

LGBTQ Oral History Project

Detroit, MI

Bré Campbell

Interviewed by

Colleen Linn

November 14, 2016

Detroit, Michigan

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

Kim Schroeder, Instructor

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Brief Biography

Bré Campbell is the founder of Trans Sistas of Color Project, a non profit in Detroit, Michigan dedicated to uplifting, influencing, and impacting trans women of color.

Interviewer

Colleen Linn

Abstract

Bré Campbell, founder of the Trans Sistas of Color Project, discusses her journey to accepting herself as trans woman and how her childhood didn't allow for her to fully access her true identity. She comments on how the women of her life have uplifted her, and also on finding an unexpected confidante in her younger nephew. Other topics include her reflections on the 2016 presidential election, discrimination both inside of and outside of the LGBT community, what it's like to experience both sides of the 'gender fence,' and how she hopes her organization will continue to uplift its members out of poverty through intentional work by not only providing her members with basic necessities such as food, and shelter, but also meaningful employment opportunities.

Restrictions: None

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LGBTQ Oral History Project

Walter P. Reuther Library

Wayne State University

Detroit, MI

Transcript of interview conducted 11/14/2016 with:

Bré Campbell, Detroit, Michigan

By: Colleen Linn

Linn: Okay so we are at the Purdy-Kresge Library at Wayne State University. My name is Colleen Linn and I'm sitting with Bré Campbell. We're participating in the first ever LGBT oral history project for the Walter P. Reuther library. Its Monday, November 14, 2016. So, welcome Bré, thank you so much for being with us today.

Campbell: Thank you for having me.

Linn: So, I'll just start out with a simple question, you can see the questions here. Just tell me about your childhood and growing up.

Campbell: Um, childhood was very *pause* looking back on it, I didn't really understand the feelings and some of the experiences I was going through as a young person. But now that I'm older, I'm realizing it has everything to do with being trans and not feeling like I was in an environment where being trans was acceptable. For instance I knew for a long time that something about me was different but didn't know exactly what it was, and then once I started to play with the idea of gender in my own mind I realized that my stepfather was very abusive, very heteronormative, very sexist. And I realized that that I couldn't express myself in a way that I felt was genuine to who I was. So a lot of my childhood was me pretending in front of groups of people and then living out my authentic self in closed spaces in my mind. So, for instance, I-my family always talked about how I never wanted to be in the same space as them, so we would have family outings, reunions, dinners, and I would always find myself in a room by myself. It was easier for me to navigate family members and friends when I didn't have to engage with them because I felt as though there were always these questions that came up that were slight digs at like my identity. So, when I was younger I had no idea, no concept of gender identity. It was always to me like me being different—me being different was always tied to my sexuality. So like um, I hated being asked, "Do you have a girlfriend, why don't you have a girlfriend, um or like, I would talk about friends that I had in school that were women, and um, *laughs*

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LGBTQ Oral History Project

“women”... Um, cause they were like young, so I didn’t want to call them girls. It’s a weird term for me.

Linn: *laughs* Fair enough.

Campbell: But um, yeah like they were always trying to like sexualize my relationship with people. If it wasn’t with girls it was always with guys. So I couldn’t have guys spend the night and come over. It was just like really weird. I was living in this really weird bubble, um, and I didn’t realize until I was older how like my childhood was like really entrenched and saturated in transphobia and homophobia, right? And I think part of it was people had this idea that I was gay, right? And people went with that narrative because in their mind it was more acceptable or like more well-known than a child or something wanting to transition, right? So I literally spent 24 years of my life in depression, right. Even after I became an adult and I was living on my own, I got to this point where I was starting to embrace this gay identity. And then at that point that’s when I started to like think about my gender identity and because I was raised to believe that you can’t be born and be identified as male at birth and then transition, that’s not something that happens. Or like, I think about resources. Even if it was something that my family was accepting of I always think about just the different resources my family would have been able to access to be able to like make sure that I was living a healthy life. But I always felt like it was—I felt that in friend circles and even in like school settings there were certain people in my life who would walk up to me [and say], “You’re not gay,” Or like, “I don’t believe you’re gay, you’re just a woman in my eyes.” And it was like really weird at that moment because I was always taught to like ‘Man-up, be a man.’ Men don’t do these things, and I was always pushing back and I was like “I’m a male, I’m a boy” like ‘woo-woo-woo’, whatever. Those things were very offensive to me because I realized even at a young age people were just sexist. They treated women in a way that was, to me, very demeaning. And in my life, in my experience, I was always like, uplifted by women. My mom was a strong woman, and all of the people in my life who supported me at a young age were women. They didn’t really fully understand that I was transitioning but they always, like, helped [inaudible] to like try to understand in their own way. Everyone has a different level of understanding. But, I just remember always like, knowing and then once I got to an age where like I was able to use the internet and do my own research I saw these amazing people who were trans. But I think even like seeing those examples wasn’t enough for me to live it, right? Because I had never experienced, never talked to another trans—in my mind I never talked to another trans person, but now that I’m older I realize that there were trans people around, like my family and things of that nature which no one ever talked about it. So, I don’t know it was just like there was this moment when even once I transitioned I didn’t feel like a grown-up. I think people think, me and my sister, had this really interesting conversation. She had just had a baby, my nephew, and she was like breastfeeding him or something. And I just transitioned, and it was like... She asked me about an article of clothing that I was wearing. And she was like, “You know, we’re the same age. As a 24 year old woman like, some of the blouses that you wear”—I think it was like camisole, she was like, “you wear a camisole with certain blouses that you just shouldn’t.” I’m like, “What do you mean?” She was like, “As a 23 year old woman I look at you from time to time and think that you dress very teenager-like.” And I was like, “What?” [She said] “Yeah you wear clothes that like, if I was a parent and you were my

teenager I wouldn't allow you to wear it out in public." But she was like, "It's certain things that you wear, and I get that you're like, covering things and like, you know, whatever—the illusion, I guess," *laughter* But um, she was like, "You know I never really thought about it because you know, I've always identified as a woman, like this has never been in question for me, but she was like, even though you're like 24, like this is your first year being a woman right? You're very much like this baby right now, you're learning everything." And so like, um, it was funny because my sister's like, "I see you, I recognize you as a woman—but I don't even know if on the inside, do you even, do you feel like...for me, being a woman was like, I graduated from being this young girl, and like society told me, and then I felt very empowered to feel like, I'm a woman, like I reached this womanhood, right?" She was like, "For you, you're a little girl, right? I have to remember that sometimes when talking to you and thinking about things that I do on a normal basis, and like, why don't you do these things? I have to remind myself, like, you're a girl." So then like a couple years later my sister's like, "You graduated into being a teenager! Woop!" And that's not because she like plays with my identity or like, it's not like her gas lighting me or whatever. I think that for me, it really helped me transition because it was like the starting of a new life. So even now it's like a 30 year old trans woman, I still feel like, I feel like I'm, within the last year, considering the work that I've been able to do and the level of visibility that I have, one day I was like, "You just graduated from high school, now you're going to college!" So I feel like I've been in this time of my life where like I'm learning in a way in which a college student would. Which is interesting because like, I had experience with college but it was never anything that was fulfilling, it wasn't anything that enriched who I was as a person but like I feel like that all of the opportunities that I'd been getting: the trainings, the presentations are like me going out into the world and grabbing information, right? And so I'm just interested in seeing how I develop and look at my adulthood I guess? Or my trans-adulthood. Um, in like 5 years, right? And I do feel like I am, I do... like trans women are women, right? We say that a lot, but I don't think people are really cognoscente that we literally have to start over, right? And that yes, we pick up certain things along the way, as how society socializes women, things that we like, aspire to be like, or things that we aspire to do and things that we're like no, that's not for me, right? But I think that people expect for trans people to like process and then transition and then to just live this life, that like people have had years of practice in. Practice—that sounds weird. But yeah so my level of womanhood, looks different than someone who's cisgender, who's always felt comfortable in themselves. And there's things that I'm still learning about myself and how I relate to womanhood and how that applies to me. If you would've asked a year ago I would have never have thought about having a child, but now, that like society and like there's more, I'm more knowledgeable about things like that, I see that that could happen. But yeah.

Linn: That's amazing. Was there anything, like what your sister said that, you had "graduated?" Was there a specific event that made her say that? A specific thing that happened?

Campbell: I thought of—I described that as graduation.

Linn: Oh, okay!

