

LGBTQ Oral History Project  
Detroit, MI

**(Courtney G. Wilson)**

Interviewed by

(Keena S. Neal)

(November 27, 2018)

(Detroit MI & Los Angeles, CA)

As part of the Oral History Class in the School of Information Sciences

Kim Schroeder, Instructor

Fall 2018

Brief Biography

Courtney G. Wilson is an out Black lesbian from Detroit, Mi, whose activism during the 1990s and 2000s include her involvement with the founding of Full Truth Fellowship Church of Christ, the first Black gay Church in Detroit to provide spiritual and non-spiritual services to the Black, gay community. Her activism includes serving on the boards of Michigan Equality (now Equality Michigan), the Ruth Ellis Center, and the Unity Fellowship Movement, the latter a part of the national Unity Fellowship Movement founded by Carl Bean in 1982 to address the lack of religious services for openly gay and lesbian African Americans. Ms. Wilson activism focused on gay rights with regard to health and religious services for African Americans in the gay and lesbian community, as well as political action with organizations such as Equality Michigan. She now lives in Los Angeles, California with her spouse and three children.

Interviewer           Keena Neal

Abstract

In 2018, Wayne State University student's enrolled in Kim Schroder's oral history class conducted interviews with Detroit's LGBTQ activists for the LGBTQ Oral History Project. The Oral History Project chronicles the activism around gay rights, gay culture, and gay history in Detroit, Michigan. Courtney Wilson details her life as an out, Black Lesbian activist in Detroit during the 90s and the 2000s. The interview comprises of Wilson early life growing up in Detroit in during the civil rights movement and the '67 Riot; early influences on her activists such as Angela Y Davis of the Black Panther Party; and her activism in Detroit's gay community. Major subjects covered include: Wilson's family background; her work with Full Truth Fellowship of Christ, Ruth Ellis and the Ruth Ellis Center; the birth of her children through artificial insemination; and her role in Detroit's Black, gay activism.

Restrictions           None

Original Format. MP3, Audio File, 1:15 minutes

Transcription

Keena Neal: [ 0:13] My name is Keena Neal. I am interviewing Courtney Wilson via Skype. Today is November 27, [2018]. We are conducting...this interview for the Wayne State Detroit LGBTQ oral history project that I've been working on this semester. Um, I'll start off with a simple question. Tell me about your early life? Where and when were you born?

Courtney Wilson: Well, let me see. Where was I born? I was born in Detroit, Michigan...in 1957, November the eighth. And, uh, that's the where and the when, isn't it?

Keena: Tell me a little bit more about your family growing up? Your neighborhood?

Courtney: [0:59] I grew up on the Northwest side of Detroit, on Griggs Street between Puritan and Florence. A middle-class community that, uh, when we moved over there in September of 1965 (pause) I would say that the neighborhood was at that point already, (pause) uh, yeah. I would say that we probably had two white people—white households on our block between Puritan and Florence. Uh, so, white flight had already begun prior to the 1967 Riot. And

urban and violence. Oh, so, white flight had already begun prior to the 1967 riot. And certainly, after the 1967 riots, uh, those two White households were gone. One of which was...right next door to us.

Keena: What was your community like in addition to that while you were growing up? Who was in your neighborhood? Who did you hang out with?

Courtney: I hung out with, um, my neighborhood friends and..... that were age appropriate (pauses). They were all black. But I also...did not go to...Detroit Public schools. I was at Catholic schools from the time I was in first grade. And (pauses) let me see...I left a predominantly-- 99% black Catholic school over on Oakland Boulevard--Oakman. I'm sorry, Oakman. Madonna--the Parish of Madonna-- and moved to Griggs Street when I was, I don't know, seven years old. We switched schools to the neighborhood--Catholic school in the neighborhood. And it was called St. Francis de Sales. So that was predominantly a White school in 1965. And (pause) certainly again after 1967 when White flight happened, it became a predominantly black school. So, I hung out in my neighborhood with the neighborhood kids. All black. At school (pause) because of the--the racial...mm, demographics, I...hung out with White kids.

Keena: Tell me a little bit more about that. What was that like, sort of being between, I guess, two worlds...?

Courtney: Mm-hm.

Keena: In a way.

Courtney: Well, I mean, I kept them very separate. My white friends did not come over into my black neighborhood. However, I did go into their neighborhoods because my school was in their neighborhood. And...I...certainly like I said had white friends. And so, I, ...I was invited over to their homes like after school and what have you. But my life was pretty separate. I mean I compartmentalized ...my black neighborhood and...my white school, which wasn't so far. It was in walking distance. But the two worlds—the neighborhood life and school life we're pretty separate. However, I did not find myself code switching at that time. I was--I think I was too young to know to do that. So, uh, oh, wait a minute that's not true.

Keena: Mm-hm.

Courtney: [4:14] There was a term (pauses) that, uh, that the white kids used which was "You guys." Oh, my goodness. And of course, in my neighborhood we said, "Ya'll." So, I never ever--my sister nor I--ever said-- "you guys" (pause) on Griggs Street. Just--oh! (Boisterous laugh). If we said that, it was going to...we were going to be called something that had to do with... "Whitey."

Keena: Okay.

Courtney: And so, at school I would say, "you guys." But in my neighborhood, I said "ya'll."

Keena: Okay. So, as you were growing up, you know, with the people around you, and it's the 1960s.

Courtney: Mm-hmm.

Keena: And it's--you have the Riot [Detroit's 67 Riot]. You also have the civil rights movement.

Courtney: Mm-hm.

Keena: Dr. King, all this going on. Um, were the people in your community politically active?

Courtney: I don't—I wouldn't say that they were politically active. I don't know what the parents did. I know my parents (pauses) we're not politically active in as far as ... going out on Woodward and marching with Martin Luther King.

Keena: Mm-hm.

Courtney: Certainly--So I don't know about the other households and what they did politically. You know, we certainly as kids were a little oblivious to it. We certainly knew about Martin Luther King. Detroit wasn't so-- our neighborhood wasn't so segregated to the point where ... there was a Jim Crow and the (pauses) segregation as far as...having to sit up in the balcony at the movie theaters. So, it wasn't like that. But certainly we are aware of-of-of racial tensions. We certainly saw on black and white tv what was going down South as far as the civil rights movement, and the water hoses and the dogs and George Wallace who was the governor at that time of Georgia. So, we saw that...from—just through the (pauses) through tv. I did have the opportunity to see Martin Luther King, um (pauses) in person, um (pauses) mmm-- a few months before he was assassinated--in Cobo Hall during an Aretha Franklin concert. She brought him out on stage. Said that...he wanted to come out to at least wave to everybody, that he (pause) was

horse (pause) and he couldn't—he had laryngitis and he couldn't talk. That was extremely thrilling, uh, for me at least. I remember that. My sister [Robbyn], who is three years older than me, does not remember it. (Laughs).

Courtney Wilson: She has no recollection. So, I was all you [intelligible] —that wasn't part of her —her—her makeup. And so that's probably why she didn't remember it. And she made me start thinking that I was making it up over the years. And one day I finally just Googled it. And I found the article. Um, I was shocked! It made my hair stand--stand up...the whole story. Um, Aretha Franklin. The laryngitis. Martin Luther King. Cobo Hall. During a concert. I said, "Oh my God." I knew I didn't make it up, so it was really, uh, gratifying to--to see the confirmation (laughs) in writing on the internet that, that actually happened. Because I've been telling that story for years.

Keena: Nice. And do you remember what you were--do you remember getting the notice of his--his death?

