

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW OF NAOMI WASHINGTON LEAPHEART, PART 3

Naomi: So I also put my application into University of Michigan because Michigan is a great school and I was like, "I think I can get into Michigan and that'll be my safe choice if I don't get into Penn."

Naomi:

And ... I think that I got in, did I get in to Penn? I'm trying to think about the timing. This revivalist came in April. So it either was that I was waiting to hear back from Penn or I had already heard back and I got in, but I had not sent my \$200 deposit or whatever you're supposed to send to hold your spot. And this revivalist came to do a week-long revival, and I saw in the bulletin he pastors in Philadelphia. I had no sense of Philadelphia. I was like, "I wonder how close his church is to school," And I don't know.

Naomi:

So I sort of timidly asked him one night after services ... I think I had gotten in. So I said, "I got into UPenn. I don't know anything about Penn or the city of Philadelphia, and I'm really concerned that I won't have a church home if I go away." And he said, "Oh my goodness, congratulations. Penn is 10 blocks from my church." He was saying, "When you get there," he took out something and wrote down a cell phone number. He said, "When you get there call this number and we will send a van to come pick you up from campus to bring you to church."

Naomi:

And that for me was the sign, "Okay, this is where I'm supposed to be," because this person came to my church in Detroit and so there was some degree of approval or relationship with people I trusted. This pastor has already told me when I get there call this number, I can come to church. I don't have to find out this is before Uber and all that. So that to me was a sign and then all I needed was the money to be able to go, and I got a good financial aid package that was a mix of loans and work study and scholarship.

Naomi:

So it was a real kind of churchy kind of decision to be like, "I think this is the Holy Spirit saying," because this pastor came. It was very unscientific and very churchy. So that was how I decided to go to Penn. I had the sense it was a good school. Every time I said something about, "Oh, I'm going to University of Pennsylvania," people would light up and respond in ways, so I was like, "Well I guess this is a good school." I think I was so naive and had no clue what the gravity of this was: the caliber of school, how this would set me up, I had no clue.

Naomi:

And so packed a little U-Haul that we rented and drove. My mother, father and brother, we all got in this U-Haul and made our way to Philadelphia. And I was so green and so naive and had no sense of anything. I was a big fat nerd, which was helpful in some ways at Penn, but I had no worldly sense. Church was all I knew, my little arts community, that's what I knew. And they dropped me off in Philadelphia and left me there. And I was in this pre-freshman program that they do for kids of color, so I was in that. So that was helpful because I could ease my way into Philadelphia, ease my way into college classes. We had these little half a credit classes that we took.

Naomi:

And I'm starting to build a social community by first seeking out where are the Christian students gathering. So one night I came home to my dorm very early in my freshman year and I heard singing. And so I peeked in and it was this choir singing. And so I think I must have asked somebody, "Oh, there's a gospel choir here?" And she was like, "Yeah, this is when they rehearse." And so I went to gospel choir rehearsal and got in the alto section and started singing, whatever. And afterward the director of the gospel choir came up to me and was like, "You have a really nice voice. You have a strong voice. I'm so glad you came," and, "What's your name," and whatever.

Naomi:

And that was the beginning of what is now a 20 plus year friendship with Ashon Crawley, who was the director. I mean, I don't know if he tells people but he was the director and founder of the gospel choir at Penn. And ... I remember also that choir being full of queerness. It was ... people who are very deeply spiritual, but also there was no rigidity around theology. There was no rigidity around, "You got to go to church." It became our worship, it became our church. People were in relationships, people came out within the context of the choir. I mean, it was just a very ... queer ... That's the only way I can describe it ... experience.

Naomi:

I mean, you had your more conservative people in the choir, but there was no imposition of theology in the choir, which I look back and I'm like, "What a gift that was, what a gift." And we sounded good, so we would sing all over, so it was just a gift. My nickname became Reverend. I was not preaching or teaching or doing any of that. But my nickname in college was Reverend, which should have been some kind of sign to me, but it wasn't because I'm hardheaded. People came to me, talked to me, would say to me, "There's something about your energy, and could you talk me through this problem," or, "What do you think about what God thinks about X, Y, and Z," or whatever.

Naomi:

I mean, so again that should have been some sort of sign to me, but it wasn't. So college was again, more of me finding my people, finding my nerds, fellow nerds, and also finding my people who pushed me to figure out my relationship to and with God for myself. They were like, "You're away from home now. Your grandmother is not taking you to church anymore, so you going to go?"

Monique:

Right.

Naomi:

"Are you doing this out of obligation or because you're choosing it?" They would push me.

Monique:

I'm going to pause you because he's not done until 2:15, but someone has this room at 2:00.

Naomi:

Oh, okay.

Monique:

So I don't know if they're stalking us, but I don't want to be the Brown person who won't give him his space.

Naomi:

Yeah, okay.

Monique:

Yeah, he said he had a block, for an hour.

Monique:

Thank you. So we're going to pop over here to let the space be open.

Speaker 3:

Okay, for the 2:00 person, thanks.