Campbell: But I think some of the biggest supporters of my transition weren't very knowledgeable. And I think talking to them about it, because my sister was like, when I first told her I wanted to transition she was like, "I don't get it. Like, I'm comfortable in my body. I don't know how that feels to be uncomfortable in your body. So I don't get it." And she's like, "I don't think there's anything that you can do to help me get it, right?" Years later after she evolved more in her social justice framework, even her feminist framework, she's like, "I get it." You know what I'm saying? And then she's like, it's even some stuff that like I question, and I'm like I don't get it. But she's like, I've grown to this place where, she's like, I don't want anyone questioning or invalidating my womanhood. I wouldn't do the same to a trans woman. And the same with my mother and stuff like that. I think having strong women in my life, and women who have been through really traumatic things, also helped me, because my mom was like, well, I'm not telling you you can't wear these things because they look inappropriate or it's not for you, or I'm like, body-shaming you or whatever. But she's like, these are some of the things that I've experienced looking like, or participating in these things. And some people look at it like policing trans women, or coming off as transphobic. And I also valued it because I was always, when I first transitioned, I was read as a cis-woman, not as a trans woman, so I think there was this level of access into spaces that I had that trans women don't normally have access to. It helped me navigate spaces where men were looking at me like, I think there's a different dynamic of like homophobia and transphobia, right? I feel like that men will still have a fear or this unproven fear of gay men, but they still look at them as men, right? I feel like that most of the time when gay men are being like assaulted or accosted it's because of the person who's doing it looks at the person as weaker, right? But I think when you're a woman or a trans woman, I think people automatically—you could walk into a space and people would automatically look at you as less than, right? There was this like shift of safety that happened for me that I was totally oblivious to. And I'm happy that family members were able to pull me to the side and like hey, you might wanna think about these things, um, and I think that is, has allowed me to survive as long as I have. Being in the spaces that are very, just like, not safe for women in general.

Linn: What kind of spaces—anything specific?

Campbell: Now that I think about it, it's all spaces. Gas stations, liquor stores, parties, movie theaters, like I never realized, I think as a gay man I had the ability to self identify as a perceived gay man. I was able to navigate spaces in a way that's just different for women and like even as someone who wraps I realized that people will look at me and automatically start making assumptions about what's under my wrap. So, for instance, I wrap my hair. I have locks, my locks are like down towards the middle of my back and even, I don't care how wrapped up my hair is, and how, you can't see anything. A guy walked past me in Atlanta, and said, "I love your locks." And I was like, you can't see what's under my scarf? So I think it's just women don't have the ability to walk into spaces and be invisible like men do. Or like male identified people do, right? Um, we don't have the ability to just go to the store and we can't afford to just grocery shop, right? There always has to be someone who feels like they need to comment, look at us. I think now with Trump being in office people need to realize, like people are like oh well, people can look at you and say whatever they want to, right? But I think there's a level of fear that

women, people of color, trans people, and undocumented people will receive now that they're being looked upon, if that makes sense. And I think there's a level of safety that needs to be talked about. People need to be able to discern between when someone's just looking at you genuinely and when those looks can turn into something that could be violent.

Linn: Definitely, that's very powerful. I think you kind of alluded to this already, but when did you first start identifying as transgender?

Campbell: I didn't start identifying as transgender until two years after I transitioned. There's a video that I did for Model D [inaudible]? I got an award for being, I got recognized for being one of twelve emerging leaders from Detroit. And part of that was an article in *Between The Lines* and an interview. And I sat through this interview and I talked about being discriminated against and about transitioning and the person who's recording stopped and said, "Thank-you for the interview, we're going to finish off, just say you're Bré, where you're from and you know, how you identify." And literally they got me on tape saying, "My name is Bré Campbell, I'm from Detroit, Michigan, and I'm a trans..." And I paused, because I'm like, wait, I am a trans woman, right? And I think a part of that came from my family, and even my just, the way I identified myself like, I wanted to pass. This was in the beginning of my transition so like some of the things that I'm [about to] going to say are really problematic. But I think these are conversations that trans people don't have, about how we think about ourselves and our goals. To be honest, I always thought that I was going to transition, keep my job, get married, have children, and be able to live this life where I can go out and like navigate the world and no one knows that I was trans. But I think reality set in and I think it took for me to be discriminated against for me to be able to gain an activist platform off of that. They really made me start thinking about like, because to be honest my identity as a trans woman, the way I viewed the other trans people was very problematic. And like, really messed up. I was, my family, friends were like, when you transition, what about your big shoulders, what about, you're so tall, your big feet, your face... So all of these things that like people were telling me that wouldn't allow me to be a woman. I was looking at other women and being like, hm, like, or feeling like that I couldn't share a space with women who couldn't walk and talk and be in spaces like I did. And I think that's a safety mechanism but I think once you start living that life and you realize you're being discriminated against, or some type of violent act happens towards you, I think there's a shift. A shift to where you're like, it doesn't matter how much I assimilated, no matter how pretty I am, it doesn't matter. All of these things, I'm still going to be, violence is still going to show up in my life. Way more than it should. And so I think that um—yeah now, I am proud. I'm like, "I'm a trans woman! A woman of trans experience, all of those terms, but I do think, I like to use the term "Woman of trans experience." Because I always feel like, I've always been trans. And my experience, even though, it was perceived as homophobia, or attributed to me being a gay man, happened because I was trans. And I think just the women, when people are like, "Oh you're a transgender," people will always try to quantify it, or always try to like, take that away from you and say like, "But you're not, right?" But I think that the experience part really speaks to me because no one can take away my experience. But I think that transgender sometimes, people are always like, trying to figure out what that means. But I think that that term is more powerful because it speaks to my experience. It doesn't speak to my body, it doesn't speak to my mind or

these really weird ways that people try to quantify gender. It speaks to my experience. Which is something that can't be moved; it can't be changed. It's mine. And I feel like if you want to debate about my experience, that's all and fine, but my experience is mine and it's fact for me. But yeah and I think, to be honest, that if we could navigate the world and not identify as trans people, a lot of people would do that. But also I think, what I find really amazing is, that some people now are really starting to dig deeper into their gender. I hear a lot of trans women talking about once they transition, they always want to get rid of that past part of their life and not really embrace...and like you know what I'm saying because I do feel like trans people have this really great ability to be able to live on both sides of the fence. And I feel like trans people at least have a different insight on gender than other people are afforded or whatever. But yeah I think trans, trans was always something to identify with, because I felt like before I'm like, "I'm a woman before I'm trans," but now it's the other way around for me. I was trans before I was a woman. Even when I didn't realize it.

Linn: That's great. So true. I'm just going to keep on moving, um, what prejudice have you experienced?

Campbell: Types, um. I have been discriminated for housing, I've been attacked. I've called the police and they told me, the lady asked me if I was a man or a woman, and I told her I was trans. She was like, "You should be able to handle yourself." Police officers have pulled me over and given me tickets and called me ma'am and miss and once they ran my license came back and called me by my government name even after I had the change. People have literally refused to change documents once I got my name changed. Wayne State refused to change my name and refused to give me an email address when I first transitioned. It was interesting because the lady asked me, when I went to change my name in the system, she congratulated me on getting married, and I was like, "No, I just changed my name." And when she realized what had happened, she had to go get a supervisor and it became this thing that luckily, the boss that I was working for at the time had her name changed a couple weeks before I did because she had got married and she told me that that wasn't the process. And so I think when we talk about discrimination and prejudice, I think it happens way more than I could tell you or give you like examples of but I think it just doesn't happen to the outside society, that people outside the trans communities and like these systems, I think it happens within our communities as well. And I think it happens in a way with the people that are supposed to love us, especially intimate partners that we just don't talk about, right? I think about all of the men who refused to date me because my body wasn't their ideal of what a woman should be. And how I dated people who, once I started to talk about surgery and the things that I wanted to do to make my body fit me more, were like asking me not to do those things. Or like even sometimes the men that I was attracted to wanted to do things to me that I wasn't comfortable with. And so I think people just think that it always is one side, right? It's like these systems and there's like safety in communities, but even in the LGBT movement I feel like there's a lot of prejudice that happens towards trans individuals. From people who share community with us who called me sister and all of these things that I think are really just interesting. When we're telling people that we're, that it's just not, this is not reality for us, how like people will like throw in our face, "Well, you chose to transition," and it's like, it's just like someone telling you that you chose to be gay,

right? Like you know that that's not like the narrative, right? You know that's not a fact. But I think it's really interesting how we're part of this community that's supposed to be like "Kumbaya" right? But then they have consistently left us behind. So it's like, it just comes from all angles.

Linn: Both sides; we don't talk about that inside, ever.

Campbell: Yeah.

Linn: Do you talk about that within your community, within your organization mainly, or?

