NEW YORK CITY TRANS ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

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INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

AKASHA BARKER

Interviewer: Sebastián Castro Niculesci

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Sebastián Castro Niculescu: Hello. My name is Sebastián Castro Niculescu, and I will be having a conversation with Akasha Barker 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 July 12th, 2018, and this is being recorded at the New York Public Library offices in Midtown Manhattan. Hi Akasha.

Akasha Barker: Hi.

Niculescu: How are you doing today?

Barker: I’m fine.

Niculescu: So, I guess to start off we could just start talking about where you’re from, where you were born?

Barker: I am from—I was born in Boston, Massachusetts, um, year 1979. I was brought here to New York City with my mom at the age of 5 and I basically grew up here in, uh, Brooklyn New York and New Jersey, actually, at a young age, so I know both New Jersey and New York as my—where I was brought up.

Niculescu: Was there a specific reason for this shift from Boston to New York?

Barker: Um, I had no place to live, I lived with my friend of many years I considered my sister. We had the same trans experience and basically I was kind of like a runaway at one point, then I was an emancipated minor, and then I was, um, ended up just living my life, you know, as easy as can be with other people like me.

Niculescu: Do you have a first memory?

Barker: Of what specifically?

Niculescu: Just the first, like earliest memory you can think of.

Barker: The earliest memory, which I’ve kept to myself for many years, um, being a... After birth, I could say, it was always in my mind like I feel like I remember the time at birth, and then after that, which was just warm cozy, and just seemed peaceful and great. And then being born and seeing the world, and I was always fascinated with the trees and the—I was always I guess looking up, cause I was being laid down, never I, I analyze things as I talk them out sometimes—

Niculescu: Yeah.

Barker:—uh but, the trees and the peacefulness up in Boston, and the parks, and the trees and the shifts from different places, like I—I was pretty interested in my surroundings, the peaceful beautiful surroundings, and, um, from my understanding I was told that I didn’t talk for many
years. I wasn't interactive with people, or, um, I really stayed to myself a lot and kind of just paid attention to certain things. But I was not interactive with other kids. I was really, um, I really didn't have an interest for other people. My mom said that she took me to—to find out if I was okay. And the specialist said I was just bored, that I was just, like, not engaging because I was not being stimulated mentally. So I was kind of, like, I guess I finally decided to talk at some point [laughter]. But I kind of felt like that for years, like I think a lot more inside my head than I do outside. On the outside, speak out, I'm now currently more talkative on the outside.

Niculescu: So you're kind of like describing the neighborhood in Boston where you originally grew up, was there a specific section that you grew up in?

Barker: Um, that I don't—because I was so young—

Niculescu: Yeah.

Barker:—and I've gone back there a few times after leaving, but I really don't know where. I remember just certain things about Boston like the stone streets, um, of Boston shopping area. I remember certain trains, I remember the bus when I was being taken to school. I don't—I remember the park, I remember the fairs. They had carnival fairs nearby me but I don't know, I don't remember so much about Boston except for the peacefulness.

Niculescu: [laughter]

Barker: The different—the fun and stuff like that, I mean I remember it was a time that I was pointed out for being different, just it wasn't so drastic. I was pointed out in class by some boys for being different, but I can't remember different how. But it wasn't like something really big but I do remember that that was kind of weird to me. In my mind, you know, I didn't really care but it was kind of like, I remember the teacher having to stop the situation.

Niculescu: Was that in elementary school?

Barker: This was pre-k [pre-kindergarten].

Niculescu: Pre-k, oh wow.

Barker: Pre-k or like a daycare, yeah it was pre-k.

Niculescu: Okay, so then, um, how was—you mentioned not talking at the beginning, was that continuing into beginning school?

Barker: Mm-hmm.

Niculescu: Okay, and so what was your early experiences with school like?

Barker: My early experiences were, um, I mean, first coming to New York City it was... school was kind of like, um, how do you say, it was fine? Where I was—where we first moved to—my
mom moved around a lot, in the beginning years. It was fine when I first started, the first school... I used to go to school by myself. I used to get up and walk to school up the block, my mom would go home—I mean to work, and I would go to school. School was only like one block away, it was just around the corner. I was fine in that school, that first school, my second school I guess I transferred there in the... I think first grade?

Niculescu: Okay.

Barker: And that school was, was fine but they said I was bad. So I guess I don’t know what I—I don’t remember what I did that was bad, but they said I was bad. Like talking out in class and I’m supposed to be quiet, or—that was a block away too, the school was a block away—or if I’m late or something, I think that was the reason why. When I got more concrete, um, memories, it was the third grade, I had transferred to a school in Brooklyn, PS 137 [Public School 137], and basically I got picked on for, um, all the way into junior high school. By the same people. [laughers]

Niculescu: Oh wow, okay.

Barker: So it was my elementary school friends—not friends—but elementary school, all went to school up the block which was a junior high school. I was bullied because I was a nerd, from third grade on up.

Niculescu: A nerd in what way?

Barker: Um, geeky and non-interactive with people, like I stayed away. Even during lunchtime I would go to the library or the computer room and stay there and do art, or do, um, play with the computer and stuff like that. I was pretty anti-social.

Niculescu: Yeah. And you mentioned moving around with your mom—what was your mom doing, in terms of working at the time?

Barker: At that time, my mom was an immigrant.

Niculescu: Okay.

Barker: And she... I don’t know if she was on a temporary visa or something, but she was finding stability. And, um, the places that she worked I wasn’t really sure, like I think I know them but I’d rather not talk about them—say—you know

Niculescu: Okay.

Barker: But my mom was basically an immigrant from another country who came here and stabilized herself.

Niculescu: Okay, um, do you mind mentioning which country?

Niculescu: Yeah. Okay. So what was... we talked a bit about life at school, what about life at home around that time?

Barker: Life at home was kind of... I was quiet, basically. And it was pretty much confusing. I mean, I grew up poor, my mom was poor. My mom didn't have much. There would be time when we didn't have lights, we didn't have much to eat, and um, we just—I was just used to it. And so outside would be kind of like my relief, um, but also inside I was capable of just doing anything and being okay. Doing anything as in art, or playing with paper, or playing with whatever caught my attention.

Niculescu: So those were the ways that you found relief, through art and through...?

Barker: Mm-hmm.

Niculescu: Did those continue as you grew up?

Barker: Mm-hmm, yeah, it definitely continued. I ended up getting an art award from school, music awards from school. I even got like, a bond, from the New York State Education Department, um, for my accomplishments and also I got a scholarship into an arts school museum that was here in Manhattan.

Niculescu: Okay.

Barker: Um, so it pretty much... yeah, it was just like my—it was something I enjoyed and it was like, paper and pen? You can't go any—you can't go wrong with that, like you could do a lot of things with just paper, paper... I would watch Lambchop's—Shari and Lambchop, that was the show that was on with the puppet. I would get gratification from watching stuff like that and be able to create something new. Books, Reading Rainbow, stuff like that, it helped me survive. It helped me survive mentally, it helped me survive not having friends and made me, um, okay with being me.

Niculescu: So then, you mentioned that... so this is all what's starting around elementary school, right?

Barker: Mm-hmm.

Niculescu: So maybe we could go a bit forward into like, you mentioned junior high. Were there any—you were with the same people so you were living in the same place?

Barker: In the same neighborhood.

Niculescu: Okay, the same neighborhood.
Barker: It was really a close-knit neighborhood, of southerners, and I really like that about the neighborhood so growing up there, and I'm coming from a Caribbean background, it was slightly different because my—to my parents, that was something different, being from another country. American ways were different, so my mom tried to keep me close to home all the time because of the outside influences. Like on the block—which I didn't know, which I never understood at first—was crack houses and drug houses, like I didn't know. And a friend in class would be—like if I made a friend in class, and then I'll be visiting their house which is on the same block but across the street, and I didn't know that his—maybe his family member was, his mother or father were in a crack house or something. So I would be yelled at and banned from going there, and my mom would be very upset but I wouldn't understand. It kind of became conflictive and kind of like, I can't make friends in the neighborhood, my mom would be very strict about that but I didn't understand. Today I understand, but when I was younger I felt like nothing mattered, that's just my friend—just because of whatever you're talking about, that's my friend though, what did my friend do? So there'll be weird stuff like that to me not understanding but the neighborhood was basically close-knit families of, like southern families, that stuck with each other and they were friends with each other on the block. They never tried with me but I was the oddity, so it was like destined.

Niculescu: [laughter] Did you grow up with a kind of Caribbean tradition?

Barker: Mm-hmm.

Niculescu: And what was that like?

Barker: Caribbean food. I did not listen to American music, so I did not know what American music was for many years and then I discovered 106.7 lite fm, at the time, with—what's, um, Jon Bon Jovi, with—oh The Infamous, you know Barbra Streisand, um, Cher... I only heard that music but I still didn't know like, ethnic Black culture music. And I didn't know it was literally surrounding me in my neighborhood. I heard it in class for the first time—my teacher played it and it was a song that they had us listen to but I didn't understand. Where I came from everybody was like, “What's wrong with you, how do you not know who Michael Jackson is?” [laughter] I don't know! How do I not know who Tevin Campbell was? So it was kind of, like how do I say—cause I didn't even know my mom was an immigrant. I didn't know what was the difference between me and them, I just thought it was just, my family’s my family and we're all different. But I never understood that—and my mom was very strict to a lot of things regardless, and I was fine with that. But we ate different food, you know the Caribbean rice curry, stuff like that—I knew nothing about southern smothered chicken, pork chops or anything. I knew nothing about collard greens and things. So it was basically different in that, aspects of when others would talk about it I wouldn't understand. I guess it was like the icing on the cake about why I was odd, or a nerd in a different way. I was also smart, so people would try to have me do their homework and stuff. It was a big bullying time. It was a, you know—I'm a little traumatized by a lot of my growing up so this is kind of a first for me, like try to remember everything. But um, my gender was... I was molested, at five, by relatives—my cousins. And that was the pivotal point, at five. Female and male cousins. It was scary because I was already going
through something mentally about how I felt, or the things that I did, but I didn’t understand what I was going through. But I was molested by these cousins and I was threatened if I told my mom that my mom will be upset at me, so in my head I’m thinking my mom will be upset at me telling her this stuff and it was my fault. I didn’t know what to do. So I just, um, I dealt with it—but I also, like in elementary school, that was like my separate mind. My separate mind didn’t understand what was going on inside of me because I felt like I wasn’t myself. I felt that I was not expressing who I could be or who I want to be, and I kept it to myself because, inside of the Caribbean household or in the Caribbean, it’s not right—like you could face persecution in the Caribbean back then just being feminine or whatever. I would get called out about my femininity at a young age. I wasn’t so much feminine but I would do things with girls and boys, and so I was—boys didn’t understand why I would hang out with girls and play double dutch, but I didn’t understand either. I thought everybody was free to do whatever they wanted to do but as age—as you get older, people start putting rules on you. “What are you doing?” “That’s wrong.” “You’re not supposed to do that.” Or, you know, “Come play basketball with me.” “Come play football with me.” “Come play—why are you playing house?” “Why are you hanging with her?” It just used to confuse me a lot...

