

LGBTQ Oral History Project

Detroit, MI

Atiba Seitu

Interviewed by

Autumn Diaz

Dec. 5, 2017

Detroit, MI

As part of the Oral History Class in the School of Library and Information Science

Kim Schroeder, Instructor

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Brief Biography:

Atiba Seitu was born and raised in Detroit, MI. He has actively promoted gay and lesbian rights from the 1970s to present day.

Interviewer:

Autumn Diaz

Abstract:

Atiba Seitu describes growing up in Detroit and attending Chadsey High School, discussing the shortcomings of the public school system and the importance of a diverse community. He recalls coming to terms with his identity as a gay man within the black community and the help he received from his family, therapy, and local activist Rev. Dr. Renee McCoy. He talks about the importance of doing “dharma work” in daily life, striving to better the lives of all he encounters while working at Avalon Bakery. Creating artwork in any form has been an important part of his experience for most of his adult life.

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Walter P. Reuther Library

Wayne State University

Detroit, MI

Transcript of interview conducted December 5, 2017 with:

Atiba Seitu, Detroit, MI

By: Autumn Diaz

Diaz: Really, I just want to know who you are and how Detroit made you who you are.

Seitu: Ok. I guess I can start off with my name. My name is Kevin David Zeigler. That's the name I was born with. I'm a lifetime Detroiter, I was born just maybe a mile or so, at Henry Ford hospital, up the street. I'm the second of four children, two boys and two girls. My parents - my father was from Albany, Georgia, my mother was born here. They came here from the South when he was probably like 15 or so and... we were all raised here in Detroit. Educated in the public school system, which I won't say is great. I was just talking to somebody yesterday about history, and I'm thinking, you know, I don't know anything about history. I feel like I missed a lot in the public school system, but... I got what I got, and I think that's part of what makes me who I am.

00:01:14 Diaz: Is there a strength that you think that... The public school systems might not be amazing, but was there a segment or a subject that they really gave you a good idea about, or a good teacher maybe that you had?

Seitu: I was thinking about that, you know, school really pretty much for me was uneventful. I don't think there was any desire to really learn or... you know, what this is really about. I don't think I really had a lot of teachers that even made me feel that way, particularly in junior high school. But maybe a little bit more in high school. Well, high school. When I went to Chadsey High School, which is on the west side. It wasn't in my neighborhood. It was a really dynamically diverse school.

Diaz: Diverse in what way?

Seitu: Diverse in that there were Hispanic kids there, there were Polish kids there, there were black kids there. That net neighborhood had a heavy Ukraine population back at that time, and this school was just... it was just a hodgepodge of everything. I mean there were Black Panthers there, there were White Panthers there. It was a really different kind of place. It wasn't like... They didn't have a great sports team so they ranked like zero, but it was a... that was a good experience going there, because I was just doing terribly up to that point, but when I got to Chadsey I kind of thought, "Oh, this group is a little different". They're kind of like thinking... So, I guess maybe I ... I made the honor roll for the first time at Chadsey. I... you never make the honor roll, never, never, never. I made the honor roll in Chadsey for whatever I took. I did really good in the coursework I took.

Diaz: Do you think it was the environment?

Seitu: I think it was totally the environment there, yeah. I always feel like now that nobody benefits by living secluded: if you're Arab, if you're Jewish, if you're white, if you're black, if you're Mexican - which is kind of like Detroit. If everybody's kind of living in their own corner, and there's no mixture, you don't get nothing. You only get what you got, but when you throw... It just a completely different experience. So yeah, Chadsey was a good experience for me. I'm glad I went to school there too.

Diaz: That's great, and so is that the first place where you saw any gay or lesbian or queer people?

00:03:58

Seitu: At Chadsey? No, that wasn't, you know, that probably was out of my mind. I'd put that out of my mind probably... I think when we moved, when my parents got their first home. We moved from our flat in 1966. I think I was ten or eleven. And when we moved to this new neighborhood, I figured out really it was going to be different. Now I'd figured out before we moved there that there was something going on, because there was somebody that I liked on our street - Howard. And... you know, I didn't, I really didn't think about it, that I was going to move away. And we're going to move, and I think we're going to move to a new house, we're going to move to a new neighborhood. But I mean, probably a couple of weeks after I had got... we had moved, I felt like, you know, I'm not going to see Howard anymore. [laughs]

Diaz: So you felt sadness?

Seitu: Yeah, I did so much so that I asked my father... My father was going grocery shopping, I asked my father to take me back over, could I go over on Waverly because the

supermarket was close to there, "Could you drop me off at Mrs. Jones House and I can play with Kevin and them?" So he said OK. So he dropped me off there, and I spent the whole time working the neighborhood trying to find Howard, the whole time. It was- I couldn't find him anywhere.

Diaz: How old were you?

Seitu: I was ten! When I finally found him... I hear Ms. Jones hollering, "Kevin! Kevin!" [mimics a confused child looking around] [laughs] Like "What? What? Wait a minute, wait a minute." So I run back to the house, I say, "Oh, don't, don't go anywhere, stay right here." And I went back, and my father had been in an accident, and it was like... [laughs] Smashed the car, ran into a D.O.T. bus... It was like- it was pandemonium. And I never got to see Howard again after that. So when I got to a new address, it was a whole different set of boys. I think it was there... I know people were, I was getting it even when I lived on Waverly, but there it was really, I knew I was different because everybody was telling me I was different,

Diaz: Who was telling you?

00:06:22

Seitu: You know, kids, you know, babysitter. I always think that- and I wrote it down... I kind of felt like everybody had already, they started defining me before I had even time to define myself. People were saying things about me before I could even get a grasp. And I was ten years old, you know, I was getting it from the babysitter: "You act like a little girl". You do this, you do that. At school maybe I thought - and I'm trying to think about all these questions, and I could think about little incidents where things would happen. I was thinking, like boys that maybe I didn't even know or anything like that, and they just come down the hall or something and push me down or something like that. So, you know, I was starting to get that message: punk, sissy. You start getting those messages really early. As soon as everybody finds out you're a little different.

So I hadn't defined gay or lesbian or anything, even the time I was fooling around with Howard. I thought we were doing what everybody else was doing, so I never had to talk about it or anything like that. I wasn't going to say "I like Howard". Me and Howard were kissing in the garage or something like that or hugging or something like that... I didn't think anything about it. I didn't think anything about it until I moved over there, and I was getting older - 11, 12, 13, 14. Then I started thinking like, OK, this is... this is going to be difficult.

And then, where I get my real reference point is, I was passed at the Tower Theatre on Grand River on Easter Sunday. We went there to see, on Easter Sunday you got dressed

up and these are things I miss about Detroit. On Easter Sunday, the whole neighborhood, everybody'd had on their Easter clothes, they were going to church... It's just been erased now! That doesn't happen anymore. People don't go to church. You don't see the kids out on the street. But we went to the movie theater that day. It was a movie *The Detectives* with Frank Sinatra and Lee REMEC, and this plot was something where this detective was dealing with this... homicidal maniac. He was killing people, and he was killing homosexuals. At the movie, everybody's like screaming and laughing and everything, and when I heard the word, I kind of went down [whispers, hunches down] in my seat, I was like, wow...