Campbell: I feel like there's only so much talking about it that I can do without people looking at us, looking at trans people as divisive. And that's a narrative that I'm really trying to like change with The Trans Sistas of Color Project (TSOCP). Like, no. We want to live the same lives that anyone else does. But I think to be honest, the gay movement had everything to do with safety, right? And people are like, "Oh we want people to stop harassing us." Gay people are still bashed, that's still a thing but I think there's a level of disgust and a level of community support that happens with those instances that doesn't happen with trans women. Especially trans women of color. I think people are so quick to make up reasons why trans people are in the position that they are, without calling out white supremacy, right? Without calling out these systems, calling themselves out, right? In a way where they engage with us. A trans woman gets murdered, and people are always like, "Well, y'all should stop tricking these people. Y'all should get off the street. Y'all should stop having sex for money." And it's like you're saying all these things without providing any type of protection, without providing us any type of space. When trans people come to you and tell you that they're being harmed, we're always looked at as being angry. Especially trans women being angry, being divisive. And people have been saying, movement leaders and grant funders, and people who have a lot of power and privilege, have been telling trans women to wait their turn. I've heard that several times in meetings that I've been to, not only from local leaders, but nationally. I even heard it at the White House that we need to wait our turn and, um...

Linn: What does that even mean?

Campbell: Exactly. To be honest I think there's this fight for the rights for LG [lesbian, gay] people is totally different from the BT [bisexual, trans] people. I think B [bisexual] people have a totally different struggle that shouldn't be included in the LGBT movement. I think there's parts of it that intersect.

Linn: Did you say, 'B'?

Campbell: Yeah, like bisexual people. But bisexual people get no love from gay and lesbian communities. They're always looked at as being confused, or increasing the rates of HIV in communities and people don't think they're valid. I think people... it took me a long time to struggle and to get to this place where I identify as someone who loves the same sex, right? So like, why can't you get to that phase? They believe that you have to be one or the other [gay or straight]. You can't be in the middle. Which I think trans people also fall into that spectrum where people want us to look cis as hell, they want us to be surged and pretty and all this stuff

and then anything that falls in-between that male and female binary gets looked at, gets questioned, and people don't understand. It's really interesting as a trans person, people will say to me all the time like, "Bré you can come to this party." And I'm like, "Oh, can I bring my trans friend?" And they say, "I don't know." And I'm like, "What's the difference?" [They say] "Oh its just different, you know how to act, you look this way." And I'm like, "So? I'm supposed to give you a cookie like for that?" No! That is not, no, you can't tell me that you love and support and you care about me as a person while you shit on other trans women or trans people in general. And that's something I've been really pushing back on is like if I can come into a space and I can't bring my friends, I'm not going to be in that space because at the end of the day, you're not going to bring me into a space that allows me to see my friends get into it or people looking at them and making them uncomfortable and expect me not to say something and show up and show out, right? But I think the trans community have been dis-serviced for a long time because we've been under the impression that the LGBT community will support us, and I do believe it's for us in certain ways, but overall I do think the LGBT community has had a consistent track record of just leaving trans people behind because they don't understand. Because it's too hard to fight for us. No shade, to be honest, I go to a lot of gay clubs where gay men don't want to be in the bathroom with a trans woman, and so I think we have a lot of work to do within our own community before we turn around and tell cis people and heterosexual people how to treat us.

Linn: Yeah. Who has inspired you?

Campbell: Ooh. My mother has always been my inspiration. My mother, my sister, all of the women in my family.

Linn: Aunts, grandmothers? Or other cousins?

Campbell: Not grandmothers particularly because I feel like that anyone that's in my mom's generation who thinks for themselves is really weird. Because like who I would consider like, anyone over the age of 50...there's not a lot people who are there yet.

Linn: Like who understand?

Campbell: I don't think they want to understand. I do agree that there was a level of discomfort that I experienced when I transitioned to like get rid of a lot of those really toxic ideas of like men, women, sex, gender, all of those things. But I think they lived in a time where things were just different. I think it's harder for them to get past all of that shit and process in order to be able to get to the space where they can affirm and love and all of these things. But yeah, it's interesting because my nephew is someone that I look up to and he's 10. And I just think it's really interesting because he never engaged with me until after I transitioned, which I thought was really weird. And he just has this really awesome way of affirming my identity in moments where I need it the most, when I never thought anyone was looking. For instance, when my sister first started trying to have a conversation with him about me being trans, we were sitting at the dinner table, he was eating, and me and my sister were having a conversation about like, what is he going to do when he finds out? Is he gonna be devastated? And I was like, "He doesn't care. He really doesn't care." So she was like, "Let's find out. Patrick!" He stops eating, and says like,

“Yes?” And she was like, “What am I?” And when she asked him, “What am I?” He automatically knew what she was talking about. Cause he responded, “You’re a girl.” Like, “Mom you’re a girl.” She was like, “Oh, okay... what are you?” “Mommy, I’m a boy.” She was like, “Well, what is Bré?” And he’s like, “Bré’s a girl.” She was like, “Well... Bré’s trans. She was actually born...” Whatever. He was like, “No, Bré’s a girl.” And she was like, “No. Well, she is now. But she hasn’t always been.” And we were trying to like, get him to understand. And he literally drops his food, and was like, “Mommy, Bré is a girl. And I don’t wanna talk about this anymore.” And literally got up from the table and went to play.

Linn: How old was he when you had this conversation?

Campbell: Three.

Linn: Oh, wow.

Campbell: And we’ve tried to talk to him about it when he was five, and then again when he was seven. When he was seven, he literally told his mom like, “This is the last time. I’m not doing this with you, this is the last time we’re going to do it. Like because this hurts my feelings.” And he also affirms his mom’s identity as a lesbian and he just has this level of knowledge. And it’s not even knowledge I would say, understanding. Because he understands that he doesn’t really know what exactly, the ins and outs of it. But the way in which he affirms people is like really amazing, right? He inspires me because like, and he inspires me the most because people are always pushing back at him about his mom’s marriage to a woman being normal, right? And people are always pushing back at him, he’s like talking about me and like. Cause we spend a lot of time together, and he’ll be like, “Yeah my Auntie Bré...” and someone will be like, “That’s not your aunt.” And like, he’s come home and has feelings about that, right? And I think it’s just really interesting how like now he knows when he goes to certain people’s houses and he’s in certain spaces people will mis-gender me and now he doesn’t even fight it anymore. Cause he’s like, well, we’re like, you’re a kid. You have so much power. What do you believe? And now, he’s like okay, you can say whatever you want like I know who she is, I know...you know, whatever the case may be. And I think it’s always really great to have someone in your life who can do that. And I think adults have a really great way of having like, empathy and trying to understand but I think there’s a level of understanding that I have with my nephew, like talking to him about adult things where I don’t feel like I’m being pacified or gaslit, like very genuine and very like stuck on like the feelings, like he doesn’t know what it’s like to be trans, right? But he knows what it’s like for people to tell him that they weren’t going to play with him because he was black, right? And so he’s like, “Well you know, if people don’t want to play with me all the time because I’m black, but you know, I get it.” And I’m like, how is it that my nephew’s social justice platform is like, on fire right now? And like, he cried when Trump was, um, when he found out on Wednesday that Trump was president, like he cried to the point where he couldn’t go to school. He knew that it was just not going to be safe for a lot of people. And like, that’s at like, 10, right? It’s just like, I imagine what his life is going to be like when he’s 18.

Linn: Probably pretty amazing, he will inspire a lot of people. Do you think he’s indicative of the next generation, or just because of his experience with you and your sister?

Campbell: I think he is a perfect example of what can happen, if we sit down and allow children to feel and have conversations and push back on a lot of things, right? It's really interesting because even like when it comes down to toys, he doesn't, "What do you mean that's a girl toy? Anybody could play with these!" Like, you know what I'm saying? I know for a fact for me, when I decide to have children, the same level of like, we exposed him to a lot of things. Which, sometimes as an adult, I'm like, so much exposure is okay, but I've been around people who expose their kids to like drinking and smoking and stuff like that and there are kids who know a lot of adult stuff. And it's interesting how my nephew knows what a transgender woman is but when you ask him about sex, he was like, "Yeah it's when like two grown-ups decide they want to have a kid and they go and they go to the hospital and buy one." But he knows what his penis is, he knows what a vagina is. But he just like, that disconnect between him and children, like, if I have a friend and they want to be called Max and I was calling them like Sam, Samantha, the day before, like I'm gonna call them Max because that's what they want to be called, right? And it's just, he's really [understanding of] some stuff that I'm like "How do you believe in trans women but you're like Santa Claus isn't real." Just this level of like knowledge that sometimes I have to scale back on because I want to have really in-depth conversations with him, but I'm like I'll wait, because I understand what that is and it's really great to have like these really great surface conversations. And like he gets it. And I'm like, how can a 10 year old get it and adults don't?

Linn: Right. I'm glad that he's around. What have you adopted from the leaders that have come before you?