**Niculescu:** [checks the time, distracts Barker] I was just checking the time.

**Barker:** Okay. It used to confuse me a lot, and that was always in the back of my head and why I was quiet, on one spectrum because I didn’t understand me. The breaking point was gym, junior high school, and that was the pivotal point where I did not want to go inside of the locker room. I did not really want to play sports. I did not want to... anything like, anything pertaining to—also I still didn’t go to lunch, [laughter] I still was inside of the library, I still try to get away from there or I would sit by myself and I would just endure problems but I found music as my outlet. I just felt like I was... that gender, that was the point where I became more aware that I don’t want to go, you know, that I don’t like masculine things too much, or I don’t want to be around other boys, I don’t want to be around other boys at all, in that way. Not that I liked any of them—I didn’t want to be around any area where I would have to take off my clothes. So it was kind of weird, it was that point that I—that everything kind of halted for me, like what’s happening? Wait, why am I going to the lockers? Or, you know, I could get dressed at home, how about I just—and I would put my clothes underneath and just take them off, and then go and put them back on. I would not use the locker to take a shower or anything. It was just kind of weird but I still didn’t know what was wrong with me, I knew I was just doing certain stuff and that was different for people to understand. But I was trying to keep it so... enclosed, like hidden from everybody that, it just came off weird to other people. I excelled at education though. I excelled at science, math, everything else, but social became difficult—being social, through my years, it became the most difficult part.

**Niculescu:** I’m wondering—you’re talking about the ways in which you felt different or people perceived you differently, but not really having a name or an identity for that yet and I’m wondering when you started to get that, or see, or understand certain vocabulary for what you were experiencing?

**Barker:** So all those years, elementary to junior high school, I would take my—excuse my
language—ass-whooping from my classmates or whatever, and I sucked it up and kept it moving. I also, I was writing. I was becoming more close with spirituality, close with people—I would read a lot of books, my step dad would have me read a lot of books, my mom and step dad both would have me reading a lot of books—and I became more... like I would have empathy for people with cancer, or things like that, or runaway children—I would read all these books about sadness. Shakespeare was one of my favorite books to read, and I would start writing. I would write a lot of poetry but the poetry started to get dark. It used to talk about being in the shadow of a wall, you know what I’m saying? Being connected with sadness. I remember it kind of—I did it for a class one time and my mom was called to the school, and it was a big no-no. My mother also didn’t know that I was being bullied in school. So there was just a lot of sadness being stored inside me, so when she did come the teacher said, “Well you need to teach your child to fight.” My mom did not believe in fighting. I listened to my mom because I had to come home to my mom. My mom was very strict and I’m there for one thing, and you’re talking about fighting? I don’t want to fight. I don’t want to have to fight. So that was brought to my mom’s attention and all this other stuff, and then I realized that I was lacking in masculinity, in some type of way. That was in elementary school, sorry to go back to that [laughter].

Niculescu: No, of course.

Barker: That was in elementary school that I was lacking in some type of way. When I wrote that poem, when attention started to come to me, but I didn’t think that anything was wrong— I was literally, I guess I was going through... I don’t know. I felt like that inside and I expressed it through writing so my mom became more aware of—monitor my writings. She’ll take it and she’ll rip it up, or she’ll like “Stop it!” and she’ll get mad at me, and she’ll get angry at me and etcetera, it just became more difficult. I was also getting involved—I started playing instruments in elementary school, and I played the trumpet, the trombone, the tuba, the drums, I was in the marching band, I was playing the glockenspiel. I would start to do stuff to take my mind off of things, so I would go to after school programs, and I learned knitting, I’ve learned sewing, I’ve learned instruments, I would go for vocals, and then into elementary school I started to do the singing thing—got into the main chorus band and I would, um, I was in the musical plays. My mom didn’t know about any of those. I didn’t tell her. I just did—like I was doing stuff to take my mind off of things, so the music and the after school programs, they kind of helped me not think too much about my problems. I would work—I started work at the library in the neighborhood, and that’s when I started reading the books about patients, cancer patients, runaways, and then I ran into a book about gender. I ran into a book about transgender sex change. I kind of highlighted it and was like “Wow!” but I thought it was like a story, and I didn’t believe, but I was like, wanted to believe. I started to put pieces together bit by bit, but not understand what I was paying attention to, because the word wasn’t transphobic— transgender [self correction]. It wasn’t that, I don’t remember what it was, but it just described that. When I would work in the library, I was shelving and I would run into different books and stuff, and I would just start reading them. So I didn’t understand—what was that about? But then I would see Michael Jackson and his look has changed, and I would say “Okay, wow, so a person can change themselves.” Then I got—I had a hernia, I was born with a hernia, and I got surgery done to it. And I was like, “Wow that’s real, you can actually change yourself.” I started to see things on TV and that were like—but it wouldn't be about gay or transgender but there
was one time they talked about Jones Beach and I was like “I got to find Jones Beach!” I didn’t know where I was going, but this girl, who was—who knew me from school, she asked me, she said, “Do you want to go to Jones Beach?” So I don’t know if she was just playing—this was after graduation of junior high school—I didn’t know if she was just playing with me but she said she wanted to go. I said, “Yes!” and I waited for her at the train station, and she never showed up. [laughter] I was like, I was trying to figure things out and then I finally went to, I went on my own. But I got lost. I ended up on that train, looking around and looking at the people, and I ran—I saw somebody LGBT experienced—LGB, LG... yes B [self correction] experienced, from the flamboyancy. And I was like [whispers] “I'm going to follow them.” [laughter] And I followed them. Like a creep. And I, I stood there and I watched through the mirrors—not the mirrors, but the glass of the um, trains—and I would just watch the reflection and I would get off wherever I thought they were getting off at, in Manhattan because now I'm looking for the Village [Greenwich Village]. And I could hear them talk, “The Village.” They didn't really go where I thought they were going, I don't know where they were going, but then I saw them go into a place and it had a flag. I was like, “Wow!” The flag—I associated the flag, and I was like “Okay.” It was like a store, a store with postcards, and so I went in there. I would start to visit the place all summer. And then I would come back to the area, but still didn't know where the Village was, I didn't know what the Village was I just knew there was a Village. I would just go to stores with that flag or try to go to places with that flag, and then I found this—the LGBT Center, it used to be the Gay and Lesbian Center before, and that's what I find. I went there and it was kind of like, “Yay!” But everybody was older. I didn't—it was weird because I didn't identify as gay, nor did I feel that way, but I felt like I was home amongst people who were comfortable with me. But everybody was older at the Gay and Lesbian Center, and they had classes I didn't understand about, but I would go into the writing class and I met somebody who was from my country who wrote about being a lesbian and... but she was raped, by several men... and how she expressed it through her writing. This was me learning about what it is to be an LGBT community at that point. This is me learning from older people how real issues are, and that was my first perspective about what was going on. And then I met people who liked me, who asked me to come to the Village, down to Christopher Street.

Niculescu: [coughing] Sorry.

Barker: No problem. I never understood what that meant, Christopher Street, and i'm like “no, no, no”, then one time I finally went down with them. I discovered a youth center for LGB, and that's when I really started to—everything started to make sense, it was like putting pieces of a puzzle together and things start to happen. So if you're in the wrong place, things won't happen, but when you start to find pieces to the right puzzle then everything starts to happen, and everything kind of accelerated at that point. And that was the age of fourteen. It was the age of fourteen. I graduated at thirteen, I started discovering, you know, and it took a very long process before understanding. So that whole year after graduating junior high, I felt like that was adulthood like “Yes! I'm going to be an adult.” That was when I started to learn more about sexual orientation. I still didn't understand it, and then I... my first experience, sexually, I was—I didn't know it was going to be my first experience, but, um, I was speaking to this guy and I was like “Okay this is interaction,” with people and with a guy and stuff like that, and I'm trying to discover, and I went to his house and he raped me. It was the most painful situation. I was
just sent right out the door, like I thought I was actually going to hang out with—you know, but he was an adult and I should have known better. I just was like, “Okay.” And I just got sent out the door and it was, you know, it was a very horrible feeling because like, just immediately upon coming into his house he just immediately did everything. And, um, I left, went home, was like—I didn’t like this. I didn’t tell my mom or dad. I was like, whatever, and I just said, “Okay, well maybe I need to try this again.” So I said, “Okay let me go try it again.” I aimed for the sexual experience instead of the understanding, the following time. And then that was—that was not satisfactory, as in there was no feeling behind it, sexually, and I thought that the person could have been attractive, you know he was very masculine and stuff like that, and I wanted to try it. But it wasn’t, um, satisfactory at all like, I had no feelings in the context of like—I had no connection. Going to that center, I ended up dealing with a partner who was around my age, who was considered youth that went to the youth center, and that person became my boyfriend and that person I had sex with, and I did not like it. It was not... me. That person didn’t understand—I wanted to separate, and they were nice, but they were masculine and everything—it was like a lot of people were coming at me in that perspective but I didn’t feel comfortable. Then one guy, I went to his house—and this is the sexual part—I went to his house, and like, he was awesome, he was nice, he was everything, and we had intimacy and it felt great, and I felt he was awesome, and he was very very masculine but he was very caring and a caring person. It took him awhile to mack me [laughter] in the span that I felt was a long time, but he had a lover, which was masculine as well. I was in their house and the partner wanted to fight me, and this was the first time I’ve ever been in a situation with lovers, or they’re together and I’m imposing and I’m there and that person wanted to be with me, and the partner’s like “No” and the person is masculine—and I said, “Oh wait, I’m not like that.” I don’t like gay on gay, masculine on masculine. And I found that weird—masculine on masculine, I felt like it should be feminine aspect with masculine. So I was like, for me, I felt like it should be feminine aspect with masculine, and I felt really odd, just kind of left and didn’t speak to him again. Within that time, that’s kind of when I had to understand me. I still had never saw a girl like myself at that time, I still hadn’t seen a person who was of trans experience. And then, come to find out that my ex boyfriend was trans. He...

