

Oral History Interview: Darlene Franklin

Interviewee: Darlene Franklin

Interviewer: Monique Moultrie

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Monique : To begin recording, my name is Monique Moultrie, and today is June 9th, and I'm here with Reverend Darlene Franklin. We're here to conduct an oral history for the LGB Tran oral history website and my research project, tentatively titled Hidden Histories: The Faith Activism of Black Lesbian Religious Leaders.

Monique : We're going to begin early in life, and hit milestones along the way. Feel free, at any point, to skip whatever you don't want to talk about, or to elaborate. If I don't ask about something and there's something in middle school you really found formative, insert that wherever you want.

Monique : I go in segments that may not be chronological, because it's based on what I've compiled about you, through lots of web searches and other research searches, so I may not have your timeline right. If I don't, feel free to say, "No, well this came first," and redirect. It'll all make sense when it comes out in the final wash. I just tell folks that, because they're like, "I spent a whole lot of time talking about my elementary school." I'm like, "That's fine."

Darlene F.: I know, I know. I've done this kind of stuff, where you spend a whole lot of time talking about something that ain't got one sentence. You're like, "Hey." You know, so ...

Monique : Okay, so we're on record. I know from your website, you're born in East Orange, New Jersey. What can you tell me about your early life? The type of neighborhood you grew up in, was it middle class? Working class? What kind of neighbors did you have?

Darlene F.: Working class, and we had neighbors, the kind where all kids played kickball in the street. Families that were trying to make it, a mixture of families, that's what I liked about it. Growing up there, an urban community, that it seemed like all of us were poor, if you will. Some had jobs, some were a little better off than others. We grew up with Haitians, we grew up with Italians, we grew up with Mexicans, we were all there, blacks, we were all there together.

Darlene F.: We were not really growing up, I was not really conscious of race issues and things like that, from white people, other than what my mother told us from their growing up, in history. From what I would get from other kids, "You're too black," or, "You're a darkie," and this, and that, and the other.

Darlene F.: Growing up there was just a childhood that we came home when the lights went on, gone all day. I had, at the time, six brothers and three sisters. It was a very lively household. Education was what my mother preached. I didn't grow up in church. We

were told my father, even though my father was a deacon in the church, but we decided early on, my mother was like, "Mm-hmm (negative), it's too much. Too much going on up there. Too much hypocrisy," sort of like. She taught us to love God and treat others the way that you want to be treated. That was it. That's what we know, that was what she preached to us.

Darlene F.: She was very, when she felt that she needed to go to church, she went to a Catholic church, which was at the time, around seventh or eighth grade, we would get little summer jobs in the church camps, and things like that. Which always seemed like the Catholic church had that going on there. We weren't associated with a black church, growing up.

Monique : What denomination was your father a deacon in?

Darlene F.: Hmm?

Monique : What denomination was your father?

Darlene F.: I think it was Baptist, because that was a short-lived thing that I remember. I'm the eighth child, so I only remember things vaguely. It always seemed like people were towering over me, and I'm trying to find out, figure out what was going on in growing up. My brothers and sisters were, when he was really doing his church thing, the last five of us were really young. I don't remember much of it. These were the stories that were passed down. I do remember going to church, being in church with him one time, and he was singing in the choir, and that's all.

Darlene F.: Other than that, my mother really instilled in us about treating each other right, and treating people right and fair, that kind of stuff.

Monique : You had a large immediate family. Did you also have a large extended family? What did you all do for fun?

Darlene F.: We had cousins, but we really didn't, my mother didn't take us around them a lot, because there was so many of us. My cousins and things, there was like one or two, and they were much more well to do than us. Coming up, it was really strange. You know how people would be, "I got this, and you don't have that." My mother was like, "My children are not going to be treated bad," so she just kept us home a lot. We rarely actually interacted with our cousins.

Darlene F.: Now the older children did, the older five, like my brothers. There was my older sister, who was the firstborn, then there were four boys, then twins, then me, and two boys under. Those first five kids interacted with them, because they grew up with them. That was when my father was acting right, so to speak. That was when he was acting right with those first five children. With the last five children, he was doing something different.

- Darlene F.: It was a household with a lot of chaos and confusion. Our extended family, when we did go around our aunts and our uncles, we knew who they were, the last five of us, but we didn't visit them a lot. Again, it was stories about ... My father was a long distance truck driver, and he brought a lot of them from down South, in the early days.
- Darlene F.: His older sister was a missionary in Nigeria. I remember her telling me a lot of stories about Africa and things. When the war was going on over there, they had to leave the country immediately. Her house, I remember going over her house, and she just had all of this artwork, and all of these statues and things. We would never be there long enough for me, because I was very inquisitive, to get all of the stories, because she was so fascinating. I regret that now, I regret that now, because I'm trying to piece together, "Where did we come from as people?"
- Darlene F.: What did we do for fun? We just hung out with our neighbors. As a family, we celebrated. Everything, as happens in a lot of black families, happened around the kitchen. My mother was an excellent cook, and it was fascinating to me, to watch her make ends meet. With a family of 10, never did we go hungry, not one day. My father worked on and off. In their early days, they were domestics, and my father was a chauffeur, before he started driving a truck. Off and on, he would have these jobs or whatever.
- Darlene F.: Then of course, there was welfare. My mother made ends meet. There was bartering at the corner store, just what goes on I guess in our neighborhoods. We didn't spend time separating ourselves from the neighbors. It was like a community, we were a community on some level.
- Monique : Okay. Let's talk a bit about school. What was a typical high school day like for you?
- Darlene F.: Hated it.
- Monique : What activities did you participate in? Any groups you were a part of?
- Darlene F.: None. As a matter of fact, I cut school a lot, because I was going through ... I've known that I was, they didn't call it lesbian back then, but I've known that I've liked girls since I was seven. Which felt really, really natural to me, that this was the way everybody was. At seven years old, what else would you think? You have a little boyfriend or whatever, somebody gravitates to you or whatever, and I just thought that was the coolest thing, to know that I was attracted to girls.
- Darlene F.: When I really discovered that, it was about ... You know how you say at seven or whatever, "That's going to be my girlfriend, that's going to be my boyfriend." I came home and told my sister that I had a girlfriend. She said, "We all have girlfriends." I was like, "No, that's my girlfriend girlfriend." She said, "You can't have a girlfriend like that." "Why would something that feels," and I'm putting grownup words to it now, "Something that feels so good could be something that's so bad?"

