ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW OF NAOMI WASHINGTON LEAPHEART, PART 4

Monique:

All right. So we were talking about your UPN journey. You were urban studies, and what did you plan to do with that?

Naomi:

I was initially a political science major, and I wanted to be a lawyer. I was interning at a law firm, doing all the things that they told me I needed to do to prepare, including looking at this LSAT test. I was like, "Okay. I know I'm going to have to take it."

Naomi:

At the same time, a friend of mine who was in the choir started teaching for the Princeton review. One day she says to me, "You know, they're hiring. They want black people to teach these courses, because they've gotten some criticism around how white their teaching population is. You should apply." I was like, "I've never taken the LSAT before." She was like, "If you do well enough, they'll train you and then you can get certified." I went in and took a little sample. It was like reading comprehension sample test, and I guess I did well enough. They never told me how well I did on that test, but I did well enough to go to the next round, which was complete this long training, like weekly, eight week training, whatever it was.

Naomi:

I did the training, and part of the training is teach-back. It's one thing to master material on your own, but you have to be able to teach it, and so you have to do the teaching. I past this training, and so I find myself as a sophomore in college teaching LSAT classes. I was a political science major. I was like, "This is the best possible outcome, because I can learn this test, teach this test, and do well on the test when I'm ready to take it."

Naomi:

I taught one LSAT class and hated it. I didn't hate it because of the teaching. I hated it because of the test, and I hated it because I felt like the students I had were just arrogant jerks. I just felt like if this is what becoming a lawyer entails, I don't want to do that. I switched and started teaching SAT courses for the Princeton Review, and that was my stride. I fell in love with teaching. I fell in love with engaging young people.

Naomi:

That was what prompted me to switch majors. I saw that many of my courses cross-listed with urban studies. I was like, "Okay, so instead of me starting something over again, let me just major in urban studies and I could within that major have a particular concentration." Mine was education.

Monique:

Okay.

Naomi:

That facilitated the shift. For all of the years I was in the professional working world before seminary, I was involved in some way in urban education, either in classrooms or as the development person behind the scenes trying to resource these programs that were dying because the school district was cutting left and right and we needed some supplemental something for students who weren't getting what they needed in school. I was happy with that. I mean, right before seminary I was teaching in kind of a GED. It was fundamentally a GED prep program for high school students who had exhausted their possibilities for continuing with the school district. They had gotten kicked out, or they dropped out and it was now too ... These were kids who were out of school but who wanted to get some credentials so they could move on, and I was a teacher.

Naomi:

Really, I would say that that was what prompted me to think about how my work could also be connected to notions of justice, because I had these students who were deeply traumatized in many ways, who have made choices that were now making it difficult for them to move forward with their lives. Several queer kids who were trying to negotiate that, and they would come to me needing help navigating life. I said, "Well, what can we do in the classroom? I'm teaching math. How can I help? Algebra is not really going to help them fill out that job applications."

Naomi:

I happened to meet the doctoral student at Penn whose dissertation was all around math as citizenship building, so like math literacy is what helps you be more engaged in civic life and professional life. She said, "Well, would you let me study your classroom? Like could we develop materials together around math as citizenship or whatever?" I said, "I would be open to partnering." That was when I started teaching a social justice math class once a week.

Naomi:

That was when we started to look at say teaching geometry, Philly as a grid system essentially. We got the grid of Philly and I'm teaching geometric formulas or whatever, but we're also talking about how does the layout of a city, how does the design of a city impact the extent to which people can access services, can access grocery stores? I mean, what's the map look like, et cetera? We were looking at stop and frisk data for the city of Philadelphia and plotting it on graphs. We're teaching graphing, we're teaching statistical analysis, but the data we're using has to do with stop and frisk in the city of Philadelphia, right?

Naomi:

I was there when Trayvon Martin was killed, so from a history perspective, we were talking about what does the Constitution say about the right to bear arms? Let's read it. My classroom became a space where they were learning what they needed for the GED, but we were contextualizing that learning given what they were reading in the news and seeing on TV every single day.

Naomi:

I would say that was the three years before seminary. I got a taste of what it would be like to commit my professional life to the advancement of justice. I think that the thing that was anxiety producing for me in that role was the students were also coming to me for spiritual support. Again, this has been the story of my life, right, that people are like, "Can I talk to you?" I'm thinking it's about X, Y, Z academic thing, but it morphs into, "I have these existential questions and I need help working through them."

Naomi:

That for the first time was when I said, "Let me be trained in responding to people's needs in this way," and that was the first time that seminary was kind of on my radar. Not so that I could to be a minister in the public sense or a pastor in the parish sense, but so that I could be more well equipped to deal with the needs of the students that I was working with.

Monique:

Okay.

Naomi:

Maybe I could be in a context where, not in the school setting, but maybe in another kind of setting, I could have that training. I at the time was also a member of Saint Paul's Baptist Church where Leslie Callahan was the pastor. One day, involved in the church again, church girl in the choir, at Bible study every night, started the young adult ministry, whatever.

Naomi:

Leslie and I were at lunch or dinner or something one day and she said, "So, when are you just going say yes?" I was like, "Oh, what you mean? Yes." She said, "You're not going to be able to run from this your whole life. It'll always come back." I was like, "I don't know what you're talking about. What are you talking about?" She was like, "Okay, you can continue to be in denial. That's fine, but he will not let you go until you say yes." That combined with my experience in the classroom of wanting to meet those existential needs or helping students wade through those existential questions was what prompted me to take seriously discernment about seminary.