Courtney: Oh, of course. (laughs) Of course. Yeah.

Keena: What was that? What was it like, just in general, living through that time as...

Courtney: [7:52] It was--

Keena: I'm sorry, go ahead.

Courtney: No-no, you go ahead. Finish your question.

Keena: I was just gonna say as an African American woman, you know, I'm quite removed from that time.

Courtney: Yes.

Keena: I've spoken to my mom about it. And she's a year younger than you. And she remembers getting the notice when he passed away. So just kind of give me a sense of, of what it was like to be an African American youth? And, and then growing up in a time where, you know, the community seems, was--was so politically active and so, you know, trying to get human rights and dignity.

Courtney: Yeah, sure. So...(pauses) okay, let's start with the first question. Do I remember (long pause) finding out that Martin Luther King had been assassinated? Absolutely! It's--it's, uh, it's (pause) buried deep inside of my-my-my psyche, uh, remembering when it was announced that he had been assassinated. I remember going to school...and there was a white boy named Tim Kelly--I'll never forget his name. When I got to school, he said to me--in such a nasty little voice, "Oh, so your King is dead (pause) what you gone do now?" (Pause) And it just scared me. We were all scared. You know, I mean, I think the adult, the kids (pause) ...a little frightened. Because you didn't know. Remember, Kennedy had been assassinated in '63. President Kennedy in '63—Robert Kennedy earlier in 1968. I think (pause)--he died before that-- maybe he was killed afterwards. I can't remember. Both of them-- both Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King were assassinated in 1968. So it was a time of turbulence. I remember, um, 1963 and watching President Kennedy's (pause) funeral...on black and white TV. So (pauses) so, yeah it was a scary time. I didn't know what we're going to do. And I--years later it occurred to me that--that this, what? 10-year-old boy could not have come up with that by himself. That he clearly heard that [at] his kitchen...dinner table, "What they gone do now? Their King is dead. What are they gonna do now?" So, I was just very, very scared. But Ima tell you (laughing) a year later I had my long, past shoulder-length, pressed, hair cut off and wore an afro from the time I was 11 years old until, I don't know, throughout high school. My high school graduation picture, of course, like all of us did in the 70s, most of us had afros.

Courtney: So, it-it just, you know, empowered me. I was known as the "Midget Militant." (laughs) And of course that segued from the peaceful movement of Martin Luther King into a more activists' situation where--where you took on the mantle, you know, my generation was more the Black Panthers. That--that was the buzz ...these radical...this radical group of young African American people...who wore afros. You know, the Angela Davises. I mean...we--as a young woman that's who why I was more impressed by. I was ten-eleven years old, maybe eleven years old--maybe 10 years old when King was assassinated. Um, yeah, I was 10. 'Cause I turned 11, November of 1968. He was assassinated in April of '68. So ... he was gone. Now what we gonna do? Boom! Here comes these radicals (laughing) you know. Bearing weapons and wearing berets and saying... "Power to the People." And so...in Martin Luther King's day, it was Negro. So, I've gone from being...Colored to Negro--my birth certificate says Negro--to, uh, Black to African American.

Keena: So, would you say that, you know, your influence-- like Angela Davis and the Black Panther Party-- influenced your own activism and your own sense that you needed to be a part of, of something bigger?

Courtney: [12:03] Sure. Again, I was too young to join the Party—the Black Panther Party. But I remember going to a Black Panther meeting in New York City when I was eleven years old. My God sister, actress Denise Nicholas, she was on a very popular show back then...227. And I was 11 years old in a Black Panther meeting (laughing)...in New York City. So yeah, that--that had an impact (laughs).

Keena: Okay. Were you aware at eleven...what that was? Or is that just from looking back on it and understanding as the years have gone on what that meant?

Courtney: No. No. I was aware.

Keena: Okay.

Courtney: Very aware that, "Ooh, we're going to a Black Panther Meeting. Exciting." Yeah, I was aware of that.

Keena: Okay. So, I'm gonna transition a bit to sort of your coming out.

Courtney: Sure.

Keena: How and when did you... how did you come out? And when did you come out?

Courtney: Mm. Well, we all tend to come out to our friends first. So, I have an interesting story. First of all, I didn't identify as being a lesbian in my formative years. Nor...did I recognize myself or identify as lesbian in high school. So, my first sexual (pauses) encounters were heterosexual. However, I did know from the time I was probably eight years old--I didn't think about it...that I-- I wasn't sure--I remember (laughs). I was very attracted...to one of my mother's best friends. And probably about 10 years ago, I told her that. She was probably at that point, you know, 80 (laughs). But I told her. I said, Thelma, you were my first (pause) girl crush. And she said, "Oh, [intelligible]." But she was...but I never thought about that, .... And then when I was in eighth grade or so I used to fantasize about one of my classmates, Audrey. And I was like, "What the hell's that about?" Now right around that time a book came out called "Everything You Need to Know About Sex: But Were Afraid to Ask." And I had gotten my hands on that book and read it cover-to-cover, like most of us did back then. And it talked about sexual fantasies. And...it was, ... (pauses) just because you fantasize about the same sex, didn't mean that you were (pauses) gay. "Oh, okay, well, that makes sense. I'm not gay. I'm just...like a lot of people, I just fantasize (laughs) about the same sex. Okay." And so (pause) my coming out process was—was lengthy because, again, you come out—when you--you come out--you're gay right?

Keena: Yes ma'am.

Courtney: Okay. So you know we come out to our friends and then our family.

Keena: Right.

Courtney: Because—our friends being our other gay friends, not necessarily our straight friends. But our gay friends. Because that's how you found out, "Oh, my goodness. I think I'm gay," .... So, at 15 years old, I started-- I had met two gay guys and I started hanging out with them. So I became a fag hag. I had, uh, and--Oh, my god, to see--have my friend Quarry, who was very effeminate—and my best friend—walk down Griggs Street with hot pants on, you know (pause) his shirt unbuttoned--tied around his waist and unbuttoned down to his waist. And, you know, switching and (laughs)... It was quite a sight to see in my neighborhood because there were no, I didn't grow [up]...on a block that had any gay people. Quite frankly, for blocks and blocks. We didn't have the neighborhood sissy, if you will. Because that's what we used to call them back then. And so, unlike my White friends (pause) coming over to my neighborhood, I didn't mind my black, gay friends—very, um, what's the word I'm looking for? What did they used to call them? Mm. (pause) I'm losing my words but--flamboyant that was the word (laughs). Very flamboyant, gay teenage young man...twitching up and down my street, you know, I didn't mind that—'cause he was Black. And...I didn't get teased too much either about having him as a friend.... I don't remember that he was called..."sissy," or..."faggot"...or "punk"... as we would walk up and down...in my neighborhood. So, I know-- I didn't identify as gay at that point. But I would go to gay bars at fifteen years old though. There was a bar over on Fenkell [Ave] on the northwest side of Detroit called George's. We just called it George's. It was actually called George's Inca Room after the Inca Indians, i-n-c-a. But we just all called it George's. And I was able to get into that bar at fifteen years old because back then 18 was the drinking age. And with

a little bit of makeup...and just keeping my mouth shut, I guess I was able to pass for 18. So, I was never carded. Hm-hm!

Keena: Nice!

Courtney: I just had such a ball up in there with my--with my, uh...my sissies. (laughs). I was even able to order--I wouldn't drink, drink. But I would order Champale and Grenadine. To this day, I would never drink that. But that's what I drank back then. And I just lived up in the gay bars. It was fun. The music was better. And it was just exciting, at 15 years old, as you can imagine, being in any bar let alone a gay bar.