Diaz: You knew that was you at that point.

Seitu: [whispers] Oh god. I was destroyed. [resumes normal volume] I was destroyed that day. I remember going home, I was crying and everything was like, "Oh fuck!" [distracted, panicked voice]

Diaz: Could you pinpoint why? Was it like a lightning bolt, you knew immediately, or was it confusion?

Seitu: It was the word. So I knew because there was something that happens in the movie. One guy tries to put the make on this guy, and the guy kills him, you know. So I'm thinking [whispers], "Oh, that's what you're doing. You're homosexual." [normal volume] So it was negative.

Diaz: Was that your first clear... "that's who I am"?

00:09:31 Seitu: That was my... that there was a word for it. I didn't have a word for it or anything like that before then, nobody said... There was nobody gay very much around my neighborhood or anything that I could tell.

Diaz: You never saw anyone who you were like, oh, they kind of act like how other people say I act?

Seitu: Probably not. No, I think I was more focused on myself. I don't think I recognized other people.

Diaz: So you really did feel like the only one in the world?

Seitu: Yeah. Yeah. I mean I felt like I was, I don't feel like anybody else who's getting that designation in class or in school or anything like that. I mean later on maybe I kind of, when I got to high school I could kind of pick those up, but before that, no. So that was a

first... when I got that, and then- I was probably was 13, say 14 or 15. That's when I like, all right, this door is closed! [makes the sound of a slamming door, hits table] And I locked it out until I went to college.

Diaz: What made you lock it out? You didn't want to be that thing in the movie?

Seitu: Yes, yes. Yeah. So I closed- this door is closed, messing around with anybody in the neighborhood, a possibility of that- that's done. [laughs] So I shut that door,

Diaz: How did you shut that door?

Seitu: I just like turned it off. I turned the gay switch OFF.

Diaz: Did you change your behavior or was it a mental change?

Seitu: I always tried to change my behavior, I always would try to fit in with everybody, but it just, it just never did... If I did it, I knew I was being a fake or phony. It just didn't feel right, if I tried to get in trouble or hang out with the other guys, it just didn't... it never worked.

00:11:16 Diaz: This reminds me so much of that article that you wrote in the *Journal of Self-Help & Self-Care* about the ManKind Project? You wrote something about how you would use a mask to navigate uncomfortable situations and doing that pulled you away from being present, and it dissociated you, and it "dimmed your internal light". Those were your words.

Seitu: Totally it did. Because I would, wherever I'd go in a situation: All right, all right, this is a green situation. Green! I totally become the green. Or I try as best I could. It was a red situation. All right, you gotta be red here. All right. All right. I was like a chameleon. And it took a long time to... I think it really diminished my inner light.

Diaz: And how long did this last?

Seitu: For a long time. I mean, I think probably... there's probably some scant bits of it present now, but for the most part, yeah, I think it... it always flickered a little bit, but I think I kind of got control of it when I recognized what I was doing.

Diaz: When did you see that was a negative thing?

Seitu: Probably... I had a roommate one time when I was hanging out with some Rastas or something like that, and I remember... we're doing something and I say, "Hey, you know,

I'm getting ready to leave. I'm going over here to Hassan's house." I'm just going to go over there and maybe cop a bag of weed and hang out with them. And I remember him saying, "You know Kevin, I don't know why you going over there." I was Kevin then, I hadn't quite embraced Atiba yet. I said, "What do you mean?" He said, "Man, those guys don't like you. They know who you are. They ain't thinking about you. You come in there, maybe you bring money over there, you do that, they kinda fool around. You thinking they're your friends, they're not your friends."

So I was really mad with Calvin that day. So I went on to Hassan's house, and that day there were some other guys there, and they were talking, and they just happened to start talking about gay people, and talking about them really badly. And I was like right there in the room-

Diaz: These are Rastafarians?

Seitu: They weren't Rastafarian... I thought they were Rastas at that time.

Diaz: They weren't from Jamaica or the West Indies.

00:13:48 Seitu: No. They were Rasta wannabes from Detroit. [laughs] So I remember him sitting there saying that, and then Calvin's words just coming back to me and then thinking, so now you're just going to... This is a gray situation. So you're sitting here being gray, and you're not going to say anything, you're just going to play along like, "Oh, that's not me." And I remember I never went back over to his house again, so I think that's when I started being like, OK, he was right, so you're going to do this everywhere you go.

Then I started thinking like, OK, I'm going to have to not do this anymore. So I stopped being in situations so much where I thought, if I thought that was going on I wouldn't be in it, or if I thought they didn't really care for me, or there was reason why they were just kind of dealing with me. And then I started meeting some people who just kind of accepted me for who I was, they didn't really care that maybe I was gay or possibly, and I really hadn't- maybe I had kind of started to define it when I came back to school here [Wayne State University] after I left Ferris [University, Big Rapids, MI]. Then I had friends who I thought, it was probably OK if I didn't say anything, but they weren't intimidated by me or anything.

My friend John, who is from the east coast, and I met him here at Wayne State. I think he just kind of... when I met him I could tell that it didn't matter whether I was gay or not, even if I hadn't defined it, I think he had an idea. But he was cool with it, because he was

OK with who he was, so it didn't matter. So I don't think I really... there was... it's so much to talk about.

But there was this big thing probably when I left college, there were issues there. I still had kind of shut it down. I had a girlfriend in college for about three years, but it was still there when I was even dating her. It was always in the back of my head. So I came to Detroit. I got an official ship at the Frank Murphy Hall of Justice. I was a court stenographer there. So you know, a lot of things... I was really struggling with it there, and... probably was this close short of a nervous breakdown at one time there. And I asked to have some time off from work.

00:16:17 Diaz: And it was just this buildup over degrees?

Seitu: Yes, yes. I asked for some time off of work. I went and got a therapist and just kind of started working on and started to tear it down.

Diaz: What year was this now?

Seitu: This was probably in... between '79 and probably '83, because I got the official ship in 1979.

Diaz: That's pretty progressive, going to see a therapist. What made you seek that out? Did you know someone who had done that?

Seitu: No, but I did it at Ferris because of the same thing. I knew that it was, it was, it was... [knocks at imaginary door, whispers] "Atiba" [laughs]. And I was like, the door is closed! So I started seeing a therapist there.

Diaz: What was their response to you? Because it's... you know, it might not be the best response to a "homosexual": that is still considered a disease.

Seitu: Yeah. Dr. Kapida was pretty kind of cool. It wasn't... and I don't think I actually was saying it, I was probably like kind of masking it. I was talking about it, but I was talking about it kind of under here [hides hand under sheet of paper]. I wasn't really saying it, but... and then he put me in a, like an encounter group or group therapy group and that didn't work really well because... so I didn't stay with it that long.