Naomi:

I was still dragging my feet though, so I went to a pre-seminary program at McCormick in Chicago. Maybe they had Lilly money I don't know who funded it, to do a week long pre-seminarian program. You would take a little class here and there. You would meet ... Okay, done. You would meet ministers out in the field. We visited a church. We visited a nonprofit run by a minister. That was what solidified it for me that here I was in a lecture taught by Valerie Bridgeman, an old Testament lecture at this McCormick program, and I was like, "So seminary is like all this all the time?"

Naomi:

We did I think it was a church history something class, Daniels ... What's his name? What's his last name? What's his first name? He's a COGIC minister who's also an academic at McCormick. Anyway, he came in and did a thing. We had somebody who did pastoral care. We had Teresa Delgado came in and did ... Meeting all these people, and my mind was blown. I was like, "This is where I need to be." I applied for seminary and started, was it that same fall, at Lancaster.

Naomi:

I chose Lancaster because I was able to kind of pay for it. I mean that was really ... I mean I got a scholarship. It was close enough to Philly that I wouldn't have to completely dig up and move. I thought I would be in Philly every week. I was like, "Oh, I'm in Lancaster on the weekend." I didn't know anything about the UCC. I didn't know anything about central Pennsylvania, but I knew they had a black director

of admissions so who I trusted. They had Valerie Bridgeman, and they were paying for me to go. I was like, "This is where I'm going."

Naomi:

It literally changed my life. I was there right before the verdict from the Trayvon Martin trial, the George Zimmerman trial came down. I was already angry in a way that I hadn't ever been angry before. My father died. I started seminary in late August of 2012. My father died in November of 2012. Then I had all of these theological questions. I had been given a theological framework, a worldview that was insufficient for my grief. I was like, "What the hell?" It prompted me to desire to be part of the work of theologizing that actually helped people work through the crises of life. Like not some pat, "God will make a way," but let them know. My father was here on Saturday and gone on Sunday morning, and there's no reason for that. There's no reason for that. That was critical to my theological formation in seminary as well.

Naomi:

Then Michael Brown was killed. When was that? We just celebrated, so that was 2014. Anyway, Michael Brown was killed. At that point, I'm in seminary, but I'm also a pastor at this white church. The story behind that is basically I was leading worship in seminary on a fairly regular basis. It was part of class. The pastor of this church that's down the street from the seminary decided to take another call, so they were losing their pastor and their minister, because they were married. I didn't know anything about it.

Naomi:

Three ministers, local ministers who are all connected to the seminary, decided we're going to put ourselves, our names in the hat to partner as a copastoral team at this church. We're going to propose this and see if they would call us as a team. Well, we don't have any answer to the question of what are they going to do about the music over here at this church, because their minister of music is leaving. I get a phone call. "Naomi, we've seen you lead worship, the music and worship at the seminary, and we wonder if you would be open to talking to us about being the music director at this church." I was like, "What? I'm in seminary full time. I don't have time for that." "Well, just come talk to us."

Naomi:

I go talk to them. We have a conversation about life, about ministry, about our vision for pastoral leadership. It just became a two and a half hour conversation with ... These were not my peers. These were my superiors really in ministry. These were seminary professors. These were people would had been in ministry 20 years, and I'm just a second year seminary student. Actually, I'm a first year seminary student. This happened spring semester my first year.

Naomi:

At the end of the conversation, I said, "I would consider being music minister at this church if I get to work with you all." "Okay." They go back to the drawing board and put together their proposal, and then they call me again and they say, "We've been thinking about it and praying about it, and you're actually a pastor, and so it doesn't make any sense for you to come over as minister of music. You should come on as one of the pastors on this pastoral team and have music be part of your portfolio." I was like, "What? I have never ... I preached one sermon in my life. I don't know how to pastor anybody. I'm a first year seminary student. I can barely run the music at the church." They're like, "Well just pray about it."

Naomi:

I sent this email out to all my mentors and people and I was like, "Can you pray with me on this? Because I don't know. This is happening too fast, and I don't feel like I could do it," and everybody said there's no preparation. I mean you're in seminary. You're preparing for this. You're never going to feel ready. One person said, "I'm pastoring. I've been pastoring for 20 years. I don't feel ready to do it." I mean you get ... Each day is new. The point is to trust God, that God has called you to this, and that if your ethic is to do no harm, if your ethic is to give grace, to be authentic, whatever, then you'll be fine.

Naomi:

I said yes, thinking they're never going to call us. Like this black woman, this gay, white gay man, this Presbyterian, cradle Presbyterian minister, and a cradle UCC. This was the team. And they called us. We started there as a pastoral team that year.

Naomi:

That was all 2013. 2014, Michael Brown is killed. I am activated. I am frustrated that nobody at the church is saying anything about it. I go to his funeral because I just felt led to go. I spend my own money and I'm ... I came back and I said, "We need a social justice ministry here in this church. We no longer need to be silent about the issues happening right here in Lancaster. We don't have to go to Ferguson. Right here in Lancaster, there's a police brutality issue. Black and brown people in Lancaster feel targeted in a certain area. We started a social justice ministry at the church, and we've organized protests. People would meet me in the fellowship hall and make signs, and we would go down there, and I would speak at the line, and there would be the members of the church standing right there. That was what helped me to know that perhaps this is what I can do. This is what I can contribute to the work of the gospel here in this community.