- Darlene F.: As I began to grow into myself, I knew at that time, "This is something you can't tell everybody about. You can't tell everybody about this." I hid it. I tried to hide it, bury it, kill it, but for me, I was such a tomboy, it didn't matter what I did, I didn't fit in anywhere. I didn't fit in anywhere. Even if I tried to look girly, it was just my energy, it just didn't fit in. I was bullied, I didn't have many friends. I loved school, but as I began to grow in school, especially around my sixth, fourth grade, fifth grade, whatever, I acted out. I was a terror.
- Darlene F.: Home life, my father was an alcoholic, fighting my brothers and stuff like that. I don't mind telling this stuff, because I've healed, an inner healing process, it's been the total story of my life. I knew that, that was something that I didn't want to be, especially as I began to hear how society felt about bull daggers, that's the word. That's what you were called at that age. No boyfriends. It was horrible.
- Darlene F.: To get along, I would just do stuff. I started drinking at 14, probably earlier. It's just going through a period of my life where that, no matter what anybody said, no matter what anybody called me, a bull dagger or whatever, I would never admit to that. I could never admit to that, because that was something that was worse than being, just the worse thing in life to be. That's the message that I got.
- Darlene F.: I remember being in, I think I was in sixth or seventh grade, and I remember I would never take gym, because I didn't want to undress, even though the gym teacher, that was in high school, even though they gym teacher was a lesbian, we found out later. It was around the seventh grade, I was in a gym class, I was running around, and I heard the girls call me a faggot. By then, I knew the words, the difference. I was like, "They call boys faggots, who act like girls, but I'm already a girl, so what does that mean?" That's the day, and I've written about this, that I said that, that's the day I lost my face. That's the day I lost my face. That is the day that, "I'm a girl, so what they're saying is I'm a girl who acts like a boy, who acts like a girl." Can you imagine that, trying to sort that out at 11 or 12? I just lost my face, and I just became a nobody.
- Darlene F.: My sisters knew. Everybody, they knew something's different. My mother knew, "There's something different about her." My mother was like, "You know you can't ..." My brothers would come, because I'm just remembering, I had six brothers. My brothers would come to the kitchen table, you know how boys walk around without their shirts or their t-shirt, well at the time, I didn't have a chest, I could too. My mother said, "Go back and put on blah, blah, blah, blah," that kind of stuff.
- Darlene F.: I really grew up in an environment, in a place in the family where I basically raised myself in the midst of all it. The older ones were off doing something. The twins, who were right over me, you couldn't pin ... You know how this is, older sisters, "We don't want anybody," that kind of thing. Then I had two brothers under me. The first five kids of our family, they were born in the 40s. The last five, we're 50s babies. It was something different. There's a difference. Within that five, is the twins and me, right there in the middle.
- Darlene F.: I would go and attach myself to people's families. I had one family, who I went to school with, we were friends. That family, I just attached myself to that family. That's where I

hung out all the time. We wouldn't be doing nothing, but just sitting up talking, doing what teenagers do, smoked cigarettes and drink, or whatever, and talk all day, and skip school, and whatever.

Darlene F.: In school, I was always in trouble. I had been suspended a million times, and nobody ... "You're just a bad kid," I wasn't a bad kid, I really wasn't. It was just that you get awakened at 2:00 in the morning with screaming, hollering, and then you're expected to get up and go to school and act right. All the troubles and traumas of that.

Darlene F.: High school, I look back on school and I was smarter than I thought I was. I could miss school and then go to school and be caught up. I'd pass. I don't know how I made it out of high school, but I did. Actually, school was boring to me. It really was, it was boring to me. I said, "Because everything I need to know about school and do, I can do it, and I can grasp it, and I can do it," and I did it, "What's next?" School, there was no coming out.

Darlene F.: Then after I graduated high school, I hung around for a year, and then I said, "I'm going in the military."

Monique : Why the military?

Darlene F.: Hmm?

Monique : Why the military?

Darlene F.: Because it was an escape, I could get out. I could get free college. I could get just a different boost up. That's what I did. Mostly everybody in my family went in the military. Brothers and another sister, so that's what we did.

Monique : Why'd you choose the Air Force?

Darlene F.: Because everybody else chose the Army. My brothers and my sister chose the Army. I told them, I said, "I'm too smart to be in the Army. I'm too smart. The Air Force is for the elite." That's what I did. In there, it was my goal ... I wish I'd have did 20 years, but I didn't. It was my goal to outdo everybody else, what they did. I was going to go in the Navy, but when I went to see the recruiter, a guy had just come off a ship and he said, he took one look at me, he said, "Oh, they're going to love you on the ship." He looked me up and down and he said, "They're going to love you on the ship." I looked at him and I looked at the recruiter, and he didn't say anything, I said, "He just lost you a recruit," and I left out the door and went across the hall to the Air Force. That's what I did.

Monique : How long were you in the Air Force?

Darlene F.: Seven years, I was in the Air Force seven years. Snatched out of urban society, and thrown into Haver, Montana, which is like 15 miles from the Canadian border, it's a

radar site. I was like, "What did I get myself into?" I spent two years in Montana, and I married a man.

Monique : While in the military?