And I probably tried a couple times outside of that. I had some counseling at Herman Gardens Housing Project, went before they tore it down. That didn't work so well I don't think the guy really... but when I almost had this kind of breakdown at... when I was

working at court then I sought somebody else - George N'namdi who owns the art gallery, and he was a therapist but he had stopped doing it.

So he sent me to see... He said, I'm not doing that anymore, but I have a friend who's still doing it. You might want to go visit him. So I called him up and talk to him and he said the same thing, "Atiba, I went to school for this but I ain't thinking so much about this whole psychology thing, but if you want a hand job, I'll give you one but you got to pay for it.

So I said OK, it was Dr. George Fleming. Yeah. And he was the one who... got me to thinking, I've brought all the things out about what was going on. He said, well, you know, I remember he kind of gave me a piece of candy. I was told, "You want a piece of candy?" I said, "Sure." "You know, Kevin, I don't care if you like sticking a water hose up your ass. That's what you want to do, that's what you do, it's nobody's business but yours." You know, just get over it! [laughs] So it was him that...

Diaz: Was that enough, or was it... you had to build from there?

00:19:01

Seitu: I had to build from there, but that was the beginning to be like, just the way... he was just so comfortable. And he just said it matter-of-factly. "You come back, and we'll talk and we'll talk." Not so... it started working there, but then I was, I was already gay and I still was not dealing with it as well, but I saw therapists at the University Psychiatric Center, Wayne State, Dr. Erin Fallucca. She gave me some medication, we talked. I was done after her! And then I remember one day she came in, I said, "You know, I kind of think... I don't think I need to come back anymore." And she said, "You know what? I don't think you do either." [laughs] It was great.

Diaz: So she fixed you? [laughs]

Seitu: She helped. She got me together. She and Renee McCoy. I give kudos to Renee McCoy, because probably when I left court... I ended up walking away from that job, and I think it had a lot to do with everything I had gone through, but I needed to just clear the space and do something different.

But Renee started this kind of ministry for gay and lesbian African Americans who had been thrown out of the church. My parents weren't religious or anything like that, but I still had that kind of foundation under me, or "this is where you're supposed to be". But she was doing some really progressive work back then and it wasn't, you know, her church wasn't so religious... She was really kind of giving us some spiritual principles to deal with being gay and lesbian. And then people always telling us that we're not worth

anything, we don't have this, but you're entitled to the same gifts that everybody else is. Don't let anybody tell you differently. You're chosen, special. We are probably the best loved persons, of God's children.

Diaz: The opposite of saying God thinks you're an abomination. God loves you best.

Seitu: ...exactly the way you are, that was her thing. So all the messy stuff you're doing out there, she would... Her sermons would be so cool, about like, you would be at the bar, it's like a quarter to, and you're going to- "I'm gonna find somebody tonight to take home too". [laughs] She would use Toni Braxton, "Love Shoulda Brought You Home Last Night". She would do all these things. So you had to start thinking about what you were doing.

So I think that she really got a whole lot of us together. She was really tied to a community because she came from Washington DC and I think she's with the... I think it was called the National Coalition of Lesbian Gays [National Coalition of Black Lesbians and Gays] in Washington DC. So she's really hooked up to all these people there like, Cheryl Clark, Essex Hemphill, Marlon Riggs, Michelle Parkerson. She'd be talking about all these people. She would have magazines that they published in DC. So we're getting all this information.

00:22:08

And then this community starts coalescing, this black community. People started coming to the church, they start to organize, like, "Well, let's have a Kwanzaa celebration!" "Kwanzaa? We can't have Kwanzaa! They can only do Kwanzaa at the Shrine of the Black Madonna. Gay people can't celebrate Kwanzaa." This Dr. Kofi Adoma (Amorie Robinson) was a psychologist or psychiatrist, maybe - she's a PhD. But she said, "Yeah, we can celebrate Kwanzaa." So we would have Kwanzaa celebrations.

Then we started making other organizations. We started the James Baldwin/Pat Parker Society, which was kind of an art organization where we'd have a yearly art program where we'd have poetry, dance, art. So it was really kind of cool.

We... when [Channel] 56 was on 2nd, all this stuff came out of Renee's church too. They were going to show Tongues Untied on the PBS stations, but Detroit said no, it was too... it was too risqué and Tongues Untied was a film that Marlon Riggs had done about being black and gay and they were saying like, this is not suitable for TV. So he staged a big boycott at Channel 56.

So all these things started pulling people together, and I think people started feeling better about who they were. I certainly did. And I attribute a lot of that to what Renee did for

the community. And... I think that really her... all those things stacked together kind of helped me solidify that I was all right and who I was and I could move from there. I didn't have to be feeling bad about being gay anymore or sad about it that there was something wrong with me or anything like that.

And I could just totally throw the whole church thing out the window. And I, I have a spiritual life certainly, but a lot of the stuff that I hear and see, I kind of reject. It's like, OK, whatever. I'm not sure about any of this. When I said, I don't know about history as much as I should, but I think for the most part, most people we don't. We're listening to what somebody else is telling us and if we think that they're smarter, we accept it as truth as opposed to finding out for ourselves. Really? Yeah.

A classic example is talk about the loaves, the feeding of the masses. When Jesus fed the, the masses with two loaves and a couple of fish. And I used to think as a kid, "What did he do?" He tore a piece of the fish off and then it would just grow back [laughs] [pretends to tear pieces off of a sheet of paper], tear a piece off and give somebody and it would just grow back. You tear the bread off and it go back to a full loaf again.

Diaz: It's magic. [laughs]

00:25:12

Seitu: Right, yeah! It's magic! [laughs] And then I was thinking like, Atiba, that didn't happen. He fed them, he did this, he prayed over the food and they multiply. I tell people, "Nah.." I told a lady who comes pick up bread at the bakery, I said, "That's not what happened." I said, well, did Jesus... he came... he was that kind of magnetic personality. He's just like, Hey, what do you have over there? I got some pita bread. Bring it over here. Hey, what about you over there? Nico, what have you got? I got some tacos. What about you? Audrey, what do you got? I got some Collard Greens. Everybody was so... the little that they had they probably just put together. He brought all these people together and he had so much food, so it multiplied. It wasn't magic... And they say, "No, Atiba, just get away from me."

Diaz: "That's not what the Bible says."

Seitu: Right, right [laughs]. I can... I don't take it literally anymore. I think it's meant to tell us some things. Everything in that book is not true, or it didn't happen exactly that way.

Diaz: It was written a long time ago.

Seitu: Right! [laughs] You didn't see nobody write it. Yeah.

Diaz: Well that sounds... how do you describe that, the fish and loaves situation, that sounds like what Rev. Dr. Renee McCoy was doing, she was bringing everyone together and they were contributing...