Naomi:

We did some really great work together around mass incarceration and reentry of people coming home from Lancaster County Prison. We did some work around, of course, Black Lives Matter movement. The congregation was involved in protests, and then having events at the church. We were involved in LGBTQ advocacy. We hosted the Transgender Day of Remembrance ceremony a couple of times. Went down to the courthouse steps to do a trans affirmation. Got the city involved. In that way in seminary, as pastor of this church, I came to know myself as a person who could do ... who was called to kind of public ministry for justice movements, and that I could pastorally do that as well, because people in the movement still need pastoral care and they might not go to church to get that, but they will go to the protests. If I can be a person that they can talk to, I can walk alongside them at the protest, then I would do that. That's what I've been doing.

Monique:

Backtrack and talk a bit about ... You said you had preached one sermon at that point. At that point, where you're acknowledging a call to ministry, or was that like a part of a class?

Naomi:

I think it was acknowledging a call to ministry. It was in a congregation. It wasn't part of a class. I had visited. I happened to be at the church where I would end up being the pastor. It was a church that was in walking distance of the seminary. It was exhausting for me to go back and forth to Philly every single

weekend. That's what I had been doing. I would come to Saint Paul's every weekend. I said, "Let me find a church in Lancaster that I can go to when I can't make it all the way to Philly."

Naomi:

I walked to this church. Sitting in the pew next to the consistory president, happened to be next to the consistory president. She invites me down to the fellowship coffee after church. She says, "Oh, you're a seminarian?" I said, "Yeah." She said, "Oh, we're looking for somebody to preach on blah, blah, blah day because the pastor's got to away." I was like, "What?" We just met two seconds ago. I'm just sitting next to you on a pew.

Naomi:

She brings the pastor up, the one who would eventually leave. She said, "Yeah, you want to preach?" I said, "I've never preached before." She said, "Well, you've got to start sometime. You want to preach?" I was like ... That was my first sermon, at the church that I would end up back at being installed as a pastor and preaching every other week, and doing funerals, and doing weddings, and running the music.

Naomi:

I think my life has felt like one big like ... I think my theology doesn't necessarily hold that God is kind of pulling the strings and making up, but when I look back I'm like it's not coincidental that the people at college called me reverend. It's not coincidental that my students would come talk to me about existential questions. It's not coincidental that my first sermon was at this church that I randomly walked into because I was too tired to drive to Philly and I got invited to preach, and that introduced me to the congregation that would then be reviewing a proposal to invite us as a pastoral team, so that they knew who I was.

Naomi:

It's not coincidental that the Black Lives Matter kind of movement started or coincides with the beginning of my seminary journey such that I now see no separation between the work I'm doing as it relates to justice and the work I do as it ... I mean my training as a minister happened at the same time as my training as a kind of justice seeking person. It's not coincidental that I did that pre-seminary program at McCormick and met Valerie Bridgeman, who taught at the seminary that I would apply to and be my preaching professor. I don't think any of that is coincidental.

Monique:

At the point in which you have said yes to these various opportunities, you mentioned earlier when you were sort of preparing yourself to go to seminary, it kind of seemed like you were preparing yourself to go back and be a support system for your students.

Naomi:

Yeah, yeah.

Monique:

Now it sounds like you're shifting in what you think your end goal will be after seminary. Did you plan to continue full time pastoring, or what did you think your next life call would be?

Naomi:

While I was in seminary, I met other past, other ministers who were organizers. They were outside of the parish context. They maybe did pastor at some point, but they were outside of the parish context, and they were using religious symbols, religious language. They were doing theology in public spaces to agitate legislators to do right by vulnerable people. That idea was introduced to me while I was in seminary by people who were doing it. Like I'm working as an organizer for a faith based group, and I'm still a minister, and I still preach sometimes, but my work is really to invoke my faith when I am fighting for justice and rally congregations to do the same.

Naomi:

I got involved with what's formally known as PICO, it's now Faith in Action, first as a volunteer. I was just a seminarian that would come to the protests or I would come to the meeting with other people of faith, and it's multi-faith, to talk about what are the ways we can show up as people of faith to these fights. For us in Pennsylvania, it was a fight around equitable funding in public education. Again, I was interested in that. I had done work in public education. This was my thing. Yes, the schools need to be adequately funded so that students can thrive. I was just kind of a volunteer doing that work.

Naomi:

Then the closer I got to the end of seminary, Dwayne Royster, who used to be a local pastor here and now is the national political director for Faith in Action said, "You need a job after seminary?" I was like, "Yeah. I'm going to need a job after seminary." He said, "Well, I'm now running ..." He was running Power, which is the local affiliate of Faith in Action in Philadelphia. He said, "We're going to be looking for ... We're going to start a chapter organizing in the suburban context in the Philly metro area, and we're going to be hiring an organizer. Here's the job description. You should apply."

Naomi:

I applied in fall of '15. I was going to be graduating that next month. I got hired in January of '16 and started part-time as the suburban organizer for Power. Working in the area, Ardmore, where we are now, organizing congregations to get involved in this public education fight, to get involved with ... We were doing public education, and our other big campaign was economic dignity, so making sure people have a living wage where they can thrive, pay all their bills, representing the vulnerable wage workers who if they strike, we're going to support them or whatever.

Naomi:

That was my first job out of seminary. I had that job before I left seminary. Doing local faith-based organizing where I could still put my ministry seminary training to use. We were often looking at sacred texts. What do our sacred texts have to say about protests, say about engaging municipalities, engaging politicians? Sometimes it involved pastoral care. Really, helping pastors find and religious leaders find the courage to say what needs to be said from their pulpits, to not be discouraged when it feels like your congregation is not with you. Helping them frame it so that their people can hear it. Like that to me felt like pastoral care. Who's pastoring the pastors? Who offers encouragement to the clergy?