Campbell: A level of care. I think the elders and in my life, the people that I look up to have supported me in a way that I would expect my mother to do. And I always wonder where that came from like okay, is this like, is this attributed to being a woman? Is this attributed to being trans and realizing not a lot of trans people have like familial relationships? And then I thought about it. The level of care that the elders have towards the younger generation is a main result of not having resources that weren't afforded to them. Or that belong to them. So I think about all of the trans women/men who are over the age of like 30 who weren't living in this time or when hormones and surgery weren't accessible. Housing was accessible. Jobs are accessible. So literally these women we're taking the resources that they had to support other people right, and so I tried to do that in my work. I don't have a lot of resources, especially now that I have left my job and academia to do the work on the Trans Sistas of Color project full time. But like the little resources I have I make sure like, I'm a firm believer in like, my ancestors, the elders were like, "Well, Bré if we're eating, and you're in the space, you're eating." So I look at those things and I'm like, well if I'm in a space and I know that there's a trans woman there, like, they're eating. And even this weekend, there's an elder, a trans elder, Janetta Johnson from California. And every time, the first time I met her she extended an opportunity for me to come and visit her and see her organization and build power with her, and I never made it in that capacity, but every time I would see her in spaces I would attach to her, like, "You good? What are you doing today? Did you eat today? How you feelin'? Take your medicine? You need anything? You need water?" And we saw each other in Atlanta for Facing Race and we were in the elevator and she checked out, like I could tell her eyes were glossing. And I'm like, "You good?" She's like, "Bré

you always checking in on me.” And I’m like, “Yeah.” There’s a level of care that I think you should be participating in that you won’t do for yourself and it may have nothing to do with her wanting to take care of herself, her disregarding herself because she’s always on the move to like, she’s building power, she’s building resources. She’s making sure communities are good and I was like, “You remind me of myself. I go above and beyond for people even when I don’t have the resources. I know that you won’t take the time to take care of yourself so yeah I’m going to take care of you. You need anything?” And she just kind of like laughed, “No I’m good.” But there’s certain people, certain elders in spaces when I’m in the same space with them, they good. Like I’m going to check on you, you know what I’m saying? And even, there’s even some people in my age group that I’m like just mindful of like, there’s trauma they’ve experienced or whatever. And I just feel like there’s certain people that need consistent check-ins, right? And I tell people all the time, if I’m asking you too much or if I’m doing too much like, let me know. But I think I would like to see communities go back to that. I think we’ve gotten, social media has gotten, led us to believe that we can share a picture, we can add a filter to our pictures, we can do a hashtag, we can wear safety pins, stickers, rainbow flags, t-shirts... all of that stuff. But I feel like in support and solidarity for people, I feel like we’ve moved away from this, going down and questioning the people, like hey, are you good? You know what I’m saying? It’s one thing to like, hold a sign or like hashtag something, but I think it’s a—I imagine what life would be like if all of the cis allies would get off of Facebook and social media and stuff and stop hash tagging and actually start going to the streets, and be like, “Hey, you’re a trans person. You need something?” Like one of my friends posted and she was like all of you people with pins, can you put \$100 on those pins? You know like, people do for their birthdays and when you see someone who needs that resource they should be able to take it from you. And one lady was like, “I don’t feel comfortable with that,” which means, “I’m being a target walking around with like money on my chest.” And she responded to that, like “You’re a target because you’re walking around with money on your chest, right these people are targets because of all of these systems, right?” And she was like “So, if you’re not gonna pin it on yourself, what are you doing to do with them?” And she’s like, “I don’t know, I’m trying to figure out where to donate the money.” And she’s like, “You can donate it here.” And you know what I’m saying, stuff like that, like we could be doing more, you know...

Linn: We’re so close to it but we’re not actually engaging with these opportunities.

Campbell: Engaging, right? And most people you know, and I think that’s what I hate about like, non-profits sometimes and even like, systems, when they want trans people to show up, they’ll feed them in the moment or they’ll meet an immediate need to get the people there. But like when we do our events, I’m like you could, here’s what we said we were going to give you for coming but you could, you could [do more]. I just feel like there’s a level of care that shows people, a level of support that you can show people and that’s not always like. And people have been donating money but we’re still in the positions we’ve been in, right? And I think some of the people oh, I got to give a donation to HRC, you know, a task force. Not saying that these organizations don’t do really great work. But I think those organizations also have a lot of power and privilege and a lot of support from people with power and privilege. Where I’m like that’s

nice that you're donating to these organizations but I think that it's really interesting that across the country we have trans-led organizations that are struggling for funding.

Linn: You said HRC, the Human Rights Commission?

Campbell: Mhm.

Linn: Okay, just clarifying. Yeah, that's a very good point. It's very very interesting. What was the, so moving more towards your organization, how you started it and everything. What was the atmosphere, energy like in your life like when you came up with the idea for Trans Sistat of Color Project?

Campbell: It was really interesting because we, me and John in our conversations, around building a program, never thought that we were going to have a whole organization. We knew that there was a lot of money, time, and energy that was going to be involved in creating a non profit that we just didn't have the capacity for and still don't have the capacity for. To be able to do successfully, right. We were always afraid of being a non profit and all of the overhead costs that come with it, like doing that because we, in our minds, wanted to be a direct-response program where we were able to teach the girls skills, we would be there to build community, but it would be up under another organization that had the support and the capacity. The organization that we decided to go with was like, the stuff that you have planned is not gonna happen here in this space. So we made a choice and at that moment I felt like that I had been giving so much to this organization to turn and run and say he could not, they couldn't help me help trans women of color in Detroit. Start like a really meaningful program and be meaningfully involved, so we just decided to create an organization. I think at the time we thought it was going to be a lot easier, 'Kumbaya,' than what it turned out to be. But what I will say is that me and John were very intentional about pulling in advocates from Detroit who have been involved in nonprofit who I felt like, to be honest, I feel like that nonprofits will hire trans women to meet their goals but they don't talk about personal development like, "What do you wanna do when you leave here?" Whatever the case may be. So there were a lot of trans women who were participating in working with organizations, working for organizations, who were just kind of like stuck. And I pulled them and was like, "Hey, do you wanna do this like trans-lit thing?" Cause I do feel like trans women have been participating in organizations and trying to create change but I think it's just the higher-ups way in which the systems have been created, the way in which people have identified our bodies, like erased our identities as trans people, that makes it difficult. And so literally we started, I will say that I recognize and acknowledge the fact that I was blessed enough to have a slight platform before I started this organization which allowed me to be in spaces and access funders and movement leaders in a way that I probably would not have if we had just started an organization just off-rip. So that in combination with going to D.C. and working for The National LGBTQ Task Force and participating in Afropunk and doing all of this other stuff that happened like, people, are like, "Oh! We hear about your organizations," so people are like sharing and sharing my image and talking to me about, talking about me in spaces and allowing me to be in other spaces where people are like, "Hey, we'll fund you." Or like, "Hey, you know we'll help you do this initiative," so like I feel very blessed in that, but I also realize that that's not the reality of like everyone else which is why intentionally I know that I'm

not interested in riding the Trans Sistas of Color project forever. Not interested in doing it past five years, because I realize that I had this platform, and I had this support system so if literally I wanted to leave the Trans Sistas of Color project right now, I could go anywhere in the country because I know people and could make it work. And it is not my goal to like do this, to take up space to like, uplift the name of Bré Campbell. Like this is for the girls, and I do believe that as a leader, like, me in my capacity in the Trans Sistas of Color project takes opportunity away from one person. If I was making \$30,000/yr., \$100,000/yr. I would be like, 'Woah, pause.' But I'm not making that, I'm literally making \$500/month from all of the work that I do with Trans Sistas of Color project that involves traveling, paying for hotels, Ubers, flights, food, all of those things. So the money that I literally make from the Trans Sistas of Color Project goes towards increasing the capacity of [the project], right? But I also know that like that \$500 could also help another person, you know what I'm saying, survive. Me and John have been very intentional about making sure that we're building the capacity, building support, building financial stability of [the project] to pass it off. Because we know that like, in this role we've done so much that we are, me and John have already been planning what our work will look like after and how our work after will still support the organization. Or like, people, I hate to say this and I really should, it really makes my skin crawl, but people are like, "Bré you're such a celebrity" And I'm like first of all like, "No, I'm poor. Let's be very clear." And maybe some celebrities are poor, right, but I think people have this idea that like anyone that's in the movement that is visible, that's in magazines that has like, that people value their opinions, that think we have the financial means and like literally, I don't. And in the work that we're doing I always have been very honest with the girls about like, when we first started the organization I'm like, "Look, y'all not getting paid, I'm not getting paid. If you stick with me, we'll be blessed." And I think there have been times in my movement work where I like didn't have the capacity, I was tired, I didn't want to. And I'm like you know what I got a whole slew of girls who can do it. So I make my phone calls, "Can you do it? Oh, you're not available. Can you do it? You don't want to do this. Can you do it? You can? You don't have the skills? Let's meet beforehand." And I send these girls and they do amazing stuff and they come back and they're like, "Bré, thank you for that opportunity." And then now some of their opportunities have opened up for them, and I wanted this organization not to be like a service organization because I feel like that sometimes we get too wrapped up in service, right, and get so wrapped up in meetings, numbers, and pleasing our funders that we get, we get lost in that round. We don't really have an impact on communities but not only do I really want this place to be a resource, an organization where people can go to get direct services but I also want this to be a place where people can go to build their skills and go out into the world and like, I was going to say fuck it up, I already said it—and fuck it up. You know? That's what I'm here for, going to these spaces. Like after I met Tracey Africa last year, I was like I remember reading about her, I'm meeting this women! And she's like doing amazing things, right? And people are like, "You get to hang out with celebrities!," and I'm like all of the people that I know that are doing really great intentional work, are living paycheck to paycheck. And I'm like, y'all really think these people are celebrities because you see them places, like no. I think that for trans women being an advocate, being visible, is like this double-edged sword. We also need to remember it's not like just about remembering the girls that's on the front line, we got to remember the other girls too, right? And I feel like society puts us in this