Keena: Yes.

Courtney: So, I probably came out -- it occurred to me that I was gay (pause)--I think I was in my 20s. I was probably 20... Still had not had any encounters with women, at that point. I went from identifying as heterosexual to identifying as bisexual (pause) as I started exploring my feelings for women. And then at 20, I think, yeah probably 20 years old, I went out to a lesbian bar for the first time. And (pause) that was it (laughs).

Keena: What was the name of the bar?

Courtney: The bar that I went to was probably (pauses)--it was probably a bar called Socio's. [Spells out the Name]. Yeah, Socio's. May not have been the apostrophe-S. I can't remember. And don't even ask me where it was. I don't remember that either. I could find out for you where that was. But I wasn't driving at that time even though-- 'cause I didn't get my license (laughs) until I was 19--I was driving. But I didn't have a car. These two women came and picked me up who—we had a mutual friend with. And to this day (pause) one of those women is my best friend for life. The Godmother of one of my--of my oldest child. And I'm certainly still in contact with Treva (pause) who is ...we--we're all still friends (pause) all these years later.

Keena: That's awesome.

Courtney: So, I didn't come out--I'm going around I'm trying to give you the background of my journey. So as I started meeting lesbians and being very attractive to them, I met my first back then what we called "lover" in—at Socio's. And, uh, yeah, that was my first experience with a woman. And I'm pretty sure I was 20 years old.

Keena: Okay. So you came out to...your best friend first?

Courtney: I'm came out to Quarry who was my best friend, you know my little sissy friend, who, um, I was his Fag Hag. I don't know if they still use that term, (laughs) but that's what we were called; straight women who hang out with gay men. And I came out to him first. And good God, I would have thought he was happy. But he was not happy. He was like, "What do you mean?" He was very upset (pause) that I told him that I was gay. And I think in his own way he probably thought that he had something to do with that. And being two years my senior, probably knew already at 17--when I told him, I was 20 and so he was 22—but he knew-- because he was nothing-- he was gay all his life up until that point. And, he probably knew how hard it was and didn't want to--didn't wish that on me. But (pause) but he had, you know, he had--had nothing to do with that. But he came around, and it was okay with him. But, yeah, so, I came out to him first. And then, oh my God...I think the next person that I came out to, besides...my gay friends, of course...let them know, "Yeah, I'm in this—I'm in it now. Let's go," was...my sister. I was in college and I told my sister [Robbyn]. And she was pretty much unbothered by it all. She said that she just...needed to get back to her studies because if she didn't watch out, I was going to--her baby sister was going to graduate before her. And so...she didn't seem to care. And because we were quite frankly brought up in a household where we did have gay--my mother had gay first cousins, two-two men. And one, uh, woman who didn't live in Detroit. She lived in Chicago where my mother was from. And (pauses) my mother's best friend (pause), a woman named Ivis, happened to --I did not know it (pause) until years later...when I finally came out to my mother—was gay. I had my suspicions. So, my mother's--one of her dearest friends was a lesbian. She had the two gay first cousins. And (pause) my mother and my step-father were always invited over to her gay cousins...Christmas parties, whatever party.... So, I didn't grow up in a household where gay people--first of all, I didn't grow up in a religious household. Okay? So, I didn't grow up in that church-going, bible thumping household.

Keena: Okay.

Courtney: [22:33] Instead of listening to gospel music on the weekend when we cleaned up the house, we listened to jazz.

Keena: Okay.

Courtney: You understand? So it was different, you know. And so there was no gay bashing. I didn't grow up with gay bashing. So one would think that I would be (pause) brave enough to come out to my mother sooner than I did. Because I didn't come out to my mother until I was 29.

Keena: Okay.

Courtney: And I didn't come out to my father until I was 32 and pregnant through artificial insemination (laughs). So, I just felt that-- I was scared, number one. But I also knew that I was not going to be (pause) ostracized or...by my family. And I was correct about that.

Keena: Okay. So, my next questions-- and some of this we'll come back to in subsequent questions-- but tell me about Detroit's Black gay community at the time...when you came out?

Courtney: It was pretty underground. Um...most of our bars (pauses) we entered through the back. Back doors as [unintelligible: maybe closest?] right off the street. Um, so that we could pretty much sneak in. One of those bars—and...you say the Black Gay community, I mean there were no--there were some (pauses) quote-unquote Black gay bars, like The Famous Door [146 W. Michigan Ave], which I believe, I don't even know where The Famous Door was. I think The Famous Door was--I don't even know where The Famous Door was. (Laughs). Again, I can find out for you. Because, again, I wasn't driving. (laughs). I was only a passenger. So, I wasn't really paying attention. Uh, there was Fosters which was downtown Detroit. Which by day--you familiar with the Woodward [Woodward Bar & Grill]?

Keena: Yes.

Courtney: Okay. So you see where you enter --you see you enter off the parking lot?

Keena: Okay.

Courtney: Well (pauses) that's how a lot of bars were. You enter through the rear. There is a front door on Woodward [Ave]...of the Woodward, but...that's just--was not their entrance. That may have been their entrance during the daytime...when they were just a bar and a restaurant for people who worked in the community. But... so there were a few Black gay bars. But, as I was coming out, we went to White gay bars. Uh, Menjos...The Railroad Crossing, which was over on Eight Mile. So there were bars like that. But they were White. And some of them, like Menjos, which is over in the Palmer Park area, I think it's still there—they discriminated against Black folks. So they would card us heavily.

Keena: Oh.

Courtney: You had to have (pause) three pieces of photo ID. All kinds of crap like that. Where the white patrons were not asked to have...anything like that. One ID and they were in the door. So, inside of the gay community, of course, there was racism. Which is unfortunate. But it certainly did exist. So, we all knew each other. Because we were a small group of Black (pause) children, .... We were...we were the children. And we all knew each other. And that's why most of us all slept with each other too, .... Because the community was so small. You couldn't--couldn't help but-- help but do that. [Keena Starts to ask a question, but Courtney adds] And this was before AIDS.

Keena: Okay, so I'm sort of related, you sort of touched on it a bit. But what was the climate in Detroit for the Black gays, Black lesbians at the time?

Courtney: (Pauses) You know Detroit is the little Bible Belt of the Midwest. And-- oohh! (pauses) When I was (pause) in my 20s...I went to church. I was--I did eventually start going to church. And I was very much in the closet at church. Even though my choir director, I knew that he was gay. Everybody knew that he was gay. And certainly there was some (pauses) suspicion that the pastor was...bisexual. But...it...just wasn't talked about... I didn't go to a Baptist church where gay bashing happened from the pulpit. My mother (pauses) would not have gone to that kind of church anyway. Or my step-father. So....., yeah, I was, I was in the closet. So in our communities, in our church going community, for the most part, we were in the closet. And so I can't tell you what that was like as far as you, because I didn't go to one of the churches. I'm sure other people my age could tell you about being in the closet and going to some Church of God in Christ, or sanctified church, and having to be banished from the pulpit. I don't have that experience. so I don't have a (pause) negative experience of being a black gay person during that time. (pause), except for when I got older (pause) and came out more, came out of the closet more (pause) and became an activist.

Keena: Okay. You said as you got older you faced some challenges?

Courtney: Yes.

Keena: Can you tell me about some of those challenges? And from that, from when you were

Keena: Can you tell me about some of those challenges? And from that, from when you were older and more out and more active?