Naomi:

Of course, that also meant that I was doing lots of public speaking, speaking at the rally or offering an invocation at this or that or whatever. Again, that developing a public voice that could be used for the work of justice. That was my first job after seminary.

Monique:

I saw that in one of your bios, you speak about also coming out as queer while in seminary.

Naomi:

Yeah, yeah.

Monique:

We haven't talked a bit about that, so what do you want to have on record there?

Naomi:

I think that I've always known that I ... Like I remember being in middle school and having a crush on the person who was my best friend then. I don't think I ... I didn't have any language for that. I didn't have any ... A lot of my queer friends have a lot of stories around self-hate, like I knew this was wrong and I had self-hate around it. But I didn't have that, because again, even though I was in these uber conservative religious spaces, there was never any explicit condemnation around queer identity, homosexuality, trans identity. There was never an explicit ... It just did not exist. Which I guess given my my age, I didn't have an analysis around that. I guess that was better than hearing it was wrong. I just didn't hear anything about it, so I didn't hear ... I didn't impose this ... I didn't hate myself because of it, but I didn't pursue it either because there were no models for that. I didn't know what this was.

Naomi:

In college, again, I had this robust friend group of some queer identified Christian folk who modeled for me that there's a way to be a person of faith and be queer and be all ... You've reconciled that. You're cool with that, and God is cool with that, so let's move on. I had models, again, of people who were courageous. I just didn't have the courage myself to name it for myself.

Naomi:

Then post-college, right before seminary I started like going out, and like here I am at the LGBT event, like sitting there. Not really saying anything, not really interacting, but like more and more wanting to be in queer spaces. Then I started dating people. Like again, nobody knew, but I was dating people.

Naomi:

Then by the time I was in seminary, I was out to myself and out to other people, but not out publicly. I think something about doing this public ministry really compelled me to say, "Listen. If I can't live fully, then how am I going to advocate for anybody else to be able to live fully? How am I going to-"

Monique:

Right.

Naomi:

I think also what's part of my history is that from the age of say 13 to 19 or 20, certainly from 13 to 18 before I left Detroit, I was in this ... I thought it was a relationship. It was a sexually abusive ... I struggle with the terminology around this. The pastor of the church I grew up in in Detroit groomed me and pursued me between the ages of 13 and 17, and then when I turned 17 started to suggest that we be in a relationship and was sexually abusive to me between then and probably my sophomore year of

college. This was all going on in the background behind everything. I couldn't tell my family. I couldn't tell my friends. I couldn't tell people at church.

Naomi:

I'm now clear that some of the people in the church knew, and I've talked to them since then and been like, "What the fuck?" One person said to me, "Well, Naomi, you were so mature, and I just thought that you could handle it," or, "Naomi, I didn't want to offend you by coming to you and asking you if this was going on, because if I was wrong, I didn't want to offend you." I'm like, "Offend me? I was a kid." I'm clear that some people knew something was happening. He's still the pastor of the church. He did the eulogy for my grandmother. Fortunately did not do the eulogy for my father because he was out of town. I think I wouldn't have been able to handle that.

Naomi:

I think that part of also my resistance to allow myself to fully live any kind of sexual life or just intimate relational life had to do with the deep trauma. I mean my way of dealing with the trauma was to just push it down like it wasn't. Then I was closed to intimacy, because my wiring around intimacy had been damaged due to this. Okay, door. Really?

Monique:

I know, right? It must be like the segue. Okay. We'll probably have to be kicked out in 20 minutes.

Naomi:

Is he doing anything? He's just sitting in there reading a paper.

Monique:

He's reading with someone, because they were adamant that you have to have two people to be in a room.

Naomi:

Well, this is the walk-in room, so we can come in here. We can go in there, if nobody ... I don't think they reserve this room.

Monique:

Yeah, they don't.

Naomi:

Yeah. Yeah, so that trauma was also ... I was also very acutely aware, like I didn't want people to be like, "Oh, you're queer because you were sexually abused," because that narrative is common. It just took a long time for me to believe that I deserved something that was healthy and whole and something that was authentic to my own sense of identity. That took a while for me. By the time I came to know myself as queer and gave myself permission to pursue a relationship, I was almost 30. I was like late 30s. I mean late 20s.

Naomi:

Yeah, by the time I was in seminary, again the discernment around what I was put here to do and the fact that that happened to be being in public, fighting for justice for folks who could not, who could not fight for themselves because it was too risky or needed others to accompany them on the fight, I said, "I've got to be able to be me." Within the context of my being at that church, pastoring that church, being in seminary around people who were out, having mentors who could walk with me through the journey and say, Bishop Flunder who could say, "You can tell the truth and survive," was what compelled me to just come on all the way out to everybody all the time.

Monique:

Okay.

Naomi:

Yeah.

Monique:

I'm going to do a very awkward segue from that to go back to sort of your work self. We've dealt more with your private self and personal self. After you copastored this church, it seems that you then been go into anti-racism work for the YWCA.

Naomi:

Yeah. Yeah.

Monique:

What did that move mean for you to move out of specifically religious space doing organizing to a kind of pseudo-religious space?