Seitu: And she did that, yeah. She really built a community, and other organizations: there are people who didn't come to the church either, but they were starting to... Things were spinning off from that little hurricane eye that she was doing.

Diaz: They wanted to get in there, even if they didn't...

Seitu: ...even if they didn't want to go to the church. Yeah, exactly. A lot of them probably wouldn't admit that, but I really think that's really what happened.

Diaz: Well, she sounded like she was pretty open about it. Like she didn't hold fast rules where you have to believe in Jesus Christ.

00:27:07

Seitu: No, nope, that wasn't her thing. And she... Renee really took care... and it was like at the height that HIV, when it was just starting and everything... Renee probably eulogized and buried most of those guys that died, because their parents wouldn't have anything to do with them. I mean, she would sit by their bed. I remember telling us one Sunday, she said, you know if any of your friends are sick, if you know they're sick and they're not going to... She said, you should go there and you should sit by their bedside. She said, "And you should not leave them until they give their last breath." She said there's something about that experience. She said, "I can't tell you. It's a phenomenal experience." She said it's something that we all should experience. She said, you know, don't deprive yourself that opportunity. I remember her telling us that.

But she would do it a lot. Sometimes she would just break down on Sunday morning because she would stay with somebody all night and this person died. And a lot of those people would come to the church at the end, because they didn't have any place else to go. So yeah. She really took care of a lot of people. She did a lot during that time. I kind of felt like the broader community never honored her for what she did. That was significant. And I know a lot of these other churches weren't doing that, they weren't doing that kind of stuff.

Diaz: That's interesting because she came in from outside Detroit. She really enriched Detroit.

Seitu: She was originally a Detroiter. She lived right down the street from... my parents knew her as a little girl. Yeah, she lived on my dad's street. My father used to drink with her father and everything. So she was a neighborhood girl. Yeah. But she went to DC. Yeah.

And then she came back from DC and stay here. Now she's gone to Seattle. Yes, she's living in Seattle now. Yeah. But she's a, she's a significant person in my coming out experience, in becoming whole, yeah.

Diaz: Yes, yeah. So when you look back to little Kevin, what's different now?

Seitu: What's different now? God, there's a lot of things now. I don't think I hate myself as much as I hated... I don't think I really liked myself when I was little because I was getting all these messages. It really made me feel bad about myself for a long time, for a long time. So when I look back at that...

Diaz: Were these messages all to do with "You act like a girl" or "You're different, there's something we can't pinpoint" or was it other things?

00:29:57

Seitu: Yeah, it was mostly that or you're not... even in school, you're not smart enough. Or if you're not good at sports, not as agile as other people, you're not that. My thing is that whole thing about... being smart. I think there's so many people that are probably... Where does that word come from? Being "smart". What does that mean? And that certain kids get told that, and other kids don't get told that. And I think that kind of impacted me too. I was really bad at math. I just could not get math for anything, and I always felt stupid because of it. And... I remember making a decision in the third grade that I would give up on math because I just couldn't get it. So... that's why I have kind of a sour taste in my mouth about the Detroit public school system or public school systems in general. I'm not sure.

Diaz: Yeah, it happens a lot. I would think even in private schools too. I think education... it's what you were saying, what we tell kids: you're over here, you're not over here, and that shuts the door. Like you were saying, you turn that switch. You can't go there anymore, your mind won't let you. It doesn't mean you're not capable.

Seitu: Exactly. Exactly. But my sister, my youngest, my oldest sister, same thing with her. I think she got told, "Oh, she's not smart, she's not this, she's not that." So I think she just kind of bought it. She never did anything. So... [sound of exasperation]

Diaz: And that was your experience in most Detroit schools?

Seitu: Most Detroit schools. Except for maybe when I got to Chadsey, I didn't hear those messages. But everywhere else, yeah, I definitely got them, and the kids who were excelling, they got the attention. If you weren't excelling, you didn't get any attention. It's the same in gym. If you were like one of those kids who displayed athletic prowess, you

were good, you got attention. If you didn't, you go off... you're just in this corner, and they didn't work with you or anything, they really didn't care what you did, you know.

Diaz: Well, what did you get attention for? Did you excel at anything in the eyes of these...

Seitu: I don't think so. I think I kind of liked Art, but I don't think anybody really focused on it or anything. Writing was my thing. There was one time when one of my teachers put me in a creative writing class, but I don't know what happened. Just kind of like petered out, and I never went back to it, but I think that was really what I probably should've done.

I probably should've done journalism, but I just never... I could never figure out what... I felt like I never, because of my experience at school, I never was able to quite figure out what am I supposed to do? What am I here to do? So I'm 62. I mean, I'm doing what I'm doing now, but I'm not quite sure I'd... really found... like, oh, what do I want to be when I grow up? Still trying to figure that out, yeah. But it's kind of cool, because I've been all over the place trying to find that. Yeah.

Diaz: And so right now you're at Avalon?

Seitu: I'm at Avalon. I've been there like seven years now.

Diaz: And what do you do there?

00:33:22 Seitu: I'm a Barista, but I just started as a customer service person. When you come in to the store, [I] just pull your order together. So now I went to a Barista training maybe a couple years ago, so I've gotten really good with that, I'm managing their coffee program, which is kind of cool, but you know, it's like this is... I'm trying to figure out what's going to happen in the next three, four years. I don't think Avalon is going to be where I'm going to be at, but I don't really know what the next step is.

Diaz: That article that you wrote, you said something about... you had a long-standing desire to give back to your community based on your skills and experience, so how have you done that?

Seitu: How have I done...? I think I did a lot just being involved with the church, being involved with building some organizations and that organization and... kind of being a grunt worker there, I think I was integral to that. What I really like to do now, I think, what I'd like to give back, you know, I'm kind of into Yoga. I'm not like a yoga head or anything like that, but I always... I saw this program and it happened in, happens in Baltimore, it's a program where they teach yoga to children. And I thought, you know, that would be

really cool to be able to teach that to children, teach them meditation and that for a couple hours, where they come into class and we just sit down, we're going to be quiet, we're going to do some stretches, we just kind of bring it down. I would love to be able to do something like that that gives back to kids, that gives kids a space to like center themselves.

Diaz: Yeah they've got noise in their head, for sure.

Seitu: Yeah, yeah. Just like I did. Yeah. Just like I did. Yeah. And they'll be able to quiet that noise, but I'd like to do something like that. I mean... yeah! I really, I want to do something... And I think I do that an Avalon. I think what I do at Avalon is... I do dharma work at Avalon, you know. Some people... I have conversations with people, I'll listen to people. I give them coffee.