Courtney: [28:05] Yep! So, I was (pauses) I'm a founder (pause) founding member of Full Truth Fellowship, it started out being Full Truth Fellowship of Christ Church. So, I moved to New York City. Okay, and that might be why some of this—I got away from anything that was going on in Detroit because at the age of 25 in 1983 I relocated to New York City. And it had nothing to do with being gay and not wanting to be gay in my own backyard. It had to do with...I just wanted to get the hell out of Detroit. It was boring. And I wanted to spread my wings. Thought where else to go but New York City.... I had a (pause) gay cousin there. Oh, let me say this. I had a cousin who happened to be gay. Again, I didn't move to New York City because I had a gay cousin there (laughs). So, I moved to New York City and lived there from '83 to '86. [I] went back to Detroit (pause) quite frequently because airfare was like \$99 round trip. They had two airlines, New York Express and Big Apple Air, uh, that don't exist anymore. But they were like, they were--they were hubs. And so, \$99 round trip that was certainly affordable. And so I came home frequently and partied and everything. But (pause) for those three years and during...the AIDS, which turned into an epidemic or a pandemic, I was in New York City (pause) watching you know, gay men drop. I have a saying that I came up with that says, "They went from a cough (pause) to a coffin (pause) in 30 days."

Keena: Wow.

Courtney: So, by time I got back to Detroit in 1986 (pause) I had heard, uh, in 1989, flyers had gone around about a woman named Renee McCoy [Founding Pastor of Full Truth Fellowship Church of Christ, 1988] who was starting (pause) a church service for the gay and lesbian community. And that was just mind blowing to me. Like, "What? A gay church? Okay, let's go." So, (slight laugh) I went and stayed with that church--Oh, my God. (pauses) Oh my goodness --into, I don't know (pause) probably ten years.

Keena: Okay.

Courtney: And, uh, was on the board of directors. Was a choir member. Was choir president. Was, uh, directed a little bit. But I was also, like said, the chairperson of the board. Along with Kofi Adoma [co-founder Ruth Ellis Center]. She was on the board as well. So, that was, like I said, just--just the, "What?" And that's when--when it started becoming known in the church community...that there was this church over there on Joy Road and Martindale, saying they were a quote unquote, a gay church. Yeah, then...stuff started (chortles). Yeah, rumblings happened. But we'd also become-- the news media...got wind of us. And there was an article. Oh, I don't know, let me see (pauses) there was an article in the late 90s--mid 90s about the church. And when that article came out, and I was featured, my ex at that time--my now ex, we had (pauses)--think we only had two kids at that time. We had her (pause) brother who moved in with us and he was 13. And then my oldest son [Jordan], who at the time was...I don't know (pauses) five-six-seven, something like that. We were featured in the news article with photographs (laughs) and interviews. And when all that stuff came out, and the whole city (pause) now learned about us...then it was like...(pause) there was buzz. And like I said, certainly buzz in the black church community. Some of the preachers...were getting on the radio or standing up in front of their congregations saying that we're all going to hell. And, "How can they have a gay church?" And, you know, blah blah blah blah blah. So, that's when it started getting (pauses), not ugly, but (pauses) challenged I should say.

Keena: How were you able to overcome those challenges either...you personally or as a faith community?

Courtney: Well as a faith community, we just stuck together. The name of the church was Full Truth, where we come-- come to God in the full truth of our lives (pauses) hiding nothing. And, there had been rocks thrown through the window. And...little-little excitement like that. But we just overcame it by knowing, that uh, God is love and love is for everyone. And that was the church motto: "God is love and love is for everyone." At some point and time we joined up with the Unity Fellowship Church Movement here in Los Angeles with Carl Bean. And, uh, started opening up more churches across the country. And, you know, just stood our ground. We learned, uh, we're very learned. We were taught liberation theology. We went out and bought an inclusive bibles (pause) that had inclusive language in it. And to this day it's because of, (laughs) it seems odd, but a lot of us are no longer Christian because we (laughs)...we learned so much that we...walked away from Christianity, quite frankly. One of the a—A friend of mine who

married myself and my spouse last year [2017], Alfreda Lanoix out of Los Angeles, she used to be the pastor of Unity Fellowship Church Movement here [in Los Angeles] and is no longer Christian. So...we learned so much (laughs) about God--about God's love, if you will, that (pauses, laughs) we-we-we outgrew Christianity. But saying that—not to say that...when you have a church (pause) there's going to be somebody else who wants to have their own gay church, okay?

Keena: Okay.

Courtney: And that's why you get--churches are like that, that's why you have, ..., First Baptist Church, right. And then next thing you know (pause), there's a Second Baptist Church. Then there's a Greater Second Baptist Church, ..., (laughs). Everybody's trying to outdo the other. So that was the same thing that happened because a church is a church is a church. And that's the same thing that happened to Full Truth. There were people who, like some of the deacons or whatever, who decided, "Well, wait a minute. I'm going to (pause) start my own church," you know? And all of a sudden that splinters. For a minute, Full Truth was the only Black (pause) gay church, if you will, even though there were White folk who came too...but it was Black, uh, Black headed. And so (pause) it splintered (paused) off into about, oh my god, at some point and time, into—I don't know, like maybe five different churches. So of course, what happens? If you have a hundred people who got to Full Truth, and then it starts splintering off then the congregation gets smaller. Now you've got all these little small gay churches with (slight pause) 20 coming people.

Keena: Mm-hm.

Courtney: You know, so. (pauses) And that's a problem. And that's why I think right now to this day, I don't know, there may be two or three, something like that. Who knows?

Keena: [36:06] So in my research, and much of the work that you're doing seem to be centered around providing support. What support services, you know, do you wish you would have had when you first came out? And was your activism sort of related to establishing some of those services for others within the community?

Courtney: Yeah, that's a good question. I guess you're right. I mean...the three organizations that I was most involved in, um, Full Truth, the Ruth Ellis Center and Michigan Equality which is now--What is Michigan Equality now? Equality Michigan?

Keena: Yeah.

Courtney: [36:53] Equality Michigan. Okay, yeah, um, (pause) there was the Triangle Foundation [Founded 1991]. I think the Triangle Foundation and Michigan Equality [Beth Bashert founded Equality in 1999; Courtney served on the board in 2000], joined forces and became Equality Michigan. Now that was (pause) after I think I moved to California, because I've been out here for 16 years. Um, (pause) yeah, they are all about services. Well, yeah, support. It was important to me, uh, this-this gay church. Because I didn't want anybody to think (pause) that just because they were gay (pause) that they had a one-way ticket to hell, if you will. If you believe in that, you know. How-how horrible was that? To live your life thinking that -- if you're Christian-- that you're going to perish in the flames of hell. Just because you're gay. So that message resonated with me. And, uh, (pause) it was my first time jumping on board a gay (pause) or black gay movement if you will. And then, um --probably because my--my religious background's Catholic. So was Renee McCoy's. And, uh, she used to always say from the pulpit that she was a recovering Catholic. But I was Catholic, not by family--nobody else in my family was (pause) Catholic. Again, I grew up in a household that was not religious, but we were in Catholic schools. And back in the 60s, if you were going to be in Catholic school, (pause) you had to become Catholic.

Keena: Okay.

Courtney: So that was fine with my mother because we weren't converting from any (laughs) religion. And so, we-- my sister [Robbyn] and I became Catholic. And I became a Baptist on my own at the age of 17. Because at that point, for some strange reasons, my mother and stepfather decided that they were going to start going to church. And so, I sang. And Mama joined the choir. And I said, "Okay, I'll come over there (slight pause) and sing in your--in the choir." And then I...became baptized as a Baptist.