Naomi:

This was all kind of happening at the same time. While I was pastoring, while I was still in Lancaster, I started leading circles, facilitating circles for faith groups around anti-racism. The person who worked at the Y was constantly getting calls. Especially Michael Brown had been killed, Tamir Rice had been killed, so congregations wanted to do some work around anti-racism. He said, "I don't have the faith stuff. I mean I might be able to walk people through kind of anti-racism in a secular context, but I would love some help with contextualizing this for faith communities, talking about how white supremacy is cultivated in religious spaces or even within the context of doing theology. Like how are some of our theologies actually rooted in white supremacy." We had known each other because we were running these justice circles together, and so he asked me, "Would you be willing to be a facilitator for the Y when we get faith groups?"

Monique:

Okay.

Naomi:

I said yeah. It was kind of like a side gig. I would be paid to facilitate anti-racism circles for people of faith. Sometimes it was a mix of people of faith and people who weren't there for religious reasons or as part of their religious affiliation. So that's how I got to do that work with the YW.

Naomi:

It all worked together, right? Because the justice work wasn't devoid of ... I mean we needed to have a racial analysis in order to do that work well. The fact that I could work with congregations on the race stuff and then say, "Oh, wait. Why don't you all partner with our congregation? Because we're doing this forward facing justice stuff. Why don't you and we can work together in that way?" It all made sense to me given that Lancaster is small enough where all of these roads could meet. Yeah.

Monique:

Okay. At the time, either in your own training, in your own practice, did you see a divide when he's saying, "I don't have a lens for the faith piece," did you see a distinction between or among the social justice activist work and faith?

Naomi:

I'm going to say no. I mean, I think that I have come to believe that the system of white supremacy could not be successful if it had not been sort of sanctioned by the religious establishment. If we could not make sense of this system as a divinely orchestrated one, then it would not be as successful I think as it has been. I was eager to make those connections, even for people who didn't come as a congregation, who didn't come as a person of faith. Like I wanted to bring that up anyway, because I wanted to say, "Oh, and by the way, look how this anti-LGBTQ policy is actually religious in nature, or actually refers to the Bible," or. "Look how our theologies around lightness and darkness is working in the background when a police officer says, 'This black man looked like a demon to me,' or whatever, whatever the dude said."

Naomi:

For me, there was even ... There's no separation from me. I even think secular organizations working for justice need to have a faith analysis, need to have ways of engaging faith communities. Because I just think that much of this, much of what we're fighting has been coded in religious language, and we have no choice but to deal with that. I mean that's kind of what I was doing at the task force. I mean this is the secular organization, policy organization, but they do faith work because that's what's necessary to dismantle some of the anti-LGBTQ excellent policy.

Monique:

Absolutely. You talk a bit about sort of the shift from local organizing to national organizing. I note from the Y you go to Power.

Naomi:

Yep.

Monique:

From Power you go to the National LGBT Task Force. Can you talk a bit about what led you to those segues, and was there a difference for you both profile wise but also workload wise between the local work and the sort of national organizing you were doing with the task force?

Naomi:

Yeah, for sure there ... The work I was doing for Power, we had multiple campaigns around multiple issues. Mass incarceration, public education, economic dignity, to some degree climate justice, climate change. We were running all those campaigns at once. People could kind of get in where they fit in. What campaign do you want to work on?

Naomi:

But while I was at Power, the massacre at Pulse happened. That was June 2016. It happened on a Saturday night, and we all woke up Sunday morning to kind of this developing story. I remember I was preaching that Sunday in a local Philly Episcopal, black Episcopal church. We were getting all these updates and text messages. The woman who introduced me earlier in the service said something about, "We want to pray for something that's happened. There's been a shooting at a nightclub in Orlando. We want to pray."

Naomi:

Later that day when I find out what had actually happened, we were exchanging emails, Power staff members, like, "We have to make a statement. What is this?" We found out we had a really, really personal connection, because the youngest person who died at Pulse, Akyra Murray, had just graduated from West Philly Catholic High School, was on the basketball team, started this basketball team, and the coach of the West Philly Catholic High School basketball team ran communications for Power, was the director of communications at Power. We discovered that this was one of her girls. This was the kid she coached. She knew the family, whatever.

Naomi:

We really insisted, this coach and I and some other members of the Power staff who also happened to be queer, that we need to make a statement. Like what is this? We got pushback, because Faith in Action as an organization has decided to not organize around reproductive justice, or not even reproductive justice, reproductive rights, abortion, and LGBTQ concerns because the organization was founded by a Catholic priest. They have lots of Catholic donors, lots of Catholic congregations, and we just want to organize around issues that won't be divisive, where everybody can sort of come together. One table. We need to all come around one table.

Monique:

Okay.

Naomi:

There was hesitation around condemning this act of violence toward queer people. I as a queer person on staff was like, "What the hell?" We were having a meeting later that week, an assembly. We called them assemblies where we bring in all the congregations and brief them, and update them, and rally them, whatever. The concession was, "Well, Naomi, can you make remarks at this assembly, and you can say whatever you want about the Pulse? You do it." That really enraged me. I don't know. I guess I don't give a damn if this gets ... This is the story.

Naomi:

I did. The text I used was, "Greater love hath no one than this, than to lay down life for friends." Because part of Akyra's story was she had gotten out of the nightclub, but her cousin, she was there with her cousin and her friend, her cousin hadn't. So she went back in to get her cousin, and that's when she was

shot. They did get back out after being shot, But Akyra was shot. It hit an artery or something, and so she ended up bleeding out or losing too much blood in the parking lot of the nightclub. I just talked about how this young woman, this queer woman, gave her life for her friend because she didn't have to go back in there and get nobody. I mean you know. I just talked about.

