. At least, that’s how I think it is. And you can’t help who you love. And what may be good for me is not good for anybody else, so... It’s—I don’t know what to say.

**Keyes:** Mm-hmm.

**Holder:** It is what it is.

**Keyes:** Mm-hmm.

**Holder:** Mm-hmm.

**Keyes:** Um, at this time, who did you party with?

**Holder:** Who’d I party with? Everybody. [laughter, then coughing] Excuse me. Everybody. There was Tracks; there was Midtown 43; there was Better Days; there was the Garage; there was—oh my God, there was Escuelita’s. There were so many different clubs, you know. Everybody. Mm-hmm, yeah.

**Keyes:** Are there any parties you remember? [chuckles]

**Holder:** Um, I worked with Vanessa Williams one New Year’s Eve at Sally’s. Not Vanessa Williams. Um, the porno star. What was her name? Vanessa del Rio? Yes, her. And, um, you know, when they did *To Wong Foo*, John Leguizamo and them used to come into Sally’s. That’s where he got his character, Cheetah Los Bandito—Latin ballroom drags, you know. Cheetah Rod—whatever her—the name was. And—yeah, people used to come out. I met Grace Jones once in the Village. Met Freddie Jackson. I met a lot of s—I met stars. I knew Phyllis Hyman. Mm-hmm. Yeah, mm-hmm.

**Keyes:** And how have you—have you felt you’ve been able to maintain a sense of community even after Giuliani started closing a lot of these places down?

**Holder:** It’s hard now. But now you have social media. Before, you know, if you wanted to know about somebody, you picked up a phone, or you went to their house and checked on them, or, you know, you met up somewhere. Now it’s “Oh, let me go on Facebook” or “Let me message you” or, you know... I’m sitting right next to you. Why do you need to message me? Why you got to text me? You know? It’s—I guess it’s, you know, everything evolves, but sometimes it’s like it takes away from—what’s the word I’m looking for?—face-to-face. You know, you met people face-to-face, and you’d get that interaction. You know, it’s not behind a computer screen or a keyboard. It was, you know, you went out and you were like, “Hi, how are you? Nice to meet you. How are you doing?” So I’d get to see your reaction and see if you’re genuine or if you’re human or—you know? Now it’s “Send me a picture” or yada-yada-yada or “What are you—” Come on, whatever happened to the art of dating or courting or just be meeting up as friends? Let’s go to dinner; let’s go have drinks; let’s do girls’ night; let’s do—let’s just go dancing. I love dancing, so... Yeah, stuff like that.
Keyes: So speaking about social media and the internet and Instagram...

Holder: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm.

Keyes: ...we’re in this moment of increased trans visibility.

Holder: Mm-hmm.

Keyes: How do you see yourself in this moment?

Holder: Meaning?

Keyes: I guess first, before—

Holder: [coughing]

Keyes: Before, you felt your family and your community created this world together.

Holder: Mm-hmm.

Keyes: Now that there is more limelight...

Holder: [coughing] Excuse me.

Keyes: ...and maybe more mainstream...

Holder: Mm-hmm. Oh, more mainstream.

Keyes: ...how do you feel...

Holder: Because you have to understand, tran—um, being trans was taboo back then. And you know, it wasn’t as in your face or out there in the open. We were there, but we weren’t... You know, it wasn’t like anyone could do anything, like it is now, you know? You had to be very careful—[coughs] excuse me. It’s just—there’s a lot of exposure now, and some good and some bad, and then, you know, there’s a lot of people who—a lot of trans girls getting murdered, and for whatever reason or whatever situations, but... I wouldn’t wish death on no one or harm on anyone. And I just want everyone to be careful with themselves. [coughing] Excuse me.

Keyes: What’s your dog’s name?

Holder: Scruffy.

Keyes: Scruffy.
**Holder:** That's the little man of the house.