Darlene F.: Yes, I married him. I said, "Because society is never going to accept me as I am, so I better marry this man because he asked me," and that is the God's honest truth. We were the only two black people on that base. He was 10 years older than I am. To him, it was like, "They sent me an angel here. I'm going to be able to make it through," one of those kinds of things. I'm young, "He's black, he's going to look out for me. Nobody else is ever going to ask me to marry them." That's what I felt about myself.

Darlene F.: I said, "I'm going to marry this man." Did I love that man? No. I knew who I was, and he knew who I was. This is a truly interesting story. He was such a worldly man, and as men think that they can do, change lesbians, because of their penis. I wasn't thinking about that. My thing was, "I'm going to kill this inside of me. I'm going to kill this. Marriage is going to do that." What I did was I married my father. I had two children, two lovely daughters.

Darlene F.: From there, we got stationed in California, at Beale Air Force Base, California. From there, I decided, "I'm not staying with this man." We weren't getting along. I said, "I'm not, I'm not doing this." It's strange how it happened, because I had just had my youngest daughter, and I got orders to go to Japan on the company for 18 months. You can't take your children. I would have had to leave within 30 days of her being born. I was not leaving my kids. My oldest one was four, I was not leaving my children with him. He couldn't take care of himself, let alone my kids.

Darlene F.: I had to make the decision whether to, because at the time I had to reenlist, I would have had to reenlist to finish out that assignment, or turn it down. I turned it down, and they made me get out. I wanted to stay in, but they made me get out. Because of turning it down, they made me get out early. It was fate, because at the seven year mark, had I been ten years, it would have really been sad to have to get out at the ten year mark.

Darlene F.: I got out, and when I got out, that's when things really got bad between us. I said, "I'm not staying here," so that's when I moved here with my older sister. My older sister, one of the twins, was living here. I moved here. I went on vacation. I went on vacation. I told him, I said, "I'm going on vacation to visit my sister." That's the only way I was going to get away. I said, "I'm going on vacation to visit my sister." "Oh good, you're going to be gone for seven weeks or whatever, good, good." That was fine to tell him, but I never went back, never went back. That's history.

Darlene F.: That is when, once it dawned on him I wasn't coming back, "You was just a lesbian," all of that, whatever. I raised my children with my sisters, another sister, who her twin moved here as well. Between the three of us, we have eight children, and we raised them within a block of each other. It turned out to be good. It turned out to be good.

- Monique : I haven't asked any questions about your spiritual formation during these various periods. I want to bring that into the mix. You've talked a bit about education, and career, and family life. What was your foundation, spiritually, during these various periods, as you're progressing?
- Darlene F.: I didn't have one. I really didn't have one, other than the fact that we believed in Jesus, because my mother believed in Jesus. Like in a lot of families, the Bible sat on the coffee table, and we'd dust it off, and we'd read the 23rd Psalm. You never go near Revelations, it was that kind of thing. The Bible was holy, you didn't touch it, every now and then.
- Darlene F.: For me, when I look back as to who I am, my spirituality was ever since I was a kid, but that's another story. Anyway, it didn't, I didn't have it, I didn't. When I moved here, I started to run into ... Where I lived, I lived in Mount Clemmons, which is a very small town. It's small, it's predominantly white. It was like one side of the track is little people, and the other side was ... Where I lived, Greater Morning Star Missionary Baptist Church was around the corner. The women would come walking around, like Jehovah's Witnesses, but they weren't, and visiting.
- Darlene F.: Plus, I had put my kids in the summer camp. I put them in vacation Bible school, in the camp, for two weeks or whatever. My children, I could not afford to send them to camp or something like that, so what I did was around April or so, I would map out their whole summer, free camp here, free camp there, basketball camp, I would coach basketball and blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, even though they went to Catholic school. I would work for them to be in school, just work it off, because I didn't have enough money. That's how I got into that church, and through friends of mine.
- Darlene F.: This one friend of mine, who I met when I started, I was working in a factory when I first got here. It was one of my first jobs. This woman said to me, "You know, you have pretty lips." I said, "Okay, here we go." At that time, I had made up my mind, "I'm just going to be who I am. I'm not going to be with a man anymore, that's it. I just can't do this, live this lie." I think I was about 30 at that time. She and I started kicking it, and dating, and going together, and whatever. She was a part of that, her mother was a part of Greater Morning Star Missionary Baptist Church.
- Darlene F.: We'd be sitting in church, and we kept it hidden, and everybody knew, but we kept it hidden. She wasn't really gay. I knew I was, but she wasn't. When the church folk women picked up on it, they're going to save us, we're going to get saved. I did, I went and I committed my life to Christianity. I didn't know anything really about Christianity. I just knew that it started with my children, from them saying, "Bring your children to church. Bring your children to church."
- Darlene F.: Then I began to learn, "Bring your children to church," and then I began to pray with folks, and hear the message, and I enjoyed it, going to church. I thoroughly enjoyed my pastor. It was also that thing, "We know who you are." They could see it. I'm one of these people, you just can't hide this. I don't care how dressed, whatever, it just doesn't work. It's just not my energy.

Darlene F.: My children, I started going to that church. The day that I got baptized, I went home. I was sitting in the window and I began to hear all of this stuff. I began to hear this voice talking to me. I knew then, as they say, I got called into ministry on that day, or whatever that is, I got called into ministry on that day. I was like, "God, you're real funny. This is a joke, because you know, nobody knows who I am, you know who I am." All the while, I'm hiding it and I'm trying to change myself. I'm trying to pray the gay away. I'm trying to do all of this stuff, but I'm sneaking around with this woman, and keeping it from my kids, and all of that.