Courtney Wilson: So...yeah...support through the church. Yeah. Supporting all those black (pause) gay people. Particularly, still dying of AIDS all over the place (pause) was very important. Uh, then, um, Michigan Equality...I can't remember which happened first Ruth Ellis



important. Oh, uh, um...Michigan Equality--I can't remember which happened first Ruth Ellis or--Ruth Ellis Center or Michigan Equality. But, yeah, Ruth Ellis Center, uh, Kofi Adoma brought it to my attention. I became one of the founding board members of Ruth Ellis Center. Uh, because Kofi brought to my attention about...throwaway youth. And that these kids, particularly young men who were coming—being brave enough--now we've empowered people (pause) to come out of the closet. You know? Be proud! Stand up! Tell your parents your gay, ... Without thinking of the responsibility of that was that, or the outcome of that, was going to be that a lot of these young people were being kicked out of their homes (pause) and--and because they were gay. And not... being able to take care of themselves financially. And then going out on the street and having, uh, survival sex. And then contracting HIV (pause) turning into AIDS (pause) and dying, right? So, it was incumbent upon the community--the black community-- to (slight pause) take care of these kids. And so the Ruth Ellis Center...it was just a concept at that time. And Ruth was there. Ruthie, she was there...at the ribbon cutting ceremony [Ruth Ellis Center opened 2000]. We actually opened up (pause) in a--God were we in a--I think the offices that we were in were upstairs from an (laughs) X-rated movie--uh, the [unintelligible].(laughs) on Woodward, right there, ..., in the, um, Park. ...but yeah (pause) giving that support to the black gay community. And then Michigan Equality--I can't remember who brought that to my attention. But that was transitioning more into a political arena. And again ...more of a political action committee. And again offering that support to the, to the gay community. Because I kind of missed out on the Civil Rights Movement. I mean, I was young. I remember it. But I wasn't active in it. Okay? And so this was my way of becoming an activist for another group of people that I was, which was gay.

Keena: Okay.

Courtney: Black and gay.

Keena: I'm going to go back a little bit. I found an article that you wrote for Kick Magazine in 1995.

Courtney: For what magazine?

Keena: Kick magazine?

Courtney: Kick?

Keena: Kick, yes.

Courtney: Oh, Kick Magazine! Yeah.

Keena: Um, you affectionately referred to Ruth Ellis as your "ansister." What did it mean to have her in the community?

Courtney: [41:45] Wow. Wow. She was just—were-were all just (pause) blown away and fascinated by the fact that there was this 80-some-odd-year old Black woman who was out of the closet and gay, you know. That we did not even know existed. That we did not even find. Ruth was brought to the white gay community--white lesbian community because, um, the way she...the person who brought her to us (pause) met her on an elevator after-- you know, that story?

Keena: No.

Courtney: Yeah, Ruth was--a senior (pause) exercise or karate class--I think it was a karate class. And, um, God I can't even--I'm trying to think of the--of the name of the woman who found her, or who Ruth approached. It might--it might not come to me. But the woman who was teaching the class, who was on...left the class, got on the elevator. Ruth gets on the elevator with her and (slight pause) basically (pauses) asked the woman if she was Gay. And, and she said--God, why can't I remember her name? And she said, "Well, yeah." And Ruth basically told her, "Well, I am too. And where are--..., I would like to meet some...some more lesbians." (laughs). And that's how (pause) Ruth (pause) came to our...came to the (pause) the lesbian--the White lesbian community. Who then--not that...they share her, but Ruth found the Black lesbian community through the White lesbian community.

Keena: Okay.

Courtney: And so, she was just a treasure. ..., she was only about four feet tall (laughs). She was...so little that when I would take Jordan [Courtney's eldest son] who was, again, a child at that time, to Royal Oak Pride, uh, Jordan would spot Ruthie before I would spot her because he was more her height. (laughing)

Keena: (laughing)

Courtney: And he'd see her in this...crowd of people, he'd say, "Mommy, there's Miss Ruth." I'm

like, "Oh!" You know? (laughing) She was just a treasure. None of us (pause) knew! You know, we're thinking--I mean, we knew that there were black gay people before us...before our generation. But Lord knows, we didn't know any of them (pause) to any great degree. And so here came Ruth with this--this history (pause) and this herstory of being a lesbian back in-in the 1930s, you know, the 1940s. I mean, she was born in 1899. So...we just couldn't fathom this. So, she opened up a-a door and a window to-to-to what it was like to be black and gay ...in the 1920s. You know? (laughing) And what that was all about. Because Ruth and her partner used to let young gay people (pause) come to their house, move in with them. They were all a little family. Hence, the center was named after Ruth because she provided that type of support, ..., in her day, .... And so it was just befitting that it was named after her. But she was--she was just a treasure. She was a treasure. I remember asking her one time did she remember seeing an airplane in the sky for the first time in her life. And she did. (Laughing). ...she said, "Yeah, I remember seeing that," .... So...just fascinating. And of course, she breathed and lived in the--she took a breath in three centuries: 'Cause she was born in the 19th century; lived her life through the 20th century; and died...in the 21st century, in 2000 (pause) I think 2000.

Keena: Wow. Along those lines, you know, my question is sort of about your role there...what the vision for the center was in its inception? And you've touched on that a bit, but also, what's your impression of its evolution? What it's become?

Courtney: Oh, Wow. Uh, the vision (pause) for the center, literally, was at a table. I mean (pause) just talk. What--what do we want this to be? You know? And at that point, so early on in the beginning, it-- it was just about, "We gotta get some money (laughs). ...we've gotta get some grants written...." So, we knew that we wanted it to be (pause) eventually become housing (pause) for (pause) cast out (pause) throwaway (pause) gay youth. And more so for the boys. Because, ..., that's who was being thrown out more, or coming out more, being ostracized more in their families than the girls. But at some time we saw it being for both. But I think initially it was just going to be for-for young men. And then we finally...we opened up our offices. But it was not...it wasn't what it is now. There was just, again, a-a room, a community room, if you will...that people could come stop by.... And then shortly thereafter, I think I may have moved on to something else. But I don't know how long I was...on the board of the Ruth Ellis--probably a year, in the beginning. What it has become now (pause) is more than--it certainly--I don't know if it exceeds the expectations, because that was always the vision. I have been to the-the offices maybe 10 years ago, since last time I was there [Ruth Ellis Center] in the offices. I don't even know what its become sense then. But it was certainly, um, very, very impressive 10 years ago. And I was like, "Wow, look at that." And I'm very, very proud.

Keena: And let's see, that was in 2000, so from 2000 to 2001, you said you would be on the board?

Courtney: And it started in 2000?

Keena: [47:48] That's what I have from my research, yes.

Courtney: Okay. Yeah, yeah, 'cause I still lived in Detroit at that time. No, in 2000-- it started in 2000? Oh, no, in 2000 I moved to West Bloomfield. I'm thinking I was still living in Detroit when when it started. Maybe, I mean, hmm (pauses) was it possible--what started in 2000? Was that the Ruth Ellis Center as it is now?

Keena: I think so.

Courtney: Okay, yeah, I'm going to say that the board started way before 2000. 'Cause she died in 2000.

Keena: Yes. So the center came out, when would you say the board-- its original inception?

Courtney: That's--I don't know. Um, certainly in the 90s. Certainly in the 90s. Whoever's interviewing Kofi Adoma [co-founder of Ruth Ellis Center in 1999], (pause) she would have all that information.

Keena: Okay.

Courtney: But it was in the 90s. But maybe-- I mean, like I said, Ruthie died in 2000 so maybe like '95, '96.