**Niculescu:** The first one?

**Barker:** He was trans—somebody asked me, do I know where she [emphasis] is at? And then then tell me where to find her. And I said, “What?” And my curiosity got me [whispers] I want to see her. I want to see her—I want to see how she looks. And then they pointed me to what is called the stroll.

**Niculescu:** Okay.

**Barker:** Um, which is where the girls all prostituted to make money, in the city. And I went there looking for my boyfriend slash girlfriend, ex girlfriend slash boyfriend, and I said, “Okay, I’m looking for her” and that was the point of relief. It was like, I finally saw girls like my—like who I wanted to be like. I finally discovered, finally discovered everything I wanted to be at that moment. I was so negative before and then when I saw them, I became happy—inside. Like all my sadness and everything as a child, my isolation, my bullying, nothing mattered anymore. I
found peace within myself by just seeing this alone. And that was in the year of changing fourteen. That was the summer—

Niculescu: So this was all the summer of being fourteen?

Barker: And I transitioned, immediately. And I started taking hormones, off the streets, immediately. I started taking shots, pills. My mom, she thought I was gay, because the person—my boss at my job told her that I was. And my mom, at that point—because she didn't know anything I was doing before—my mom at that point kind of just, kicked me out of the bedroom with my brother and more came to the conclusion that I was trying to, that I was going to molest my brother, or something—rub off on my brother or something. I was brought the scriptures, the biblical scriptures, and said that, you know—persecuting me. And I was told to sleep in the raw basement of the house, and it was just cold and just no walls or anything. That's when my life kind of just, changed. And then I just had to kind of deal with it, but I wasn't going to stay in the raw basement so I stayed out on the streets, and I went to a friend's house, and I started just staying by friends' house. I just knew I didn't want to go home. I didn't tell anybody what was going on, I just didn't want to be home. At that point, oh my goodness! Did I let you ask me any other questions?

Niculescu: [laughter] I mean, I have a few but I'm really just interested in where you're going—but just maybe, [coughs]

Barker: Yes, I apologize.

Niculescu: No worries at all, I guess maybe I have a couple clarifying questions. So the stroll, where you first saw women like you, where was that?

Barker: 14th Street and 8th Avenue. 14th Street and 8th Avenue to 9th Avenue... That was it. In, um, the meat packing district. And, um, that's where all the toss-always were. But they were beautiful and amazing, but that was their struggle. They were definitely not going to get employed and they were definitely not going to, um, be able to just live normal life and so you were told, “You have to do what you have to do. Cause ain’t nobody else gonna do it for you.” And the thing about it is that they helped each other, so some of them will be roommates and they will help each other, like, live life comfortably. And that's where I saw it, and these people, these women were amazing to me. They looked amazing and it didn’t—they made working the streets look glamorous. But, you know, and this was it—that was it, 14th Street between 8th and 9th.

Niculescu: I'm just, I'm really kind of inspired by the way you're talking about finding the stroll and having that be a really pivotal moment for you. So if you could just like, describe the scene the night that it happened?

Barker: It was like this, this raw bar, okay? So it was like, I came down and I was walking down to 14th Street and I'd never been there before—I'm walking down—I didn't know where all these places are—which they're just in blocks away from each other, but I had no idea, and the center
is on 13th Street—so I had no idea, but it was at night. So what I would do is I would get up, and I would—I mean, I got up that day and I was with another friend, because come to find out that this person was dating me and my new friend—we called each other sisters at the time, well, bristers [laughter] because we were not transitioned but we were feminine. We found out that we were dating the same person at the same time, and we were kind of offended like, wait a minute. And then because she—he at the time—would tell us that they wanted to get back with us and everything and they’re flossing off—they were a football player!

Niculescu: Wow.

Barker: Exactly, like a, you know. And we’re like “What?” And we’re like, tinier than them, we’re like “What?” And we’re both the femmes, like—then come to find out that she was on the stroll. So we went up there, we went together, and we were looking, and we were—we were being so mean. Like, “We’re going to find her!” and we were saying her name out loud, and like from masculine to feminine and we were saying it back and forth, but we were happy! We were skipping down the block [laughter] we’re gonna find and it was weird, like, we both were happy. And we start going down that block and then we got there, and we didn’t—we never found her. But we found [laughter] the girls, and we were like, [sighs] and for both of us, we both started to become more effeminate. We started to, like, up our game. I didn’t know what was going on with her, and I know she didn’t know what was going on—she’s now she now, my friend—we didn’t know what was going on with each other, like, we just knew. We found the spot [laughter] that we saw all these, you know, amazing—and we could talk about them, like, seeing them... underneath that, that, the light from the street light, but how beautiful they were. They were expressing themselves and they looked amazing and they—like you couldn’t believe that they had a past. And we were just like, “Wow!” And we would just stand from a distance, “Oh my goodness, are they really? Her too?” and we would just keep it to each other... it was happiness to just find... glamorous! They were glamorous! They were out there not, not in like hoochie-mama, they were literally glamorous with gems, buns going into their hair, long lashes and nothing street walker like. They were giving you glamor, in the environment, or giving you somewhat glamorous on the street. They were hanging it with each other in groups. The lights, and the street, and the way—I mean this place was the dumps, but the way the light shined in certain ways—there’ll be like this club over here, not a—it was like a bar—and a bar here, and they were the most biased bars that you could ever find, and they did not like the girls. But the girls would just walk around and, “Hey honey, how are you? Hey girl, [kisses]” it was just a unity. They even had some girls driving around in cars, and it was just—everybody was so... looked so happy. That’s when you knew that you can make your own happiness. That’s when we were like, “Wow,” I was amazed and that’s when the answers started to come to me. Eventually, I remember I got a job, I found, um, organizations to get training from. And school to get my GED, because at that point everything was really bad at my house with my identity and, um, the—I basically became an emancipated minor by the age of sixteen. Through the help of the court and through The Door, The Door organization over by Spring Street, which is another place that I used to go to, um, to escape and just be in—be around positive energy, regardless. The LGBT center helped me find GMHC [Gay Men’s Health Crisis] which is where I got certified to be a teen facilitator by the age of fifteen. I wrote the first trans brochure—trans resource brochure ever, no other organization had them. So it was like, in this time I was just discovering
stuff but I also noticed that there wasn’t anything for me. GMHC, I mean they were, that was when Arbert [Arbert Evisu Santana?] was there. [Arbert] was the, the, I would call her the mother of the House of Latex, and I—another friend introduced me to [Arbert], and [Arbert] took a liking to me and asked me if I wanted to do some training here. They would, um, get certified and I’m like, “Yeah, totally! I want to get certified in something.” Let me get the, um, what do you call it, the certifications… and then they would also give you money! So, it was like, “Okay great!” And then I get money for finishing it, or coming to the trainings, and so of course I’m going because I don’t have no money and I don’t have anything. So then I got a job as a, um, outreach worker at Positive Health Project. And I got into a school called… Safe Space [Safe Space NYC]? It used to be on 41st, 44th or something.

Niculescu: Okay.

Barker: And I would go to the GED school, so I would learn about different resources through different organizations, not specifically for trans but for, for, um, gay and lesbian at the time. So nobody really acknowledged the girls, and I only used to get dressed at night. It was like, okay, okay, and I started to make accomplishments within our community. I started to do outreach working to that same stroll, and then I found out that it was also on 42nd Street, a stroll. I started to discover that—how much bigger… these places was. I would provide condoms. It was weird because I understood that there was an epidemic, and I understood about using condoms, but I didn’t understand how much at risk my community was. I mean, at the time, it was—we wanted to be part of that community. I didn’t understand what they were going through, I would just see the glamor. I was working for the organization as an outreach worker, I would be there all the time and I would be going there—it was also a needle exchange program. That’s why I got introduced there, because also they did needle exchange for trans. But it wasn’t big. It was also for safety of transmission—transmission safety, being able to prevent transmission of anything through blood, through needles and stuff like that. It, you know, it opened my eyes to more of what trans community was at risk for. We had—we created these groups for people to come to. For girls to come to. Where there was no groups. I started going to different places, and I’m handing out condoms, and I’m just happy to see more girls. I’m walking around and I get to be myself, and I get to be—because like, I was, I used to call myself androgynous, and I was just the androgynous look. So I’m like, “I love myself, I don’t need anything, I just want to get my change,” and that’s all I wanted, was my change. It was like everything I knew—that’s all I wanted and that’s all I needed, I just, I’m growing my hair and I’m going to get my change. That was it, and I just started—I would work in the, I would go down to the Village [Greenwich Village] and I would pass the [inaudible] and I would go to the stroll and I passed out the condoms, and then I was arrested. That was the most amazing thing, to be arrested, not because I did anything—my first arrest—not because I did anything, because I was trans and I was in a trans stroll environment, but I was walking around with my ID, with my bag, passing out condoms, and I was arrested, and I didn’t understand. Me and another person, um, and we were in jail and I went to Central Booking and I went to Canal Street—over by Central Booking I guess that was Canal. I had to bend over, and I had to spread my legs, and I had to have a picture taken of me and I thought it was the most hideous picture that a trans could, like—I looked, in my head, I looked so horrible. [laughter] I was like, “Oh my god look at this picture!” And all I kept thinking about was the picture! And then I had to drop my pants in front
of all these men, and it was just so demeaning. I was arrested for solicitation, and I fought it—I fought it, like I was surprised and everything, my job helped me fight the case and it was dismissed. Come to find out years later that that was a false arrest, it was just to obtain numbers for that night and everybody that was arrested, um, received a lawsuit amount. I missed it, but everybody—yeah, because I was between my transition and I didn't have a steady home and everything, and I didn't get notified so I couldn't receive information about what—but everybody got a large lawsuit out of that, who was made aware that it was just false, um, a false arrest for attaining numbers for their division.

Niculescu: Like just filling a quota?