**Keyes:** Aw. [chuckles] Um, how do you—how do you identify with LGB communities? Like you were mentioning how you didn't feel that the Center was for, maybe, trans people. How do you feel... Yeah.

**Holder:** What do you mean?

**Keyes:** I'm sorry. Um, let me clarify.

**Holder:** Well, you see, now they have a lot of different organizations. You have like—you have Destination Tomorrow; you have Exponents; you have, um, NYTAG [New York Transgender Advocacy Group]; you have Brightpoint; you have, um, CK Life [Community Kinship Life]. You didn’t have all of these things back then. There was only GMHC [Gay Men’s Health Crisis], the LGBT Community [Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual & Transgender Community Center], the Door, you know. Those three outlets, you know.

**Keyes:** Mm-hmm.

**Holder:** And the streets. So...

**Keyes:** And what was it like being trans in those spaces, or...[inaudible]

**Holder:** [coughing] It wasn't—I didn’t go there.

**Keyes:** Mm-hmm.

**Holder:** I didn’t—I didn’t go. Because the Door was like—it was for, like, runaways, but there was for, like, gay teens—males. And you were trans, they put you with them, so...

**Keyes:** Mm.

**Holder:** ...it was kind of awkward or... And the LGBT Center was mainly—I'm sorry to say this, but—for white people. And GMHC is gay men.

**Keyes:** Mm-hmm.

**Holder:** So where do you fit in?

**Keyes:** Mm-hmm.

**Holder:** Nowhere. So you look for—you look for family and get acceptance where you felt accepted at.

**Keyes:** Mm-hmm.
Holder: What's that, Papa? [smooches]

Keyes: [chuckles]

Holder: Dubba-dubba? What?

Keyes: Hello. Um, do you have any, um...

Holder: [coughs] Why am I coughing?

Keyes: Do you want some water?

Holder: No, I'm good.

Keyes: Okay. Um, do you have any intergenerational relationships with trans people or LGBT people?

Holder: What do you mean?

Keyes: Um, like currently, do you feel like you have any close relationships with, like, younger people?

Holder: Everyone—I'm everyone's auntie. Everybody's auntie. Yes, I'm everybody's auntie. "Auntie Brenda" or, you know, or "That's my sister" or—but mainly I'm everybody's auntie. It's like I said, I'm a—I'm looked at as one of the elders of the community. Because if you notice, um, the thing behind trans is like, trans weren't supposed to live past 24. I'm 51. So I'm kind of like the matriarch. And I know there are other peop—there are other trans women older than me who are still around who are my matriarchs. So that's how it is. Like in the ballroom community and on the scene, you know.

Keyes: Um, so, um, how has being trans related to other aspects of your identity, whether it be religion or your race? How have you felt like it's played—

Holder: I'm me.

Keyes: Mm-hmm.

Holder: [coughs] I can only be me. I'm sorry. It doesn't matter—before I was anything else, I was me. I'm a human being, before anything else. I went to church—I went to church before I transitioned; I would go to church after I transitioned. I was black before I transitioned; I'm black after I transitioned. So it doesn't make a difference. I am human. So don't put a label on me, or don't—because I don't sound like the norm or my voice is deep or... You know, I don't want to be—what's the word I'm looking for?—passable? Or I want you to know there's
something different about me. Question, you know. I want you to question. It's like, “Hmm. I'm not sure, but...” Use your mind before you use your mouth. Think before you speak. You know?