Keena: Okay,

Courtney: 97? (laughs)...it was the mid-to-late '90s when the board, uh, when the board first started.

Keena: Okay.

Courtney: And there were white folk and black folk on the board.

Courtney: This were here mine from the other from the court.

Keena: Okay. I wanna go back or touch a little bit more on--you said that you were the first African American lesbian to give birth via artificial insemination in Metro Detroit.

Courtney: That we know of.

Keena: That you know of.

Courtney: Mm-hmm.

Keena: So...

Courtney: I don't know if there was--if anyone else had-had that done, they didn't tell anybody. And they certainly weren't...out about it.

Keena: Okay. Well... in that context, what does it mean to be the first?

Courtney: You know, it's funny, um (pause) I...look now and see people...lesbian couples having...children through artificial insemination and all this stuff. And I kind of chuckle because now it's just the norm. Everybody's doing it. But when I did that in 1990--damn near 30 years ago, it was not the norm. Lesbians who had babies had them...the-the conventional way. Um, whether they were married before...and...divorced and got out of that and still had the children. So, it was, it was interesting. Like, I remember (pause) in all those...years that I was out (pause) gay (pause) in the bars, whatever, they're never--. I gotta tell you, I think I was the first (pause) pregnant woman (laughs) who came into a bar. And, boy, the stares that I got.... And you can see the people ...whispering.... It was just something. I don't even know if they knew I was artificially inseminated. Most of them...probably didn't even know who I was. Um, because I had been off the bar scene for so long... and not so long; long enough.

Courtney: I don't think I went to a bar. I think I went to a party (pause) at a club or something. And I remember everybody just, you could just tell that there was ...that they were talking about me. But I just went ahead with my pregnant self. And, my partner at that time...danced and...had a good time. But...as much as a pregnant woman who was showing good. (laughs). Cause I certainly wasn't drinking. But it was, it was very interesting. And my spouse now, who I'm with, I remember when we first met. She told me that she...remembered me from all those years ago. She's 10 years younger than me. But that she remembered me from all those years ago, and certainly always knew (pause) my son's name. She said, "I always knew--" she said, "All of us knew about you. And all of us knew his name. All of us knew (pause) Jordan." And I was like, "really?" That's just freaky.... But...being that...pioneer of doing that. And certainly, as more lesbians in our community started doing it, black lesbians ...I became that resource. They would come to me. "Can I call you? Can I talk to you?" I'm like, "sure." 'Cause there was no books written. There was one book out there called "Heather (pause) has two Mama's." It was about a little white girl with two Moms. You know? So it was--it was different. It was--because of him, it made me come out (pause) more and more and more. Because I was not going to have this kid--. My sister--I remember my sister wanted me to--to lie to him and tell him that his father was killed in the Gulf--Persian Gulf War.

Keena: Oh?

Courtney: I'm like, "What?" (laughs). And she said, "Yeah, just tell him that." And I said, "So what happens when he wants to go to his father's grave site? Or he wants to meet his father's people--his family? What do I--What do I do then?" I said, "Girl, that's just nonsense." So, because--the more I came out, I knew I had to come completely out of the closet. In my neighborhood. In my child's school. In my, um, community. In--everywhere. On my job. Everywhere! Because I wasn't going to have this child hiding...or feeling less than (pause) because he had a lesbian mother.

Keena: What were the legal issues or hurdles that you--did you have to overcome any legal issues or hurdles to do that? Or how--what was the process like, I guess?

Courtney: The process of becoming pregnant, or?

Keena: Well, no, like, I guess what was--because you'd never done it before. So, ..., what was that like? Going through that process alone? Going through that process, sort of trailblazing that...so that you could be a resource to (pause) other women later?

Courtney: [54:02] Yeah. What I did, I just (pause)--I'm trying to think if there were computers then. Yeah, I guess there were. Okay (laughs). I think I um (pauses) (quietly) God, I think [unintelligible] was there the internet. Honey, [Keena laughs]I don't know how the hell I did but I did it. I was able to find, I think--oh, ... what, it was the Yellow Pages. (laughs). I looked in the Yellow Pages for sperm banks.

Keena: Okay.

Courtney: And I found a sperm bank. Uh, International Cryogenics (pause) in Birmingham, Michigan. Uh, I did my research, um (pause) finding sperm banks throughout the country. I found that the three major ones were in New York, (pause) San Francisco, or Oakland, California, New York, and Atlanta. But I also knew that those three places were heavily (pause) occupied--not occupied but--heavily populated by gay men.

Keena: Okay.

Courtney: Okay. And with that came (pause) human error (pause) for me contracting (pause) HIV. So I ruled all three of those places out, you know? Now, the one thing that was nice about all those places was that, when my son turned 18 years old, he would have been able to meet--if his donor was still alive at that time--his-his donor. Unfortunately, at the Birmingham location of International Cryogenics, they did not have that option. So, it was strictly anonymous (pause) for the rest of his life. And I...but I also knew...it was probably safer to go with the Birmingham Michigan location. So that's what I did. So, I called them up (pause) and I asked him, "What was it going to take?" Or I told them, "I was a lesbian and I wanted to get inseminated. And what did I have to do?" And they told me that I just have to find (pause) a doctor (pause)that--that was all right with it. I said, "Okay, fine." So, I was a pharmaceutical rep. at that time. And I called on--just happened to call on OBGYNs. And so I (pause)... I'm sorry. They gave me a list of the doctors (pause) that they dealt with (laughs).

Keena: Okay.

Courtney: And so all of them, I called on. And I had to make decision, ooh—at that point I was not out on my job.

Keena: Okay.

Courtney: And so I chose Dr. Hassan Amarikia because I liked him (pause) and he seemed like a very, very nice man. And I, um, made an appointment with him. And--In private--told him I was a lesbian and that I wanted to have a baby. And he said that was fine with him. And so that--that was that. I got pregnant on the first try.

Keena: Okay.

Courtney: (laughs) And...now after the baby was born, I do remember, um (pause) when we were bringing the baby home (pause) somebody asking (pause)-- the woman who was wheeling us out (pause) said something about the father, I don't know. And then my partner...and I told he--she asked me if my partner was my sister. That's what it was. And I said, "No, this is my--my partner. We're a couple. We're a lesbian couple." And she...was like, "Oh." That kind of look, you know. And I knew it was always going to be (pause) people like that...who I was going to have to deal with--that my son was going to have to deal with for the rest of his life. But now, of course, in 2018 it's just like a non-issue. I have two younger children, um, who have a different biological mother [than] my ex, but who were conceived [by using] the same anonymous donor, uh, in 2001 and 2014. Remember this sperm has been frozen since 1989.

Keena: Okay.

Courtney: And so, they did not--they just did not have the same issue that my son [Jordan] had. Completely different, uh, experience (pause) growing up in a lesbian head of household (pause) and, um, being time conceived through anonymous artificial insemination. Completely different 10 years later (pause) by the time my 17-year-old was born.

Keena: Okay. Let's go back a little bit. How did you--what was the conversation like when you explained to your son--your eldest child--how he came to be?

Courtney: Well, I was always just very honest with him. Again, there were no books on it. I don't know if there's any books on it now. (pause) But I just took it one day at a time. And I always said, I would know when the moment came. And what happened--he was—oh, probably like four years old-- three-three or four years old; probably four years old. And he came one day, from nursery school (clears throat), crying, (pauses) "I want my Daddy." (laughs). "I want my daddy." And I was like, (quietly) "Now, where the hell is that coming from?" He had never said anything about a daddy. He had a father figure, who was my father and my stepfather. And so, it's not like he didn't have a man in his life. My Daddy acted like it was his son.