Naomi:

But I was still ... I think it resonated with some, and some people left the room. I mean it was that kind of situation. I think it resonated with most people who were there. But in that moment I said to myself, I'm not comfortable making this kind of compromise. Like we can't say wrong is wrong because we don't want to piss off the folks who believe homosexuality is a sin, whatever they believe. And we've lost somebody. We've lost this 18-year-old kid from West Philly. We're in Philadelphia and we can't name that this was our baby girl.

Naomi:

I sort of became a little disillusioned about the extent to which I was going to be able to be authentic and actually fight for the people who need justice, all the people who need justice in this role. I was disappointed. I wasn't really looking to transition though. I was just like it is what it is.

Naomi:

Then I got a phone call from the person who at the task force had this job of faith work director, but who had gotten promoted. He said, "What are you doing?" I said, "Well, you know what I'm doing. I'm working for Power." We had known each other for years. "I'm working at Power. We're doing this faith based stuff." He was like, "Well, I'm looking to hire somebody as faith work director, and I want you to have this job." I was like ... He was like, "It's part-time. It's 20 hours." I'm like, "I'm not leaving a full-time job with benefits to come work part-time." He was like, "What do you need to be able to do it?" I said, "Well, I need to be at least making what I'm making now, and I need benefits, period." He was able to negotiate that for me, but I came in part-time making what I was making full-time and benefits.

Naomi:

This was an opportunity. I think I was just feeling so pissed off. This was an opportunity to work with congregations around the issue of LGBTQ justice without apology and do it intersectually such that we're not just talking about marriage for example, but we're talking about queer kids who have no place to live because they've been kicked out of their home and church communities, or we're talking about trans women who are engaging in sex work for survival and don't need to be criminalized for such, or we're talking about queer people in prisons who are harassed and assaulted on a daily basis. It's not just about LGBTQ affirmation in a kind of basic sense. It's also about queer people are also living in poverty, are also criminalized because of their gender identity, are also experiencing disenfranchisement at work and being fired because they put a picture of their spouse on the desk. I mean, so it just seemed to me to be a place where I could also talk about all those issues I was talking about before and be unapologetically queer and fight unapologetically for queer people.

Naomi:

I transitioned to that kind of principally based on that. Then the natural leap, I mean that was a leap for me because I had never ... I'd been to Harrisburg to do state-based organizing work, but I had no political literacy around how does change get made in Congress. I mean I didn't know anything about that, but felt like I was working with a team that would help me. I was working with people who had

worked for Obama for America way back when and people who had been lobbying on the Hill forever. I felt like I could learn that stuff. What they needed from me was the person who could do the translation for faith communities, the person who could represent the organization publicly as it relates to faith perspective. That was the kind of thing that I could do. I knew I had done that for Power, so I could do that.

Naomi:

That involved lots of going back and forth to DC. I didn't move. I still live here in Philadelphia but going back and forth to DC. I started right before the election of 2016. We just had no idea what we were in for.

Monique:

Yeah.

Naomi:

Worked that election in Charlotte, North Carolina. North Carolina had just been through this debacle around the bathroom bill, HB2. I had been to North Carolina a couple of times, went back and worked for the election, worked on election day, doing exit polling as people were coming out of their polling places. Then we all sat together at dinner, and at first the tone was kind of light. "I think we got some good data. People coming out of the polls and saying that they support reproductive justice, abortion access, they support LGBTQ rights and justice, whatever." Then the more we watched the TV, we were like, "Oh, no, y'all. What happened?"

Monique:

Yeah.

Naomi:

That changed really our whole agenda. I mean it became really a defensive agenda.

Monique:

Defensive, yeah.

Naomi:

Going back and forth to Washington, trying to disrupt the agenda that was basically let's roll back all of these rights that LGBTQ people have experienced and let's block any new progress toward non-discrimination policies on the federal level. I learned so much in that role about what is on the books, what's not on the books, what we need on the books. Talked to people who are deeply religiously conservative. Got the chance to talk to people who probably think whatever they think of me, but were willing to be in conversation with me about how these policies are hurting like real people. It's not just the theological or theoretical conversation. Like real people are dying.

Naomi:

Got to talk to denominations, Christian denominations that were dragging their feet around articulating welcome and affirmation, full welcome and affirmation for LGBTQ-plus people. Got to develop a project called Free Indeed that was basically targeting black, historically black Christian communities around this

notion of religious freedom and how it was first employed as a means to preserve segregation and preserve white supremacist policies and is now being used as a means to deny products and services to LGBTQ people. Trying to talk to them about like, A, this is the trick that was used, and B, LGBTQ people are also black, and C, what does it mean to be free indeed? Like that was the name of the project. What actually does the Bible say about freedom, about what it means to be free in Christ, et cetera, and how is that connected to religious freedom from a political sense? Got to do some really great work.

Naomi:

I think I was just exhausted after three and a half years of traveling so much and feeling like just being mad all the time, because this administration was just coming at us left, right, and sideways. My transition now back to the city has to do with, A, wanting to be more grounded and more still, not doing so much travel, but also coming back to my roots as a person who wants to work with local people of faith, local everyday folks who are trying to figure out what it means to be faithful, and everyday folks who need their city to live into its mission, right?

Naomi:

Really, I think this is a relationship of mutual accountability. People of faith, congregations holding the city accountable to do right by the citizens of Philadelphia. Also, government saying to faith communities, "Listen, y'all are the first stop shop most of the time for people in neighborhoods."

Monique:

Right.