Barker: Yeah cops have a quota that they have to fill out and that's when we started to find out about that. So when they get that quota, they—it keeps their division open, so that's the sad thing for cops, but other people suffer because of it. So that was my arrest! But I got into that environment—I kept going back and I started giving out condoms, and I was considered the condom lady. [Laughter] And I started—yeah, I was the condom lady. I would take off my drag but I would go back to the organization and get dressed, or go inside a bathroom and just start like [whispers] “Okay I'm getting ready.” Unfortunately, at that time, um, I met another person who was just my friend—like I didn't want to be with anybody, I was happy, I was just being able to transition and everything, and I was still kind of lingering at my mom's house because I didn't have a place to go yet after being emancipated it just happened so quickly. I was kind of at my mom's house, I would go to other houses and stuff, but I was kind of consistently just working and getting my life together even though my mother didn't understand what I was going through. I still was trying to do positive things and make her be aware that I was doing positive things. I started—I slept at the door, I slept at the door on the carpet by the entry of the house. They would make me sleep there, because I wasn't going into that basement, but at least I got to sleep by the door. It would be cold, snowy days, everything, but it was like I wanted to prove to my mom that no matter—I'm still me, and I'm still trying to do positive things, however that worked out, you know, whatever. I worked at this organization and I was being, um... One of the guys that I met at a ball, which is the ballroom environment community, which I loved, um—one of the guys that I met, I was his friend and unfortunately I didn't know that he was really like, stalking me... And you know, I'm like sixteen—I'm fifteen changing sixteen when the emancipation happened I was sixteen, he was around from fifteen until I hit sixteen. This person who was my friend and would know all the things I'm doing in my job and everything, I was helping the community, I'm doing all this stuff... He liked me. And I didn't know that he liked me. But he loved me—he loved me, like he would ask me for relationship advice and everything, but I was oblivious to people who liked me, like in general anymore—I was just oblivious, I was just happy, like I found who I was. It was never about trying to have sex with anybody or do anything, it was about finding me. And I finally found me. That was just the solution for so much. He, I... there was a little situation where somebody called me and was like, “That's my man.” I was like, “Oh no, no no no, I'm not—that's just my friend you can have him. No, I'm not about that.” I tried to let him go and he... I tried to tell him, “Okay, no I don't want to be...” And he showed up to my house. And I never told him where I lived at.

Niculescu: Your mom's house?
Barker: My mom's house. I never told him where I lived at. He told me to come outside, and I was like, “I don't want to deal with you, just listen I'm not a part of that.” And he said, “You better come outside, now.” I came outside, um, he said, “I know where you live,” and he threatened to hurt my mom, or my dad, and I... I'm Caribbean. I'm already having issues. I'm already trying to find myself, I'm having my own life outside of my house. The last thing I'm doing is bringing somebody to my home, my family's home, who does not believe in what I am. My mom was pregnant at the time with my baby sister, and I'm already the problem person, and I... I went out the door—because you know, this was back in the day with landline phones—I was like, “Hey,” and he pulled out the blade out his mouth, and he punched me in the face. And I saw snow [laughter] like the poltergeist, like the TV screen when it's blank, old TV screen when it's blank, when it was like [imitates sound]—I saw snow. And he said, “You're coming with me” and he meant it. He pulled that blade out of his mouth and he said, “You come to work with me.” I walked away from home and didn't return back for years. This man, um, basically kidnapped me and pimped me out for four years. I couldn't leave him. He held me at his... another house, and, um, sent me out to work every day, and I just lost myself. I was working at the organization—like he, I tried to get away from him and he'll wait outside of the job, he knew everywhere I was—he stalked me. He knew all of my moves, jobs, my school, everything. Come to find out, even people who I interacted with would tell him—and I don't know if they would tell him knowing what I was going through, they would tell him where I'm at. I even would leave with them and try to escape him, like... I was scared, and his sister knew I was scared, because she even—he knocked down like a whole wall frame trying to get to me, that's how strong he was. And you know, I'm small, I was really small back then, like really skinny and small—I only weighed maybe a buck thirty, a buck twenty, I don't even gain weight. Here I am—I was shorter too, I was 5' 9” or 5' 8” or 7” but I was short... yeah I was about 5' 7” or 5' 8”. I was short, he was 6' 2”, 6' 3” or something, he was big. This was just my friend! This was supposed to be just my friend, and... after that he knew everything. He knew my job, my this, my everything—he just knew everything about me, and I couldn't get out for years. I was scared for years. I was scared to say anything, I mean I've even tried being in front of the cops and that—I found out later, like I finally analyzed the situation later like, oh, that was during the Mayor Dinkins [David Dinkins] reign, where the cops didn't care about anything and they let crime just go, and, you know. So I was one of those people that was so happy when Giuliani [Rudy Giuliani] came in, I was like, “Yes!” Not knowing that he tarnished like all of New York, like he also changed it in a bad way. I was... I was mishandled and I had no freedom. I had nothing but a prayer. Every day, just praying, and making money for somebody, and being dragged up through everywhere, I'd be so tired after coming from off the streets. I didn't want to be on the streets. I didn't want to be trans and a statistic, I wanted to be trans and help my community at the time. I wanted to be trans and do something bigger and help. My life was ruined—not ruined, but it was... my youth was just taken away from me. My childhood, that was just... everything just kind of aligned itself where, I may have not said everything growing up, but I endured situations from home, growing up. I endured situations not because of gender identity, but prior. Then I endured situations in school, and I never expressed it because... it was like a challenge between home and school and I just felt like that was my life, and so I was quiet through that. I tried to find myself—at one point I finally did, and then I fall back into something that I was already getting at home. Feeling... being abused. Being that abused situations in so many environments
to going right into it with another person, a person who saw my vulnerability and I'm already broken as it is, so you could just keep beating down—beating the bush they call it, and so...

When I finally escaped from him was I was nineteen, he was arrested on the account of murder. Warrants and everything, like, they all just finally got him. And I... I ran back to my mom's house—it was the only place I knew where to go, and that was at nineteen, and I didn't tell her what happened, I just came back. I didn't know how to explain any of that. So I went back in there and just kind of followed the cycle all over again, going back to people who... who didn't understand me or my lifestyle, and didn't understand this transition thing, and didn't understand... [sigh] I don't want to be like—mention anything about my family, but it was hard—I'm trying to say it in a better way—it was hard for them to understand me. So I wasn't considered a real person but I have no ill will towards them, I understand that they didn't understand—but it was hurtful, what I had to endure. It's just, you know, I know it gives—it's like giving excuses, but it was just... I had to get out—I had to get out of one bad situation and the only thing I could think about was family. I went out of one pot into another pot and I still try to keep my head up high, and be mistreated... and I ended up going to friends and not having the right support, doing all the wrong things... and I don't want to be—I know it was our survival and this was a thing, so I'm going back to the streets, I'm not finding security. I kind of just endured that for years, until I just finally... until I just finally kept trying, and... I kept trying and trying and trying and it was like I knew—I did not know where to go, and I didn't know the shelter, which was... the shelter was just not treating us right. I didn't really know anything about it, but it was like... I tried to go to the youth shelter and they would just... nobody knew how to—to address me. It was so demeaning and I didn't understand and I was just being hurt. So no matter where, which way I was going, I didn't know where to go, except, okay, the streets is what I have to survive. I ended up finding an apartment—finding a room in a part of Brooklyn, and I had a job and everything... I kept trying to do positive things, trainings and all that other stuff, but I would have to go to the streets sometimes to make money, to go to school, to have something to eat, to not be a burden on others, and it was just... confusion. And then my house was on fire New Year's Eve, and it was like one thing after another. I went and got street silicone placed in my—not literally off the streets, but I went to a underground street market for silicone to feel more... to be what guys wanted, and to make more money, and it affected my health, and I... it triggered systemic lupus in my system, and that was at the age of twenty. Everything just kind of went downhill from there, my health digressed. I didn't know what was wrong, I didn't know it was the silicone because so many other girls have gotten it, and then that's when I realized that there was another epidemic that was out there, and it was an underground epidemic where... I've watched my girls die, get mistreated, get beaten, get murdered, all on the spectrum of trans to survive to be ourselves, and have no place to go. The only place that we did have was the stroll. Saying “the stroll,” it's not only that it was a stroll to us, it was a place where we found each other, and it didn't matter about us working, it mattered about us hanging out with each other and finding solace in each other, and meeting with each other and knowing the exact place where—

Niculescu: Having community.

Barker: Yeah. It was our, our version of our Village. And it didn't matter if the cops wanted to arrest us, or whatever, you know we'd just go across the street—it didn't matter if we didn't
make no money for the night, it didn't matter anything. We met, we ate, we helped each other out, it didn't matter. We—this was our meeting point, this was our village, this was our environment, and then the cops just started becoming more aggressive and started to just, just... when I say police brutality, it was police brutality. You know, the streets are starting to get cleaned up more and, you know, it was just hard for us. Because when you’re dealing with all that trauma and then you're trying to find a job, and you’re trying to find a place to belong, you’re trying to survive, you're trying to stay in a home and you—you're at risk of losing your home so you have to go to the streets because you need to eat, nobody's trying to give you a job, nobody's trying to give you education, like they judge you even because you’re not—your gender marker wasn't changed, and so those were the things like, I, I was like, “I have to help with this,” or stuff, or then we let people know, this is what we need. I—it was hard. I was even arrested for going inside of a women's bathroom. And the woman found out—she didn't know at first, but then she realized and she called the police, and I'm inside Penn [Pennsylvania] Station and, you know, I was completely embarrassed. You're getting me arrested for, for going into the women's—where am I supposed to go? And this is after the silicone and I'm showing the cops like, where am I supposed to go? Like, do you see me, do you see my body? I don't, I don't pull out to go use the—I don't know that way, and they were... they didn't care. It was—that was the environment that I had grown up in. That was my... my tall tale, my um... I was there enduring so many problems from different angles, the denial of school, work, myself—the denial of school even though I had a high grade. I got a high score—highest they’d seen in a long time, but because I was not identifying as male, they denied me the, um, the resources. They denied me the school, they denied me stuff just because of that.

Niculescu: Was this in the GED program that you were a part of?