Keena: Mm-hm.

Courtney: And my father never had any sons. He had all daughters--he had four daughters. They had a very special relationship. So, at four years old he came home from nursery school and said, "I want my Daddy." I decided--and let me back up and say I was 32 years old when I got

pregnant. So, I wasn't... a young mother, .... I was good and grown. Homeowner. Degreed. All that stuff. So, by the time he was four years old crying he wanted his daddy, I was 36 (laughing) ...37...something like that. And-and I just looked at this little boy knowing that he had probably just come from nursery school hearing (pause) some other child. Actually, at four years old (pause) he wasn't at nursery school (pause) it's probably in kindergarten. Because he went early. But he had heard some kids saying that, "I want my daddy." And I sat him down, and I told him-- quite matter of factly, Jordan, you don't have a Daddy. (laughing) You have a Papa. And that was that. You know? "You don't have a daddy. You have a Papa. You have your grandfathers." And, um, ..., okay. And from there it evolved into (pause), "Jordan, you were conceived through artificial insemination. Let Mommy explain to you what that is." You know? "Jordan, your realities in life are going to never change. You were conceived through artificial insemination. You are being raised in a lesbian head of household. You are biracial. You're half Black and you're half Cuban. Those are your realities that are never going to change. ..., and you'd better, uh, accept it! (laughs) And be proud of it! Because I'm not going to let you hide it." (laughs).

Keena: Okay.

Courtney: It was probably like baptism [unintelligible] (laughs). Poor kid. Now he's 27—he's 28. And I think (pause) his story is just fascinating because he was this young black kid (pause) who (pause) didn't have the same story (pause) as the majority of black kids.

Keena: Nice. You have two other children?

Courtney: I do.

Keena: And what are their names, if you don't mind?

Courtney: [1:01:22] Parker, he's 17. And Sheridan. S-h-e-r-i-d-a-n. She's, uh, fourteen. And they live out here. All my kids live out here. Sheridan was the only one that was born here. Parker's was born, um (pause) Providence Hospital in Southfield in 2001. And then we moved to California when he was a year old—the following year.

Keena: Okay.

The sperm had to be, uh, FedExed out here (laughs) for Sheridan.

Keena: FedExed?

Courtney: Yep. From International Cryogenics. We used the same donor for all three kids.

Keena: [A] couple of my best friends, they did that with their daughter and son. So they're each... birth mom, and...

Courtney: Yeah.

Keena: then they have the same donor, the same...

Courtney: Right.

Keena: ...genetic ties. I always thought that was awesome [Courtney laughs] that way. Let's see getting towards sort of the end of my questions here. I don't want to keep you too much over the...

Courtney: Yeah, I gotta get out of here at 1:45.

Keena: So my question is, I asked you earlier about...challenges that you faced when you were first coming out.

Courtney: Mm-hmm.

Keena: How do you feel as an out lesbian today?

Courtney: [1:03:03] Oh, it's-it's just so different. I mean it's--its, (pause) status quo. Actually, I don't think it's as much fun. Because...when you're hiding something it's ...there's that intrigue to it. That mystery. You know?

Keena: Mm-hm.

Courtney: And then the excitement of maybe somebody finding out. And now these kids are walking down the street hand-in-hand and shit (laughs), and I'm like, "Damn!" You know? But I--when I did that...in my 20s--when I was bold enough to walk down the street in Detroit, Michigan--holding my lover's hand...that was a big deal. But now, it's just not. And I don't know if that's going on in Detroit. But it certainly is everywhere here in Los Angeles. It's just --everybody's just out. (laughs) Everybody! (laughs) So my spouse, when the Supreme Court ruling came down a couple years ago, she was so upset. Because we went down to West Hollywood, which is the gay area in LA--gay neighborhood, gay community. I mean their police cars have the gay pride flag on 'em (laughs). And [unintelligible]. She was just really jealous that she was older now. And she was like she, felt that she missed out on something. And I-I felt completely opposite. I was just so proud that I, that I, that they were standing on my shoulders

completely opposite. I was just so proud that I--that I--that they were standing on my shoulders, you know what I'm saying?

Keena: Yeah.

Courtney: So the two different, um, different (pauses) responses to-- to the ruling. One was jealous and one--one was, you know, proud. ...but, but now--girl please. I have fought on my job for domestic uh-uh, partnership benefits. I mean, I've been through it. I fought-- I have spoken from the steps of the Capitol in Lansing, (pause) at Pride. I mean...I (she laughs). I-I have been through it. Fought for (pauses) gay adoption in the state. And that's when-- one of the reasons I moved--we relocated out here in 2002 because that--fighting for the rights for gay folks to be able to adopt children. At that point I think I was--I'm sure I was--yeah, past my forties when I moved out here 'cause I'm 61 now. And, I just said...I don't have time for this just bullshit. I need to-- we need to go someplace where we're respected. And at that time, Gray Davis, the governor at that time of California, had the most comprehensive gay laws in effect...in the country. And so, I was like, "Screw it. Let's just go to where we're--(pause) where our family is respected. 'Cause I was sick--and of course, I did--I made the right decision because (pause) gay marriage was never legal in Michigan, I don't think, until the Supreme Court ruling.

Keena: Mm.

Courtney: And I'm assuming, I don't even know if that includes gay adoption now. I don't even know. It just-it may or may not, but-but back in 2000-2001, uh, one gay person could adopt a child, but two gay people could not adopt a child together.

Keena: Mm.

Courtney: But (pause)...a family is two children--I mean two parents. But you're not allowing that family to happen.

Keena: Right.

Courtney: Based upon sexual orientation. So, (pause) I had had it. (laughs)

Keena: What's your partner's name? Your wife?

Courtney: Uh, she's my hersband.

Keena: Your hersband?

Courtney: My hersband, yeah (laughs). She's a-she's a male-identified lesbian.

Keena: Okay.

Courtney: Her name is, uh Madisun. M-a-d-i-s-u-n. Leigh, L-e-i-g-h. She was on the airwaves of a smooth jazz station in Detroit on CBS Radio for 12 years.

Keena: Oh, nice.

Courtney: Yeah. So everybody knows her. (pause). She's in Detroit right now.

Keena: Oh, is she?

Courtney: Mm-hmm.

Keena: And, um, I'm going to go back just a little bit to, how many siblings do you have?

Courtney: I have (pause) one full sibling who I grew up with.

Keena: And Is that your sister?

Courtney: Yes.

Keena : Uh, what was her name?

Courtney: Her name is Robbyn. R-o-b-b-y-n. I won't give you her last name cause she's so private.

Keena: That's fine.

Courtney: Okay. She's three years older than me.

Keena: Three years older?

Courtney: Mm-hmm.

Keena: And, uh, is there anything that you would like to add, or you (pause) think that we didn't really talk enough about today?

Courtney: Uh...I think you've hit all the questions that you've sent me. Um, (pause) I do want to talk very briefly about the AIDS pandemic.

Keena: Okay.

Courtney: Uh, and the activism...from Full Truth around that. We lost-- we were losing (pause), members, friend. I've lost over 35 friends and family members, those two gay, male cousins, first cousins, of my mother's that I spoke of earlier, both died of AIDS. And Full Truth, the one thing about...that black gay church that other churches were not doing (pause) was (pause) recognizing and supporting (pause) the-the (pause) AIDS victims. And through nutrition, through counseling,

the, the gay community, (pause) what really brought the community together, certainly, the gay community at large, was...the AIDS epidemic. And certainly, that has to be noted, because we've lost too many (pause) who are now...nameless (pause) and during that time. So...that has to be speaking of. When you think about it, Full Truth had an outreach for the HIV community. The Ruth Ellis Center had-has that tie in with HIV because of the survival sex.