Naomi:

I see my role as a bridge between the city and faith communities. I think there's possibility for some innovative programming around the opioid crisis, which as you know Philly is trying to get our hands around here. I think helping people cope with suicide, deaths by suicide. I think I'm really interested in like not only religious leaders who died by suicide, young people who are dying by suicide. How does a city grieve, and how can we tell the truth about how we create a society where people are in such despair? I mean-

Monique:

Yeah.

Naomi:

We're also thinking about what does it mean to be a trauma informed congregation. Could we create a program by which congregations of all faiths could be designated as trauma informed? What would that mean? What would that look like? How would that help? You're a sanctuary church, and that signals something to people on the outside. You're a trauma informed congregation. What does that signal to people on the outside? What is the investment the congregation has to make to really keep that alive? I mean I don't know. I think the possibilities are sort of endless, and I think this administration, this mayoral administration is really looking to me to articulate some sort of vision for what my office can do.

Naomi:

I'm excited. I'm two weeks in to the role and have already been invited to offer the invocation at several events, including the city council meeting the other day. Several members came up to me. One in particular said, "Would you be open to like my coming to your office? Like if I need to ..." Like she was essentially saying, "If I need to unburden myself." I was like, "Here we go again with this." Interestingly, I think this could also be a time ... What would it mean for me to be the chaplain at city hall? Like what would that look like?

Naomi:

Yeah. I'm still trying to figure out what I'm doing.

Monique:

Yeah.

Naomi:

I'm trying to figure out payroll. I mean administratively I'm trying to figure out what I'm doing, but I have a lot of hope about what's possible here, and that I've been prepared for this. Like I've done the policy work and hobnobbing with the people who are making policy. I've done the kind of chaplaincy within movement spaces, making sure people feel like they can kind of be spiritually whole enough to engage in what can be really exhausting and in some ways violent kind of work.

Naomi:

One of my passions is still the classroom, still teaching, and so working also with ministers in training about how do you get prepared to do this work. Teaching theology at Villanova and now teaching this class at Wake. I feel incredibly blessed to be able to be all of who I am and do the work that I really love to do in the classroom, in the public square, in the congregation. I'm able to preach. I'm able to teach. That feels really good to me. Yeah.

Monique:

We have roughly 15 minutes to keep you on our time schedule thing that I said at two hours I'd let you free, but I have four very disparate questions.

Naomi:

Okay. Okay.

Monique:

You can choose to address each one or just one and we can be done. I had a question about what role you saw your teaching serving in your activist life. I had a question about where you find courage and sustainability around the issues. I had a question around what you see yourself as an activist for, like what did you say yes to? What is your work? What have you identified?

Naomi:

Yeah.

Monique:

Then I had a question about identity formation. Which identities are important for you at this stage of your life?

Naomi:

Okay, so I'll start there. I think my blackness is really a primary identity for me. It is the identity where I find strength and courage. When I think about not only what my kind of ancient ancestors had to do, but what my grandmother did as a college educated woman in the 30s. Teaching as a vocation for her in public school settings, but also then when she retired in church settings. Like she was over the Christian education department. I mean she saw teaching as kind of the most important work you can do.

Naomi:

Thinking about how she made her way through college with own tips that she got because she was a waitress at a restaurant, so a quarter here, 50 cents here, whatever. We used to tease her. She would go to restaurants and leave 30% tips, and we would be like, "Put your money .... Don't. You ain't got ... You're on Social Security." She would be like, :No, no, no. Tips got me through." She heavily tipped.

Naomi:

Thinking about folks like Bishop Flunder who just represents for me not only the minister I'd like to be and the pastor I'd like to be in whatever context that ends up, whatever context I'm pastoring, but also the woman, like the spouse, the partner. But watching her navigate family even as she's pulled in 82 different directions and trying to live into some measure of justice related to her family, just like she's fighting for justice for other folks.

Naomi:

To me, blackness is what animates that. The courage that my grandmother had, the courage that Bishop Flunder has. I find in blackness possibility. I find in blackness joy, because blackness really is an articulation of another way to live. Because this paradigm ain't working for you, so you've got to articulate something else. That's what I find in blackness.

Naomi:

Then I think my queerness and my womanness sort of work together. What does it mean? I as a black woman who loves another black woman, like I think there's something there that really shapes my sense of self. A black woman who loves another black woman who's raising a black girl. We're always talking to them about what it means to be womanish, to love deeply, and fully, and unapologetically. To let your yes be yes and no be no kind of. That deeply shapes me.

Naomi:

I think teaching in terms of how teaching connects to my sense of activism. You know, I really think the syllabus is a political document. I think it's an ... I'm working through my activism even in crafting the syllabus.

Monique:

Right.

Naomi:

Even in saying, "No, we're not going to talk about that. We're going to talk about this." Working in a white, predominantly Catholic context like Villanova. The fact that they hired me, I'm like, "Well, if you hired me, then I'm going do the thing. I'm going to just go all out as a black queer, non-Catholic person. I'm going to do this as long as you'll let me." That means I'm not going to ... I'm going to bring ... I know that the students at Villanova will get the white Catholic perspective.

Monique:

Yeah.

Naomi:

I'm not here to do that, and I'm unapologetic about that. Yes, I think seeing the syllabus as a political document, understanding that even though I'm not ... Villanova is not a seminary, so many of my students are born and bred Catholic. They're active in Catholic communities. But when you poke, they actually don't have any ... they have not been intentional about theologizing or about ... If I can just in the 14 weeks they were together get them to more thoughtfully participate in those parish communities, or ask questions that wouldn't have occurred to them before they took this class, or introduce them to different paradigms of faith that they before had dismissed or hadn't known about, then that to me feels like we've done justice in this classroom.