Darlene F.: Then one day, my daughter came home. At that age, they just thought that, Deborah was her name, they just thought that she was just mom's friend. She did their hair, I wasn't a braider, she did their hair and everything. They just thought she was my friend and she was a fun person to be around. Then one day, my oldest daughter came home, and I think she was about, and I know I'm kind of skipping, she was in the seventh grade. Where she went to school at, right around the corner was a gay bar. The teachers would walk them through the neighborhood every so often. I don't know how she knew that was a gay bar, but she came home and she said, "We went walking today and we went by the gay bar, and those faggots was in there, and that's just nasty." I was like, "Oh my God. Oh my God."

Darlene F.: I wrestled with that thing, I wrestled with that thing, and I wrestled with that thing, and I said, "I've got to tell her who I am. I've got to tell her who I am." I said to her, "What would you think if somebody in your family was like that?" She said, "Nobody in my family is like that. That's just nasty." I said, "Okay," and I struggled with that, and I struggled with that. Then I think about a couple weeks after that, I told her. I told her. I said, "She's old enough. I love her." My other daughter was like seven, I think, and Kimberly was 11, and I told the seven year old too. I'm just telling them, and I'm just balling, and I'm just telling them. The seven year old said, "Okay, could I go watch TV now?" The oldest one was like, she went to her room and she got a book, she had some book about different people in the world. It was about a couple of days, she read that book and read that book, and she came down a couple days later or so and said, "I'm okay. I'm okay. You know what? I'm okay."

Darlene F.: Do you know, I'll never forget this, I told them that on a Tuesday, Wednesday prayer service, we went to prayer service and the prayer leader in the circle started saying that, "All these lesbians and homosexuals are going straight to hell. Condemn them to hell God." My daughter, I looked at her and the fear on her face, the fear on her face was just unbelievable. I was like, "What am I supposed to say to her now?" I never went back. I never took them back to that church.

Darlene F.: At that church, my process was, and I'm talking about some years, a couple years, maybe three, four, or five year span, that I'm talking about. I'm jumping over. My process said the church was ... I was trying to let the pastor know I've been called into ministry, "I want to be here," my pastor was dynamic "I want to be here at this church. You're opening up your special Bible studies to the men, and special Bible studies to this person and that person," and I began to show up at those Bible studies, and his wife was like, "What are you doing here?" It would be nothing in there but men and me. She thought I wanted her husband. I wanted to tell her, "Honey, I don't want your little

husband, okay?" "What are you doing here?" I just wanted to learn. I loved the way he taught.

Darlene F.: When I read the Bible, I saw something different than him. They would always get on me about, "Sister Franklin, don't be reading, putting words in it, don't be reading ..." It didn't make sense to me. I'm like, "We are women, we birth babies. How did we come out of the side of a man?" That kind of stuff, "We were born out of his side." Those things began to, I began to be awakened to, "Some of this stuff in here is just not adding up." Then to go on with the Sodom and Gomorrah stories, and over there in Corinthians, and Romans. When I would read it, just the literal version of it, a literal reading, it was like, "This doesn't make sense to me. It doesn't make sense to me."

Darlene F.: I said, "I can't go back to that church," and that saddened me, because where do I go now? Now that this has been awakened in me, where do I go? There I was in Mount Clemmons, out of church for a year, and they're, "Come on back, come on." "No. No, no, that's not love." Then I heard about, somebody told me, "This church in Detroit, you ought to go there." At that time, I lived in Mount Clemmons 15 years, and I will tell you I had not been to Detroit to hang out or whatever, I was scared of it, because of what people would say.

Darlene F.: I'm out here in this town, and I'm like, "I don't go down there," but I went. One day, I went. November, on a Sunday, November 1, 1993, and I never looked back. Renee McCoy was in there, and in this church there were people like me, black gay people, because Mount Clemmons only had a few black gay people, and they all were going together. When I went down there, the regalia of black gay people and this being in the tradition of the black church, and the singing, I never looked back. I joined that church and I stayed there every day for 17 years. I hear, "God is love, and love is for everybody," that was the message.

Darlene F.: Bishop Carl Bean, that's where I was introduced to him. Full Truth, at that time, was part of the Union Fellowship Church. I remember following Renee McCoy around for almost two years, to tell her I've been called into the ministry. "I've been called in." "What do you want to do that for?" Renee was in transition, she was transitioning now. By that time, I think the church had been open like seven years. With her, what she had went through in that church was the actual deaths. You know from what she's told you.

Darlene F.: Those of us that were coming along ... I came along at a time when people were still dying, and women had begun to start dying and contracting HIV. It wasn't about you got a calling and now you go do seminary, and this. That's not that type of ministry. That ministry was about literally saving people's lives. It wasn't about us going to school to show that I self-improved, it was about, "This poor person has been kicked out of their house, kicked out of their church, and they're sitting over there on whatever street at the park, out of their mind, nothing to eat," and that's what we did, go get them, feed them, love on them, bring them to church, make sure they have food, talk to them, "Life's not over," even though you couldn't tell people that at that time, because they didn't have what we have now. They weren't living with HIV. They really had to have a community and families to look up to. People were leaving their loved ones at funeral homes. They weren't eulogized at their mama's church. That's where we were.

Darlene F.: On top of that, we were coming out of the closet in droves, loudly, crazy. Anyway you wanted to come out, we was coming out. We had to come out. There it was, you were kicked out of your church, and not only during that time did I join that church, I had started work. I had just left a job working for a shelter, a battered women's shelter called My Sister's Place. I was in domestic violence, and this type of work, I'm just called to it. I've been doing it since I was 17, working in group homes, and mental health, and nursing homes, and things like that.

Darlene F.: The military was basically, in hindsight, in looking at that period of my life, that was just something I wanted to do, but that was not the trajectory that was the purpose for my life. Even in there, it was service, that's what I worked in, it was the service part of it, feeding war ready missile material, and things like that. At this particular time, Full Truth, I also worked at AIDS Partnership Missionary, which was Wellness Networks at the time. I was the first statewide HIV/AIDS Coordinator for the HIV/AIDS state hotline.