Barker: No, I got my GED! I did get my GED, on my own. I studied one month—like, even though I came out of that bad situation I studied one month, on my own, and got my GED. I was trying... so nineteen hit and I was trying to get into other programs, I tried to get into Riker programs, and I would test and I would do everything—because I wanted to get my life on track, I wanted to stop being judged, and they still, “Hold on, you're going to have to come to the office, we're going to have to see you, can you please give us your ID” and everything, and I'd be slowly shoved right out the door. I didn't... jobs, everything. I was just so hurt from all those situations. I just... I got through them, I eventually, like... went into a temp agency, and I went in as me. I shaved all my hair off, and I said, “You're going to judge me, for me.” And I went in, hoping that this will kind of help me to get my life together, and I went in as androgynous as I am, and I went in there and... I was given an opportunity from the temp agencies. As long as you were available, they needed you, and they didn't really see—it was like I was me, so I was being more bold and I was, you know, no hair and everything, skinny and everything, and I gave model. They just didn't see anything different so they were giving me opportunities and I was working for the biggest names here in New York City. John Coleman, a Rockefeller, um, the Leona Helmsley Building, and oh, [whispers] I don't know if I should have said that. [laughter] But I was given real opportunities, real experience, real... something of foundation to me becoming better. And it started to push through, and I became employed.

Niculescu: And what age did you start with the temp agency?
Barker: Um, twenty... twenty two? Twenty two.

Niculescu: Okay.

Barker: Before that I went into a training program by the, um, community courts. They had a job training program that I saw they had a flyer for, I went in there and I took that training for office—office manager—office specialist. So I worked in their own court environment doing filings, doing mailroom services, doing stuff for the courthouse and doing stuff for—they hooked me up with an internship at the C.L.R. James Institute, I almost forgot about it. I worked at the C.L.R. James Institute and I started doing positive things, and I just kept going, and I kept finding as much good things to do and just kept going and going and going. I started to get the real foundation and it didn't matter about my gender and didn't—the Leona Helmsley Building, they hired me, [whispers] I don't know if I should've said that. But they had hired me and they gave me a position, and I grew within that position, after almost dying—and I'm sorry, I kind of skipped that part. Um, the silicone had got into my lungs, travelled into my lungs and capsulated, and it also created—which we didn't know at the time—the systematic lupus, and come to find out within my own family I have genetic... it's a gene—autoimmune issues... is a genetic thing in my family from surgeons disease and stuff like that. I had symptoms as a kid but nobody understood it and so I just dealt with the issues, but when I got the silicone in my body that's what really triggered it. So I was paralyzed—two years later, it attacked my lungs and I became completely paralyzed, nobody understood what was wrong with me. So they... they cut me open in different ways and tried to see what was wrong, then they found the silicone in my lungs and they realized that it travelled through my bloodstream, and they said I was going to die, in the hospital. They said I wasn't going to make it past the hospital. And I almost gave up, on life, and I said “No.” I said, “God,” in my head, to myself, I said, “God, if you allow me—” because at the time I couldn't speak, I was like a stroke victim, I couldn't speak I was just paralyzed and I couldn't tell them anything, so they had to do what they had to do. I couldn't walk, I was just bedridden. They said it, they said I was going to die in the hospital, a person who has had—is like the people at 9/11, all that, they... silicone pneumonitis is what they said I had, and I was incapable of breathing for myself, like they had to put me under so much pain killers to restrict the pain that I was having, but they said I wasn't going to make it out. And I remember this was during the, I think the re-election for Bush [George W. Bush] at the time... I think it was... and Mr. Kerry [John Kerry] was in it.

Niculescu: So this was 2004?

Barker: Probably, maybe—was it 2004?

Niculescu: Yeah, yeah.

Barker: Okay, so I'm missing a spot [laughter] I'm missing a spot, but that was... oh, the fire. The fire happened, I became homeless, and I was out on the streets and they sent me to a shelter, and in that shelter they were calling me “him, his” this, that... I was being threatened by people who lived there, and made fun of the whole time. This was just my encounter just
coming in for a few days, and they had tried—the people who worked there disrespected me, and the... the police disrespected me and they assaulted a person that was with me because they were cis male, and they identified that with—but they were my partner. And they attacked him, on Randall's Island, and we couldn't even go to the police to say anything. They said, “A cop—” it was the 125th precinct—they said, “A cop make a complaint against a cop?” and they laughed. At that time, when that happened, and I was hurt by that and I left him—not I left him, we left the shelter immediately, but I left him because I didn't want him to endure... consequences of being with me, and it hurt me to see him be attacked just because I was trans. After that, I just, I left and—I actually left and went to Florida. I got sick because of smoke inhalation, I started to feel worse and that's when I came back to New York and I ended up in the hospital.

Niculescu: So how long were you in Florida, overall?

Barker: Um... I don't know. It was the fire, and then... I did the GED first, then the fire—I got my body done, then I got the job... I got my body done, I got the training from that, um, the community office there, then I got the... the first job I got was at ADAPT [ADAPT Community Network / Currently the Essex Prevention Coalition] which was an organization down in Brooklyn, A-D-A-P-T and dot-A-dot-D-dot, because there's another ADAPT, which is I think insurance or something like that. I worked for an organization which is, um, drug prevention and intervention training where I guess, I did more training at the Red Cross for my... being able to teach others about HIV/AIDS awareness and other 101... HIV 101, 102, stuff like that. I worked there, and that's when the fire happened. In between that time and when I left, and then came back. So it was that first, got out of that bad relationship, went into that sad situation, ended up on the streets but still trying to make it, went and studied on my own, got baptized in between that, took my GED test, got it by twenty, and, um, ended up going and getting my certification because you need your diploma in order to succeed first in New York City. Then, I—instead of doing the nonprofit organizations—because in between that time I was trying to do nonprofit organizations and realized that it wasn't going to help me, that's when I went into corporate and I said, “Let me do corporate,” and that's when, um, I was... coming back from Florida, going into the nonprofit organization, and that's when I was paralyzed. Did that make sense? The timeline. [laughter]

Niculescu: Yeah, yeah, the timeline.

Barker: The timeline, some of them wasn't mine anymore to have. I kind of just got lost in the streets. So a lot is because I had no foundation or no security or no home.

Niculescu: So nothing to like, measure it by?

Barker: Right. So when I came back and I was in the hospital, and it was that Bush - Kerry [George W. Bush - John Kerry] run, it was the Bush - Kerry run, I was in the hospital at the time. I was paralyzed and they said I wasn't going to live past there. I was in the hospital for a month, and I—that's when I made the prayer, I said “God, please keep me—” and I will live. Because I was still... before that, I was sad Akasha. I was trying to be optimistic but I was more pessimistic
because of how life treated me thus far. After that—I guess when somebody tells you that you're going to die, you kind of, just... I didn't even get to live. That was the pivotal point—the epiphany, that I wanted to live. I said, “God if you—” in my head I said, “God if you allow me out of this hospital, I will start to live life.” And I left, with my legs still feeling numb—I had no feeling but the pain killers and everything that they gave me in order help me with my breathing, it gave me breath but I still didn't have feeling. So I went, and I would kind of wobble [laughter] and I went back to my mom's house, again. Of course, that is not—wasn't a good idea, but it's what I needed. But it—the stability, in my mind, is I know they're stable and I know they don't do bad things, but I know that they don't agree with me. But I need to do this. So I went back there, despite knowing what problems may happen, and I just immediately went into the temp agency and started, like, “Here I go, here this is all I have, I need your help, please—" calling everyday, signing up with all different organizations, and Randstad [Randstad New York] being one of them, which is not too far from here, that was my temp agency, and they helped me, and then, um, professionals from nonprofits—these places, these temp agencies work, at the time. I started just pushing through, and this is when temp agencies really worked and they had big jobs, and I went in there and I was there. It was—just get myself together, get myself together. Let me try to see if I could afford this, to just have it taken away—let me try, hoping that one day I could try, but still trying to just live life, like if I die within this time at least I tried. I started to just, like, accept the world around me and start to look at the beautiful things all over again as when I was that kid, five years old—younger than five, in Boston, watching the trees and everything. I started to appreciate the... what's around me. The trees, the stars, the moon—I would go to the park, I would... I met somebody who also helped me—a partner—who helped me look forward, to look at everything and try to enjoy life. We would also go to the library together, this one right here.

Niculescu: The Schwarzman [Stephen A. Schwarzman Building]? Yeah.

Barker: Right here. And I would pick up Spanish classes, and I would just—I had to have a sense of normalcy. Because even though I went to the Village [Greenwich Village], and I did all of that, it still separated me from normalcy—what everybody else experiences—when I've only thought about how harsh life treated me on those streets, and the people, and losing friends and sisters all—these girls that I considered my sisters—and just seeing murder and stuff like that, and fighting clients—when I worked on the streets I fought, I've been attacked, I've been robbed, I've been raped, I've been held by gunpoint, I've been... that was the streets, that I didn’t get to—that I didn't mention. That was... I've gone without clothes, money... wearing the same outfit every day and washing my underwear out just to—and just changing shoes, or whatever... not being human. Feeling like an animal. That was—I think that was what I felt like, all those years, an animal—guided and told what it is that I could and cannot do. When my life was going to be taken away from me, I finally became aware that... I am human and I need to live life, not as everybody says I have to, as I want to. The job I was at, I met celebrities, and I met designers, and I met—they would say, “Well why is it that you’re not pursuing your dream?” And I couldn’t tell them—I didn't even want to say anything about gender or anything. They said, “You need to pursue your dreams,” and these were dreams as a kid—my writing, my directing, producing, um, music, everything, singing and stuff. It was so weird because when those celebrities visited that building I was working for [whispers] the management—I don't know if I should be saying
it—but I worked for the management office, and the management office everybody needed our help. We had to basically take care of this building that was the same size as Macy's. This company gave me an opportunity as permanency and they loved me and they kept me on permanently, and they hired me, gave me my yearly salary, and I'm young and like I—I'm going forward because I'm thinking positive and I'm seeing positive. And when I did that, I met all these celebrities that just came to the building—Regis [Philbin] and Kelly [Ripa], not Kathie [Lee Gifford], but Kelly. Um, Iman's husband, um, Springsteen—was it Springsteen? Iman [Zara Mohamed Abdul Majid].

Niculescu: Wait, [David] Bowie?