We've had some issues with the homeless people and begging and stuff like that, you know, and it's... I have a lot of mixed feelings about that. But I sent a letter to the CEO of the company and said, "Look, you know, we really got to do something, because guy comes in there everyday..." He's begging and actually a staff person... we'd got in an argument because he wanted to throw the guy out. And I said, "Yeah", and he says, "Well, Atiba, you know, I need you to do it." And I say, "But that's not my job to throw them out." Because they're bothering the people, the paying customers, I understand that, but why do I have to do that? He's black, I'm black, he's poor, I'm sort of poor [laughs]. I'm doing better than he's doing, but you know. Why do I have to be the overseer? Or I got to be the bad guy and do this? Because it's not... this is not my business. I know... people have to say, "No, I can't give you any money", but people do it. So we got in a big argument, because I told him it wasn't my job. He said it was my job. So I see that is an issue. So I sent her a letter and said, you know, we've got a problem here. I don't feel comfortable approaching these people. I don't think it's right for me to approach these people.

00:37:29

These people are in need. We can look at them and tell them they need. Can we sit down and talk about this? And then we can go to midtown Detroit and all these businesses down here, we can sit down and we can construct a plan. All these people are moved in here, you've got people living in \$500,000 lofts. Now we can't impact the situation? I'm not saying we're going to solve the problem, but we can impact it. Can we sit down and talk about this? So she said we can't do it this week, but next week. And I really want to kind of be able to spearhead, because this one guy he wants to throw out... I look at him, I see him as a person who's in need. And if he's not in need, there's something that's... there's something where he's coming up short. There should be some kind of way where we can figure out where you're coming up short. Is there something we can do for you?

Diaz: Mm hmm. As a community.

Seitu: Yeah. If we can, and you allow us to, fine, but if we offer it to you, and you don't take it, then I think we can say, "All right, no. You can't stand out here and panhandle. We offered you this. We did this, we asked you to do this." We tried. We can't just throw them out, say get outta here and go down the street. So does that solve the problem? They just go around the corner, and then a day or two they're going to be right back doing the same thing again.

Diaz: Because you haven't solved the problem. And he's not the only one...

Seitu: He's not the only one. So, I want to be able... I want to do work like that. That's the kind of work I want to do.

Diaz: How did the CEO respond?

Seitu: She responded very positively, and the manager sent me an email too and said, "Yeah, I really think this is really crucial". Because I think we're at... I told her, we're, we're at a tipping point. Because all these people come, and I've never seen these people before. Where are they coming from? But they're coming to this corner, because they know people here have money, they know people are buying this bread, they know that they're coming in these businesses. And people just give him the money because they don't want to be bothered with just here, take the money to get out of my face. That's not really going to help them.

00:39:37

Maybe we can figure out something... that we can figure out who they are. What's your story? All right, we got his story. OK, this is what's going for him, maybe housing... So I think those kind of things are things that I've done in the community and those are the kinds of things that I want to continue to do in the community. Yeah. I want to just make it a better place. I want to make it better for me, but I want to make it better for everybody. For those kids...

There's a head-start program in my neighborhood too: I need to go over there. I talked to somebody with the community foundation and she said, well, you better be really careful when you approach these people. And I'm thinking like, why? Well, you know, you're a guy and you kind of know what people think about men who want to be around children. [laughs] Just like... I was furious about that!

Diaz: Yeah, it's a bummer. It's a part of our society, it's a problem that we have to deal with too, just like the homelessness.

Seitu: Yeah, I was furious about that. I said, OK, so if I say I want to help kids, that's what people are going to say. He's a little gay, he's got earrings in his ear... Maybe not. [laughs]

Diaz: When you were working with the Ruth Ellis Center, you were working with young people then. Not quite children maybe, but more teenagers... Did that feel fulfilling? Did you feel like you were kind of healing yourself at the same time?

Seitu: I think I started out feeling that way, but then ultimately I think I didn't have the skills that I probably needed to have to do that work. And that was something that was new that was starting. It hadn't been done before. What we thought we were going to do was house them. We're going to get an old abandoned house, we're going to fix this house up, we're going to put them in a really nice place where they're going to... where all their needs are going to be met. [sighs] Oh God. It didn't work like that at all. [laughs]

Diaz: What happened?

00:41:40

Seitu: It was... really difficult. Again, I say that I'm not sure I was equipped. I wasn't a social worker. It just based on what I did in the community, and I stayed with the organization while we're trying to get the grants and everything, pulling things together, doing grunt work, doing all this stuff to get the center going. So we've finally got the house completed - [whispers] The house was beautiful! We got the drop in center... and there were issues there with the drop in center, but it was right on the corner of Grove and... Woodward, which is right in the middle of [laughs] probably... it was what was left of that once thriving gay community there. But it was everything else, prostitution, drugs, Deja Vu, the topless bar. Everything was right there on that corner where we're trying to serve the kids.

So I don't think we had... all the tools that we needed to do it. I certainly realized now that I didn't have the tools. Then I tried, I wanted to try to treat the kids like my parents treated me, to some... kind of that authority. "I'm the adult. You listen to me. You do..." And those kids had experienced so much... my life was cake compared to theirs. The little stuff that I went through, they could have done that with their hands shackled behind their back. It would've be nothing for them to walk through. They had been through some stuff.

So I think it didn't go as well... I ultimately got terminated from that job because they said I wasn't able to push the program forward. I worked there for three years, but I worked like sixty hours a week, seventy hours a week there trying to make that work. I busted my ass there. But it didn't, in the end it didn't work out like I thought it was, but I tried. I gave it my best. I think I did make an impact on the program there.

We did a lot of good things there. We did a lot of good things for the youth there. We had a feeding program there. We tried to run programming there when they were accessible to it, you know. Yeah, I mean we did a lot for them. We provided food for them. We tried to provide program... Our program would be competing with the stuff going on outside the door, because that was more exciting to them. You know, a lot of times we didn't know what was going on. They would come to the center during limited hours during the day and by 9:00 when we closed the doors they probably, a lot of them had to go back to wherever they were. We did get some kids in the house and that was successful to some degree, but you know, we had problems at the house too, you know. Big problems at the house. But I mean, they had an opportunity. Some kids did OK.

Diaz: What were the main problems?

00:44:55

Seitu: The main problems were probably just their histories and not having a lot of parental involvement, where they had to listen to somebody. Or they'd been tossed around probably foster home to foster home. And just being at that age and plus being gay? Yeah, I think it was a lot for them. We couldn't just devote twenty-four hours to them.

So, you know, I did what I did. I did my best. I probably made some mistakes. I probably did make some mistakes. Took me a long time to come to that. Probably the executive director, as well-intentioned as she was at the time, I think she made great mistakes, great mistakes. At the end, they really tried to trash her really bad, but it's like, hey. She brought what she had to the table, and nobody can say that... She did some good work here. She did some good work. She did some... tons of stuff.

We buried a couple of kids. I mean, we gave them send-offs you wouldn't believe, collected money, made things happen that was... their families couldn't even do. We took them places sometime when we could. I think we did a great job. And if nothing else, we just showed them you can do something else, it doesn't have to be like this. And maybe a Kwanzaa celebration.