Darlene F.: When I worked in the field of domestic violence, I was the Coordinator for the National Domestic Violence Hotline. When I started working for Wellness Networks, our clients, not only would I run into, we were the servicing agency for people with HIV and AIDS, but it was based in Ferndale. With that, there was an influx of African American people coming through there, which their spiritual needs got funneled through the church. I had access to them at the church and at my job, which was just amazing. It was just really, really amazing for me.

Darlene F.: Then when Renee McCoy finally heard, got it that I was not going to leave her alone about being in the ministry, she welcomed me into the student clergy program. Halfway through that, she retired. She retired just around the time where I would have been finished with it. She retired and she left. Then the next pastor, Alan Spencer, he wanted me to continue in the program. We would do program hopes for meals and empowerment meals, where every Monday night a group would come, single guys or whoever, didn't have families on holidays, make sure that they had gifts and things, and there was something for those guys, and it was mostly men. On the holidays, Thanksgiving, Christmas, and picnics in the park and things like that.

Darlene F.: After that, he left, and then Reverend Darren McCarol became the pastor. He came from Bishop Bean's church, the Unity Fellowship Church Movement. I'm also an ordained deacon in the Unity Fellowship Church Movement. He said, "I want you to work another year, so I can see if you really ..." I said, "I've already worked, well, whatever."

Monique : So a Jacob story.

Darlene F.: Yeah, "I want you to work another year, so I can see if you are ..." Anyway, I did that, and finally I was ordained a deacon. Somewhere along the line ... He was a brilliant man. One thing which, I don't know if you've ever seen pictures of him or if Renee mentioned any of the other pastors that were there, but for the men, which all of them are deceased now, to be HIV positive and working with the community, really took a toll on them as pastors. That's just my personal opinion, because I've watched what they do.

- Darlene F.: During that time, you're dealing with very, very, a lot of disfunction. We were coming out. We didn't know what to do with that. You didn't know how to live with that. You're coming out with people from hiding, and masking their pain, medicating their pain. What do you do with this God, when all of a sudden this is a welcoming God, when all you ever heard was this was a God who was going to send you to hell and burn you up for eternity? What do you do with that? It was sort of like on the one hand, the difference with Renee McCoy and Bishop Carl Bean, was that Carl Bean was, "We've got to come out from under this oppression of church hierarchy, and all and all respecting it, but let's look a little deeper into what this freedom and liberation theology is about," is what he introduced us to.
- Darlene F.: Renee, on the other hand, loves her high church, and structure, and pomp and circumstance, and that. It was sort of like ... Here you are, you have this sort of like wild child, that we're trying to mold and shape into church. Because all we knew about church was for you damnation, that's what it is, unless you denounce that, then this is not for you. We had to learn and be taught the love of God, and looking at the word and find the love of God, and live and move in that. It was quite an experience.
- Darlene F.: Over the years, after Darren McCarol left, Renee McCoy came back. Renee [inaudible] "That one ain't right, I'll come back." People would go dig her up. That happened with all of the pastors, except me, except me. When she had to come back and, "No, you're not treating the women right," that was that. For me, when she came back, there was two of us there, me and another deacon, and she ordained us reverends. The church chose me to be the pastor. I pastored it for 10 years.
- Darlene F.: My tenure, what the congregation and community looked like during my tenure, for me, was, "Now we know, we know God loves us. We know this. Now it's time for us to learn. Now it's time for us to be visible in the community. Now it's time for us to not just lead, but have other ministers and other deacons that go out into these places, where we're not wanted." This is something that I discovered after I left, that this was what was going on during my tenure. I wanted to make sure the building, we own it. When I got there, we only had like \$11,000 left to pay for the building. I made sure, "We're going to pay that off." That was paid off. That property belongs to Full Truth.
- Darlene F.: The other thing was, "What does it mean to be in a committed relationship? Let's talk about that. What is pleasing in God's sight, to honor each other and to honor and respect loving relationships, instead of feeding into the mantra of what gay people do, hopping all around, in and out. What does it mean to ..." Those were things that I was led to teach about, and to do education.
- Darlene F.: I also started a radio show on a Christian, I had a radio show on a Christian station, and I wouldn't let people call in. I talked about what kind of God loves all people. My thing was educating the community, "I don't want you calling in," I wouldn't let people call in to talk about, "You're going to burn in hell because scripture so and so and such and such said." "No, you're going to hear me. You're going to hear what life is like for me." I did that for a couple of years.