Barker: Bowie! Yes! Um, um, encouraging—people who have so much and treat you, like, so respectably—they respect you. They don't look down on you. They have so much—I've met so many people that have so much, and it was so funny because, rich people treat you like... a normal person, and talk to you, engage with you, like a normal person. It was like, the middle class will treat you like... beneath you, like you're beneath them, like you're not relevant. But all these people I would interact with, designers, everything, they thought I was so nice, so cool, so everything, and kept saying, “Pursue, pursue, pursue.” I said, “No? I need security.” And I finally left corporate at... I finally—within my mind, within that time, I'm already knowing that I'm going to die soon, and that was on my mind. I was getting sicker and I was getting sicker, and I would have more symptoms and more things would happen, and I just wanted to live my best life, all that I have left, from trying to be me to living, just living, and seeing the good in everything instead of the sad and the negative and the mean, and having this positive mentality. I would go around and I would try to pass on positive, and just like—these people that were mean, I would try to be that happy person and then come out, and “Oh my god,” and “oh, everything will be better just think about doing this,” and encouraging others. I decided to go to Thailand, because I was ready for my change, I said, “I don't want to die without being complete.” I don't want my casket that they say, “Oh, we've got to figure out what to do with her body.” You know, like, I didn't want people to say, “Oh, we're going to bury her as a man.” That bothered me. And I said, “If I die any day and I'm by myself in my house—” because I was by myself in my house, and I was alone for all these years, I still was with my partner but we lived separately, and I would be alone a lot but I had time to think and I just had time—like I said, “I don't want to die alone,” but also “I don't want to die not being complete,” with people identified me, and I didn't want my family to have my body and just say, “Oh, this is what—” you know, just based off my genitalia. And I said, “Okay, I'm going to get my surgery,” and I was like, “okay cool. Let me do this,” I went and got my, um, surgery—went to Thailand, I booked my ticket the year before, um, 2008, and I sprained my ankle and I had a hairline fracture and I couldn't go that year, so I made the decision to go the following year. I was just like, you don't get an opportunity, and I have the money and I'm sending it to the doctor and I'm going to do this. And I did it. I just, I left my job, I listened to all those people who kept giving me positive affirmations and I went—I left my job, and miraculously I got... I had all the money for my doctor, and my ticket, everything was great and done, and I went and I got my surgery, and I came back. When I woke up, I was so happy. Then I said, I could keep doing this, I could keep trying, I could keep looking at all the positive and just keep trying, and just, you know. And I did, I went into school when I came back—I went into, um, for my hair license—are we near
Niculescu: Oh, no, I was just checking.

Barker: I got my license for hair and I... it was actually my second time going for my license, um, I had my license when I was nineteen—I forgot... that was the nineteen year old, when I was at my parents house, as the nineteen year old, the first thing when I came back was try to go into school. And LIBS [Learning Institute for Beauty Sciences] was one of the schools, and I finished it, and I accomplished that, but I was thrown out from my family's house, just upon graduating—I didn't get to go to the graduation. I had everything, and accomplished everything, and they basically had all my hours and they threw it away. Because you have to take the test, the licensing test—I had just graduated the school, but didn't pass the test. So I got everything just taken away, and I had to do it all over. I said, “You know what I'm going to do this, going to work off the books and pursue my dreams of being a singer.” You know? And, um, when I came back from Thailand I did that and I said, “Okay, I'm going to work in hair, and I'm going to do this, and I'm going to work off the books,” and unfortunately that didn't work out the way I thought that it was going to work, from leaving a salary job to a, um—a salary job to a non-salary job, to an hourly wage job, paying only seven dollars an hour, 7.25, and it was... yeah, 7.25 and you're getting paid every two weeks, and you're working off of tips—whew. When I tell you, um... what is that called? Um, oh, Supercuts is, [laughter] Supercuts is really pretty amazing to, just, you know, you're working off of basically nothing, they run you like—they use you as much as they can. And I basically took that and I... I left that, and a friend of mine invited me to one of the trans clubs.

Niculescu: Do you remember the name of the club?

Barker: The name of the club... I don't know the name of the club but it was... the person I know, she's a promoter, her name was Sandy Michelle and her party was—her parties were called “Sandy Michelle's Parties.” So I went to the trans club and—because I was like, “What?” I was very new to—I came back to New York—I was in Jersey at the time, um, and I lived up there after my mother threw me out that other time [laughter] I lived in Jersey while I was working in corporate, while I was working for the temp and everything I was living in Jersey and my life had changed and everything felt better, quiet environment, peaceful. I came back to New York first to finish school out here after I got my change, and I finished a—went into a room in New York [engine revs in background], finished a training, finished the school for hair, and I went into the hair industry but it wasn't working out. New York was new all over again to me, and, um, as in living and trying to survive, and I came here thinking everything was going to get better. It didn't, so when that friend, when she introduced me to one of the clubs, Sandy Michelle's Parties... I went there and [laughter] at that point, I was working literally in the financial district as a workforce analyst, I was a workforce analyst and... was I? Workforce analyst—as an analyst for this company. And I was doing great, and I was working—because the hair part wasn't working and I was like, “I got to work.” The hair part wasn't working and so I was like, “Okay.” I needed to find a—at the location where I was living at, the landlord was being, um... inconsiderate, and he was trying to come on to me and he was making the situation difficult, and his nephew started to do the same thing and I realized that they were going in my
room and they were—they were making things difficult, like in general—to me, very uncomfortable. I just, I left—I left as soon as possible and I remember the phone call that he gave me: “I allowed you to leave. You didn’t leave because you wanted to, I allowed you to leave, but I could’ve kept you there.” He was so sexual and at the same time became—and I’m used to that, over all the years, you know? But that—it was my home, my home is always my sanctuary. I had left and went over to my [yawns] mother's house again, you see I kept needing my mom—I kept needing her security, I kept needing that. But it was like, I’d go there and it’s... not understanding my difficulty because nobody understands what it is to be trans or be the way that I am or someone—and how difficult—how much different it is for a person like me. I’m not trying to be lazy or try to just—but it’s difficult. And this is still like... this is before change had happened. So here I am, working this long—issues were not good at home because my brother, my older brother had came to her house and he’s being biased towards me and threatening me and everything. And then... another situation was happening, but I mean, [sighs] um... Just say that I’ve kind of, endured a lot of sexual abuse and... sexually trying to take advantage of me. People look at me and say, because of the way that I am I deserve it because that's what I want—I want to be seen as a sexual... it's like a woman, a cisgender female who wears a skirt—that means she wanted it. They identify trans—the stigma in a lot of people's head, especially in the Black community... you wanted it, that's why you're doing it, because you're doing it for sex—you're doing it so you could fuck, so that you—you want to be seen, and basically you deserve what you get. That's not... that's not me. That's not a lot—basically that’s not the trans community. They judge and so you have no outlet. You can’t go, “Hey, cops, this is what's going on.” Ha! [exaggerated laughter] You are who you are and they think of you as, you are this, and so you want that. What are you talking about? You get what you want, get out of here with that. So I had to leave. No explanation, I can’t say nothing, I got to go again. I can’t explain Caribbean taboo as well, that's what you want. The prior times I also had engaged with that, I'd run away. I'm a runner and so I run away, and that's seems to be a lot of my history. Instead of dealing with the problems head on I run and just try not to be the problem. So I ran away, I left again, and I found my apartment in [yawns] New Jersey. I was working as a workforce analyst in the financial district, and they ended up—was going to shut down and they wanted to send me to India. And I still don’t have my life right, and the silicone is attacking me more, and I just want to live before it's too late, and I’m working seven days a week, and the issues are being more frequent because I'm overworking, and I can’t endure too much but I'm still trying because in my head I'm like, “Nobody's going to help me, I have to do this on my own.” That was my mind for a long time. “Nobody's going to help me, I got to do this on my own. There's no help, in any type of way. Keep going forward. Keep going forward—keep that smile on your face, and just keep going forward.” So it was like a choice between going to India and now I’m faced with this and my home and my health and I need to stay in New York because—that was another reason I came back to New York—I need to stay in New York, I need to come to New York because I was going to be denied services in New York because I was from New Jersey and I had New Jersey insurance. They couldn't help—the Callen-Lorde location said that, “We can't be giving you services and you're from New Jersey and you're—we can't help you the way that we need to help you.” Because they said over time that I—I had so many things going on with me, and I didn't know what was wrong with me. All I know was that the silicone got into my lungs, and then they're not—they don't understand and I'm going through pain all through my body, nobody knew it was an autoimmune issue. They're just... it was like, no help
from anywhere. No understanding what’s wrong with me. So I’m just scared. I'm by myself. I didn't even know I was having seizures—I found out recently—I didn't know that I was having seizures, I didn't know that I was having... I didn't know what my issues were while living in New Jersey. I went there and I had to come back here for help. But then I'm not making it out here, so I have to go back to Jersey for the apartment, and so now I'm back in Jersey and I'm working seven days a week and I'm killing myself, literally, and that's when I couldn't start to maintain anymore. I was regressing instead of progressing. I started to become less... an attribute to society. I felt less capable, because my health was—I didn't know what was wrong and I just thought, “I'm creeping closer to death.” Because also when I would get sick it will feel worse and worse. So I concurred what they told me earlier when I was paralyzed, “You're going to die, eventually.” It was supposed to be from six months—it was die in a hospital, to six months, to a year, to this amount of years, maximum. I just continued in that pattern. I tried to fight the mentality of thinking I'm going to die, to just live for now. Then I went into the... I went into the financial district and then my friend when she said, “Come through!” I said, “Okay!” And I danced, and I made thirty five hundred dollars my first night.

Niculescu: Wow.

Barker: [laughter] Exactly. And I said, “If I do this again I'm not going back to work.” [laughter] Because I'm like... it's hard to be in the financial district, it's hard to be around people who don't understand gender—it's hard to be in an environment where people are judging you and you're trying to be the best employee that you can be just so that they wouldn't judge you, not even about your gender but just you being you. You want to judge me and you're hurting me by judging me—you're hurting me and I'm trying to keep my head up but it's like school again and being bullied. I just have to keep going in and keep my head up high—it doesn't matter. And I'll sit by myself and eat, and “Oh hi!” and hoping that somebody would talk to you but then they'd look at you as odd, because you know you're socially awkward in general, and you know why you're socially awkward in general is because of who you are, and you've already been being judged in this environment and the thing about it is you're a boss—you're the boss, you're one of the boss. So you're there being judged by nine hundred and something different employees, and you don't know—you have nice people and mean people and you hear them talking and you just snap out of it, you're like, “Ah! Whatever.” And you're doing great but... it's mentally getting to me, which is triggering my physical—the autoimmune—which is triggering the seizures, which is triggering everything, and you're sad and you're, like... you get back up every day and you smile and to go back to work, and you put the smile back on and you keep doing it and then you're friend she shows you this one little bit of hope—thirty five hundred dollars in one night. One night. Oh, I'm leaving this job. I go back again and make a thousand? I said, “Okay, I'm going.” I was on painkillers, migraine medications and all that for all these years still—

Niculescu: And you were still dancing?