weird position where you have to be like super-visible in order to get attention and support, or you have to die. And there's these girls who are in the middle, that don't aspire to or will never have access to being that visible but then you have these girls that are in the middle of that, close to being like another one of these girls who we're hash tagging and sharing articles about and those girls that I do my work for, cause at the end of the day I take pictures with people all the time. These are my friends and like, you know it's more powerful when I'm out and about. I've built relationships with so many girls who feel like I shouldn't be their friend. Or feel like I shouldn't be reaching out to them and they're like, "Oh my god, Bré wished me happy birthday! You're such a celebrity," and I'm like, "No. And I love you." You know what I'm saying? I share spaces with the girls that they're like, "I seen you in a magazine, like why are you here?" And I'm like, because my main goals are community engagement and involvement. Like I'm here to uplift the girls like any other person that I meet and I'm like, "You're dope, what are you doing?" And I'm like let's be friends on Facebook and I share their stuff all the time because a part of it is like, I wanted somebody to do that for me, right? Somebody had uplifted and acknowledged me enough where I'm able to go to the White House and be considered for international trips and all of these things and like I know that that access only came from those people supporting me and I want to support people to do that. I don't want to do this work for the rest of my life.

Linn: It sounds like you're challenging that norm, the normal concept of how an organization is structured and giving more agency to your members instead of taking it all for yourself.

Campbell: Yeah, cause it's not about, to be honest, the, I'll say this on tape. To be honest, the only things, when I first transitioned, the only things I was worried about was getting surgery, getting my name changed, getting my gender marker changed. Everything other than that I was like, I'll figure it out, whatever the case may be. I feel like that in the past people have used my story and used my resilience as an attack on other transgender women. Or they'll say stuff like, "Bré you've been discriminated against, you still have a job, you done all of these things..." And I'm like, no, like that's not, don't tell me that since I have done it, other trans women should be able to do it, because at the same time not only are you invalidating these girls experiences, and you're blaming them for all of these systems that they have no, really no say or control over, you're also devaluing the shit that I've been through in order to get here. Cause it's not always easy. There was once, I was discriminated against. I laid in bed and I cried. It was my mother that told me that I had to go on and fight for this. My mother, my ex-partner, like, you got to go fight this. And I did it, I did it for them. But a piece of me was like, no, this shit's not going to happen to another girl. But at the end of the day, it's still happening. And I think that there is not a level of, I could think of all of the things that I've been saying and all of the things that I'm like, hey, we need your support we need you to stop doing these things. And people are going to do what they want to do, which is why I always believe that like, I have not met another, I have not met too many nonprofits that are really invested in the liberation of the trans woman. They say that they are, they say that they are providing services to make sure that the trans women are safe and whole, but if you really sit down and you really look at them for real, it's not...

Linn: What's missing?

Campbell: Meaningful involvement, of communities. And when people are like, talking about individuality and meaningful involvement I think they get stuck on compensating people. And I think compensation is nice, too, but like with the girls we just don't give them money. Like I make myself available, right? I make myself available, I make the resources available to the people that need it the most. And I think that a reason why these organizations are, I think their meaningful involvement is a community advisory board, and I feel like that community advisement, community advisory boards, when we're dealing with young people, you invite people into these spaces and you tell them that you are able to make change but they're constantly fighting in the spaces to make change. And I don't think that that's fair, so like with the Trans Sistas of Color Project, what we do is, we really mean what we say about community involvement. Its funny because every event that we have, like they're like, oh okay.. and I'm in the corner like taking notes. And people are like, "What are you doing?" I'm like writing down everything that y'all said, so like any time tonight, anytime we have programming, or someone's like, "Hey we want to give you this funding for this work.." I pull out my notebook and I go through and I'm like, you said these things and I talked to those funders, those people who want to do initiative with us and be like they, these are some things that our community members have already brought up, how do you plan on addressing these things? And that goes to show me how intentional they are because when you're reaching out to Bré, when you're reaching out to [the project], it's not just Bré. It's Bré and and the hundreds of other girls that are living in Detroit. And it's really interesting because people don't realize that they're like, "We just want you." No, it's not just me. It's these other people. And I love how like, and I know when people are intentional because when they hear me talk about our work, they're like, "You're doing that? Oh my goodness! That's amazing." And it's really interesting how like people want to do more intentional work for people and we're getting blocked in every way, shape, or form. So like I feel like that organizations have this structure that is really problematic and toxic for a lot of people who really want to be intentional and be impactful. Because this bureaucracy and red tape that you have to like navigate through that makes it hard, I think it makes communities believe that like people in non profit aren't really here for them. And there are some people who I'm like, you work in non profit and that's it. And there's some people who I'm like, your heart is in it. But I feel like that those people have the hardest time trying to change the conditions for the communities that they're trying to serve. I don't need you to improve my conditions, I need you to change my conditions.

Linn: What's the difference to you?

Campbell: Improving is, I test positive for HIV, you refer me to a doctor, they write me a prescription for my medicine, right. Changing is you do all of those things, but in the meantime you also make sure I have the food, the housing that I need in order to make sure that I'm taking my regimen right. That involves a level of change, right?

Linn: The environment...

Campbell: Changing the environment, changing the circumstances, and I just think it's really interesting how people are like, oh, we've talked about for years about the intersection of like people with HIV and being homeless and having food and security, right? But I have not seen a

non profit stand up to homeless shelters In Michigan, and I'm going to say Michigan particularly, to demand that they accept trans people in with HIV. And these shelters, they're like, it's the shelters. And I'm like but your organization is sitting on power and privilege and hundreds of thousands of money, millions of dollars depending on which organization you're talking about. How are you... And then the sad part is you'll tell me that you don't know of a homeless, you don't know of any shelter that will prefer trans woman, or accept trans women, but you're still referring people out to these organizations that are problematic. You'll tell a trans woman you could stay at this shelter but you have to de-transition, whatever that means. But then you're still turning around and referring people to this organization that's clearly trans-phobic. And I think that's why that's hard for me as an advocate to really be, to go on to spaces and let my guard down and be trustful. Because I feel like even when I'm bringing up the issues from a trans community perspective, we get gaslighted all the time. Its not your turn, it's not how it works, we don't have the power to tell people, to make people do stuff. The fuck out of here! Like, guarantee it, like no shit, a lot of these organizations that are in existence are because you guys got together and said you weren't going to take it anymore, right? And I just think it's really convenient, its really funny how people can make excuses about why and which trans communities are left behind. Left out, you know what i'm saying, walked all over. And without providing any real tangible support or changes. And then the people that you have that are, I can name off the top of my head, amazing activists, that had to leave Michigan and go to other places in order to do really great work because the people weren't interested and invested here.

Linn: That's really messed up. When you started the project, what resources did you have for support? Is there a certain support--it can be ying-yang question—what did you have or what did you wish you would have had?