**Keyes:** Yeah, I feel like I could relate a little bit to that.

**Holder:** Mm-hmm.

**Keyes:** I feel like I, um—I don’t pass really, you know.

**Holder:** Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm.

**Keyes:** It's a whole con—whole thing, but, um...

**Holder:** Mm-hmm.

**Keyes:** I always—I often wonder...

**Holder:** Have you ever traveled?

**Keyes:** Not a whole lot.

**Holder:** You want to know—and from my hand to God, the only place that people know that I'm trans is in New York. Mm-hmm, true. I've been carded. They were like, “No, no.” I've been to LA, Florida, Europe... “No, no, no. You have such a beautiful, deep voice,” and “Oh, da-da-da-da-da-da. Oh! Ah! Wha?” I never used to speak. Went on vacation with my girlfriend to Florida long time ago. And so we were coming back from the airport, so, you know, they’re like, “Miss, can we help you? Miss, you're so beautiful. Da-da-da-da-da-da-da.” So my girlfriend's like, “She doesn't speak. She doesn't speak.” And I wasn't speak—and I wouldn't speak because of my voice. And then one guy was like—he just kept—till I said, [whispering] “Leave me the fuck alone.” You know? And it was like, “You can talk!” Really? Dumbass. And you know, now I'm comfortable with myself and I don’t give a... I accept I'm—this was when I was younger, but now I’m good with me. I like be—I love me. I ha—like I said, I have my ups and downs. I suffer from depression and PTSD, but it doesn't define me. And I deal with—I try to deal with it the best that I can. Sometimes I find myself isolating myself from people because I don't want to—my negative energy at that moment to pass on to somebody else. You know, I'd rather keep it to myself or stay to myself until I can focus it to where I'm able to control what's going on in me, and sometimes it's hard to do that.

**Keyes:** Mm-hmm.

**Holder:** Mm-hmm.

**Keyes:** Um, I think I'm just going to pause for a second. So have you had any experiences with police or law enforcement?
Holder: Mm, I tend to stay to myself, and I don't travel in crowds. So, you know, police have stopped me before and asked me for ID, you know. Or “You look like somebody,” and I don't look nothing like the person, and when I show them my ID and I show them my military ID, and like, “Oh, we're sorry” and, you know, “And you can go on about your business,” XYZ. And there's a lot of—sometimes there can be hatred with the police. I've seen it. And it's not right, and they got to do better. They have to do better.

Keyes: Um, what are your everyday safety concerns?

Holder: To be aware of your surroundings. And if it doesn't feel good, don't put yourself in that position, you know. Trust your inner judgment, you know. You get that gut feeling. “This is not right” or “This is not for me,” then try to avoid... Like they say, people, places, and things. Yeah.

Keyes: Um, you had mentioned earlier that maybe around the early thousands...

Holder: Mm-hmm.

Keyes: ...that it was a difficult time for you, and you were seeing friends pass away?

Holder: Yeah. Mm-hmm.

Keyes: Um, can you tell me more about that?

Holder: They were people that I grew up with and people who helped make me the person that I am, who guided me and protected me, not in a physical sense but in a mental sense, and, you know, right from wrong, and what to do and what not to do, or to be careful, or to be cautious, and don't put yourself in situations where it can harm you—harm—you can get harmed.

Keyes: Have you had any experiences with substances, and have they ever been—have they been important in your life?

Holder: Substances, yes, because I self-medicated due to the fact that I was losing—I built my own family from the LGBT community, and I was watching a lot of them passing away, and losing them was hard for me because of the bond that we had built. And it hurt to the point where I started self-medicating and—till I was numb behind that. And—but I—I'm clean; I don't do drugs. Social drinker, you know. And drugs and being trans doesn't mix [chuckles]. It's hard to say it, but it doesn't. You know, because we invade our bodies with the hormones and, you know, stuff like that, so they don't mix.

Keyes: You mentioned earlier that, um, your grandmother, Dorian Corey, gave you your first injection. Um, can you tell me more about how, after that moment, you were able to access medically transitioning?

Holder: Um, let's see. The—I got—I'm a veteran, so I get the majority of my health care and my hormone therapy and mental health issues addressed at the VA [Veterans Affairs]. Then it was
hard because it was su—you know, it was a different time, and it was mainly “sir” and this, that. But now it's more acceptable and accessible, so, you know.