Barker: Yeah. But at this time, nobody knew that I was under all of this medication. And then I stopped, um, because I had a dystonic moment where I had impulses where my muscles were not controlled. I was walking—I know I was on Lyrica at the time for the pain in my tissue. I
would feel the pain from joints and I would feel my muscles shifting, I would feel every movement—I could feel inside my body, but what was so weird is that I couldn’t feel the outside, so if you hit me I wouldn’t—that wouldn’t be an issue. Like somebody could beat me up and I wouldn’t feel like it was anything. But my own body felt like it was…just hurting me, just shifting and moving and pulling and that would be so much stress on me. It was like I was having those episodes at home and I didn’t know how to deal with that, but once I got into that club, that’s when everything got better. I was around the girls again. I was around guys who were interested in girls like myself. That became my normalcy now, all over again, because it’s like you’re living one life, and you’re all wrong, and then you’re living another life and it is all right, but then it’s not all right in other aspects. So it’s like, both worlds. I made the best of that entertainment industry and I… I listened to those celebrities that told me all the positive things, and I worked as a dancer and moved my way up as an assistant for one of the promoters for the parties, and I moved my way up as an events—event director assistant. I started managing clubs and I started being free in an environment of club kids—I started to go to club kid parties, and now, as you can see, as I was young I never did any of that. I also didn't smoke, drink, or do drugs. Through that whole time I've endured health issues and worse, and nothing. I did not celebrate, I didn't go out, I didn’t have fun, I was a homebody—I didn't live life still to the fullest and now I'm now introduced to a club and I'm like, “Wow!” I took that club on and I would meet the girls every day and I would just go and my friend she would get me in, and sometime I would have to pay. It started from that, to working where I got full access, free, come in, you know? I would drink, and I’m like, “Great, I feel relaxed,” because they would say that I was so uptight when I would come—like, I didn't know my environment nor did I know how I was, because I was socially awkward, because I didn't ever really mingle. So now this is bringing out positive out of me and I'm happy to meet everybody and I'm introducing myself to people and it's like, I felt like, if I would meet new girls I would know how they feel and I would go towards them and tell them, “Don’t worry! This is what’s going on, just be happy, just incorporate yourself inside the place, just relax and let everything—everything will happen in time.” And then I would go to the club kid environments and do the same thing and—all of every spectrum in a club kid environment, there is no LGBTQ nothing it’s just people. Going to industry parties and everybody is just love, and I’d just meet other promoters and I’m just spreading love, and this became my everything. My love, my family, my friends, my sisters, my brothers, my everybody—everybody, it was…this is when I realized it was me. This is when I realized entertainment was me and I never pursued… I never pursued my dream. I was told that I couldn’t, I was told that I wouldn’t—I was directed into what people felt that I should be and listening to them. And I did it. I went in there and I became known as Season’s Best, the entertainer, and I became an event specialist myself—DJ, model, I started to do campaigns, documentaries, films, acting, I just finished up a film recently.

Niculescu: Wow.

Barker: Yeah, I just did, uh, it's called Nightfall—it'll be out in 2019. I have a supporting role in the film. I'm also in a film called Walk for Me. I did different documentaries as well, the video, um… I've done portraits and photography, I've also had a piece written on me in Vice.

Niculescu: Oh wow.
**Barker:** Yeah, Vice Magazine.

**Niculescu:** As Season's Best or as Akasha?

**Barker:** I've got to remember... It might be Season's Best or Akasha, um, in the night club entertainment—because I became a promoter myself. I became a promoter for my community, for trans, for LGBT to come and—I mean, I've met such amazing people in this time. You know? People who are attracted to girls like me, who... couples, families, and everything—and they just want to hang out and they're free, and people who just don't care, who... none of this they judge us or anything, and I'm with celebrities and I'm saying, “Hi! What's going on?” And I feel home. And I would always go back to when I was working at the company, and they would treat me as if I'm one of them. It stayed in me and I strived. I became successfully known and I became, uh... do you call it plateau? Plateau for others. And I started to appreciate being trans, and teaching others, and I realized that it really takes being caring and supportive and positive affirmation to help build my community—and not the mentality that they are incapable of... I'm not in there for that. I'm in the field of telling them they can do anything they want. Upon that, I'm at the point where I can—I have an organization at my disposal, amongst being—amongst the news that I gave you—but my own organization where I am implementing talent, expression, writing—writing courses, writing groups, art groups, dancing, everything—because we're told we can't, and we're told that this is not... but what about the holistic point of trans care? I had none of that, but I... it kept me alive, mentally. I had none of that as a kid, only through the programs at school, not knowing what I was going through. But that capability to express yourself and be free, and not only be about health and all the other stuff—but that is a part of health, which is mental and—holistic, is what I keep calling it. It's a part of your health to know that everything will be okay. Just relax and be yourself. Just relax and free your mind. Just relax like, imagine dance classes for trans community, you know, dance! Why not? Why can't we? And there are so many jobs in dancing and we're told, you know, even as young, “Oh dancers, you can't become a dancer.” There is so much talent. We're still—as I broke it down to somebody, I said, “I am still the same person, gender or no gender.” I had a debate with somebody online, on Facebook. They were like, “Oh, you guys don't know the resources that is out there for you.” I said, “Well wow, I'm a part of the beginning of resources.”

**Niculescu:** Yeah—you wrote the first handbook!

**Barker:** Right! Like, nobody was doing that! I had groups for people to attend so we could come together at this place called Positive Health Project where we had groups and I brought in a doctor—we got the doctor to come in and we got people from different aspects, from even intersex to come and speak at the group—from people from different countries, and what they endured and how hidden their lives were. Broadening. And people that were in the group are now leaders today in the trans community. But you're telling me that you don't believe that a person like me knows what kind of resources are out there? You're saying that, “Oh, I've realized that, um, you guys are catty and this,” that was a general statement and I tried to tell them, “You're saying a general statement, that's not how it is.” There is different types of people of every culture, ethnicity, or whatever. You can't say “everybody.” And I am trans. I'm
trans, I am me, and I'm comfortable, and my brain has nothing to do with my gender, as per say, it has nothing to do with my gender identity. What I can do—educate, learn, everything—has nothing to do with my gender. My talents have nothing—it has to do with me. It is in all of us growing up. It is in all of us—all of us, we have a dream of where we want to be. It might be deterred because of what others have done or said, or you know, basically that, what others have said or done. But as long as we believe in ourselves we can be whatever we want to be, no matter what. And that's... subtracting the gender. We're still a person and we're still human and we're still people with brains that work functionally and artistically and logically. We're still people. And that's what a lot of people... a lot of people that I have encountered and have seen, um, and just the world itself, that they are not understanding we're still people. And so now it's just more stressed about gender now, but it's the character not all this other stuff. Look at me for what I can provide—it shouldn't matter about anything pertaining to me, anything else but my character. That's the mindset that I want others to understand—be you. I noticed that works a lot. When you're capable of not feeling restricted, and just say, “What am I upset about being myself? Why should I feel upset, or why should I feel—” it's like saying, “I want to be my hand here, but I'm refraining because others might think I shouldn't.” You know, like you reach out and someone's like [slaps] “Don't do that.” No! What? Like, “Don't go—why are you going to the park? Why are you going to—” that's so boring—that is a bully mentality. When you say, “No, I can't do,” you say, “I can't do,” that's when you say, “Yes, I can.” And you push forward. “No, I can't be a writer.” “Yes I can. What's stopping me, but me?” So what will you do? Stop people from thinking that they can't and let them know that they could. I'm going to be me regardless—I'm going to smile, I'm not hurting anybody by smiling, I'm not hurting anybody by being myself, being myself. I'm being the best that I can be. Because we're all put on this earth to live life, and that's what I feel. We're put on earth to live life, not to worry about life—live, within our lives. Because all that worrying—you're going to realize that it can be taken away from you at any moment and you've never lived. So would you rather live? [whispers] Yes. I would rather live. And it took my near death experiences to put me in that mentality. When you think you have nothing left—when you think, “I'm not going to live,” like I've seen a cancer patient who started to do all of their dreams and try to do all the things that they've never done before because they had this type of cancer—and then they did it, and guess what? They found somebody to help them, because it was a special type of blood I think for leukemia cancer, and now they're living. But they did all of that and they loved it and they really—now they're helping other people live the same dreams, and other cancer patients and other people who don't—I've got to find that and I'm going to send you that information. But now they get to pursue their dreams and it's just because they were scared that they were going to die and not have that time. So I did the same thing, not knowing how much more that could help others live life. You know, so... is there anything that you want to ask me? [laughter] I go through those moments.

**Niculescu:** Yeah, no, that was amazing, um... but yeah, I guess I'm interested in how you're functioning—you mentioned dance classes and stuff like that—what are the spaces that you're offering now with the platform that you have?

**Barker:** I am working—okay, so I have been slowed down, because I had a heart attack in 2015. So...
**Niculescu:** And also what year did you start the clubs?

**Barker:** Oh, I started in... 2009—no, 2011. Yeah, 10-11. Yeah, 2011. What happened with me, um... what was the question again?

