

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW WITH REVEREND DR. CARI JACKSON, PART 1

Monique: Here. So let's begin recording. My name is Monique Moultrie, and today is May 9, 2018 and I'm here with Reverend Dr. Cari Jackson. We're conducting an oral history for the LGBT-RAN website, and for my autobiographical research project. We're going to begin early in life and hit milestones along the way, but feel free to skip any questions, to choose what to elaborate on, choose not to elaborate, just to skip subjects all together. This is your oral history as narrated by you, so feel free to do that.

Monique: I'm gonna start some questions, and I didn't have a CV to sort of chronologically order things, so if I'm moving around, feel free to narrate as your life went, as opposed to how I'm asking the questions.

Cari: Okay.

Monique: So if this is when you went to seminary, and that's when you wanna talk about seminary stuff, don't wait for me to get to it.

Cari: Okay.

Monique: Whenever it works for you.

Monique: Okay, so I start in the beginning. I know you were raised in Baltimore, Maryland. Can you tell me more about your early life? What type of neighborhood did you grow up in? What was your childhood experiences like?

Cari: Well, I grew up the youngest child of four, the only girl.

Monique: Go right ahead. I'm clearing space at the same time.

Cari: And I grew up in two different neighborhoods before college. The first neighborhood that my family lived in as my parents were renting the apartment that we lived in was a middle class, unusually racially diverse neighborhood. And I say unusually because at that time, the 1950's and 60's in Baltimore very much as it still is today: Very racially segregated. But there was this pocket community in Baltimore that was very racially diverse. And so I grew up initially thinking that's what the world was like. Then I would go to church on Sundays into an all-black community. So I just... I'm a little kid. That's what I thought. I didn't know why things were that way, but it caught my attention.

Cari: And then, when I was eight years old, my parents bought a house in a different part of Baltimore that was racially diverse when we moved there, and then the neighborhood, within a couple of years, completely turned over as there was tremendous white flight, and became an all-black neighborhood, and pretty much working class. That's where I lived until the time I went to college.

Monique: Middle class?

- Cari: Pardon?
- Monique: Middle class? Working class?
- Cari: I'd say my family was working class, and very typical black Pentecostal family in that my father was the head of the household and mother, for most of my childhood, did not work out of the home, because that's... My father, it was important to him to be the provider and he didn't want his wife to work. So our finances were very determined by what my father brought in. My family did, all six of us, the two parents and the four kids, we worked as a team in cleaning the homes of wealthy white people. So I started working at age four, just learning how to dust and doing things like that.
- Cari: So very early on my world was very racialized in terms of who had access to what, and those kinds of things. I was trying to make sense of all of it. I was someone who learned early that I didn't fit various places. I didn't fit in working class black community, I think because I had earlier exposure to a different socioeconomic class. I didn't fit in church in some ways. In some ways I did and other ways didn't, because I felt God was bigger than what was being portrayed to me in church.
- Cari: So I grew up very early, not quite fitting, and then I was nine years old when I began recognizing that the gender of the people I had crushes on were... 90% were female, and I knew that was very different from my peers, my little nine-year-old peers. I was very quietly trying to navigate that. Then, when I was about 10, 11 I started realizing that one of my brothers seemed to have same-gender attraction as I did, and I saw how negatively and harshly my parents dealt with him. So I was determined to fix the feelings I had or, at a minimum, not let anybody know I had them, because I knew there was a high cost.
- Monique: So can you tell me, outside of your neighborhood, outside of working, what were some of the values that you were gaining as a young person?
- Cari: Both of my parents were very service oriented. They both believed strongly in giving to the community, helping the community be better. My father was a boy scout leader, and he helped lots of young boys, young men have structure and positivity in their lives that often would not have been there. And so I saw that, and that was important. My mother was very involved in school with all of us and then with voting and just a lot of... There was a real civic consciousness that my parents shaped in us, so when I was a young teenager, 13, 14, I was very involved in my own volunteer service. 'Cause that's what I grew up seeing and knowing.
- Cari: So when I was 13 I decided to volunteer in a children's hospital, 'cause I was thinking, "Oh, wow, that must really be hard to be a kid and be sick." 'Cause I had never been sick, so I was just imagining that must be really hard.
- Cari: Now, when I volunteered there, I couldn't have had any idea the kinds of experiences I would have. That it wasn't just children who were sick, but volunteering there I learned about child abuse. I knew nothing of it before. My very first day in the hospital I met a

little girl who was 18 months old, and I can still see her and feel her in my arms as I held her. This little baby was in the hospital because her mother's boyfriend had poured scalding hot water over her.

Cari: So the deformities of this little baby really opened a consciousness within me about a whole reality of living that I had known nothing about. I grew up in a two-parent home, they worked together as a team, they didn't fight and cuss at each other. We went to church together. So that's what I knew. And we didn't have any abuse in our home. So working at the hospital really opened my young mind and heart to some harsh realities that many children experience.

Cari: And I thought I knew something about harsh realities because my mother had been orphaned as a child, and I knew some of her stories, and I knew my mother had dropped out of school in the eighth grade because she had to support herself. I knew my mom went back to high school as an adult woman raising children, 'cause this was before GED existed, and so you had to go grade by grade by grade and my mom did that, and then started college. My mother was brilliant. And my father was someone who had always wanted to play violin, and he learned how to play violin as an adult. So I had parents who had their own life challenges, and they kept pushing and moving forward, and so I just figured that's what you do, and you find a way, but you don't hurt somebody else in the process. That wasn't really a part of my construct until I volunteered in the children's hospital.

Cari: Then I also was involved in voter registration, 'cause I felt very strongly that black people, of all people black people need to vote, that there were lots of costs paid for us to have that privilege. I was involved as well in environmental justice issues, and felt very strongly about that. That was part of... That work was pretty much it was all white people, and blacks thought I was weird for having interest in the environment, and they said, "We got too many issues to worry about." And so I had some of those kinds of concerns that people expressed.

Cari: I always had friends who were of variety of races and religions, and so I had lots of challenge from people about that. That that was not acceptable. I had friends who were atheists, so my Pentecostal folks said that wasn't acceptable. And I had friends who were white and Asian and then blacks said, "That's not okay." So that's why I said I grew up, in so many ways, feeling like an outsider, but it taught me to just be me, be authentic to who I am.

Monique: Okay. I'm gonna pause this.