A couple years ago I did run into... I run into somebody every now and then, they say, "Atiba, you know, we really loved you, Atiba, you really... yeah, you kind of gave it to us, you were giving it to us, but... the Center after you left, the Center wasn't the same. So I said, I wish you could've let me know this before. I thought I was doing a rotten job. And a young woman at Kwanzaa. I went to Kwanzaa a couple years ago. I was getting ready to leave. She said "Before you leave..."- she was one of my outreach workers, and she said, "Before you leave, I need to talk to." She's married, she had a daughter, a son, and was doing really good. She said, "I just want to tell you, Atiba, when I was at the Center working with you, I was really young, I did some stupid things. I said some stupid

things about you. You really did a good job. I really appreciate everything you tried to teach me and everything." So, I think when she did that, I felt like, OK, I feel... what's the word you want to use? Exonerated. From my termination. Yeah, I felt really good.

But when they told, the day they told me I was gone, I was sad because I just bought a house [laughs]. I was like, how am I going to pay for this house. But I was like, [sigh of relief] "Oh thank God." And then when I told my parents, I went over to their house, "I got terminated from my job" and that was my mother's thing. "Oh, thank God!" "What do you mean, thank God?". She says, "Honey, have you looked at yourself in the mirror lately? You look terrible!" [laughs]

So I remember I took some pictures, I was going to get a passport to go somewhere. I looked at those pictures and said "Oh my God! Yeah, I did look..." But people would start telling me that at the end. [laughs] "Atiba, do you need a job?" One lady was talking to a friend and she's looking over at me, and she told [the friend] "I'll be right back". She just looked at me. "Hey, darling, how're you doing?" She said, "Atiba." "What?" "Do you need that job, that bad?" "What are you talking about?" And she got mad. She said, "Don't do me like that. You look terrible. You need to give it up. Something's going to give." I'll never forget that, yeah. She said, "Don't talk. Don't act like that with me. You're going to make me mad." She said, "Do you need that job that bad?"

00:49:07 Diaz: So this is another turning point like the courthouse. You don't want another nervous breakdown. You go on to the next stage.

Seitu: That was another turning point. Yeah, yeah. But you know, I think we did great work at Ruth Ellis Center and, you know what, all I say is we laid the foundation now they're now they're really strong. I'll say we just, we just had to hold it until they could come take it over. They took it over. You know, Laura Hughes [executive director from 2011 to 2013], the new guy that's there now, they're building it up, and they got the expertise, they've got the brains, they got the organizational skills, they got everything. They could make it a rock.

Diaz: So Detroit now, it's a lot different than when you were growing up. What do you love about Detroit now?

Seitu: To be honest, Autumn, I've always loved this place. No matter where I go, California, my brother's there, he can't stand this place. I love Detroit. As a young person, regardless of all my experience, I always love living here. I love Motown. I love music. I love my neighborhoods that I grew up in. I had... you know, my parents, not educated people, but they were good folks. They gave me all that they could get me. It was great. For awhile

after the riots and stuff, Detroit seemed like... I thought I would move to the suburbs and everything, but I still felt like, Detroit is my home.

This is my place. Right now. Gentrification. Regardless of that. I love what's going on in Detroit now. I think this is a great place to live. It's a great place to do it. Whatever you want to do. It's like a painting, it's a clear landscape for anything that can be done. Black folks can do it and I think we don't need to wait for white folks. We don't need their permission to do anything. We can do whatever we want to do, if we want to do it. Latino... it's an open canvas.

And, I love working in midtown. I like living in Corktown. I live in a really diverse neighborhood, and it's diverse. It's got all kind of... it's a hodgepodge. And that's what makes it really powerful because, even though there's some people that are doing really well, some people who are not doing so well, some people who are really not doing well there at all, but what I respect about them is they were there before we got there. And they're still there! [laughs] And they're still there. So they got a little flavor, they got a little nutmeg and salt and pepper and they're adding it! They make the neighborhood what it is, you know.

00:52:13

So I really like what's going on here. I like the restaurant. I love the people that are coming in. Um, sometimes I feel like an outsider. But I think Detroit has a lot to offer and it's had a lot to offer me. It's made me who I am. How could I not love this place? And I think I'm a pretty awesome person. I think I'm a pretty awesome person. I don't think I turned out... I think I turned out great.

Even when I heard the thing about the shooting at the DIA [Noel Night shooting], usually I would get really upset. And I kind of heard the news, and I thought, OK. This is some kids, some kids just kind of not thinking, being kids, being 18, 19, or however they were. Not thinking. This is not going to color what's going on here. It's not going to make people run away and go again. And they do. That's OK. Let them go. They weren't down with it anyway.

But just like, what's going on here, I mean D'lectricity - did you go to D'lectricity at all? You've got to go. It's a light festival they run on Woodward. Amazing. Just all the people on the street, just a mixture of people on the street. Everybody down. I just saw some phenomenal artwork, performances.

Diaz: Well, you're an artist yourself, right?

Seitu: I'm an artist too. Yeah, I need to get busy.

Diaz: Tell me about your art.

Seitu: My art's pretty good. I just don't trust it, you know?

Diaz: What don't you trust about it?

Seitu: I feel like because I didn't finish school or something like that, that doesn't make me an artist, you know? I don't have a bachelor's, I don't have an MFA, and I can't write this proposal that says all this crazy stuff about my work. My art, it's pretty abstract, some of it. I'm doing collages now. I think my work is good, Autumn. I just need to kind of shift my energy from Avalon and be able to start focusing on it a little bit. You know, I think that job takes a lot of my time, but if I could shift my focus, and I can get my work out here, I think people would be interested in my work. I think my work is really, it has a lot to do with my experience living here, my experience as a black person, my experience as a gay person, I think that's all in my work. Even if it's not there literally, I think it's all intertwined.

Diaz: When did you start making art?

00:54:56

Seitu: Probably after I did that stint with, when I got the job at the courthouse. I realized court reporting, this is not going to be forever for me. So I started taking classes here [Wayne State University] and I took one art class, then I took a photography class, and I started taking more. Then I really got into it, you know, I was here in the studio and Oh man, to like four in the morning sometimes, painting or doing whatever I was doing, yeah. But I loved it.

When I get some time I do it, and I try to go see a lot of art. But everything I do is art. What I do down at Avalon is art. Somebody was arguing with me the other day, like "Atiba, just pour the milk!" and no, you don't just pour the milk on the Cappuccino. I said, "This is art, this is my art." And I said, whenever I set that down I never put the lid on, I let people see it, and they'll say, Oh that's beautiful. I said, you guys, you just put the top on it because you don't want them to see. I want them to see it. They say, "Oh that is so beautiful." So that's art.

My little spiritual work I get to do at the counter sometimes. Some guy told me that this is Avalon... that counter is the altar of Avalon. And he said "People are going to dump their garbage here, they're going to give you shit", and he said, "You're going to have to swallow it [laughs] or come up with something different." A guy came yesterday, he just walked up to the counter...

[phone rings] I thought I turned this thing down...