Campbell: *laughs* I think it's a double edged sword, I, from the beginning, from March of 2015 to February 2016 I was literally putting my own money into the Trans Sistas of Color Project. I was working for [inaudible] university and the University of Michigan, one full time, one part time. I had got myself out of debt, saved up some money, surgery money, that I was going to use for surgery, and then the organization happened. And I was like, okay, so in the beginning it was like small stuff, little supplies, food for meetings, and I was like, okay that was like \$35/month and like food and like small supplies and I would get supplies from like my employers and like whatever. And then we had our first event, and I put up the rest of my surgery money to make sure that event happened so that was venue, we did a screening from a film, so screening fee, flight, hotel, all of that stuff. And I remember leaving after we had our first event, leaving town to go to Las Vegas and feeling so emotionally drained, and like I can't do this. And then we got the call form Equality Michigan, for them to fiscally sponsor us, so literally when we signed our sponsor agreement in January and we already had a grant out so that took, that helped me like, survive. Because at this point I was literally, rent to me, rent, lights, gas, all of that stuff was irrelevant to me at that point, cause I was like well if anything I can go stay with people, like I was gung-ho on making sure that this organization existed and existed in a way that, I don't know how to say that, but like I was so afraid of people not supporting us in our first year that we were just going to fold. And I just didn't want to see that happen. So now that we're able to write grants and all of that stuff I feel like it's better. But I feel like that I

would like for us to have more engagement in systems, but I feel like that there are just certain systems that aren't interested in the liberation of trans people and I realize that. For instance I would love to have conversations with police systems about how to keep trans women safe, but I also can't do that fully knowing that these systems also criminalize trans people for participating in the only line of work that they have access to. And people are like, that's not the only line of work, and I'm like, let's be very clear, in the state of Michigan, if you could be discriminated against, if you could be fired from a job for just being trans, or even like LGBTQ, let's be very clear, that's the only line of access of work that people have where they could be comfortable, right? And when I say comfortable, that doesn't mean like, a lot of people are very uncomfortable doing sex work, so I want to also uplift that. There's this intersection of a want and a need. But I think that the need, there's more people on that need intersection than on that want [intersection]. I'm not gonna sit here, I feel like that trans communities have voiced it a lot of times, engaging with non profits, communities that don't want to be engaged, and a part of me is like, I wish I had contacts in these systems. And have the power and stuff, but I do feel like I want to help, and people have been helping navigate space, but I feel like there's a level of accountability and a level of support that I need from these people in order to feel comfortable. I just think its interesting. It's hard and sometimes I really wonder what it would've been like to have been around in the beginning of the AIDs epidemic or in the beginning of the women's rights movement, to see like if they were experiencing some of the same barriers and challenges that I feel like I'm experiencing now. Because it was like this new, and I don't want to say new, cause these communities were always around, but I think they were just organizing differently and I wonder what organizing different for trans people looked like. I'm also really scared of what that looks like because part of creating the organization was to stop the narrative that you had to look or live a certain way in order to be an advocate, to be successful, but then also it's this double edged sword of like, I realized over the weekend, like I accept myself as a target, as an advocate, right? Not only as a person who's trans, as a person who's Muslim, as a person who's black and as a person living with HIV. You can go online you can Google me and find those four things, yeah you can find out those four things about me. And there's just a level of safety now that I'm concerned around advocates, not just myself, but all of my advocate friends. We have literally set ourself up as targets now, and so like my fear is that like I want to get as many trans women of color involved but also I feel this duty to kind of like protect them from violence, but that's like unrealistic, right? So I'm always like, damn, I want to do a march through the streets, but then I'm always thinking about the homes or the places that the people go after these things. We were supposed to have one a year ago, and I called it off because I'm like, there is no way that I can keep these girls safe like even if like, let's just say we got a 100 girls together and they were like surrounded by allies, white people, right? There are still pictures, someone is going to see a picture, someone is probably going to know this person and out this person in a way that's not safe for them. And so I think that's a part that sucks because the visibility should be there, but I also feel like that even now, people are mindful now, we're concerned about, we're concerned about Trump because now people are going to be experiencing a way of life that trans people of color have been living for a long fucking time. And now it's a concern, like now it's this pressing thing, right, and I just even when I hear about people talking about their anger in the election, it has everything to with being LGBT, "Oh the LGBT, the black people, the women,

undocumented people...” But nobody talking about how Trump affects trans people, right? I have not heard one commentary about protecting any, and this is from both sides, like people for Trump and people who are against him. And saying LGBT doesn’t fully talk about, encompass all of this shit that trans people have to deal with. Like this man being in office, right?

Linn: Yeah, they’re more concerned about the [marriage] equality law being reversed, that’s the narrative that I’ve heard the most. But that’s the only time I’ve seen it touched even, just the worry about that one law being repealed, but no other.

Campbell: Yeah, and it’s just...I think I’m working through that now, but I do, what I will say, what I’m happy about that the organization has been doing is, building community. And like I hate when people are like, “What do you guys actually do?” And I’m like, “We’ve been building community,” and they are like, “Well what kind of services do you provide?” Building community is a fucking service!

Linn: Definitely.

Campbell: Because we’re taking the time and the energy to gather the people and work with them through trauma. It’s so interesting, how people are like, “Oh, well, you’re just having meetings.” I leave every one of those meetings, in trauma, because we’re sitting around talking, and people bring up stuff that you’re just like, you think when you’re living it and you hear it all the time that you’ve heard it, like nothing can shake you. No. I’m in this space a lot of time like, oh my gosh. And the funniest thing to me is that I laugh because what do you do? And so many trans women in the spaces that we provide are like “Thank you for providing this, like, I needed this, I need this to get out of my house, I needed to be around other trans women, I needed to be in a space where it wasn’t like fucking competition and like people being nasty and catty.” And we do that. And I’m like hey you know what, I know the community, if you wanna laugh and do all that stuff, go outside, but in this space, like no we’re not going allow you to pick on people and take shots and do all of that stuff because that’s not what we’re here for. And like I think that’s why I’m really excited about the documentary because people need to see that. And so many trans women have come to our groups and said that they wanted to get involved and either got involved with us or started getting involved in their own way and started making waves and names for themselves, which people are always like calling me for interviews and somebody trans does something in Michigan. They’re like, “Oh, are they involved with TSOCP?”, and I’m like, “They’ve been to an event or two of our’s,” and they’re like “Oh yeah I’m going to put in here that they are on the, do you mind if I put in here that they’re part of TSOCP?” I was like, “Did you ask them?” [They say] “Well they mentioned that they do stuff with you but they didn’t say like that they...” I was like, “No.” They’re like, ““Why? That’s what you do as an organization,” and I’m like, I don’t ever want the work that we’re doing as an organization to overshadow the girls and the people, right? And like if she wants to do her own thing, and she doesn’t want to attribute it to Trans Sistas of Color Project, that’s fine. Because at the end of the day, what I’m not interested in like co-opting off of somebody else’s work, right? If the girls want to uplift the Trans Sistas of Color Project and say how big of an inspiration and helpful it’s been to them, that’s fine. And if they choose not to, I don’t care. Because I know what we’re doing. I know we’re doing it. And the relationship that we have with people. I’m not interested in

every time a girl from Detroit, her narrative is like, Trans Sistas of Color project. I'm not interested in that, no. But you guarantee when I see it on Facebook, Trans Sistas of Color project shares it, not because of our own selfless promotion, because that's a different thing in itself. But like, no, I want to make sure that these girls' narratives, these girls' stories, these girls' accomplishments get out.

Linn: Right, that's great. I just wanted to check in with you on time, are we still okay?

Campbell: I am actually going, I am feeling really triggered to talk to these people. I am going to let them figure out what they're going to talk about and then they'll send me an e-mail *laughs*

Linn: Okay. Do you want me to just pause it for a second?

Campbell: Um, okay, nope.

Linn: Are you sure?

Campbell: Yep, we good.

Linn: Okay, yeah, let me know, whenever. Um, where did I leave off? Um, obviously you touched on this a little bit throughout the entire thing but, just for the sake of the interview, just describe your organization, the people involved, common everyday issues, the good, the bad, all of it? A day in the life.

Campbell: A day in the life. Um, Trans Sistas of Color Project, is a trans led organization for women of color, and when we say women of color, we're not just talking about black trans women, we're talking about all women of color. The mission of Trans Sistas of Color project is to impact, influence, and uplift the lives of trans women of color in Detroit. That looks different for each individual person and we say all of those things because we really realized that we could try to demolish systems and all of those things but like we were really focused on the actual community members, the girls. And so all of the work that we're doing is to do that, right, to uplift, impact, and influence. So we're in our uplift moment right now. We're building community, we're uplifting the girls and allowing people to take charge in the organization and run groups, and give us ideas and stuff like that, um, but we're a small organization.

Linn: About how many girls are coming and going?

Campbell: 35. Thirty-five people who are consistently engaged with us, and that's anywhere from people from the ages of 15-16 to ages of like I think our oldest is 70.

Linn: Oh wow.

Campbell: Right, so we've broken up the work into silos. And we realized that a lot of times in the work that's happening with trans populations, everyone's so focused on youth. So we have a group for anyone that's under the age of 30 and then anyone that's 31 and up. Both of those groups, it's really interesting because both of those groups have different needs. I want to do a research study to gage the resilience of like the older communities because when we were doing our, doing just like the community survey, like what are the needs and what do you need, a lot of the stuff [between the groups] overlapped but there were a couple of issues with like elders about

like care, elder care, and things of that nature that didn't. But yeah we're a small organization, we've been fiscally sponsored since January first of this year. We're working on a documentary, which I think is really amazing. And the goal of the Trans Sistās of Color Project is to have a 24 hour drop-in center where people can come, have food, shower, get clothed, access resources and then also have a transitional living program and shelter for trans women of color, and that's our goal. Also we are working on trying to figure out how to meaningfully employ trans women of color.