- Darlene F.: It came to, "Okay, people in my church, you want to be ministers, you want to be deacons. We don't have any college education to move on into a seminary." It takes you having a Bachelor's Degree to go to seminary, that's not who that congregation was. Yet again, I said, "We can start somewhere." I started going to this church out in Roadsville, a mainstream Christian church, evangelical. They had a school there, but their thing was to mainly gear that towards women. I said, "But this would be a good opportunity for us to learn something, get some degrees, get whatever, so my people can go out with some kind of pride, saying, 'We accomplished something.'"
- Darlene F.: We started a chapter of that in my church, and the so called Bachelor's Degrees that they said that they earned, whatever, that you can't transfer to nowhere else, it was that kind of thing. What it gave the people that I pastored was a sense of accomplishment. I'm not probably ever ... Some of those people probably are never going to go to a mainstream school, but they had that to keep working in the ministry.
- Darlene F.: It was really quite an experience to see people who have been selling their bodies on the street, women, people who just ... Not just the marginalized of society, but people from all walks came to that church, who knew they were gay, who didn't want to be out and couldn't be out, but they came. It was unbelievable to see. Sometimes people come from, "I'm just here for the weekend, visiting," and they come to church and that message hit them. They go back changed, ready to live in the full truth of their life. That's what that church was for.
- Darlene F.: That church was to prepare a people to go out into the spaces and places, and spread love into those places where we had been denied and turned away from. To take love back into their families, to show mama, "I'm still your child, despite what you think, I'm yours. I'm yours." To go back into the mainstream churches. Now, mainstream churches wouldn't ask me to preach, but do you know how I would get in the mainstream churches? My members may have a family member that died, and they want me to do the eulogy.
- Darlene F.: I, by that time, had embraced the masculine side of myself and, "I'm going to wear whatever I want to wear. I'm going to wear my Stacy Adams shoes. I'm going to wear my men's suit. I'm going to wear a tie." I would wear that at my church. To me, it was very important that I wear it at the grocery store, I wear it at my job, I wear it when I go do a funeral for your family member, in a very hostile environment. That's what my life was like. It would just be some of the most amazing things, to see people who, "Oh, look at how she look, but she preaching the word." Change, it's the truth anyhow.
- Darlene F.: Don't look at the messenger, let's look at what God has brought together here. Let's look at the spirit of what God is doing here. Let's look at the humanity. Are you really searching that Bible to see what Jesus was really about? No respect of person. During those special times is what would happen. Change, creator of change, touching people in a place in their humanity. That's what it was like at my tenure. Preparing people that knew that they were saved, so to speak.
- Monique : Let me ask a question about, because you describe several different leadership moments, leadership in the workforce, being the state administrator, etc. Then

leadership in the ecclesial setting, in your church. What do you see as your leadership style?

Darlene F.: I think I connect to people, if that's a leadership style. Anywhere I go, white, black, Jewish community, my energy just, I put people together, you know what I mean? My leadership style in my church was, "I don't have all the gifts." My leadership style was, I used to didn't like to go visit the sick, and people would say, "What? You're a pastor." I didn't like to go visit the sick, because I wasn't the one that really had that energy to make a difference with them when I went. Now, I could go and pray, but I knew my minister over there, when she went to go visit the sick, they really felt better. What I did at my church was get people in touch with their gift and their purpose.

Darlene F.: Why am I going to try to sing, because everybody wanted to be the pastor. Everybody wanted to be the pastor, and everybody felt that they had, if they had a calling, that meant, "I'm supposed to preach." No, it doesn't. What I tried to show people was, "You can sing and I can sing, but if you're really gifted to sing and that's your spirit, you're the one that's going to move this whole church. I'm a preacher. I'm a preacher. I don't have all the gifts. I was just chosen at this point in time to hold the space, that's who I am. I see you can do this, and you can do that, and you can do this."

Darlene F.: The pastor before me, he was a brilliant musician, was he a pastor? No. Was he a preacher? No. I told him one day, I said, "You know what? If you play that organ before you get up to preach, on the heels of that, you will have just what you're looking for." Do you know he never played the organ again? He said, "You mean to tell me that I'm supposed to play the organ and get up and preach to you?" No, he never played again, but his gift was in music. I said, "God will give you other ways to use that, if you want to preach."

Darlene F.: That was what I was called to do and still am. I see something in you, and I'm going to give you the space to do it. That's my leadership style, if that's a style.

Monique : Yeah.

Darlene F.: If that's what you're looking for. That's my leadership style, empower the people. Everybody is worthy, everybody. I tell people, "You are not your circumstances." That's what I do now, I do substance abuse counseling. "You are not your circumstances. I don't care where you've been, you are not your circumstances. If you're still breathing, there's some life in there, there's some value in there, and there is some fire. We've got to get to it, so you can have a purpose for who you are."

Monique : That also brings me to your transition from Full Truth. You had what? About seven years of leadership there?

Darlene F.: 10.

Monique : 10 years of leadership there, when you decide you're ready to move to something else. What pushes you into something new?

- Darlene F.: It's sort of like the marriage is over. I had began to realize, I didn't know who I was. Darlene had got lost somewhere in Pastor Franklin. I can't go to the emergency room. I was in the emergency room one day with asthma, trying to breathe and somebody, "Pastor Franklin, you've got to [inaudible] I'm just trying to breathe. I had gotten lost in that.
- Darlene F.: Full Truth was never supposed to be like a traditional church, but yet my question was, and I'm going to this in a round about way, my question was, "Well, why can't it be? Why does a Full Truth even have to exist? Why can't I got to Greater Grace and be just as welcomed and fully welcomed into the church, fully welcomed?" The church that my mamma built, for instance, it wasn't my mamma, but some of those people that were in our churches, their mamma's had built those churches, steadily giving, and you can't get married in that church? You can't even go to the singles retreat in that church? You can't do anything in that church but sing in the choir? You can't be over the money, but you can give?
- Darlene F.: To me, a Full Truth shouldn't have had to have existed, in the black community especially, of an oppressed people turning around and oppressing people. Then I began to see that black gay people started to oppress different segments of the LGBT. I said, "Something's not right here." In our fighting for equality as gay people, and justice or whatever, we turn around and we oppress those of our own? As a black woman, lesbian, oppressed in all of those intersections, I began to think, "Something's not right about this. Something is not feeling right about this for me. I've got to look at something else." This is when my spirituality begins to kick in, that it's not just about being a lesbian, but it is about being a spiritual, loving person, whole and healed, and I've got to get to that.
- Darlene F.: I knew that I couldn't do it there, because they wanted to have church, and I was tired of the performance. I was tired of the hypocrisy. I was tired of the disfunction, that I too was a part of, unhealed, wounded. I said, "Enough. I love this place enough that I have to let it go." I had told them, people had start to congregate ... In my heyday, because everybody has a heyday, it would be like 200 people in that space. It had dwindled down to like 10 people going to church. Why? Ministers that I had ordained left, went other places. When they leave, of course they take part of the congregation with them. This is going on, and that is going on. Then everybody's church hopping. It had gotten to be just a mess.
- Darlene F.: What I look back on now, and it didn't feel that way at the time, but what I look back on now is that's what the church is supposed to do, I think. It's supposed to get to a place where it does this, and it changes, and it transforms. It's not about a personality, it is about a community, a body. We don't stay the same, we change. I made sure that it was left in a space, to bring the next leader in, however they wanted to do it, but that's what I did, that's what led me to do it.
- Darlene F.: I had begun to, I had went to I lyanla Van Zandt's Inner Vision, and I had started going there every weekend, and just getting a different perspective, and my wife as well. She was raised in a bishop's house. Her father was a bishop. I met her on my way going out.