He walked in and I thought, God. I said, "What's wrong?" I said, "You look like this weight just dropped down in front of me." And finally he says, "Oh, it's just how I'm feeling right now. My dad died last Thursday." I could feel it. I said, "Man, I'm so sorry about that." He wanted a green tea. I didn't even charge. I said, "Here. Just take the tea." I said, "I hope you feel better." So that's my art. When I front the stuff in the cooler, that's my art. I get it all like... [mimes turning beverages just-so] I'm kind of obsessive compulsive that way. [laughs] Get them all... "That looks really good", I look at it, you know.

Diaz: How do you think people see you, people on a day to day basis or who just come through the shop briefly?

00:57:31 Seitu: I think that I... I hope I'm not sounding egotistical. I think that I'm the face of Avalon. I'm kind of the face of what they... what they're trying to represent to the community. Yeah. I think when people come to see me, they know I work hard there. They know I'm there to take care of them. I'm going to make them feel comfortable. Even that guy yesterday, the one that they want to throw out, I said, "You OK? You're looking a little spacey today, you're pacing a lot today. What's going on?" "Oh, I'm ok." "All right."

Diaz: At heart, you're an activist. Would you call yourself that?

Seitu: Mmm. Ok, I'll take that.

Diaz: There's a drive in there. So it's not there every day? It comes and goes?

Seitu: It comes and goes. Yeah. Sometimes I want to be the activist. Sometimes I think like, no, I just want to take care of myself. Sometimes... you just need to take care of yourself.

Diaz: So you balance it.

Seitu: So I try to balance it. Yeah. Yeah.

Diaz: What are you involved in now?

Seitu: Right now, I'm just doing my work right now. Right now, this thing, trying to do this thing in the bakery with the homeless. I think I'm committed to seeing something happened with that. And so I need to be able to even connect with some customers that come in there. There's people that work with the Green Garage, which is kind of like a business incubator, I think, on 2nd street. I think I need to connect with them and say,

"Hey, you know, can I invite you guys maybe this meeting?" and I need to go talk to somebody at Midtown Detroit Sue Moseley [Executive Director of Midtown Detroit, Inc.]. It's like, "Hey, can we get together and just talk, talk about this situation?" So I think that's my next activism piece. I wanted to try to solve that situation there. Not solve it, but impact it. That's where I'm at right now. Yeah. Yeah, I can't think of anything else that I'm being really activist...

Diaz: Just to dip back into your childhood. I'm wondering, were there like any public figures or movies or songs that really inspired you and drove you to become who you are?

Seitu: As a kid, I just think the music of Motown was very influential.

Diaz: Yeah? Who are your favorites?

01:00:21 Seitu: Probably all of them at the time because you know, you're just being bombarded with the Four Tops, with Martha Reeves and the Vandellas. The Supremes were, at one point... but I figured the Supremes were, like, too gay, so I kind of closed the door on them. You can't identify with Diana Ross, that's a little too gay. You know what they're going to think about you, if you be into the Supremes. So you've got to close that door. [laughs] And now, if people say they'd going to see Diana Ross, I think, "Really? Mmm, I don't think so."

Diaz: You still have that little piece of you!

Seitu: [laughs] I won't lie, I won't lie! Yeah, but I think, like... Diana Ross? "Really? Oh..." So, I mean, I think that I really like... and music... well, who could I say? I don't know.

Diaz: Is there music now that you hear that you're like, "Oh this is what I want to hear"?

Seitu: You know, I hear so much music now. It's kind of hard, you know, it's kind of hard. There's some of the younger jazz musicians, like the Blue Note All Stars, there's Robert Glasper, who's a pianist. I really like his work. I'm clearly, clearly, clearly, I'm a Joni Mitchell fan, from Ferris, from my Ferris days. From... everything from there up to now, her music. I think her inclination is like jazz now too. But, yeah.

My father was a drummer. He was a musician, so I heard all kinds of music at home, so I'm not really wedded to...

Diaz: Was he a professional drummer or just liked to do it?

Seitu: He just liked to do it, but he played a lot with a lot of bands and stuff. In fact, I found a book here, and I found his picture in the book, on a bandstand, I think was at the Blue Bird [Inn] on Tireman.

Diaz: Do you remember those bands? What their names were?

Seitu: No, I don't remember his band, but I can remember him getting ready to go out to play a Gig. Because his drums were in the basement. He would practice in the basement, but I will watch him get ready. He'd be like shaving... and he dressed up, you know, they dressed when they went out. Not like they do now. Yeah.

Diaz: What was his name?

Seitu: John Zeigler, John David Zeigler. Yeah. But I found his picture in the book he didn't believe it. I said, "Look, Dad, you're in this book."

Diaz: Was he proud?

01:03:03

Seitu: I was! I certainly was, because I could remember him playing drums in the basement. Just going down there and listening to him. I can remember watching him shave and getting ready and putting on the Old Spice and... I would say, "Oh God, he's like really dressed-up looking." I thought maybe your attraction really started with your father.

Diaz: Do you dress up nowadays? Do you put on a suit every now and then?

Seitu: I do, I do. Noel Night I had on a tie, and a pressed shirt and my apron. I do that there all the time. Sometimes they say, "Why you put that tie?" I say, "Because I feel like being that person today." And people will treat me a little different: "Are you the manager?" "No..." [laughs] "Are you the manager? You know, you look really nice today." "Thank you." And I have my little bib thing on, I'm the barista I'm the artist there, you know. So I do do that. And I do that for me. That makes me feel good. Yeah.

Diaz: So you were there on Saturday night?

Seitu: I was there Saturday night.

Diaz: Were you working Avalon?

Seitu: Yes, I was. Yeah.

Diaz: How were people reacting? Could you hear any shooting or...

Seitu: Oh, no, no. I think the shooting was over here on Kirby...

Diaz: It was Farnsworth and John R...

Seitu: Yeah, which is a long way. But everything was fine over there. There was... people were on the street, we were packed. We had to close the door at 10 and all right, we're done. Yeah, yeah.

But, you know, you're talking about music, and I'm around a lot of young people, and they're listening to a lot of stuff. And I'm thinking, "The stuff you guys listen to, I don't know how you listen to it." But somebody was telling me about... I overheard them talking about... what's her name? Solange Knowles. So I thought, "All right, Atiba. I'm going to go..." I saw her on Saturday Night Live one time and I thought, "What is she doing?" Whatever, Solange. Whatever." So I just got up and turn the TV off. So I thought, all right, I'm going to... you're going to give it a try, you're going to listen. So I put in the computer, on YouTube, "Cranes in the Sky". It's a great, great... it's a great song. And so, I found myself... I plugged in the whole album and listened to it. I forget what the name... Seat at the Table is the name of the album. So I thought, that's really great seat at the table. Everybody wants a seat at the table. Yeah. [laughs]

Diaz: You feel like you've got a seat at the table now?