Linn: Employ?

Campbell: Mhm. So a lot of times trans women work in non profits because it's easier, a little bit more affirming to their identities, easier to navigate. So we are in the process of trying to figure out what type of business ventures that the community will like to go off into. So for instance we know a lot of trans women who do hair, make-up, trans women who cook, we have a couple of artists, we have a writer. We're trying to figure out ways in which that we could build capacity for those people doing their work. In way that also support them. So for instance one woman is writing a tell-all book about her life and her experience, but her barrier is publishing, right? So thinking about what a publishing company looks like for trans women of color, thinking about what a hair salon, a beauty salon would like or a boutique for trans women of color, or not even for, owned by. Because I think it's, there are a lot of skills that trans women have access to and are really great at that don't just benefit their community, but other communities as well. And I think it looks different, I know so many trans women that work at salons that take their money, right, and spend their money however they're going to spend it. But I think about what would it look like if we were able to help trans women create businesses and those businesses could then in turn fund TSOCP and movement work, right? Something we've been struggling with as an organization is we don't want to always rely on grants to do the work that we're doing because those dry up. A lot of times we passed up grants because they would do more harm to our community than good. And we realized that we like, I don't want to keep writing grants and keep competing with all of these organizations to get money, right? Because at some point, I mean we could write grants for the rest of our lives, right? But at some point that money is going to dry up and what do we do when there's a point when there's not as much funding or where other organizations are struggling? I'm really being intentional in thinking about not only providing services for people, providing safe space, safe housing, but also I think where we lose the people is that we can provide the HIV testing, the care services, the medication, the food, the housing, right? But if you're not really tackling employment you get people stuck in this system. And so we want to be able to move people out of these systems to be able to stay on their own, have bank accounts, be able to save money, and do the things that you know, normal citizens are afforded on a day to day basis. But I think there's challenges along they way, like, so many challenges, and I don't even think people who are not trans understand the level of red tape and the hoops that we have to jump through in order to be affirmed and to live our lives. People still don't even realize that trans people in some states need a \$30,000+ surgery in order to get documents changed, and yeah, so like how do we, how does an organization—we're trying to figure out how we are a non profit organization that does social work, that does activism work, that also really is meaningfully looking at employment. And looking at starting businesses. So I

think a lot of people think that non profit is like easier to get into, non profit just allows you to write grants, right? And allows you not to pay taxes right? But I really wonder what it would look like if instead of trans organizations becoming nonprofit, like, what a business model for trans, would one be an organization. A trans business model that's successful.

Linn: In order to sustain the community?

Campbell: Mhm, yep.

Linn: Very interesting. How did you feel when the marriage equality bill passed? We talked a little bit about that the other day.

Campbell: A part of me was like, yay I can get married? But then I thought about it like, there are so many other things that need to happen in order for me to be married and feel secure and safe in life. I just wish communities would rally around the rights and the safety of trans women, that they would around marriage equality. I feel like, I get it, but and there's that double edged sword again about being involved in the LGBT community. I felt like we supported them in their marriage equality and it was this weird thing because I was against it, like. I'm like, okay yeah, marriage is nice but what about all of this other stuff that's happening? And not even from a trans woman of color perspective, as a person of color perspective. These organizations for gay black men are like being like, "Oh, marriage, marriage, marriage!" And I'm like, but we also have the statistics that say gay black men are not in a position to even be married. Not to be funny, but you don't have a house, you don't have food, you really think I'm going to go down to the courthouse and pay money to change my last name and be married to someone? No! And then I'm like, no shade, we aren't even talking about like gay men or like gay black men being like economically stable first, right? So I feel like that we were duped into believing that if we sat back and supported the marriage equality that they would turn around and support us but I think it's very clear that a lot of the organizations that were supportive of marriage equality are having issues standing with trans people around bathroom access, because...

Linn: And that came after the decision was decided, correct?

Campbell: Yeah, and that's the thing I feel like, and I don't know if it's like republicans, if it's white supremacy, it might be a combination of all those things, but like they organize in a way that's really amazing and disgusting at the same time. I feel like that anybody that's like, groups that are pro-equality, thinking about the here and now, and they don't think about what we are going to tackle next. I felt like when people who are against marriage equality found out that that was like something that they lost they still tried to fight it through the courts but I felt like they were like, "Oh well, if y'all can get married we're gonna keep y'all out of bathrooms," you know what I'm saying? So I feel like that once again trans communities get left behind. And to be honest, like, I'm, I don't know, like I'm not married I haven't seen what it is like to get married but I just wonder sometimes like does the marriage equality thing protect trans people? I don't know.

Linn: Was there anyone in your organization that was in that place to be married? That took advantage of...?

Campbell: No, one of our founding board members, she is getting married, um, but yeah like we haven't talked about the systems, right? How do you navigate that, and then it's weird because as a trans person who also has ID that doesn't match my gender identity, if I decide to go and get married to my partner, that's not a fucking gay marriage, but like on paper that's what it looks like, because my partner's male. And then I wonder too like, have I heard of trans people being turned away from getting married? But I wonder what that would look like. Especially considering you have to show birth certificates, and some people's birth certificates don't match their name on their ID, right? I'm not paying the state of North Carolina \$60 for them to amend my birth certificate for it to have the correct gender on it, no thanks. But yeah and you know that's the reality for some people so it's just—I knew that it was not going to get better after the marriage equality, to be honest. I think now that we see like where we're at and what it is, I think it's refreshing to hear that Trump has some type of common sense to know that he can't just come in here and remove people's like, remove laws and like change people's lives but at the same time, I do feel like that this all would've been alleviated if we really had stuck together. And it's really interesting how a lot of the organizations that support marriage equality won't stand with trans people. Or even like gay men, there's a high number of gay men who are married who lived that life [of being discriminated against], who are like, "Trans women shouldn't be using the bathroom," you know what I'm saying?

Linn: They've just assimilated into that...

Campbell: Yeah. They thought it was over. We got gay marriage, it was over. And it was like, all that money, like...

Linn: Would your organization have been happy with Clinton winning the election? You think, I mean, obviously happy that Trump didn't but was Clinton, what was Clinton as candidate for you?

Campbell: The status quo. To be honest. And this is not an attack on Hillary Clinton, like, I wanted to her to win, to be honest. But also like I knew for a fact that Hillary Clinton winning the election was not going to lead us to our liberation. I say that as someone who is black, who recognizes that her husband's policies are the reason why our communities are in jail. I also look at it as someone who's Muslim, right and who recognizes that we're bombing countries that we shouldn't and we're not bombing the people who are actually being terrorists, we're bombing families, children, stuff like that. As someone who's also like a descendent of like Native Americans like, Standing Rock should not even be a thing. Which also leads to my disappointment in Barack Obama, I feel like he's done a lot of great things but I feel like the moments where we needed him to stand up and show out, he didn't. And I think part of it is like trying to please the overall people, and that's what I hate about politics. You could say that you feel some type of way but it never actualizes in practice because you're always trying to appease all of these other people who may be for or against it. It would've been the status quo, we still would've been invited to the White House. That's the thing all of the trans activists are like, when Trump gets into office, who's going to be invited to the White House?! We sent Caitlyn Jenner, she's going to be the only trans woman who's ever going to be invited to the White House after the Trump presidency. Caitlyn Jenner. But um, you know like, I feel like we

would've had a better engagement with Hillary Clinton but at the same time we've had better engagement with Barack Obama but I still feel like we still had to fight for this, we're here, like, recognize us. Don't forget us. Even when I went to the White House, a black man, called out a black trans woman, for asking if we can talk about the shit that's happening with black trans women. And he's like, "You're playing the race card!" And I'm like, I've never heard a black person ever in my life say that to another black person.

Linn: What was his role at the White House?

Campbell: He was some White House representative for people living with HIV. Then when we got done with our meeting, we were supposed to thank them for inviting us, and I'm like I'm not thanking you for inviting us, you should've invited us. What do you mean? But I think I would've liked to see Hillary in the White House. But also I really would've liked to see another candidate who really was like, who really talked about the different issues that I experience as a person. Being a Muslim, being black, being trans. You know what I'm saying? All of those things, and I just feel like either way, either way we win, it was going to be a hard life for someone. I was just hoping that people would've been like, Donald Trump? Not so much. But I feel like that if Hillary would have been more inclusive with other communities, a part of those forty-nine million people that didn't vote would have probably come out and voted for her. But there were, and I couldn't be mad, there were people who were trans that wanted to vote for her but couldn't because of the other issues. And so...