**Niculescu:** What you're offering now in terms of like, how...

**Barker:** To do—well, for that I'm still working on finding the space to be able to start the programs, because I... This is going to be a general organization but to help others, which is also immigrants, because they're so closely related to me. It's actually between me and my mother. We have came together and through my experiences my mom has changed so much, and has found an understanding and has looked so deep inside and went into child psychology and everything. We work together now as a unit and we may have misunderstandings, but we found out that we were so—we felt were so different but realized we were so similar. We have faith in god and we have faith in each other. This environment we're trying to incorporate in different boroughs in Brooklyn, and for me, I want Manhattan—I find it to be a safe place, no matter what I find it to be a safe place. And um, be able to provide food for people—all my experiences where... me and my mom are trying to basically get a building for homeless youth and I'm looking for one for trans youth, and we're trying to find that space—I want it to be more like a community center, but not like the other one—not like the one over there—but one for talent, music, and arts—for the arts. My sister passed away the same year that I had the heart attack. We both were in the hospital at the same time. We both got silicone injection around the same time. The injections got her later on in life, at this time, as me it was affecting me all these years, but it got her [snaps] out of nowhere just all of a sudden and she was in the hospital the same time I was in the hospital, and it was down hill for her as it was going into downhill for me. We were only a year apart. She is also my—she was also my trans experience sister and she was there for me through thick and thin. We were talking and everything—

**Niculescu:** Is she the first one that you went to the stroll with? Or was this a different...?

**Barker:** She was actually—she was actually one of the ones that I first started—that's not the one, but that's one of the... she's actually the one, but not the one that I first—that first time that I went down there. We were in the hospital together—we literally transitioned, everything—she was a very supporting role, encouraging to me, when I was going through everything with my family. She believed in family, she was the first one to start bringing me around other people and start having me and you know—I had anger issues and I didn't know, like I was pushing people away and she was like, “No this is what you got to stop doing, people are scared to be around you.” Why? Why are they scared to be around me? Because I was angry inside and I was reflecting it on the outside, not knowing what was going on on the inside—I wasn't trying to push anybody away but I was very anti-social, and so people, seeing that, would go “uh-uh” but not knowing I had a lot to contribute. But I didn't know how to engage with others to do that. So I've had... she died when I had a heart attack, we both were in the hospital at the same time and, um, unfortunately she died. I didn't know that she was going to die, I didn't know that she knew that she was, at that point, but we did spend time with each other before her passing. I just—I had no idea. I'm glad I did get to speak to her before her passing.
We had so many—we said we were going to get the silicone out our bodies and everything, and we were going to—because we both were in the hospital. I had a heart attack because the silicone had travelled into my heart and stained it and it created kidney problems so I was in the hospital for a year with kidney problems. She was in the hospital for a clot and it just—we were talking to each other from hospitals and it was just weird. It was like... It was just—she died. And that was the first time dealing with somebody who was close to me, very very very close to me, because I kept my... I don't know, through all the other passings of my sisters, younger, it was something I was just used to, but now we're in our thirties—I'm thirty five and I know you since I was thirteen, and this is weird to me. That was the first time dealing with depression—the first time dealing with it on the outside. I cried, for... I've cried for almost a year straight—a year, I cried for like a year straight. I am just getting over her death as of this year. But I took it hard and never understood, I was also not in a good place after my heart attack... I was—after the abuse in the hospitals and the mistreatments after finding out my gender and the fact that everybody was just trying to toss me away. These last few years has been—I had stopped working, I had stopped with the organization at that point, I was in the hospital there was nothing I could do—I had lost part of my memory, part of my past, I didn't even know who my mother was, and my mother doesn't know and... I didn't know—I knew who she was but I didn't know who she was. Everything was there but wasn't there, nothing would come to the forefront it was like here and it would just block—it was a fog. My heart almost stopped after, I was having anxiety attacks, and it was really downhill. I didn't know what was wrong, and I kept trying to work, I kept trying to go back to work. I was hurting myself more. The hospital, Bellevue [Hospital], unfortunately wasn't giving me correct care—I was complaining but they weren't listening. I would go to other hospitals, I would go to the hospital emergency room and they said nothing was wrong with me, what am I talking about—they just started treating me like... I have had mistreatment medically within the last few years as well as the years passing by, because nobody listened. A lot could've been avoided, but everything happens for a reason. And at that time... I feel like I wouldn't have lost so much but at the same time I've gained so much. But the hospital system literally abused their power, had biased individuals who were supposed to be there to help you, who I felt like, if I was an elderly person... and I would see these commercials about elderly people and the abuse they would go through, so now imagine a person who's crippled or not capable of advocating for themselves where it's not about a voice anymore—I have no voice. I have no—I can't even talk for myself, I can't even make decisions for myself. Being tossed around. What I found—they didn't know my brain capacity before I went in there, and it was weird because I could understand everything and hear but I couldn't get it out. My responses—I was talking like, [imitates short sounds], and the doctors thought I came in there like that—the nurses and everybody thought I came in there like that. So when the nurse walked into my room and nobody changed my diaper, and the whole floor was flooded with urine—a puddle—is because they just left me in there and didn't care, and then the nurse came in and she shoved the catheter inside of me and she said, “That’s what you get for doing this to yourself. That's what you wanted, right?” And this is stuff I endured while my...

Niculescu: While you were like, stuck inside your body?

Barker: Right. And I couldn't speak—I couldn't... this is how our elderly are being treated. This
is how our sick are being treated, when they think nobody is listening, when nobody—when I don't have a voice because nobody visited me in the hospital, because they thought I was alone. I had bruises all over my veins for the lines that they had put in, and it was so old, and the machine was beeping and it's hurting but they knew I couldn't...

**Niculescu:** Do anything about it.

**Barker:** Right, I couldn't vouch for myself. All of that, all of my experiences because of that, I had to overcome, after that—overcome my sister's death, overcome how I've been treated, overcome... because at one point, when my sister passed away and then my best friend's mother passed away the following year, I didn't believe in love, I almost died again the following year. I worked for a community center again that didn't listen to me when I was saying something's wrong, that I need to take off, something is wrong—the hospital that I'm at is not doing the right thing, something is wrong, I need to take off. I was told, at this job, that you're under contract. That's what you came here for and... and I said, "But something's wrong and I don't know what's wrong and I need to take off." And, "Akasha you need to stop—you need to do what you got—" and I'm telling them—also I'm homeless at the time, because I left my environment because I realized I wasn't being helped and I had to leave, and I couldn't vouch for myself. I was being degraded by the very people that I felt were in support of human rights and LGBTQ rights. This company didn't care. I just... my last day of the contract, I walked off, the last day of work I stayed—I was lingering and not working because I was so hurt, on the inside and something was wrong. The shelter, I had a curfew, so I'm going to work and I'm going to my shelter, so if I can't go to the shelter and I got to go home and I lose my bed or I lose my stuff and I'm working and this is the only time I could do this, but I'm telling you I need to take off and you tell me no, I have a contract—what do I do? So the last day of work, I walked off—I left, I lingered in the area, which was gay pride day, I lingered near the table that we had, and I just stayed around and then I'd walk away and I stayed around—because I knew this was a day I was going to take care of myself, but I'm going to show that I stuck this through. And I stuck it through, despite how much I was going through and how hard my life was, and I walked off— I walked away at the end, said, "Oh everything's done? Okay great, bye." I walked into the hospital and I went into Mount Sinai [West] hospital, um, on 59th—58th Street and I walked into the emergency room and I said, "You know what?" because I thought Bellevue [Hospital] was a great hospital—and I said, "You know what?" I was even going into the Lenox [Hill] hospital right around the corner from my job, and that—they kept saying nothing was wrong. I went into the hospital and thank god that I said, "Something is wrong and y'all really need to do something," and I kept describing what I was going through, it was—I kept going, [imitates lack of breath], and I would have moments where it was [imitates lack of breath] my heart was trying to stop, all these months, and it was at the point where it was going to stop. That last day when I went in there was the point where, if I—I don't know what would've happened if I didn't go. I went in there and they had to keep me for a month, because my heart was going to stop. I was going to have to get a device placed inside and everything—I had to wear a monitor for a full year. My whole depression kicked in, and if you don't have love from your own community, and you don't have love from outside of your community, you don't have—it took this one heart doctor to listen to me and found the problem, and went in and helped me, and I'm better today—I'm not as I was before, but I'm better today. I have to take each day at a time.
But I got to also learn to... one of the main things that they said was, “You must learn to take care of yourself before you take care of others.” Stress is actually a killer, and the more my heart was pumping, it was destroying itself. Key things within this timespan is that I’ve been needing to find myself and find happiness and find who you are to be able to move forward. That’s on the path, and that’s a part of the whole solution, for me, within my organization, to push it forward—and the name of the organization is the Helping Hands for Life. It’s going to accelerate [laughter] it’s going to accelerate. I have been working by myself, taking my medications and, um, which is my heart medications—unfortunately I have congestive heart failure now from the heart attack. They found all of that, they realized—because the people before didn’t realize that, nobody was helping me, they didn’t—wasn’t giving me strong enough medication to help my heart—but now it’s better and functional, the memories took a while to come back, I realized, you know, people need therapy sometimes to talk to people. In the community it seems like, not everybody—they don’t have therapy for what’s going on in your life, besides what’s going on with your gender, like what’s going on with you and the trauma you have gone through. Because a lot of people are sucking up the trauma and it could break them down. That’s where I have to step in and the organization that has been around since 2013 is going to have its foundation—its location foundation and will push forward. I will also be writing, detailed, about—I write as well—detailed... I do playwriting... and that’s another thing that I want the center to be engaged with, a place for them to feel free and be able to join all of those aspects—music, art, everything—and come together and throw plays, throw musical plays, throw exhibits and everything, together, and see that we could work together and be wonderful together—and help them publish books, help them find careers, help them find... I feel that’s... Before all of this, I never wanted to write something personal—I’m a sci-fi writer [laughter]

Niculescu: Oh very cool.

Barker: Yeah, I love sci-fi. I don't like to be personal—even though I love reading personal and self help and everything, but I don't like... I like sci-fi. I'm a trekkie fan, um... Star Trek. I love X-Men, I love comic books, anime, all the other stuff. There's a deeper meaning within stuff. But I need to teach others that they can do that—I need that environment to do that. Part of the dedication is towards the person that passed away, that's my sis, and part of—the reveal is better than just saying her name, at a point... the reveal—she was a beautiful person who pursued her dreams and she was successful at it, and she lived a great life, and that's what we have to instill in others. Because she instilled it in me, all those points, people didn't know I spoke to her—she instilled it in me, and the schools instilled it through those positive things that I did—that's what I'm going to instill furthermore. I go through a zone, [laughter] I keep saying that I go through a little zone and I start to like...

Niculescu: No, it's beautiful. Um, I think we do have to cut out the interview, but thank you so much for sharing your story.

Barker: Was it okay?

Niculescu: It was amazing, yes.
Barker: Was it interesting?

Niculescu: Yes.

Barker: Okay. Was it all over the place? [laughter] I—like, my past is really traumatic so I've been trying to pull it out and... because it's been traumatizing, so it's harder. So upon that, I have to take... I'm looking for a ghostwriter to actually do more detail, um, because I would break down and cry inside this room and I'm trying not to, so I have to take each detail slowly—but I think people need to hear my story. It's not something to be wasted, it's something... I need somebody to get the details, but it's hard. Me and my therapist, we've been trying to work through this stuff—it's really detailed and it's been traumatic, but as slowly—there's a lot of people who've been going through a lot of traumatic stuff and been holding it in and... those people I've been out on the stroll with, a lot of them have been traumatized and they're dealing with it in different ways and it's... it's time for change, for better change, in a different way. So I'm Akasha Barker [laughter] right?

Niculescu: [laughter] Yes. Thank you.