01:05:53 Seitu: I have a seat at the table now. And you know, "Atiba, you've always been at the table". "Really???" "Yeah." I've always been at the table. I just didn't think I was. I just didn't think that was. But yeah, I definitely have a seat at the table now. Yeah. So if I'm listening to anything, I'm going to say Solange is in my ear. Solange, yeah.

Diaz: You're coming back around, see. Young Detroiters are still teaching... And do you have anything to teach them, do you think?

Seitu: I wonder. Yeah. I have a young guy that I work with and, he's... I adore him. He's a really smart guy. Sometimes not smart in the right way, but you know, I say, "Atiba, you're probably just like him. You probably were just like him, you've just forgotten it. But you're just like him. And I don't think he thinks I have anything to give him, but I do and I hope that I'm able to bridge that with him. I think he, he likes me, but I think I get on his nerves sometimes, he gets on my nerves sometimes. But I just adore him. I just adore him. I don't think he knows how much I do.

Diaz: What do you like about him? Is it because you can see yourself in him, or is he different completely?

Seitu: Because he's completely different from me. It's completely different. He's kind of... he's riding the... he says he's bisexual, he's got a beautiful girlfriend. But I've known some of his boyfriends who've stopped in there, who are equally as beautiful. But he's involved with this woman right now, and they're both kind of activists and they're working together... And I just love her. I adore her. So I like that he's... and I know that his life is different from mine, he's told me some things about his life. And I probably wouldn't have, if I had a bit of his shoes, I probably would not have done well. But he's done pretty well. I mean he's probably like 35, but he buried his mother really early and he must have stepped up and took the responsibility to do that. Where his brothers didn't do it, and I think that's probably why we kind of have this tension because he's, he's had to man up at a really early age. And I also notice, and that's the thing, I didn't talk about that with the Ruth Ellis Center.

01:08:29

I had a father at home. I think in a lot of the young gay boys that were at the Center that I had to deal with, and even Tristan, their fathers were not present for probably the most significant part of their life. Probably not a lot at all. He was telling me his father left him and married somebody else and his mother gets cancer and he's like a kid. He's got to take care of his mother and do all this stuff. So my thing is if there's an older figure, an older male figure who comes up and tries to show them, it's like, "Oh, you can't show me anything." You know, "My father wasn't around, how're you going to show me something? Guys like you, whatever." So I think that that figures with me and our relationship with him, I think that he kind of feels that "You a old guy, Atiba, get outta my face. I done done this all myself with no help from no adult male for no support. So you know, get away from me."

Diaz: Well, probably just like you when you were younger, if someone came along and tried to say, Atiba, this is who you are, you've got to flip that switch back on. You couldn't have heard it. It wasn't time...

Seitu: Nope. I couldn't hear it at the court, when they were telling me Atiba, you've got to... you can't do that. I would question the judge when the judge would make a decision, I'd be like, "How'd you make that decision?" And they were saying, "Atiba. Kevin. You can't do that." "Why not?" That's when I think about myself like Tristan. Yeah, I can be like that. But I think also I really think that's really significant. At the center of that, a lot of them couldn't, they couldn't listen to me because their dad wasn't home. "Who're you going to...? You're not telling me what to do. My father don't even tell me what to do. It's just me and my mother, whatever. So get out of my face." No, it wasn't like that. "Get the fuck out of my face, Atiba." [laughs] They would tell me that sometimes. "But I'm an adult!" In my head I'd be thinking that. Like, wow, he just told me to get the fuck out of his face.

Diaz: Your parents, they were generally supportive of you?

Seitu: I think my parents... you know, my father never called me a sissy, never called me a fag or anything like that. I think he probably would've liked me to have been something different, but no, never. No. I think my parents were really supportive of me, even when I came back from the... when I went to the First National Black Gay and Lesbian Leadership Forum. I was 32, I came back and I kind of said, well, "Hey, you guys, I think this... "Where did you go?" And I said this because I was so empowered when I came back. So, this is where I went. They said, "Really, that's where you went?" I said, "Yeah, it was fantastic!" And, my mother said, "Well, you know, we always kind of knew who you were." Oh, no, maybe I was... I think I was 38 when I did that. When I went to the conference. And my mother said, I kind of knew all the time, before you quit that court job, I was begging your father to talk to you because I don't think that it was all of the work and everything that the court and the cases that was bothering you, I think it was mostly you just not being able to deal with who you were. I really thought, and I tried to get your father to talk to you, but he never did it."

01:12:14

But I called my father up one time, when I was having that meltdown, the first time when I asked him for the time away from court and I told him like [moaning]... I remember crying and everything, he came over to my house and he's just kind of listened to me for a few minutes, and he said like, "Um. All right, you gonna be all right, boy." That's all they said to me. It was like, what?? I'm crying, I'm saying all this, so I don't know where my life is going, I'm saying... this is the kind of stuff I'm saying. I don't know her life is going... I was a mess! And he's like, "Mm. You'll be all right, boy. All right, I'm getting ready to go back home."

Diaz: That's all he could give at that point. Was he later able to give more?

Seitu: I think he was just able to accept. My father. He was one of those persons who, his father didn't stick around. So my thing is how did he... I'm not sure he exactly knew how to do all of that. He didn't know how to navigate all of that. He was just kind of on the job training. He did a good job. He was supportive of me. I think he, he loved me, but he never said anything bad about me being gay, and when I kind of came out, and he'd meet my boyfriends or whatever, he'd be respectful to them, nice. "Come on in, here, has something to eat. You want something to drink?" That was my father. They'd go out in back and have a cigarette and talk or something. Whatever, you know.

Diaz: That's huge. To some people, that's impossible.

Seitu: Yeah. Like I said, those were my parents. So they were, they were OK. They accepted my friends and stuff. Now my sisters, they're kind of... they're kind of on the fence. Both of my sisters, they've become church ladies, more than my mother. My mother wasn't even a church lady, so they... they believe that Bible. One's a Jehovah witness and one is... goes to some other church. She'll say stuff like, I'm taking... I'm caring for an 87-year-old uncle. My father's brother, who's like in a Rehab Center. I had to put him in a Rehab Center, maybe two years ago. But he's gay. Born in 192... 1931, I think he was born.. No, 1929. He was a student here. John Angry. He's had had a really tough life, you know, he's had... a tough walk. And probably because he was gay, and he's told me some stuff that just made me so sad sometimes, you know. But... [smiling] my father had a gay brother, so it's like my father knew, he knew his brother who was gay. Yeah, they kind of accepted him, so I guess he had some kind of experience. So he knew... because he had, he would have to get my brother, he would have to get him out of jail... Vice would pick him up or something like that. Yeah. So. But he never said anything bad to me... They were very supportive of me. Yeah.

01:15:32 Diaz: That's wonderful.

Seitu: Yeah, that is, that is. That's a lot. Yeah.

Diaz: So that's chapter one... of your life.

Seitu: [laughs] That's just chapter one, yeah.

Diaz: Thank you for sharing it with me.

Seitu: All right. Thanks.

References

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