We were talking about spirituality, something was calling us to growth, to healing, to trans, something different.

Darlene F.: I understand that, which makes me say, "Because of what our ancestors have suffered in that, it's ours. We have a right to it. We have a right to it." As always, I don't feel that I'm called back to pastor right now. I said, "But if I was standing there right now, somehow or someday I will get back, find my way back into the church, because my people are still there in a space and in a place that is I think oppressing them to a degree." I think there's a message that we can't just throw the baby out with the bath water, is how I feel. That belongs to me. That belongs to me.

Darlene F.: In leaving, I didn't realize how much healing I needed to do when I left there. I mean I had been there literally every day for 17 years. When I left, I had not finished my education. All of my military education benefits had expired. I couldn't use them. I was just right there. When I left, I said, "I'm going out and I'm going to dust my resume off, and I'm going to go get a job." When I was working, that's when you could take your resume and go, "Oh, you did that good." Well when I went there, they were like, "A degree? I don't see that degree."

Darlene F.: It was at that time, I left in 2010, in 2011 I went to school, and by 2018 I earned three degrees. I had to go back and do all of that. In the midst of all of that, I got a real good chance to get back to Darlene and who she is now, and where she is, and what does that mean. I'm always going to be in service to the people, because that's my life path.

Monique : This brings me to the last section of questions that I have, that are about your life of service. I'm going to try to combine three or four questions. I'm trying in my head to make it make sense. I'm really interested in how you see service and faith intermingled, and how that has shown up in the various communities you advocate for. How do you decide where to put your priority, who to work for, how to work for them, and how does your faith or does your faith sustain you, or activate you, or motivate you in that activity?

Darlene F.: Right now, my faith is about, especially at the age that I am, I have to work in what fulfills my destiny, if that makes sense. In other words, I can't just go and get a job, just because somebody's going to pay me. I have to be committed to, because I work with people, I can't just usher people in because the company's going to get so much. I have to really make an impact on people. I have to be about healing. I'm about healing. That comes in many ways. In a sentence, it is about, for my individual gifts, are for people to get in contact with their purpose, as to why they are here at this time, breathing breath. What are you here to do?

Darlene F.: If I had a church right now, I would not, like I see a lot of churches, the pastor on the pedestal, the pastor knows all, the pastor. If I had a church right now, my congregation would be about, "What is God saying to you? I want you to get in touch with your inner voice. I want you to learn to trust your inner voice. What are you hearing? What are you feeling? What is your every day? Why are you here? Do you know that? Let's talk about that. How do you feel about what's going on around you? Why are you here taking up

space? What are you doing? What has God gifted you with?" That's what my church would be about, and that is the type of thing that I'm in the process of creating.

Darlene F.: Especially, particularly the healing of women, in light of this political climate. Women have been silenced in the Earth. It's time for who we are, what we bring, the creativity that we have to be balanced here. That's what the rest of my life is going to be about, working. How I plan to do that is through several vehicles. Through ministry, through where I work, in my home. My home, my plans are to not stay here, but I do it now, my home is a place of healing. My vision is if a sister calls me and says, "I just need to, something's happened in my life. I have to fall apart, blah, blah, blah." "Come here and lay down. Be still. Let us feed you. Let us pray with you." I don't need a church to do that. I don't need a church to do that.

Darlene F.: I look for it every day when I'm walking in the street. I listen for it. What is my opportunity to use my gift? You know what else I do? I stay in my lane. I stay in my lane. I'm not called to do what you do. You do what you do. It's like I used to tell my people, I said, "Everybody can bake a sweet potato pie, but you need ingredients to bake a sweet potato pie. Eggs can't be cinnamon, cinnamon can't be eggs. Everybody got to know what they're here to do," that's what I think. There's no sense in me trying to be jealous of the eggs because I'm cinnamon, which leads back to a scripture.

Darlene F.: The hand got to work with the pinkie, or whatever that scripture is, it leads back to that. The foot is needed for the body. Those are the messages that we have really got to get back in the Earth. There's no sense in throwing away the Bible. There's a lot of good stuff in there, as gays and lesbians, let's own it. Own it, and let's stand up and preach it the way that, that validates our existence.

Darlene F.: Now, is that taking the Bible and making it say what you want to say? Well, people have been doing that for years, when you study the history of where it came from. Part of this is still being worked out with my wife and I, because we are a team in that. It's still being worked out in what our purpose and what we are going to do together. For instance, we rent here. We're talking about, "Do we really want to go buy a house with 10 rooms, just to setup, or do we really want to be about getting something and moving somewhere, or being a part of something that brings healing to humanity? What do we need to be saying during this political climate? Coming out of our comfort zones, talking to," "Talking to Arabic women. Are you afraid right now?" There was a period not too long ago here in Detroit, right down there in Dearborn, where women were being attacked. Here I am in Wayne State, sitting with a bunch of women in hijabs and nobody's talking about their fear.

Darlene F.: This is what is going to help us overcome Trumpism and the political climate. This is what his era has brought up for us, for me, is to step out of my comfort zone and be brave enough to bring my gifts loudly and clearly in the Earth, to say, "What you talking about? That doesn't work for me. It doesn't work for me."

Monique : Where are you being sustained? With whom and with what resource?