Keena: Mm.

Courtney: [1:09:23] So that's just--just very, very important. And the other thing I want to mention is that, I was wooed (pause) by HRC [Human Rights Campaign Fund, founded in 1980] to be on their national board. But I turned it down. Elizabeth Birch was the ED [Executive Director] at that time. And we had hosted a...(clears throat) excuse me. Kind of like a (pauses) town hall meeting in my home in Boston Edison.

Keena: Okay.

Courtney: In my living room, like in the 90s, (coughs) excuse me. Matter of fact, it had to have been like ninety-eight, something like that, '97-'98. And she came to my home and there were other activists, Black activists, leaders in the community. And it was a--trying to--talk to the HRC about...their lack of involvement in the Black gay community. (Coughs). Excuse me. And so, out of that Elizabeth wooed me to join the national board. And at that time, I said, "No." Because...I had this young child and that just wasn't going to happen. And she understood. And then probably about a year, year and a half later, she emailed me and told me that she--now that she's a mother, I think her --either she and her partner, or her former partner, either adopted a set of twins or had a set of twins. I can't remember how that happened. But all of a sudden, she (laughs) she understood why it was that I wasn't going to be able to fly back and forth to [Washington] D.C. and all that stuff, once a month. And shortly after that, she left the HRC. You know before it was the HRC it was the--what was it? It was the HRF. Or HCF - Human Campaign Fund...What is it now? the Human Rights Campaign [Human Rights Campaign Fund]. It was the Human Rights Fund-- or the Human Rights Campaign Fund or something like. He [Steve Endean, founder] dropped "fund" off of it. And so I just want to mention that as well.

Keena: I guess just going back to that just a little bit and can you give me an idea of sort of what it meant to have those services in terms of counseling and nutrition and assistance in the community at the time, particularly for African Americans. ... I didn't grow up in this time, but I have been familiar with how the HIV AIDS epidemic is impacts the African American community.

Courtney: Mm-hmm.

Keena: And how disproportionate the services are in terms of people who are African Americans and who are gays and lesbians--transgender. The Full Truth provided those services and I think program was called H.O.P.E.S [Healing Ourselves through Prevention and Education Services]

Courtney: Correct.

Keena: And then Ruth Ellis provided--provide those services. What was that like to be on the forefront of-of helping in your community in that way?

Courtney: Okay. Now (pause) we're going to go into another interview to talk about that because I got to-- I gotta hard fast out of here. And I've gone three minutes over.

Keena: Okay.

Courtney: So, if that's okay with you, I'd love to talk about that. Do you know what H.O.P.E.S stood for?

Keena: Um, I don't have it right here in my notes.

Courtney: Okay. It was Healing Ourselves through Prevention and Education Services.

Keena: Okay.

Courtney: And, um, Renee McCoy started that. (pauses) And (sighs), You know who you could talk to about that? Would you actually like to talk to somebody about that, who was, like, headed that program?

Keena: Yes.

Courtney: okay so her name is Marie (pauses) Colts Calhoun [Spells out the name]... She headed up H.O.P.E.S. And she happens to be my (laughs)--besides the other woman I told you about, she--Marie is my--that's my baby. She's right there in Detroit. And I will (pause) put her in touch with you.

Keena: Okay.

Courtney: Because I think she can tell you so much more about that. She also worked with

Courtney. Because I think...she can tell you so much more about that. She also worked with Latino Family Services. She's always worked in the social arena-- in the social worker [field] if you will. And she can tell you much more than that. And the nice--the beauty of it all (pause) is that she's older than me. So, (laughs) she's--she's 69.

Keena: Okay.

Courtney: She...like I said, she was hands on with H.O.P.E.S, I wasn't. It was...an outreach inside Full Truth, ..., when I was on the board. So, I didn't work directly with H.O.P.E.S. But she can talk to you about the meals that were provided and all of the social services that H.O.P.E.S. provided in the Black HIV community.

Keena: Awesome.

Courtney: [1:14:50] Okay. So, I really...can't speak on that that last question that you asked. But I can tell you--to wrap this up--that it was big. It was huge in the community. Because nobody else was doing it. No Black churches. You know we got people from black churches who are being condemned...from the altar (pause) who would come over to Full Truth just to get some love ....and to be able to walk in with their...partner and sit hand-in-hand...and receive...that fellowship. I'm going to have--I'll have Marie call you. Or, if you prefer, I can just talk to her and give you her number? Which one would you prefer?

Keena: If you want to give me her number, um, that'd be great.

Courtney: Okay. I'll talk to her about it. I'm sure it's fine. But I never give out someone's number as you can appreciate without talking to them first. I'll talk to her later today. And I'll email you her information.

Keena: Awesome. Thank you so much.

Courtney: Okay?

Keena: I appreciate it.

Courtney: Well, thank you. This has been fun.

Keena: Yeah, definitely.

Courtney: All right. Let me know if you need anything else.

Keena: Certainly. Have a good day.

Courtney: All right now, you too.

Keena: Bye-bye.

Courtney: [1:15:52] Bye-bye.

Interview concludes at 1:15:52

### Bibliography and Footnote Citation Forms

Beth Bashert papers, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan

Capeloto, Alexa. 2000. "Ruth Ellis: Set Example for the Gay Community." *Detroit Free Press*, October 6, 2000. <http://search.proquest.com.proxy.lib.wayne.edu/docview/436299937?accountid=14925>.

"Equality Michigan Action Network: Our History." 2018. Equality Michigan. 2018. <https://equalitymichigan.org/our-history/>.

Jackson, Jancye. 2005. "Black, Gay and Christian." *Colorlines*, 2005. <http://search.proquest.com.proxy.lib.wayne.edu/docview/215536050?accountid=14925>.

Keating, Patrick. 2003. "Triangle Foundation Works to Promote Civil Rights." *Michigan Chronicle*, June 25, 2003.

LGBT Detroit Records, Walter P. Reuther Library, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University

Newman, Andy. 2005. "Serving Gays Who Serve God: A Church for a Minority among Minorities." *New York Times*, September 16, 2005.

News, Detroit. 1991. "ROTC / Gay Rights Issue Is Postponed at CMU," 1-14.

Fraser, Brad. 2000. "100 Years of Living with Pride." *National Post*, May 20, 2000. <http://search.proquest.com.proxy.lib.wayne.edu/docview/329676378?accountid=14925>.



Urbina, Ian. 2007. "Gay Youths Find Place to Call Home in Specialty Shelters." *New York Times*, May 17, 2007.  
*Los Angeles Sentinel*. 2007. "Archbishop Carl Bean's 25th Anniversary Gala," October 4, 2007. <http://search.proquest.com.proxy.lib.wayne.edu/docview/369305103?accountid=14925>.  
"Rev. Dr. Renee McCoy | Profile." 2018. LGBTQ Religious Archives Network. 2018. <https://lgbtqreligiousarchives.org/profiles/renee-mccoy>.

Walter P. Reuther Library  
Wayne State University  
Detroit, MI

Transcript of interview conducted November 26, 2018) with:  
(Courtney G. Wilson, Los Angeles, CA)  
By: Keena Neal

Neal:

Wilson:

(Format Note: Include a time code in here randomly when there is a natural break in conversation. It should be in 10-point font and located in the far-left margin).

Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University

LGBTQ Oral History Project