Linn: Because of her other issues?

Campbell: Yeah because of her other stances on stuff.

Linn: There wasn't an ideal candidate?

Campbell: Yeah, people were looking at lesser of two evils. And I'm tired of that narrative. Why do I have to vote on a lesser of two evils? Like why can't they both be equal? Not saying that they're, let's be very clear, one evil is clearly greater than another, but like I don't know. Like I was hopeful that she would've won. But at the same time I'm really interested, even if she would've won, do I think that people would still be, do I think hate would have showed up in a way that it did? Hell yeah. I think people would have been pissed, regardless to whether Trump won or not. Yeah.

Linn: Makes sense, what do you see as the necessary steps, I guess this goes in accord, for society to accept the transgender community more wholeheartedly?

Campbell: That's the thing, I think that people think the trans communities are looking for acceptance. I could care less if you accept me. What I want you to do is I want people to stop criminalizing us, and I want people to stop killing us. Like that's the biggest thing. Or stop discriminating against us too. But like people are like, at the end of the day, I walk past hundreds of people who in my mind, if I sat down and polled them would be like, no I'm not here for trans rights, or I don't like it, and I'm like, I'm not fighting with you about like how you feel, and like, you know what I'm saying like, what I'm saying is I need people to stop using their personal biases against a community to like oppress them, right? And the sad part is this is the narrative

that's been happening in this country since its beginning. I'm like I don't understand for the life of me how like the black church could be trans and homophobic, when like considering like not even 50 years ago black people we being like sprayed—no, let's be very clear. Fifty years ago black people churches were being bombed. Okay. And we're and then you're sitting on this pedestal pretending as if your life as a black person is more valuable or more valid than the lives of trans people and it's like to be honest, no, we've all been in this shitty boat for real. And I'm really interested, like Trump being president really scares the crap out of me, but I think now is the time for the communities who are really affected and the communities who have been involved in activism and the movement, it's our time to shine. And I don't say that like it's not going to be hard. I'm not saying that I'm not acknowledging that there's violence, right? But all of the movement work that we've been doing has led up to this exact moment. And I feel like having Barack Obama and having Clinton in the office to a certain extent has softened people's idea of like activism because at first like, I'm an activist, I'm like, "Woo, hold the sign up!" But I never really thought about like dying for what I believe in. Like, to be honest. With Trump being in office like, dying for what I believe in is now a reality for me. It wouldn't have been as big of a reality as it was with Hillary Clinton in office, but I think with Trump and just some of his views on things I don't feel safe in any intersection. I feel like someone can attack me because I'm Muslim, because I'm black, because I still get shot by police because I'm black, you know what I'm saying. Like people can find out I'm trans, people find I'm living with HIV so like it's just all of these different intersections that I'm like really freaking afraid of. And I think when you don't have to live an intersectional life or as intersectional of a life as trans people do, that gender nonconforming people do, like, *sighs* all of you people, all of these people are like scared now, welcome to our world. We've been scared. We've been telling you we've been scared, we've been asking you to stop killing us and you've been telling us, people have been making excuses, so what's the excuse now? But I'm happy to be the leader of an organization in this moment. If you would've asked me this a month ago I would've been like, "Fuck organizing!" organizations, all of that stuff because it's really traumatizing, and I need people to know that being on the front line, like, I get articles and take pictures and I smile and I do all of that stuff, but that's really traumatizing, like to live my life daily. It's one thing to be a fighter, and to walk into spaces and have to fight when you feel like it but walking into spaces everyday and being expected to show up to uplift the voices of the people who aren't there, do all of these things, and then to go home and still deal with all of this shit that comes with being black, trans, Muslim, all of those things, it's traumatizing. Very depressing. I get depressed a lot, and you know what, the thing that brings me back, the people. When I'm depressed and the girls tell me, call and tell me that they got an opportunity and that they planned on doing something, sometimes I'm like, not as engaged with the people as I should be. And they'll call me and be like, "Bré, we were gonna have this meeting," and I'm like, here I go having to show up and playing. And they're like, "No, we planned, it we got the people coming, and all you need to do is show up." That stuff really makes me happy because it goes to show there's a level of fight in my community that's happening now that has not happened, or wait, it's been happening, but I don't think it's been visibly happening and now girls are going showing up, showing out telling people what they will and won't do. People like some of our community members have turned down opportunities because now they know how they work, right? And I think that's more

powerful for me as an organizer, than being able to say we provided a hundred and fifty HIV tests in the last month, you know what I'm saying? Because the HIV test is like you knowing your health. But that's a small part of it right. I just love the fact that these people are empowered and feel like they can go out and do the things right? Do the things. *laughs* Do the meaningful work, right? Because I think that translates too, right, if you're willing to stand up and fight in public and you're putting yourself on the line, to me that reassures me that if you're out and about that something happens to you, you'll fight harder in that space and I feel like a lot of trans people that have been murdered because they haven't been, this is weird, haven't been used to or like successful in like fighting on a day-to-day basis if that makes sense, give up, right? And um, I think of Cece McDonald all of the time, when she was telling me about her situation about like killing someone who's you know, fighting back and killing someone who attacked her and like just how in that moment she felt just like crap. Like this person is like, it's between me and this person, right? And she survived that but like I just have meant, my girls are fighters. And like next year when we do this self-defense training class, like, it's going to be no holds bar, cause I feel like we've—that's interesting too. I think it's really interesting that there's not been an LGBT non-profit that has also provided people with self-defense classes. And I'm interested to see, I'm not going to announce that we're going to, we're planning on doing one until we actually, it's going to be January of next year. I think it's really interesting how you have all of this money in power and privilege, and you're telling people to be safe, but you're not providing them with the tools to be safe. So my hope is that in this organization we'll be able to fill in the smaller gaps. We've struggled with this whole being an AIDS service organization, and I'm like why would do that when other people are doing that? This whole recreating the will, recreating another space is important in some aspects. But like no shade, I want to be that organization that people come to when they get, when they're like okay, well I got my HIV test, I got my housing referral, I got this whatever. But this is, but I need this. Especially like education like, get the girls back in school. I'm excited to be on that side of the movement, right? Building leaders, because I don't believe all trans activists should be or all trans people should be trained to be activists. I feel like if your biggest thing is about being, being visible only does so much. Because as a visible trans woman my face is a lot of places and I'm still broke. I'm still broke. I'm still being discriminated against. I still walk through violence on a daily basis. But I think it's another thing when you're actually providing opportunities, and the Trans Sistas of Color Project is a visibility organization, yes, but we're also providing opportunities. Not just in the movement, but also outside of the movement.

Linn: Right, that's huge. I wanted to go back to what you were saying about intersectional lives, intersectionality? To those people who aren't as affected by those multiple intersections, like what do you see, what do you think they can do? Or what would their ideal role be in society for you?

Campbell: I'm a firm believer that there are going to be some people who need to take our stories and our voices in the spaces that we'll never be able to, and just show up for us in a way that like—I think also checking yourself, too. I feel like I could give you a list of things that you could do, right? But I feel like that for each person it's different so like, for instance. We don't share the same intersections [referring between herself and the interviewer], but the work that

you're doing here, and the interview that we're doing now, will help guide the narrative of what's happening within trans communities here. So that's one thing. I didn't have to tell you to do that. You're doing it. And I feel like there's going to be times where trans communities are going to have to tell people like, "This is what we need, this is how we need you to show up." And then other times, I as a trans person, sometimes I navigate this space of why do I always need to tell other people how to show up for me?

Linn: Yeah, I'm sure that's really frustrating.

Campbell: Yeah, and sometimes it is. Especially like I hate doing it with people who have a certain level of power and privilege, like, rich people. Like, what can I do to help support you in your work? You should've just said thank-you for speaking, and here's a check. You know what I'm saying? Like moving out of the way, you know what I'm saying? But I do, one thing I will say is that in the work, we have to be intentional. So i've been noticing like on Facebook how like people support trans people but they say transphobic stuff. People support women in their choice to choose and all of these things but they are slut-shaming Trump's wife [Melania Trump]. I feel like you can't you can't do both. If you're going to be intentional about making sure that you're showing up for other marginalized communities, you have to actually show up for them. And sometimes that means showing, that means checking people, that means if you're in that space and somebody's telling you what's happening to them, believe them. And ask questions only when necessary, not to like devalue or you know to like add value to their story in a way which is comfortable to you. Like y'all gotta show up. But it's not always our job to tell you how to show up.

Linn: Yeah, of course.

Campbell: I think, oh shit, my parking meter.

Linn: Oh, really?

Campbell: Yeah.

Linn: Yeah, anything else you want to add? These are my last two.

Campbell: Um, we can go. I got a ticket.

Linn: Well thank you so much for talking with us.

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