Naomi:

I connect the dots often between the theologizing and real life stories. I'll bring in the story ... We'll talk about Blake Brockington, who was a trans boy who died by suicide. We'll talk about incarceration and abolition and what ... is there a better way to hold people accountable for what they do and to make room for them to repair the harms they've done, they've caused in community while not stripping them of their dignity and humanity? Like we'll talk about that.

Naomi:

We'll talk about religious freedom. I mean, I talk about this all the time in my classrooms now, because much of this is rooted in, especially for people seeking healthcare in Catholic hospitals, rooted in the Catholic kind of doctrine. I bring in this is the Catholic doctrine as outlined by the conference of bishops, and this is how it impacted this black woman who tried to go get ... who needed a medical termination of pregnancy and didn't get one or whatever. This is now it impacts this trans person who needs a hysterectomy but can't get one because of Pope So-and-so.

Naomi:

I'm always trying to figure out ways to make my worlds collide, not only because it's easier, because it feels like less work, but because it all does connect. Certainly at Wake I hope to teach more seminarians, because then we can just be explicit about making these connections between training for ministry and training for advocacy. I hope to do more of that.

Naomi:

Yeah. I see the absolute connections, and it also keeps me learning, keeps me feeling challenged. I think part of this work can be very disillusioning and very kind of rote, like, "Oh, here we go again making a statement about ... Here we go again, praying." Sometimes I don't feel like I'm learning much. I'm just saying the same thing over and over again. But teaching feels like new every day, and a challenge every

day, and I get a more immediate kind of gratification at the end of my 75 minute class that really keeps me going, keeps my ego healthy I guess. I make those connections. What was the other one?

Monique:

I had a question about sustainability. What sustains you-

Naomi:

Oh, goodness.

Monique:

In the midst of?

Naomi:

Friendships. Deep and abounding friendships. I mentioned that Ashon and I have been friends ever since I walked into that first choir rehearsal way back when. Friendships with people who are deeply thinking about the same issues I'm thinking about, but also people who ain't thinking about that and we just go to the movies or whatever. I mean friendships that allow me some degree of escape from what feels like a pressure to show up for these really critical campaigns and struggles.

Naomi:

I also think I'm trying to do better about listening to my body and trying to discharge some of what my body holds. They say the body keeps a score. I think my body is keeping lots of score of lots of ... I get monthly massages. I keep my barbershop appointment. Like there are ways that I'm trying to kind of feel good and look good as a means of being good psychologically, emotionally.

Naomi:

I think that my marriage ... Kentina is different from me in that she is not ... she doesn't have ... Much of my identity is wrapped up in my work. Like my sense of self is very connected to the work I'm doing. For her, that's not the case. She's like, "I'm off at five o'clock. This is not ..." That doesn't mean she doesn't take her work seriously, but she just has much better boundaries than I do. She pushes me to be like, "Babe, are you doing work email?" Or, "You're not answering that. It's Saturday. No," or whatever.

Naomi:

I think that for me, it's been so critical to have a partner like her, because I would be working 24 hours a day, seven days a week, and I would have kept on at the Task Force despite my exhaustion, despite my ... I need somebody who says to me, "When you get home you have nothing left for us, and that's not just. You can go ahead with your justice, and what does it mean to be just here?" Right? I need that accountability, and I need that push and that nurture, right? Somebody who'll make sure I ate today, somebody who's going to make sure ... She's been critical to my sustainability.

Naomi:

I have not found a worshiping community. I think one of my deepest longings is the church girl in me wants to be involved in a congregation more regularly. I think that's hard because of the nature of my work, or that was when I was at the Task Force for sure. Often I'm preaching on Sunday, so that means I'm working. I'm at church, but I'm working. I long for spaces that feel like worship. I'm creating them in

ways, or part of them in a non-church context, but I do miss ... I miss the organ. I miss ... That's a desire of mine and I'm just trying to be prayerful and discerning about finding a home in that way. I mean, I'm a member of City of Refuge, but clearly I can't go sit there and pray.

Monique:

Okay. Well, that is perfectly timed. We're exactly at-

Naomi:

Yes!

Monique:

2:20.

Naomi:

Wonderful.

Monique:

Thank you so much. I always want to make sure it's on record. I thank you deeply for your time, for your story, for everything you're sharing, not just for my project, but for the next generation. This project started with LGB-Tran as a response to the It Gets Better campaign.

Naomi:

Okay.

Monique:

With queer teen suicides back a decade ago. Originally, they wanted to interview people, seasoned people to say, "No, no, no. It might not be better immediately, but like in the lifespan, it will get qualitatively better. It will get substantially better." When I decided ... so you and Kentina are the youngest people that I've interviewed for the project.

Naomi:

Oh, wow.

Monique:

Largely that's because the first interviews were from their [inaudible 01:11:02]. Then that's sort of where my model was too, of thinking that I wanted to include younger activists, largely because I felt a different sense of hope and a different sense of authenticity within younger activists and the ability to have been out longer or to have seen more freedoms in your lifespan. I think there's something powerful about that that I also wanted to bring to bear. Thank you for that, for sharing for the 14-year-old that's going to be Googling and finding your story, and knowing that it's possible and not something that they have to like live a lifetime and then they get to do that one day.

Naomi:

Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Monique:
That it's something that they could do now.

Naomi:
Yeah, yeah. For sure.

Monique:
Thank you.

Naomi:
Thank you. I will go grab Kentina Do you want to take a minute?