Darlene F.: For my spiritual growth, for me?

Monique : Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Darlene F.: That was our plan. All the kids are gone, cat, everybody. We did that, and so now we're looking at our own, we're healing our own issues, so to speak, through this transformation and healing process, and it's a journey. We're right now, in other words, looking at self-reflection and what is spirit saying to us in all levels of our life, education, spiritually. We're involved with a group of women, who we pray together, we ritual together, we support each other within this healing modality for 90 days, which is turning out to give us different lifelong practices of things, that we incorporate into our life and in our home. Learning about why we keep an ancestor altar, which is right there, that's hers, her parents, and why we keep a self altar, which is hers. Looking at her every day and saying, "You are worthy to be here," healing our childhood issues.

Darlene F.: We know that our purpose, not only individually that have brought us together, but our marriage is for the healing of couples, women, people. People come to us all the time. We went to the store Saturday and bought some candles, and the lady just told us, she said, "I don't even know why I'm telling you this, but I had an ultrasound yesterday and I have a tumor." She teared up and she said, "I don't even know why I'm telling y'all this, but I just feel led to tell you."

Darlene F.: Now, one thing I know about myself is I'm a healer. When she was talking to me about that, I could just feel it, that I was supposed to touch her. I'm leery about just touching people, I don't just touch people, especially heterosexual women. I left out of there, and I tell you my hands were on fire. I said, "I'm supposed to touch her." She said, "You need to go back in there and tell her that." I went in there and I told her that, and I just held her hands. She just started crying, she had a customer, she owns a store, she just started crying. I didn't say anything, I just touched her. She said, "I am so grateful you came back in here and did that."

Darlene F.: It's that kind of stuff. We don't need to make a big deal out of it. We don't need to get on Facebook and say, "We're healers." That's not what it's about. It is about what has God given you, even you. Going around, what drives you to go around driving, getting these stories, it's something. That's the something that makes us, we can do that for 150 years if we so live. I'm not going to be employed by my job for 150 years, but this thing that I've been purposed to do on Earth, I can do that for 150 years if I so live. That's the thing that I want people to get to. I told people, I said, "If you think about it, you've been doing that very unique, special, gifted thing since you came here. If you think about it, and what your family does," like I know my family are service providers, teachers, cops, military.

Darlene F.: When I sat down and thought about this ancestral lineage, I have a lot of ancestral women in my family, ancestors, a lot of women, healers, great-grandmother. When these stories start to come together and you find that your family lineage, then you don't need to run over there. If you're supposed to be a writer, I bet you somebody in your family, way back, watches over you, gives you ... Don't stop being a writer and try to be this, that's where we get all messed up, I think.

- Darlene F.: What sustains me is knowing who I am. So many of us don't know that. We don't have to wait til we're 62 to start figuring it out. Right now, even with the group that we're in, we've met this group of women who are young women. They're trying to raise children, they don't think they're worthy, they've got money, they've got mister, he over here just draining them of all their ... Those are the women we're ministering to. I have two daughters, that's our children's altar over there. We have sons in the military.
- Darlene F.: We don't need to give them detailed stories of the ... That's what grandmothers are for. That's what elders are for. "What's going on in your life?" I don't need to tell you all about it, but I know that I go and I pray, and I sit, and I hear, and I'll get that message, "Go do this. Go do that." The church is not doing that. It can, but it's not.
- Monique : I have two very, very different final questions. You can choose to answer both or neither.
- Darlene F.: I'm sorry, I go all ... I'm sorry.
- Monique : No, this has been very, very rich. I'm at time, so I want to ask both, but I realize they're just in so different, opposite directions. You don't have to answer either of them. One, the question I always ask at the end is a company question to what practices nourish you, is to where do you find joy fulfillment? I always want to end on joy, but another question, particularly because your activism is so broad, I want to ask you about how you find successes and overcome stumbling blocks, of holding together these very broad interests? You share identities, but there are times where you have to prioritize. There are times in which you're speaking from the voice of X, and Y is going, "What about me? What about me?" I'm always curious as to how activists make those decisions and how they make peace with those decisions. Either or nor.
- Darlene F.: I don't know if I even call myself an activist. I'm just me. I think the greatest contribution I could make, probably more, because I give here, I support people, like say for instance Bishop Flunder. Bishop Flunder is out there, I'm not going to do what Bishop Flunder does, so I'll support that. I've done that in this level. Right now, I think the greatest contribution that I can give, as being an activist, if that's what I am, is to show up in the healthiest way that I can, as me, unapologetically, authentically, hiding nothing.
- Darlene F.: My living space is my sanctuary, my home is my sanctuary, my wife is my best friend. There is where I find my joy. There is where I find my sustainability. My children, I never told them they had to support and run out, "Rah, rah, homosexuality." All I ever said to them was, "You have to support my life." You don't know what you're going to be, and what I might have to support. With that, my grandchildren have two grandmas who they love dearly.
- Darlene F.: I've learned that family is everything. I have had to make those inroads in my family, that, "I am here and I'm not hiding. Tell your kids." I'm not the only gay one in my family, my brother right up under me was gay. I've had three brothers deceased from HIV. I have a nephew that's gay, I have a great-niece that's gay, I have a great-nephew that's gay. My great-niece was six years old, she's a twin, one is girly, one is tomboyish. She

told her dad, "I want to wear boy's clothes," and he let her wear it. Everybody in the family were like ... I just got a kick out of it. I know probably somebody else, I won't say, in there is gay and she hiding, but we'll be here for her, should she ever.

Darlene F.: I'm looking for those rich, it's those rich that I'm committed to that whoever I meet and encounter that, the impact that we have is rich, because that's what sustains me. That's what gives me joy, simple things, little things give me joy.

Monique : That's a great place to stop. I'm going to stop all of my devices. I always on record say thank you, so I want to also do that before I'm off record.