**Keyes:** When did you start being able to receive, um, HRT [hormone replacement therapy] medications at the VA?

**Holder:** Ninety—hmm. Ninety-eight?

**Keyes:** And you said you started, uh, transitioning in ’91?

**Holder:** Mm-hmm. But that was black-market hormones. So, yeah.

**Keyes:** Can you tell me more about that? That process?

**Holder:** Black market—black market? You know, you bought them from your girlfriend, or, you know, there was somebody who sold hormones, and you bought it from them.

**Keyes:** Mm-hmm.

**Holder:** Mm-hmm.

**Keyes:** Um, so I’d like to talk to you a bit more about mental health.

**Holder:** Mm-hmm.

**Keyes:** Um, and that you said you once self-medicated with substances, but what do you feel are your current coping mechanisms for depression or any other mental...

**Holder:** Oh. I don’t know, because it’s—I do—you know, there’s a suicide hotline, or there’s—sometimes people will see you as these health-care providers or mental-health providers, and they'll see you and they'll look at you, and they're like, “Oh, there's nothing wrong with you.” But then you're just looking at what you see. That's superficial, but what's wrong is on the inside. So then it draws back—I draw back, and then I have to reevaluate what's transcribed. And then I go into shutdown mode, and I isolate myself and I stay home and—the crying and, you know, the “Why am I here?” Or “Where do I go from here?” Or “What do I do?” Or “Who really understands me? Or does anyone understand me?” You know, “Is there hope?” You know, “Can I get better?” Or then you get to the point which is “Leave me alone. I just want to be at peace.” You get tired of fighting, and you just want to be at peace and make peace with everything and just take it from there.

**Keyes:** When you get—because I can very much relate...

**Holder:** Mm-hmm.
Keyes: ...to what you're saying right now. Um, how do you feel you get yourself to come out of these isolations?

Holder: I don't know. That I don't know.

Keyes: You don't know.

Holder: I have a therapeutic dog. You met Scruffy. And I take him for walks. And I don't like the winter, because it's—the depression really sets in, and I don't like the cold. The summertime, you know, is more active, or you can try to be more active. But depression is always there, and you never know when it's going to sneak up on you, at any given moment. Any given moment. And it's something that is very hard to control. And if you're not strong enough, you can end up taking your life. Yeah.

Keyes: So outside of the VA and you mentioned the suicide hotline, what have been some other important sources of support for you over the years?

Holder: Um, let's see. There's Exponents. Um...

Keyes: What kind of support have you received at Exponents?

Holder: Exponents, they taught me how to cope with living, and a lot of different things—job readiness and dealing with a lot of social stigma and—can direct you to places where you can get help. So, yeah.

Keyes: So, um, are there any other sources you’d like to talk about?

Holder: There's GM—GMHC is good now. And like I said, there's CK Life, Destination Tomorrow. Um, there was the Audre Lord Project and, um, BOOM!Health, United—Harlem United... Different agencies now that a lot of trans people can go to. There's Housing Works, you know, where you can go and get assistance that you need. Mm-hmm.

Keyes: So, um, to wrap up...

Holder: Mm-hmm.

Keyes: ...if you wanted people to hear one thing from you, what would it be?

Holder: I'm a survivor, not a victim.

Keyes: And if there's one thing you want to be remembered for, what would that be?

Holder: Let's see. What do I want to be remembered for? That I was there. I was there. Yeah. Yeah. I was there, and I'm here.
Keyes: Um, is there anything else you'd like to add?

Holder: Be true to yourself. Live your own truth. Your own truth. Do not let anyone define who you are, because only you know who you are. And believe in yourself. Don't let nobody take anything away from you. If you believe it, you can achieve it. God bless everybody, and I wish everyone well.

Keyes: Thank you so much.

Holder: You’re welcome.

Keyes: Can I give you a hug?

Holder: Yes. [laughter] [muffled grunt] I hope this was helpful.

Keyes: Absolutely.

Holder: Mm-hmm.